

First Order 371

Chapter 371 As brilliant as a star

It seemed that Zong Cheng had sensed something and given the playing cards to someone else a while ago. After the artillery bombardment on Ren Xiaosu's position, the playing cards turned into bait that led him straight into the ripping chaos of the thundering troops.

As this was the era of supernatural beings, no one knew what kind of superpower they were up against.

Zong Cheng was also unsure if there were any problems with those playing cards. He was only being careful not to fall into a trap, and was trying to prevent any supernatural beings from plotting against him in these strange times. As it turned out, Ren Xiaosu really came looking for him.

Ren Xiaosu stood in the middle of the battlefield with soldiers surrounding him in heavy numbers. He had to come over, because if he did not, the artillery fire would continue bombarding the bandits and refugees until they were all dead.

And by now, the mortar bombardment had stopped.

The batteries of the nanomachines in Ren Xiaosu were still depleting, and some of them had crumbled off like dust due to being out of power. It was as though this unique "lifeform" were withering away one by one.

The shadow clone continuously circled Ren Xiaosu as it slaughtered the enemies with its black saber in hand, cutting them down like a whetstone.

But Ren Xiaosu just stood there silently.

He suddenly felt like he could understand Qing Zhen a little better. The humans in these wastelands sought power and ambition like ugly moths attracted to candlelight and warmth.

Humans had been endlessly seeking power over the strongholds, resulting in them becoming selfish and greedy.

If I do not kill you, you will end up killing me. As such, the basic rule of the world was to fight to the bitter end. That was because even when the world came to an end, hope still did not exist.

As Ren Xiaosu looked around, his tough armored figure was slowly being disintegrated into a fine dust.

This was a trap that had been prepared for a long time. His opponent was cunning like a hyena and was about to kill him right here.

'Since you wanted me to come over, and now that I'm here, why are you not showing yourself?' Ren Xiaosu roared again, "Come and kill me!"

The Zong Consortium's soldiers were looking at the armored young man in the crowd like he was a star in a mysterious nebula of the universe.

Scorching, dazzling, and lonely.

However, they also felt that this was probably Ren Xiaosu's final moment of brilliance. After that, this dazzling star would become just like the afterglow of the sunset.

Sinking into the sea.

A hail of bullets rained down on Ren Xiaosu and the shadow clone. Heavily surrounded, this lonely island would get swallowed up by the tsunami, and the clown would mock him in delight from the waves.

A god was about to die.

But at this moment, Ren Xiaosu looked back at where he had arrived from.

The Zong Consortium's soldiers were taken aback. Why was he looking behind him?

Someone followed Ren Xiaosu's gaze and looked over. Suddenly, a steam locomotive resembling a long dragon rushed out of a gray mist and smashed through the formation that had surrounded Ren Xiaosu!

At the same time, the steam locomotive shattered the endless despair.

"Shit, he's trying to escape!" someone exclaimed.

"Kill him!"

"Use the RPGs!"

The soldiers wanted to use their weapons to stop the steam locomotive, but not even a direct hit from the RPG could cause any damage to the train.

The steam locomotive sped through the air and threw the entire defensive line into complete chaos.

No one had expected such a reversal. They all thought the armored young man who had been surrounded was surely going to die!

Ren Xiaosu said calmly, "I'm here, so why don't you come out and kill me? Why don't you show yourself and kill me? You better watch out when I come and kill you."

Then the seemingly ancient train "drove" out into the real world. The sound of the wheels turning and the metallic clanging of the tracks paving themselves was enough to terrify anyone. The railcar's smokestack suddenly spewed a cloud of thick black smoke, and the long whistle that followed was like a bugle being blown.

On the battlefield, the "black iron" steam locomotive was driving straight in and headed for Ren Xiaosu who was standing there silently.

The Zong Consortium's soldiers felt a strong sense of powerlessness, as though no matter how hard they struggled, they would still have to face their fate.

As the steam locomotive drove past Ren Xiaosu, he grabbed onto Yang Xiaojin, who had stretched out her hand from the inside. He was then carried forward by the train as it sped off into the distance towards the wilderness.

However, Ren Xiaosu felt his heart ache. That wilderness had represented his hope and light.

The soldiers at the rear concentrated their firepower on the departing train, but their firearms seemed to have no effect on the steam locomotive.

As the train drove north, Ren Xiaosu spat out another mouthful of blood after he was brought into the train through the window. Right after, the nanomachines that were still covering him also started falling off.

Ren Xiaosu slumped into a seat in the carriage and wheezed as he leaned against the wall. Even though the nanoarmor took the damage from those vicious bullets, he still sustained internal injuries. Moreover, the damage to the steam locomotive and shadow clone would be directly transferred back to him. It was a pain that normal people would never experience in their lives and was so extreme that he felt as though he were in the abyss of hell.

At this moment, he just wanted to sit still like this until the world ended.

More than half of the nanomachines had died in this battle and could not return to Ren Xiaosu's body.

Even he couldn't take on an entire regiment of people armed with firearms and explosives. Or rather, he could handle them for only a short period and only if he were assisted externally by something like the nanomachines.

With the loss of more than half of his nanomachines, the armor could no longer cover his entire body. If he got shot, it would be very dangerous for him.

Wang Yuchi and several of the other male students came up to Ren Xiaosu and held out their hands. "Use ours."

Ren Xiaosu glanced at them before shaking his head and saying, "Y'all don't have much of them in your bodies."

Yan Liuyuan firmly said, "There's mine too."

Ren Xiaosu calmly rejected him, "Keep them to protect yourself."

Yang Xiaojin crouched down to help him wipe away his sweat and blood. "I wasn't of any help."

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "How many of our brothers are dead or injured?"

Jin Lan said tearfully, "More than 60 of them have died. We wanted to bring the female refugee with us, but she committed suicide with Xu Jinyuan's gun."

Ren Xiaosu paused for 30 seconds before changing the subject. "Who's familiar with the terrain around here? We can't head to Mt. Kushui anymore. There's a spy among us."

Everyone looked at one another. A spy? So it was because there was a spy who had revealed their whereabouts that caused them to get ambushed?

Jin Lan shouted at the group, "Who is the spy? Step forward!"

Ren Xiaosu sneered, "Search everyone. This spy must have some kind of communication equipment to contact the Zong Consortium."

Just as he finished speaking, a bandit suddenly panicked and jumped out of the window to try to escape from the steam locomotive.

But while he was still in midair, Yang Xiaojin took out her pistol and shot him straight in his temple.

Ren Xiaosu said coldly, "Keep searching, there might be others!"

But this time, they could not find any more clues of who could be a spy.

But Ren Xiaosu still found it hard to put his mind at ease. Even though they did not find any communication equipment, it did not mean that there were no more spies.

The spies seemed to have left a mark on Ren Xiaosu that made it difficult for him to trust others again. It was a mark caused by the deaths of Xu Jinyuan and the others.

They seemed to be safe for the time being. But Ren Xiaosu's failure to kill Zong Cheng was weighing on him. His opponent was a fierce, cunning, and cruel hyena, and the feeling of disgust was overwhelming Ren Xiaosu.

Chapter 372 Don't you die

But at this moment, the steam locomotive suddenly started shaking when something exploded in front of the train. Yang Xiaojin stood up and said, "Land mines, this spot is covered with land mines!"

It seemed that Zong Cheng had not only sent a large force to ambush them with artillery fire, but also made sure to plant land mines at any possible escape route they might take.

Ren Xiaosu immediately paled when the land mines loaded with TNT exploded one after another in the wilderness, bombarding the steam locomotive as it went past them. Even the train started turning a little more translucent, as though it would disappear at any moment.

Each time the steam locomotive set off a land mine, Ren Xiaosu felt like his vitals were being torn apart.

Everyone saw Ren Xiaosu suddenly curl up on the ground in pain. It was so painful that large beads of sweat started rolling down his forehead. But then, everyone realized there were two gunshot wounds on Ren Xiaosu's side!

As it turned out, Ren Xiaosu's nanomachines were no longer fully protecting him while he was escaping earlier. However, Ren Xiaosu was forced to remain composed and not treat his wounds immediately since he had to deal with the spy first.

Everyone watched Ren Xiaosu put his right index finger and middle finger into his wound. Then, he forcefully plucked out the first bullet before doing the same for the second bullet!

Jin Lan and the others looked on in a daze. They had never met anyone so brave as to extract bullets out of their own wounds.

Ren Xiaosu had his eyes closed, and every last strand of hair on his body looked to be trembling

Only then did Yan Liuyuan finally react. He quickly took out the black medicine Ren Xiaosu had given to him and applied it onto his wound.

But even though the wounds had been treated, the pain of the backlash from the attacks on the steam locomotive did not lessen.

Ren Xiaosu was trembling as Yang Xiaojin hugged him tightly in her arms. She said, "Put away the steam locomotive and let everyone walk on foot."

But Ren Xiaosu roared angrily as though he did not hear it. The steam locomotive that had started turning a little translucent "solidified" once more!

Yang Xiaojin whispered, "You've already done enough. Ren Xiaosu, I won't have any regrets if we die together today."

Ren Xiaosu wanted to give up as well, but he had to hold on. If the steam locomotive were to disappear at this moment, everyone would fall into the minefield. If that happened, all of them would die!

Jin Lan probably understood what Ren Xiaosu was doing. He said in a daze, "Boss, just give up. Let's die together."

Ren Xiaosu continued to keep his eyes closed and did not respond, but the steam locomotive "solidified" once more.

It wasn't until the train drove for a further three kilometers before they finally got out of the wilderness zone that was filled with land mines.

Ren Xiaosu could take it no more. The steam locomotive started to rapidly slow, but it suddenly disappeared before it could fully stop, forcing everyone to roll to the ground.

Jin Lan heard motorcycle engines in the distance. It sounded like a large number of bandits were heading for them!

"What should we do?" Zhang Yiheng asked with a frown. He could already see over a 1,000 bandits in front of him.

It was impossible for Ren Xiaosu to participate in such high-intensity battles. At this moment, Ren Xiaosu looked extremely pale, so it was difficult to say if he still had any strength left to put up a fight or not.

The pain was like millions of ants biting into every nerve of Ren Xiaosu. It was so painful it could make him lose his mobility. Ren Xiaosu clenched his teeth with his eyes closed without saying a word.

They were at a dead end.

Everyone could only watch in silence. No one could bear the burden for Ren Xiaosu.

Some people in the group suddenly started fleeing northwest without saying anything. They stopped caring as they treasured their lives more!

Everyone was fine with not going to Stronghold 178 and happily continuing to earn their bullets at a new settlement. But if they died here? There would be nothing left if they died here!

Ren Xiaosu had already planted a seed of faith in their minds. Given time, the seed might even have grown into a towering tree someday.

But there was no time anymore.

Just as Ren Xiaosu had understood it, there was no hope when the world came to an end.

Yan Liuyuan quietly watched as hundreds of people started leaving their companions behind. He said to Ren Xiaosu, "Bro, I'll stay with you."

Ren Xiaosu's trembling gradually lessened. It seemed that with the disappearance of the steam locomotive, the pain from the backlash had also rapidly dissipated.

Jin Lan slowly got up from the ground and dusted himself off. He unslung the automatic rifle from his back, disengaged the safety, and cocked the weapon.

Then he smiled at Zhang Yiheng and said, "At worst, I'll go down to the Underworld to meet up with Xu Jinyuan. Those of you remaining from the 1st Squad, follow me and don't disgrace Boss!"

The sound of guns being cocked rang out. Adrenaline suddenly rushed through the veins, bones, muscles, and hair of Jin Lan and the others.

Jin Lan laughed and said, "Boss, get some rest for now. We'll go down first and wait there for you. Ptui, ptui, ptui, that sounds a little ominous.... I felt really happy during this period. In this chaotic world, it's good enough to have felt happy just once."

"2nd Squad, take the others and get out of here!" Saying that, Jin Lan suddenly rushed towards the oncoming bandits.

In the sunlight, Jin Lan's back seemed to be glowing

“Stop acting like a hero.” Zhang Yiheng wiped away his tears and yelled, “Protect Boss, let’s head west!”

Yang Xiaojin glanced at Yan Liuyuan. “Carry him on your back.”

Yan Liuyuan was taken aback. “Sister-in-law, where are you going?”

But before he was done talking to her, Yang Xiaojin had already turned around and walked off into the wilderness. She wanted to create a last line of defense for Ren Xiaosu there. “Don’t you die.”

At this moment, Jin Lan’s group, who was standing behind the others, had found an ambush location behind a hill. They crouched on one knee to stabilize the gun with the method Yang Xiaojin had taught them.

Laughing, Jin Lan shouted, “Believe it or not, but I must’ve been a sniper in my previous life.”

Someone laughed heartily and said, “No, you’re not, I am!”

“Haha, come on, we were definitely all snipers in our previous lives!”

Then Jin Lan saw the enemy bandits finally entering their range. He shouted until the veins on his neck were protruding, “Open

fire!”

When the gunfire rang out, a large group of bandits right at the front of the motorcade suddenly fell to the ground.

But too many bandits had come this time. Previously, Qing Zhen’s men were holding them back in the north. But with his men deployed to the south, no one in the valley could keep these northern bandits in check anymore.

Jin Lan’s group had not undergone any formal military training before. They just imitated whatever firearms knowledge Yang Xiaojin had taught them and carried out the basics, like burst firing.

But they did not really manage to stop the bandits from advancing south even after they had finished firing all the rounds in their magazines.

Seeing that the motorcade was almost right in front of them now, Jin Lan’s group couldn’t reload amid their panic. Suddenly, he threw aside his gun in desperation and blocked the motorcycles in front of him with his body. “Motherfuckers, you’re not allowed to pass through me!”

In that instant, Jin Lan turned his body into a barricade. One of the enemy bandits riding at the front of the motorcade made an emergency turn when he saw someone rush out from behind the hill. But Jin Lan was reluctant to let the enemy speed past him, so he jumped at the motorcycle.

With this hijack, he actually pulled down the bandit from the motorcycle. Meanwhile, the fallen bike ended up blocking the path of the other bandits behind the rider. The bandits further back got up and started shooting mercilessly, killing Jin Lan and that fallen bandit together.

Jin Lan smiled as he closed his eyes. "Motherfucker."

This was a chaotic world where the living had no choice, and the dead were forgotten.

Since the day they were born, there had been nothing to be happy about for them. All they received was suffering.

But on one day, someone suddenly appeared and let them see the light and learn what hope was. Because of that, they knew they had to let this person carry on living.

This person might very well be that ray of light.

Chapter 373 I want my sorrows to become the sorrows of this era

North of the battlefield, Zong Cheng was standing on a hill as he waited for the outcome of the battle.

Two people were standing in wait next to Zong Cheng. The 30 nanosoldiers from the Yang Consortium stood quietly behind him. However, these nanosoldiers who were originally part of the Yang Consortium seemed to be unaffected by everything that was happening with the outside world.

"You'll probably succeed this time," a person beside Zong Cheng said to him.

Zong Cheng was not exactly anxious. He exuded a calm and composed aura. "We spent so much time planning this. If we fail, that would be really disheartening."

"But even if you could control Yang Xiaojin, I'm afraid it wouldn't affect the Yang Consortium much." Someone beside him asked, "Can you make her live like a normal person in the Yang Consortium?"

"Yes." Zong Cheng glanced at him.

However, the voice didn't come from Zong Cheng's mouth. He saw a nanosoldier walk out from behind Zong Cheng with a smile and say, "Han Yang, you don't understand. The Yang Consortium will be helpless now that they're facing Qing Zhen, so I'm not too interested in the Yang Consortium anymore." Zong Cheng said calmly, "What I'm targeting is the power of the organization behind her. The Saboteurs are currently controlled by her aunt, so that role will definitely be passed to her someday. I don't even have to do much. I just bide my time."

These "puppets" that were controlled by Zong Cheng were just like Zong Cheng himself.

"What about Ren Xiaosu?" Han Yang wondered, "Do you want to leave him around?"

Zong Cheng was somewhat hesitant. His original plan was to go to Stronghold 88 and find an opportunity to take Yang Xiaojin outside. Then, he would use his superpower to control Yang Xiaojin before letting her go back and live like a normal person.

But Zong Cheng did not eye Yang Xiaojin's influence within the Yang Consortium from the start. He was only interested in her influence with the Saboteurs.

He was a supernatural being himself, so he understood what it meant when organizations like the Pyro Company and Saboteurs started bringing together supernatural beings. That would truly tilt the balance of power in the world.

Meanwhile, Zong Cheng would not even need to spend too much effort on the Saboteurs. He would only require Yang Xiaojin to get the entire Saboteurs involved.

However, an unexpected involvement from Ren Xiaosu happened. When he first learned that Ren Xiaosu was Zhang Jinglin's student, he was absolutely ecstatic on the inside. If the successor to Stronghold 178 were to fall into his hands, the Zong Consortium would be like a tiger that had grown wings.

Zong Cheng loved his superpower. It was a hand that could control everything from behind the scenes. He could easily gain the status and power of others and control them like a puppet.

However, Wang Congyang said that Ren Xiaosu did not really seem to have that good a relationship with Zhang Jinglin. This made Zong Cheng a little hesitant. He knew that what Wang Congyang said might not be the truth, but even Zong Cheng doubted that Zhang Jinglin really looked upon Ren Xiaosu as his successor to Stronghold 178. Wasn't Ren Xiaosu a little too young? Furthermore, could Ren Xiaosu convince the masses?

Zhang Jinglin had been at Stronghold 178 for over a decade before he was able to fully win over the masses. As a member of Stronghold 178, everyone was even more supportive of him.

But Ren Xiaosu was different. To the current Stronghold 178, he should still be considered an outsider, right?

So after careful consideration, Zong Cheng still felt that Ren Xiaosu's value was clearly not as great as Yang Xiaojin's.

Yang Xiaojin and the leader of the Saboteurs were blood relatives, and Yang Xiaojin was also publicly acknowledged as the successor of the Saboteurs.

"Han Yang, you should go along as well. It's best if Ren Xiaosu is captured alive. If you can't, just kill him," Zong Cheng said calmly.

Even if he could only get his hands on Yang Xiaojin, it would still be a success.

The group led by Jin Lan only numbered around a dozen people, and they ultimately could not stand up to the torrent of northern bandits riding motorcycles.

Zhang Yiheng was walking along when he suddenly came to a stop beside Ren Xiaosu. He looked at Ren Xiaosu, who was still panting hard on Yan Liuyuan's back, and said, "Boss, I'm going too."

After that, Zhang Yiheng turned around and said, "2nd Squad brothers! Follow me!"

Their group laughed and headed to welcome the bandits. "We can't have Jin Lan get all the fun, right?"

Zhang Yiheng asked, "Do y'all blame me? If I hadn't brought y'all here from the mountain hideout, you might not be dying today."

Someone said, "There wasn't really a point in living back where we were."

Zhang Yiheng smiled and said, "Yeah, it was boring."

"I wonder where we'll go after we die. Underground?" one of the bandits asked as he inspected his gun.

"I don't know. In any case, study hard in your next life and learn a handy skill. Look at that Xu Jinyuan. Just because he knew how to build a house, he attracted that woman into pulling him into her house every day," Zhang Yiheng lightheartedly mocked. "I'll have to learn how to build a house in my next life as well."

"I wonder if I'll get to meet Boss again in my next life?"

"We should be able to reincarnate in time to meet him."

"Does anyone have a poem for the situation we're in?"

"Hahaha, who would fucking know something like that?"

These people had never been educated in their entire lives. When they were living in town, only the richer families could send their children to school. For them, they were sent to the factories and coal mines by the organizations.

It was precisely because they could not stand those dark days that they became bandits. Now that they saw the light and knew what hope was, they preferred to die with some dignity.

Suddenly, a sniper rifle boomed from a hill in the distance. Then a motorcycle in the cluster of bikes exploded into a huge fireball. Following that, the motorcycles exploded into balls of fire one after another. Yang Xiaojin was once again using her specialty to dominate the battlefield.

But there were too many bandits, and they were still getting closer!

Zhang Yiheng turned around and looked at Ren Xiaosu's back. He shouted, "We're gonna fucking take them on! My name is Zhang Yiheng! I'm a hero too!"

Zhang Yiheng did not know why he shouted out his name, but he felt that this was probably the most glorious moment in his life.

From this moment on, it wasn't Zhang Yiheng who needed the world, but the world that needed Zhang Yiheng! He was not going to retreat, not even a single step!

Yan Liuyuan did not turn around. He did his best to carry Ren Xiaosu as he ran west. Every nanomachine was making an agonizing sound inside his body at the burden they were carrying. Yan Liuyuan was already pushing his limits.

"Bro, does this world not want to see us lead a good life?" Yan Liuyuan panted as he spoke.

“We’ve already left the stronghold. We were already planning to hide in the wilderness and not have anything to do with them, so why are they still doing this?”

Yan Liuyuan ran while carrying Ren Xiaosu and asked blankly, “Bro, are these the sorrows of this era?”

He was not sad for Jin Lan and the others since he had never interacted with them before. Nor did he think that these people were that heroic, because he had witnessed a more heroic act before.

It was just that this era did not seem like it had any intention of letting anyone lead a good life.

In this chaotic world, one could only dream if they sought to better their lives.

Ren Xiaosu was still a young man and did not used to understand why Zhang Jinglin was so tired of war. He also did not understand why Qing Zhen and Li Shentan would bother fighting to the death with their enemies.

But now he and Yan Liuyuan understood why the world was called chaotic. It was because no one would be spared from it.

Without enough power, there would be no way to build a place of one’s dreams. Before achieving absolute power, everything else was just wishful thinking.

In the past month, everything that had happened in this valley was like an indulgence for Ren Xiaosu. In his 17 years of struggling and suffering, he had never seen his hands create something so beautiful before.

So even though everything felt really surreal, he was still willing to give up his rationality and believe it was all true.

It was a normal day today, just like any other day before.

But when the bullets arrived on the battlefield, the peace from before vanished into thin air.

Yan Liuyuan did not dare to use Curse Manipulation because Ren Xiaosu was on his back. Right now, Yan Liuyuan was unsure if he could help Ren Xiaosu avoid the backlash together with him. If the backlash hit Ren Xiaosu, it would be over for him.

Ren Xiaosu’s weak voice came from behind. “Put me down.”

Yan Liuyuan pursed his lips and did not say anything as he continued running.

The sound of the sniper rifle ringing in his ears was like an artillery bombardment, but there were too many northern bandits here. They had broken through the suppressive fire and come to where Zhang Yiheng was!

Ren Xiaosu said while trembling, “Liuyuan, put me down.”

He struggled while on Yan Liuyuan's back, but the pain was still numbing his nerves. Although the pain was gradually fading away, he still remained helpless at this moment.

Right at this moment, the northern bandits went around the defensive position Zhang Yiheng and the others were guarding. They split into two groups, and one of them rushed towards the sniper, while the other chased after Yan Liuyuan and company.

More than 400 members of the northern bandits remained behind. Their numbers were too great for Zhang Yiheng and his people to stand up to.

When Zhang Yiheng saw the bandits going around them, he immediately got anxious. "Stop right there! Come and kill me instead!"

But the bandits did not care about them.

Yan Liuyuan saw that the bandits were about to reach them, and no one could stop them.

Five plum blossoms suddenly flew out of Jiang Wu's arm with five crimson petals on each of them.

In the intense wind, Jiang Wu's petals flew towards the bandits like blades. But there were far too few petals. It was still not enough.

After one of the blade petals flew towards a bandit and sliced the life out of him, it transformed into a red glow before fading away. However, there were still hundreds of bandits around.

Jiang Wu gritted her teeth and three plum blossoms bloomed again from the markings of a plum blossom stalk on her arm.

But that was still not enough. She was about to attempt to burn up her life force as someone else had once done.

Wang Yuchi pulled her back and said calmly, "Teacher, we're still here." Then Wang Yuchi picked up his gun and prepared to charge.

At this moment, a surge of bandits were charging in Yang Xiaojin's direction. Yang Xiaojin was a sniper, so how could she kill so many bandits in a short time?

Then Yan Liuyuan stopped in his tracks. He turned around and said to Jiang Wu, "Ms. Jiang, carry my brother on your back and keep walking forward. Don't turn back." He placed Ren Xiaosu on Jiang Wu's back and walked alone towards the battlefield and towards disaster.

Xiaoyu shouted at the top of her lungs, "Liuyuan, what are you doing?!"

Yan Liuyuan said calmly, "Uncle Fugui, take Big Sister Xiaoyu and go."

Xiaoyu tried her best to break free from Wang Fugui's grip. Meanwhile, Wang Fugui felt terribly awful on the inside.

He did not know what Yan Liuyuan was trying to do, but he knew he could not let go of her hand. If he let go of her, something could happen to Li Xiaoyu as well.

Xiaoyu cried out, "Liuyuan, come back here. What are you doing!"

Yan Liuyuan turned around and smiled at Xiaoyu. "I want my sorrows to become the sorrows of this era."

After that, Yan Liuyuan gradually stepped away. This was an era on the decline, and a new era was definitely arriving.

But how strong would you have to be to build an era filled with hope? Yan Liuyuan did not know, but he felt that Ren Xiaosu should be able to do it.

Suddenly, dark clouds appeared in the sky, and the distant earth let out a keening cry.

This was a time when gods seemed to be walking the Earth again—the era of "The Rise of Gods."

Yan Liuyuan walked towards the oncoming bandits step by step. Suddenly, a gray aura wrapped around him like an evil dragon representing calamity.

The beast whose heart was bound was roaring. It was roaring at this era!

Yan Liuyuan, who was just a harmless boy-next-door in the past, had mastered the power of wishes and curses.

No one knew what he could do, nor did anyone know the extremes of his curses.

Now he was cursing the sky to collapse and the ground to split. And so, the ground really broke apart.

As Yan Liuyuan overexerted his power, his willpower suddenly stabbed and gave him a splitting headache.

Finally, two teary streams of blood flowed down his cheeks.

"Hnnng, this won't kill me," Yan Liuyuan said softly. He did not feel any sadness. All he wanted was to bury this old era together with the world.

"Bro, it's time that I protected you now and that impending new era as well," Yan Liuyuan said softly.

In the distance, a huge amount of energy abruptly burst out of the trembling crust. Cracks suddenly started spreading across the ground just like the one that had originated from the Jing Mountains and was capable of tearing the strongholds apart. Almost instantaneously, the ground in front of the bandits broke apart.

It was almost exactly the same as back then.

That was the force of nature that Yan Liuyuan had witnessed with his own eyes and was now being released by him.

The fracture cut through the ground like a knife as the world rumbled loudly like it was about to collapse.

The fracture reached all the way to the bandits and trapped them in an abyss they could not overcome.

Deep below the abyss was an endless darkness. When the winds of the wilderness blew into it, it sounded like a behemoth lived in it.

However, the fault did not stop as it continued shooting northwards. Yan Liuyuan could not see any threat in the north, but he felt a very disgusting existence there that needed to be erased from this world.

When Zong Cheng, who was in the north, saw this scene from afar, he was scared out of his mind. He had not thought there would be such a powerful supernatural being in this world!

“Run!” Zong Cheng’s calm demeanor disappeared. He madly dashed to the side to avoid it, but the fault kept chasing after him. He could not shake it off.

However, Zong Cheng realized the fault was running out of momentum. He was too far away from the battlefield. Even with Yan Liuyuan’s full-power attack, he could not kill Zong Cheng, who was several kilometers away.

Gradually, the fracture came to a halt before the abyss slowly started closing up.

Zong Cheng’s heart sank as he fled north with the nanosoldiers.

He never expected the bandits charging Yang Xiaojin and Ren Xiaosu would be buried alive by an abyss!

After surveying the area through her scope, Yang Xiaojin looked up at the young man who had summoned the calamity.

Zhang Yiheng and the others stared blankly at the sight before them. They had survived?

Was this... the power of the gods?

Yan Liuyuan just stood quietly and waited for the backlash.

Since the curse was a natural disaster, the backlash would also be a natural disaster.

Suddenly, a loud rumble came from the west. It sounded like the galloping of thousands of horses. Yan Liuyuan understood that a flood was coming

Yan Liuyuan used whatever was left of his strength and shouted at Wang Fugui and the others, “Run for higher ground!”

Then he slowly sat onto the ground in his weakened state. His nanomachines were out of energy, and the curse he had overexerted his willpower to cast left him unable to avoid the backlash. He could only wait for fate’s judgment.

Every spring, the floods in the valley would arrive as expected. When that happened, the valley would form a new river, and most of the landscape here would be changed by the flood.

But the difference was that the peak of this year’s floods seemed to have arrived a few days early.

A boundless amount of water gathered upstream, which then crashed down like an avalanche. It was cascading at a speed faster than the blink of an eye!

Yan Liuyuan could already hear trees breaking upstream. He turned around and looked up into the distance at the floodwaters that were towering high. It was going to crash down on them!

But then he saw Ren Xiaosu break free from Jiang Wu's back. Xiaoyu had broken free from Wang Fugui's grip as well.

While everyone else was running for higher ground, Ren Xiaosu and Xiaoyu were running towards him with all their might. Yan Liuyuan was stunned. "Bro..."

As the crest of the flood arrived, Wang Fugui and the others who were uphill could not avoid the rushing waters in time and got dragged into the waves. The plum blossom branches on Jiang Wu's arm suddenly materialized an extension of themselves, and the long plum branches tied everyone together as they got swept down along the river.

When Ren Xiaosu heard the rushing of the floodwaters coming up from behind, he knew it might be too late. As such, Yan Liuyuan heard Ren Xiaosu's angry bellow as he shouted, "City Crusher!"

An instant later, Ren Xiaosu's speed increased again. He suddenly arrived in the front of Yan Liuyuan as the torrent of floodwaters touched his back.

But yet another unexpected event occurred! A supernatural being suddenly appeared atop a hill in the north. It was none other than Zong Cheng's subordinate, Han Yang!

In an instant, Han Yang raised his arm and a bright red spear appeared in his hand. When he tossed the spear, Yan Liuyuan said anxiously, "Bro, dodge it!"

The spear looked like it was soaring through the bounds of mortality.

Ren Xiaosu also knew there was danger behind them, but he did not care. He forcefully grabbed Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu's arms before City Crusher could deactivate and flung them onto the shore. After Xiaoyu landed on the ground, she passed out.

In midair, Yan Liuyuan saw the sharp red spear pierce Ren Xiaosu's right side.

The long stream of floodwaters split the north and south into two different worlds. Ren Xiaosu and Yan Liuyuan were looking at each other from afar across the lengthy river of time. Ren Xiaosu's abdomen was bleeding profusely, but he smiled at Yan Liuyuan as though nothing had happened and said, "Don't you die."

Then Ren Xiaosu got swept away by the floods and disappeared within the murky waters.

"Bro, wait for me!" Yan Liuyuan cried out in grief. He wanted to get up and give chase down the river, but he lost all strength when he stood up and fainted.

Suddenly, the wolf pack in the south headed north. The Wolf King rushed to where Yan Liuyuan was without caring about the floodwaters. When it came to Yan Liuyuan's side, it picked Xiaoyu and Yan Liuyuan up with its mouth and left.

Right after, the floodwaters came in and engulfed the area where they had just been.

End of Volume Three: The Sorrows of Our Era

Chapter 374 Yang Xiaojin's revenge

Han Yang was escaping. The floods had stopped his enemies on the other side of the river, but there was still someone chasing after him relentlessly. If not for his past experience in the army, he would have already died at the hands of his pursuer.

Earlier, Zong Cheng had escaped back to the Zong Consortium in advance because Yan Liuyuan had displayed a power that was too shocking.

As such, Han Yang had been left behind by others. He was just a sacrificial pawn now.

Upon reaching the outlying area of Mt. Guan, Han Yang carefully made his way into a small stream flowing out of the valley. This was an area he was familiar with. The bandits controlled by the Zong Consortium used to be stationed inside of Mt. Guan.

The outside world thought the bandits in the valley had gone out of control. However, as the main party in this matter, how could the Zong Consortium have completely lost control of this place? All of the bandits at Mt. Guan still remained under the control of the Zong Consortium.

When he arrived here, Han Yang heaved a sigh of relief. He knew he was almost safe.

However, the most dangerous moment when walking a tightrope was the last three steps. Han Yang heaved a sigh of relief before resuming his alertness.

The ghostly opponent behind him was definitely still tracking him. He couldn't afford to be careless.

But all of a sudden, Han Yang felt like his heart and lungs had been torn apart. A great force of inertia hit from his right and sent him right into the stream. He could not resist this force.

A bullet spinning at high speed passed through the gap between his ribs. The massive tearing force ripped his muscles apart like they were wadding while his heart was pulverized.

Only now did the sound of the sniper rifle reach his ears. Han Yang fell into the stream with his blood flowing from his wound, dyeing the water red. He laid on his back and watched the sky appear to darken before his life faded away.

In the distance, Yang Xiaojin got off the ground. In order to hunt down Han Yang, she had spent the past two days and two nights awake.

Yang Xiaojin's eyes were bloodshot, but it wasn't clear if it was due to crying or a lack of sleep.

She had a chance to finish off Han Yang earlier, but she held back so Han Yang would experience the same pain as Ren Xiaosu.

No, she wanted Han Yang to experience even more intense pain.

At this moment, Yang Xiaojin was feeling a little lost. The other day, she had sprinted in a frenzy to the river to search for Ren Xiaosu. Even if he had really died, she needed to see his body first.

But the river was moving too fast. She could not keep up even after running with all her might for several kilometers. All she could do was helplessly watch as the river took Ren Xiaosu further away.

Even supernatural beings had limited endurance when running at full speed.

Seeing that she could not keep up with the floodwaters, she forded the river at a narrow point to chase Han Yang down all the way to Mt. Guan.

But what to do after killing Han Yang? Would she go after Zong Cheng next?

However, just killing Zong Cheng would not quench her hatred for him.

Suddenly, a white paper crane flew onto her shoulder. Yang Xiaojin was stunned for a moment before opening up the paper crane. She saw a line of beautifully written words on it: "Come to the Central Plains. After the matter here is handled, Auntie will help you to finish off the Zong Consortium."

When Ren Xiaosu opened his eyes, he felt as though he had lost all his strength. And he heard someone say in surprise, "He's awake."

The voice belonged to a girl. Ren Xiaosu looked over in silence and saw a girl who was around the same age as him looking at him from the passenger seat.

He was lying in the back of an off-road vehicle with the backseat laid out flat like a bed.

The girl picked up the vehicle's walkie-talkie and said, "Big Bro, the injured boy has regained consciousness."

The vehicle slowly came to a stop. Ren Xiaosu had not said a single word since he came around. He had not figured out what had happened yet, but he could feel a sharp pain in the right side of his abdomen throughout all this.

The door opened and he saw a middle-aged man in a wheelchair being pushed over.

The middle-aged man smiled and said, "Hello, my name is Wang Shengzhi. We had found you by the river unconscious and severely injured, so we made the decision to bring you with us. I hope you don't mind."

Ren Xiaosu stayed silent for a moment before saying, "Are my injuries serious?"

"I have to congratulate you on that," Wang Shengzhi said with a smile.

Ren Xiaosu was a little puzzled. What was there to congratulate?

Sensing the doubt in Ren Xiaosu, Wang Shengzhi kept his smile and said, "The wound you suffered happened to be right at your appendix. Whatever penetrated you actually cut it off for you, so you don't have to worry about getting appendicitis anymore."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless.

The young girl smiled. "My name is Wang Shengyin. How did you get injured?"

Ren Xiaosu replied without any hesitation, "We were farming, but when the floods arrived, our settlement was wiped out. I was carried away by the floodwaters and hit into a tree where a branch went right through my abdomen."

"I see." Wang Shengzhi nodded with a smile. He did not seem like he had any intention of getting to the bottom of how this wound was inflicted.

But Ren Xiaosu had some hesitations of where these people were from. Where were they going?

In this era, anyone who had an off-road vehicle was no ordinary person. But even though Wang Shengzhi sat in a wheelchair, Ren Xiaosu could vaguely sense that he was the person in charge of this convoy.

Ren Xiaosu did not wish to tell the truth. He no longer trusted anyone.

There was a time when he wanted to believe in something, but that brought about a disaster. Since he experienced that, he definitely had to remember the pain.

Wang Shengzhi asked, "It's not convenient for you to move about. Why don't you follow us and wait until your injuries are healed before making any plans?"

Ren Xiaosu asked in return, "Where are y'all headed?"

"Stronghold 178." Wang Shengzhi smiled and said, "We're from the Central Plains and are heading to Stronghold 178. Do you know about Stronghold 178?"

"I do." Ren Xiaosu nodded. "But I've never been there before."

Only at this time did Ren Xiaosu realize these people were actually from the Central Plains to the east. So these were... Central Plainsmen?

He had been swept along by the flood to the east. But in the end, he was brought back to the Northwest by these people. It was in the exact opposite direction.

But why were these people going to Stronghold 178? Ren Xiaosu noticed that everyone in the vehicle was dressed in casual attire, and there weren't any special symbols in the vehicle either.

"OK." Wang Shengzhi nodded and said, "Since your home has been washed away by the floods, come with us to Stronghold 178. Who knows, you might be able to find a place there and settle down."

When he heard the word "home," Ren Xiaosu felt a sharp pain in his heart. Wang Shengzhi saw Ren Xiaosu's expression and said, "Apologies for reminding you of your painful memories."

Ren Xiaosu did not try to hide it. After all, he should be like a distressed refugee right now. He paused before saying, "Stronghold 178 doesn't accept outsiders."

Wang Shengzhi smiled and said, "I have some connections with Commander Zhang over there. Perhaps we can help put in a word for you. Even if that doesn't work, we can't just leave you out here in this wilderness."

Ren Xiaosu thought for a while. "Alright, thank you then."

Ren Xiaosu's injuries were indeed very serious. A sense of helplessness permeated throughout his entire being and into his bones, and he did not even have the ability to think properly.

He was too seriously injured this time, so he needed to find an opportunity to apply the black medicine on himself as soon as possible.

When the convoy got back on the road, Ren Xiaosu asked to make conversation, "Very few people from the Central Plains come to the Northwest. Why have y'all come to such a poor place?"

The girl answered as though she did not have any reservations, "We're here to open up the trade routes in the Northwest."

Ren Xiaosu pondered this for a moment. Open up the trade routes? Would the Zong Consortium, spread across the trade routes, agree to that?

Chapter 375 Traveling together

The group headed to Stronghold 178 from the Central Plains did not consist of a lot of people. Although Ren Xiaosu was badly injured and immobilized in the backseat, he could roughly tell that there were about 20 of them. The six off-road vehicles formed a convoy, with one of them pulling along a supplies trailer.

The key figures of the convoy were probably the pair of siblings named Wang Shengzhi and Wang Shengyin. However, the two of them did not put on any airs. They seemed to be very easygoing, and the other people in the convoy did not feel any pressure in their presence.

As they traveled, Ren Xiaosu checked on his wound. The tear in his right side was horrific. Fortunately, these people had stitched it up for him. Otherwise, he would probably have died before he could even come around and apply the black medicine on himself. The sutures over the wound were straight and neat. He could tell the person who did it was meticulous.

Listening to what these people were saying, Ren Xiaosu realized he had been swept by the floodwaters to more than a 100 kilometers away. He did not even know how he survived.

When it was time to eat, Wang Shengzhi's subordinates brought over some piping hot food for Ren Xiaosu. Ren Xiaosu ate silently in the vehicle. But as everyone in the convoy knew that he had just survived a disaster, they thought it was normal for him to be quiet.

After sunset, the convoy set up camp on schedule. Ren Xiaosu heard them discussing the entire Northwestern and Southwestern situation by the campfire. A man said, "Why did a war suddenly break out there? Hasn't it been several decades since any conflicts happened in the region? We never used to pay attention to that area."

However, Wang Shengzhi said with a smile, "In the past, it was because that place was quite inaccessible by traffic. Meanwhile, the clans in the Central Plains took no interest in the Southwest either. They could

not even handle the matters back home, so how could they have time to care about whatever was happening over there? We don't really have any dealings in that region anyway."

The Southwest was destined to be an isolated region due to its geographical location. However, it seemed that because of the sudden war that happened recently, some people in the Central Plains started paying attention to it.

"It's said that Qing Zhen is an extremely formidable figure." Wang Shengyin thought for a moment before saying, "Although we don't know the details of the war, after the Qing Consortium and the Yang Consortium were done dealing with the Li Consortium, it seems that the Yang Consortium also got played by Qing Zhen. We must definitely be careful of a belligerent like him."

To the eyes of an outsider, the developments in this war looked like Qing Zhen had been controlling it entirely on his own. From the beginning to the end, the war fully emanated Qing Zhen's ambitions and plans.

However, only those who were in the know understood that Qing Zhen had only been doing whatever it took to protect himself all this while.

Just as Qing Zhen had said, if he had been given more free rein previously, he might not have become the head of the Qing Consortium now.

In the current times, those who were satisfied with the status quo would eventually get destroyed and die. On a long and dark road, no one could turn around until they saw the light.

Someone suddenly turned around and asked Ren Xiaosu, "Aren't you from the Northwest? Do you know how the war started?"

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "I'm not sure. I'm only a refugee. Why would I know about those things?"

The person speaking scratched his head. "True, these matters are really far from you, hahaha. I guessed I asked for nothing then."

When Wang Shengyin heard that, she asked Ren Xiaosu, who was half-propped up in the vehicle, "By the way, I haven't asked you your name yet."

Ren Xiaosu hesitated for a moment. "My name is Ren Xiaosu. My family was also swept away by the floodwaters. If you encounter anyone looking for me in the Central Plains, please tell them that I'm still alive."

This was the most Ren Xiaosu had spoken in days.

Ren Xiaosu had wanted to hide his identity, but it was not like these people knew much about the Northwest and Southwest anyway. So Ren Xiaosu dismissed the thought and gave his real name. Moreover, he was hoping to find his lost family. His name should be considered quite unique since it didn't contain any repetition. If Liuyuan, Wang Fugui, and the others heard his name mentioned, they would definitely come looking for him.

In fact, he would also have liked to go look for Yan Liuyuan and the others. But finding people in this vast world was simply too difficult. He still had more important things he needed to handle.

During this period, Ren Xiaosu would have to pay back the suffering and despair the Zong Consortium had inflicted on him. However, his strength alone was limited, so Ren Xiaosu was thinking about how he could get support for his cause. Now that this group of people in front of him were thinking of opening up the Northwestern trade routes, perhaps this would be his chance.

Thinking of this, Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt that he could understand Li Shentan much better. Back then, he thought Li Shentan was like a demon. But now, Ren Xiaosu finally understood that when you were not living in a state of pain and hatred yourself, you shouldn't be trying to persuade others to be kinder.

Of course, understanding was one thing, but being friends was another.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, "Are there any wars in the Central Plains?"

Wang Shengzhi glanced at him and said, "That's a place that any military would be willing to fight for."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. Wang Shengzhi meant that there were also wars happening in the Central Plains. He asked, "Don't they all say that the Central Plains are a prosperous and wealthy place?"

Wang Shengzhi smiled. "It's precisely because it's prosperous and rich that wars happen. There's no contradiction between the two."

Ren Xiaosu did not probe further. That wouldn't match his current status as a normal refugee. But Wang Shengyin's interest did get piqued, and she got in the mood to chat. "What do you refugees in the Northwest usually do?"

Ren Xiaosu calmly answered, "Farming, brick making, and digging ditches to irrigate the crops."

"How long does it take to fire a kiln of bricks?" Wang Shengyin asked.

Ren Xiaosu answered, "The black bricks take about 13 days to make, but that also depends on how long we take to cool the kiln down with water. We haven't fired any red bricks before, so I don't know how long those take to make."

Wang Shengyin nodded and did not ask anything else. The questions might have seemed casual, but there was actually intent behind them.

But at this moment, several military transport trucks suddenly drove over from the northwestern direction. Everyone stopped talking and looked over. When Ren Xiaosu saw the mark of a long saber on the vehicles, his heart sank. That was the symbol of the Zong Consortium.

They were still at least a 100 kilometers away from the Zong Consortium, so why would their people suddenly appear here?

Ren Xiaosu shifted himself further into the vehicle and kept his face hidden in the shadows within.

Meanwhile, Wang Shengzhi and the others remained seated by the campfire like they were not worried at all.

Those vehicles stopped next to the campsite, and three combat platoons from the Zong Consortium disembarked. The leader was a tall and broad-shouldered man. He looked like an officer of the Zong Consortium. He frowned and asked, "Who are you people?"

Wang Shengzhi turned his wheelchair around to the officer and said with a smile, "We're from the Central Plains and are headed to Stronghold 178. Who are you?"

The officer did not answer Wang Shengzhi's question. Instead, he continued asking, "What are you going to Stronghold 178 for?"

"We're going there to do business," Wang Shengzhi replied briefly.

"This route is controlled by our Zong Consortium. Why don't you all come back with me to the Zong Consortium first and we'll let everyone leave after we get a clear understanding of the situation?" the officer said. It sounded like this officer was still being polite as he was unsure of who he was speaking to.

However, Wang Shengyin said, "Then wouldn't we have to take a detour? We'll just stick to our planned route and mind our business without troubling the Zong Consortium."

At that, the Zong Consortium officer dropped his polite tone and said to the soldiers beside him, "Take them back."

Then they heard the Zong Consortium officer say to Wang Shengzhi, "I'm sorry, everyone. You're not allowed to enter this area."

Ren Xiaosu suddenly wondered if the Zong Consortium was trying to isolate Stronghold 178 in the Northwest and prevent any contact between them and the Central Plains.

Chapter 376 Zhou Yinglong

The Zong Consortium officer seemed very insistent on bringing Wang Shengzhi and company away, with his three combat platoons already starting to surround them.

When Wang Shengyin saw Ren Xiaosu hiding in the shadows within the vehicle, she comforted him, "Don't worry, it'll be fine. The Zong Consortium won't dare do anything to us."

Ren Xiaosu acknowledged her and quietly put the Explosive Poker cards in his hand back into the palace.

Wang Shengyin probably thought Ren Xiaosu was afraid of the consortium's combat troops, but he was actually worried that his identity would be exposed.

The Zong Consortium should not know he was still alive, but just in case, it was better that he not reveal himself.

Yesterday, Ren Xiaosu applied the black medicine on himself. But the problem was that after his wound had been stitched up, the black medicine did not work as effectively on his internal organs.

Wang Shengzhi said to the Zong Consortium officer with a smile, "You don't have to be so anxious. Just look at me. Could a handicapped person like me possibly get away from you all? We can go back to the Zong Consortium with you for questioning, but can you help us prepare some delicacies from the Zong Consortium's stronghold?"

When he said that, even Ren Xiaosu was stunned. He did not expect Wang Shengzhi to suddenly bring up the topic of getting something to eat. Why did it feel like he treated this as a vacation to the Zong Consortium's stronghold? Furthermore, Wang Shengzhi didn't seem to mind talking about his disability at all. He had a very good mindset about things.

But right at this moment, a car engine thrummed from afar again. The Zong Consortium officer was taken aback. Wang Shengzhi's smile broadened as he said, "It looks like we can't make the trip anymore. If there's another chance in the future, we'll definitely go there."

As he said that, an off-road vehicle appeared on the horizon. From afar, this off-road vehicle's lone presence seemed a little weak compared to the Zong Consortium's combat troops.

But on that off-road vehicle were three numbers: 178.

Typical organizations would usually put their emblem on their vehicles, but the symbol of Stronghold 178 was just 178. Everyone seemed to recognize these three numbers.

The people in the off-road vehicle were probably here to receive Wang Shengzhi and the others. But with only one vehicle coming, would the Zong Consortium let them leave?

Ren Xiaosu quietly sat in the backseat of the vehicle. When the off-road vehicle arrived in front of everyone, the Zong Consortium's soldiers did not dare move or even raise their guns.

A burly man jumped out of the off-road vehicle and said with a laugh, "I'm Zhou Yinglong from Stronghold 178. Which one of you is Wang Shengzhi? The commander has asked me to come and bring you all to Stronghold 178."

It would have still been fine if it was just one vehicle, but it turned out that there was only one person in the car as well.

But when the Zong Consortium officer heard the name "Zhou Yinglong," Ren Xiaosu noticed the immediate change in his expression.

Wang Shengzhi smiled and said, "Me, sorry to trouble you, brother."

Zhou Yinglong looked around at the surrounding Zong Consortium soldiers. "What is the Zong Consortium doing here? Trying to intercept us?"

That officer of the Zong Consortium dropped his serious face from before. He turned around and said with a smile, "No, no, we just wanted to invite the guests from the Central Plains for a visit to our Zong Consortium's stronghold."

“What’s so good about your Zong Consortium’s stronghold? Bug off!” Zhou Yinglong sneered and said, “How dare you stop Commander Zhang’s guest? You all must’ve grown a pair lately, huh? Disappear from my sight! Otherwise, don’t blame me for being rude.”

Zhou Yinglong was around 1.9 meters tall. His stature was like that of a beast, and his square face was full of vigor.

He was actually trying to threaten nearly a 100 regular soldiers from the Zong Consortium into backing off all by himself? But what was even more shocking was that the Zong Consortium officer really got back into his vehicle and left in a hurry.

Zhou Yinglong watched as the Zong Consortium’s vehicles fled and muttered, “Fuck, I almost played it too big. If I had known, I would’ve asked the Commander to let me bring more people with me...”

Wang Shengzhi and the others looked at each other speechlessly. Zhou Yinglong turned around and said to him with a smile, “Follow my car and we’ll head straight to Stronghold 178. Commander Zhang is already waiting for you.”

“How long will it take to get to Stronghold 178?” Wang Shengyin asked.

“It’s approximately a four or five-day journey.” Zhou Yinglong said, “One of the roads ahead was deliberately wrecked by the bandits. We’ll have to thank our lucky stars if we can even drive above 15 kilometers per hour.”

Wang Shengzhi said, “This Zong Consortium...”

Zhou Yinglong waved it off. “They’re just hyenas. They’re nothing to worry about.”

Ren Xiaosu suddenly understood the way Zhou Yinglong spoke. Regardless of whether he was really worried, his speech had to be tough.

Zhou Yinglong was stunned when he saw Ren Xiaosu in the vehicle. “Someone’s injured? How did you get injured?”

There were still traces of blood on Ren Xiaosu’s clothes on his right side. The blood had seeped out, and Zhou Yinglong happened to have sharp eyes. He could immediately tell at a glance.

Wang Shengzhi explained, “Wasn’t there flooding in the valley? This young man is a refugee who lived there. He was swept downstream by the flood, but we managed to save him.”

“Oh, so that’s what happened.” Zhou Yinglong sized up Ren Xiaosu, “It’s true that there was flooding. But there’s also a lot of bandits in the valley; it’s not just refugees, you know? Hey, kid, are you a refugee or a bandit?”

Ren Xiaosu said, “I’m a refugee.”

“Which settlement?” Zhou Yinglong asked again.

“It’s about 50 kilometers east of Mt. Daban,” Ren Xiaosu said.

“Then do you know who Old Liu is?” Zhou Yinglong asked.

Ren Xiaosu’s heart skipped a beat. He suddenly realized Stronghold 178 would probably have a good understanding of the valley. Otherwise, Zhou Yinglong wouldn’t have asked about a particular person out of nowhere!

He asked calmly, “Which Old Liu? Liu Junkui or Liu Desheng?”

Zhou Yinglong started laughing. “Alright, if you can mention those two names, then you must really be from a refugee settlement.”

But at this moment, Ren Xiaosu felt his heart ache.

Liu Desheng and Liu Junkui were both honest peasants who lived in the settlement. It could be said that those who escaped to the settlements were all honest people who could not stand the organizations or the way of life in the strongholds’ towns. So they could only go into the wild to seek refuge.

However, whichever Old Liu he was referring to was probably dead from the flooding. Ren Xiaosu did not feel any joy in clearing the interrogation. Each time his intense hatred was stoked, it was as if his heart was being carved out. He simply could not find it in him to forgive that. If the Zong Consortium did not cease to exist, Ren Xiaosu would never be at ease.

The convoy set off again. This time, no one doubted Ren Xiaosu’s identity anymore. However, Ren Xiaosu became even quieter. He did not want to say anything else.

In the car, Wang Shengyin said, “Brother, this Zong Consortium will probably be the first problem in our bid to open up the trade routes. The accessibility of this area is a secondary issue.”

Wang Shengzhi grunted in agreement. “It’ll be easy to repair the roads. All we need are people and money to fix that. But it still remains to be seen if the returns for these repairs will be worth it. If the Zong Consortium still continues to stop us, it’ll be useless even if the roads get repaired.”

“Then should we join forces with Stronghold 178 to eliminate the Zong Consortium?” Wang Shengyin asked.

“We can deliberate on that.” Wang Shengzhi said calmly, “We’ll see what Zhang Jinglin has to say first.”

While they were discussing, they did not avoid mentioning anything in the presence of Ren Xiaosu. Ren Xiaosu suddenly saw a glimmer of hope.

Chapter 377 Too tough to die

The Zong Consortium would not wish for any trade routes to open here, of course. After all, the terrain surrounding the Zong Consortium was really barren. This had always been an important factor that

limited their development. It was also because of this that the Zong Consortium was always seeking to expand their territory.

If the trade routes were opened, countless merchants would arrive in the Northwest, and Stronghold 178 would become stronger and stronger. As the saying went, two tigers couldn't share the same mountain. Even if Stronghold 178 had no intention of expanding, wouldn't the Zong Consortium be afraid by just being around Stronghold 178?

Of course, the Zong Consortium could still continue supporting new bandits to control the valley like they had been doing. But in the past, Stronghold 178 did not have Zhang Jinglin around. And the stand-in commander did not want to manage affairs that were beyond the stronghold.

But things were different now. Zhang Jinglin had returned!

The higher-ups of the Zong Consortium could still remember how powerful Stronghold 178 was over a decade ago. They had been building up their power over the years, but if Stronghold 178 were allowed to return to their former glory, the Zong Consortium would very likely be doomed.

This was why the Zong Consortium was not taking advantage of the situation even though the Qing Consortium and the Yang Consortium were currently embroiled in a fierce war. On one hand, Qing Zhen had cut off the Zong Consortium's shortcut to the south. On the other hand, the Zong Consortium was still wary of Stronghold 178 and did not dare to make any unusual moves.

At night, Zhou Yinglong led them to a downwind spot to set up camp. It seemed that Zhou Yinglong came out to the wilderness very often, as he looked very familiar with everything he was doing out here.

After applying the black medicine, Ren Xiaosu's wound did not feel so painful anymore. However, he still pretended like he had trouble moving around.

When he got out of the vehicle slowly to move about, Wang Shengyin even came over specifically to help him. Ren Xiaosu rejected it and expressed that he could handle himself if he moved slowly.

Wang Shengyin did not seem bothered by the blood on his body.

Ren Xiaosu found a mound and sat down. Suddenly, someone said, "I heard that many of the strongholds in the Southwest have been destroyed. I wonder what happened there. The strongholds in the Central Plains are still doing well."

Zhou Yinglong chuckled. "Let me share something with you guys about a good brother of mine called Xu Xianchu. All the strongholds he's been to, other than our Stronghold 178, have collapsed! At first, everyone thought he was a jinx, but when Stronghold 178 still remained standing, we didn't think any further about it. But when he went to Stronghold 88 recently, Stronghold 88 also got destroyed...."

Wang Shengzhi laughed and said, "Did nothing happen to him?"

"What can possibly happen to him? He always leaves before the collapse of the strongholds, so he's basically unaffected." Zhou Yinglong chuckled and said, "Brother Xu Xianchu is too tough to die. He'll be fine even if the strongholds get destroyed."

“He must be the chosen one then.” Wang Shengzhi said, “Can you introduce him to us when we get to the stronghold?”

“Haha, of course!” Zhou Yinglong said, “But Old Xu wouldn’t admit to this himself. He said that there’s someone who’s even tougher than him. He always leaves before the stronghold collapses, so he’s unaffected. But that close brother of his has never managed to escape on time, yet he’s still fine....”

When Ren Xiaosu heard this, he immediately knew who Zhou Yinglong was referring to. He recalled the strongholds he had been to had all collapsed. Even the Yang Consortium’s Stronghold 88 was not spared.

But the collapse of these strongholds should not have anything to do with him, right?

The first few that were destroyed were either caused by the earthquake or due to Li Shentan’s revenge and the Experimentals’ invasions. Even Stronghold 88—it was destroyed because Qing Zhen wanted to rescue Luo Lan.

It really had nothing to do with him!

Wang Shengzhi was even more intrigued after hearing what Zhou Yinglong said. “If I can meet this ‘chosen one’ you mentioned, I’m sure it will be very interesting.”

Zhou Yinglong carried a box of wine out of the vehicle and asked, “Do you guys drink? This Qiang[1] wine was brewed with excellent barley grains and water from snow mountain streams. It’s a little sweet!”

The others shook their heads. Only Wang Shengzhi said, “I can drink with you, but does Stronghold 178 allow drinking in their military?”

Zhou Yinglong remarked, “At our place, we’re allowed to drink during our winter break. Without alcohol to warm our bodies, it’s impossible to function.”

“But it’s almost summer now,” Wang Shengzhi said.

Zhou Yinglong thought for a moment. “It’ll be fine if you don’t tell the commander. I’ve been saving this wine since winter.”

“But there shouldn’t be many grain producers around Stronghold 178, right? Where did your barley come from?” Wang Shengyin asked.

Zhou Yinglong stopped talking. This seemed to be a very important secret.

Ren Xiaosu also realized there was something secretive about Stronghold 178 as well. There were no barley fields in the vicinity of Stronghold 178. If it were really as the outside world had said, Stronghold 178’s people tended not to leave the stronghold under ordinary circumstances. In that case, why would Zhou Yinglong know so much about the refugee settlements in the valley? And how did the barley get transported to Stronghold 178?

Zhou Yinglong changed the topic. "Did you come from the Central Plains with plans to do business with Commander Zhang? Does the alcohol in the Central Plains taste good?"

"Of course, grain production is teeming in the Central Plains. We produce tea and textiles as well." Wang Shengzhi said in his wheelchair with a smile, "But what Commander Zhang is after most are not these, but medicine."

When he heard the words "medicine," Zhou Yinglong's eyes lit up. The people in the military knew exactly what Stronghold 178 lacked the most.

What outsiders did not know was that even though Stronghold 178 lacked grainstuffs(2), they did not lack for meat. So they definitely would not starve to death.

As for medicine, that was precious. Medicine determined the survival rate after any battles they participated in.

Realization dawned on Ren Xiaosu. It was no wonder Zhang Jinglin wanted to open up the trade routes so badly. And the Zong Consortium had probably guessed the significance of these actions.

When he listened in on Zhang Jinglin's classes, Mr. Zhang would say that the ancient Silk Road was very important. Of course, times were different now, so the goods traded on the Silk Road would definitely be different as well. At that time, Ren Xiaosu could not understand why Zhang Jinglin had suddenly brought up this subject. But now it seemed like Zhang Jinglin had been thinking about it for a very long time.

Wang Shengzhi stopped after taking two sips of the wine. Then Wang Shengyin helped him cover his knee with a blanket.

"You can't hold your liquor," Zhou Yinglong muttered. All of a sudden, he looked at Ren Xiaosu and asked, "Do you drink?"

Ren Xiaosu shook his head. "No, I'm still injured."

Zhou Yinglong thought for a moment. "Since alcohol is an anti-inflammatory, your wounds won't get inflamed after drinking some. Don't you think I make sense?"

Next to them, Wang Shengyin said angrily, "What kind of crappy theory is that? After an injury, the immune system will deal with the damage and fight infection. If you drink alcohol, you'll numb the immune system. When that happens, you can just wait for your death!"

Zhou Yinglong opened his mouth but was unable to refute Wang Shengyin due to his limited knowledge. In the end, he could only mutter to Ren Xiaosu, "Don't listen to her. She might not be right either. Have you heard about how Guan Yu scraped poison off his bones? Even the Martial Saint drank alcohol after being wounded..."

Ren Xiaosu shook his head helplessly. It was not that he was afraid that drinking would affect his injuries, but that he did not want to lose consciousness and rationality among this unfamiliar crowd and environment.

Zhou Yinglong mumbled, "How boring."

Right at this moment, Ren Xiaosu suddenly heard the sound of a vehicle passing through the wilderness in the distance. Zhou Yinglong put down the bottle and sneered, "The Zong Consortium has grown too bold!"

"Do you think the Zong Consortium has ordered their people to attack us?" Wang Shengzhi looked at Zhou Yinglong. "Does the Zong Consortium dare to attack people from Stronghold 178?"

"In recent years, the Zong Consortium has been developing at a rapid pace. They probably found some backing or something." Zhou Yinglong sneered.

Chapter 378 Mysticism

When Ren Xiaosu, who had already deemed the Zong Consortium as an enemy, heard a vehicle approaching, his first thought was that the Zong Consortium must have sent someone to ambush Wang Shengzhi's convoy. This was probably because they wanted to prevent Stronghold 178 from building close ties with the Central Plains.

One by one, the members of Wang Shengzhi's convoy drew their weapons from the vehicles' trunks. Meanwhile, Zhou Yinglong got up barehanded.

Ren Xiaosu glanced at Zhou Yinglong and determined that the burly man from the Northwest was definitely a supernatural being. Otherwise, Zhang Jinglin would not have sent him here alone, nor would Zhou Yinglong not grab a weapon when facing a possible enemy attack.

However, when the Zong Consortium's convoy finally approached, it surprised them. The moment the people in the vehicle got out, they immediately expressed that they were not carrying any weapons with them. The leader of the group was an unfamiliar young man.

A few people dressed in chef's attire jumped out of the cars behind them. They were carrying some pots and pans, while some even carried portable gas stoves.

The young man said with a smile, "Good evening, everyone. I'm the Zong Consortium's Zong Xiang. I heard all of you wanted to have a taste of our Zong Consortium's delicacies, but since you can't go to our stronghold due to your schedule, I've brought my chefs out here instead so you can get to enjoy authentic food like caramelized potatoes, Hundred Blossoms Chicken, and roasted whole goat."

When Ren Xiaosu heard this from inside the vehicle, he sneered. The Zong Consortium was clearly eager for everyone here to die, yet they pretended to be really welcoming.

Before Zong Cheng revealed his intentions, he had acted really warm and hospitable too. But in the end?

Even now, Ren Xiaosu could not understand why Zong Cheng would attack them. This was what Ren Xiaosu was most furious about.

Looking at this young man named Zong Xiang, Ren Xiaosu was very sure that he and Zong Cheng had a close relationship. He was considering if he should kill Zong Cheng on the spot. But what would he do after killing Zong Xiang? That would not be enough to sate his fury.

Ren Xiaosu needed to make sure the entire Zong Consortium was destroyed. Just killing Zong Xiang alone would not erase his hatred.

Ren Xiaosu was even considering intentionally creating a conflict between Wang Shengzhi, Zhou Yinglong, and the Zong Consortium. For example, killing Zong Xiang and framing it as though Wang Shengzhi and the others had made the move. But if he did that, they would not be able to return to the Central Plains safely, right? These people had saved his life, so he could not do that.

Ren Xiaosu took a slow, deep breath to calm himself down. He wanted to gain the support of Wang Shengzhi and Stronghold 178 to use their power to seek out the best opportunity to destroy the Zong Consortium.

As the saying went, slap not a smiling face. Even Zhou Yinglong was not saying anything at this moment.

After the food was prepared, the aroma spread throughout the entire campsite. Zong Xiang asked the chef to cut him a slice of mutton. He grabbed it and put it into his mouth. "Let me taste it first for you all.... Mmm, it's cooked. The meat is crispy on the outside and tender on the inside, so please enjoy it. I won't disturb you any further and hope that you'll have a pleasant journey in the Northwest."

After saying that, Zong Xiang actually left with his men.

The taste test seemed more like it was to prove to Wang Shengzhi and the others that the food was not poisoned.

When Zong Xiang departed, Zhou Yinglong spat on the ground. "What good can possibly come of a hyena trying to please you?"

Wang Shengzhi smiled and said, "Why do you hate the Zong Consortium so much?"

"When Commander Zhang left the stronghold, the Zong Consortium loved throwing themselves at Stronghold 178, and even secretly sent their people behind the walls. That ended with the news in Stronghold 178 always getting leaked in advance." Zhou Yinglong said with a dark expression, "This group of hyenas kept fighting for power and benefits in Stronghold 178, creating a foul atmosphere in the organization. It was only later on that we found out the Chief of Staff was actually a bastard son of the Zong Consortium. Commander Zhang was quite upset after he found out about this. Since then, Stronghold 178 stopped accepting outsiders. That was mainly to prevent people with ulterior motives from infiltrating the stronghold."

"How did you guys learn he was an illegitimate son of the Zong Consortium?" Wang Shengyin asked.

Zhou Yinglong sneered. "Through torture, of course."

Ren Xiaosu thought to himself, 'Doesn't that make him a sleeper agent? Who knows how long that bastard son of the Zong Consortium was lurking to even rise to the role of chief of staff.'

Wang Shengzhi nodded. It was no wonder the people from Stronghold 178 hated the Zong Consortium so much. He smiled and said, "We used to worry about such matters too."

Zhou Yinglong was stunned. "Have you stopped worrying?"

"Mhm, it's been resolved," Wang Shengzhi replied.

"Can this be resolved too?" Zhou Yinglong frowned. "It's impossible to guard against those with ulterior motives once they get into the stronghold."

"We have artificial intelligence to depend on." Wang Shengyin smiled as she explained, "Our AI can use a camera to analyze whether a person is suspicious."

This time, it was Ren Xiaosu's turn to be confused. What was this artificial intelligence that was being talked about?

Ren Xiaosu was not the only one who was dumbfounded. Even Zhou Yinglong was confused. "What the hell is that?"

Wang Shengyin explained, "AI is something that our predecessors researched before The Cataclysm. It was fortunate that we managed to preserve all of the data from their research. To put it simply, we want our computer program to have the ability to analyze things independently like a normal human being. However, our AI doesn't really have sapience. Currently, the philosophy behind AI is still—"

"Don't tell me all that. I can't understand it," Zhou Yinglong interrupted. "Surely what you're talking about is mysticism, right?"

Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt like he could identify with Zhou Yinglong. Anything he could not understand would immediately be deemed superstitious.

He knew what machines and programs were, but to make machines and programs think like humans? Was that even possible? Ren Xiaosu did not believe it. Machines were just machines.

Due to The Cataclysm, humanity's scientific advancement deviated. Whatever research that remained behind would continue to get studied and become the mainstream research direction of the organizations. This would allow them to instantly gain a lead over the other organizations in certain fields.

Wang Shengzhi said, "Your Stronghold 178 can also deploy our AI to screen for any spies."

Zhou Yinglong wasn't stupid. He chuckled and said bluntly, "Although I don't know what that thing is, and it might be very reliable in screening for spies, our Stronghold 178 will never allow something like that to monitor us. What if you can operate it remotely? We don't have the technology to fight you."

Wang Shengzhi did not mind. "It's fine, I was just offering a suggestion."

Zhou Yinglong wondered, "Even your machines have become intelligent. Please don't tell me you live in a floating stronghold in the sky or something."

Wang Shengyin laughed. "That's pseudoscience. What kind of propulsion can support an entire stronghold and make it float high in the air? Humans can't achieve something like that. There isn't actually much of a difference between our stronghold and your stronghold except we live a little more prosperously, have more high rises, and have better living conditions. We have factories and grain fields outside the stronghold just like you. The nanomachines the Yang Consortium and Li Consortium developed are not something we have."

The entire conversation, Ren Xiaosu did not say a word. As a refugee, he should not understand these things, and nobody cared if he could understand them.

Chapter 379 The two great jinxes

Wang Shengyin carried on explaining more about artificial intelligence. For example, the practical field of artificial intelligence was not very wide. It was mainly put into the stronghold's surveillance cameras to create the so-called "eye in the sky" function.

It was precisely because of the appearance of such an artificial intelligence that the Central Plains could become a civilization where one wouldn't need to shut their doors at night. It could even analyze thefts and inform the stronghold's Public Order Division to arrest the thief.

Thus, the rumor that people in the Central Plains did not close their doors at night was not because that place was civilized, but because it was too easy to be caught after committing a crime.

Ren Xiaosu could not help but ask, "Are there also refugees in the Central Plains?"

Wang Shengyin looked at Ren Xiaosu. "Yes."

Ren Xiaosu realized the Central Plains were not exactly a paradise either. From his point of view, there was no such thing as paradise as long as oppression existed.

When Ren Xiaosu learned of the meaning of the phrase "artificial intelligence," he found it extremely ridiculous. Back when he was still living in town, he did not even own any electronics!

In the entire town, only brick houses like the ones that Wang Fugui lived in had electrical cables wired. The rest of the refugees did not even have light bulbs in their homes, but someone here was actually saying that machines in the Central Plains were close to being intelligent?

Ren Xiaosu found this unreal.

Zhou Yinglong stated, "That means the combat strength of those in Central Plains is about the same as ours, but the only difference is that there's been a breakthrough in this pain of an AI thing." To this burly man from Stronghold 178, the first thing he was most concerned about was the combat strength of those in the Central Plains.

Wang Shengzhi laughed and said, "The wars happening in the Central Plains aren't going to reach Stronghold 178 any time soon, so don't worry."

"Who can say?" Zhou Yinglong muttered. "Alright, get some rest. We'll reach Stronghold 178 in another two days."

At this moment, Ren Xiaosu was leaning on a mound. Here he was at the northernmost part of the valley, an area that was closest to where the Zong Consortium called its territory, where the vast expanse was covered in yellow dust.

Because there were no industrial activities out here, the stars in the sky seemed to be right in front of him.

But there was no one to keep watch for Ren Xiaosu anymore.

Ren Xiaosu stared into the void while thinking. No matter how hard he tried to fall asleep, he just could not.

He wondered where Yan Liuyuan was right now. Perhaps he was already on his way to the Central Plains? Did Wang Fugui and the others survive? Ren Xiaosu had seen Jiang Wu's power undergo a new transformation at the last minute before they got swept away by the flood. So with Jiang Wu around, the others might have survived.

According to Wang Shengzhi, the Central Plains were downstream of this river. It would flow past Strongholds 46, 37, 28, 7, 9, and end at Stronghold 1. If Ren Xiaosu wanted to seek out his family, he could go there according to this route.

Ren Xiaosu made a mental note of it. He would definitely go and look for Yan Liuyuan after the Zong Consortium was destroyed. But before the Zong Consortium's destruction, Ren Xiaosu did not want to drag Yan Liuyuan, Wang Fugui, and the others into this mess.

At this moment, Wang Shengzhi rolled up to Ren Xiaosu in his wheelchair and asked, "Are you thinking about your family and friends?"

Ren Xiaosu gave him a look. "Actually, I don't have any family left, just friends who were like family."

"I'll help you look for them after I return to the Central Plains. Tell me their names." Wang Shengzhi smiled and said, "If they really did manage to get to the Central Plains, I'll definitely help you locate them."

However, Ren Xiaosu remained silent for a moment. He did not want to give Wang Fugui and Yan Liuyuan's names because he did not know if Wang Shengzhi was a good or bad person. How could he possibly entrust the safety of Wang Fugui and the others to someone else? He believed that even without Wang Shengzhi's help, Wang Fugui and the others would still be able to live well.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly said, "Thank you, but only one of my friends still remains. His name is Li Shentan."

Ren Xiaosu did not tell the truth.

Wang Shengzhi smiled and said, "Alright, I'll remember it."

After the convoy restarted their journey, the Zong Consortium did not reappear. After driving for some distance, the sunset in the wilderness was starting to arrive later.

On the night before reaching Stronghold 178, the sun only went below the horizon after 8 PM.

The vastness of the Northwest was something Ren Xiaosu had never seen before when he was in the Southwest. In his wheelchair, Wang Shengzhi looked out into the vast plains and snowy mountains in the distance and said with emotion, "Today, I'm finally able to appreciate how large this world truly is."

Zhou Yinglong chuckled and said, "A real man should be living out here. You people from the Central Plains aren't noble enough."

Wang Shengzhi did not refute that. He asked, "Why did Commander Zhang leave Stronghold 178?"

Zhou Yinglong asked in return, "And how did you get to know our commander?"

"After Commander Zhang left Stronghold 178 all those years ago, he traveled to the Central Plains. We got to know each other then." Wang Shengzhi smiled and said, "Back then, I still had full control of my legs. But time passes like a song. He and I are both getting old."

Zhou Yinglong curled his lips. "Our commander is still young though."

All of a sudden, a convoy of cars appeared on the horizon. Zhou Yinglong waved excitedly and said, "I used the satellite phone to inform the commander yesterday that you were arriving soon. Who'd have thought you'd be so important that the commander would even come out personally to welcome you?"

Wang Shengzhi smiled without saying anything. Beside him, Wang Shengyin looked at Ren Xiaosu. "When we get to Stronghold 178, it shouldn't be difficult for my brother to arrange for you to join Stronghold 178 with his influence."

Ren Xiaosu was a little stunned. How long had it been since he last saw Zhang Jinglin?

He had squatted outside the school and listened to the classes for three years. Later on, he was finally allowed to attend classes in the school by Zhang Jinglin. Counting the days, Zhang Jinglin and he had known each other for quite some time. But that teacher had turned into the commander of Stronghold 178 all of a sudden.

The vehicles on the horizon drove over in the twilight of the sunset. When the convoy arrived in front of everyone, the first person to jump out of a vehicle was someone Ren Xiaosu knew: Xu Xianchu.

When Xu Xianchu saw Zhou Yinglong and the others, he was stunned. Zhou Yinglong smiled and said, "Bro, why have you come in advance to pick us up?"

Afterwards, Xu Xianchu walked in a trance past him and came to Ren Xiaosu. When he saw Ren Xiaosu's pale face and the bloodstains on his body, he asked anxiously, "What happened? You got injured?"

Ren Xiaosu smiled and said, "It's just a minor injury. I'll be fine soon."

“You call that a minor injury?” Xu Xianchu was shocked. He lifted Ren Xiaosu’s shirt and saw the scar on the right side of Ren Xiaosu’s abdomen. “It’s a penetrating wound? Who did this? Weren’t you at Stronghold 88?”

Ren Xiaosu said, “It’s a long story. This was done by the Zong Consortium.”

“Where’s Liuyuan?” Xu Xianchu looked around at everyone. “And where’s Wang Fugui?”

Ren Xiaosu’s face darkened for a moment. “We got separated.”

Zhou Yinglong, Wang Shengyin, and Wang Shengzhi were all stunned. “What’s going on? Didn’t he say he was a normal refugee?”

Meanwhile, Zhou Yinglong was even more surprised. He had never heard Xu Xianchu having friends on the outside... Wait a minute! It seemed like Xu Xianchu really did have a friend on the outside.... Damn!

Chapter 380 Attitude switches faster than flipping through a book!

The people in Stronghold 178 had all mocked Xu Xianchu for being a jinx. But later on, everyone realized it wasn’t Xu Xianchu when nothing happened to Stronghold 178 since he arrived.

Later, they heard from him that he only managed to join Stronghold 178 thanks to a recommendation letter by his friend. Otherwise, he couldn’t have even gotten inside Stronghold 178. And it was this friend who was the most unfortunate one. Whichever stronghold he went to would surely collapse. After Xu Xianchu came to Stronghold 178, he had only ever mentioned this friend of his. So Zhou Yinglong quickly put two and two together.

While they were traveling here, Zhou Yinglong thought Ren Xiaosu was a normal refugee. On one hand, Ren Xiaosu’s act was very believable. After all, he really was a refugee to begin with. On the other hand, the information Ren Xiaosu mentioned regarding the refugee settlement matched up with what Zhou Yinglong had asked.

So why had his status changed all of a sudden?

Wang Shengyin pursed her lips. She whispered to Wang Shengzhi, “Brother, he lied to us. He’s too deceptive.”

After saving Ren Xiaosu, Wang Shengyin was the one who stitched up his wound. She cleaned off the dirt on his face too. She had thought Ren Xiaosu was a pitiful refugee who looked rather honest. But in the end, he didn’t speak a single truthful word the entire trip.

Women hated being lied to. In just an instant, Wang Shengyin’s impression of Ren Xiaosu had gone down the drain. The only thing she did not expect was that Ren Xiaosu actually had contact with Stronghold 178.

Wang Shengzhi smiled indifferently and said, “He’s not exactly deceptive. It’s quite normal that he didn’t trust us. It must be this cautiousness that helped him to survive in the wilderness. But at his age, I wonder what he’s been through to constantly be so wary.”

“He still lied!” Wang Shengyin got unhappy.

At this moment, Zhang Jinglin got out of a car. There was also a group of people from the convoy standing guard next to him. Zhang Jinglin said to them with a laugh, "You guys don't have to be so uptight. Everyone here is an old friend."

But no matter what he said, the burly men behind still followed him closely. Someone mumbled, "What if someone tries to harm you?"

Wang Shengzhi was smiling as he watched this scene play out. He was a little envious of Zhang Jinglin's high status in Stronghold 178. He was clearly a frail scholar, yet he was being supported by this group of burly Northwestern men.

The people following Zhang Jinglin were all fully armed and looked extremely menacing. If they were deployed to their stronghold in the Central Plains, the AI might think they were bad guys and tell the Public Order Division to arrest them all.

Zhang Jinglin suddenly saw Ren Xiaosu as well. He frowned and greeted Wang Shengzhi briefly before coming over to Ren Xiaosu. "What happened? Where's Liuyuan? Where's Xiaoyu?"

Just like Xu Xianchu, Zhang Jinglin lifted Ren Xiaosu's shirt and took a look at his wound. "It's a puncture. Could this be the same as the wounds some of our soldiers suffered when they got ambushed?"

Someone behind him leaned forward to have a look. "It's been stitched up, so I can't tell. Why don't we remove the stitches and get a better look?"

Ren Xiaosu was speechless. Who the hell would suggest removing the stitches before a wound healed just so they could have a look?

Zhang Jinglin asked seriously, "Who did this?"

"It was the Zong Consortium's Zong Cheng." Ren Xiaosu did not hold back anymore now that Zhang Jinglin was here. They'd known each other for many years and were very good friends. He said, "We had planned on heading to Mt. Kushui to settle down there. But along the way, we encountered Zong Cheng, who led his men in an ambush."

Zhang Jinglin frowned. "Zong Cheng!"

"Mr. Zhang, do you know Zong Cheng?" Ren Xiaosu was stunned for a moment.

"I do." Zhang Jinglin said, "Zong Cheng and Zong Xiang are the cream of the crop among the younger generation of the Zong clan. It seems like the higher-ups of the Zong Consortium intend to let Zong Xiang take control of the Zong Consortium, while Zong Cheng will be Zong Xiang's Shadow. They're biological brothers."

Ren Xiaosu remembered the clean-shaven young man named Zong Xiang. He was practically close enough to him that he could have killed him. But it wasn't exactly a missed opportunity either. By killing Zong Xiang, Zong Cheng would probably get alerted. There were still many more opportunities in the future to kill them together.

However, Zhang Jinglin said, "Zong Cheng is a supernatural being. His superpower seems to allow him to make someone into his puppet, but we still can't verify that as he keeps a very low-profile and doesn't act predictably."

Ren Xiaosu frowned. If Zong Cheng were really as Zhang Jinglin had said, could it be that Zong Cheng had attacked them because he wanted to control him? No! If he wanted to control him, he wouldn't have tried to kill him. So that meant... he was trying to gain control of Yang Xiaojin?

Wang Shengzhi and the others had been cast aside. Wang Shengyin stared blankly as Zhang Jinglin and Xu Xianchu stood around Ren Xiaosu. Was this young man so highly revered in Stronghold 178? What the hell? They had picked up this young man on the road. How did he turn out to be such an important person? They really did pick him up by chance!

Wang Shengyin turned to look at Zhou Yinglong. "You don't know this Ren Xiaosu? Isn't he from Stronghold 178?"

Zhou Yinglong was also a little confused. "I didn't know he knew the commander either."

Moreover, Zhang Jinglin's attitude towards Ren Xiaosu seemed to be a little special. Now that Zhou Yinglong was thinking about it, Xu Xianchu was also recommended to Stronghold 178 by Ren Xiaosu, wasn't he?

At this moment, Zhang Jinglin whispered something to Ren Xiaosu. Then he turned around and said with embarrassment to Wang Shengzhi, "I'm sorry, Shengzhi, but Ren Xiaosu is my student. I wasn't expecting to see him here, and he's even seriously injured too."

Wang Shengzhi said in surprise, "He's your student? Then why isn't he a member of Stronghold 178?"

Zhang Jinglin replied, "This student is a little more peculiar. Let's head back to Stronghold 178 first before I fill you in further."

Zhou Yinglong suddenly muttered, "It's over, we're done for. The strongholds he's been to have all collapsed. Our Stronghold 178 has collected two of these great jinxes together. And one of them is even a student of the commander!"

The burly man next to him asked, "Old Zhou, what are you mumbling about?"

"Nothing, it's nothing..."

When they set off again, Ren Xiaosu was still sitting in Wang Shengyin's vehicle. But he noticed that something was off about Wang Shengyin's expression. She looked to be sulking. However, Ren Xiaosu did not give any explanation and only said, "Thank you for saving me. I had no choice, so please understand."

Wang Shengyin pursed her lips and said, "Yeah, that's right, you're a big shot, so of course you had to hide your identity to prevent others from harming you."

Ren Xiaosu did not say anything further. He just looked out of the window. Zhang Jinglin had told him earlier that they should head to Stronghold 178 first. Stronghold 178 had some ideas for dealing with the Zong Consortium. If he wanted to seek revenge, he could only rely on Stronghold 178 for now. Even the Qing Consortium couldn't divert their attention as they were busy defending against the Yang Consortium's desperate counterattacks.

Zhang Jinglin knew exactly what Ren Xiaosu wanted. So he only needed one sentence to convince him.

All of a sudden, Wang Shengyin asked in a soft voice, "Did something happen to your family as well? Was it caused by the Zong Consortium?"

"Mhm." Ren Xiaosu continued staring out of the window as he grunted a response.

"Whatever, you're forgiven." Wang Shengyin said, "Don't feel too sad. We'll help you find your friends in the Central Plains."

Ren Xiaosu sighed. A woman's mood was really complicated and volatile. Their attitude could switch faster than flipping through a book!