

First Order 621

Chapter 621 Flower

In this vast steppe, it was extremely common for the nomadic tribes to be engaged in strife with one another. Even though civilization had once been ended by The Cataclysm, it was still very difficult to change the nature of the people living on this land.

The large tribes set up their royal courts, appointed their kings of the left and right wings,[1] and designated some lower-ranked tribal leaders to complete their control over the steppe.

However, as the steppe was too vast, a truly ambitious person would sometimes rise and overturn the original hierarchy of power.

Hassan felt he was currently witnessing such a change. When he heard the howling of the wolves, he was no longer afraid. Instead, he even felt a little excited.

The power displayed by his master had surpassed the level of all the other lords in the grasslands. That was the power of the gods.

After Yan Liuyuan sent the wolves away, Hassan and the others led the remaining horses and cows on the battlefield back to the tribe. The mutated horses were now the main mode of transportation for the nomads in the grasslands, while oxen were mainly used for transporting supplies.

When the wolves attacked this group of people, they were even specifically instructed by Yan Liuyuan not to harm the horses and the cows. This, in Hassan's eyes, was truly a miracle.

After all, wolves were carnivores, so to be able to make them give up their prey, who else but a god could do something like?

On their way back, Yan Liuyuan kept silent the entire time. When they were about to arrive at the tribe, Xiaoyu suddenly said, "I shouldn't have countered your orders in front of the others."

Xiaoyu looked a little gloomy. She had followed Yan Liuyuan to the grasslands and knew exactly what he wanted to achieve. Unifying the grasslands was only the first step.

She could not stop Yan Liuyuan from wanting to do this, nor did she have any intention of stopping him, much less have any reason to stop him. So she just quietly watched everything from behind Yan Liuyuan.

Xiaoyu knew very well that the young man next to her was likely no longer the little brother she used to have. He was now the leader of a tribe. In the future, he would even become the leader of many more tribes, eventually setting up his own royal court to take control of the entire plains.

Therefore, she might not be able to talk to Yan Liuyuan like she used to.

But... she did not want to see this young man who used to be innocent and naïve fall into the abyss.

But after she said that to him, Yan Liuyuan suddenly smiled and said, "Thankfully you're here, Big Sister Xiaoyu."

A strong gust of wind started blowing again, causing Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu's clothes to flutter. Yan Liuyuan continued saying in the wind, "Sometimes, I really wish that my brother were still here with me. If it were him, it would probably be easier for him to unify the plains. But I know that he doesn't have such thoughts. He was never an ambitious person and just wants to protect the people around him."

Xiaoyu listened quietly.

"Regardless of whether my brother admits it or not, he's still a good person in my heart. Actually, Big Sister Xiaoyu, you were right to stop me today. I was just thinking that if my brother were still alive, he would definitely hate this tyrannical me." Yan Liuyuan sighed.

"He won't." Xiaoyu shook her head and said softly, "You're the most important person to Xiaosu. Even if you fall into the abyss, he'll still pull you out from it."

"Mhm."

Xiaoyu was very important to Yan Liuyuan. Only with her by his side could he continue being clear-headed.

On this day, Yan Liuyuan stood atop a grassy hill and looked south. He remained there from dusk until night, then from night until dawn.

Hassan came out of his tent several times and looked at the back of his master from afar. He felt his master looked a little lonely.

In the morning, when Yan Liuyuan returned to his tent, he was surprised to see a young girl kneeling inside.

Yan Liuyuan asked, "You're Hassan's daughter?"

The girl was a little timid. "Father asked me to come and serve you."

Yan Liuyuan smiled helplessly. "You may leave. I have my own hands and feet, so I don't need anyone to serve me. By the way, what's your name?"

"Tsetseg." The young girl answered timidly, "It means 'flower.'"

"How old are you?" Yan Liuyuan asked again.

"13. I'll be 14 in another three months," Tsetseg answered.

Yan Liuyuan nodded. "Alright, I'll remember it. Go on back to your mother now."

But just as Yan Liuyuan was about to lie down and rest, Tsetseg ran out and brought in a basin of hot water and a cotton cloth.

She soaked the cotton cloth in the hot water and went to wipe Yan Liuyuan's face. Yan Liuyuan asked, "Aren't you afraid of me?"

"Dad said that you're a god who's the protector of our tribe, so I don't have to be afraid." Tsetseg said.

Yan Liuyuan was stunned. It was not because Hassan had called him a god, but because he said that he was their “protector.”

He softened his tone. “I’m not a god. I’m just a normal person like you.”

“But you can command the wolves and command the eagles in the sky.” Tsetseg said, “And the girls in the tribe... they all say that you’re very good-looking...”

By her second line, Tsetseg’s voice softened.

Yan Liuyuan was indeed different from the males in the tribe. He did not have rough skin that was damaged by long exposure to ultraviolet rays, and his appearance was also more “defined.”

So many girls in the tribe were saying that only a god could look so good.

Xiaoyu had also mentioned this to Yan Liuyuan. Yan Liuyuan wondered how long it had been since these nomads saw people from the Central Plains.

When Tsetseg saw Yan Liuyuan not respond to her after a long time, she got a little anxious. “I can help comb your hair, wash your clothes, and cook for you. Dad wants me to stay in your tent. He says that... I’m yours from now on. If you chase me out, I’ll be very embarrassed.”

Yan Liuyuan was stunned. What kind of tradition was this?!

He laughed and said, “Then come help me comb my hair, but you don’t have to remain in my tent every day. After you bring hot water over in the morning, you can go back to your mother’s side.”

“Don’t I have to come over at night?” Tsetseg asked softly. To be honest, she wasn’t ready for this yet.

“No,” Yan Liuyuan said with a smile.

Then Tsetseg sat down behind Yan Liuyuan and wiped his hair with a wet towel, being careful and meticulous about it.

After a moment of silence, she could not help but say, “You’re not as dangerous as I thought. They’re all saying you made the wolves kill a lot of people yesterday, much more than the people we have in our tribe. But Big Sister Xiaoyu said that you’re a very nice person, so she told us not to be afraid of you.”

Before this, Tsetseg had lied. When Hassan told her to come to Yan Liuyuan’s tent, she was indeed a little scared.

But now she really was not scared anymore.

Yan Liuyuan did not respond to Tsetseg. Meanwhile, Tsetseg continued chattering, “If I only need to come over every morning to comb your hair, I can still go gathering with others during the day.”

Yan Liuyuan wondered, “Gathering?”

“Going out to gather some of the edible fungi,” Tsetseg explained. “Otherwise, we can only drink milk or go hungry. Dad said that many of the cows and goats died in the blizzard, so we can’t eat them anymore. We have to wait until they give birth next year.”

Chapter 622 Searching for sal

The cows and goats were to the nomads what farming was for the Central Plains. It certainly wasn’t as though they could eat their crops or livestock as they pleased.

However, after Yan Liuyuan’s arrival, Hassan had been slaughtering the tribe’s goats for Yan Liuyuan to eat to show his respect. As for the rest of the tribespeople, only the younger, stronger manual laborers would get to eat meat, and even that meat would have to come from the animals that died in the blizzard.

For the young girls like Tsetseg, even though she was Hassan’s daughter, she did not receive any preferential treatment.

It was also probably because of Hassan’s impartiality that he became the tribe’s chief.

The moment Yan Liuyuan arrived at their tribe, he was treated with the highest respect. Therefore, he had never had to experience the hardships of the nomads. When Xiaoyu and he saw that these people reared their own livestock, they thought that the tribe was quite well-to-do. However, they did not know the livestock were not supposed to be killed at whim. With so many people in the tribe, if they only ate beef and goat meat for their meals, they would probably have to slaughter several of them in one day alone.

Their tribe could not survive such extravagance.

When Yan Liuyuan heard this, he started asking Tsetseg about the situation in the tribe in detail. Only then did he realize that not only did the tribespeople not get to eat meat often, they also rarely got to have salt.

Salt was extremely scarce in the grasslands. The nomads had always supplemented their salt intake through eating mutton, beef, and drinking goat milk. The meat they usually ate did not have much taste, and only the meat served to Yan Liuyuan would be seasoned with some salt.

But now, as the tribespeople were not allowed to eat any meat, they could not replenish their salt intake. Many of the women and elderly would get dizzy, experience muscle spasms, or show signs of nausea.

When such symptoms appeared among the tribespeople, due to a lack of knowledge, they just felt they might be ill or something. So everyone would gather around the firepit and pray for blessings from the gods, hoping they would get cured in the process.

There was no salt or medicine in this place, and the tribespeople would only resort to killing goats if they got too hungry.

“That’s right, we’re the poor people of this era, so why did I think that y’all were leading a good life?” Yan Liuyuan said with a bitter smile, “It’s my fault.”

Yan Liuyuan had Tsetseg call Hassan over. Hassan glared at his daughter on the way to Yan Liuyuan's tent. Then he respectfully said to Yan Liuyuan, "Master, don't listen to Tsetseg's nonsense. Actually, things aren't that difficult for our tribe yet."

"Enough, just listen to me." Yan Liuyuan said calmly, "The women and elderly are showing signs of nausea because they don't have meat to eat anymore, so they can't replenish their salt intake. We need salt."

Hassan said awkwardly, "Salt is very scarce here. Only the large tribes have it. We need to pay tribute to the big tribes with our livestock every year to obtain the precious salt that they have."

Yan Liuyuan realized this sounded like one of the methods the consortiums used to control the refugees. Hassan's tribe was just like the refugees outside the strongholds, always getting controlled by others.

But at the thought of this, Yan Liuyuan became even more interested. He wanted to lead these people to a good life.

Yan Liuyuan asked, "Don't y'all have the ability to get salt by yourselves? This steppe is so vast, so you should be able to find some, right? It might not be much, but there can't be completely nothing."

"The salt pools are all controlled by the large tribes, and there aren't that many salt pools in the steppe to begin with," Hassan replied. "I heard that the large tribes don't even have enough salt for themselves."

Yan Liuyuan carefully recalled what Ren Xiaosu had told him about wilderness survival. He did not like learning, but he would always take note of everything Ren Xiaosu mentioned to him.

Yan Liuyuan suddenly said to Hassan, "Gather the herdsmen. Ask them if they remember where and what the cows licked when they brought them out to graze."

He remembered that Ren Xiaosu had told him before that all mammals needed to take in salt. Humans had long lost their instinct to survive in the wilderness, but they were a species that relied on their intelligence. If they could not find salt by themselves, they could always get the animals to help them locate it.

How did the animals in the plains replenish their salt intake? Some of the cattle farms in the Central Plains would place some coarse salt in the cowsheds for them to lick. Meanwhile, in the grasslands, there would be salt licks that cows would find to replenish their salt intake.

As expected, Hassan managed to get an answer after asking a few tribesmen.

After all, there were only a few places the cows liked licking when they were grazing in the pastures, so how could they not know?

Yan Liuyuan immediately set off and led Hassan and the others to that pasture.

What happened after was simple. Yan Liuyuan led a group of people to pry open the frozen ground and bring a lot of the soil under the grass back to the tribe.

Yan Liuyuan did not know how the salt should be extracted, but he knew for sure there was salt in this soil.

He could only use a makeshift method of mixing water with the soil before filtering it through a cotton fabric over and over again until the water cleared up. Then the water was placed over the firepit for distillation.

Very quickly, Hassan, who was standing off to the side, saw a faint layer of yellowish-white crystals forming at the bottom of the pot. It was a very minute quantity. As the extraction process was not up to par, the crystals that formed did not look clean.

Hassan could not wait any longer and placed a little bit of it into his mouth. Then he looked at Yan Liuyuan in surprise. "Master, this is really salt!"

Regardless of its appearance, it was still salt!

Yan Liuyuan heaved a sigh of relief. In the past, Ren Xiaosu would go out into the wilderness to look for the roots of a walnut tree to boil in water. The water that was cooked would then carry salt content. At that time, it was always Ren Xiaosu who was responsible for looking for food, and now, it was Yan Liuyuan's turn.

He said to Hassan, "Scrape these off. I want y'all to go to the salt lick and do the same as I did earlier, understand?"

"Yes, I understand," Hassan said excitedly. This was indeed a god. He could even extract salt from barren soil. How powerful!

Actually, the nomads were capable of similar expertise like this long before The Cataclysm. But after civilization had developed to a certain extent back then, the steppe inhabitants did not lack any salt intake in their daily lives anymore. Even while living in the north, the people still had access to salt that came from thousands of kilometers away.

The steppe inhabitants from before The Cataclysm were going through a formal education system during their schooling years, and no teachers had ever taught them how to search for salt in the grasslands.

Therefore, by the time The Cataclysm occurred, there were even some steppe inhabitants who knew the poem, "Preface to Prince Teng's Pavilion." [1] But when it came to surviving in the grasslands, they had lost the crucial skills necessary for that.

Gradually, the pressure to survive started hanging over everyone's heads. Eventually, even the "Preface to Prince Teng's Pavilion" was forgotten.

All that was left was an instinct to survive. After that, ambitious people began rising up and consolidating their authority over the grasslands. Then they started getting ideas about treating the Central Plains as their granary to feed themselves.

However, there had been some flaws in their understanding of the world. When they arrived at the Central Plains, they realized they were actually the ones in the most miserable state after The Cataclysm. Strongholds had already been established in the territory of the Central Plains, and they were even equipped with firearms.

The nomads living in the grasslands did not even quite understand what the South had become. Only Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu knew.

Yan Liuyuan sat in the tent while Xiaoyu, who was next to him, kept smiling at him. He asked, "Big Sister Xiaoyu, why are you smiling?"

"I'm smiling because I find that you look just like your brother now." Xiaoyu said gently, "He'll definitely be proud of you, don't you think?"

Xiaoyu realized Yan Liuyuan had fallen silent and was looking rather down.

Yan Liuyuan said softly, "Big Sis, I miss my brother."

623 Throne

Yan Liuyuan underestimated Hassan and the others' enthusiasm for harvesting salt. For the next three days, Hassan led the members of the tribe to the grazing area and dug up the ground the cows liked to lick.

The more one lacked something, the more they would desire it. Although there was also salt content in the beef and mutton, anyone who had ever had boiled beef and mutton would know they were completely different types of food from meat that was seasoned with salt.

Moreover, Yan Liuyuan had told him the illness the women and elders in the tribe were suffering from was caused by a lack of salt. Therefore, Hassan was exceptionally motivated to harvest as much salt as he could.

Only with salt would one have strength.

In just three days, Hassan had forcefully harvested a bowl of salt from the frozen ground with the help of his tribe.

Under Yan Liuyuan's instructions, he slaughtered another goat and added in some salt while cooking it. Just drinking the broth alone felt blissful.

Although his heart ached when he was killing the goat, when he saw the excited looks on the faces of his people, Hassan's wrinkled face was also full of smiles.

However, on the afternoon he slaughtered the goat, another envoy arrived from a distant grassland.

Yan Liuyuan was already standing at the entrance of the tribe. He quietly watched as the other party arrived.

The wolves had discovered the enemy three hours ago, but they did not attack.

The envoy was riding a muscular horse and had a long saber tied at his waist. Next to Yan Liuyuan, Hassan said, "Master, this saber is only worn by the battle-hardened warriors of that large tribe. Be careful. don't let him get too close to you."

Yan Liuyuan smiled and nodded. "Don't worry. Let's see what he has to say first."

The envoy came up to Yan Liuyuan and jumped off his horse about 20 meters away. He slowly walked over. "I'm the khan's envoy, Bogdei. The khan has ordered me to invite you to the royal tent for a meeting. He's willing to appoint you as Commander-in-Chief of the Right and let you take charge of a section of the steppe!"

This envoy did not sound as arrogant as the one who came previously. Instead, he was much politer.

Yan Liuyuan was surprised. He looked at Hassan. "I killed his subject, but he wants me to replace the other party?"

The previous Commander-in-Chief of the Right had just died by his hands. The khan did not even mention revenge and was actually trying to offer him amnesty and enlistment instead?

Hassan explained, "Such things happen sometimes. On the steppe, everyone only respects strength."

A large tribe in the steppe was actually not particularly united. It could be made up of about 50 to 60 smaller tribes, so it did not seem like it would be a big deal to replace some appointments with another holder.

But Yan Liuyuan felt that something was not right. That khan was about to set off for the South for a raid soon, so it should be the time for him to establish his authority. If he did not kill Yan Liuyuan, how could he convince the masses?

So many of the smaller tribes were watching and waiting to see what would happen. If it were other times, the other party might really be serious about enlisting him into their ranks, but it was definitely not so right now.

Even a young man like Yan Liuyuan understood this principle, so how could the other party who was the commander of dozens of tribes not know this would be the wrong move?

Then the envoy said, "If you don't believe me, I have the khan's edict that you can look at." The other party walked forward and took out a goatskin scroll.

But before he could get close, Hassan shouted, "Master, be careful!"

Then Hassan attempted to push Yan Liuyuan aside. However, Hassan did not manage to make Yan Liuyuan budge. Instead, it was Yan Liuyuan who pushed him away.

Hassan turned around in panic and saw a silvery glow coursing through Yan Liuyuan's blood vessels. It was just like how Yan Liuyuan looked when he first arrived at their tribe in the blizzard. He was exuding an extremely mysterious aura.

When the envoy got right up to Yan Liuyuan, he unsheathed his saber. A blinding glow surged towards Yan Liuyuan like a wave crashing upon him. The envoy had come here with the mission to kill this young man in front of him. Once he accomplished that, he would become the new Commander-in-Chief of the Right!

Based on the description of that previously blinded envoy, Yan Liuyuan was likely a supernatural being. But the young man's power could probably only control wild beasts, such as eagles and wolves.

However, there were no supernatural beings that did not have any weaknesses. Since his power was to control wild beasts, then it should mean his physical body was very weak.

As long as the battle-hardened warriors of the tribe could get close to him and prevent him from controlling beasts, they could get rid of this great threat.

The khan had indeed recognized Yan Liuyuan as a great threat. Someone who could control over a 1,000 wolves would probably and easily strike a huge blow to his troops if they were to clash.

Furthermore, the herdsmen in their tribes, being ignorant people, would surely get confused upon seeing such a strange sight. They might even break down before the clash began.

Therefore, he had to kill Yan Liuyuan. On one hand, he needed to establish his authority to stabilize his own rule. On the other hand, he had to nip the threat in the bud.

For this, he did not even hesitate to give away the appointment of Commander-in-Chief of the Right!

But when this warrior named Bogdei got to Yan Liuyuan's side and saw the mysterious silvery strands on his face, he suddenly got an ominous feeling.

With the saber coming straight down at Yan Liuyuan, the nervous Bogdei was suddenly overjoyed. He did not expect the young man to not even dodge!

Even a god like the khan could probably not withstand a saber strike like this one, right?

Clang!

When the steel saber came slashing down, the sound of metal colliding rang out. At some point, Yan Liuyuan, who was standing in front of Bogdei, got wrapped in armor of steel. When the steel saber struck the head of the armor, it could only leave behind a white mark!

Yan Liuyuan did have some shortcomings due to his power. He did not have a strong physique like the other supernatural beings, so if an enemy were to get close, he could easily die.

But Ren Xiaosu had already helped him mitigate that!

Ren Xiaosu had accumulated nanomachines from dozens of nanosoldiers and gave them all to Yan Liuyuan before they got separated. Ren Xiaosu had done so precisely because he was worried something would happen to Yan Liuyuan.

This amount of nanomachines was enough for Yan Liuyuan to complete his armor!

In the grasslands where heavy weapons were not available, not mentioning Yan Liuyuan's own power, just having this armor alone was enough for him to walk around brazenly!

This was a gift from Ren Xiaosu. Yan Liuyuan used his hand gloved with the armor to grab Bogdei's long saber before breaking it in two.

Bogdei was at a loss as he looked at the steel beast in front of him. How was he supposed to deal with a ferocious beast that could not even be damaged by a saber? Without his saber, was he going to use his teeth to bite it?

But before Bogdei could think about his next course of action, he saw the herdsmen behind the young Yan Liuyuan kneel down to him. These herdsmen from the tribe were genuflecting to Yan Liuyuan as though they were worshipping a god.

In their eyes, this was undoubtedly yet another miracle the gods had performed.

Yan Liuyuan smiled at Bogdei and said, "I understand the khan's intention now. I'll be happy to use your skulls to construct my throne."

If he wanted to rule over the entire steppe, he would first have to let the plains know of his arrival.

In the future, he would have to kill a lot more people. He would keep killing until this steppe belonged to him.

However this era had treated him, he would do the same back to it.

Xiaoyu watched quietly from the sidelines. She suddenly felt a little fortunate she was still by Yan Liuyuan's side.

Chapter 624 Regaining consciousness!

Stronghold 61 had already regained its vitality. The refugees quickly took to their jobs in the stronghold, and the entire place was back to running with law and order.

Due to the supervision of the Wang Consortium's artificial intelligence, some of the refugees who had sinister motives were also forced to settle down in the end. Those who still dared to cause trouble in the stronghold were mostly locked in jail, and many of them were sentenced to death.

However, the atmosphere in the stronghold was a little oppressive. Many of the refugees became afraid they would get imprisoned if they did anything wrong.

Regarding the entire running of Stronghold 61, the Wang Consortium's people specially recorded and organized detailed information into a report.

The officials of the Wang Consortium were especially serious about this matter. This was because it was what their boss, Wang Shengzhi, wanted. It was said the information would be used to train and improve the artificial intelligence.

Outside the stronghold, the houses Ren Xiaosu bought at a great discount were all sold for higher prices thanks to the Wang Consortium...

Of course, they were not sold too expensively either. After all, Ren Xiaosu had to consider the purchasing power of the refugees. There were not many refugees who could save that much money.

However, the prices Ren Xiaosu bought the houses for were incredibly low.

This left Old Wang feeling a little conflicted. He felt that Ren Xiaosu always seemed to be able to make a lot of money very easily. Meanwhile, he worked really hard and traveled extensively, yet the money he earned was way less than what Ren Xiaosu had.

At this moment, the town was filled with people again. After a month, the hustle and bustle in town was even more lively than ever.

As a matter of fact, before the incident at Stronghold 61, there were only around 40,000 people living in town. But after the trouble was taken care of, over 80,000 people had gathered there.

While Ren Xiaosu was playing cards in the tavern, he looked out of the window at the passing people and said with a sigh, "The Wang Consortium's move was really beyond everyone's expectations, and these are only the people we see in town. I think there's even more who got transported by military trucks to the factories. The Zhou and Kong Consortiums should have a problem on their hands right now. The fact that their factories have stopped running is the least of their worries, but if their food supply gets reduced next year, a lot of people are gonna go hungry."

When the Zhou and Kong Consortiums first found out about the incident at Stronghold 61, they had shown some sympathy on the surface and were willing to support the reconstruction process. But behind the scenes, they were probably gloating hard at what happened.

And now, they were completely dumbfounded. After the dust settled, the Wang Consortium actually ended up turning the tables on them.

Ren Xiaosu thought even more highly of Wang Shengzhi for this.

Beside him, Wang Yuchi asked, "But, Brother Xiaosu, why would the Wang Consortium need so many refugees?"

"Only with people will there be productivity." Wang Fugui explained from next to them, "The Wang Consortium is mainly located in the plains, and there's still many good fields in the wilderness that haven't been reclaimed yet. In the past, they did not have the manpower to do so, and it was difficult to break ranks and force the stronghold residents to go outside to farm. But now they suddenly have an overabundance of people to work for them."

Qin Sheng looked at them and said, "Less talk. Hurry up and play your cards."

“Oh yeah, a pair of fours.” Ren Xiaosu threw out two cards.

“A pair of fives.” Wang Fugui also took his turn. “By the way, Xiaosu, has that Zhou lady in your house regained consciousness yet?”

“No.” Ren Xiaosu frowned and said, “I don’t know what’s happening, but that woman has not regained consciousness even though an entire month has passed. I was thinking that since she is a floral supernatural being, she might’ve absorbed too much energy from the plant this time and ended up a vegetable....”

When he returned home at night, Ren Xiaosu looked quietly at Zhou Yingxue. The woman had been asleep for an entire month already, but there was still a healthy glow to her face even though she had not eaten or drunk anything. He muttered, “Looks like you won’t have to eat anymore in the future. That’ll be great. I could save some money on your meals that way....”

As he spoke, Ren Xiaosu kept staring at Zhou Yingxue’s fingers. It was written in the books that when a comatose person was about to wake up, they would start moving their fingers first.

But as Ren Xiaosu was staring at Zhou Yingxue’s fingers, a cold voice rang out, “Who are you?”

Ren Xiaosu jerked his head up to see that Zhou Yingxue’s eyes had opened. Her gaze was deep and cold, as though she had never met Ren Xiaosu before.

It fell silent in the room. Ren Xiaosu had gotten used to Zhou Yingxue lying here quietly in a coma. He was hoping she would wake up, but he was still shocked when she really did regain consciousness.

The candle in the room seemed unmoving, as though stilled by the heavy atmosphere in the air.

Meanwhile, Zhou Yingxue lay on the bed and looked at Ren Xiaosu coldly. Both of them were suddenly caught in a deadlock.

A second later, Ren Xiaosu muttered, “Did you really damage your brain? But I guess you did not have a brain to begin with anyway.”

Zhou Yingxue immediately got angry. “Master, is that how you see me? You’re the one who has no brain. How boring! Couldn’t you have just played along for a bit?”

“Get up already if you’re awake.” Ren Xiaosu said unhappily, “You’ve already occupied my bed for a month. Do you know how I got through this past month? I had to sleep on the ground! Is letting your master sleep on the ground what a maid should do? Is that even something a human should do?”

Zhou Yingxue looked at the mattress spread out by the window and softened. She carefully got up and asked, “Master, you’ve been guarding me for a month?”

“What do you think!” Ren Xiaosu snapped, “You slept well for the past month, but I went through hell. It’s winter now! Do you know how cold the ground is!”

Zhou Yingxue smiled apologetically and said, “Master, please sit down. I’ll massage your legs—”

“Forget about the leg massage!” Ren Xiaosu inspected Zhou Yingxue and asked, “Do you know what happened to you?”

“My memory stopped at the final moment I infused my energy into the creeper vine’s roots. Initially, I thought I could gain control of it, but my energy seemed to have only ‘cut’ a hole in its body, and its chaotic energy started flowing into me instead and then I passed out. I floated in the darkness for a long time in my subconsciousness and saw many strange bubbles glowing. In the bubbles, I could see the entire lives of some people.” Zhou Yingxue said, “I suspect they’re the memories left behind by those who died in the disaster after getting devoured by the creeper vine.”

Ren Xiaosu pondered that for a moment. “So, did you get a look at their bank accounts and passwords?”

Zhou Yingxue was taken aback before nearly bursting into tears. She cried out, “Oh no, Master! I forgot to check!”

“Is it too late to check now?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“It’s too late.” Zhou Yingxue was filled with regret. “When I woke up, all those memories disappeared.”

Ren Xiaosu sighed and said, “You’re usually quite the money-grubber, so why did you drop the ball at such a crucial moment?”

“Hey, wait a minute, Master!” Zhou Yingxue came back to her senses. “I’ve finally regained consciousness after an entire month, so why are you paying attention to money the moment I come to? Shouldn’t you at least be a bit more concerned for me?”

“Ahem.” Ren Xiaosu changed the topic. “By the way, do you feel any changes to your superpower?”

Actually, this was what Ren Xiaosu wanted to know the most. After all, Zhou Yingxue had absorbed the energy of several hundred thousand people from the stronghold. Even though that energy was absorbed via the creeper vine, it was still a shocking amount.

625 Qinghe in crisis

When she heard her master ask about her power, Zhou Yingxue thought for a moment and replied, “I just feel like I’m stronger than before...”

“Can you be more specific?” Ren Xiaosu raised an eyebrow. “What kind of metric did you use to figure that? Why don’t we head out to the wilderness and test out how strong your physical fitness is?”

Under normal circumstances, other than the particular case of Yan Liuyuan, the physical fitness of a supernatural being would increase accordingly with their power.

When they arrived in the wilderness, Ren Xiaosu had Zhou Yingxue run at full speed and punch a big tree.

To Ren Xiaosu’s surprise, the speed and strength Zhou Yingxue displayed were comparable to that of his shadow clone! And the shadow clone’s strength and speed were twice that of Ren Xiaosu’s!

In the past, Ren Xiaosu had deliberately observed that Zhou Yingxue's prior speed and strength were already at half the level of his. In other words, in terms of physical fitness alone, Zhou Yingxue was already four times stronger than before. She was now twice as strong as Ren Xiaosu.

Ren Xiaosu felt a little jealous. What kind of dogshit luck did this woman have?

Other supernatural beings, including Wang Congyang and Zhou Qi, who were the earliest to awaken their powers, only had a physical fitness level that was about the same as Ren Xiaosu's. In fact, they were not even as strong as Ren Xiaosu.

Yet Zhou Yingxue, who was brought into the stronghold by Ren Xiaosu and led by hand for a stroll, had achieved what most others could only dream of.

"Then what about your power? Are there any new developments?" Ren Xiaosu asked, "There should be a lot of changes in that area, right?"

Zhou Yingxue replied, "I only feel that I can make the plants more powerful after taking control of them. I also obtained a new seed ability that I can use to plant a creeper vine."

When Ren Xiaosu heard Zhou Yingxue say she could plant a creeper vine, he nearly choked. Was it a creeper vine as huge as the one that grew in Stronghold 61?

"Don't use that power carelessly." Ren Xiaosu said, "If others see that the creeper vine that you plant looks exactly like the one from Stronghold 61, they might think that you were responsible for that creeper vine from before."

However, Ren Xiaosu suddenly realized another important point. After the creeper vine had mutated and was absorbed by Zhou Yingxue, she gained the ability to plant a new type of seed.

So would that mean that if Zhou Yingxue were to encounter other mutated flora in the future, she could also fold them into her power? If that were the case, the variations of Zhou Yingxue's power would only grow more abundant.

So it turned out that the variations of her power still had the potential to grow.

Ren Xiaosu immediately planted a Potato Shooter in the ground. He looked at Zhou Yingxue. "This time, do you want to try absorbing the energy of this plant like you did for the creeper vine?"

Zhou Yingxue did as Ren Xiaosu said, but the Potato Shooter instantly withered!

Ren Xiaosu looked at Zhou Yingxue. "What happened?"

A green ball of energy within Zhou Yingxue's hand materialized into a seed. She said happily, "Master, I can now plant potatoes too!"

"It seems that if we hear about any more mutated plants, I'll have to take you there to collect them." Ren Xiaosu frowned and said, "I think I came across an article regarding some exotic plants that were

reported about in Hope Media's newspaper recently. I'll look for it later when we get back. In the future, we'll have to start paying more attention to such articles."

In the current day, not many plants had mutated yet. But even for those that did, they were generally not that aggressive. Otherwise, those people would not have been so slow to react to the creeper vines.

It was definitely a good thing that Zhou Yingxue had become stronger. The creeper vine seeds might just end up being very useful during critical times.

After returning to town, Ren Xiaosu saw the door of Qin Sheng's residence wide open. There were two people packing things inside the house.

He asked them, "Where's the owner of this house?"

When Qin Sheng heard that, he came out of the house and said to Ren Xiaosu, "I've just received news that I am to return to Luoyang City immediately. I enjoyed my time with Brother Xiaosu, but I have to leave now."

Ren Xiaosu wondered, "Don't you Riders have a rule that says that you have to stay in a town for a full year? Why are you leaving just like that?"

Ren Xiaosu had realized the rules the Riders lived by were extremely strict. Otherwise, Qin Sheng would surely have stepped into Stronghold 61 to save others during that incident. So what could be so important that Qin Sheng had to hurry back to Luoyang City no matter what? Could something have happened to the Qinghe Group in Luoyang City?

He remembered Old Li had mentioned that all was not well within the Qinghe Group.

Qin Sheng looked at Ren Xiaosu and said, "It's definitely urgent if they want me back immediately. I'm really sorry that I can't tell you the truth."

"Where's the threat coming from?" Ren Xiaosu wondered, "The twelve of you Riders are all supernatural beings, so what could possibly threaten y'all?"

Qin Sheng said with a wry smile, "I'm afraid that a large number of superhumans have gathered in Luoyang City. There were already people from the Wang, Zhou, and Kong Consortiums, as well as the Anjing House and the Saboteurs, who infiltrated the city. This is because Luoyang City has an open door policy, and a lot of people enter and leave the stronghold every day. So it's very difficult to track everyone. Besides... forget it, there are some things I can't talk about. I shouldn't be airing our dirty laundry in front of you."

When Ren Xiaosu heard the Saboteurs get mentioned, he was stunned. Saboteurs!

If he could find the Saboteurs, wouldn't he find Yang Xiaojin? He suddenly said to Qin Sheng, "By the way, I mentioned this to you a few days ago, but if Wang Yuchi and the others are thinking of attending Qinghe University, will this matter affect them?"

Qin Sheng gave it some thought and said, "I don't think so. No matter how scheming those people are, there's no need to target Qinghe University. There's no secrets there. How about this? I'll immediately convey this matter to the others once I get back. When you guys get to Luoyang City, no one will stop you from entering. Wang Yuchi and the other students can just focus on testing into uni."

"Alrighty then, thanks in advance." Ren Xiaosu nodded. Then he asked, "But I don't understand one thing. Why would those forces want to attack Luoyang City?"

"They aren't targeting Luoyang City." Qin Sheng shook his head and replied, "They're just after the Qinghe Group because they have too many satellites under their control. Those things are simply too important for an organization."

Ren Xiaosu did not ask further. He did not know why the various forces would all choose to make a move at this time. As there was not enough information, he could not judge what was happening.

Rather than asking Qin Sheng, he might as well consult the storyteller and the Great Hoodwinker.

However, he would still have to make a trip to Luoyang City. While the satellites had nothing to do with him, he really wanted to go there to look for the Saboteurs.

Hold on! Ren Xiaosu suddenly remembered Li Shentan's strange words from back then: "Make a trip to Qinghe University. There could be a reward waiting for you there."

If Qin Sheng had not mentioned the Saboteurs, he would not have recalled those words. But putting together Qin Sheng and Li Shentan's words into context, he realized he might really have missed out on something.

Li Shentan did not tell him to go to Qinghe University just to watch a boring debate.

When Qin Sheng was about to bid farewell, Ren Xiaosu said righteously, "We're friends now, so whatever's troubling the Riders is my business as well. I'll go to Luoyang City with you!"

Qin Sheng was stunned. "We shouldn't trouble you like that. Actually, this matter has nothing to do with you...."

"Alright, shall we set off then?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

Qin Sheng was utterly confused. 'Bro, did you hear what I just said?'

Seeing how Ren Xiaosu started calling for Wang Yuchi and the others to set off immediately, Qin Sheng could only say powerlessly, "Shouldn't you guys at least pack some stuff with you?"

"There's no need to pack! We're leaving right away!" Ren Xiaosu then dragged Qin Sheng off towards the wilderness.

Chapter 626 Clues to the Saboteurs

For this trip to Luoyang City, Ren Xiaosu brought along Wang Yuchi and the other students. Meanwhile, Wang Fugui and the others stayed behind at Stronghold 61 to continue waiting for Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu to arrive.

After all, if Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu were to find their way to Stronghold 61 after seeing the ad in the newspaper, they could miss the chance to reunite if there was no one waiting for them there.

Therefore, to be safe, Ren Xiaosu asked Wang Fugui to halt his mercantile business for a while.

Based on Ren Xiaosu's plan, he would only be looking for Yang Xiaojin or the Saboteurs' members when he went to the Qinghe stronghold. After that, he would settle Wang Yuchi and the others at the college before returning to Stronghold 61. The entire process would not take too long.

But in the time that Zhou Yingxue was unconscious, Ren Xiaosu was also thinking about something. Were Yan Liuyuan and Xiaoyu still alive?

After an entire month, the longer Ren Xiaosu waited, the heavier his mood became.

Over and over again, he would get his hopes up only to see them be dashed, just like how this world was.

But fortunately, he had already found Wang Fugui. This gave him some confidence again.

Unlike other big shots who often traveled in their off-road vehicles when going on a trip, Ren Xiaosu and the others took Wang Fugui's truck to Luoyang City. This was considered a rather unique form of transport out in the wilderness.

Qin Sheng drove the truck and asked Ren Xiaosu, who was in the front passenger seat, "Brother Xiaosu, I would like to express my gratitude to you on behalf of the Riders for your help at a time like this. To be honest, there aren't many people nowadays who are willing to help others."

Ren Xiaosu said politely, "Don't worry about it. After all, I've won so much money from you, so it would only be right to help out a little."

Qin Sheng's face darkened. "Ahem, please don't mention the fact that we played cards together when you see my teacher."

Nothing unusual happened along the way, but what surprised Ren Xiaosu was that when they were about to reach Luoyang City, Qin Sheng drove to the black market outside the stronghold and said he wanted to handle something there first.

Ren Xiaosu told him to be quick, but when Qin Sheng got back, there was an extremely strong scent of blood on him. It was as though he had just killed someone and returned.

And he had even killed more than one person.

"Did you kill someone?" Ren Xiaosu asked.

While starting up the truck, Qin Sheng answered, "Yes, I had to take care of some ignorant people who tried to take advantage of the situation. In the past, we didn't care to deal with those people in the black market. But now it's no longer alright to keep them around. Ever since the new administrator took over in the black market, those people have not been cooperative at all. They've even started stabbing us in the back."

Only at this moment did Qin Sheng appear like a Rider, instead of a simple young man who played cards with them all day long.

Ren Xiaosu thought to himself that these must be the desperate times calling for desperate measures. Now that the Riders were starting to purge the internal threats in Qinghe, it must mean that they had sensed that great danger was impending.

At this moment, Qin Sheng took out a copy of Hope Media's newspaper he had just bought from the black market. Ren Xiaosu took a glance and saw it was today's newspaper.

Why did he suddenly buy a newspaper to read at this time? It was not like he could not do this, but it was a little unusual of him.

Realization dawned upon Ren Xiaosu. Were the more secretive communications between the Riders actually transmitted through the Hope Media newspaper?

"Come on, we're going back to Luoyang City." Qin Sheng stepped on the accelerator and said, "I've also informed Teacher that you're coming along this time. He said he would like to treat you guys to a meal. The current acting president of the Qinghe Group, Xu Ke, would also like to meet you. What do you say, Brother Xiaosu?"

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "There's no rush for that. I want to go to Qinghe University first after we get to Luoyang City."

"I'm afraid you can't get into Qinghe University right now." Qin Sheng said, "In order to protect the students, the entire school has been cordoned off. Unless you have a student pass, you can't get in. If you'd like to go and have a look, I can arrange a student pass for you after I've settled my affairs. You can stay in the stronghold for as long as you want."

"It's fine. I can climb over the walls and get into the school," Ren Xiaosu said nonchalantly.

Qin Sheng was in a dilemma. 'Could you not say something like that in front of me?'

He said to Ren Xiaosu, "Then why don't you go to Qinghe University first? And say we set the meal for tomorrow night?"

"Sure," Ren Xiaosu agreed.

After Qin Sheng got Ren Xiaosu's agreement, he breathed a sigh of relief. After all, the entire Riders' organization was paying special attention to Ren Xiaosu now. On one hand, they were suspicious of his identity. On the other hand, everyone already knew he was going to be the future commander of Fortress 178, so they definitely would not want to be negligent about it.

Even if Ren Xiaosu were not the person they were looking for, maintaining a good relationship with Fortress 178 was still something everyone would be happy to see. Moreover, the Riders always had a good faith relationship with Fortress 178 and an admiration for their likable soldiers on the frontier.

And this time, with Qinghe facing a crisis, it was definitely better to have a strong ally joining them.

They finally arrived at Luoyang City during the night. Luoyang City was no longer the same as when Ren Xiaosu was here last time. It was already very quiet outside the gates.

The Qinghe Group temporarily canceled the access rights of those holding business visas and work visas. Most of the refugees who needed to work in the stronghold were stopped outside the gates.

The refugees did not know what had happened, but they understood it was very unusual. Since they were not allowed to enter, so be it. In any case, the Qinghe Group would compensate them for their losses.

For the past two days, the Qinghe Group had sent some meat into the town for the refugees to eat and informed those with work visas that they would be compensated for their lost working hours.

This was probably the reason why Luoyang City was not affected as much after the Wang Consortium's Stronghold 61 announced they were opened to the public. This was because the Qinghe Group had always treated the refugees well, and no one was willing to leave the environment they grew up in.

After Ren Xiaosu got into the stronghold, he first proceeded to the public square where he had met Li Shentan previously. He wanted to find Li Shentan to ask him what he meant by those words.

When he arrived at the square, the entire place was still bustling with people, but he could no longer find Li Shentan.

He also asked Qin Sheng if he had discovered any traces of the various forces in the stronghold, but Qin Sheng did not answer him.

Ren Xiaosu could only rely on himself now.

On the way to Qinghe University, Ren Xiaosu caught sight of a familiar figure.

Ren Xiaosu could not remember who it was for a moment. When he chased after that person, he realized the other party had already disappeared into the crowd.

There was no curfew in Luoyang City yet, so the residents were not really affected. They were still going out to stores at night, enjoying snacks, and watching shows.

It was as though all signs of danger were hidden in this sea of people and drowned out by the crowd.

"Master, who are you looking for?" Zhou Yingxue asked while holding a roasted sweet potato.

"I keep getting the feeling that it's someone I've met before. It's a woman, but I can't remember who she is. I only caught a glimpse of her back just now." Ren Xiaosu frowned as he cycled through his memories.

Zhou Yingxue did not disturb Ren Xiaosu anymore and continued eating the roasted sweet potato happily. She even had another one wrapped in a plastic bag in the pocket of her coat that she was planning to give to her master after he was done thinking.

Ren Xiaosu jolted! He remembered who it was that he had seen earlier. Dong Funan!

She was a supernatural being they encountered at a stronghold back in the Southwest. Her awakened power was similar to that of a vampire. However, his disciple had caused Dong Funan to lose two of her bloodsucking fangs!

That girl had been taken away by Yang Xiaojin's people at that time, and it was very likely she had joined the Saboteurs.

Therefore, the Saboteurs were really here in Luoyang City. This was the first time he had discovered clues to the Saboteurs since arriving at the Central Plains!

Chapter 627 Li Shentan gets pursued

In an old Daoist temple more than 600 kilometers away from Luoyang City, Li Shentan, who Ren Xiaosu had been looking for, was looking at the campfire in front of him with a melancholic expression. He also added some firewood to the fire as he watched it burn.

A cataclysmic event had caused human society to collapse, yet this temple was still standing here fine. At least, it did not collapse.

Si Liren looked at Li Shentan eagerly while pointing at the pheasant roasting over the fire. "Can I eat yet?"

Li Shentan looked back at Si Liren and saw her dirty face. He sighed and said, "What the hell did I do to deserve that girl's relentless pursuit? I wasn't the one who caused them to miss out on reuniting. Speaking of which, I even made an effort to bring them back together."

"But she doesn't know that." Si Liren muttered, "She doesn't know what we did, nor does she know that Ren Xiaosu was at Luoyang City. I keep getting the feeling that she's only hunting you because she doesn't like you."

"Do you have to be so honest?!" Li Shentan glared at Si Liren. He tore off one of the roast pheasant's legs and gave it to Liren. "Be careful, it's hot."

But Si Liren did not care. She was famished. After running around aimlessly with Li Shentan for more than half a month, her little face had slimmed down even more!

"Why aren't we getting back at her?" Si Liren asked after taking a bite of the drumstick.

"If we had really tried to fight her, we would be in big trouble." Li Shentan sighed and said, "There's some people we can go against, and some we shouldn't, understand? That girl is really strong. She's so elusive that it's almost impossible to guard against her. But I haven't seen any signs of her for a week

already, so I guess she doesn't have time to waste with me anymore. After all, looking for Ren Xiaosu should be the priority for her."

"Since she's not pursuing us anymore, how about we return to Luoyang City?" Si Liren was still thinking about the roasted sweet potatoes in Luoyang City. It was particularly difficult for these two people who did not have many wilderness survival skills to make it out here.

Li Shentan shook his head. "Luoyang City has become a troublesome place, so we can't go back there now. Grandpa Hu Shuo sent us some information and said that a lot of supernatural beings have gathered at Luoyang City in the past month. He was the one who told us to quickly leave that place."

"What's Grandpa Hu Shuo doing now?" Si Liren asked.

"He couldn't idle around any longer and went back to his old profession. He's set up an intelligence network, and I even heard he's adopted some refugee orphans to raise them," Li Shentan answered.

"Why did those supernatural beings go to Luoyang City?" Si Liren grumbled, "I can't even enjoy my sweet potatoes now!"

"A person's talent will arouse the envy of others." Li Shentan sighed and said, "Think about it. For a single stronghold to control more than half the satellites that are still in service, it's only normal that there's people hankering after them. Grandpa Hu Shuo said that some very determined people are after those satellites this time. The satellites seem to be very important to them, although he doesn't understand why."

"Then where can we go if we can't return to Luoyang City?" After Si Liren finished eating the drumstick in her hand, she greedily eyed the one in Li Shentan's hand.

"Why don't we head south to see the sea first?" As Li Shentan handed his roasted drumstick to Si Liren, he thought for a moment and said, "Didn't you say you wanted to know what the sea looked like? I've never seen the sea before either. Apparently, it used to be very lively there before The Cataclysm, but now, the consortiums avoid it. I think it's because typhoons are a common occurrence there now. Those typhoons are so strong they can blow us away."

"Alright, let's go and see the typhoons then!" Si Liren said firmly.

"Silly Liren, typhoons only occur in the summer."

"Then we'll stay there until summer!"

"This is the first time I've heard someone get so excited about seeing typhoons..."

...

Inside Luoyang City, Ren Xiaosu spent almost half the night searching for Dong Funan. In the end, he didn't know where that female vampire had ventured off to, as he did not manage to find her again.

“Forget it, let’s stop searching for now. We can’t check into a hotel, so we’ll have to stay in a residential area.” Ren Xiaosu said, “It’s too eye-catching to stay in a hotel at this time. We’ll definitely attract attention that way.”

Ren Xiaosu was also aware there had to be a lot of people with ulterior motives gathered at this special stronghold in the Central Plains. Outsiders were forbidden to enter Luoyang City. Currently, the people looking to stay in a hotel would either be young couples looking for a room or non-residents.

Ren Xiaosu definitely did not want to catch the attention of others. He was even more unwilling to room with Zhou Yingxue.

Moreover, there were still Wang Yuchi and the others. With so many people in their group, they would easily attract attention.

Ren Xiaosu had wanted to find a bridge and make do with sleeping underneath it. If he were alone, he could definitely settle down for the night just like that. But the problem was that Wang Yuchi and the others were also traveling with him.

Of course, Wang Yuchi and the others were no longer pampered children like before, so it would not be a big deal for them to sleep outside. But these students were about to face a specially arranged admissions exam. It was a critical period for studying, so Ren Xiaosu did not want them to copy him and sleep under a bridge.

“Let’s go and look for the Qinghe Group.” Zhou Yingxue muttered, “We’re here to help them, so they should at least take care of our meals and accommodation, right?”

“If we get too close to the Qinghe Group at this time, wouldn’t that be as good as revealing ourselves to everyone?” Ren Xiaosu said, “I’m not even planning to turn up for the dinner appointment with the Qinghe Group’s president tomorrow night. We absolutely cannot put ourselves out in the open and get targeted.”

Zhou Yingxue thought to herself that her master was really cautious. However, she would not have to think too hard anymore in this case. All she had to do was tag along and rely on her master.

“Then where are we going, Master?” Zhou Yingxue asked. “It’s too late to buy a house now.”

“I’ll give Qin Sheng a call later to see if he has any good suggestions,” Ren Xiaosu said.

This time, in order to contact Ren Xiaosu more easily, Qin Sheng had even purposely given him a satellite phone. Furthermore, the phone was an encrypted one the Qinghe Group members used. This way, there would be no worries that the content of any conversation would leak.

In the end, Qin Sheng gave Ren Xiaosu a satisfactory answer. They could head to Junmin Alley where there was a secluded courtyard house that was recently vacated. As it was still occupied yesterday, it would not arouse any suspicions if they were to move in.

After Ren Xiaosu hung up, he sighed and said, “The Riders are still quite dependable. They’re simply flawless in their planning. I feel that the people causing trouble this time might not be able to take advantage of the situation at all.”

Ren Xiaosu told Wang Yuchi and the others, “Study hard when you get to the house. There’s no need for y’all to think of anything else. In our group, only the few of you have the potential to be intellectuals, so y’all have to treasure this opportunity.”

Wang Yuchi nodded his oath.

When they arrived at the courtyard house, Ren Xiaosu had just flipped on the lights in the living room when he heard the telephone beside the couch ring. He answered the call in confusion and said something along the lines of “OK, no problem” before hanging up.

Zhou Yingxue asked, “Master, was that from Qin Sheng?”

“Oh, no.” Ren Xiaosu said, “Someone said he wanted to take tomorrow off because he can’t go to work.”

Zhou Yingxue said in a daze, “Then, Master, did you approve of his leave just now?”

“Yeah, who cares who he is. I’ll just approve it. I consider that as doing a good deed,” Ren Xiaosu said nonchalantly. That person was not his employee anyway.

Furthermore, he even received four gratitude tokens for it when the person on the other end of the line thanked him profusely.

Zhou Yingxue was speechless.

Chapter 628 Class representative, Ren Xiaosu

Early in the morning, Qin Sheng wrapped up tightly in a disguise and arrived at the courtyard house where Ren Xiaosu and the others were staying.

He handed a student pass to Ren Xiaosu and said in embarrassment, “I wanted to apply for a new student pass for you, but the dean of Qinghe University did not agree. He said that no suspicious persons are allowed to enter his school at the moment in case his students come to any harm. The old dean can be a little stubborn, so not even we Riders are influential enough to ask for a favor.”

“Something like that happened?” Ren Xiaosu asked, “There are actually things that a Rider can’t handle in Luoyang City?”

“Yes, there’s two places where our words don’t matter. To be precise, it doesn’t matter who’s speaking.” Qin Sheng explained, “One of them is Hope Media, and the other is Qinghe University. Hope Media’s Chief Editor Jiang Xu and Principal Hu Xingzhi of Qinghe University are both very principled people. We also respect the two of them very much.”

“Then what about this student pass?” Ren Xiaosu asked.

“It’s my cousin’s student pass,” Qin Sheng replied. “Luckily, he has a similar face to yours, although he wears glasses. When you go through the security gate at school, just tell them you didn’t put on your

glasses and that you look a little different from your ID photo. That'll be good enough for them. You have to enter the school at 8 every morning and leave school at 8 PM. Be on time. Our undercover agents only work these two shifts."

Ren Xiaosu nodded. "OK."

It looked like Qin Sheng had arranged everything for him. Ren Xiaosu was a little embarrassed that he had to trouble Qin Sheng to arrange so many things for him at such a critical time.

However, Ren Xiaosu noticed Qin Sheng wanted to say something. He asked Qin Sheng with concern, "Is there anything else?"

"Oh." Qin Sheng awkwardly took out a schedule and said, "This is my cousin's class schedule."

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

"Look, since he gave you his student pass, he can't go to school anymore. You have to take his place in class and get marked for attendance," Qin Sheng said helplessly. Actually, his cousin just wanted to ditch. Now that he had someone attending school on his behalf, he couldn't be happier. He could stay at home and play video games all day.

However, Qin Sheng felt embarrassed because this man in front of him was the future commander of the Northwest. Making the commander help with attendance was too much.

"Sure, no problem," Ren Xiaosu agreed. Since they were helping him, he could not possibly reject such a trivial request. Besides, Ren Xiaosu also wanted to attend some college classes to see what it was all about.

After Qin Sheng finished going through the important matters, he was about to leave when Ren Xiaosu suddenly asked, "When will those people make their move?"

"I don't know." Qin Sheng shook his head. "We've killed a bunch of them these past two days. Perhaps, our harshness has shocked them. So, many of them have started lying low for now. However, Teacher said they'll definitely take action. They're just waiting for the right opportunity."

...

Ren Xiaosu would be going to Qinghe University alone. Zhou Yingxue tried to persuade Qin Sheng to get her a student pass as well, but Qin Sheng rejected her request. After all, she did not look like a student in the slightest.

When entering Qinghe University, the troops enforcing the lockdown outside the school did not even raise any doubts about Ren Xiaosu's student identification.

This was not his first time at Qinghe University, but the campus was still a maze to him.

But what left him most speechless was that every class was actually held in a different classroom. In other words, he found himself losing his way before the start of every class.

“There’s only one class in the morning?” Ren Xiaosu looked at the schedule in his hands and thought the Qinghe University students had it easy. No wonder these people had the time to do all sorts of activities since they were mostly idle.

Ren Xiaosu walked around campus and inspected his surroundings. He was hoping to spot that familiar figure he was looking for, but he got nothing.

When he finally located the classroom for the class and went in, all the students in class turned around to look at Ren Xiaosu. Someone said, “Mate, this is the Humanities and Political Science class. Did you come to the wrong place?”

“Wait, do y’all know Zheng Hang?” Ren Xiaosu asked, checking his class schedule.

“Yes.” A girl said, “He’s a classmate of ours.”

Ren Xiaosu grinned and said, “Oh, I’m in the right place then. I’m here to attend class on his behalf. When does the teacher usually mark attendance?”

The students in the classroom were stunned. A male student shouted hyperbolically, “That Zheng Hang is way too lazy. He actually spent money to get someone to show up for attendance? Hey, how much do you charge for getting marked for attendance?”

These words stunned Ren Xiaosu. How did this get linked to charging a fee? Could there really be people in Qinghe University offering an attendance point scheme as a business?

He grinned and replied, “30 yuan per class.”

“That’s quite a fair price.” A male student joked, “But with two to three classes per day, I’m afraid that only a nouveau riche kid like Zheng Hang can afford it. I’m so jealous.”

At this moment, the sound of a cane tapping on the ground came from outside the classroom. The class immediately quieted down. A male student shot Ren Xiaosu a look to get him to sit down.

But it was too late. The tapping of the cane had already reached the door. When Ren Xiaosu turned around, both him and the person outside were stunned.

The person who came to class was the chief editor of Hope Media, Jiang Xu!

There were many visiting professors at Qinghe University. These professors were all people with extremely high social standing and academic attainment, so much so that they could be called the authorities in their fields.

And Jiang Xu was one such visiting professor who taught at Qinghe University. He was even personally invited to teach by the university’s dean, Hu Xingzhi.

Ever since the incident at Stronghold 61, Jiang Xu could not help but think of Ren Xiaosu. It was not just how those two numbers really stood out, but also because he always felt that sorrowful phrase about the era should not have been spoken by a young man that age.

What kinds of experiences had he had to come up with something like that?

However, Jiang Xu did not expect to actually meet Ren Xiaosu again in class. He had not seen him in class before. Although Jiang Xu had a lot of students, this young man had a unique aura about him, so he would definitely remember if he had seen Ren Xiaosu in school before.

Jiang Xu asked slowly, "What's your name?"

Ren Xiaosu thought this was bad, but he still forced himself to say, "My name is Zheng Hang."

Jiang Xu did not expose him. Instead, he walked up to the teaching podium. "It just so happens that I still don't have a class representative for this class. In the future, Zheng Hang, you'll be my class representative. Your duties will include tasks like collecting homework."

The students observed a moment of silence for Zheng Hang.

How did Zheng Hang manage to find someone show up for attendance and end up getting appointed as the class representative all of a sudden? Who knew what kind of miserable life would be waiting for Zheng Hang. If Jiang Xu found out that Zheng Hang had gotten someone to stand in for him in class, he might even get held back for several years.

Chapter 629 Your name

Honestly, Ren Xiaosu did not expect to bump into Jiang Xu here. No one had told him Jiang Xu was a visiting professor at the university, after all.

However, there was still another surprise today. When he went back after class, he could tell Qin Sheng to congratulate his cousin for getting appointed as the Humanities and Political Science class representative. This should be considered a good thing no matter what.

Thinking of this, Ren Xiaosu felt a little guilty. However, he did not think it was a bad thing in general.

He sat down. Actually, he was already aware that Jiang Xu knew he was not a student in this class. It was just that he did not expose him.

Jiang Xu walked up to the podium and looked at all the students. "At the end of the previous lecture, I wanted you all to go back and think about the current political situation based on what was reported in Hope Media's newspaper. If you have any questions, you may ask them now."

A girl suddenly asked, "Professor, you mentioned the geopolitical situation of the Wang Consortium, Zhou Consortium, and Kong Consortium during the previous lesson. I think it's very dangerous for our Luoyang City since we're smack dab in the middle of these three consortiums. Our school has already been placed under lockdown. Is this related to the things you're telling us about?"

Jiang Xu gave it some thought and said, "It's somewhat linked, but it's not something you all need to worry about. No matter how serious the situation is, it won't affect us at school."

A male student said, "Professor, I have a question. You mentioned the consortiums are all greedy, and it isn't something that will change according to the will of the leaders because the consortiums need to stabilize their own power base and interests first, so the huge war machine must march on. However, to maintain this march, there needs to be a stable class structure in place, right?"

"No." Jiang Xu shook his head and said, "Actually, it's this stable class structure that might encourage rot to fester sometimes. If a ruler has great ambition, they could choose to shatter this class structure first to energize the lower classes back to life."

"Then does the Wang Consortium's high profile announcement of Stronghold 61 taking in refugees mean that Wang Shengzhi has great ambition?" a male student asked.

"Yes." Jiang Xu said, "I've never ever doubted that. Furthermore, Stronghold 61's acceptance of refugees has severely damaged the Zhou and Kong Consortiums' industry. This can be considered killing two birds with one stone. Regarding this, I'm also very impressed by Wang Shengzhi's boldness. When he wanted to implement this policy, he would definitely have faced objection from those in the Wang Consortium with vested interests. This is because an empty stronghold requires many key positions to be filled. Since Wang Shengzhi was able to successfully make use of the refugees for that, it also shows that his authority within the Wang Consortium is secure. No one dares to challenge his authority."

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. Jiang Xu could understand the situation better than him. Ren Xiaosu only saw the damage the Wang Consortium did to the Zhou and Kong Consortiums, but he did not think of the implications.

Jiang Xu spoke with assuredness and used 20 minutes to thoroughly analyze the Wang Consortium based on one incident.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt a little jealous of the university students. They only had to pay tuition to gain the wisdom others had accumulated over their lifetime, all in the comfort of their ivory tower.

As for the lecture's mode of delivery, Jiang Xu did not just regurgitate what was covered in the textbooks. Instead, it was carried out in a discussion format. Jiang Xu had everyone pay attention to current affairs, then used some of the minor details to ignite their thinking. This method was not meant for imparting knowledge but to improve the wisdom of the students.

One of the female students asked, "Professor, I've seen the line 'don't let the sorrows of our era become your sorrow as well' printed on the fifth page of your newspaper recently. Why did you publish such a statement? We all like it a ton."

"Oh, that." Jiang Xu smiled as he flicked a glance at Ren Xiaosu and said, "A young man around your age shared it with me. I also like it a lot, so I decided to publish it in the paper."

The students looked at each other. They did not expect those words to come from the mouth of someone their age.

When they were done discussing this, Jiang Xu suddenly looked at Ren Xiaosu. "Representative, do you have any questions for me?"

The students looked at Ren Xiaosu sympathetically. Even a substitute student could get picked to ask a question.

But it so happened that Ren Xiaosu really did have a question. "Professor, what I want to ask is, is the artificial intelligence that the Wang Consortium has really that reliable?"

Jiang Xu thought for a moment and replied, "It's still too early to say whether it's reliable. But in terms of managing the strongholds, it has displayed an extremely powerful ability. However, I've also heard a story about it. I'm just going to share it, no notes needed.

"Apparently, one of the Wang Consortium's computer engineers mentioned this story to someone after his retirement. He said there was a time when he got bored and wanted to put the AI through a Turing test. The Turing test is a test that requires a human to communicate with an intelligent machine without being aware of that. If more than 30 percent of the human evaluators do not discover that their conversation partner is a machine, that means the device possesses 'intelligence.'

"In fact, the Turing test was devised a very long time ago. It cannot truly be considered the standard for assessing whether AI is intelligent. Furthermore, this engineer was already confident beforehand that the Wang Consortium's AI would definitely pass the Turing test."

Jiang Xu smiled and continued, "So out of boredom, he started experimenting for fun. But something unexpected happened. That AI did not pass the test."

Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt that Jiang Xu was stealthily trying to reveal something. He did not explicitly say what it was but just shared a story. The teacher's intention was far more difficult to understand than the deeper meaning behind the story itself.

Ren Xiaosu suddenly remembered the artificial intelligence did not raise the alarm about the creeper vine growing in Stronghold 61.

Ren Xiaosu actually started becoming very interested in Jiang Xu's lecture. He would have to come and attend the class next time.

When class was over, Jiang Xu took out the student roster. He looked at Ren Xiaosu with a faint smile and said, "We're going to mark attendance now. Those who aren't present will get ten points deducted on their final exam."

"Shu Linlin."

"Here."

"Gao Yingyu."

"Here."

"Zheng Hang."

Ren Xiaosu said helplessly, "Here."

But all of a sudden, Jiang Xu said, “Yang Xiaojin.”

The class fell silent. Ren Xiaosu was also stunned!

When this name rang out in Ren Xiaosu’s ears, he felt like he had been shot through the heart by a sniper bullet from thousands of meters away.

This name was too familiar to him, so much so that when Jiang Xu mentioned it, Ren Xiaosu felt his entire body go numb as he sat dazed in his seat.

It was a name he had not heard in a long time.

Jiang Xu frowned and said, “Is Yang Xiaojin here?”

Yang Xiaojin also used to ask him questions, so he had quite a good memory of her, if only because the questions she posed were different from what a normal student would ask. They were more brutal questions.

A female student explained, “Professor, Yang Xiaojin has already left Luoyang City after applying to take a leave of absence from school ten days ago. You didn’t mark attendance during our previous lecture, so you didn’t know.”

“Oh.” Jiang Xu sighed and said, “What a pity.”

Ren Xiaosu looked around his surroundings. So these were Yang Xiaojin’s classmates? So Yang Xiaojin had really attended college here? But now, she had left for some unknown reason.

As Ren Xiaosu was pondering over this, Jiang Xu said to Ren Xiaosu, “Zheng Hang, come to my office after class.”

Chapter 630 Chinese Chess

When Jiang Xu called for Ren Xiaosu to go to his office, the students all looked at him sympathetically. Ren Xiaosu followed Jiang Xu and passed through campus. Whenever any students in the school saw Jiang Xu, they would greet him very respectfully. They were also very curious about who Ren Xiaosu was as he followed the professor.

Jiang Xu limped along while using his cane and said to Ren Xiaosu with a smile, “What’s your real name?”

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and decided there was no need for him to hide it from Jiang Xu. “Ren Xiaosu.”

“Oh, it’s you.” Jiang Xu sighed and said, “What a small world. I was just discussing you with others some time ago. Yet here you are, standing in front of me.”

“Chief Editor, you know about me?” Ren Xiaosu wondered.

“Oh, don’t you know? I’m good friends with Zhang Jinglin. When he called me, he mentioned you.” Jiang Xu said, “But why did you come to the Central Plains instead of staying in the Northwest? Don’t tell me you don’t hunger for authority? I heard from Zhang Jinglin that he wants you to be the next commander of Fortress 178.”

Ren Xiaosu suddenly felt like the entire world knew he was going to be the next commander of Fortress 178. He explained to Jiang Xu, “I came here to the Central Plains to look for someone.”

“Who are you looking for?” Jiang Xu asked.

“Yang Xiaojin.” Ren Xiaosu said, “She’s your student as well, but she left right when I arrived.”

Jiang Xu stopped in his tracks and looked at Ren Xiaosu with interest. “You must be the guy she likes, right? You two seem really compatible.”

Ren Xiaosu immediately grew fond of Jiang Xu!

But he was a little puzzled. “What do you mean by I’m the guy she likes? Do you know her that well?”

“There’s actually a rumor going around campus.” Jiang Xu chuckled and said, “Yang Xiaojin has a lot of suitors at Qinghe University—”

“Where are they?” interrupted Ren Xiaosu, his eyebrows twitching.

“You’re so rude. Don’t you know that you shouldn’t interrupt your elders when they’re talking? Why? You want to fight them? This isn’t the wilderness.” Jiang Xu said, “Let me finish first. There was a guy who confessed to her. But perhaps she got impatient with him, so she said she already has someone she likes. Furthermore, she claims the guy she likes is definitely not pampered like how the Qinghe University students are.”

Ren Xiaosu was stunned. Actually, he had been worried that Yang Xiaojin might think he was dead and slowly forget about him. If that happened, what was he supposed to do?

But now it sounded like Yang Xiaojin had not forgotten about him and even told others she liked him.

However, Ren Xiaosu wondered, “You’re the chief editor of a newspaper, so why are you so interested in student gossip like that?”

Jiang Xu was amused. “How can I be a reporter if I’m not a busybody? A reporter should always be curious about everything and have an enthusiasm for life. Whoever said that a chief editor can’t be a busybody?”

Jiang Xu continued walking forward. He brought Ren Xiaosu into an office building and opened the door to his office. “I’m usually only here in the morning since I have to go back to Hope Media in the afternoon. Do you want to hear more about Yang Xiaojin? If you want to, come in and play a game of chess with me.”

Ren Xiaosu quickly stepped into the office and saw that there were only a table and two chairs inside. There was also a Chinese chess set on the table.

Jiang Xu looked at Ren Xiaosu with interest. The initial impression he had of Ren Xiaosu came from the few words he had uttered. But it was different now. When he learned of Ren Xiaosu's identity, he became even more interested.

He really wanted to know what kind of person Zhang Jinglin had chosen as his successor.

Jiang Xu was already very old. He had been thinking about who should take over Hope Media so that he wouldn't have to feel worried. He believed that someone like Zhang Jinglin was probably facing the same predicament as him. Therefore, when Zhang Jinglin said there was someone he could entrust his role to, Jiang Xu actually felt a little envious.

One could get to know a person better through a game of chess. Jiang Xu wanted to play against Ren Xiaosu to see what kind of a person he was.

Both of them sat in the chairs. Jiang Xu set his cane aside. "I'll let you move first, so you had better not go tell Zhang Jinglin that I bullied you when you get back."

Ren Xiaosu calmly shifted a chess piece on the board. Jiang Xu was stunned. "You don't know how to play chess, right?"

Ren Xiaosu asked in surprise, "How did you know?"

Jiang Xu snapped at him, "I've played chess for many years, but this is the first time I've seen someone move the general on their first move...."

Ren Xiaosu was speechless.

Jiang Xu did not know what to say. How was he supposed to assess this person when he did not even know how to play chess?! The only obvious thing he could see was that this person did not know how to play chess!

"Ahem." Ren Xiaosu was a little embarrassed. "When I was living in town, the refugees there usually played poker instead of chess. Of course, some people know how to play chess too, but it's very rare. I only saw them play it occasionally, but I never got the chance to learn the game."

To say nothing of chess, he even started learning how to play Fight the Landlord only after he had gotten his Explosive Poker power.

As if he could find time to think about such downtime activities. It was already very difficult just trying to survive.

Curious, Jiang Xu said, "Why don't you tell me why you moved the general on your first move?"

Ren Xiaosu thought for a moment and said, "I thought the general should be the strongest of these chess pieces, so why should the strongest piece be hiding behind the others? What's with that?"

Jiang Xu was stunned. He sighed and said, "I kinda get why Zhang Jinglin chose you."

Playing chess was different from being human. To be human, you had to keep a low profile and consider the pros and cons of a situation before acting. You had to consider the ways of the world. But that was not necessary when playing chess. You could do whatever you wanted as long as that was how you thought.

Some people liked confounding the opponent by making risky moves, while others preferred playing fair and honest to counter any surprises. The way they played would reveal their true nature.

"How about this?" Jiang Xu said, "I won't teach you the rules of chess, so you can just play however you want, that OK?"

Ren Xiaosu gave it some thought and replied, "Sure!"

Jiang Xu smiled in his head. Perhaps he could learn something about Ren Xiaosu's personality this way.

But then Ren Xiaosu said, "You lost."

Jiang Xu looked at the chessboard in a daze. How could he possibly have lost when he had not even made a move yet?

"This 'car'[1] must be a tank, right? Look here, since I already know where your general is, I can just bombard it from afar." Ren Xiaosu explained.

Jiang Xu said, "Um... this game is based on ancient warfare, not modern warfare."

"Alright then," Ren Xiaosu reluctantly agreed.

Awhile later, Jiang Xu saw Ren Xiaosu running a pawn around like crazy on the battlefield, jumping across five or six squares in a single move. Jiang Xu could not help but say, "How can a measly pawn have such great mobility? You're just messing around, aren't you?"

"I was also a measly pawn on the battlefield during the war in the Northwest, and I'm that mobile," Ren Xiaosu explained patiently.

Jiang Xu stared at Ren Xiaosu in shock for a long time and could not refute him. In the end, he could only say, "Alright, even if it does have such mobility, it still can't move backwards, right? That would make it a deserter in battle."

"Why can't a pawn move backwards?" Ren Xiaosu retorted, "There's such a thing as guerrilla warfare in tactics. There's no reason that we should only keep charging forward bravely. Isn't that as good as being cannon fodder? Are the lives of the pawns not the same as ours? When I was fighting in the Northwest, didn't we also have to return to the forward operating base to reorganize ourselves? If we were not allowed to retreat, Zhang Xiaoman and the others would have died on the battlefield!"

Jiang Xu was stunned. What the fuck did this have to do with Zhang Xiaoman? And who the hell was Zhang Xiaoman?!

Jiang Xu remained silent for a long time. Then he suddenly flipped the chessboard and said, "I don't want to play anymore!"

"Alright!" Ren Xiaosu stayed seated. "So can you start telling me about Yang Xiaojin now?"

When Jiang Xu heard this, he finally snapped and said, "Speak, what do you want to hear about her?"

"I just want to know what else she's said." At this moment, Ren Xiaosu was sitting quite harmlessly in his chair.

"She didn't say anything else, and there was still an endless stream of people chasing her. However, she didn't even notice them. Are you happy now?" Jiang Xu said unhappily, "It was just that she had accused the Qinghe University students of being pampered, which was as good as pitting herself against the entire student body. As a result, she didn't have a good relationship with her classmates."