

Ice Age 221

Chapter 221: You Are Useless

"Are you kidding? You want me to save you?" Zhang Yi thought incredulously. He wasn't inclined to rescue these elite students. Raised with silver spoons in their mouths, their lives had been more extravagant and fulfilling in twenty years than many people's sixty-five. These young masters and mistresses would be a burden if rescued.

"I'm only here for Yang Xinxin. The rest of you are on your own!" Zhang Yi declared, turning to take Yang Xinxin away.

However, these cunning children of officials and wealthy businessmen quickly realized Zhang Yi had no intention of taking them along. Several students approached Yang Xinxin, seizing her.

"You must take us with you! Or we'll kill her!" Zhang Mengning threatened, her face twisted with malice.

Lu Keran, shocked by her classmates' actions, rushed to free Yang Xinxin but was pushed to the ground by a tall boy. "Don't! You're all classmates; you can't do this!" Liang Yue weakly protested, but no one listened. To them, she was merely a glorified bodyguard.

Several students restrained Yang Xinxin. Zhang Mengning glared at Zhang Yi, "If you don't take us, no one leaves!"

Zhang Yi scoffed, turning to Fatty Xu and Uncle You. "Why are there so many self-righteous people in this world?" he asked, seemingly casual but ready to act.

With a quick, nonchalant turn, he switched to his police-issue handgun, more manageable for precision shots.

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Four consecutive shots echoed as Zhang Yi fired without hesitation. The students holding Yang Xinxin collapsed, blood oozing from bullet holes in their foreheads. Their eyes widened in shock before life left them, and they fell to the ground, dead.

"Killing! Ah!!!"

The surrounding students screamed and scattered, looking at Zhang Yi with fear as if he were a wild beast. Liang Yue, furious and shocked, pointed at Zhang Yi, "You... you killed those children!"

Zhang Yi laughed coldly, "Children? They knew how to use a classmate's life to threaten others, and you call them children?"

Ignoring their moral arguments, Zhang Yi walked to Yang Xinxin. The dead bodies didn't faze her, her expression detached. "Desensitized?" Zhang Yi wondered, hoping she wouldn't be too psychologically scarred.

Liang Yue continued to berate Zhang Yi for his cold-blooded actions, pleading for him to take the other students, too. Zhang Yi paid her no mind, extending his hand to Yang Xinxin. "Let's go. I'm taking you home."

For the first time, Yang Xinxin's light blue eyes showed emotion. "Okay," she nodded, taking his hand.

"Can you take my friend too?" she pleaded, looking at Lu Keran nearby. "She's a special student at Tianqing Academy, just like me."

"Special student?" Zhang Yi asked, intrigued.

Yang Xinxin explained, "This school has two kinds of students: children of the elite and those specially admitted for their talents. Lu Keran is a mechanical genius, on par with engineering graduates from Caltech. She built this custom wheelchair for me."

Zhang Yi examined Lu Keran, a short-haired girl with a robust physique, essential for a mechanical engineer. "What can you do?" he asked.

Lu Keran's eyes brightened, seizing the opportunity. "I'm skilled in vehicle design and repair, and I know a lot about firearms. If you take me, I can modify cars and guns for you. I've also studied swordsmithing and can forge weapons if conditions allow."

Impressed by her skills, Zhang Yi clapped, "Alright, you can come too."

Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin exchanged glances, excitement in their eyes. "Thank you... What should we call you?" Lu Keran asked.

"Call me Zhang Yi. You can call me Brother Yi," he replied with a smile.

"Thank you, Brother Yi!" Lu Keran beamed, overjoyed.

Zhang Yi had Lu Keran push Yang Xinxin's wheelchair as they prepared to leave. The remaining students, on the verge of tears, begged, "Mr. Zhang, we have skills too! I'm a great driver!"

"I know eight languages; I can be your translator!"

"I'm well-versed in literature and can recite Dream of the Red Chamber backwards!"

Despite their elite education, their skills were mostly impractical in the apocalypse. The remaining students, realizing their futile pleas, turned to Shen Miaohe, the brave girl with long, wavy hair.

"Now that Ms. Liang is weak, and the monster is still around, what will we do if it comes back to kill us?" she asked Zhang Yi.

"Without your intervention, Ms. Liang might have killed the monster. Are you just going to leave us to die?" she argued, trying to appeal to his sense of responsibility.

Zhang Yi remained unmoved. "You speak as if you'd survive if we hadn't intervened. Maybe you'd all be dead by now."

Chapter 222: Not as Frail as She Seems

The students were reluctant to accept reality and wanted to argue further, but Zhang Yi waved his gun, and their mouths instantly fell silent. They could only watch with envy and hatred as Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin followed Zhang Yi.

As they watched them leave, the remaining students exchanged resentful glances, full of anger but powerless to do anything. Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran bowed in gratitude as they passed Liang Yue.

"Thank you for caring for us during this time, Teacher Liang," Yang Xinxin said sincerely.

Despite their classmates' cruelty, Liang Yue was a responsible teacher who cared for them. Yang Xinxin knew Liang Yue couldn't abandon the others and leave with them, so she didn't invite her along.

Liang Yue, too exhausted to speak, merely nodded faintly. Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran said nothing more and followed Zhang Yi and his group.

Once they had walked far, Liang Yue struggled to her feet. "Follow them!" she commanded. "I'm seriously injured, and that monster won't be much better off. Now, while it doesn't dare come out, we should follow them and at least find a way out of here."

The students finally understood. "That's right! If we want to survive, this is our only chance!" they realized.

Two girls came forward to help Liang Yue, and the group followed Zhang Yi's party out. They had considered leaving before, but the maze of tunnels dug by the monster made it impossible to find the right path. With Zhang Yi's group leading the way, they hoped not to get lost.

Fatty Xu noticed the group following them and whispered to Zhang Yi, "Those people are following us. What should we do?"

Zhang Yi smiled, "What, do you feel sorry for them?"

Fatty Xu shook his head, "Not really."

"Then do you want to bury them all? With your power, you could collapse the tunnel and bury them alive," Zhang Yi suggested.

Fatty Xu was startled, "No, I don't mean that. They haven't done anything to me."

Zhang Yi shrugged, "Then just ignore them. We can't save everyone. We're not capable of supporting dozens of people."

Fatty Xu nodded, finding Zhang Yi's reasoning sensible, and continued walking.

The markers Zhang Yi had made earlier came in handy as they followed them back to the snowy surface. Zhang Yi immediately retrieved two snowmobiles from his spatial storage without wasting time.

"Fatty, you ride with Uncle You," Zhang Yi instructed.

Fatty Xu grimaced, "A motorcycle in this cold? It's going to be freezing!"

Zhang Yi placed a helmet on his head, "This will help."

"Oh, this isn't so bad! I've always wanted to try riding a motorcycle!" Fatty Xu eagerly ran to sit on the motorcycle's sidecar with Uncle You.

Zhang Yi then opened the front passenger door, carefully placing Yang Xinxin inside and storing her wheelchair. Lu Keran sat obediently in the back seat.

"Let's go! Time to head back!" Zhang Yi said, honking the horn and signaling Uncle You to start the engine. The snowmobiles roared to life and quickly sped away from Tianqing Academy.

Not long after, Liang Yue and her group emerged from the snow tunnels. Their hopes were dashed as they saw only the exhaust trails of the departing snowmobiles.

"Where do we go now?" a girl asked, bewildered, looking at the endless white landscape. At least underground, they had shelter and food, but now they had nothing.

Wu Chengyu stepped forward, smiling confidently as he pulled out his phone, "Leave it to me!"

With a signal restored outside, he intended to contact his influential father to send help from the West Hill Base.

On the way back, Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran relaxed in the warmth of the car, gradually showing signs of comfort after over a month trapped beneath the snow, constantly facing monster attacks. Seeing their dirty and fatigued appearance, Zhang Yi smiled and extended his hand, producing two bottles of mineral water, several chocolate bars, and some bread.

"Have something to eat to replenish your energy. Be careful not to eat too quickly, or you might get stomachaches. Getting sick now would be very painful," Zhang Yi advised.

Lu Keran's eyes filled with tears of gratitude, "Brother Yi, you're such a kind person! Thank you!"

Despite her tomboyish nature, Lu Keran's personality was pleasant and easy to get along with. Yang Xinxin, though appearing frail, politely thanked Zhang Yi before starting to eat. Zhang Yi glanced in the rearview mirror, his smile growing.

Once they had finished eating and rested comfortably, Zhang Yi began conversing with them. "Xinxin, you're really impressive," he said.

Yang Xinxin looked puzzled, "Brother, are you talking about me? I don't think I'm impressive at all."

She smiled softly, like a budding flower. "I've always been a burden to everyone. I'd be dead by now if it weren't for Lu Keran's protection."

Lu Keran laughed, "We're good sisters; no need to be so polite!"

Zhang Yi smiled, not entirely agreeing with Yang Xinxin. "Is that so? But I think you're quite remarkable."

Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran looked curious, wondering why Zhang Yi thought so. Zhang Yi explained, "You've had polio since childhood, confining you to a wheelchair, yet you survived in such dangerous conditions. That's quite extraordinary."

Zhang Yi continued before Yang Xinxin could respond, "You might attribute it to luck or Lu Keran's protection, but surviving multiple monster attacks over a month isn't just luck."

He smiled at Yang Xinxin, "I think there's more to it. Am I right?"

Yang Xinxin's pure and innocent expression slowly faded. "Brother, you're very smart. No wonder you've survived and even cared for those two silly sisters."

Her smile turned somewhat sinister, her demeanor changing entirely. "You're very clever in figuring it out. I didn't just survive by luck."

Lu Keran was shocked, "What are you two talking about?"

Zhang Yi remained calm. "It's not about being exceptionally smart. From an outsider's perspective, there were too many coincidences. And when you asked me to stop the fight between your teacher and the monster, it wasn't to protect your teacher but the monster."

He concluded, "You've been feeding that monster, haven't you?"

Chapter 223: The Target is You, Brother

After listening to Zhang Yi's words, Yang Xinxin's mouth curled into a meaningful smile.

"Brother, you're very smart! You've guessed about sixty to seventy percent of the truth."

"But I'm not as bad as you think!" Yang Xinxin adjusted her hair, revealing her fair and slender neck.

"I'm not the owner of Huahua, nor did I command it to kill my classmates and teachers. However, it has indeed been protecting me all this time."

Upon hearing Yang Xinxin call the monster "Huahua," Lu Keran's eyes widened in astonishment.

"Huahua? Is it... is it the stray cat you used to feed?" she asked, shocked.

Zhang Yi waited quietly for Yang Xinxin to explain. He was very interested in the mutated cat. When he arrived at Tianqing Academy, he couldn't quickly determine Yang Xinxin's location. The monster's appearance seemed almost deliberate, as if leading him to her. If Fatty Xu hadn't attacked and angered it, it might not have intended to harm him. Such a smart and powerful mutant would be perfect if tamed! After all, animals are far more loyal than humans.

Yang Xinxin, looking into the distance, began to explain, surprising Lu Keran with her story. The monster was indeed a mutated stray cat. Due to her polio, Yang Xinxin spent most of her time in the dormitory, feeding a stray cat named Huahua behind the building. Their bond grew strong during that time, so Huahua never attacked her.

Lu Keran, taking a long breath, said, "No wonder! It scared me every time it showed up but never attacked us. I thought we were just lucky!"

Zhang Yi, however, wasn't satisfied with her explanation. "Is it really that simple? Just gratitude for feeding it?" he asked.

He looked at Yang Xinxin, his expression playful. "So it led us here and didn't attack us just out of instinct?"

Yang Xinxin, smiling, responded, "Brother, your observation skills are impressive! Nothing escapes you."

"Yes, Huahua became incredibly intelligent after mutating. It understands my words. I told it that someone would come to take me away and not to harm you."

"Although, I didn't expect you to be so strong!" she added, glancing at Zhang Yi.

Zhang Yi raised an eyebrow. "So, did you also instruct it to kill your classmates?"

"No, not that," Yang Xinxin replied, smiling. "Although many were annoying, I didn't hate them enough to kill them."

"Initially, they died because some had abused Huahua before and because Huahua needed to eat."

Her gaze darkened. "But things changed later."

"You have no idea how many times they considered me a burden and wanted to leave me to distract Huahua. They even deliberately overturned my wheelchair or pushed me out."

Yang Xinxin's smile grew cold. "It's hilarious. They had no idea Huahua wouldn't harm me, so I survived every time, deepening their hatred towards me!"

"They wanted me dead because my survival reminded them of their evil intentions. As long as I lived, they felt guilty and uncomfortable, realizing their own wickedness."

"That made them even more desperate to see me dead!"

Lu Keran fell silent, recalling the many accidents she and Yang Xinxin had faced. Despite being aware of the truth, she felt powerless to resist. Liang Yue had done her best to protect everyone, but her strength was limited and couldn't cover every student.

"Now I understand," Lu Keran said quietly. "I often thought we were doomed."

Yang Xinxin, caressing the bottle in her hand as if it were a cat, smiled brightly at Zhang Yi. "So, Brother, when Huahua started toying with them and gradually killing them, it was indeed related to me."

"Do you think Xinxin is cruel?" she asked.

Zhang Yi looked at her for a few seconds before smiling. Cruel? Maybe a little. But instead of being repelled, he felt a sense of admiration. This girl was like him—of the same kind.

"They have nothing to do with me. Whatever you did is your business. I don't care," Zhang Yi replied. "I'm rescuing you because I promised your sister and need your skills as a top-notch hacker."

Yang Xinxin nodded, unsurprised. "In this world, only those with value are saved."

Zhang Yi reassured her, "Don't worry. Join my team, follow orders, and work diligently, and you'll never face cold, hunger, or death again. I guarantee it."

Hiring new, talented members, he needed to make them feel secure. What he promised was mostly true. As long as nothing unexpected happened, following him would ensure a comfortable life.

"Thank you, Brother Yi," Lu Keran said.

"Thank you, Brother," Yang Xinxin echoed with a smile.

Zhang Yi checked the rearview mirror before asking, "Xinxin, I have one more question."

"Please ask, Brother."

"The apocalypse has been going on for a while. Why didn't you contact your sisters earlier? Why only recently? And how did you manage the signal issue buried so deep under the snow?"

Yang Xinxin giggled, "Brother, I'm a world-class hacker. Handling signals is easy for me. Besides, Huahua helped."

"As for contacting my sisters..." She opened her eyes, revealing a sly glint. "I never intended to contact my foolish sisters."

"From the start, my target was you!"

Chapter 224: Both of You Are Talented

Snow continued to fall, albeit lighter than a month ago, but the wind was fierce. The snowmobiles headed towards Cloud Manor, cold outside, but warm and comfortable inside the vehicles. Zhang Yi's expression remained unchanged, though his eyes showed a flicker of surprise.

"Your target is me? What do you mean by that? We've never had any prior contact," Zhang Yi said, intrigued.

Yang Xinxin explained softly, "I originally thought my foolish sister was dead. With her intellect and capabilities, she could manage in the entertainment industry but saving lives? She'd be lucky to save herself."

"Therefore, I never placed my hopes on her."

Zhang Yi asked, "And then?"

"Then, my phone received messages from the outside world." She pulled out her phone from her clothes—a device Zhang Yi had never seen before. It seemed to be a custom-made product, hence its powerful signal reception.

"Its performance rivals that of a supercomputer. Just a little analysis, and I could find all the information about you, Brother," she said, tilting her head to examine Zhang Yi's handsome, determined profile.

"Xinxin really admires you, Brother! Even though you were just an ordinary warehouse manager, you achieved so much in the apocalypse."

Zhang Yi felt a chill down his spine. A top hacker could easily access your information in an era of highly developed information technology.

"How much do you know about me?" Zhang Yi asked, uneasy.

"Almost everything!" Yang Xinxin said confidently. "Anything that can be found online, I can uncover with a few keystrokes."

"Like your involvement in the Walmart South China warehouse theft case, your bank transfer records, and the numerous neighbors you killed in the Yue Lu District!"

She suddenly covered her face with her hands, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes filled with infatuation. "After reading your story, Xinxin became obsessed!"

Zhang Yi thought She's a yandere!

Being targeted by a beautiful, tragic, and crazy girl was both thrilling and unsettling. Not knowing if it was a good or bad thing, Zhang Yi took a deep breath and said, "So you knew I was living with Yang Siya and Zhou Ke'er, and you used them to contact me. Is that right?"

Yang Xinxin nodded, "Yes, exactly! Although I wasn't sure if you would come to save me, I knew if you didn't, I'd come to find you."

"But you did come to save me, and Xinxin is so happy!" she exclaimed, lightly grasping Zhang Yi's coat hem and blushing.

Zhang Yi was speechless. He thought he had everything under control, only to be caught in someone else's plan. This cunning girl was indeed someone to be kept on his side rather than as an enemy.

"Xinxin, I have a question. You and that monster cat seem to have a good relationship. Will it follow your orders completely?" Zhang Yi asked.

Yang Xinxin pondered, placing a slender finger on her lips, then shook her head. "Brother, have you ever kept a cat?"

"With cats, you can be their friend. They'll be close to whoever treats them well. But being their master is too difficult."

"Especially with stray cats."

Zhang Yi rubbed his head in frustration. "That's tricky then! I was hoping to recruit a powerful ally!"

Looking through the rearview mirror, Zhang Yi sensed something following them through the heavy snow. His instincts told him it was the monster cat.

"Is it reluctant to part with Yang Xinxin?" Zhang Yi mumbled. Cats are unpredictable creatures. Domesticated pets aside, stray or rural cats retain their wild nature, are distrustful of humans, and are difficult to tame.

"Maybe I can try. Plenty of cat food, fish snacks, and treats are in the warehouse. Those might be more appealing than human food," Zhang Yi mused. "I haven't tried them, so I can't compare, but it's worth a shot!"

Back at Cloud Manor, Zhang Yi thanked Fatty Xu with a food package and a limited-edition Madoka Kaname pillow, which Fatty Xu joyfully clung to. For Uncle You, Zhang Yi provided two large barrels of gasoline, a precious resource for him.

"Thank you both for your hard work today," Zhang Yi said, smiling.

Happy with the generous reward and easy mission, Uncle You and Fatty Xu left contentedly, offering their help again in the future. Zhang Yi, generous to his allies, never hesitated to reward them.

"See you next time!" they parted ways, and Zhang Yi brought Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran back to the shelter. Starved and frozen for over a month at Tianqing Academy, the two girls were thrilled to find themselves in the warm, luxurious refuge.

"Wow, this place is like a dream!" Yang Xinxin exclaimed, while Lu Keran, usually tough, cried tears of joy.

"As long as you help me and ensure this place's security, you can live here happily forever," Zhang Yi promised.

Lu Keran swore her loyalty, "Big Brother, I'll follow you wholeheartedly from now on!"

Yang Xinxin shyly asked, "Does helping you include... daily life?"

Zhang Yi, slightly exasperated, knelt in front of her, patting her cold cheek. "Such a young girl, yet you know so much!"

"But your main task is to help me maintain the security of this shelter. Got it?"

Despite her beauty, Zhang Yi saw Yang Xinxin primarily as a top computer expert. Her usefulness far exceeded her attractiveness. His words relieved her caution but left her feeling slightly disappointed, and she wondered if he found her disability repulsive.

Women are complicated creatures. If Zhang Yi showed interest, she'd be wary; if he didn't, she'd feel rejected.

Chapter 225: Mechanical Expert

Zhang Yi quickly brought Yang Siya and Zhou Ke'er to the living room. Seeing Yang Xinxin safe and sound, they burst into tears of joy and rushed forward.

"Xinxin! It's so great that you're alive!"

"Do you know how worried we were about you?"

Yang Siya knelt in front of Yang Xinxin with a fawning smile. "Why didn't you contact me earlier? You must have suffered a lot out there!"

However, Yang Xinxin showed little warmth towards her celebrity cousin. With a cold snort, she replied, "My lowly sister! You only became famous by exploiting men's fantasies. Aside from relying on your body, what else can you do?"

"If it weren't for discovering you were with Brother Zhang Yi, I wouldn't have contacted you at all!"

Yang Siya's face turned awkward. Zhang Yi raised an eyebrow, realizing the strained relationship between the cousins. It was no wonder, given Yang Siya's reputation and Yang Xinxin's intellectual prowess.

"Brother Zhang Yi?" Zhou Ke'er remarked, intrigued by Yang Xinxin's respectful address. "Since when did Xinxin become so polite to anyone?"

In her memory, Yang Xinxin, due to her extraordinary intelligence, rarely acknowledged anyone.

After brief introductions, Lu Keran shared her background. Although not from a prominent family, her parents were university professors, making her upbringing respectable.

Clapping his hands, Zhang Yi assigned tasks to Yang Siya and Zhou Ke'er.

"Mimi, prepare a good meal to welcome Xinxin and Keran."

"Ke'er, organize their rooms."

Zhou Ke'er cheerfully agreed, "Sure! I've already prepared Xinxin's room; I just need to set up one more."

Yang Siya began working in the kitchen to prepare the dinner.

As for Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin, who had just arrived, Zhang Yi didn't rush them into work. Given the lack of proper bathing conditions at Tianqing Academy under the snow, he sent them to take a bath first.

Lu Keran pushed Yang Xinxin to the bathroom. Knowing their measurements, Zhang Yi provided several sets of clothes for them to choose from. In the kitchen, Yang Siya glanced at Zhang Yi, her knife moving slower.

Zhang Yi sighed, "Still holding onto that after so long?"

Yang Siya pouted, "You can do whatever you want to me, but don't think about doing the same to those innocent students."

Zhang Yi chuckled. He had no such intentions. His previous treatment of Yang Siya stemmed from knowing she came with her body as a bargaining chip for survival. But Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin were different—they were skilled talents essential for the shelter's security. Zhang Yi wasn't desperate. They needed to focus on fortifying the shelter.

If emotions developed over time, well, that was beyond his control. The two girls spent a long time in the bathroom. Coming from decent families, the long period without proper bathing had been tough. In a comfortable environment with hot water, they thoroughly cleansed themselves.

After their baths, the girls emerged in the clothes Zhang Yi had prepared. Feeling refreshed, they looked at Zhang Yi with growing affection—after all, he was their savior, providing them with a safe and comfortable home.

"Big Brother, we're done!" Lu Keran said cheerfully.

Zhang Yi, smiling, invited them to sit, offering hot drinks to replenish their energy. With a coffee machine available, Yang Siya served Yang Xinxin a cappuccino while Lu Keran opted for an Americano.

Crossing his legs, Zhang Yi casually chatted with them. "Xinxin, you'll be responsible for the shelter's network security. Is that alright?"

Though Zhang Yi knew little about computers, he knew Yang Xinxin's expertise.

Yang Xinxin nodded confidently, "Leave it to me!"

Turning to Lu Keran, Zhang Yi asked, "You're skilled in mechanics. Can you manufacture weapons and ammunition?"

Lu Keran sat up straight, "Big Brother, I can! But I'll need specialized mechanical equipment."

"And for ammunition, the necessary materials aren't readily available in the market."

"But for cold weapons, the materials can be sourced from other metals at home. However, forging tools are required."

Zhang Yi smiled, "That's not a problem."

He stood and led Lu Keran to the basement, revealing a spacious room filled with industrial machinery he had salvaged. From CNC machines to various high-end equipment, they were invaluable.

"Can you use these? If not, I can find more from steel factories," Zhang Yi offered.

Lu Keran's eyes sparkled at the sight of the advanced machinery. "These are perfect! Even if some aren't directly useful, I can modify the parts."

Her enthusiasm reassured Zhang Yi. Her mechanical skills would be crucial for their survival.

"First, organize the equipment. Later, you can help create whatever we need," Zhang Yi instructed.

Zhang Yi had plenty of chemical supplies for ammunition materials in his spatial storage. Large firearms were abundant, but he needed bullets and suppressors—especially for his sniper rifle, which made too much noise, hindering stealth operations.

"Rest assured, Big Brother! Leave it all to me!" Lu Keran said confidently, flexing her well-toned arms.

Watching her enthusiasm, Zhang Yi felt delighted. He initially expected less, but her talents were a pleasant surprise.

"Since you're familiar with materials, check this out," Zhang Yi said, handing her the Loong Roar Sword from Liang Yue.

"Is this an ancient artifact? When I took it, your teacher seemed ready to fight to the death," he mused.

Lu Keran, familiar with the sword, eagerly examined it. As she unsheathed the blade, a cold gleam, and a clear ringing sound emerged.

"This is Teacher Liang's treasured sword! Finally, I can see it up close," Lu Keran admired the sword, studying it like a rare gem. After a long while, she reluctantly sheathed it and returned it to Zhang Yi.

"This sword, Loong Roar, was crafted by Yuan Lin, the greatest swordsmith in China. It's not an ancient relic but a modern masterpiece made of Adamantium, said to be the hardest metal, capable of slicing through diamonds."

Zhang Yi was astonished. "That's impressive!"

Lu Keran explained, "Adamantium was developed ten years ago for military applications but was too costly and scarce. Some used it for cold weapons, creating indestructible blades."

"This one, Loong Roar, was given to Teacher Liang as a reward for saving a high-ranking official's life. It symbolizes immense honor to her, which is why she values it more than her life."

Zhang Yi's eyes glowed as he admired the sword. It was no wonder Liang Yue could fight the mutant cat—ordinary blades would have dulled.

"This is a great weapon. I'll keep it safe," Zhang Yi decided, preferring it over his previous Damascus steel hunting knife for self-defense.

Chapter 226: Changing Winds

In the evening, Zhang Yi and his companions hosted a banquet to welcome Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran. Having gone so long without such good food, even these elite students from a prestigious school quickly abandoned their initial restraint and began eating with enthusiasm.

Zhang Yi quietly put down his chopsticks, amused by the sight of the two girls eating. While watching with concern, Yang Siya and Zhou Ke'er kept adding food to their plates while asking about their time at Tianqing Academy.

With her mouth full, Lu Keran explained, "The school wasn't short on food! There were over three hundred students, but we had twelve dining halls and an internal supermarket. We had plenty of supplies."

Zhang Yi smiled faintly, trying to imagine the aristocratic school based on Lu Keran's description. She swallowed a meatball and gratefully looked at Zhang Yi, "But if you hadn't come to rescue us, even with all the food, we wouldn't have lasted long in such cold weather."

Zhang Yi nodded, "It's fortunate you were underground with a large group. The temperature would have been less severe."

Snow and ice are good insulators, at least effective against wind. In Xudong Village, the snow-covered houses maintained warmth thanks to Xu Chunlei's efforts to build them with ice and snow.

"As long as you work hard here, you won't go hungry," Zhang Yi assured them. He appreciated Lu Keran's straightforward personality, not because he had ulterior motives, but because he preferred dealing with honest people.

Lu Keran kept nodding, "Thank you, Brother!"

Yang Siya and Zhou Ke'er exchanged glances, relieved that Zhang Yi didn't see the two newcomers as burdens. They had worried that the extra mouths to feed would strain their resources, unaware of the vast supplies in Zhang Yi's spatial space.

Even if they all ate freely every day, their supplies would last over two hundred years. Moreover, Zhang Yi could always find more frozen supplies, so food was never an issue.

After dinner, Yang Siya took the initiative to clean up, a task she had recently taken over entirely. Even when Zhou Ke'er was around, Yang Siya would take on the chores, transitioning from initial wariness to trust and feeling guilty.

In this household, Zhou Ke'er was a doctor, Yang Xinxin was a computer genius, and Lu Keran was a mechanical expert. But what about her? Apart from keeping Zhang Yi company, what could she do? Although Zhang Yi never criticized her, Yang Siya was a strong-willed woman who disliked being a useless ornament.

At the dinner table, Zhang Yi discussed the shelter's rules with Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran. Their harmonious interaction left Yang Siya feeling a bit left out. She wished to be as indispensable as Zhou Ke'er and the others.

After dinner, they relaxed on the sofa, watching TV. Zhang Yi leaned back, with Zhou Ke'er and Yang Siya beside him. Given the presence of the two younger girls, they refrained from being too affectionate. Yang Xinxin, observing the dynamic, noticed something unusual but kept quiet, understanding that such relationships were common in the apocalypse.

Only Lu Keran, sitting cross-legged and barefoot on the bed, was completely engrossed in the giant TV. They could watch stored movies and TV shows or official news from around the world. Domestic news was largely ignored as it held little valuable information.

As they watched, the atmosphere in the living room grew tense. Today's news delivered a crucial yet unsettling message:

"The snow disaster has shown no signs of stopping after over a month, with extremely cold temperatures remaining. Connections between most global regions have begun to break down, leading to increasing resource conflicts, especially between countries and regions. The extreme weather has caused many official institutions to lose control, with armed organizations rising to seize resources and survivors."

This news was alarming, indicating that the world had officially entered a state of anarchy in which armed forces would no longer be restrained.

"This is bad!" Zhang Yi muttered, arms crossed.

Yang Siya didn't quite understand, "Hasn't the chaos already started? I didn't expect it to become so dire."

She sighed, having once hoped the world would return to normal so she could resume her life as a beloved star. But now, she no longer dared to entertain that thought.

"It's different," Zhang Yi explained. "Previously, even armed organizations feared higher authorities. But after a month of extreme cold, it's clear the ice age won't end soon. Without fear of retribution, these groups will act without restraint."

Yang Xinxin added, "It's like regulations in an organization. Not everyone follows them strictly, but their existence keeps people in check. Now, there's no order left in the world!"

"Not entirely," Zhang Yi glanced at Yang Xinxin. "The most powerful forces still belong to the highest levels. However, the extreme cold has hampered their ability to manage other regions effectively, leading to the rise of warlord-like powers."

"It's akin to the Shang and Zhou era," he continued. "The Zhou king controls the central power, while local armed forces govern their areas. This situation will persist unless the apocalypse ends."

Yang Xinxin nodded in agreement. Yang Siya, blinking, remarked, "Isn't that somewhat positive? At least there's still some deterrence."

Zhang Yi laughed, "Not at all!"

"Why not?" Yang Siya asked.

"In the past, all power belonged to the central authority. Now, local armed forces have control, signaling the start of a chaotic warlord era," Zhang Yi explained, taking a deep breath. "An era where human lives will be as cheap as grass."

Battles between ordinary people resulted in limited casualties. However, when superhumans got involved, the death toll would rise sharply, though still incomparable to the devastation wrought by armed forces vying for resources. The safety of civilians would become even more precarious.

Chapter 227: The Cat

Zhang Yi always monitored the changing external situation, as it directly affected the safety of his future life. He might have been overly cautious, thinking powerful organizations wouldn't attack his shelter, but he had to prepare for everything.

"Xinxin, come and see your new equipment!" Zhang Yi called out, standing up from the sofa and motioning for Yang Xinxin to follow him to the supercomputer room.

Yang Xinxin wheeled herself into the control room, eyes lighting up at the sight before her. The setup was so luxurious it felt like being in outer space. Wang Siming, who pursued luxury, had even installed OLED screens on the control room floor. A blue light flowed like a galactic river, and the large control panel's buttons were neatly arranged.

"From now on, the network security here is your responsibility!" Zhang Yi said, patting her shoulder. He couldn't help but glance at her immobile legs. Despite her polio and paraplegia, Yang Xinxin was a genius hacker—perfect for this role.

Yang Xinxin nodded, rolling her wheelchair to the control panel. Zhang Yi granted her secondary access, allowing her to maintain network security without altering the core system.

Without a word, Yang Xinxin placed her white hands on the control panel and began working like a pianist. Black and blue panels filled the large screen, code flashing rapidly. Unable to understand, Zhang Yi stood beside her, watching with interest.

Yang Xinxin had scanned the shelter's network in under ten minutes. "Are there any vulnerabilities?" Zhang Yi asked.

Yang Xinxin replied, "This Galaxy Light system, from ten years ago, was the top personal network system. It's incredibly powerful and can still outperform most systems worldwide. Its AI is excellent, theoretically making it invulnerable."

"But," she continued, "a top hacker can create vulnerabilities."

"In the past two weeks, the system has faced thousands of attacks. If not detected in time, the entire network could collapse in a month."

Zhang Yi's eyes narrowed. His suspicion was confirmed. After the Lu Fengda incident, the shelter had drawn the attention of capable adversaries.

"Can you fix the vulnerabilities and block these attacks?" Zhang Yi asked.

Yang Xinxin smirked. "Brother Zhang Yi, don't forget my specialty!"

As a world-class hacker, network security, especially offensive tactics, was her forte. Though her opponents were skilled, they were no match for her.

"Fixing vulnerabilities is easy. I'll also set up a new encrypted network. Stop using the old router—wireless hacking is too simple."

Zhang Yi agreed. "Do as you see fit!"

In no time, Yang Xinxin completed her task and looked up with a smile. "Brother, I'm done!"

Zhang Yi praised her, "Xinxin, you're amazing!"

Yang Xinxin, pleased by his praise, added, "That was just simple maintenance. But now, I'll find out who's trying to hack us."

She licked her lips, excited by the challenge of counter-hacking. Taking on more difficult tasks was instinctual for a top hacker like her.

Zhang Yi thought for a moment before asking, "How confident are you? What's the risk if you fail?"

Curious about the organization spying on him, Zhang Yi preferred gaining information over direct attacks. Yang Xinxin responded, "It's hard to say without knowing their exact strength. So far, their attacks haven't been very strong."

"But don't worry. Even if I can't break into their network, I can hide my tracks well enough to avoid detection."

Satisfied, Zhang Yi nodded. "Alright, go ahead!"

If someone provoked him, he'd retaliate. As they spoke, Zhou Ke'er's panicked voice echoed outside. "Zhang Yi, something's wrong! A... a monster!"

Zhang Yi and Yang Xinxin exchanged glances. "That cat of yours seems very attached to you," Zhang Yi joked.

Yang Xinxin tilted her head. "It probably trusts only me among humans. Worried about me, it followed us here."

Zhang Yi noticed the cat following them. He intended to tame it as a weapon and now was the time to do so to prevent further casualties.

"Let's check it out!" Zhang Yi said, pushing Yang Xinxin's wheelchair out of the control room.

Zhou Ke'er, pale and trembling, clung to Zhang Yi's arm. "Zhang Yi, there's a huge monster outside! It's meowing at the window."

"Keran said Xinxin needs to go to it. It followed her here."

Zhang Yi reassured her, "Don't worry, it's Xinxin's friend. Let's go see."

They pushed Yang Xinxin to the living room and saw the monster cat outside. Its huge red eyes glowed in the night, staring into the house. It meowed, not aggressively but as if urging them to come out and feed it.

Upon seeing Yang Xinxin, the cat sat quietly in the snow, looking almost like an oversized pet despite its sharp, steel-like fur.

Yang Siya hid behind a table, watching it cautiously, while Zhou Ke'er stayed close to the glass window but kept a safe distance. The cat's calm demeanor reassured them somewhat.

Chapter 228: Building Trust

Zhang Yi observed the giant mutant cat, Huahua, sitting in the snow for a long time, now covered with snow. Despite this, Huahua displayed no hostility, just a vigilant gaze directed at them. Occasionally, when it blinked, Zhang Yi noticed signs of fatigue.

"It looks like the battle with Liang Yue took a toll on it," Zhang Yi remarked.

The fight between Huahua and Liang Yue had drained both of them significantly. Liang Yue's sword, Loong Roar, had left several wounds on the cat. This likely prompted Huahua to follow Zhang Yi and Yang Xinxin here, seeking the only human it trusted.

Zhang Yi saw an opportunity to tame the cat. "Let's go feed the cat," he told Yang Xinxin. He equipped himself and helped Yang Xinxin put on a thick coat before leaving the shelter.

"Meow—" Huahua uttered a cautious cry upon seeing Zhang Yi but showed no aggressive behavior. Its gaze held wariness and fatigue.

Sitting in her wheelchair, Yang Xinxin waved at Huahua. "Huahua, don't be afraid! Come to your sister."

However, Huahua only watched her, occasionally glancing at Zhang Yi, and whimpered softly, not approaching. Clearly, some caution was still harbored towards Zhang Yi, especially after their earlier conflict at Tianqing Academy.

Zhang Yi smiled and opened his spatial gate. "Whoosh—" A mountain of cat treats, dried fish, and bags of cat food poured out.

"Come on, Huahua! Have some food! The outside world is too harsh. If you agree to be my pet, I'll ensure you're well-fed and sheltered," Zhang Yi coaxed.

Huahua stared intensely at the pile of food. Zhang Yi even noticed its throat move in anticipation, a good sign. However, Huahua remained cautious, backing away a few steps while watching Zhang Yi and the food.

"Meow—" Huahua's cry became a mix of challenge and skepticism, as if to say: Do you think you can tame me with just this?

From her wheelchair, Yang Xinxin smiled. "Brother, Huahua is a stray cat, highly vigilant. It took me over a month to build trust with it initially."

Zhang Yi rubbed his face and smiled. "Over a month? I don't mind, but I'm worried it might attack the village across the river where Fatty Xu lives."

While he didn't care about the villagers' lives, he valued Fatty Xu as a loyal subordinate. Any trouble caused by Huahua might strain their relationship.

Turning to Huahua, Zhang Yi said, "Hey, Huahua, I know you don't trust me yet, but I can provide food for you. However, you must promise not to attack the villagers across the river. Can you agree to that?"

He pointed towards the southern village. Believing in Huahua's intelligence, Zhang Yi was relieved to see Huahua look in the direction he pointed and then at the pile of food, nodding slowly.

"Meow—" It was a sign of agreement.

"Alright, that's settled then!" Zhang Yi knew building trust with a stray cat required patience, especially one as intelligent as Huahua. He had plenty of pet snacks and could afford to feed Huahua gradually.

However, he noted, "Such a big cat has a huge appetite. I'll need to find more food for it."

As Zhang Yi wheeled Yang Xinxin back inside, they heard excited cries from the women inside. Turning back, Zhang Yi saw Huahua had disappeared.

"Zhang Yi, look!" Zhou Ke'er exclaimed, pointing to the pile of cat food.

Zhang Yi looked closely and couldn't help but exclaim, "Whoa!"

The enormous mutant cat had shrunk to the size of a normal tabby cat. The women, who hadn't seen a cat in a long time, were now gushing over the adorable sight through the window.

"It can change its size?" Zhang Yi was surprised and delighted.

This ability meant Huahua's feeding requirements would be significantly reduced. Lu Keran laughed, "Of course, big brother, your biology knowledge seems lacking!"

"If it always stayed big, those at Tianqing Academy wouldn't have been able to feed it enough."

Yang Xinxin added, "I suspected as much. Its sudden appearances and disappearances, without causing a commotion, suggested this. Even Liang Yue, a martial arts master, couldn't detect it."

"Given its food intake, its size-changing ability makes sense."

Zhang Yi relaxed, smiling, "That makes things easier! Feeding a tabby cat is much simpler."

Yang Xinxin, frowning, pointed out, "Huahua is injured!"

Zhang Yi noticed the fresh bloodstains on Huahua, likely from Liang Yue's sword, Loong Roar. Though the blood had frozen, indicating recent wounds, Huahua didn't seem bothered while eating.

"I'll provide some medicine for its recovery tomorrow," Zhang Yi thought, knowing not to approach while it was eating. Stray cats might perceive it as a threat and attack.

He preferred handling this himself to build trust with Huahua, rather than having Yang Xinxin intervene.

That night, Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran shared a spacious room. Decorated in warm pink and yellow tones, the room had an 80-square-meter floor area, a huge double bed with cloud-like soft bedding, and warm velvet covers, as the room temperature was high enough to not need thick blankets.

The room was neatly arranged with a wardrobe, dressing table, and desk, and even had some cute oversized plush toys in the corner, making it a princess-like bedroom.

Yang Xinxin wore white silk pajamas, her long, silky hair falling like satin behind her. She sat on the bed with a happy smile. Lu Keran, in green pajamas, sat cross-legged on the bed, chatting happily.

Having been through the apocalypse, they hadn't slept soundly in a long time. Lu Keran exclaimed, "Xinxin, pinch me! This feels like a dream!"

"Just this morning, we were starving and freezing under the snow, and now we're in such a comfortable room!"

Yang Xinxin smiled gently. "Isn't this wonderful? We owe it all to Brother Zhang Yi."

Mentioning Zhang Yi, she hugged a pillow, her face showing an uncontrollable smile. Zhang Yi's calm, rational, and strong image was deeply imprinted in her mind.

Lu Keran also admired, "Yes, Brother Zhang Yi is incredible! To create such a haven in the apocalypse."

She raised her fist with determination, "I've decided to work hard and not disappoint Brother Zhang Yi's kindness!"

Yang Xinxin curiously asked, "What did he ask you to do?"

Lu Keran explained, "He asked me to familiarize myself with and modify some equipment. Besides repairing equipment, I'll likely make weapons too."

Yang Xinxin smiled, "Weapons aren't easy to make, right?"

Lu Keran nodded, "Yes. Simple firearms are manageable, but complex ones need specialized equipment and molds. Even then, the precision might be off."

Yang Xinxin suggested, "Brother probably doesn't lack simple firearms. Bullets and bombs might be more useful to him."

Lu Keran realized, "You're right!"

Making high-end firearms was challenging, but bullets and explosives were easier. Even basic demolition experts could create makeshift bombs. For a professional like Lu Keran, making more powerful, stable bombs was no problem.

"I'll discuss it with Brother tomorrow!" Lu Keran said happily, determined to repay Zhang Yi's kindness.

The next morning, Lu Keran eagerly approached Zhang Yi with her ideas. Zhang Yi was intrigued, considering his traps too simple to handle stronger enemies. More landmines and explosives would be ideal.

"Great! Make a batch of those. Be careful, and let me know what materials you need," Zhang Yi said.

Lu Keran confidently patted her chest, "Leave it to me, big brother!"

Zhang Yi's eyes momentarily glanced at her chest, slightly worried for her future children. "Work hard, I have high hopes for you!" he encouraged, patting her shoulder.

Chapter 229: Arrival from West Hill Base

As the story unfolds, after Zhang Yi, Yang Xinxin, and Lu Keran left Tianqing Academy, Liang Yue led the remaining students to climb up the snow-covered surface. Unbeknownst to them, the cat demon, Huahua, had also followed Zhang Yi and Yang Xinxin. They might have stayed obediently at Tianqing Academy if they had known, given that the supplies there were still enough to sustain them for some time. But fate is unpredictable, and they were unaware of the full situation.

Upon reaching the snow-covered surface, the group was hit by a bitter cold wind that made them shiver uncontrollably, forcing them to retreat back into the snow cave for shelter. The class monitor, Wu Chengyu, was thrilled as he pulled out his phone and called his father, Wu Jianguo, for help. When the call connected, Wu Chengyu indeed heard his father's voice on the other end. After inquiring about the situation at Tianqing Academy, Wu Jianguo instructed them to stay put, assuring them he would send someone to rescue them.

The group was elated by this news.

"Finally! We're saved!"

"We won't have to stay in this hellhole any longer!"

"Monitor, you're amazing! Truly dependable."

Although others had tried contacting their families, they were all children from wealthy backgrounds with prominent family connections. Yet, none of them managed to reach their families, except for Wu Chengyu. This left a bad feeling in their hearts. Could it be that their families had already met with disaster? The students dared not dwell on such dreadful thoughts. The ongoing pain and despair over the past few days had already numbed them. The inability to get through on the phone perhaps still left them with a sliver of hope.

However, as Teacher Liang Yue observed the commanding presence of Wu Chengyu, a peculiar feeling stirred in her heart. Could Wu Chengyu's father really have the capability to rescue them? If he did, wouldn't he have already sent someone to investigate, even if Wu Chengyu hadn't been able to make contact earlier? Why wait until now? But why would he agree to come if Wu Jianguo couldn't save them? Liang Yue couldn't explain it, but she instinctively felt something was off.

The group waited in the snow cave for several hours until they suddenly heard a commotion outside.

"My dad's here!" Wu Chengyu excitedly scrambled out of the snow cave. The other students quickly followed, afraid of being left behind if they were too late. Liang Yue, who had regained some strength, also stood up and climbed to the snow-covered surface with the help of two students.

On the snow, they saw several dog sleds, each pulled by large Alaskan Malamutes, wrapped in custom-made winter gear. These were clearly well-trained, specialized dogs. Seven or eight people disembarked from the sleds, dressed in white clothing, helmets, and even weapons wrapped in white cloth, blending almost seamlessly with the snowy landscape. Yet, their presence exuded an aura of authority and danger. Being familiar with such individuals, Liang Yue recognized them at once as battle-hardened veterans, and not just any soldiers—these were elite troops!

The soldiers glanced at Liang Yue and the students, exchanged a few words among themselves, and then started inspecting them, nodding occasionally. Their eyes seemed to be assessing a group of goods, though the excited students failed to notice this.

Wu Chengyu stepped forward and asked, "My dad is Wu Jianguo. Did he send you to rescue us?"

At that moment, a man stepped out from behind the soldiers, lifting his mask to reveal a somewhat haggard face. He spoke excitedly to Wu Chengyu, "Xiaoyu, Xiaoyu! It's me, your dad!"

Wu Chengyu stared for a moment, taking a couple of seconds to recognize his father. It was no wonder he didn't recognize him immediately. In the past, his father, who held a high-ranking position in Tianhai City, was rather plump with a face full of wealth. But after just over a month, his once chubby face had slimmed down so much that he was almost unrecognizable!

Although puzzled, Wu Chengyu was still overjoyed and rushed forward to hug his father.

“Dad, you finally came! You have no idea what I've been through during this time.”

Wu Jianguo patted his son's back, equally emotional, “It's alright as long as you're safe, that's all that matters!”

Wu Chengyu, however, was a bit dissatisfied, “Dad, why didn't you send someone to rescue us earlier? I've suffered so much here. I almost died!”

Wu Jianguo's expression became somewhat awkward, “Let's not talk about that now. What matters is that you're safe! Come, let's go home.”

Wu Chengyu pointed to his teacher and classmates, “What about my teacher and classmates?”

At this point, the soldiers in white armor approached. The team leader asked, “We heard your school has stored a lot of supplies. Could you show us the way? We need to take all the supplies back to the base.”

Liang Yue frowned, sensing something was off. Weren't they supposed to be here to rescue people? Why, after all this time, hadn't they mentioned rescuing anyone but instead started asking about supplies?

Wu Chengyu eagerly responded, “The supplies are beneath the snow! But there's a mutated creature down there. We didn't dare go near it!”

The soldiers discussed this among themselves briefly before the team leader said, “No need to worry. Any monster that shows up, we'll take care of it!”

“Young man, why don't you lead the way for us?”

Wu Chengyu's face suddenly turned pale. “I...” He certainly didn't want to go back to that dangerous place.

The team leader assured him, "Don't worry, we have experience dealing with mutated creatures. There's no need to be afraid!"

Despite the reassurances, Wu Chengyu was still extremely anxious. After thinking for a moment, he gritted his teeth and pointed at Liang Yue.

"It's always been our teacher, Ms. Liang, who handled the supply searches. She knows better than I do where the supplies are!"

Without hesitation, Wu Chengyu threw Liang Yue, who had protected them for so long, under the bus to save his own skin. Many classmates secretly looked at him with disdain.

Liang Yue felt a heavy weight settle in her heart. But she only sighed, then stepped forward.

"I'll show you the way," she said.

The soldiers confirmed Liang Yue's identity and then followed her down. The other students approached, asking the soldiers how they would be cared for.

"Don't worry, arrangements will be made for you later," one soldier responded coldly.

The students dared not press further, sensing that something was off and that the situation wasn't what they had imagined.

After a while, two soldiers came out and instructed the students, "Come help move some things!"

The students obediently followed. Since Huahua had already left, there was no longer any danger. The soldiers directed the students to pack up all the supplies they could find and carry them to the surface.

Chapter 230: Entering the Base

As the students were put to work, complaints began to surface among them.

“Aren’t they here to rescue us? Why are they making us do all this work?”

“We’ve suffered so much already, and we thought the rescuers would take good care of us. Who knew they’d treat us like laborers?”

One student approached Wu Chengyu and whispered, “Monitor, this isn’t what you told us would happen.”

Wu Chengyu looked embarrassed. He had always boasted about his father, Wu Jianguo, being an important leader in the West Hill organization. But now, it seemed like the situation wasn’t quite as he imagined. His father didn’t seem to hold a very high position in the West Hill organization. However, with the soldiers around, it wasn’t the time to discuss such matters.

Wu Chengyu whispered back, “This is a critical time. They won’t keep idle people around! Just do your work. They’re just short on manpower. Once we reach the base, we’ll be able to rest.”

With no other choice, the students complied.

The soldiers outside loaded the supplies onto the sleds. Unexpectedly, there were still quite a few supplies left at Tianqing Academy, enough to fill the sleds completely. The soldiers nodded in satisfaction. After a brief arrangement, some of them set off first with the sleds, escorting the supplies back, and Wu Jianguo was also sent along to escort the supplies. Given his condition, he wouldn’t make it back without a ride.

Only two soldiers remained to escort Liang Yue and the students back to West Hill Base.

“Let’s go!” one soldier commanded.

Watching the sleds disappear into the distance, the students were stunned.

“You mean we have to walk there?”

“Where are the vehicles? Why didn’t they bring any?”

These students pampered their whole lives, and they had never walked such long distances before. The journey from Tianqing Academy to the West Hill organization’s base was at least ten kilometers. After being hungry and cold for so long, they didn’t have the strength to walk such a distance through the snow.

Hearing the students’ protests, the two soldiers exchanged a glance, their eyes full of mockery.

“Shut up, all of you!” one soldier shouted, his military authority and air of killing intent immediately silencing the students.

“If you want to live, follow me. If anyone doesn’t like it, you can get lost right now!” the soldier added impatiently before turning and walking away without looking back.

The other soldier coldly remarked, “Let me remind you, whatever status you had before, it’s gone now. The apocalypse has come, and your previous identities mean nothing. If you want to survive, you’d better obey.”

After saying this, he tossed them a bag of energy bars and then turned to leave.

The students were left speechless, clearly unable to accept this new reality. Liang Yue spoke up, “Let’s follow them.”

The students were clueless, but the teacher knew better. Even though Liang Yue said so, the panic-stricken students had no choice but to stick close to her. Once again, Liang Yue became their greatest source of support.

A ten-kilometer journey felt like an eternity to them. Cold and hungry, the wind howled around them, and many students collapsed along the way. The two soldiers didn’t bother to help them, only pausing briefly if someone lagged behind. If anyone couldn’t get up, they had no intention of offering assistance.

Liang Yue organized the students to help each other.

“Listen up, we have no other choice. We must reach West Hill Base if we want to survive,” she urged. “Everyone, hang in there. We’re almost there!”

With Liang Yue as their anchor, hope slowly rekindled in their hearts. They trudged forward, encouraging each other step by step.

It took them most of the day to cover the ten-kilometer distance. They'd eat an energy bar whenever they were on the verge of collapse. These military-grade energy bars were remarkably effective, keeping them from collapsing in the snow—a scientific marvel indeed.

After some time, they finally reached West Hill. The West Hill organization's base was located in the West Hill range near Tianhai City. Its entrance was at the foot of a mountain. Following the two soldiers, Liang Yue and the others struggled to reach it. A massive iron door slowly opened at the mountain's base, revealing a deep staircase leading underground.

The two soldiers didn't say a word. They just stood guard by the door and signaled them to enter. Despite their exhaustion, the group mustered the strength to head inside, seeing this place as a safe haven—their beacon of hope for a better life.

Liang Yue and the others descended the stairs, not knowing how long they walked until they finally arrived in a spacious room resembling a bomb shelter. Several corridors branched off from the room, each sealed by thick green metal doors.

“What now? What are we supposed to do?” The students were filled with anticipation and fear, unsure of what awaited them.

“Don't worry, they wouldn't have gone to all this trouble to bring us here if they meant to harm us,” Liang Yue reassured the students.

At that moment, the door to the right corridor suddenly opened with a loud rumble. People wearing protective suits and carrying equipment similar to pesticide sprayers emerged. As soon as they

appeared, they raised their spray guns and began dousing Liang Yue and the others with heavy disinfectant mist, enveloping them completely.

The students coughed repeatedly but understood that this was necessary for entering a shelter, so they gritted their teeth and endured it.

After the disinfection, a middle-aged woman approached them.

“Everyone, line up in two rows!” she instructed.

“I need to explain something to you. To ensure the safety of the shelter, we must conduct thorough disinfection and health checks. Please cooperate with our procedures.”

Medical personnel brought over two tables and set them up in the room. Liang Yue and the others had no choice but to obediently line up as instructed. The medical staff took blood samples from each of them and then led them to an empty room to wait for the test results.

By this point, Liang Yue and the others were so exhausted that they simply followed instructions without question, lacking the strength or courage to speak up. They were locked in the room, where someone in a protective suit brought them food. The food was served on plates—some kind of thick, white liquid. No one knew what it was, but they were too hungry to care and devoured it quickly.

The substance had a texture somewhat like yogurt, though it definitely wasn’t yogurt. After eating, they regained some strength, and some of them began to sleep.

After an unknown amount of time, a plump woman in her fifties appeared, wearing glasses. Wu Jianguo accompanied her.

Wu Chengyu, upon seeing his father, was overjoyed. “Dad!”

Wu Jianguo shot him a glare, signaling him to keep quiet. The woman with the glasses glanced at Wu Chengyu, a hint of amusement in her eyes.

She asked Wu Jianguo, "Is this your son?"

Now somewhat hunched, Wu Jianguo replied obsequiously, "Yes, Director Xu. This is my son, Wu Chengyu."

Director Xu nodded without further comment. She addressed the group, "The tests show that you don't carry any infectious diseases or suspicious pathogens. That's very good! Next, you'll come with me for a thorough cleaning and then be sent to The Fourth Life Pod."