

Ice Age 231

Chapter 231: No Paradise

Following Director Xu's orders, Liang Yue and the students were escorted for deep cleaning. Wu Chengyu, expecting to join them, was stopped by Director Xu.

"Come with me," she instructed.

Wu Chengyu's eyes lit up excitedly as he turned to his classmates. "See? I told you my dad isn't just any ordinary person here."

His classmates looked at him with envy as he eagerly approached Director Xu and his father, Wu Jianguo.

Wu Jianguo leaned in close to his son's ear and whispered, "Xiaoyu, you must obey your superiors here. Whatever Director Xu tells you to do, you do it. Understand?"

Wu Chengyu, still thrilled, nodded, thinking he was about to be assigned to an important position.

Director Xu smiled warmly. "Xiaoyu, come with me."

As Liang Yue and the others were led down the left corridor, Director Xu took Wu Chengyu away. His classmates watched with envy as he left.

"Lucky him!"

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Wu Chengyu followed Director Xu through the vast underground complex of West Hill Base. Though not high, the temperature was around six or seven degrees Celsius. He was curious about everything he saw. Soldiers in white military uniforms guarded the area with guns, giving the place an air of strict discipline. Few people were around, and those moved purposefully, making the entire scene feel orderly.

Director Xu brought Wu Chengyu to a private room, pointing to the bathroom. "Take a shower first."

Wu Chengyu found the room peculiar. It had women's clothing and seemed like someone's personal space. But after so long without a proper shower, he didn't think much of it and eagerly rushed in to clean up.

After half an hour, feeling refreshed, he stepped out of the bathroom—only to freeze in shock at what he saw.

The room's lighting had changed to a suggestive pink from a rose-shaped bedside lamp. Now wearing nothing but a loose piece of lingerie, Director Xu lay on the bed, propped up on one hand, looking at him seductively. Her massive legs resembled thick slabs of pork piled together.

"What are you waiting for? Come here," she cooed, patting the bed.

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Meanwhile, after Liang Yue and the students finished their showers, they were given new clothes—standard uniforms in a dull gray color, practical but far from attractive.

"Follow me," a woman who seemed to be in charge said as she approached. Two armed soldiers followed her closely. A sense of dread began to settle in the hearts of the students. Life in this shelter was nothing like what they had imagined. The atmosphere felt more like a prison, deep underground with dim lighting and armed guards.

They instinctively huddled closer together, looking to Liang Yue for guidance. She frowned slightly but remained silent. It wasn't the time to act rashly, not before understanding the rules here.

Liang Yue quietly signaled the students to stay quiet, and they nodded in understanding. She led them as they obediently followed the woman deeper into the shelter.

The place was enormous, with countless corridors branching off in different directions. After hours of walking, they had no idea where or where they were going. The dim lighting overhead flickered occasionally, adding to the students' pale, exhausted faces.

Eventually, their long march ended as the woman led them to a massive workroom. When the doors opened, they found themselves in a three-meter-high, thousand-square-meter underground cavern.

Inside, they heard a rhythmic "creak, creak" sound. To their amazement, the cavern was filled with stationary bicycles bolted to the ground. Around a thousand people were inside, pedaling away relentlessly. The scene resembled a gigantic fitness center, but the expressions on the cyclists' faces were far from those of people exercising—they were blank, numb, and exhausted. Yet, no one dared to stop.

"What are they doing?" a wealthy young lady gasped.

The woman glanced at them and then at Liang Yue. "This is where you'll be working from now on. Your job is to generate electricity for the base. These bikes are actually generators, connected to the base's power system."

"The base's code of conduct will be given to each of you shortly," she added, her tone calm but chilling undertone as if she were addressing a group of tools rather than survivors.

Finally, she emphasized, "Remember, if you want to stay in this base, you must fully obey the rules. The consequences of disobedience are severe."

After briefly introducing the base's operations, the woman sternly ordered them to start working immediately. A girl suddenly broke down in tears, clutching Liang Yue's sleeve.

"Ms. Liang, Ms. Liang..." she sobbed, not even knowing what to say, just calling out in despair.

The others shared her feelings. The brutal reality of their situation had crushed their spirits. Life in the shelter, with its oppressive environment, felt like something out of a sweatshop from two centuries ago. Even though their time at Tianqing Academy had been dangerous, at least they had freedom there. Liang Yue had protected them.

The woman showed no sympathy for the girl's tears. "You can cry, but you'll work first."

Liang Yue quickly comforted the girl. "Let's just get to work."

With two armed soldiers standing nearby, Liang Yue dared not take any risks. She had assumed this was a government-run shelter where they would be properly cared for, but now she realized how naive she had been.

The students, still tearful, followed Liang Yue to the bikes.

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The red light bathed the scene in Director Xu's room as she dressed herself with a satisfied expression. Clearly, the new boy had been to her liking. After getting dressed, she stepped out of the room. Wu Jianguo, who had been waiting outside, greeted her with a sycophantic smile.

"Director Xu, were you satisfied with my son's service?"

Director Xu gave him a pleased smile. "Not bad at all. The son of a bureau chief has quite the skill in bed. Did he inherit it from you?"

Wu Jianguo laughed obsequiously. "Not at all! Please, don't call me that. That was in the past."

Director Xu's tone became businesslike. "Make sure to clean up afterward. I'll ensure logistics takes good care of you two, allocating extra supplies."

Wu Jianguo was overjoyed, bowing and thanking her profusely. "Thank you, Director Xu! Thank you! Let me know if you need anything, and I'll bring him right over!"

Director Xu walked away, her large figure swaying as she left. Wu Jianguo's expression darkened as he opened the door to the room.

The red light illuminated the space, heavy with the scent of hormones and blood. Wu Chengyu sat on the bed, wrapped in a sheet, his eyes unfocused. His body was bruised, with blotches of purple and blue, and the sheet beneath him was stained with blood. It was hard to imagine what he had endured during that time.

Wu Jianguo closed the door behind him and sighed.

“Son, are you alright?” he asked as he approached, saying, “To survive here, you must learn to accept all of this. It’s okay. You’ll get used to it.”

Wu Chengyu looked up at his father, tears streaming down his face.

“Dad, why didn’t you ever tell me it would be like this? Weren’t you the chief of a bureau? How could this happen?”

He couldn’t understand. He thought he would continue living as the privileged son of an official, even here.

Wu Jianguo sat beside him, his voice low and heavy. “This is how things are now. My title as bureau chief is worthless here.” He began to explain what had happened since the apocalypse began.

At first, the people who arrived here were the elite of Tianhai City and their families. Wu Jianguo had some status in the city but wasn’t at the top. His position’s nature determined his place in the hierarchy. Thanks to a tip from a friend, he had only managed to get here at the last minute.

In the beginning, everyone treated each other respectfully, believing that the snowstorm would last a month or two, after which they could return to their roles. But soon, it became clear that the effects of the supernova were much more severe than anticipated, plunging the world into an ice age that could last years or even decades.

Wu Jianguo’s voice was filled with sorrow. “This meant that our former identities and statuses were gone.”

“Soon after, those who controlled the armed forces staged a coup, killing the base’s leaders. The leader of the rebellion became the new head of the West Hill organization. He’s ruthless, punishing anyone who defies him harshly. He’s the one who introduced the class system here.”

Wu Jianguo looked at his son with a heavy heart. “Of course, there will be a hierarchy in any society with human activity. Even without ordinary civilians, there will still be those who supply and those who control. What happened today is your first lesson on how to survive here.”

“For those at the bottom to survive, they must unconditionally obey those in power. You should be glad—this might be your way out of the lower class.”

Wu Jianguo forced a smile as he patted his son’s head. “Even if it means using your body, selling yourself, it doesn’t matter. In this circle, nothing is off-limits if it leads to success.”

Chapter 232: The Organization

After a grueling day, Liang Yue and her students finally had a chance to rest. By the end of the day, they better understood their current situation. They were required to wake up at six every morning, with just half an hour to wash up before participating in group activities, after which they could eat breakfast. Their main task was pedaling stationary bikes to generate electricity. Each bike had a meter to track the amount of power generated, and if they failed to meet the required quota, their food rations would be reduced.

No one forced them to work, but their workload directly impacted the food they received. To meet the standard, an adult had to pedal continuously for eight hours—this didn’t include breaks or meals. Most of their day was spent on the bikes outside of eating, sleeping, and group activities.

They were given a bland, protein-based paste, supposedly a high-tech meal replacement that provided the necessary energy in the smallest possible quantity. They had one day off every six days, but breaks were staggered even then, so it was a rotating shift schedule.

The pampered students, unaccustomed to such intense labor and the oppressive environment, struggled on their first day. As a result, they received no more than half of a normal portion of food. At night, they slept in dormitories with bunk beds shared by more than a dozen people. Electricity was

scarce, and the dim lighting barely illuminated the room. There were no entertainment facilities like TVs; even charging their phones was strictly regulated to prevent waste.

After their workday ended, everyone gathered in one of the dormitories surrounding Liang Yue, sobbing.

“Ms. Liang, why do we still have to work? Why is life in the shelter so hard?”

“This is nothing like what we imagined!”

“I pedaled all day, my butt is raw, and my thighs hurt so much!”

“If we have to live like this every day, I’d rather die!”

Just one day, they felt like their lives had turned into hell. Liang Yue felt sympathy for her students, but what could she do?

“These are extraordinary times. Just being alive is already a blessing,” she said, trying to console them. “Did you notice the people pedaling around you today? None of them were of lower status than you before all this. I even saw a few bureau chiefs from Tianhai City pedaling.”

Liang Yue took a deep breath and sighed. “A world where everyone is happy and carefree doesn’t exist. But at least we’re all alive and don’t have to worry about survival, right?”

As an adult, Liang Yue could accept the harsh reality of their current life. She even felt somewhat relieved. Back at Tianqing Academy, she had been solely responsible for protecting all the students, constantly on guard against attacks from the demon cat. Now, in the shelter, they could rely on their own efforts to obtain food. As a martial arts expert, the labor wasn’t much of a burden for her. Most importantly, she no longer had to worry about the safety of her students.

But her students didn’t see it that way. In their world, it was natural to get something for nothing. They were used to being on top, born as winners in life. Words like “work,” “labor,” and “hardship” had never been part of their lives.

One student immediately cried out, “But we’re elites! The world will need us to rebuild it in the future.”

“We’re so young, just kids—why do we have to suffer like this?”

“Ms. Liang, can’t you do something?”

Liang Yue felt a bit helpless. “I’m just a teacher. Here, my status is no different from anyone else’s.” She was well aware that even the lowest-ranking person in the power generation department outranked her several times over in the old world. She had no say in the matter.

The door suddenly opened at that moment, and everyone fell silent, cautiously looking outside. Wu Chengyu walked in, looking despondent. He was wrapped tightly in his clothes, his collar pulled up to hide his neck.

When the others saw Wu Chengyu, their eyes lit up with hope, and they left Liang Yue to surround him.

“Wu Chengyu, you’re finally back!”

“Is your dad a leader in the base? Can he help us so we don’t have to work here?”

“Even if we could work in an office, I could be a clerk!”

Wu Chengyu glanced at his classmates and said coldly, “Stop dreaming. Here, everyone has a role. Based on your status, all you can do is pedal these generators.”

Ignoring the others, Wu Chengyu walked over to Liang Yue.

“Ms. Liang,” he greeted.

Liang Yue nodded. “Wu Chengyu, where have you been?”

A pained look flashed in Wu Chengyu's eyes. "I went on a tour of the base with my dad. I now have a general understanding of the situation at West Hill Base."

A classmate hurriedly brought a chair over. "Class monitor, please sit!"

Wu Chengyu quickly waved it off. "No, no, I'll stand."

"Don't be polite! We're all counting on you now!"

"No!" Wu Chengyu gritted his teeth, instinctively clenching his buttocks. The memory of what the old woman had done to him still made his heart bleed.

His classmates were taken aback by his attitude.

"I... I just wanted you to sit and rest."

Wu Chengyu kept his head down as he carefully sat on the edge of the bed.

"Ms. Liang, from now on, we can only rely on you," he said, looking at her earnestly.

Liang Yue pondered for a moment, understanding Wu Chengyu's implication. If their former statuses no longer mattered, then in the apocalypse, power would determine one's place. As a martial arts expert who had awakened supernatural abilities, Liang Yue could eventually become an important figure in the base.

She calmly asked Wu Chengyu, "Do you know the current situation at West Hill Base?"

Wu Chengyu nodded and shared the information he had gathered from his father.

The West Hill organization was now led by Chen Xinian, who was once a high-ranking official in charge of Tianhai City's armed forces. The organization had no ordinary members; even Wu Jianguo, Wu

Chengyu's father, was considered mid-to-low tier in terms of status. Besides the top leaders, the base was home to many skilled professionals, including doctors and scientists. Additionally, a large group of elite soldiers was tasked with defending the base.

Chen Xinian divided the base into four sections, each known as a Life Pod to maintain order.

The First Life Pod housed Chen Xinian and his family, who enjoyed the highest resources. Their living conditions were as luxurious as they had been outside. Supplies that the other three Life Pods couldn't even dream of were easily accessible to them.

The Second Life Pod was reserved for Chen Xinian's inner circle, including his trusted aides and top-tier scientists and doctors. Although their living conditions weren't as lavish as those in the First Life Pod, they still enjoyed a comfortable environment and delicious food.

The Third Life Pod housed the elite soldiers who protected the base. West Hill Base had over a thousand soldiers, all top-tier warriors with the best combat skills and equipment in Tianhai City. Their living conditions were second only to those in the Second Life Pod, with no worries about daily necessities.

Finally, the Fourth Life Pod was where Liang Yue and her group currently resided. The people here had little value to the base, so they were relegated to manual labor, generating electricity for the base or performing other menial tasks. The living conditions in the Fourth Life Pod were abysmal, barely sufficient to sustain life. Resources, energy, and entertainment were scarce.

"Most of the West Hill organization's population resides in the Fourth Life Pod," Wu Chengyu explained. "But don't even think about rebelling. The Third Pod's soldiers stand between us and the higher pods. We'd never be able to fight against those well-equipped warriors!"

Given their privileged backgrounds, Wu Chengyu deliberately warned his classmates, knowing they might be tempted to rebel. He had considered fighting back when the fat woman was on top of him, but the sheer power difference had forced him to submit.

When the others learned that over a thousand elite soldiers were stationed just outside their area, their hopes were crushed.

“So, does that mean we’re stuck here for the rest of our lives?”

“I can’t take it. I’d rather die!”

Several girls broke down, crying. They had never lifted a finger for manual labor, and now, after just one day, their thighs were raw, and their delicate skin was chafed. They had to look forward to this every day from now on.

The others were also on the verge of tears, faces filled with sadness and despair.

Wu Chengyu closed his eyes, his voice cold as he spoke. “Do you think they let us come to West Hill Base out of the goodness of their hearts? They needed to replenish their labor force.”

“A lot of people couldn’t accept this reality and chose to end their lives. The base doesn’t care about us. If they need more workers, they can just capture other survivors to replace us.”

Suddenly, one of the boys grabbed Wu Chengyu by the collar, his face twisted with rage. “This is all your fault! If you hadn’t exposed our location, we wouldn’t have ended up in this hellhole!”

Wu Chengyu simply looked at him coldly. “If we had stayed at Tianqing Academy, would you have survived?”

The boy was momentarily speechless. Freedom or life—a choice between two evils.

Wu Chengyu pushed the boy away and then turned to Liang Yue, who had remained silent.

“Ms. Liang, if we want to change our situation, we can only rely on you!” he pleaded. “You’re a Superhuman, and in West Hill Base, Superhumans are granted special privileges.”

“Teacher, please help us!”

Chapter 233: Morning Meeting

Wu Chengyu's words struck a chord with the students, and they all turned to Liang Yue with pleading eyes, crowding around her and tugging at her clothes, hoping for her protection.

"Ms. Liang, you have to help us!"

"You're our teacher. It's your responsibility to care for us!"

"We can't handle hard labor. Please talk to the base and see if we can get work done more easily."

After a day of rest, Liang Yue's strength had almost fully recovered. She was now formidable in combat, capable of quickly taking down armed soldiers. However, she was rational and wouldn't act impulsively out of emotion.

After listening to Wu Chengyu, Liang Yue didn't find any severe issues with the West Hill Base; it was simply a case of social stratification—a common occurrence throughout human history. She didn't agree with her students' desire to avoid labor either.

"I will protect your safety, but I need more time to observe the situation before making any decisions about work," she replied.

The students were clearly dissatisfied with her answer, but since Liang Yue was now their last hope, they didn't dare to express their displeasure as openly as before. Instead, they continued to plead with her, whispering in her ear.

Feeling overwhelmed, Liang Yue finally said, "It's getting late. Everyone should go back and rest. We have work tomorrow, and you'll need your energy."

Reluctantly, the students left, but not before reminding Liang Yue to help them negotiate lighter duties.

Liang Yue did intend to talk to the base leaders the next day. The current living conditions were oppressive, and if she could do something to improve the situation, she was willing to make the effort.

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The next morning at six, the dormitory loudspeakers blared, waking everyone up. The newly arrived students followed the others to wash up, completing their morning routine in the allotted half-hour.

Liang Yue and the rest then joined the larger group in the cafeteria. The female leader of the power plant, accompanied by several soldiers, greeted them. She looked out over the hundreds of workers and forced a smile.

“Good morning, everyone! Today marks the 48th day of our survival. Thank our great leader, Comrade Chen Xinian, for guiding us to this day of safety and happiness!”

Immediately, someone raised their hand and shouted, “Long live our great leader, Comrade Chen Xinian!”

The rest quickly raised their fists and echoed, “Long live our great leader, Comrade Chen Xinian!”

They chanted this three times before stopping. The woman continued, “Yesterday, our team rescued another group of survivors from the outside. From now on, they are part of our family!” She looked toward Liang Yue and her group, smiling as she added, “Come on, family members, please introduce yourselves to everyone!”

Applause erupted as everyone turned to look at Liang Yue and the others. Liang Yue felt a chill run down her spine. She recognized this scenario all too well—it was brainwashing.

The scary part was that Liang Yue knew how effective this kind of brainwashing could be. It wasn’t just about being smart or staying vigilant to avoid being assimilated. The herd mentality could make you gradually identify with the group and environment to the point where, even if you kept telling yourself it was just brainwashing, your mind and body would adapt, trapping you in that environment.

This was why so many intelligent people, including college students and professionals, had fallen into the traps of organizations like pyramid schemes.

"They're using this to manage the lower classes?" Liang Yue thought, taking a deep breath. She understood but felt powerless to change it. The herd mentality was a natural, pervasive force.

Reluctantly, she led the students to the front and, as instructed, introduced themselves one by one.

"Now, let's proceed with our daily morning meeting. Who's leading today?" the woman asked.

A middle-aged woman raised her hand. "It's my turn today!"

"Alright, let's get started!" The woman didn't leave but joined the others in the front row.

Brimming with enthusiasm, the middle-aged woman took the stage, smiling with satisfaction as she looked out at the crowd. She seemed to relish the opportunity to feel like a leader again.

"The first item of our morning meeting: Praise the Organization!" she announced, leading everyone in a song.

"With the light of the rising sun, we illuminate the dreams of West Hill. Hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, we face the snow and frost together.

"With our passionate aspirations, we ignite the strength of West Hill!

"You and I, together we create new glory!

"We fulfill our dreams, our passion soaring, embracing the next moment's brilliance!

"We fulfill our dreams, our blood boiling, together we sail through the storm, together we set sail!"

Liang Yue and her group mumbled along to the song, trying to keep up. The host reminded the newcomers that they had three days to learn the song, as someone would check.

But that wasn't the end of it. Next came a series of games. They played three games: "Carrot Squat," "Draw and Guess," and a group exercise routine.

After all this, the workers were returned to their posts to generate electricity for the base. Liang Yue noticed a subtle change in her students' expressions after the morning meeting. Though they still looked unhappy, they seemed to slowly integrate into the group, chatting with coworkers they had met during the games.

"This might be for the best. If we can't resist, we might as well accept this life. At least we'll survive," Liang Yue thought. If life continued like this, it was better than waiting to die outside.

But in life, you never know whether a surprise or an unexpected event will come first.

Around ten in the morning, a group of heavily armed soldiers arrived at the power plant, immediately drawing everyone's attention. The factory leader hurried over to greet them.

The soldiers stood at the entrance, and then a young woman in a suit, wearing burgundy glasses, slowly walked in.

"Secretary Ge, why did you come here in person? If you need something, just tell me, and I'll take care of it," the factory leader said, her tone ingratiating.

Secretary Ge didn't even glance at her, instead asking, "There was a group of survivors rescued yesterday. Is Ms. Liang Yue here?"

Chapter 234: Adopting a Cat

Hearing Liang Yue's name, the surrounding students turned to look at her. Wu Chengyu quickly whispered, "Ms. Liang, don't forget about us!"

Liang Yue dismounted from the stationary bike and said, "I am Liang Yue."

Secretary Ge's gaze met Liang Yue's, and after a brief pause, she smiled and walked over. Everyone's eyes were on them, curious as to why such an important figure would personally come to the Fourth Life Pod.

Secretary Ge extended her hand and shook Liang Yue's. "Hello, Ms. Liang. I'm Ge Rou, the secretary to our leader. The leader would like to meet you."

The workshop instantly buzzed with excitement. The leader of the West Hill organization wanted to meet this newcomer? This surely meant she was about to rise to a position of power.

The students were even more excited, calling out to Liang Yue.

"Ms. Liang..."

"Ms. Liang..."

Secretary Ge heard the murmuring and glanced around, silencing everyone with a look. She smiled at Liang Yue and gestured, "Please, come with me."

Liang Yue was curious about what kind of person Chen Xinian, the leader, might be. Besides, any opportunity to escape the grueling work in the power plant was welcome. She nodded and followed Secretary Ge out.

After they left, a soldier called out two more students' names, "Luo Nianchen, Dongfang Qingming. You two, come here!"

The two students, filled with excitement, quickly scrambled off their bikes and ran over, leaving the others watching enviously as they were led away from the power plant.

Liang Yue followed Secretary Ge through the underground complex of West Hill Base, eventually arriving at the office of Chen Xinian, the organization's leader. He was a middle-aged man in his fifties with neatly combed graying hair, giving him a sharp and capable appearance.

When he saw Liang Yue, he approached with a warm smile and shook her hand. The kindness in Chen Xinian's expression brought a long-lost sense of warmth to Liang Yue. Caring for the students from Tianqing Academy had left her exhausted, and she had almost forgotten that she, too, needed someone to offer her a safe harbor for her weary soul.

After a brief conversation, Liang Yue was captivated by Chen Xinian's vision for West Hill Base, particularly the structured hierarchy of the Life Pods. She agreed with the necessity of such a system to preserve the seeds of Chinese civilization and ensure the base's survival.

"To preserve the legacy of our civilization and keep this base operational, I hope you'll lend us your strength, Ms. Liang," Chen Xinian said sincerely.

After a moment's thought, Liang Yue nodded. "If there's anything I can do to help, please don't hesitate to ask."

Chen Xinian's smile grew broader, and he immediately called Secretary Ge back to arrange a new living space for Liang Yue. She was promptly promoted from the Fourth Life Pod to the Second Life Pod, where she was given a private room with all the comforts of a high-end office building. The bright lighting made it easy to forget that they were deep underground, and there were delicious meals to enjoy, along with unlimited hot water.

"This place isn't so bad after all," Liang Yue thought, feeling a sense of warmth fill her heart. She believed she had made the right decision to come here. Meanwhile, the students still toiling in the power plant anxiously awaited her return.

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Over at Cloud Manor, Zhang Yi's main task had been feeding the cat. The demon cat, Huahua, was the first mutated animal he had encountered. Its formidable size, needle-sharp fur, and natural feline hunting skills had deeply fascinated Zhang Yi. He had made up his mind to tame this demon cat and make it his pet, believing that animals were often more reliable than humans. With a good relationship, it could become a trusted and formidable ally.

Perhaps because Zhang Yi had previously had Fatty Xu intervene to stop its fight with Liang Yue, Huahua had started to warm up to him. By now, its attitude towards Zhang Yi had noticeably improved.

One afternoon, Zhang Yi crouched by the door, a large cat bowl in front of him. It was filled with cat treats, premium cat food, and even a few fresh fish. Not far from him, Huahua had returned to its normal size and was eating heartily.

No cat could resist the allure of delicious cat treats, often dubbed “stray cat bait.” Zhang Yi smiled and said, “Huahua, I’ve been feeding you for a week. Look at all the food you’ve eaten. From now on, you’re my cat. How about coming home with me?”

“Meow—” Huahua glanced at Zhang Yi, squinted slightly, and then resumed eating.

“If you come with me, I promise you’ll have plenty of this food every day! The house is nice and warm, and there’s a fireplace where you can bask in the heat. Look at how cozy it is inside. Why stay out here in the cold?”

Zhang Yi coaxed gently. After finishing the large food bowl, Huahua cleaned its paws and fur. When Zhang Yi mentioned the warm room, Huahua looked through the glass at the fireplace inside, and for the first time, hesitation flickered in its eyes.

At first, Huahua had followed the group because of the girl who had once fed it. But with intelligence far surpassing that of an ordinary animal, it also realized that this man’s home was very comfortable. After Zhang Yi had spent so much time feeding it and treating its injuries, Huahua began to think that following this man might not be such a bad idea.

Zhang Yi noticed the longing in Huahua’s eyes as it gazed at the warm room. Cats were not naturally cold-resistant animals; they had an innate desire for warmth, possibly because their ancestors once roamed the deserts of Egypt. Sensing that the time was right, Zhang Yi slowly walked towards the house and opened the door.

“Huahua, why not come in and take a look? It’s nice inside,” he said gently, fatherly.

In recent days, even Zhou Ke'er and Yang Siya had felt a twinge of jealousy. Zhang Yi treated the cat better than he treated them! However, for Zhang Yi, animals were more trustworthy and easier to care for without any emotional burden.

Huahua tilted its head, licked its fur a couple of times, and finally raised its tail and cautiously approached the open door after a moment of consideration. Zhang Yi's eyes lit up—it was working!

"There's even more good food inside. Why not come in and try it?" he continued to coax the cat step by step.

And Huahua followed him into the house!

Success! Zhang Yi was overjoyed. Once inside, Huahua curiously explored the room, quickly leaping onto the expensive sofa and starting to scratch at it with its claws. The floor and sofa were soon marked with dirty paw prints.

Instead of being upset, Zhang Yi smiled and encouraged, "It's okay! Feel free to explore. This is your home now!"

Zhou Ke'er, watching from nearby, remarked jealously, "Good thing this cat can't turn into a woman, or I'd have no standing in this house at all!"

Chapter 235: The Network Intruder

On the first day that Huahua arrived at the shelter, it began causing havoc everywhere. The shelter was enormous, and Huahua's curiosity led it to explore every corner, leaving paw prints and even breaking an antique vase. However, Zhang Yi was incredibly patient, allowing the cat to roam freely and make a mess without concern. He knew the key to building a relationship with a cat was establishing trust from the start. If that initial trust was broken, it would be nearly impossible to rebuild it later.

After hours of rampaging through the house, Huahua finally seemed to tire out. It leaped over to the fireplace, stretched out lazily, and lay on the floor. Zhang Yi took a long breath, recognizing that Huahua was finally content with its new environment. He carefully approached, hoping to pet its head from behind.

"Meow—" Huahua turned its head to look at him, causing Zhang Yi to pause his movements. For a few seconds, they locked eyes, and then the cat rested its head back on the floor. Zhang Yi exhaled in relief, thinking, "Dealing with women isn't even this tricky!"

Despite the tension, Zhang Yi was delighted when Huahua started purring contentedly, accepting him as its new caretaker. "Success!" Zhang Yi thought, a genuine smile spreading across his face. The joy of successfully adopting a cat was indescribable.

Huahua's presence brought a new sense of happiness to the shelter. The girls in the house competed to feed and pet it, but for some reason, Huahua still preferred to stay by Zhang Yi's side. It even started sleeping at the foot of Zhang Yi's bed at night, a place it chose over anyone else's. Even Yang Xinxin, who had previously fed the cat, could compete with Zhang Yi for Huahua's affection. It seemed that cats often preferred the company of men.

During this time, the two new arrivals, Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran, also kept themselves busy. Yang Xinxin was responsible for the shelter's network security. With her presence and the shelter's supercomputer, it was nearly impossible for anyone to breach their defenses. However, as a top hacker, Yang Xinxin wasn't content with playing defense. She used her advanced hacking skills to track down the source of any incoming network intrusions, launching counterattacks.

It took her only a few minutes to pinpoint the origin of a recent intrusion. When Zhang Yi received the news, he immediately rushed to the control center.

"Xinxin, what's the emergency? Did you discover something new?" Zhang Yi asked.

Yang Xinxin flashed a sly smile. "I found the person trying to hack into the shelter's network!" She showed Zhang Yi the laptop on her knees, displaying a map of Tianhai City.

Zhang Yi noticed a pentagram marking the location of Cloud Manor, with a blinking red dot indicating the intruder's location. After examining it closely, he realized that the red dot was located where the southwest of Xishan District and the northwest of Lijiang District met, just about thirty kilometers away from the shelter.

"They're that close?" Zhang Yi's expression grew serious. He hadn't expected a powerful organization to be hidden so near.

Yang Xinxin, however, seemed unimpressed. "Their hacking methods were quite rudimentary. It's likely the work of an amateur engineer. Their equipment wasn't sophisticated, and I had no trouble hacking into their system. The data on their computer is encrypted, so it'll take some time to crack, but based on what I've seen so far, there does seem to be a large organization in the Xishan District."

Yang Xinxin looked up, her light blue eyes calm. "We might be running into them soon."

Zhang Yi crossed his arms and said calmly, "If it's inevitable, we won't shy away. I'm not one to seek trouble, but if anyone tries to disrupt my peace, I'll make sure they pay for it."

Zhang Yi was no longer the person he used to be. He now had a fortress-like shelter and a team of elite fighters. Among them were three Superhumans, including himself. Even if they encountered a formidable armed group, he was confident they could handle it.

"Xinxin, keep tracking their signal and crack the data. I want to know more about that organization," Zhang Yi instructed, patting Yang Xinxin on the shoulder before leaving the control center to find Lu Keran.

Thanks to Zhang Yi's support, Lu Keran had set up her mechanical workshop. As a genius specially recruited by Tianqing Academy, Lu Keran was highly skilled in mechanical engineering. Although she couldn't handle extremely sophisticated machinery alone, manufacturing weapons and ammunition wasn't particularly challenging. In 2050, industrial technology had advanced to the point where, with the right equipment, even something as complex as a firearm could be produced with a 3D printer. Making bullets and explosives was relatively straightforward.

Lu Keran was now busy fulfilling Zhang Yi's request to produce a large quantity of bullets, focusing primarily on sniper and pistol rounds, as these were the types of ammunition he was currently most in need of and the ones he used most frequently in combat.

When Zhang Yi reached the workshop, he knocked on the door. "Keran, it's me."

The door opened, and the clanging of metal filled the air. As Zhang Yi stepped inside, he immediately noticed the sweltering heat in the room, making him sweat even though he was only wearing a light shirt.

Lu Keran was working at the bench, dressed in shorts and a green tank top, with a black apron tied around her chest. Her entire body was drenched in sweat, with her hair sticking to her skin. When she saw Zhang Yi, she greeted him with a bright smile, "Big Brother, what brings you here?"

Zhang Yi chuckled. "Just wanted to see how your work is coming along."

At eighteen years old, Lu Keran had a naturally bubbly personality, almost like a big kid. Zhang Yi couldn't help but think of her as a little sister.

Lu Keran grinned, revealing her pearly white teeth. She eagerly reached for something on a nearby shelf. "Big Brother, check this out—I've got something cool for you!"

Zhang Yi took the item from her and saw that it was a silencer for a sniper rifle. His eyes lit up. "This is great!"

For him, this was incredibly valuable. Zhang Yi's Superhuman ability, Precision Shooting, allowed him to double the power of any firearm. He could take targets up to 3,000 meters away with a sniper rifle. The only downside was that the sound of the gunfire could give away his position. With this silencer, that problem could be solved, allowing him to eliminate enemies from the shadows without fear of being detected.

Chapter 236: Good Brother

"Good job!" Zhang Yi praised with a smile.

Lu Keran, with her hands clasped behind her back and her fingers fidgeting shyly, smiled and said, "Try it out first and see if it fits! I made it to match the dimensions of your sniper rifle, but if it doesn't feel right, I can still make adjustments."

Zhang Yi nodded, "It's well done!"

Hearing Zhang Yi's praise, Lu Keran's cheeks turned rosy with excitement. "Big Brother, if you need anything else, just let me know. I'll do my best to make it for you!"

Zhang Yi smiled, "That's exactly why I'm here."

He put his arm around Lu Keran's shoulder and guided her to a nearby chair. Feeling Zhang Yi's warm hand on her shoulder, Lu Keran's heart began to race. Despite often presenting herself as a tomboy, she felt something new and unfamiliar stirring within her.

"Keran, can you make grenades, landmines, and explosives?" Zhang Yi asked.

Lu Keran turned to him, her eyes wide with surprise as if she had just heard something unbelievable. Zhang Yi blinked and asked with a grin, "Is it too difficult?"

"Not at all!" Lu Keran suddenly stood up, seemingly a bit displeased. "Big Brother, you're underestimating me! I thought you were going to ask for something complicated."

"Hmph, the things you mentioned aren't even as challenging as making a new energy battery!" She pouted slightly, clearly unhappy that Zhang Yi had doubted her abilities. "You don't appreciate my skills enough, asking me to make such basic stuff."

Zhang Yi was momentarily speechless. For a genius like her, were those things really that simple?

Seeing Zhang Yi's surprised expression, Lu Keran understood what he was thinking. She explained, "Those items aren't particularly useful in modern warfare. Maybe they were effective in single-soldier operations a hundred years ago, but making gunpowder is something even a high school student could do with the right materials. It's just sulfur, saltpeter, and charcoal."

Zhang Yi laughed, "Things aren't like they used to be. With the arrival of the extreme cold era, aircraft carriers and planes have become nearly obsolete. Now, wars are fought on a much smaller scale between individuals. In this environment, landmines and explosives have their place again."

Zhang Yi then told her about the discoveries Yang Xinxin had made. "Our shelter has been targeted. We don't know who's behind it, but it's likely a well-armed organization. I must upgrade our defenses and set up more traps around the area to ensure our safety. Do you understand?"

After hearing Zhang Yi's explanation, Lu Keran's expression turned serious. "I see. I'm sorry, Big Brother. I didn't realize the situation was so serious."

Given her lack of experience with human conflict, her ignorance was understandable.

Zhang Yi smiled reassuringly, "It's okay. Just focus on your work. You don't need to worry about anything else—I'll take care of it."

"I'll protect you," Zhang Yi said gently, his hands resting on her shoulders, his eyes full of sincerity. Lu Keran, who had little experience with the world, couldn't help but be moved to tears.

"Big Brother... You're so good to me. I... I don't know how to repay you!" Tears began to fall from her eyes.

Zhang Yi gently wiped her tears away and said softly, "The first time I met you, I felt an instant connection. You look so much like the little sister I once had. The moment I saw you, I just wanted to protect you."

Lu Keran sniffled, her wide, innocent eyes blinking at him. "Really?"

"Of course. Why would I lie to you?" Zhang Yi replied with a warm smile.

Lu Keran beamed with joy. In the chaos of the apocalypse, having such a kind man treat her like a little sister was a blessing. Yet, for some reason, her heart had a slight sense of dissatisfaction.

A sister? Is that all I can be?

Before she could dwell on the thought, Zhang Yi's hand had gently touched her flushed cheek, making her face even hotter. Her head started to spin.

"Listen to your brother, okay? Don't worry about anything else—I'm here to care for you."

"As long as I'm around, no harm will come to you."

Lu Keran's mind was completely muddled, her eyes dazed. Never before had she been treated so affectionately by a man.

"Mm, mm, mm." She could only nod repeatedly, unable to speak, agreeing with everything Zhang Yi said.

Zhang Yi smiled and said, "Alright, then. You get back to work, but take care of yourself. Don't overwork, okay?"

With that, he left the workshop, leaving Lu Keran with a dreamy, faraway look in her eyes.

After stepping outside, Zhang Yi took a deep breath, reflecting on how he had once again captured the heart of an innocent young girl. But when it came to Lu Keran, a true treasure, he knew he had to keep her close. She needed to be completely loyal to him.

Using a bit of charm was a small price to pay if necessary. After all, weapons were too dangerous to be entrusted to anyone but those he could fully trust.

Zhang Yi thought momentarily and then took out his phone to send a message to Uncle You and Fatty Xu, informing them about the potential threat and urging them to stay vigilant.

"Recently, I've noticed an unknown presence nearby. It's close, so be careful. Don't trust anyone too easily in these times."

"Due to the snow disaster, official organizations are no longer able to effectively manage different regions. Be especially cautious of anyone claiming to represent the government."

"And remember, under no circumstances should you reveal our abilities. This is extremely important, so please keep it in mind!"

After reading Zhang Yi's message, Uncle You and Fatty Xu were startled into action. They quickly agreed to stay alert and follow Zhang Yi's advice.

For Zhang Yi, this was all he could do. After all, he had no intention of leaving the safety of the shelter. With this fortress-like stronghold, he was confident that he could handle any enemy, no matter how powerful.

"However, the most dangerous situation right now might be with Fatty Xu's group," Zhang Yi thought, recalling the location on the map. The signal source spying on them was positioned right along the path between the Cloud Manor and Xu's Town.

Zhang Yi frowned and sent another message to Fatty Xu: "If you run into trouble and can't handle it, head straight for my place."

As an ice-element Superhuman, Fatty Xu was too valuable to lose. Zhang Yi couldn't afford to let anything happen to him.

Chapter 237: The Scouts

A smile spread across Fatty Xu's chubby face after reading Zhang Yi's warning. It felt good to be cared about, but he didn't take the message too seriously. After all, Xu's Town had always been a quiet, insignificant village on the outskirts of Tianhai City. The property prices were low, and the people of Xu's Town held little status in the eyes of city folk. "If anyone's planning something, it would be to target Zhang's villa, not our humble town," Fatty Xu thought as he tossed his phone aside and returned to flipping through his manga.

Meanwhile, 27 kilometers west of Xu's Town, two figures emerged from the snow-covered buildings in what was once a newly developed area of Tianhai City. It was an unusual pair: a towering man, over two meters tall, with the build of a bear, and a slender, nimble woman dressed in minimal clothing. They were clad in white, making them nearly invisible against the snow unless closely observed.

The woman's scant attire—a form-fitting white leather outfit—highlighted her curvaceous figure. Despite the severe cold, where temperatures dipped below minus sixty degrees, she wore no hat or

scarf yet seemed entirely unfazed by the freezing weather. Beside her, the giant man carried a rifle wrapped in white cloth. His every step left deep imprints in the snow, and he found the trek exhausting.

"This snow... I wonder how long it'll keep falling! If it goes on for a few more months, the whole world might get buried," Liu Ziyang grumbled, looking up at the snowy sky, his square-jawed face etched with frustration.

The woman, Xishan Base Second Lieutenant Xie Huanhuan, smiled softly and said, "The snow won't fall forever. The water molecules in the air have nearly all condensed. Without more evaporation from other regions, how could there be more snow?" She caught a snowflake in her pale hand, adding, "I've heard that even the equator is now down to minus twenty degrees. So, the cold will persist, but the snowfall will gradually lessen. This might be the last bit of mercy the world receives."

Liu Ziyang scratched his head, clearly not understanding Xie Huanhuan's poetic language. She, however, paid him no mind and walked over to a sled tied to the side of the road. She mounted the sled with effortless grace, her light frame barely pressing into the snow.

She pulled out a small palm-sized device from a pouch at her waist. This was their communication link with Xishan Base. Their mission was to survey the surrounding areas of the base.

"Original Hai Xiang Road, Dong Yixin City inspection complete," Xie Huanhuan reported into the device, which now had several marked locations displayed on it.

"Where to next?" Liu Ziyang asked.

"Our survey was originally limited to Xishan District, but we've been given orders to conduct a special search in one more area," Xie Huanhuan replied.

"Special search?" Liu Ziyang's curiosity was piqued. Xie Huanhuan's role was superior to his, as she determined their route.

"It's a special task from the higher-ups, but no specific details were given. It doesn't seem to be anything too important, though. As usual, we'll just check it out and report back."

Xie Huanhuan suddenly stood on the sled, shading her eyes as she looked into the distance. There, a large river gleamed under the cold light.

“The place we’re heading to is by the river. We just need to follow it, and we’ll find it!” she said.

The extreme cold had damaged many communication towers worldwide, making most positioning devices unreliable. Even if they could see a location on a map, the maps were outdated, from before the apocalypse, and still needed to be verified manually.

“Let’s go! One last stop, and then we can head back,” Xie Huanhuan said, sitting back down on the sled.

Liu Ziyang whistled to the Alaskan Malamutes leading the sled, then pushed it until it gained speed before hopping onto the back. Given his massive size, only these large sled dogs could pull him.

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Over an hour later, Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang arrived at Xu’s Town. The sight before them left them both astonished as they approached the snowy expanse. Their original destination had been Cloud Manor by the river. Still, as they followed the river, they came upon a village entirely made of ice and snow, with a massive snow fortress dominating the center.

Compelled by curiosity, they decided to investigate.

As the sled neared Xu’s Town, the village’s sled dogs quickly sounded the alarm.

“Woof, woof!” The barking started with one dog and quickly spread throughout the village, alerting everyone.

The entire village was immediately on high alert. Ever since their failed assault on Cloud Manor, where Zhang Yi single-handedly wiped out a hundred of their men, the villagers had lived in constant fear. Even though Zhang Yi had promised not to harm Xu’s Town in the future, the villagers were still terrified of him. Any unusual sound now made them worry that Zhang Yi might be coming to attack them again.

As a result, the villagers grabbed their weapons and gathered their dogs, ready to defend themselves. Upon seeing so many people, Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang couldn't help but be surprised.

"Who would've thought there were so many survivors here?"

"Not only have they survived the cold and hunger, but they've also maintained the village—it's incredible!"

Their curiosity about the village grew.

The villagers, however, were wary and blocked their path. A group leader holding a hunting rifle coldly asked, "Who are you? What do you want in Xu's Town?"

Liu Ziyang frowned his right hand already on the safety of his rifle. But Xie Huanhuan stepped forward with a gentle smile, saying, "I'm Second Lieutenant Xie Huanhuan of the Tianhai Military Subdistrict. I'm here on behalf of the government to search for and assist survivors of the snow disaster. There's no need to be alarmed!" She pulled out her identification and showed it to the villagers, fully aware that these people likely still held out hope for the government. Showing her credentials could avoid a lot of unnecessary trouble.

Chapter 238: Guiding Inspection

As expected, once Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang introduced themselves, the villagers of Xu's Town immediately became much more welcoming. Even in the post-apocalyptic world, the ingrained respect for authority was still deeply rooted in their bones.

The newly appointed village head, Xu Dongtang, stepped forward to closely examine Xie Huanhuan's credentials. Seeing their official uniforms and bearing, he was convinced they were who they claimed to be. His demeanor changed instantly from stern to obsequious, with a broad smile spreading across his face.

"So, it's the leadership visiting us! Welcome, welcome!" Xu Dongtang said enthusiastically, and the villagers quickly lowered their weapons. They curiously eyed Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang, brimming with questions. Communication networks were no longer as reliable as before the apocalypse, so they

had little information about the outside world. They were unsure about the state of the world, whether the government was still functioning, and how it planned to handle the snow disaster. However, none of this dulled Xu Dongtang's eagerness to curry favor with the two officials.

He invited them into the village, ordering the villagers to prepare food for their guests. "Prepare a feast! Today, we have higher-ups visiting for an inspection. We must treat them well!" Xu Dongtang commanded, instructing the villagers to bring out some stored food.

Someone questioned, "Sixth Uncle, we don't know what they're here for. Why are we treating them so warmly?"

Xu Dongtang responded with a knowing smile, "As long as they represent the government, that's all that matters. In these troubled times, when the world is in chaos, it's our chance as farmers to rise. If we can establish a connection with the government, who knows? The Xu family might just ascend to great heights! And besides, it's just some food—we can afford it."

The villagers, convinced by Xu Dongtang's reasoning, returned to their homes to gather their best provisions to offer Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang.

For their part, Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang were surprised to find such a lively and well-organized village. It seemed almost untouched by the snow disaster, which they found remarkable. As they strolled through the village, accompanied by Xu Dongtang and several elder members of the Xu family, they observed everything with keen interest.

Xie Huanhuan asked, "Old sir, despite this heavy snow, it seems your village hasn't been affected much. How have you managed that?"

Xu Dongtang puffed out his chest, eager to impress the officials. "First and foremost, we in Xu's Town are resilient and self-reliant. We didn't let the snow disaster defeat us! Secondly, as village head, I played a role in guiding the people. You see, I've always advised them to stockpile food in emergencies. So when the snow disaster hit, our villagers didn't have to worry about food. Not to brag, but not everyone in Xu's Town has starved!"

Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang exchanged a meaningful glance. Meanwhile, the older villagers were internally rolling their eyes at Xu Dongtang's self-congratulatory speech. He'd only been village head for a few days, and the previous head, Xu Dongsheng, had led the real efforts. Moreover, Xu's Town had

always been an agricultural and fishing community with a longstanding tradition of stockpiling food. But now, Xu Dongtang was taking all the credit.

Casually, Xie Huanhuan asked, "So, your village has plenty of food stored up, then?"

Proudly, Xu Dongtang replied, "Leader, it seems you're unfamiliar with Tianhai City's agricultural market. To put it bluntly, Xu's Town supplies a third of Tianhai City's vegetables!"

Realizing he might have said too much, Xu Dongtang quickly tried to backtrack. "But, of course, the heavy snowfall over the past month has ruined much of our food. Right now, we're just managing to get by."

Xie Huanhuan smiled gently. "Even so, for a village with over a thousand households, being able to get by is quite impressive."

Xu Dongtang chuckled, "In all of Xu's Town, our village is in the best shape. Just look at these ice houses we've built—they solve our housing problem perfectly! Other villages weren't so clever; many homes were buried under the snow, and a lot of people died."

He pointed to the ice houses with a smug expression, claiming all the credit for the idea, while the other villagers, though exasperated, refrained from contradicting him due to his position.

Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang were genuinely impressed. They thought, "This old man has some serious talent!"

Liu Ziyang gazed at the massive snow fortress in the village and remarked, "These ice houses were all built by hand? That's incredible—your village has some skilled craftsmen!"

Xu Dongtang shamelessly claimed, "We're farmers. We need skills to make some extra money and support our families!"

Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang nodded, not questioning his explanation. Xu Dongtang's self-aggrandizing had the unintended effect of keeping the existence of Xu Chunlei, the real skilled craftsman behind the ice houses, a secret.

After touring the village, Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang didn't find anything particularly noteworthy. The villagers had prepared lunch, and Xu Dongtang enthusiastically invited them to join.

Having been on the road eating only compressed food, Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang were eager for a hot meal, so they gladly accepted.

They were taken to Xu Dongtang's home, where several senior members of the Xu family joined them. The ice houses, surprisingly good at retaining heat, were also wind-resistant. Once a fire was lit, and with many people inside, the cold became more bearable. The meal was cooked over a makeshift stove, with everyone gathering to enjoy a hotpot—a rare luxury in these times.

To host their esteemed guests, the villagers brought out the best of what they had: preserved meats, dried chicken, and the locally popular frozen fish, all tossed into the pot to create a hearty dish.

"Please, help yourselves! Don't be shy—eat as much as you like!" Xu Dongtang and the Xu family elders warmly urged Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang to dig in.

Looking at the steaming pot filled with delicacies, Xie Huanhuan couldn't help but think, "This village is certainly prosperous."

Chapter 239: The Leak

Xu Dongtang and the others subtly probed for information about the official organization as they ate.

"Leader, when will the government start addressing the snow disaster?" Xu Dongtang asked, pouring a glass of his prized aged liquor for Liu Ziyang.

Liu Ziyang downed the drink, feeling a warm sensation spread through his chest, bringing a flush to his face. He remained silent, continuing to eat. Meanwhile, Xie Huanhuan responded, "Rest assured, the

government has already formulated a plan to tackle the snow disaster, and it will be implemented soon."

Hearing this, Xu Dongtang and the villagers showed visible signs of relief and hope.

"That's great news! This dreadful weather has been unbearable!"

"We common folk can't do much—we need the government to step in and fix the situation so we can return to our lives."

One villager couldn't help but ask, "Do the experts have any idea when the snow will stop?"

Xie Huanhuan smiled gently, "Soon. The snowfall won't last much longer. You've probably noticed that it's already less intense. In a few months, it should stop altogether."

Liu Ziyang glanced at her, but Xie Huanhuan maintained a calm, confident demeanor, as if everything she said was true. Not one for words, Liu Ziyang focused on the food before him.

Xie Huanhuan took a sip of the liquor, her cheeks flushing slightly. She didn't dare drink too much, knowing she was on duty, but the cold weather and the warmth of the alcohol were too tempting to resist. Although she wasn't bothered by the cold due to her special physique, the pleasant sensation from the alcohol was something she couldn't refuse.

After a drink, Xie Huanhuan began questioning the villagers. "Has anyone in your village experienced any strange changes recently?"

Xu Dongtang frowned slightly at the question, as did the other villagers, who immediately thought of Xu Chunlei. However, Xu Dongtang feigned ignorance. "What do you mean by strange changes? Everyone in our village is perfectly normal."

One of Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang's primary tasks was investigating population centers and resource points around the base. They also had a special mission to identify and bring back any Superhumans. However, the number of Superhumans was so rare that their base had only discovered a few. Xie Huanhuan asked more questions than expected out of routine.

Nevertheless, as a soldier, Xie Huanhuan was highly observant and quickly noticed the subtle changes in the villagers' expressions.

She set down her cup and said calmly, "I'm talking about people whose bodies have mutated, granting them abilities beyond those of ordinary humans. If someone in your village had undergone such changes, you would have noticed."

"If you can provide useful information, the organization will reward you generously!"

The villagers avoided her gaze, their eyes betraying their thoughts as they considered the implications of her words. But no one spoke up. With Xu Dongtang, the village chief, present, it wasn't their place to talk.

Behind his gold-rimmed glasses, Xu Dongtang's eyes flickered with uncertainty. The person she was referring to was undoubtedly Xu Chunlei. Should he reveal Xu Chunlei's existence?

Xu Dongtang didn't rush to answer. Instead, he asked, "If I may ask, what does the organization want with these people?"

Xie Huanhuan's suspicions deepened—she was certain the villagers knew something about a Superhuman. With a friendly smile, she replied, "These individuals are valuable assets to the nation. We need to harness their abilities to help rebuild our homeland."

"Village Chief, if you know of anyone like that, you must report it immediately! The organization will greatly reward you."

Xu Dongtang nodded. "Oh, I see!" He poured more liquor, but his eyes held a glint of cunning. Her words sounded promising, but where was the tangible benefit? Xu Chunlei was the village's most valuable asset. Without him, who knew what would become of the village? He wasn't about to hand him over.

"I'll keep an eye out. If I find anyone like that, I'll report it right away," Xu Dongtang said, pulling out his phone and smiling as he offered it to Xie Huanhuan. "Leader, let's exchange contact information."

But Xie Huanhuan's expression suddenly changed. She looked up at Xu Dongtang with a knowing smile. "Village Chief, are you hiding something from me?"

"Being dishonest with the organization is a serious offense."

The atmosphere in the room instantly grew tense. The villagers were paralyzed with fear, unsure of what to say, while Liu Ziyang continued to eat heartily.

Xu Dongtang's hand froze in midair, his face showing confusion as he frowned and said, "No, of course not! Leader, what do you mean? I'm completely loyal to the organization—I'd never tell a lie!"

Xie Huanhuan asked coldly, "So there's no Superhuman here?"

"Think carefully before you answer. This is a matter of great importance to the organization, and withholding information could have serious consequences!"

Xie Huanhuan was indeed concerned. Discovering a Superhuman would earn her significant recognition from the organization. She could tell that Xu Dongtang and the others were hiding something important—their expressions gave them away.

Caught in his lie, Xu Dongtang's smile wavered momentarily. But then, inspiration struck.

"Ah, Leader, if you put it that way, there is someone I'm suspicious of. But he's not from our village, so we don't know much about him. That's why I hesitated to mention it," Xu Dongtang said, suddenly eager to shift the focus.

"Who is this person?" Xie Huanhuan asked.

Biting his lip, Xu Dongtang replied, "His name is Zhang Yi. He lives across the river at Cloud Manor."

The mention of Zhang Yi made the villagers grit their teeth in anger. Many had lost family members in the failed attack on Cloud Manor that night—how could they not hate Zhang Yi?

Xie Huanhuan's eyes lit up at the name. It matched the one mentioned in the special mission she had received. If there were no mistakes, Xu Dongtang's Zhang Yi was the person she was supposed to investigate.

"What a coincidence!" Xie Huanhuan murmured to herself. This was a perfect opportunity to gather intelligence on Zhang Yi from the villagers of Xu's Town.

Chapter 240: Target, Cloud Manor

To cover up his earlier slip of the tongue, Xu Dongtang quickly threw Zhang Yi under the bus, hoping to divert attention away from Xu Chunlei. After all, Zhang Yi was a Superhuman, so mentioning him could effectively fill the gap and keep Xu Chunlei's existence hidden.

"That Zhang Yi is a terrifying figure! He single-handedly killed over a hundred people from Xu's Town! We can't do anything but swallow our anger and keep quiet about it," Xu Dongtang lamented. "Leader, now that you're here, please, you have to stand up for us!"

Following Xu Dongtang's lead, the villagers eagerly shifted all their problems onto Zhang Yi, desperate to keep their guardian, Xu Chunlei, a secret.

As it happened, Zhang Yi was the exact person Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang were sent to find. Their mission aligned perfectly with the information they had just received, filling them with satisfaction. Now, they only needed to complete this final task to return to the base and report their findings. Moreover, discovering Xu's Town was an unexpected bonus.

Eager for more details, Xie Huanhuan pressed the villagers for information about Zhang Yi. However, Xu Dongtang realized they knew little about Zhang Yi's age, height, or appearance. After all, the villagers had fought him in the dead of night, being hunted like dogs by Zhang Yi, who wielded a powerful sniper rifle.

"We only know that traps surround his home, he's armed, and he has a vehicle that can traverse the snow," Xu Dongtang reported.

Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang noted these details, especially the information about the weapons and traps, which would be crucial for their investigation.

"And what about his Superhuman ability? Do any of you know what it is?" Xie Huanhuan asked, focusing on the most important detail.

Superhuman abilities varied greatly. Some mutations were detrimental, while others offered only minor advantages. However, a powerful ability could be incredibly valuable to West Hill Base.

The question left Xu Dongtang and the others stumped. During their encounter with Zhang Yi, they were too busy dealing with traps and sniper fire to witness any use of supernatural powers. Their knowledge was limited to what they had heard from Xu Chunlei.

Awkwardly, Xu Dongtang laughed. "We wouldn't know about that! We're not familiar with Superhuman abilities. All we know is that he's not normal—something about him is off."

"Leader, this is something only you can investigate!" he added, deflecting the responsibility back onto Xie Huanhuan.

Disappointment flickered in Xie Huanhuan's eyes. Understanding a Superhuman's ability was crucial for knowing how to counter them, but she could not obtain this critical information. Despite her repeated questioning, the villagers genuinely knew nothing.

Even Xu Chunlei wasn't entirely sure about Zhang Yi's abilities, only that they were related to space manipulation. Zhang Yi had done an excellent job keeping his powers and arsenal a secret, leaving even those close to him, let alone these villagers, in the dark.

After finishing their meal, Xie Huanhuan and Liu Ziyang prepared to leave Xu's Town, having gathered all the information they could. Before departing, Xu Dongtang, still hoping for a favor, hinted at wanting an official position. To him, a second lieutenant's rank was as good as a high military honor.

Xie Huanhuan smiled and nodded, "From now on, you'll be responsible for this area. If you come across any valuable information, report it to me immediately."

Xu Dongtang's heart swelled with joy. "Of course, I'll do everything I can for the organization! You can count on me!"

Before they left, Xu Dongtang sent them off with gifts, and while Xie Huanhuan didn't take much, she did keep a few bottles of good liquor.

Once outside the village, Xie Huanhuan reported back to West Hill Base using her device: "Discovered a large village, Xu's Town, with approximately 2,000 survivors and significant food reserves. No Superhumans detected."

After completing her report, Xie Huanhuan put away her device. Standing guard nearby, Liu Ziyang asked, "Back in the village, why did you lie to them?"

Liu Ziyang couldn't understand why Xie Huanhuan had told Xu Dongtang and the villagers things that were almost entirely untrue like the snow disaster ending soon or helping them rebuild after the disaster.

Xie Huanhuan glanced at the simple-minded soldier and smiled dismissively. "If we told them the truth, do you think they'd still treat us as honored guests, feeding us and providing us with information?"

Liu Ziyang scratched his head. "I get that, but it still doesn't feel right. Those villagers were nice to us."

Xie Huanhuan chuckled softly, her voice laced with irony. "That's why you're just my subordinate."

Liu Ziyang could only smile wryly and shake his head. While an elite warrior, he wasn't as savvy in dealing with people as Xie Huanhuan.

"They heard what they wanted to hear. Far from resenting me, they'll be grateful that I gave them hope," Xie Huanhuan explained.

"But won't they eventually realize you were lying? What will you do then?" Liu Ziyang asked, puzzled.

"I'll have new explanations ready by then," Xie Huanhuan replied confidently as if everything was under control. "As long as we represent the government in their eyes, whatever we say will be considered the truth."

Liu Ziyang was left feeling uncertain. Could they claim to represent the government? After all, West Hill Base had undergone a power shift, with control taken from the former government officials and placed in the hands of Chen Xinian, who now commanded the military. Strictly speaking, they were rebels. But in these chaotic times, the lines between right and wrong had blurred. Liu Ziyang knew only one thing for sure: as a soldier, his duty was to follow orders.

He shook his head, deciding not to dwell on such complicated matters. Xie Huanhuan, for her part, didn't care what Liu Ziyang thought. She was in charge of this mission, and Liu Ziyang was merely her subordinate.

"Next stop, let's go see Zhang Yi!" she said, brushing her hair back with a curious gleam in her eye. "From what the villagers of Xu's Town said, this guy is something else. He might even be a Superhuman!"

Liu Ziyang smiled eagerly. "If we can bring him back, that'll be a major achievement!"

A knowing smile spread across Xie Huanhuan's lips. "There's more to it than just him."

Whether Zhang Yi was a Superhuman was uncertain, but her briefing had instructed her to investigate his connection to the Walmart warehouse theft. Initially, the leaders at West Hill Base hadn't paid much attention to Zhang Yi, but after hearing the villagers' accounts, Xie Huanhuan suspected there was more to the story.

Perhaps, through Zhang Yi, she could uncover the whereabouts of the stolen goods from what was once the largest warehouse in South China.

Excitement sparkled in Xie Huanhuan's eyes. "If I can find those supplies, the credit I'd earn could make me the second-most powerful person at the base—or maybe even more..."