

Ice Age 341

Chapter 341: Take It All!

The West Hill Base had turned ominous.

Beneath it lay thousands of corpses, thick with a stench of death, eerie and terrifying. If it weren't for his combat suit and the sharp-nosed Hua Hua by his side, Zhang Yi wouldn't have dared to venture down here.

Without delay, the group continued onward.

The West Hill Base housed a massive warehouse filled with food and other essential survival supplies. Following the map's directions, Zhang Yi quickly found the warehouse at the end of the Second Life Pod.

The pathway was strewn with rubble, but Uncle You activated his Superhuman Energy, easily clearing the debris.

The warehouse door was firmly locked with a complex password system.

"Let me try!" Uncle You stepped forward without hesitation, slamming his iron fist down hard.

Boom!!

A deafening crash reverberated through the underground space, yet the thick metal door let out only a grating creak instead of breaking. Uncle You withdrew his fist, revealing a dent three centimeters deep.

"Of course it wouldn't be that easy to break into the warehouse," Zhang Yi commented with a smile.

"What now? We don't have a key, and even Uncle You can't break through. We're out of options," Fatty Xu said, looking to Zhang Yi for a solution.

"No rush—this is actually good news. It means the contents inside are still well-preserved!"

He unhurriedly opened his Spatial Storage and pulled out a pile of tools, starting with a large metal canister, rubber tubing, and a nozzle-like device.

“A blowtorch!” Uncle You immediately recognized it. This torch could reach thousands of degrees, perfect for cutting through thick metal.

Zhang Yi grinned. “I’ve got loads of tools stashed in here!”

This torch was something he’d picked up from the warehouse earlier, though he hadn’t known when it might come in handy. Now he did!

Zhang Yi assembled the blowtorch, then handed it to Uncle You with a thumbs-up.

“It’s up to you now, Uncle You!”

Fatty Xu muttered, “Boss, I thought you’d do it yourself!”

Zhang Yi laughed, “I’ve never done this kind of work before—don’t have the experience!”

Uncle You, who’d worked as a security guard for years, was a pro at handling tools. Any time a resident needed help, they always turned to Uncle You first. ♦?

Grinning, he took the torch. “This I can handle! Did some welding back in the day.”

As he ignited the torch, Zhang Yi and Fatty Xu stepped back five or six paces.

A slender, blue flame shot from the nozzle, heating the metal door until the surrounding air grew stiflingly hot. It took a while, but Uncle You eventually managed to cut an opening large enough for an adult to crawl through.

The three entered the warehouse, their headlamps illuminating a jumble of items stacked in rows. It looked like the storage room of a massive supermarket, stocked with all kinds of goods.

Compared to the Wal-Mart warehouse Zhang Yi had emptied earlier, this place was a bit sparse. Most of the items here had been stored for emergencies or military needs and had been there for years.

Uncle You scanned the room, his eyes lighting up as he pointed to one corner. "Zhang Yi, look over there! Something good!"

Following Uncle You's gaze, Zhang Yi saw a large blue tarp covering something, with a steel edge poking out from underneath.

"Building materials? Ah, these must be for repairing the West Hill Base!"

Zhang Yi's eyes brightened. If they wanted to build a sturdy defense around Cloud Manor, these durable materials would be essential. He'd been wondering where to get supplies, and now he had a stash right here at West Hill Base!

The base, after all, had a vast underground network, and maintenance was a constant priority, so it made sense that repair materials were well-stocked.

The three of them pulled back the tarp, revealing an enormous stack of steel and concrete piled like a small mountain.

"These are military-grade materials, perfect for constructing fortifications! We've got our defense materials sorted!" Uncle You cheered.

"Take it all! Everything!" Without a second thought, Zhang Yi stored the entire stockpile in his Spatial Storage.

As for the other items in the warehouse, there were too many to list, so he simply swept them all into Spatial Storage.

In a separate section, they found rooms dedicated to food storage, mostly cans and some high-quality provisions. These weren't appealing to Zhang Yi, but since he was here, he might as well take them.

He turned to Uncle You and Fatty Xu with a grin. "I've got more than enough food at home. You two can split the rest!"

The food didn't hold much value for him, but it was a nice favor to offer them.

For Uncle You and Fatty Xu, though, these provisions were priceless.

Hearing Zhang Yi's generosity, they exchanged uneasy glances.

"Zhang Yi, you should keep most of it. You did the heavy lifting to capture the West Hill Base, and without you, we couldn't have imagined victory here," Uncle You said earnestly.

Fatty Xu nodded. "Besides, there's so much here, we couldn't eat it all in twenty years! Boss, you keep it, and we'll come to you if we need some."

Zhang Yi chuckled. "I consider you both family; no need to stand on ceremony. If I have good things, I'll always share them with you."

"But you're right that it's too much for you to carry around. I'll hold onto it, and you can come find me anytime you need supplies."

The two were visibly touched.

With the food stored away, the entire West Hill Base's years of supplies vanished in minutes.

It was ironic. Chen Xinian had gone to such lengths to get Zhang Yi's warehouse supplies, only to lose everything, including his own warehouse, to Zhang Yi. Karma indeed.

With the warehouse emptied, there was nothing left in West Hill Base of interest to Zhang Yi—except the First Life Pod.

However, that area was as secure as the Shelter, and Zhang Yi didn't have a way to break in for now.

From what he knew, it was mainly Chen Xinian's private quarters, unlikely to contain valuable supplies. Even if it held a few secrets, it wasn't worth Zhang Yi's time.

So the three quickly left West Hill Base.

Before leaving, Zhang Yi pulled out rubble to block the entrance.

“Fatty, give it a final touch!”

With a nod, Fatty Xu activated his Snow Burst ability. Pale blue light gathered in his hands, and the sound of wind and snow surged around them.

Rumble!

Snow from the mountainside cascaded down like an avalanche, sealing the tunnel up to a hundred meters deep.

Apart from Zhang Yi, it would be nearly impossible for anyone else to dig their way inside. Even though he'd emptied the place, Zhang Yi didn't want others scavenging behind him.

“Alright, time to go home!”

He wasn't planning to linger anyway. Not long ago, he'd killed a Superhuman and some soldiers from the Chaoyu Base, and if reinforcements arrived, it could mean trouble.

Better to get out while he could and play it off if anyone asked questions.

The three piled into the Snow Vehicle, heading for Cloud Manor through the storm.

Meanwhile, outside the Shelter...

Liang Yue had come as usual to train Zhang Yi in martial arts and collect her daily rations. Despite the two weeks' worth of food Zhang Yi had previously given her, it hadn't lasted long once her ravenous students got hold of it.

During their time in West Hill Base, they had subsisted on protein solution, barely enough to survive, let alone feel full. The sudden abundance of food meant they could only think about eating their fill.

So now, Liang Yue was back to the daily responsibility of providing for their meals.

Apart from the ten-person ration she earned by teaching Zhang Yi, she also had to take the students to Lu River to fish through the ice.

Fishing wasn't easy, as the fish had swum deep into the water to escape the cold, making every catch a taxing effort.

Today, however, Zhang Yi was away, so Zhou Ke'er met her instead.

"Zhang Yi's out on an errand with some others, and they'll probably be back late. Maybe we should cancel today's lesson, Liang Yue?" Zhou Ke'er suggested with a gentle smile.

But this warm expression made Liang Yue hesitate. Skipping Zhang Yi's training wasn't a big deal, but if she didn't take back food, her students would go hungry.

Chapter 342: The Meal That Triggered a Breakdown

Liang Yue's face was full of struggle.

A single meal might mean nothing to Zhang Yi and Zhou Ke'er, but for her and her students, it was essential to survival. Food was already scarce, and today's circumstances only made it worse, leaving her feeling understandably downcast.

Sensing this, Zhou Ke'er quickly smiled and said, "Oh! I can't believe I almost forgot!"

"Ms. Liang, you must not have eaten yet. Why don't you join us for a meal?" Zhou Ke'er extended her hand, warmly inviting Liang Yue inside.

Liang Yue's throat tightened as she thought of the warm, delicious food in Zhang Yi's house, and her stomach growled at the thought. But after hesitating a moment, she shook her head, declining Zhou Ke'er's kind offer.

"No, thank you! I'll come back tomorrow instead."

With her students all starving, the thought of eating alone would make her feel too guilty.

"My apologies for making you come all this way for nothing!" Zhou Ke'er smiled apologetically.

"Oh, it's fine," Liang Yue replied. "He has his own matters to handle. Besides, a tutor should adapt to the student's schedule, not the other way around."

Turning to leave, Liang Yue walked away, her stubborn determination making Zhou Ke'er chuckle.

"Ms. Liang is such an endearing person!" she remarked.

From the living room, Yang Xinxin rolled up in her wheelchair. "That's the warrior spirit—unyielding," she said with a hint of admiration.

Zhou Ke'er sighed softly, "If she'd just asked, I could've packed some food for her to take back."

She knew that Zhang Yi held Liang Yue in high regard, not only for her abilities but for her unmatched strength as a warrior. As such, Zhou Ke'er treated her with respect as well. If Liang Yue were ever to join them permanently, Zhou Ke'er would make sure to stay on good terms with her.

Yang Xinxin chuckled, "Sending her back with just one meal might actually make things worse."

"Oh?" Zhou Ke'er tilted her head, puzzled. "Why would it be worse? Isn't one meal better than nothing?"

Yang Xinxin's hands rested on her lap, and her expression turned slightly mysterious.

"Those classmates of mine aren't exactly a charitable crowd."

"If Ms. Liang only brought back one meal, she wouldn't eat it herself. But if she tried to share it, how would she divide it?"

"With a dozen people trying to eat a single meal, a polite sharing would be impossible. They'd end up fighting over every bite, with yelling, insults, and maybe even brawling."

"Ms. Liang is already exhausted from looking after them. She wouldn't want to add more trouble for herself."

Zhou Ke'er nodded thoughtfully, agreeing. She could understand why Liang Yue would act that way. Liang Yue had been these students' teacher for many years and saw them as her own children, making it hard for her to watch them struggle alone in the apocalypse.

In the past, Zhou Ke'er would have pitied these students too. But that was before. Now, she held on to a sliver of kindness, tempered by reason.

“Even knowing he’d be gone, Zhang Yi should’ve anticipated that Ms. Liang would come by. Do you think he did this on purpose?” Zhou Ke’er asked, looking out at Liang Yue’s solitary figure in the snow.

Yang Xinxin blushed a little, a dreamy look crossing her face. “Oh, I’d bet it’s part of Brother Zhang Yi’s plan!”

Zhou Ke’er’s eyes sparkled as she turned back. “Are you saying Zhang Yi intentionally did this to deepen the conflict among your classmates? Or to make Liang Yue face reality faster?”

Yang Xinxin nodded. “Of course, Brother Zhang Yi would have thought it all through.”

She added, “Pretending to be busy and ‘forgetting’ his appointment with Ms. Liang—it’s his way of creating trouble for those people and stirring up Ms. Liang’s doubts.”

“Brother Zhang Yi is so brilliant!”

“Definitely, it’s just like him,” Zhou Ke’er said admiringly, her respect for Zhang Yi growing. “Everything he does has layers of meaning.”

On the way back, Zhang Yi drove while letting the autopilot assist, which made driving effortless. Suddenly, he slapped his forehead. “Ah! I forgot to tell Liang Yue she didn’t need to come by today!”

Liang Yue returned to Xu Family Town.

Passing by Lu River, she saw women and children breaking through the ice to fish. Most of the town’s adult men had died at West Hill Base, leaving only women, the elderly, and children.

Yet they still had to survive, so they took on the jobs men would normally do.

As she walked past, Liang Yue noticed their numb faces. They looked almost lifeless, going through the motions merely to survive, without any real purpose.

Liang Yue thought of her students.

They were young and strong, yet far less willing to fight for survival than these women, children, and elderly villagers.

“Zhang Yi was right,” she sighed. “I’ve been sheltering them too much.”

Feeling her own hunger pangs, she silently resolved to confront her students. It was time to push them out of their comfort zone.

When she reached the house where the students lived, she found them all crammed together in one room. Despite the many empty rooms in Xu Family Town, they stayed huddled together for warmth.

Even at night, the girls would snuggle into the boys’ beds, drawn to the higher body heat. As this habit continued, relationships between them grew increasingly complicated.

Seeing her return empty-handed, the students looked puzzled. Usually, it took her hours to fetch food.

But when they saw her hands were empty, they immediately grew anxious.

“Ms. Liang, you came back empty-handed?”

“Where’s the food?”

To them, food was the most important thing in the world.

Liang Yue walked into the room, found a chair, and sat down, explaining today's situation.

"Zhang Yi had business today, so there's no food. You'll have to catch fish for yourselves."

Hearing this, the students erupted in disbelief.

"He couldn't even tell us in advance?"

"Just because he's not home, why can't the others give us some food? They've got plenty!"

"Zhang Yi has no sense of responsibility."

Liang Yue's heart sank at their complaints.

"No matter what, Zhang Yi has helped us immensely. Without him, many of us would have died at West Hill Base."

"And remember, he's only providing me with food as part of a deal. He doesn't owe us anything."

"You shouldn't be blaming others; you should be working to get food yourselves."

She tried to reason with them, but the students were unmoved.

As soon as she suggested they work for their food, some of the girls started whining.

"Ms. Liang, last time I went ice fishing, my hands got all cut up! They still haven't healed, and they hurt so much."

“We’re not cut out for this; we’re not fishermen.”

One girl muttered under her breath, “If you ask me, it’s Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran who are the problem.”

“They’ve been our classmates for years, yet they only care about themselves, never sparing a thought for us!”

“If they’d only talk to Zhang Yi, we could all be living in that cozy Shelter.”

With that one complaint, tension immediately flared, directed at Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran.

Jealousy.

Bitterness.

Resentment.

These emotions had taken root in their hearts, growing into a monstrous tree under the harsh conditions they lived in.

Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran owed them nothing and had even endured bullying from them in the past. But as the saying goes, people don’t mind poverty as much as they mind inequality.

If everyone suffered together, they might have endured it. But why should those two live in a warm, comfortable villa, enjoying heat, hot food, and a soft bed, while the rest of them starved and froze?

The girl’s complaint was just a release valve for all the frustration that had been building up inside. Once she started, others joined in, venting their anger at Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin.

“They’re so selfish!”

“I even treated Lu Keran to bubble tea two years ago! Now she won’t even think of helping me. How shameless!”

“You think that’s bad? My family’s distantly related to the Yang family! And Yang Xinxin hasn’t lifted a finger for me? Selfish to the core!”

“I always thought those two were no good. Guess I was right!”

As the students vented their grievances, they grew excited, like sharks smelling blood in the water. They mercilessly attacked Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin, as though those two had wronged them.

Liang Yue listened in shock, unable to believe her students could be so petty and ruthless toward their own classmates.

What noble academy? What elite Jiangnan socialites?

Witnessing this, she felt they were no different from common thugs.

Her heart sank completely. She finally resolved not to coddle these spoiled and immature students any longer.

“Quiet down! I have an announcement to make!”

Liang Yue’s sharp tone cut through the noise, and the room quickly fell silent.

She looked around, her voice steady as she said, “From now on, I will be moving to the Shelter—with Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin.”

Chapter 343: The Struggle of Human Nature

Liang Yue knew she couldn't keep indulging these students any longer.

She had to teach them to be independent.

Only by experiencing the hardships of life and relying on their own efforts would they become decent, self-reliant individuals.

Maybe then, they wouldn't just complain whenever something went wrong.

So, she decided to leave and go to Zhang Yi's shelter. Apart from delivering food daily, she would stop catering to their excessive demands.

With a sigh, Liang Yue felt a weight lift from her heart.

Admittedly, she also longed for comfort; she had dreamed of joining Zhang Yi and the others in their luxurious villa. But she had held back for the students' sake. If protecting them only made them weaker and unable to fend for themselves, it was time for her to let go.

After she spoke, silence filled the room.

Suddenly, a girl's face lit up with excitement. "Ms. Liang, are you taking us to live at Zhang Yi's shelter? That's amazing!"

Her logic was rather naive.

To her, Liang Yue was someone who should sacrifice everything for them without personal desires.

But before the others could join in, Liang Yue cut them off loudly, "That's not what's happening!"

"I'm the only one going. You'll stay here and learn to live by your own efforts!"

“Zhang Yi promised me ten servings of food daily, and I’ll bring them to you. But if things go like they did today, there’s nothing I can do.”

“The remaining food will be up to you to handle. I won’t spoil you anymore!”

The students looked at Liang Yue, shocked.

How could the kind, caring Ms. Liang suddenly turn like this?

“Ms. Liang, you can’t abandon us! You weren’t like this before!” a girl choked up.

“Yeah, Ms. Liang, this is so selfish of you!”

“How could you think only about your own comfort while leaving us to suffer?”

Listening to their complaints, Liang Yue gave up hope on them.

Sheltered flowers don’t appreciate the gardener who nurtures them—they just take it all for granted.

It was time they faced the harsh winds on their own.

“My decision is final! Stop trying to change my mind.”

Liang Yue gripped her Tang Sword, clenched her teeth, and walked out of the snow house.

Panic-stricken, the students chased after her, calling out desperately.

If she really left for the shelter, who would take care of them?

It's only when people face loss that they truly learn to appreciate. They were doing everything to hold her back.

"Ms. Liang, please don't leave us! We'll stop slacking when we fish!"

One of the boys gritted his teeth and shouted, "You were the one who brought us to West Hill Base and led us out! Now you're abandoning us—how is that what a teacher should do?"

Liang Yue's body shook.

Her pupils contracted, her gaze filled with disbelief and heartbreak.

The students she cared about the most had hurt her the worst.

Everything she did in silence—they saw it as her ruining them?

Taking a deep breath, Liang Yue quickened her pace, ignoring the desperate pleas behind her.

Finally, she arrived at the shelter.

Zhou Ke'er warmly invited her in, though she looked a bit curious about her sudden return.

Liang Yue didn't feel comfortable sharing this with Zhou Ke'er.

After all, Zhang Yi would have the final say on her staying. It was better to speak to him directly.

Liang Yue felt confident.

First, she knew her own worth. As a powerful Superhuman, she was valuable anywhere.

Second, she had good relationships with Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin, and could ask them to vouch for her.

Zhou Ke'er noticed Liang Yue's hesitation, smiled, and called over Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin.

"Keep Ms. Liang company; she doesn't seem to be in the best mood."

Lu Keran nodded. "Got it, leave it to us!"

Yang Xinxin's dark eyes sparkled with an unusual look.

"It seems Ms. Liang has made up her mind!"

Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin cheerfully greeted Liang Yue.

This was the first time they had all sat down to chat since leaving Tianqing Academy.

As they sat on the couch, Liang Yue asked them about their lives lately.

Lu Keran laughed happily. "We've been doing great! Brother Zhang Yi is so kind; he doesn't even make us do chores."

"And he even set up a private studio for me to pursue my interests. Honestly, I feel happier now than I ever did at school!"

Liang Yue thought: He just values your talent with mechanics, silly girl!

Yang Xinxin chuckled softly. "Our lives have indeed been very comfortable since we got here. Ms. Liang, you want to live here too, don't you?"

Yang Xinxin saw through Liang Yue's thoughts at a glance.

After all, the martial arts teacher's thoughts were always written on her face.

Especially in front of her students, she didn't bother to hide her feelings.

Liang Yue blushed slightly, feeling a bit awkward.

"Xinxin, I do think it's time for me to leave. Zhang Yi was right; protecting those kids would only make them more dependent."

Yang Xinxin smirked. "But Ms. Liang, deep down, don't you want to move in here?"

Liang Yue opened her mouth but found herself at a loss for words.

Her heart was conflicted.

As a teacher, she should have been more selfless.

But she couldn't deny her own desires—she wanted to enjoy life too.

"Well..."

Liang Yue was at a loss. Yang Xinxin's gaze was so penetrating, she felt exposed.

At that moment, Yang Xinxin gently held her hand and smiled. "It's okay, Ms. Liang. Everyone has the right to pursue happiness. You're doing the right thing!"

Yang Xinxin's gentle yet affirming look lifted Liang Yue's guilt.

Yes, there was nothing wrong with her decision.

Chapter 344: Skillful Persuasion

Lu Keran poured a hot cup of coffee for Liang Yue, who thanked her and held it in her hands, feeling a warmth that reached both her stomach and her heart.

Liang Yue sincerely asked Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran, “When Zhang Yi returns, could you please talk to him about this for me?”

“Of course!” Lu Keran said cheerfully. “Don’t worry, Ms. Liang. With your impressive skills, Zhang Yi won’t turn down your joining us!”

Having spent time around Zhang Yi, Lu Keran understood his approach well. He always treated capable people generously—she and Yang Xinxin were perfect examples. She had once been just an add-on, but since working for Zhang Yi, he treated her as if she were his own sister.

Yang Xinxin, listening to Lu Keran’s blunt response, couldn’t help but sigh.

While Lu Keran’s thoughts were straightforward, hers were not.

Yang Xinxin felt a deeper connection with Zhang Yi and respected his survival principles in the apocalypse.

She smiled at Lu Keran. “Don’t jump to conclusions! If you make promises now, and Zhang Yi ends up thinking differently, you might just disappoint Ms. Liang.”

Lu Keran’s smile froze awkwardly, and she scratched her cheek, looking a bit embarrassed. “You might have a point...”

Turning to Liang Yue, Yang Xinxin said earnestly, “Ms. Liang, while Zhang Yi is indeed a good person, he’s also principled. Anyone joining the shelter has to meet strict requirements.”

"If you want to join us, you need to be prepared. At the very least, you must be willing to follow his commands!"

Unlike Lu Keran, who tried to reassure Liang Yue, Yang Xinxin chose to prepare her for Zhang Yi's demands. By lowering her expectations, it would be easier for Zhang Yi to negotiate directly with her.

Sure enough, Liang Yue's smile faded, and she tightened her grip on her coffee.

"What... sort of requirements does he usually have?"

Liang Yue instinctively squeezed her legs together, biting her lip, her face flushing with a hint of embarrassment.

Although she didn't know Zhang Yi well, she wasn't blind to his relationships with Zhou Ke'er and Yang Siyah. Apart from him, everyone in the shelter was female.

So, if she moved in... wouldn't that mean...

Ah, she couldn't bring herself to finish the thought!

Yang Xinxin rolled her eyes subtly, then reassured her, "That's not an issue at all. Since coming here, Zhang Yi has never crossed any lines with us. He's truly a respectable man!"

"Respectable..."

Liang Yue's mouth twitched slightly. Hearing others describe Zhang Yi that way left her speechless.

Yang Xinxin winked at her. "So, don't worry about that sort of thing. Zhang Yi isn't the type to act on such impulses. Otherwise, how would he have survived this long in the apocalypse?"

“What he values is your strength. So, if I had to guess, the condition for joining would likely be that you obey his orders in battle!”

Yang Xinxin had made an accurate prediction.

Indeed, Zhang Yi’s expectations for those around him always revolved around “value.”

In terms of everyday life, he actually placed very few restrictions on them.

Liang Yue nodded, feeling both nervous and excited as she waited for Zhang Yi’s return.

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Several hours later, the sound of an engine echoed from outside.

Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin looked out the window and smiled, “Zhang Yi’s back!”

Liang Yue unconsciously clenched her fists, her heart beginning to race.

Yang Xinxin wheeled herself toward the door.

Zhang Yi and his group got out of the vehicle and headed toward the shelter, planning to discuss setting up a defensive line.

When Zhang Yi opened the door, he saw Yang Xinxin waiting with a smile.

“Xinxin?”

This was the first time she’d come to greet him at the door; she usually preferred to stay indoors, researching the materials they’d recovered from West Hill Base. ↳

Seeing her there now, he immediately sensed that something was up.

“What’s going on? Do you have something to tell me?” he asked with a smile.

Yang Xinxin nodded, glancing toward the living room and quietly told him, “Ms. Liang came over. She’s hoping to join us.”

A spark flickered in Zhang Yi’s eyes.

Liang Yue was a powerful Superhuman whose abilities he had long desired. Previously, he hadn’t invited her to join because she was burdened with those hangers-on.

Now she’d come to him. Could it be she had finally made up her mind?

“What’s the situation?”

Yang Xinxin grinned, looking like a mischievous little devil, and said, “Your intermittent fasting strategy and my advice worked wonders. Ms. Liang’s relationship with her students deteriorated, and in a fit of frustration, she came here.”

The “intermittent fasting” strategy referred to Zhang Yi’s tactic of supplying only ten portions of food for Liang Yue.

He had used this method before in Yuelu District, and it was effective once again with Liang Yue’s students.

By rationing out part of the food, he could ensure Liang Yue didn’t hold any grudge against him, while also keeping her students hungry.

One or two days was manageable, but over time, conflicts would inevitably arise over limited food.

Liang Yue was a dedicated teacher but not a saint; she couldn't endlessly tolerate the students' immaturity.

Today's visit had always been part of Zhang Yi's calculations—sooner or later, she would end up here.

With an even bigger smile, he nodded. "Got it."

"Brother, I've already prepared everything for you. When you talk with her, feel free to raise some difficult conditions!"

Yang Xinxin winked at Zhang Yi. "I'll help you convince her!"

Zhang Yi chuckled, pinching her cold, adorable cheek.

"You really are my little helper!"

Liang Yue's weakness was her students.

The softer the heart, the easier it was to persuade.

With both Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran working on her, winning her over would be a piece of cake.

Standing up, Zhang Yi turned to Fatty Xu and Uncle You, saying, "Liang Yue's here. I'm going to talk to her. Wait for me next door."

Fatty Xu gave Zhang Yi a thumbs up, his grin mischievous, as if hinting at something unsaid.

Uncle You also shot him a knowing smile, then went to the next room with Fatty Xu.

Meanwhile, Zhang Yi composed his expression, feigning nonchalance as he pushed Yang Xinxin into the living room.

His eyes met Liang Yue's, and he noticed a flicker of nervousness there.

Zhang Yi smiled calmly. "Ms. Liang, you're here!"

Chapter 345: Welcome to Zhang Yi's Team

Zhang Yi pushed Yang Xinxin into the living room, where they found a slightly nervous Liang Yue.

Yang Xinxin winked at Liang Yue as if to say, "Don't worry, Ms. Liang. I'll speak up for you!"

Liang Yue felt a bit more at ease.

Lu Keran chimed in, "Boss, welcome home! Want something to drink? Beer, milk, or maybe a nice warm milk tea?"

"Milk tea, less sugar," Zhang Yi replied.

Lu Keran cheerfully went off to make the tea but kept sneaking glances at Zhang Yi and Liang Yue. As Liang Yue's student, she truly admired her teacher and hoped someone as kind as Liang Yue could join them in the shelter and thrive together in the apocalypse.

Zhang Yi changed into his regular clothes and then took his time, settling onto the sofa without rushing the conversation. In situations like this, staying patient gave him the upper hand—whatever spoke first would be at a disadvantage.

Liang Yue sat on the sofa, nervous and hesitant, unsure how to start.

Eventually, Yang Xinxin broke the silence. "Zhang Yi, I have a request for you."

Zhang Yi turned to her, smiling. "Oh? What is it, Xinxin? You know you don't need to hesitate with me."

She glanced at Liang Yue and said, "Can Ms. Liang move in with us?"

Relieved, Liang Yue was grateful her student had voiced her hopes and looked anxiously at Zhang Yi, afraid he'd refuse.

"Oh? Ms. Liang wants to move in?" Zhang Yi chuckled, looking intrigued.

He pointed at Liang Yue. "You've got to be kidding! Wasn't it you who insisted on staying with your students?"

Then, he changed his tone. "Of course, I never said you weren't welcome. Ms. Liang, beautiful and skilled with the sword, strong in battle—adding you to the shelter would definitely be valuable."

"But, I don't like forcing anyone."

Liang Yue's expression grew a bit embarrassed.

It was true that Zhang Yi had once hinted at his interest in her joining, but after seeing her commitment to her students, he had never brought it up again.

Yet, hearing his recognition of her skills made her feel reassured.

Lu Keran returned with the steaming milk tea and handed it to Zhang Yi. "Big Bro, you don't know how things have been for Ms. Liang lately!"

"Those students of hers don't appreciate her at all. They refuse to do even a little work, just draining her energy!"

"Hmph! Only Ms. Liang's patience keeps her with them; anyone else would have left them ages ago! And yet, they still have the nerve to complain!"

Her words struck a chord with Liang Yue.

She had sacrificed so much for her students. While she didn't expect anything in return, a little gratitude didn't seem too much to ask, did it?

Instead, they'd taken her for granted.

Even someone as mild-tempered as Liang Yue had finally reached her limit.

She turned to Zhang Yi and said, "Zhang Yi, I want to move here to give them a space to grow on their own."

"Children need to be weaned off dependency, especially since most of them are already adults. Staying with them wouldn't be helping them; it would only harm them."

"Rest assured, I'll follow your rules here at the shelter. If you need anything from me, just say the word!"

Seeing her so forthright, Zhang Yi decided not to play hard-to-get any further.

Taking it too far could harm their relationship, and valuable Superhumans were essential in the apocalypse. He couldn't afford to let her slip away.

So, holding his warm milk tea, he smiled. "If Ms. Liang wants to join, I welcome you. But I still have some concerns."

Liang Yue's brow furrowed slightly. "You don't trust me?"

Zhang Yi smiled faintly. "Not exactly. I'm just not sure you'd truly follow my orders."

Under his intense gaze, Liang Yue felt her heart race and instinctively crossed her legs.

"If your demands are too excessive, I might not agree. After all, I do have my principles!"

Zhang Yi, unaware of her thoughts, replied calmly, "Your kindness and openness are strengths, Ms. Liang. But they're also weaknesses."

"If I bring you in, it's for your combat ability!"

"Teaching me martial arts is one thing, but the main point is your strength in battle."

He smiled, his gaze deepening as he looked at her.

"But what if one day, to protect our people, you're asked to kill someone you think is innocent. Could you do it?"

Zhang Yi didn't need a kind-hearted martial artist; he needed someone willing to execute orders without hesitation.

Ideally, someone like Ling Feng, willing to go to any lengths to achieve a goal and fiercely loyal.

If their roles were reversed, Zhang Yi would have eliminated Chen Xinian and taken the top spot himself.

Liang Yue's power was undeniable, but without the necessary ruthlessness, he couldn't accept her.

But, as if she anticipated this, Liang Yue took a deep breath and replied with unwavering resolve, "If it's for our safety, I could do it. But I won't accept orders that serve only selfish desires."

Suddenly, her gaze softened, and she offered Zhang Yi a bright smile.

“And from what I’ve observed, Mr. Zhang, although you appear cold and unfeeling, you’re a peace-loving person. You wouldn’t kill indiscriminately without provocation.”

Yang Xinxin gave her a subtle wink, signaling her approval—she’d nailed it!

It was clear the two of them had discussed Zhang Yi’s potential demands beforehand.

Zhang Yi noticed their small exchange but didn’t mind. What he needed was Liang Yue’s commitment.

As long as she could wield her sword for him when necessary, he was satisfied.

To put it plainly, he was just looking for a useful “tool.” So long as that tool performed well, he was content.

Confirming with Liang Yue, he asked, “So, as long as it’s for our safety, you’d kill anyone I asked, correct?”

After a moment’s thought, Liang Yue carefully replied, “I won’t harm my own people.”

She feared he might ask her to kill her students.

“Of course!” Zhang Yi assured her. “I’m not some monster who’d target his own.”

If it ever came to that, he’d handle it personally.

Zhang Yi sipped his coffee, feeling her tension from across the room.

Truthfully, he didn't like her self-sacrificing personality, nor her habit of bringing along those "hangers-on."

Letting her move in also meant he'd be expected to support her students.

Ridiculous. What did he owe them?

If anyone else had asked, he'd have kicked them out already.

But since it was Liang Yue, he weighed the pros and cons.

Ten servings of food a day would secure a powerful, martial arts expert and Superhuman who could even teach him. All in all, a good trade.

In the apocalypse, powerful fighters were essential. And Liang Yue, although somewhat naive, was far easier to manage than someone overly shrewd.

After a long pause, Zhang Yi thought, "I'd love to bring Liang Yue here and take care of those students once and for all."

"After all, they bullied Xinxin and Keran before. Taking them out would gain me their support."

"It's worth it. Bring Liang Yue in, and her students' fate will be mine to decide."

"Dying by 'accident' in this dangerous world isn't unusual. Handling them would only cost me a little food."

After considering his options, Zhang Yi realized he'd be making a profitable move, so he made up his mind.

Lowering his coffee cup, he extended his right hand to Liang Yue with a smile.

“In that case, welcome to the team! I’m happy to have you join our family!”

Chapter 346: Various Powers in Tianhai City

Zhang Yi and Liang Yue agreed on the terms: Liang Yue would move into the shelter.

She would be allowed to eat and access the basic services here, like everyone else.

But she wasn’t permitted to bring anyone else in unless she had Zhang Yi’s approval.

Of course, enforcing this rule would be challenging.

Zhang Yi only allowed people he deemed useful to enter his shelter.

The main goal was to create the best possible life for himself in the apocalypse.

And as usual, he would provide Liang Yue with enough food for ten people each day so she could deliver it to her students to keep them alive.

Hearing that Zhang Yi would continue supplying food, Liang Yue relaxed, patting her chest in relief. Now, she could ease her conscience.

But she was unaware that this very agreement triggered Zhang Yi’s resentment toward her students—honestly, he was already considering getting rid of them.

Knowing Zhang Yi well, Yang Xinxin understood the barely noticeable smile at the corner of his mouth—it was a clear sign those students wouldn’t live much longer.

Because Zhang Yi never supported people who contributed nothing.

And Yang Xinxin didn't like those students either.

So rather than revealing Zhang Yi's intentions, she chose to support him.

Zhang Yi then called Yang Siyah and Zhou Ke'er over, asking them to bring Zhou Haimei along.

They would host a welcoming event at noon to celebrate Liang Yue joining their group.

Zhou Ke'er smiled and said, "Okay, I'll get the rooms ready!"

Yang Siyah grinned, "Then Haimei and I can handle lunch preparations! Miss Liang, is there anything you'd especially like?"

Overwhelmed by their warm welcome, Liang Yue quickly replied, "I'm not picky; whatever you make will be fine."

Yang Siyah nodded, smiling, "Alright then!"

Both women wore bright smiles, but something about their expressions felt off to Liang Yue.

There was a subtle tension, an almost hidden hint of hostility, that left her puzzled.

"What's going on? Is it just my imagination?"

She couldn't think of anything she'd done to offend them, so she brushed it off as overthinking.

After leaving the living room, Zhou Ke'er and Yang Siyah exchanged a glance, sighing in unison.

“One more person in the house!”

“And it’s a really strong woman, too.”

“She’s not just strong—she’s beautiful as well.”

With a troubled look, Yang Siyah propped her chin on her hand. “That makes me the least useful one here.”

For once, Zhou Ke’er tried to console her, “Hey, don’t be so hard on yourself. At least you’re a great cook!”

“And we still have the advantage in terms of figure!”

She struck a confident S-shaped pose, proudly puffing out her chest.

Yang Siyah looked down and couldn’t even see her shoes.

Not bad—definitely something to be proud of.

At least in terms of appearance, they felt they had the upper hand, which gave them a bit of confidence.

But with this new sense of rivalry, they both resolved to prove their worth even more in the future.

No way were they letting anyone steal Zhang Yi!

...

The house was bustling. After arriving at the shelter, Zhou Haimei greeted Zhang Yi and the newcomer, Liang Yue, before heading off to help Zhou Ke'er and Yang Siyah.

Zhang Yi slapped his leg, turning to Liang Yue. "Perfect timing; we're about to hold a meeting. Why don't you join us?"

"A meeting?" Liang Yue asked, curious. "What kind of meeting?"

Zhang Yi gave a mysterious smile. "A strategy meeting."

Liang Yue covered her mouth in surprise. "Don't tell me there's going to be another fight? West Hill Base is gone; are there still enemies nearby?"

Zhang Yi gave a light chuckle. "When one river dries up, the water from other streams will naturally flow in to fill the gap."

Liang Yue understood.

"You're saying that with West Hill Base gone, the surrounding area is now up for grabs, so others will want to take its territory?"

"Something like that. At the very least, other factions have been sighted nearby, but how things will develop is anyone's guess."

Zhang Yi shrugged. "But we have to prepare for the worst! Life isn't a game, and as long as we're prepared, there's no danger we can't handle."

Liang Yue nodded, fully agreeing with his cautious attitude, her expression growing serious. "If there's anything you need me to do, just let me know!"

"Of course. I won't hesitate."

At that moment, Yang Xinxin tugged at Zhang Yi's sleeve, smiling brightly.

"Big Bro Zhang Yi, I found some fascinating data from West Hill Base's database. It's about the other factions in Tianhai City. Want to hear it?"

"Definitely! Let me get Fatty Xu and Uncle You over here so we can all listen."

Yang Xinxin nodded.

The decision of whether or not to share these details publicly was up to Zhang Yi.

He called the other two to the living room.

Zhou Ke'er and the others were still preparing for the welcoming party, but they were in the open kitchen nearby, so they could hear the conversation.

However, since their roles leaned more toward logistics, they only needed to be aware of the information; they didn't need to participate in the discussion.

Once everyone was present, Zhang Yi gave a quick recap of the events they'd encountered at West Hill Base.

"At the base entrance, we ran into two different groups and had some confrontations. This might provoke retaliation, or other factions could come in to claim territory, which could lead to conflict with us."

"So, everyone! We can't get too comfortable just yet; we need to stay vigilant and prepared for anything!"

Everyone nodded. Although they were surprised to hear about other factions, it wasn't too shocking. In the apocalypse, anything was possible.

Looking at Yang Xinxin, Zhang Yi said, “Why don’t you start by briefing us on the other factions? It’ll help us identify potential enemies.”

All eyes turned to Yang Xinxin, waiting for her report.

She placed her laptop on her lap, displaying the intel she’d prepared.

She began speaking at a calm, steady pace.

“According to intel from West Hill Base, there are four factions in Tianhai City that could pose a threat to us!”

“Among them, three are factions based within shelters, just like West Hill Base. I’ll start with those.”

“The first is the Yangsheng Base. They control the largest oil refinery in Tianhai City, making energy their biggest asset.”

“The current leader of Yangsheng Base is Xiao Honglian, a superhuman. Her powers are unknown but are rumored to involve fire.”

“She has a deputy named Zhuge Qingting, whose power is related to wind, but details are unclear.”

“The second is the Chaoyu Base, near the East Sea, controlling all the shipping companies in Tianhai City. According to West Hill Base’s data, they even have access to large vessels for sea travel.”

At this, Zhang Yi raised a hand, pausing her.

“Hold on, Xinxin. Can they even sail out to sea in these conditions?”

It was February, the coldest time of year, with the Lu River entirely frozen over.

Would it really be possible to launch ships in this weather?

Everyone shared his question, looking at Yang Xinxin with confusion.

A hint of pride appeared on Yang Xinxin's face; her academic knowledge had finally come in handy.

"That's right, parts of the coastal areas may freeze, but the open ocean remains too deep to freeze, especially closer to the equator where temperatures are warmer."

"Warm currents flow from the equator, and there are underwater volcanoes, so it's impossible to freeze the entire ocean."

"Even if temperatures drop by another hundred degrees, there will still be liquid water beneath the ice-covered surface."

Lu Keran added, "With high salt content, seawater doesn't freeze easily. Plus, with icebreakers, they can keep ships anchored in deeper waters to avoid getting trapped in the ice."

With this explanation, everyone finally understood.

Zhang Yi rubbed his chin thoughtfully, an idea forming.

"So, does that mean they could fish out there or even relocate to warmer areas near the equator?"

Yang Xinxin nodded.

"Based on the current temperatures, areas near the equator are probably only around -20 or -30°C. While disastrous for locals, it's no worse than winter in Northeast China, where people can survive."

She looked over her notes. "And, according to West Hill Base's intel, they're well-supplied with food because of their proximity to the sea."

"But since ships require substantial fuel, they maintain trade with Yangsheng Base. These two factions are the closest allies among Tianhai City's powers."

Peering over her laptop, Zhang Yi's eyes narrowed as he saw a familiar symbol in the data on Chaoyu Base.

It was a blue wave icon.

"Is this the logo for their base?"

He confirmed with Yang Xinxin.

She nodded. "Yes, each of the four shelters has its own symbol, all originally established by the government."

That explained it!

Zhang Yi recalled the uniforms of Wang Ruixuan's group, which looked identical to those of West Hill Base, except for the blue wave on the chest instead of the golden sword.

That meant he had killed people from Chaoyu Base.

"Let's continue," he said.

Yang Xinxin nodded and went on with her briefing.

"The current leader of Chaoyu Base is Wei Dinghai. Unfortunately, there's no detailed information about him; we can't even confirm if he's a superhuman."

“His second-in

-command, Chen Jingguan, is similarly undocumented.”

“It seems their main operations are offshore, so they have little contact with other bases.”

“Since they can harvest resources from the sea, and their ships are well-equipped against the cold, they rarely clash with other factions.”

Zhang Yi thought to himself, Well, now they’re clashing with me!

“The last of the three shelter factions is in Qingpu District.”

“It’s located near Tianhai Qingpu Iron & Steel Group’s plant, currently run by an organized group of factory workers.”

“Their leader is named Xingtian. His name sounds fierce, but we’re not sure if it’s real or just a codename.”

“If someone’s online alias were ‘Xingtian,’ it’d be cool. But if that’s his real name, it’s intense,” Yang Xinxin said with a hint of humor.

“Oh, and there is some info on his powers. He can apparently enhance the strength of people around him, but specifics are unclear.”

Yang Xinxin shrugged helplessly.

“With so little time since the apocalypse, none of the major factions are eager to clash.”

“And per the ‘law of the jungle,’ they’re cautious about revealing their abilities. Thus, intel is limited.”

Zhang Yi nodded, understanding this completely.

Superhuman abilities were complex and diverse.

If a superhuman’s power were a hidden weapon, it was like a gun you didn’t know the location, strength, or trigger of.

Without knowing your opponent’s powers, you had to remain constantly on guard.

Otherwise, that hidden weapon might go off in your face.

Yang Xinxin continued, “And another thing—all of the leaders of these three bases rose to power by seizing control through force, just like at West Hill Base.”

“However, they don’t have formal armies, only armed groups, so their combat training is weaker than West Hill Base.”

This made sense.

With the breakdown of order, only the strongest survived.

At West Hill Base, Chen Xinian was the exception, lacking any superhuman powers. His authority came solely from his loyal subordinate, Ling Feng.

“The three main bases, along with West Hill Base, each hold critical resources.”

Zhang Yi analyzed, “West Hill Base had military power, Yangsheng Base has energy, Chaoyu Base controls shipping, and Qingpu Base holds the steel industry.”

Realizing this, Zhang Yi felt a bit relieved.

“If that’s the case, West Hill Base actually had the strongest combat abilities among the four bases!”

After all, West Hill Base had the most weapons and a well-trained military.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Fatty Xu patted his chest. “I feel so much better. No matter how strong the others are, they’re no match for a base with a full military. And we even took down West Hill Base ourselves—what’s there to fear?”

Zhang Yi smiled, “They may have some armed forces, but they won’t match the quality of trained soldiers.”

“The biggest unknown now is their superhumans. Since intel is scarce, we likely won’t know their numbers or strength until we face them head-on.”

“In short, if we can avoid conflict, it’s best to do so!”

Zhang Yi could only hope they wouldn’t come; that would be ideal.

“Of course, if a fight does break out, we won’t back down!”

If they could conquer West Hill Base, with its formidable military, the other factions were no real threat.

Feeling a bit more cheerful, Liang Yue asked, “Xinxin, you mentioned there were four major factions. What’s the last one?”

At this point, everyone remembered Yang Xinxin hadn’t mentioned the final group.

Fatty Xu's expression turned nervous.

"The last one... could it be the strongest? Miss Yang, are you hiding a big one?"

Everyone tensed up, turning their attention back to Yang Xinxin.

Chapter 347: Followers of the Snow God

Yang Xinxin looked around at everyone, then said calmly, "It's not that this group is particularly powerful; it's just unique, that's all."

She tapped the enter key and moved on to information about the next faction.

"Followers of the Snow God, a religious organization formed after the apocalypse."

"The group evolved from a small sect known as Shenli Church in Tianhai City."

"Its leader, Yuan Kongye, is a mixed-blood of Hua and Japan, who awakened superhuman abilities after the apocalypse. It's preliminarily believed her ability is called Blessing, which can help other Superhumans awaken abilities without any cost."

A sudden "boom" echoed in Zhang Yi's mind!

Memories from the past suddenly surfaced.

Back then, Uncle You had mentioned the existence of the Followers of the Snow God to him.

Uncle You's face also grew serious; he had personally encountered members of this group.

Moreover, they had even witnessed a live example of an awakened blessing—Li Jian!

“Is there really an ability this powerful in the world?”

Liang Yue's face showed clear surprise.

She remembered her own near-death experience when she first grasped her superhuman ability.

Everyone else in the room had also awakened their abilities only on the verge of death.

But this person named Yuan Kongye could actually awaken others' abilities at will.

Just with that, she could amass countless powerful Superhumans as followers.

Zhang Yi's expression became serious.

If that's the case, then the strength of the Followers of the Snow God is terrifying.

Moreover, as a religious group offering the chance to awaken abilities, it's bound to attract many Superhumans to its side.

In other words, the Followers of the Snow God have infinite potential for growth!

Everyone recognized the gravity of the situation, their expressions turning somber.

Yang Xinxin continued reading aloud:

“After the apocalypse, Shenli Church was renamed the Followers of the Snow God, honoring Yuan Kongye as their leader. She claims to be the earthly form of the Snow God and declares that this snowstorm is a cleansing from the Snow God, and only devout followers of the group will be spared.”

“Their influence is concentrated in the Tianfeng and Changlan Districts, with a large, though unspecified, number of Superhumans under their command.”

“They’re marked as particularly troublesome enemies in West Hill Base’s intelligence reports.”

Zhang Yi crossed his hands, supporting his chin, and said seriously, “Tianfeng and Changlan are the most densely populated areas in Tianhai City.”

“Preaching there could quickly expand their reach, especially in the apocalypse when religion spreads fast—people are desperate for spiritual support.”

“But aside from the population, those areas lack core resources. Judging by that, it’s also where the most deaths happen.”

Puzzled, Zhang Yi asked, “How are they even surviving?”

Food and heating are essential for staying alive.

The Shelter has years of stored supplies, and Zhang Yi had planned for this long ago.

What’s their plan?

Yang Xinxin shook her head. “This is all the information we have. Every faction has its secrets.”

“Maybe they’re eating meat!”

Zhang Yi nodded, chuckling, “Oh, right. How could I forget such a crucial food source?”

Having lived a rather comfortable life, he occasionally lost touch with the harsh realities others face.

“These foreign cults always have ways to brainwash their followers, like claiming the meat is some holy sacrament or something!”

Zhang Yi’s joke sent chills through everyone.

“Wow, that joke was so dark!”

“What a morbid sense of humor!”

The tense atmosphere in the room relaxed a little.

Zhang Yi thought back to the two groups they encountered outside West Hill Base.

One was from Chaoyu Base, and the other, the ones without uniforms, were probably the Followers of the Snow God.

But at the time, they hadn’t shown any hostility toward Zhang Yi.

So, Zhang Yi didn’t harbor any negative feelings towards them either.

Live and let live.

As long as they didn’t disturb his peaceful life, he had no issues with what they did.

With that, Yang Xinxin wrapped up the briefing on the major factions in Tianhai City.

Although information was sparse and piecemeal, it gave everyone a basic understanding of Tianhai City’s situation.

Zhang Yi, seated on the couch, glanced at everyone lost in thought and said, "That's the gist of it. Anyone have thoughts to share?"

The group exchanged glances, each with their own opinions to express.

Zhang Yi turned to Uncle You, saying, "Uncle You, you're the oldest here. Why don't you go first?"

Uncle You didn't hold back, crossing his arms thoughtfully as he replied, "No matter how many factions there are in Tianhai City, it's definitely wise to be prepared for conflict!"

"The most urgent task now is building our defenses!"

"We've brought a lot of weapons from West Hill Base; not using them would be a waste, right?"

Zhang Yi nodded. They needed to speed up fortifying the base—there was no telling when these factions might clash with them.

After all, Zhang Yi had already taken down some people from Chaoyu Base, and even a Superhuman!

If they discovered the truth, a conflict would be inevitable.

After Uncle You spoke, Fatty Xu, sitting beside him, chimed in with a worried tone, "I think the situation looks grim!"

The chubby pessimist immediately injected some negative energy into the discussion.

"We encountered two factions outside West Hill Base. If they find out the base was destroyed, they might come to take over the territory."

"That could turn the surrounding area into a battlefield. If we get caught in the crossfire, we'll be in serious trouble."

Zhang Yi looked at him and asked, “Do you have any good suggestions?”

Fatty Xu furrowed his brows, deep in thought, though his pudgy face looked a bit forced with such a serious expression.

“I think we should just barricade ourselves in! Avoid going out as much as possible.”

Zhang Yi nodded; if nothing else, Fatty Xu had an unmatched sense for survival, aligning perfectly with his own thoughts.

Lu Keran chimed in, “The problem is, even if we keep to ourselves, they might still come after us!”

Zhang Yi rested his chin on his hand. “Then we still need to build up our defenses and be thoroughly prepared. We can’t control what others do, can we?”

“True enough.”

Lu Keran hesitated, her expression a bit troubled as if unsure how to proceed.

Noticing this, Zhang Yi smiled and said, “Just say what’s on your mind. We’re here to brainstorm—sharing your ideas might spark something for all of us.”

Encouraged, Lu Keran finally spoke, “Actually, I was wondering if we should make another trip out to gather more materials to repair the Shelter?”

Lu Keran's words reminded Zhang Yi.

This time, while they gathered some construction materials at West Hill Base, it was only enough to set up the outer defenses.

The shelter's wall had been half-destroyed by Ling Feng's earlier explosion, greatly reducing its defense.

To repair this kind of seamless wall, they needed special building materials.

"If we want to get those materials, we'll have to go out," Zhang Yi mused, rubbing his chin. "Though it'd be best not to leave right now. But these Western powers we've mentioned... so far, they haven't openly confronted us."

"They wouldn't dare act rashly unless they're sure there's no danger in the area."

"So, if we go out within the next couple of days, grab the materials, and come back right away, it shouldn't be a problem!"

Lu Keran nodded. "Got it, Big Bro!"

After Lu Keran shared his thoughts, Liang Yue looked like she wanted to say something. But Yang Xinxin jumped in first.

"Let me share my thoughts!"

Liang Yue, keeping her own thoughts in, waited for Yang Xinxin to finish.

Everyone paid close attention to what Yang Xinxin had to say. This girl was exceptionally intelligent and often had constructive ideas. If she had a downside, it would be her tendency to be overly logical, which sometimes came across as cold.

With a calm smile, Yang Xinxin addressed everyone, "I think you're all getting a bit too tense!"

Pointing to her head, she said, “Don’t lose your judgment out of fear. Actually, our current situation isn’t as bad as you think.”

“First, let’s look at these Western powers. Their reach hasn’t extended to the areas around West Hill Base.”

“For instance, West Hill Base controls the standing army in Tianhai City; their military might is unmatched, yet even they haven’t fully taken over West Hill and Lu River Districts.”

“You can tell by the fact that they’re still sending patrols.”

“So, we can conclude that even the Western powers haven’t fully secured their territories.”

“Plus, they’re keeping each other in check, wary of expanding recklessly and leaving their home bases vulnerable.”

“This means we’ve got a decent window to prepare for what’s to come.”

Yang Xinxin’s reasoning put everyone at ease. Indeed, though they were aware of other powerful forces in Tianhai City, they were letting their imaginations run wild.

Realistically speaking, it was highly unlikely the enemy would come looking for their shelter.

With the Ice Age, transportation, and communication are severely hindered.

Besides, they had no irreconcilable differences with Zhang Yi, nor any reason to waste resources searching for the shelter.

The fall of West Hill Base had only heightened their sense of caution, making it even less likely for them to act without caution.

Fatty Xu said cautiously, "Still, it's a good idea to reinforce the defense lines as a precaution."

Yang Xinxin nodded. "Yes, build up defenses, but don't stress yourselves out over it. Instead, we should use this time to gather as many useful supplies as possible."

At this, Yang Xinxin looked at Zhang Yi. "Zhang Yi, aren't you planning to gather materials to fix up the shelter?"

Zhang Yi met her gaze and sensed something strange in her eyes.

She seemed to be hinting at something.

With a slight nod, Zhang Yi replied, "Yes. According to Keran, we'll need a lot of rare construction materials to repair the shelter's outer wall. It'll take some time."

Yang Xinxin then turned to the thoughtful Liang Yue.

"Liang Yue, I imagine Xu Family Town could use some extra food supplies, just in case?"

Liang Yue blurted, "Exactly! If there's an enemy attack, won't they be in danger at Xu Family Town?"

Yang Xinxin tilted her head, looking at Liang Yue. "You can't protect them forever, right? I suggest informing them in advance so they can stock up on food and hide."

"Don't worry, Liang Yue. Like I said, no enemies are likely to show up around here anytime soon."

Zhang Yi caught on to Yang Xinxin's intent.

He gave her a deep, meaningful look before casually sipping his milk tea.

From the start, Yang Xinxin's words struck him as odd.

Even if they didn't know when the enemy would come, why was she so insistent on easing everyone's guard?

When she mentioned Xu Family Town, Zhang Yi realized her plan.

First, she and Zhang Yi both wanted those students gone—they were just a headache.

Second, with Liang Yue around, they couldn't just kick them out openly.

So, Yang Xinxin subtly guided the conversation, making it seem as if the situation wasn't that urgent.

This way, Liang Yue wouldn't ask Zhang Yi to bring those students to Cloud Manor for protection.

In fact, it was a "kill with a borrowed knife" approach.

If there were an enemy attack, they'd likely take out the villagers of Xu Family Town near Cloud Manor first.

By standard logic, Xu Family Town would be seen as an outpost of Cloud Manor.

To attack Cloud Manor, they'd need to deal with Xu Family Town first.

Liang Yue was visibly conflicted by Yang Xinxin's words.

She hesitated, then asked Zhang Yi, "Can we have them come help us with the defense work, in exchange for our protection?"

Zhang Yi didn't immediately answer Liang Yue's question.

Instead, he chuckled, "Have your students learned to fish yet? Because if they can't, in this freezing weather, they're in real trouble."

Liang Yue's face turned awkward.

Zhang Yi was implying that this bunch, who couldn't even fish through frozen ice, would be no help at all.

They'd just be dead weight, and he didn't need that!

Yang Xinxin consoled Liang Yue, "Don't worry, Liang Yue. This is just our guess. The enemy may never come. Who knows?"

Liang Yue sighed, "If that's true, it'd be a relief!"

Finished speaking, Yang Xinxin left Liang Yue hesitant to ask Zhang Yi for help.

At that moment, however, a voice broke the tension.

"If you're so worried, Liang Yue, then let me think of a solution for you!"

It was Zhang Yi.

Smiling, he looked at Liang Yue. "If danger does ever come to the area, I'll allow your students to temporarily stay near the shelter."

There were a few empty villas around the shelter—enough for them.

Liang Yue looked at Zhang Yi, astonished, as if hearing these words from him was unbelievable.

To her, Zhang Yi had never been this kind.

Even Fatty Xu, Uncle You, and Lu Keran looked shocked, as though meeting Zhang Yi for the first time.

Only Yang Xinxin stared at him calmly, a slight smile on her lips and admiration in her gaze.

Noticing Liang Yue's surprise, Zhang Yi spread his hands and laughed, "Why the look? You really thought I was heartless?"

Liang Yue's expression grew awkward, though her face confirmed her thoughts.

Zhang Yi shook his head.

"Maybe that was true before...because back then, we weren't allies."

"But now, Liang Yue, you're one of us!"

"You're a friend and part of our family! So the people you want to protect—I'll help you protect them!"

Zhang Yi's eyes held sincere warmth, as earnest as a devoted follower.

Liang Yue was deeply moved; in her time of conflict, Zhang Yi had been there for her.

This 27-year-old single teacher felt ripples in her heart, even forgetting her resentment over him taking her prized sword.

"Zhang Yi...I... I don't even know how to thank you."

Her face flushed with excitement.

From the kitchen, Zhou Ke'er, watching this scene, muttered a few words to herself, ones that looked inappropriate for younger ears if you followed her lips.

Zhang Yi simply smiled and shook his head.

“No need for thanks. We’re all in this together now. Just focus on keeping everyone safe.”

(Just as long as you stay obedient, and follow orders when needed.)

Liang Yue nodded firmly. “I’ll do my best!”

Zhang Yi’s image had grown noble in her eyes.

She realized she’d misjudged him, thinking him selfish and arrogant.

With Liang Yue’s problem resolved, Zhang Yi addressed everyone else’s concerns, bringing the matter to a close.

“In short, we have two immediate priorities: first, fortify defenses centered around Cloud Manor to guard against possible enemies.”

“Second, Keran and I will head out to find materials to repair the shelter.”

“Apart from that, no one is allowed to act on their own or leave the shelter area, to avoid unwanted clashes with other factions’ scouts.”

Everyone agreed. This was the best course of action for now.

One thing, however, went unsaid.

Zhang Yi had already killed some superhumans and regular soldiers from the Chaoyu Base at the West Hill Base entrance.

So the current peace wouldn't last as long as he hoped.

He chose not to mention it, and both Fatty Xu and Uncle You kept silent as well.

They assumed Zhang Yi was keeping morale steady in the shelter.

But in reality, Zhang Yi was setting up his own plan.

Chapter 349 : Waiting on Fate

The meeting concluded successfully, with everyone in agreement on Zhang Yi's plans.

Around noon, they gathered to officially welcome Liang Yue to their team.

The dining table was filled with steaming, sumptuous dishes: fragrant roast chicken, tangy garlic-braised fish, tender pork knuckles, savory lamb soup, and soft, stewed pig trotters with soybeans.

Even though these meals were a regular occurrence at Zhang Yi's table, for Liang Yue, it was a feast beyond her imagination. Her mouth watered at the sight, and her hands trembled slightly as she picked up her chopsticks.

Even back at West Hill Base's Second Life Pod, she'd never enjoyed a meal like this.

If the people struggling out in the icy wastelands saw this spread, they'd go insane with envy!

In a world where people were ready to risk their lives for a stale bun, Zhang Yi's group was living in utter luxury. The contrast was almost painful.

Liang Yue couldn't deny she felt secretly glad she'd made the right choice in joining them.

She ate happily, perhaps too much, as she eventually found herself clutching her stomach, feeling sick from the indulgence.

"Ouch..."

Holding her stomach, Liang Yue turned a bit pale.

Everyone froze momentarily, then rushed to check on her.

Zhou Ke'er suddenly had a realization and slapped her forehead. "Oh, it must be from the rich food. Her stomach isn't used to it after what she's been eating!"

Since they were accustomed to such fare, they'd overlooked Liang Yue's situation.

Zhou Ke'er quickly helped her to her room, gave her some medicine, and made her lie down.

"Just rest for a bit; you'll be fine!" Zhou Ke'er said gently, tucking her in.

The kindness touched Liang Yue deeply, almost bringing her to tears.

In the aftermath, this was the first time she had felt genuinely cared for, and it stirred a growing attachment to the Shelter. In just one day, her outlook had shifted drastically.

“Actually...this life really isn’t so bad.”

...

After lunch, Yang Siyah, Zhou Ke’er, and Zhou Haimei took care of the cleaning.

Zhang Yi noticed a strange, slightly troubled look on Lu Keran’s face and beckoned her over with a smile.

“Keran, what’s going on? I noticed you seemed off during lunch.”

At his words, Lu Keran quickly waved her hands. “It’s nothing, Big Brother! I’m perfectly fine.”

Zhang Yi smiled and flicked her forehead lightly.

“No need to act all mysterious with me. Just say whatever’s on your mind.”

“Remember, we’re family. There shouldn’t be any secrets between family, alright?”

Reassured, Lu Keran glanced around to make sure no one else was nearby, then looked up at Zhang Yi.

“Big Brother, why did you agree to protect those students? They’re awful!”

So that’s what was bothering her.

Zhang Yi couldn’t help but smile.

Lu Keran’s face grew serious as she continued.

“You probably remember how things were back then. Those people were far from decent, and after the apocalypse, Xinxin and I went through hell because of them.” ₹?

“So I really don’t want to see their ugly faces again.”

Though generally easygoing, Lu Keran was still an eighteen-year-old who loved and hated with intensity.

She couldn’t forget everything she had endured because of her classmates.

Zhang Yi’s smile grew.

Just then, Yang Xinxin, passing by, noticed their conversation. She and Zhang Yi exchanged a knowing look before she walked away.

Often, Zhang Yi and Yang Xinxin shared an unspoken understanding.

Being highly intelligent, Yang Xinxin could restrain her emotions with logic, much like Zhang Yi. Both of them prioritized whatever benefitted themselves and the Shelter.

Zhang Yi put a comforting arm around Lu Keran’s shoulders and led her to a quiet corner of the room.

He lowered his voice and said, “Keran, if I completely ignored your classmates, what do you think your teacher, Liang Yue, would do?”

Lu Keran frowned slightly. “Hmm... Knowing her, she’d probably leave the Shelter. She’d go off to protect them or take them somewhere safer.”

Zhang Yi nodded, smiling. “Exactly. Even though I don’t care about your classmates, Liang Yue is valuable to us. We need her to stay.”

Understanding dawned on Lu Keran. “Ah, I see! So you’re doing this to keep Ms. Liang around!”

“But, does that mean you’ll support them forever?”

Lu Keran pouted slightly, sounding irritated.

“Why should those jerks get to live off you? They don’t deserve it!”

“Don’t worry, it won’t be for long. In these harsh conditions, weaklings like them will either freeze or starve soon enough.”

“And besides, I’ve got some plans.”

Zhang Yi’s smile held a hint of cunning.

He thought of the Superhuman he’d killed from Chaoyu Base.

Losing even one Superhuman was a big deal for any faction, which would only increase contact between the Shelter and outside forces.

He’d assured Liang Yue he’d protect those students if anything went wrong.

But if a conflict broke out, he would have plenty of reasons to explain why he couldn’t intervene in time.

After all, Cloud Manor was quite a distance from Xu Family Town, so even a brief delay would be enough for the outside factions to wipe them out.

Lu Keran’s eyes lit up—Big Brother never let her down!

She was about to ask something else when Zhang Yi held up a “shush” gesture.

“Let’s keep this out of the house. Tomorrow, we’ll head out to search for materials to repair the Shelter, and I’ll fill you in on the details then.”

Although Liang Yue was resting in her room, it was best to keep their plans discreet.

With her worries gone, Lu Keran smiled brightly.

She nodded enthusiastically. “Alright, Big Brother! So, where are we going to find the materials?”

“There’s a materials factory not far from here. It’s still within West Hill Base’s control, so it should be relatively safe for now.”

“Got it! I’ll go start a materials checklist.”

With that, Lu Keran hurried to her workshop to prepare.

Watching her go, Zhang Yi began to strategize.

His plan was simple: leverage external enemies to eliminate Liang Yue’s students. He had no intention of feeding freeloaders.

Especially those students, who he saw as ungrateful troublemakers.

If they weren’t going to help, they’d only bring trouble.

The best solution was to remove any potential threats.

Additionally, this would serve as a small payback for what Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran had endured.

“But of course, other factions aren’t my subordinates; they won’t just do what I want.”

“For now, I can only wait and see if fate takes its course.”

While Zhang Yi hoped the other factions would unwittingly take care of Xu Family Town’s students, he wouldn’t deliberately provoke them.

His own safety remained his top priority.

When those students died wasn’t a concern.

Chapter 350 : Surprise or Not?

That afternoon, after everyone had rested, Zhang Yi began assigning tasks.

The top priority now was building a solid defense line.

He gathered everyone together; after all, nobody could slack off when it came to this kind of work.

Lu Keran had already drawn up the plans. The defense line would encircle the shelter and surrounding villas, forming a circular wall with a radius of 500 meters, standing 20 meters high, and 10 meters thick!

The main construction materials would be steel beams and large ice blocks—resources they could easily acquire with strong defensive qualities.

The ice blocks had the added benefit of self-repair, thickening further in the cold weather.

With ten-meter-thick solid ice, they could withstand substantial firepower.

Zhang Yi assigned everyone their roles.

Lu Keran, a genius in mechanical engineering, hadn't specifically studied architecture, but her knowledge of mechanics far exceeded everyone else's, making her the natural leader for the construction.

Fatty Xu was in charge of gathering materials.

The most commonly used material for the wall was massive ice blocks, which they could easily collect from the Lu River.

Then, Zhang Yi would use his spatial abilities to transport them back.

Liang Yue would process the ice, shaping them into suitable building blocks.

Uncle You took charge of the heavy lifting, assembling the steel beams and massive ice blocks.

Over time, the ice blocks would naturally fuse, and the steel framework would meld into the structure, forming a virtually indestructible ice-and-steel barrier!

This would be the first line of defense around the shelter.

While not as fortified as the shelter itself, its primary purpose was to prevent surprise attacks and buy everyone time to retreat into the shelter.

Having acquired a significant stockpile of weapons and ammunition from West Hill Base, including heavy artillery and combat vehicles, Zhang Yi made some last-minute upgrades to the wall's design.

Several openings were carved along the wall's kilometers-long stretch, where they mounted artillery barrels, connecting these weapons to the shelter's control system.

Thirty heavy machine guns, five large-caliber autocannons, six additional artillery guns, plus two tanks and four armored vehicles were also stationed on the wall.

Zhang Yi held back part of the heavy weaponry in his dimensional space for emergencies.

This plan thrilled everyone on-site. Once completed, this firepower-packed defense line would give them the confidence to withstand even a massive assault.

“All right, let’s get started! This wall is our safety line, so no slacking!” Zhang Yi clapped his hands, grinning as he encouraged everyone to get to work.

As for Zhou Ke’er, Yang Siyah, and Zhou Haimei, since they didn’t have powers to help directly, they would prepare hot drinks and assist Lu Keran.

With assignments given, everyone headed to Lu River and got to work.

Despite the scale of the project, everyone here had some kind of superhuman ability—no one was short on skills.

What usually required a full construction team could be divided among just a few.

Fatty Xu pressed his hands to the river’s ice, and with a loud cracking sound, the surface split into large fissures.

Soon, an enormous, rectangular ice block rose from the ground, slowly levitating.

Zhang Yi quickly opened the Dimensional Gate and stored it in his spatial storage.

Fatty Xu, going all out, extracted ten huge ice blocks in one go.

The intense work soon left him out of breath.

“Grab a snack and rest up! We’ve got time,” Zhang Yi reassured him before taking the ice blocks back to the shelter.

The large, irregular ice blocks, each the size of a small house, lay on the ground.

With her blueprint in hand, Lu Keran directed the work, guiding Liang Yue as she shaped the ice into perfect blocks.

Without a word, Liang Yue pulled out her Tang Sword. The bright blade flashed, cutting through the air, leaving a large ice block perfectly squared.

Then it was Uncle You’s turn.

He lifted one of the large ice blocks and slammed it firmly into the ground!

The giant, rectangular block, nearly thirty meters long, sunk deep into the earth like a wooden stake.

Due to frequent explosions, the ground around Cloud Manor was soft, so the foundation work went smoothly.

Uncle You’s first task was setting the foundation, then he reinforced it with steel bars along the inner wall.

After the frame was ready, they would add a second layer of ice blocks inside, creating a double-layer defense.

This setup could withstand heavy artillery without shattering the structure.

They packed soil around it for stability.

The whole team worked tirelessly, even enjoying the labor.

In the sub-zero temperatures, with everyone bundled in thermal suits, the activity kept them warm—a rare luxury in the apocalypse.

These professional-grade suits, once reserved for specialized workers, were nearly impossible for ordinary people to afford.

Zhang Yi's efficient team coordination sped up the work, and within hours, they had a hundred meters of the wall structure in place.

But as they worked, Zhang Yi noticed something out of the corner of his eye across the river.

Squinting, he recognized a vaguely familiar figure sneaking around.

It seemed like one of the students he had seen before—not familiar by name, but the face rang a bell.

Perhaps the large-scale ice extraction caught the attention of some in Xu Family Town.

Zhang Yi crossed his arms and smirked, barely caring what those people thought.

Those little weaklings? He could wipe them all out singlehandedly if he wanted.

Yet, something about the student's sneaky behavior piqued his curiosity.

Nearby, Fatty Xu, still panting, continued chipping away at the ice.

Since Zhang Yi couldn't do much to help at the moment, he pulled out a high-power telescope and observed the other side of the river from the embankment.

From this vantage point, he could see Xu Family Town clearly.

In the freezing temperatures, the town was dead silent. With so many able-bodied people lost at West Hill Base, few villagers remained—mostly women, the elderly, and children.

But as he looked closer, Zhang Yi noticed something interesting.

The sneaky student wasn't alone; a young woman followed behind him.

The two of them slipped into a snow house, one after the other.

A faint, amused grin crossed Zhang Yi's face.

These rich kids, still unable to resist their baser urges even now.

After working tirelessly to extract another ice block, Fatty Xu squatted on the ice, watching Zhang Yi curiously.

"Boss, what are you looking at?"

Zhang Yi lowered his telescope. "Nothing. Take a break."

He took the ice blocks back, and after Liang Yue finished processing them, Zhang Yi retrieved some food from his dimensional storage.

"Getting late. Take this food to your students," he said, handing a bag to Liang Yue.

As she took it, Zhang Yi suddenly added, "By the way, I wanted to apologize to you about something."

Liang Yue looked puzzled. "Apologize for what?"

Zhang Yi met her gaze sincerely. "I used to think your students were all selfish. But just now, I saw one of them helping a poor girl, and I feel I owe you an apology."

Liang Yue found his words odd, as if there was some hidden meaning she couldn't quite grasp.

Zhang Yi's mouth curved into a mysterious smile as he gestured toward Xu Family Town. "Over there, in the house on the east side of the village, your student is helping someone in need!"

Liang Yue's expression changed instantly, realizing her student might be exploiting Xu Family Town's vulnerable women and elderly!

As a teacher, she couldn't stand by and let her students do something so immoral!

"I'll go check it out!" she said, tossing her ponytail over her shoulder as she ran toward the river.

Meanwhile, inside the snow house, Wu Chengyu dragged a wooden plank, blocking the door.

These semi-underground snow houses were great for keeping out the cold, though the temperature still made it difficult for his body to react as he'd like.

Sighing as he looked at the pale, haggard woman before him, Wu Chengyu couldn't help feeling disappointed.

Back in Tianhai City, he was used to dating only the best women.

If he had any other options, he wouldn't have chosen someone like her.

But he had gone too long without, so he'd make do.

He pulled out half a meal box from his coat and threw it on the table.

When she saw it, her eyes brightened.

“Hurry up. I don’t have time to waste here.”

The woman gulped, reluctantly shifting her gaze from the food and crawling toward him.

By the time Liang Yue arrived, Wu Chengyu was already engaged in his sordid business.

Outside the snow house, she could hear the sounds coming from within—sounds that made her cheeks flush.

She was in shock, unwilling to believe that the person inside was one of her students.

In the apocalypse, Xu Family Town’s women had lost their protectors and were barely surviving.

It was clear that the woman inside wasn’t with Wu Chengyu out of love.

Either she’d been coerced or forced to trade her body for something.

Regardless of the reason, Wu Chengyu’s actions enraged Liang Yue, her body shaking with fury.

As a woman, she could not tolerate the thought of her students, whom she worked so hard to protect, exploiting other women like this!