

Ice Age 381

Chapter 381: Negotiation

Fatty Xu froze at Zhang Yi's sharp warning, standing stiffly in place as fear overtook him.

Looking at the crossbow bolt in his hand, he suddenly realized what Zhang Yi was implying. His face turned pale.

In his eagerness to show off and earn praise, he had forgotten that the bolt might be coated with poison—or even rigged with a micro-bomb.

In this ruthless era, enemies didn't adhere to any moral code. If they wanted you dead, they'd use any means necessary.

"Slowly, put the bolt down," Zhang Yi cautioned.

With trembling hands, Fatty Xu crouched and carefully placed the bolt on the icy ground.

"Step back!"

Zhang Yi gestured, and Fatty Xu obediently retreated. Zhang Yi then used his spatial ability to isolate and store the crossbow bolt in his pocket dimension.

Inside the spatial storage, Zhang Yi separated the bolt into its own secure compartment. Even if it contained a bomb, it could safely detonate there without harm.

Examining the bolt within his spatial space, Zhang Yi found no explosives but did discover a handwritten note.

"A declaration of war? Or a negotiation?" Zhang Yi wondered aloud, remaining cautious.

He glanced at Fatty Xu. "Toss those gloves and get a new pair. Just in case."

Fatty Xu understood immediately, hurriedly removing his gloves and flinging them away like they were venomous.

Back inside the shelter, Zhang Yi called Zhou Ke'er to the medical room and handed her the crossbow bolt and the attached note.

"Check if there's any poison on these," he instructed gravely.

Zhou Ke'er looked at him with a hint of skepticism. "If they came to deliver a message, they wouldn't poison it, would they?"

"Better safe than sorry. The moment you relax is the moment the enemy strikes," Zhang Yi replied evenly.

Uncle You nodded in agreement. "On the battlefield, a single careless mistake can cost your life. We've learned that the hard way."

Though Zhou Ke'er understood their reasoning, she couldn't help but think they were being overly cautious. Nonetheless, she donned gloves and professionally inspected the bolt and cloth. ◉?

When she applied a test reagent, the cloth and bolt changed color almost immediately.

Her face darkened. "There's poison on this!"

Fatty Xu turned ghostly pale, his knees nearly giving out as he recalled how carelessly he'd handled the bolt. If not for the gloves, he might already be dead.

Zhang Yi, however, remained composed.

“Never underestimate the enemy. They’re always looking for ways to kill us,” he explained. “I guessed as much because, if I were in their place, I’d do the same. Every enemy eliminated is one less to worry about.”

Zhou Ke’er placed the poisoned items under a glass cover. “There’s writing on the cloth. Do you want to take a look?”

Zhang Yi approached cautiously and examined the cloth. To his surprise, it wasn’t a war declaration but a string of coded characters.

“What’s this?” he muttered, puzzled.

Unfamiliar with the code, Zhang Yi summoned Yang Xinxin, the group’s tech expert. He also called Liang Yue, deciding there was no point in hiding the development from her. Her students’ fate was already sealed, and feigning secrecy would only arouse suspicion.

Hearing that something from Yangsheng Base had been delivered, Liang Yue rushed over with Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran.

The moment Yang Xinxin saw the string of characters, her eyes lit up. “It’s an address! If I’m correct, it can be used to contact Yangsheng Base.”

Zhang Yi remained cautious. “Is it safe?”

Yang Xinxin smiled confidently. “Brother, do you think I’d let anything dangerous happen while I’m here?”

Relieved, Zhang Yi nodded approvingly. “That’s my Xinxin—always the best!”

Yang Xinxin blushed at the compliment, her smile widening.

Meanwhile, Liang Yue took a deep breath, her nerves evident as she asked, "So, it's confirmed? Yangsheng Base is behind my students' abduction?"

"Most likely," Zhang Yi replied. "There are no such things as coincidences in this world."

Liang Yue clenched her fists. "Then let's contact them! I want to know what they want."

Zhang Yi didn't respond immediately. Folding his arms, he lowered his head in thought.

The fact that Yangsheng Base had initiated contact suggested two possibilities:

They intended to negotiate, leveraging their hostages to extract maximum benefit while holding Zhang Yi accountable for Gao Yuan's death.

They wanted to gauge Zhang Yi's strength and determine how much of a threat he posed before taking action.

Yangsheng Base likely knew Zhang Yi had killed Gao Yuan, but their hesitation to attack suggested uncertainty about his capabilities.

After careful consideration, Zhang Yi concluded that communication was the best option. If they wanted to test him, he could also use the opportunity to assess their stance.

And for Liang Yue's sake, he could put on a convincing show of effort to rescue her students.

Raising his head, Zhang Yi declared, "Alright, let's talk to them."

Liang Yue's face lit up with hope.

However, Zhang Yi's expression turned stern as he warned, "Liang Yue, I need you to understand something. I know you're desperate to save your students, but this negotiation is no joke—it's incredibly dangerous."

“If we show any weakness, they won’t hesitate to attack us. So, you can observe, but don’t let your emotions show. If they sense how much you care about those students, they’ll exploit it to make outrageous demands. Do you understand?”

Liang Yue hesitated for a moment before nodding firmly. “I understand. I promise to control myself.”

“Good.” Zhang Yi turned to Yang Xinxin. “Xinxin, set up the connection.”

The negotiation was set to take place in the living room. Zhang Yi sat at the head of the table, with the others seated nearby, waiting anxiously for the call to connect.

Using her laptop, Yang Xinxin sent the communication request through the encoded address and placed the laptop on the coffee table, its camera facing Zhang Yi.

After several tense minutes, the connection was finally accepted.

“Hello,” a deep male voice greeted from the other end.

Zhang Yi smirked. “Hello, I’m Zhang Yi.”

A pause followed. “One moment.”

The line stayed active. Moments later, a cold, clear female voice replaced the man’s.

“So, you’re Zhang Yi? Leader of the groups in Xu Family Town and Cloud Manor?”

Zhang Yi responded coolly, “And who are you?”

The voice chuckled. “I am Xiao Honglian, leader of Yangsheng Base.”

“The people I sent to the Hongyuan Materials Plant—did you kill them?”

Zhang Yi didn’t deny it. The discovery of the satellite phone made any denial pointless. Moreover, territorial disputes ensured Yangsheng Base would attack sooner or later, regardless of his answer.

Instead, he countered, “And the ones who kidnapped those students in Xu Family Town—was that you?”

“So, you admit it?” Xiao Honglian replied icily.

“Then you admit it as well,” Zhang Yi retorted.

Neither directly answered the other’s question, but their words confirmed the truth.

On the other end, Xiao Honglian’s eyes glinted with murderous intent. “You’ve got guts, Zhang Yi. No one in Tianhai City dares to provoke Yangsheng Base.”

“You’re courting death!”

Zhang Yi smirked disdainfully. “Funny, the last person who said that to me is now ashes.”

“Oh, you might’ve heard of him—Chen Xinian.”

Xiao Honglian’s expression darkened. As she suspected, Zhang Yi had been involved in West Hill Base’s downfall.

“Do you think I’m a fool? West Hill Base was destroyed by a missile. Claiming it was your doing is laughably arrogant.”

“Oh?” Zhang Yi chuckled. “And why do you think that missile hit West Hill Base in the first place?”

Xiao Honglian's smug demeanor faltered. Zhang Yi's words struck a nerve—none of Tianhai City's factions had access to higher-level organizations or understood the missile's origins. Could Zhang Yi have had a hand in it?

"Just a warehouse manager, huh?" Xiao Honglian sneered.

Zhang Yi's tone turned icy. "Save your breath. Do you think I'd tell you anything?"

"I suggest you recognize reality and stay far away from me. If I can kill your men once, I can do it again."

"And those students you took—return them immediately. If you don't, you'll regret it."

Chapter 382: Don't You Dare Hurt My Beloved Students!

Zhang Yi's declaration infuriated Xiao Honglian.

As the leader of one of Tianhai City's largest factions, she had not risen to her position by being timid or weak. Zhang Yi's threats made her slam her hand on the table.

"Arrogant!"

"Wipe us out? Do you even have that kind of strength?"

"I refuse to believe you have the power to command missiles. If you did, Tianhai City would already be yours!"

"Do you want me to kill those students and send their corpses back to you?"

Hearing this, Liang Yue's heart shot to her throat. Her eyes frantically darted toward Zhang Yi, signaling her distress.

Zhang Yi adopted a grave expression, his voice stern. "Don't do anything so foolish!"

"Those poor guys mean nothing to us strategically. Killing them won't weaken us."

Xiao Honglian sneered. "Your tone suggests otherwise. You seem awfully nervous about their safety. It sounds like I've landed myself a good bargaining chip."

Zhang Yi frowned deeply, looking troubled—a performance that filled Liang Yue with guilt.

She knew Zhang Yi was only conflicted because he wanted to help her. He didn't have to care about the fate of her students at all.

"Thank you, Zhang Yi. You're such a good person," she thought to herself.

"They're important to my friend," Zhang Yi said. "But they're useless to you. Let's talk—what will it take for you to release them?"

Xiao Honglian's smirk grew wider. She was now certain she had Zhang Yi's weakness in her grasp.

"Oh, I haven't decided yet. Let me think."

She propped her long legs on her mahogany desk, deliberating on her demands.

Demanding Zhang Yi's life was out of the question—that would mean full-scale war, and she wasn't ready for that. Testing Zhang Yi's limits, however, was a tantalizing option.

After a moment, she offered her terms.

“Zhang Yi, you killed my cousin and his soldiers. Now your people are in my hands. If you want them back, trade me half the supplies you looted from the South China Warehouse.”

“That’s all I’m asking—just half. In return, I’ll release the students, and we’ll consider the matter of my cousin’s death settled. From then on, we’ll stay out of each other’s way. Deal?”

Her eyes gleamed with amusement.

If Zhang Yi accepted, it would reveal his desperation and weakness, signaling that his forces were depleted after the battle with West Hill Base. It would also show he lacked the confidence to stand against Yangsheng Base.

Unsurprisingly, Zhang Yi immediately refused.

“Not a chance. Don’t even think about it.”

Xiao Honglian’s voice turned icy. “If you won’t agree, then it’s war! Do you think this is some kind of game?”

Zhang Yi chuckled. “And do you think Yangsheng Base is stronger than West Hill Base?”

“Perhaps not,” Xiao Honglian retorted. “But you must be in tatters after your fight with them. And let’s not forget—you’ve also provoked Chaoyu Base. I could ally with them to attack you.”

“Tell me, do you think you stand a chance against two major factions combined?”

Her tone was arrogant, dripping with disdain. “Half of your supplies is a very fair price. If you wait until things spiral out of control, it’ll be too late for regrets.”

Zhang Yi’s response was calm but cutting.

“So that’s what you believe? Let me tell you—you know nothing about our strength.”

“If you’re eager to die, then come. I’ll crush your forces and shatter your arrogance.”

He softened his tone. “But there’s no need to harm the students. They’re of no value to you. Just return them to me.”

Xiao Honglian’s suspicion only deepened. If the students were truly insignificant, why did Zhang Yi keep bringing them up?

“Just give them back? That would make me look foolish,” she sneered. “Unless you meet my terms, this discussion is over.”

Zhang Yi scowled. “Xiao Honglian! Don’t go too far. Those students are innocent. If you have a problem, take it out on me!”

Kill them already! Zhang Yi silently pleaded. Do you know how exhausting this act is? Stop giving me face and just do it!

“Oh, so they’re important to you? The more you plead, the less inclined I am to release them,” Xiao Honglian taunted.

“In fact, I’ll make sure they suffer—neither able to live nor die. And it’ll all be because of you, Zhang Yi!”

Certain she had Zhang Yi’s weakness, Xiao Honglian was reveling in her perceived dominance.

“Sink into your despair and regret!”

Zhang Yi’s voice hardened. “Don’t you dare! Those students are precious to someone I care about. If you torture them, I swear you’ll pay a heavy price!”

Xiao Honglian's gaze turned frosty. "Are you threatening me? Fine. Wait and see what I'll do!"

With that, she ended the call.

Based on her final words, Zhang Yi was confident that Xiao Honglian intended to torment the students.

Feigning rage, he slammed his hand on the table.

"This is outrageous! If she has a problem, she should come after me—not those innocent students!"

Standing abruptly, he declared, "We can't stay on the defensive any longer. We're going to Yangsheng Base to rescue them!"

Turning to Fatty Xu and Uncle You, he added, "This trip won't be like the battle at West Hill Base. We don't have the same advantages of timing, geography, or unity."

"I don't want you involved. This isn't your fight, and I don't want you caught in the crossfire."

His sudden declaration of a one-man rescue mission startled the group. Those who knew Zhang Yi well suspected something was off, but they couldn't let him rush into danger.

The others hurried to stop him.

"Zhang Yi, don't be reckless! Charging in won't save anyone—it'll only cost your life!"

"That's Yangsheng Base! They're nearly as strong as West Hill Base, and they're prepared. You'd be walking into a deathtrap!"

Fatty Xu leaned in and whispered, "Boss, this act is a bit much now."

Zhang Yi pretended to struggle against them for a moment before sighing dramatically.

“They’ve gone too far! Kidnapping Liang Yue’s students right under our noses—it’s an insult!”

Slamming his fist on the couch, he growled, “I promised Liang Yue I’d protect those students!”

Liang Yue, deeply moved by his resolve, approached him and gently placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Zhang Yi, don’t be impulsive. This isn’t your fault—it’s mine. I failed to protect them.”

Chapter 383: Persuading Liang Yue

Liang Yue’s eyes reflected a deep sense of gratitude. She had seen Zhang Yi try his best, but the enemy they faced was far too formidable. This wasn’t a problem that could be solved by charging in with a few Superhumans.

Confronting Yangsheng Base directly would mean plunging into a disadvantage. While their defensive position at Cloud Manor was nearly impenetrable, an offensive operation would leave them vulnerable. Zhang Yi had poured nearly all their resources into fortifying the manor.

“You’ve already done everything you could. Thank you for being willing to help,” Liang Yue said with a soft smile. “But this isn’t your battle, and I don’t want to drag everyone down because of me.”

Her smile carried an odd undertone, a quiet determination that immediately put Zhang Yi on edge.

“Liang Yue,” he said cautiously, “what are you planning to do?”

“Just finding peace for my soul,” she replied with a serene expression.

Before anyone could respond, she turned and walked toward her room.

The living room fell into silence. Everyone could sense that something was off about Liang Yue's mood.

After she left, Zhou Ke'er broke the stillness, her worry evident. "She's not thinking about going after her students alone, is she?"

Zhang Yi frowned, muttering to himself, "Was my performance not convincing enough?"

Fatty Xu sidled up to Zhang Yi with a snicker. "Boss, your acting was top-notch—just a little too fake."

A dark line seemed to slide down Zhang Yi's forehead.

"Fake? I once won third prize in the Spring Blossom Kindergarten Drama Contest!"

Fatty Xu sighed exaggeratedly. "Yeah, but hearing such righteous words from you... who would buy it?"

Zhang Yi glanced around at the others, who all nodded silently in agreement.

Throwing up his hands, he sighed. "Fine. At least I tried to show her that I supported her."

Uncle You chimed in, his tone pragmatic. "It's not your fault. None of us, except Liang Yue, have any connection to those students."

"And let's face it—they're a lazy bunch. Keeping them around would only be a burden."

Even Uncle You, one of the kindest members of the group, had little sympathy for the students. Much of this sentiment stemmed from their interactions with Lu Keran and Yang XinXin, who had endured far more hardship.

Zhang Yi leaned back on the couch, resting his chin on his hands. "In any case, everyone should be prepared. A conflict with Yangsheng Base is likely."

"Our defenses are solid, and there's no need for unnecessary worry. Xiao Honglian's arrogance earlier showed she has no clear understanding of our strength."

The group nodded, their tension easing slightly. After successfully repelling West Hill Base and fortifying their defenses, they felt more confident in their ability to hold their ground.

But Lu Keran, glancing in the direction Liang Yue had gone, voiced her concern. "What about Ms. Liang? What if she does something reckless?"

Zhang Yi looked at her and Yang Xinxin. "You two should go talk to her. Try to dissuade her from doing anything rash."

Lu Keran sighed. "We'll try, but Ms. Liang can be incredibly stubborn. Once she sets her mind on something, even nine oxen couldn't pull her back."

"Just do your best," Zhang Yi replied.

With a resigned nod, Lu Keran pushed Yang Xinxin in her wheelchair toward Liang Yue's room.

Liang Yue returned to her room and picked up a Tang Sword from the weapon rack. Since Zhang Yi had confiscated her Loong Roar Sword, she had stopped asking for its return. This Tang Sword, acquired at West Hill Base, was a fine replacement.

Standing by the window, she unsheathed the blade and began to methodically wipe it with a white cloth.

Knock, knock.

The sound of knocking interrupted her thoughts.

The door was ajar, and when she turned, she saw Lu Keran and Yang Xinxin at the threshold, their faces filled with concern.

“Ms. Liang, are you alright?” Yang Xinxin asked.

“Yes, you seem... off. We’re really worried,” Lu Keran added.

Liang Yue sighed deeply. “I’m fine. I’ve just realized what I need to do.”

Yang Xinxin’s expression darkened. “You’re planning to rescue them on your own, aren’t you?”

Liang Yue’s calm demeanor only heightened Yang Xinxin’s anxiety.

“Ms. Liang, Yangsheng Base is massive! You can’t possibly save them alone—you’ll only get yourself killed!” Lu Keran exclaimed.

Liang Yue smiled bitterly, gazing at the ceiling. “I know. But this is something only I can do.”

“But Zhang Yi promised to help! Why not wait for his plan?” Lu Keran pleaded.

Hearing this, Liang Yue chuckled softly and walked over to the two girls, gently touching their faces.

“Don’t think your teacher is a fool,” she said kindly. “I’m grateful for everything Zhang Yi has done, but I know him. A man as cautious as him would never truly risk everything for me.”

Lu Keran’s expression grew awkward. Clearly, Liang Yue had seen through Zhang Yi’s act.

Still, Liang Yue continued, her tone light. “Even so, I’m touched that he pretended to care. At least it shows I matter to him, even just a little.”

Yang Xinxin's eyes glimmered with a strange light. "But even if that's true, you're still going to throw your life away?"

Liang Yue closed her eyes, exhaling slowly. "You might think I'm foolish, but I can't just stand by and let them die. If I do nothing, I'll spend the rest of my life drowning in guilt. That kind of torment is worse than death."

"So, I'd rather seek redemption, even if it costs me my life, than live as a coward."

Her heartfelt words left Lu Keran speechless. She understood Liang Yue's character all too well.

Liang Yue's gaze softened as she gently stroked their faces. "I'm just glad you two are safe. At least my efforts haven't been in vain."

"Stay with Zhang Yi. He might seem cold, but he genuinely cares for you. With him, you'll survive this harsh world."

Liang Yue turned to pick up the Tang Sword, her expression resolute.

Just as she prepared to leave, Yang Xinxin suddenly lowered her head, her voice trembling.

"No... it's not like that."

Liang Yue froze mid-step.

"Xinxin, what do you mean?" she asked, puzzled.

Yang Xinxin raised her tear-streaked face, looking pitifully at Liang Yue.

"If you leave, Ms. Liang, Keran and I might not survive either."

“What?” Liang Yue’s protective instincts kicked in. “What’s going on? Tell me!”

Tears streaming, Yang Xinxin whimpered, “Zhang Yi gave us a task: to make sure you stay. He values you deeply, Ms. Liang. If we fail, even if he doesn’t punish us, we’ll lose our place here.”

“If you’re leaving, take us with you. At least we can die together.”

Yang Xinxin’s pitiful words and tears made Liang Yue’s heart ache.

“You mean... Zhang Yi...?” Liang Yue stammered, overwhelmed.

Her face turned a deep shade of red at the revelation of Zhang Yi’s feelings.

She tried to suppress her emotions in front of her students, but her thoughts were in disarray.

Although she didn’t want to admit it outright, Liang Yue couldn’t deny the joy blooming in her chest.

For a woman who had kept her heart locked away for 27 years, this realization was like the first stirrings of spring after a long winter.

Her once-quiet heart had started to tremble, and now it couldn’t stop.

Chapter 384: Preparing for Battle

Liang Yue’s emotions were a whirlwind of mixed feelings.

On one hand, she was secretly delighted upon realizing Zhang Yi harbored special feelings for her.

On the other hand, Yang Xinxin's concerns left her troubled.

She could sacrifice her own life but couldn't abandon her students.

Especially not those two excellent students she cherished so deeply.

"... I can't selfishly live for myself!" Liang Yue sighed deeply, her resolve wavering.

She had just declared she would fight for her convictions, and now, taking back those words felt impossible.

Yang Xinxin understood Liang Yue well and quickly chimed in, "You're willing to die for them, so why can't you live for Ke Ran and me instead?"

"Teacher Liang, we need you!"

Yang Xinxin clutched Liang Yue's hand tightly, her eyes pleading.

Lu Keran added hurriedly, "Teacher Liang, we can't do without you! Think about it—Xinxin and I are just ordinary people without superhuman energy. If we ever face danger, we'll need your protection."

Liang Yue's resolve faltered even more.

"But... I can't just stand by and watch others die!"

Yang Xinxin reasoned, "But they're still alive right now, aren't they? Their survival depends entirely on you."

"That's why you can't die! Besides, we still have room to negotiate with the Yangsheng Base. Please, just wait a little longer!"

After her two students' persistent persuasion, Liang Yue temporarily abandoned the idea of going to fight the Yangsheng Base alone.

She sighed softly. "Alright, I suppose that's all I can do for now."

Yang Xinxin nodded obediently, finally breaking into a smile through her tears.

After calming Liang Yue down, Lu Keran escorted Yang Xinxin out of the room.

Once outside, Yang Xinxin's expression shifted instantly, her face becoming unnervingly calm and composed.

"Xinxin, does Big Brother Zhang really have feelings for Teacher Liang?" Lu Keran whispered curiously into Yang Xinxin's ear.

"Of course not. I lied to her."

A playful smirk curled at the corners of Yang Xinxin's lips.

"Someone like Teacher Liang, a single woman, is most easily flustered by matters of the heart. As long as she believes someone has feelings for her, her mind will be thrown into chaos."

"If I didn't do this, how else could I convince her to stay?"

Lu Keran's eyes widened. "Wow, so you were playing mind games with Teacher Liang!"

Unfazed, Yang Xinxin responded, "It's all for her own good. That foolish woman—rushing headlong to her death over a moment of impulse."

After a brief pause, Yang Xinxin's tone grew more serious.

"Besides, keeping her in the Shelter is absolutely a good thing for us. Big Brother Zhang has no use for freeloaders."

Lu Keran shuddered at the thought.

In her mind, Zhang Yi had always been the kind and gentle big brother figure. But suddenly, she recalled their first meeting.

It had been in the icy ruins of Tianqing Academy's underground chamber. At that time, Zhang Yi's gaze had held not a trace of warmth.

"I need to make myself more useful!" Lu Keran resolved silently.

"And anyway, I think Big Brother Zhang does have some feelings for me," she added, a small smile playing on her lips.

After all, what young girl doesn't dream of love?

It's in their nature to see hope and romance, especially when it involves someone they admire.

Soon, Zhang Yi received the news that Liang Yue had been persuaded to stay.

Relief washed over him.

Losing Liang Yue was not an option.

A war between the Shelter and the Yangsheng Base—possibly even the Chaoyu Base—was on the horizon. Liang Yue, with her formidable superhuman powers, would be a critical ally.

“I understand. Thank you for your efforts!” Zhang Yi smiled at the two girls.

He looked out the window. Snowflakes danced in the air, blanketing the courtyard in white. Outside Cloud Manor, the towering Ice Fortress stood as an unyielding barrier, like an impenetrable wall of a fortress.

“The medicine should be taking effect about now...”

Yangsheng Base

After ending her call with Zhang Yi, Xiao Honglian’s smile grew wider.

The forceful front Zhang Yi tried to project had revealed a subtle undercurrent of helplessness.

Especially when the topic of Liang Yue’s students came up—his tone softened immediately.

What did this mean?

First, it confirmed that Zhang Yi’s Shelter had suffered severe losses after the battle with the West Hill Base, leaving him reluctant to provoke conflicts with Yangsheng or Chaoyu Bases.

Second, it indicated those students were extremely important to Zhang Yi.

This gave Xiao Honglian leverage—an opportunity to exploit Zhang Yi to her advantage.

Ideally, she’d get rid of that obstacle entirely, seizing most of the former West Hill Base’s territory for Yangsheng Base.

Doing so would make Yangsheng the most powerful faction in Tianhai City!

“According to what those students said, Zhang Yi’s group includes several superhumans. Recruiting them under my command would greatly strengthen Yangsheng Base’s power!”

The more Xiao Honglian thought about it, the more excited she became.

Zhuge Qingtian, standing nearby, congratulated her. “Judging from the current situation, it’s only a matter of time before they surrender. We should act quickly to secure Zhang Yi’s forces. If we wait too long, other factions might intervene.”

Xiao Honglian waved him off. “No need to rush!”

Her tone was cautious.

“We’ll thoroughly investigate before deciding when to act. Keep in mind, our enemies are not limited to Zhang Yi. If we divert forces to attack his Shelter, the other three factions might seize the opportunity to strike at our main base.”

“They’ve all got their eyes on our oil refinery!”

Zhuge Qingtian argued, “But opportunities slip away quickly. If we hesitate, someone else might snatch this prize away.”

Xiao Honglian shot him a sharp look. “I’d rather do nothing than make a mistake. Yangsheng Base is under constant scrutiny, and any error could be fatal!”

“Don’t focus on small gains and lose sight of the bigger picture.”

Zhuge Qingtian bowed his head. “Understood, Leader. What are your orders?”

Xiao Honglian crossed her arms, exuding confidence.

“Since Zhang Yi values those students so much, let’s stir the pot a bit. Send someone to teach them a lesson and record it on video to send to Zhang Yi.”

“Also, prioritize gathering detailed information on Zhang Yi’s defenses.”

“We must understand their exact strength before making any move. Never underestimate them—we can’t afford to lose.”

Zhuge Qingtian nodded. “Yes, Leader!”

He bowed deeply before retreating three steps and heading toward the dungeon to carry out her orders.

Chapter 385: Poison Outbreak

After Zhuge Qingtian entered the dungeon, he located the students with explosive collars strapped to their necks, their faces filled with despair.

A cruel smile crept onto his lips as he gestured to a guard nearby for a whip.

“It’s time to give our guests a proper welcome!”

Under the hopeless gazes of Wu Chengyu and the others, the guards dragged them out.

Zhuge Qingtian personally carried out the tortures.

Inflicting punishment was a skillful task. A single misstep could strike a vital area, resulting in death.

Zhuge Qingtian, however, was an expert in the art of torture. He knew exactly how to inflict excruciating pain without causing fatal harm.

This time, the primary objective was to provoke Zhang Yi, break his spirit, and make future negotiations easier. Thus, the torment took on a theatrical flair, requiring a variety of methods.

For instance, students were thrown into iron barrels filled with writhing earthworms or shoved into damp, cockroach-infested holes.

Below the dungeon, agonized screams echoed continuously—not just physical torment but mental anguish as well.

Zhuge Qingtian gleefully held a recording device, capturing the most "exciting" moments on film.

However, as he filmed, he noticed something was amiss.

One of the students suddenly collapsed to the ground, their body convulsing violently as white foam poured from their mouth.

"Hm? What's going on?"

These students were critical pieces in their plans; they couldn't just die like this.

Zhuge Qingtian prided himself on his precise methods; there was no way his tortures could have resulted in death.

He stopped what he was doing and went over to examine the student.

After the student expelled the foam, they suddenly retched violently, spewing out a massive amount of vomit. A putrid stench filled the air around them.

"What is this...?"

Zhuge Qingtian was too close and took the brunt of the stench. His head spun from the smell, forcing him to retreat a few steps.

The student lay twitching on the ground, their condition worsening. A large wet patch formed around them as bodily fluids seeped out.

“Poison!”

Zhuge Qingtian instantly understood. This was a classic case of poisoning, and the toxin had already taken effect.

Given the current state of medical resources, saving them was impossible.

As the student continued convulsing, another bound student started retching from nearby.

She struggled to hold back, her face contorted in pain, unwilling to give in. But after inhaling the nauseating stench, she couldn’t stop herself from vomiting a thick pile of sludge.

“How could they be poisoned?”

Zhuge Qingtian was baffled.

This wasn’t food poisoning; food poisoning wouldn’t cause such violent symptoms. Clearly, someone had drugged them.

As he pondered, several more students displayed similar symptoms.

A cold sweat formed on Zhuge Qingtian’s forehead.

If all these people died in his custody, there would be no explaining this to Xiao Honglian.

He hurriedly grabbed a communicator and reported the situation to Xiao Honglian.

“What? Poisoned?”

Xiao Honglian’s brows knitted slightly. These students were still useful to her and couldn’t just die like that.

“Can they be saved?”

“They seem beyond saving. The poison is severe, and two have already died.”

“Flush their stomachs! Save as many as you can!” Xiao Honglian commanded.

Zhuge Qingtian had no choice but to order the preparation of stomach-flushing materials.

“Fetch some buckets of sewage water from the latrines!”

Soon, several large buckets of foul-smelling sewage water were brought to the dungeon.

The students who had yet to show symptoms turned pale as sheets.

“No! I won’t do it!”

“I’m not poisoned! I won’t drink that stuff!”

They’d rather die than drink the filth.

But this wasn’t up to them.

The guards restrained them tightly against the walls, forcing funnels into their mouths. Buckets of sewage were poured in without mercy.

Wu Chengyu and the others rolled their eyes back in despair, their expressions showing they'd lost all will to live. At that moment, their spirits were utterly broken.

After several buckets of sewage were forced down, the surviving students looked no better than the dead.

Zhuge Qingtian dared not continue the tortures, fearing he might accidentally kill them all.

He summoned a base doctor to examine the students.

When the doctor arrived, he pinched his nose and exclaimed, "What the h***!"

"So foul!"

Despite his years of experience, he had never encountered such a scene.

Proper stomach-flushing procedures used specialized solutions—who in their right mind would use sewage that had been fermenting for who knows how long?

"Ahem, limited resources and time constraints forced our hand," Zhuge Qingtian coughed awkwardly.
"Dr. Li, bear with it and take a look."

Dr. Li glanced at Zhuge Qingtian, who stood at a safe distance, his expression full of disbelief.

"Bear with it? You're the one standing so far away!"

However, as Zhuge Qingtian was the base's second-in-command, Dr. Li had to comply.

He donned several layers of masks before examining the students.

When he opened Wu Chengyu's eyelid, he shook his head helplessly.

"The poison runs too deep. Flushing won't help."

Out of professional duty, he inspected each student.

He then turned to Zhuge Qingtian and concluded, "The toxins have accumulated in their bodies for a long time. Someone deliberately administered chronic poison."

"With proper medical conditions, their lives might have been saved. But now, there's nothing I can do."

Zhuge Qingtian's heart sank.

They had painstakingly captured these people, only to discover they were all doomed.

What was the point of their efforts?

Meanwhile, a nagging question grew in his mind.

Why had Gao Yuan's satellite phone been found in their quarters?

Clearly, they lacked the strength to kill Gao Yuan's team.

Could it be that someone else had wanted these students dead but couldn't act directly, using them as pawns instead?

Zhuge Qingtian's pupils contracted sharply.

"D*** it, we've been set up!"

"We've become someone else's blade."

He rushed to Xiao Honglian to relay his suspicions.

"These people were poisoned over time and deliberately placed in Xu Family Town. Gao Yuan's satellite phone was used as bait to lure us there."

"While I don't know their endgame, it's clear this was all part of someone's plan."

Xiao Honglian's gaze turned sharp.

"But why? Using a group of poisoned rejects to trap us? That doesn't harm us much."

"Unless Zhang Yi's own people wanted these students dead but couldn't do it themselves?"

Adjusting his glasses, Zhuge Qingtian replied, "In any case, these people won't survive past tomorrow. We thought we could use them to threaten Zhang Yi and extract some value. That idea is now unrealistic."

What neither Xiao Honglian nor Zhuge Qingtian realized was that the plan was never aimed at them. They were merely tools in someone else's scheme.

Still, adhering to a "waste not" principle, Xiao Honglian decided, "While they're still alive, record a video and send it to Zhang Yi!"

“If he didn’t poison them, we’ll use this chance to squeeze some benefits out of him.”

Chapter 386: No Hostages, No Deal

At the shelter, after the combined efforts of Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran, Liang Yue’s emotional state gradually calmed.

She resisted the impulse to grab her Tang Sword and confront the Yangsheng Base in a desperate bid to save her students. Instead, she chose to discuss with Zhang Yi how they could negotiate their release.

Zhang Yi generously assured her that he was willing to exchange resources for the students' safe return.

“Your students are of no use to Yangsheng Base. I’m sure they’ll accept my offer,” Zhang Yi said to Liang Yue.

Liang Yue sat on the sofa, averting her gaze the moment Zhang Yi’s eyes met hers, as if afraid to hold his stare.

Ever since Yang Xinxin had spoken to her earlier, a strange emotion had been stirring within Liang Yue. Even when Zhang Yi said something simple to her, her mind would wander to all sorts of thoughts.

“That would be for the best! I’m just worried they might lose their minds and torture my students,” Liang Yue sighed softly, her tone still laden with worry.

Zhang Yi quietly pursed his lips, knowing full well that those students wouldn’t survive to see Liang Yue again.

Still, he wondered how Liang Yue would react when the news of their deaths inevitably reached her.

Zhang Yi couldn’t understand Liang Yue’s inner thoughts, but judging by his own perspective, he believed it would be a kind of relief for her. At the very least, she could let go of the burden without any moral weight holding her back.

After finishing his conversation with Liang Yue, Zhang Yi patiently waited for Yangsheng Base to contact him.

Sure enough, not long after, he received a video call request from Yangsheng Base.

When Yang Xinxin called Zhang Yi to the control room, he closed the door behind them, ensuring that only the two of them participated in the conversation.

Upon answering, Zhang Yi saw the face of his adversary for the first time.

It wasn't Xiao Honglian, the leader of Yangsheng Base, but a tall, lanky man with a cold, sharp gaze and long hair.

"Zhang Yi, a day has passed. Have you thought things through?"

"This time, we're sending you a gift to help you make your decision," Zhuge Qingtian sneered as he spoke, inserting a video into the call.

The footage depicted Zhuge Qingtian torturing Wu Chengyu and the other students.

Zhang Yi sat calmly on the sofa, watching the video with a placid expression. Not a flicker of emotion crossed his face.

When the video ended, he asked flatly, "Are they still alive?"

Zhang Yi's cold demeanor caught Zhuge Qingtian off guard.

During their previous interaction, Zhang Yi had shown deep concern for the students' lives. Today, however, his tone and expression radiated pure indifference.

"They're alive for now," Zhuge Qingtian said darkly, "but I can't guarantee how much longer they'll last!"

“Zhang Yi, our leader has changed their mind. Keeping these useless people alive wastes resources, so we’re giving them back to you. But you’ll have to trade supplies for them—one ton of food per person!”

Zhang Yi’s expression remained amused despite the outrageous demand.

“That’s not impossible,” he replied. “But I need to confirm they’re alive first. It wouldn’t make sense to hand over supplies only to get back a bunch of corpses, would it?”

The amount of toxin he’d placed in their food, according to Zhou Ke’er, would take a week to take full effect. However, to be sure, Zhang Yi wanted to confirm their deaths personally before proceeding.

Zhuge Qingtian’s gaze darkened.

Most of the students were already dead, and the few who still clung to life were on the verge of death. If Zhang Yi saw them, he’d undoubtedly refuse the deal.

“You’ve already seen them alive in the video,” Zhuge Qingtian insisted.

“That was just a recording. I need to see them in real-time. Bring me to them right now,” Zhang Yi demanded, his tone resolute.

“If you let me confirm their condition, I’ll immediately arrange to provide your supplies.”

Zhuge Qingtian stared at Zhang Yi on the screen and said coldly, “Yangsheng Base doesn’t play petty games. These people’s lives mean nothing to us. Why would we kill them? Your concerns are unnecessary.”

Zhang Yi spread his hands. “Then what’s the harm in letting me see them? Just one look, that’s all I need.”

But Zhuge Qingtian couldn’t allow that. One look would expose everything.

“Mr. Zhang, I don’t see any sincerity from you...” Zhuge Qingtian tried to continue, but Zhang Yi had already reached out and ended the call.

Leaning back in his chair, Zhang Yi turned to Yang Xinxin. “They’re dead.”

Zhuge Qingtian’s behavior had confirmed it.

Curious, Yang Xinxin asked, “Brother, how did you manage that?”

Zhang Yi replied casually, “I added a little ‘tech and spice’ to their food.”

Yang Xinxin sighed in relief, a bright smile spreading across her face. “That’s wonderful! Now, we don’t have to be burdened by them anymore.”

Zhang Yi patted her head. “Spend the next couple of days working on Liang Yue’s mindset. Don’t let that foolish woman do something reckless.”

“Women need reassurance,” Zhang Yi added lightly.

Yang Xinxin tilted her head playfully, looking at him with a smirk. “Actually, Brother, if you step in personally, it might work even better.”

Raising an eyebrow, Zhang Yi teased, “You’re suggesting I enlighten her myself?”

Yang Xinxin giggled. “It’s always effective! You need to use the blade of emotion when it comes to persuasion.”

Zhang Yi responded with humor, “But I’m worried the next generation might turn out dumb.”

"Oh, and remember, keep this conversation confidential. Don't tell anyone."

Yang Xinxin nodded. "Don't worry, I know what to do."

In the following days, the shelter remained calm and peaceful as always.

The women passed the time playing mahjong and chatting, deliberately including Liang Yue in their conversations to soothe her troubled mind.

The men, on the other hand, maintained an air of casual preparedness, waiting for war to break out.

As defenders, they had already made ample preparations and had little room for improvement. If a battle did erupt, they would adapt their strategies based on their opponent's moves.

For now, a conservative approach was the best tactic in the absence of additional intelligence.

Meanwhile, at Yangsheng Base, the students' toxins had fully taken effect, each one succumbing to a painful death.

Zhuge Qingtian reluctantly reported the situation to Xiao Honglian.

"They're all dead now. We've lost our leverage against Zhang Yi."

Xiao Honglian frowned. Though she had anticipated this outcome, she couldn't hide her frustration.

Raising her head, her strikingly beautiful yet commanding eyes bore into Zhuge Qingtian.

"In that case, there's no other choice but war!"

Two days later, Zhang Yi received another message from Yangsheng Base. This time, it wasn't a call request but a video.

He and Yang Xinxin were the first to view it.

As the video played, a grim and oppressive scene unfolded.

The backdrop was a large factory's iron framework amidst swirling snow and wind. Hanging from the structure were a dozen cold, severed heads suspended by ropes.

Standing at the execution platform, Xiao Honglian stared directly into the camera with an icy gaze, her tone equally chilling:

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Zhang Yi, this is only the beginning. Soon, your head and those of your friends will hang here on the execution platform of Yangsheng Base!"

The video ended abruptly.

Though it lasted only a minute, the message was unmistakably clear—declaration of war.

Xiao Honglian had beheaded all the students as a ceremonial gesture, announcing the start of the conflict.

After watching the video, Zhang Yi remained silent for a moment before casually picking up his cup of hot coffee and taking a sip.

"They're finally dead. It's clean and done," he remarked nonchalantly.

Yang Xinxin, however, sighed softly. "So, it came to this in the end."

Zhang Yi glanced at her and asked with a smile, “Didn’t you hate those people the most? Now that they’re gone, shouldn’t you be happy?”

Yang Xinxin shook her head.

“It’s not about happiness or sadness. I really did hate them and wished they’d disappear from the world sooner.”

“But... seeing them all dead now, I can’t help feeling a little sorrowful.”

Lowering her head, her pale hands clenched tightly together in anxiety.

“I’m afraid that one day my own head might be hung up like that.”

A flicker of surprise crossed Zhang Yi’s face, but he quickly understood.

No matter how cunning or sharp Yang Xinxin was, she was still an 18-year-old girl. Witnessing the brutal deaths of peers she’d known for years would naturally evoke fear.

Zhang Yi leaned closer and wrapped her in his strong arms.

“Don’t worry. As long as I’m here, nothing will happen to you. I won’t let you die.”

“And because I won’t die, you’ll definitely live a good life too.”

Yang Xinxin was a crucial part of his logistics and support team. Zhang Yi had every intention of protecting her and ensuring her safety.

Feeling the warmth of his embrace, Yang Xinxin’s body began to regain some of its lost warmth.

Placing her hands on his back, her eyes gradually welled up with tears.

“It’s so good to have you, Brother!”

“I’ll make sure I never drag you down. I’ll be someone you can rely on! So, no matter what, please don’t abandon me, okay? If I ever become a burden, I’ll take care of myself.”

After comforting Yang Xinxin, Zhang Yi decided to make the video public. He wanted everyone—especially Liang Yue—to see it firsthand.

He knew that Liang Yue needed to confront the truth and let go of her obsession completely.

“Seeing this might break her,” Yang Xinxin warned. “You should be prepared for that.”

“I’ve already prepared both mentally and practically,” Zhang Yi assured her.

If Liang Yue truly lost control and tried to charge off to Yangsheng Base, Zhang Yi would restrain her immediately and sedate her so she could rest at home for a while.

“All acts of sacrifice come from impulse,” he explained.

“No matter how noble or grand the ideals, they can be changed.”

“In the end, she needs to understand one thing: living is everything. The purpose of life is simply to live—it doesn’t need any additional justification.”

Yang Xinxin nodded. “We’ll do our best to help persuade her.”

Zhang Yi pulled a small bag of medication from his pocket and handed it to Yang Xinxin.

“Put this in her coffee and make sure she drinks it.”

Yang Xinxin took the bag, her expression curious. “What is it?”

“A sedative,” Zhang Yi replied.

Following his instructions, Yang Xinxin prepared coffee for Liang Yue, who drank it without any suspicion.

Once Zhang Yi confirmed the medication had taken effect, he gathered everyone to watch the video.

Before starting, he reminded the group, “The contents of this video are graphic. I hope everyone is mentally prepared and avoids overreacting.”

Liang Yue felt a slight unease in her heart at Zhang Yi’s warning.

The video came from Yangsheng Base, so... could it involve her students?

Zhang Yi cast a deep look at Liang Yue before playing the video.

The screen immediately displayed the sight of a dozen severed heads hanging high in the snowstorm.

At first glance, Liang Yue felt as though something had exploded in her mind. Her brain went blank as her entire world spun out of control.

Her students... they were all dead?

In an instant, Liang Yue felt the world turn upside down. Her legs wobbled, and faint voices echoed in her ears.

“Liang Yue, are you okay?”

“What’s wrong?!”

Before she could process anything, her vision darkened, and she collapsed to the floor.

Lu Keran rushed to her side, panicked. “Liang Yue, are you all right?”

Zhang Yi walked over calmly and said, “She’s fine. I gave her a sedative. She just needs rest.”

Uncle You shook his head and sighed.

“Liang Yue is such a dedicated and responsible teacher. This must be a heavy blow for her. Let’s hope she can move past it and not get stuck in despair.”

“Time and care will heal the pain,” Zhang Yi remarked as he carried Liang Yue to her room and laid her on the bed.

Turning to Yang Xinxin and Lu Keran, he instructed, “Take good care of her for the next couple of days and help her process her emotions.”

He also addressed Zhou Ke’er, saying, “Administer tranquilizers if necessary. If she becomes uncontrollable, increase the dosage. I’d rather have her bedbound for a few days than let her act recklessly.”

Zhou Ke’er nodded. “Understood.”

With Liang Yue settled, everyone returned to the living room, and Zhang Yi began discussing their preparations for the impending battle.

“A conflict with Yangsheng Base is unavoidable. Chaoyu Base might join them, too.”

“Facing two major bases simultaneously will put considerable pressure on our defenses.”

“We’ll stick to the original plan: rely on the first line of defense and retreat to the shelter if it’s breached.”

“However, unlike Xishan Base, I haven’t killed many of their people. They have no reason to fight us to the death. Once they suffer significant casualties, they’ll likely retreat.”

“This battle won’t be too difficult. Plus, our armaments have improved significantly since then.”

This was why Zhang Yi remained unfazed.

He had no deep enmity with Yangsheng or Chaoyu Base.

Even though he had killed Xiao Honglian’s cousin and Wei Dinghai’s confidant, these deaths weren’t enough to escalate the situation to a life-or-death grudge.

This war was ultimately about territorial disputes.

If you’re strong, they’ll respect and fear you.

If you’re weak, they’ll destroy and kill you.

What Zhang Yi needed to do was prove his strength and ensure that no other organization in Tianhai City dared to challenge him.

Chapter 388: God’s Right Hand

After receiving Xiao Honglian’s video, the shelter shifted into full alert.

One noticeable change was that Zhang Yi and his team began sleeping in their combat gear. This way, if the enemy attacked, they could immediately spring into action.

However, in the short term, Xiao Honglian and Wei Dinghai had no immediate plans to launch an assault.

Organizing a large-scale war wasn't simple.

Especially since both Yangsheng Base and Chaoyu Base were far from the shelter, logistics, intelligence, and supply chains had to be secured. Additionally, they needed to defend their own bases from opportunistic factions during the campaign.

Meanwhile, in the shelter, Liang Yue was so devastated by her students' deaths that she couldn't eat for days.

Zhang Yi ordered Zhou Ke'er to administer nutrient injections to her. With a war on the horizon and her being one of the shelter's key fighters, she couldn't afford to stay bedridden.

Still, judging by her mental state, it was clear it would take her a long time to move past the tragedy.

Zhang Yi didn't press her with words of comfort, either.

Instead, he allowed her to hold onto her grief and hatred for Yangsheng Base. When the battle started, he planned to let her unleash her emotions on the battlefield, giving her a chance to vent her pent-up negativity.

Sometimes, purging such emotions through catharsis was the best remedy.

In the snowy expanse far from the shelter, a white-cloaked elderly man slowly approached.

His steps were steady, though unhurried, and his footprints sank deeply into the snow, leaving two prominent trails.

This man was Zhao Jianhua, a high priest of the Followers of the Snow God.

Braving the wind and snow, he eventually arrived near the shelter's towering, icy barricades.

Standing at the edge of the boundary, he squinted against the blinding snow, staring up at the dark structure looming amidst the storm.

Though the wind and snow stung his eyes, Zhao Jianhua's weathered, gray gaze suddenly flashed with a golden light.

In his altered vision, the world transformed into a vast canvas, vivid and swirling with colors, like a watercolor painting come to life.

Suddenly, his body trembled slightly.

In his vision, an incomparably immense aura hovered over the shelter. It was so vast and overwhelming that it seemed to blot out the sky above the entire structure.

"Such a powerful superhuman... apart from 'that one,' who could possibly possess such strength?"

"Could it be... the right hand of God?"

Zhao Jianhua's superhuman ability, Aura Sight, allowed him to see the life force emanating from all living beings.

The more vibrant and expansive the aura, the stronger the individual. For superhumans, their auras manifested as brilliant, extraordinary hues.

The brighter and more resplendent the colors, the greater the individual's power and potential.

It was this ability that had allowed Zhao Jianhua to recruit countless followers for the Snow God's teachings under the direction of the cult's leader, Yuan Kongye.

He could identify both latent superhumans and those who had yet to awaken their powers, which was a major factor behind the rapid expansion of the Followers of the Snow God.

Zhao Jianhua's vision faded as his ability subsided. Taking a deep breath, he turned and began his trek back, leaning on his cane.

This discovery was monumental and needed to be reported to the cult's leader and high priest without delay.

At Yangsheng Base, Xiao Honglian had made her decision—to wage war against Zhang Yi's shelter.

Officially, it was to avenge her cousin and subordinates.

In reality, it was a pretext for advancing into Xishan District and Lu River District to claim their abundant resources.

However, she knew better than to act rashly.

Surrounded by strong factions, splitting her forces carried significant risks. Moreover, Xiao Honglian was uncertain about the true extent of Zhang Yi's strength and resources.

She needed time to prepare, ensuring that the assault would be decisive and victorious.

Not long after, her deputy, Zhuge Qingtian, brought her a guest.

The visitor was a robust, fierce-looking middle-aged man.

“Greetings, Leader. My name is Wu Huairen, former manager of Zhanlong Security Company. I was involved in the construction of Cloud Manor’s shelter project, and I also personally managed a safe house for Zhang Yi.”

If Zhang Yi were to see him again, he would immediately recognize Wu Huairen.

As the manager of Zhanlong Security, Wu Huairen had served as a soldier, a professional mercenary, and a full-time bodyguard.

After the apocalypse struck, his combat skills and ruthless methods enabled him to survive and thrive. Now, he had joined Yangsheng Base, climbing the ranks among its soldiers.

Zhuge Qingtian, while investigating Zhang Yi, had discovered Wu Huairen and brought him to Xiao Honglian.

Curious, Xiao Honglian asked, “So, you’re familiar with Zhang Yi?”

Wu Huairen replied, “Not particularly. It was purely a professional relationship between a client and the company. However, I’m very familiar with his current residence.”

Xiao Honglian was unfamiliar with the specifics of Cloud Manor 101.

“Oh? What’s so unique about it?”

Wu Huairen detailed the shelter’s design and features to her.

After hearing his explanation, Xiao Honglian had an epiphany.

“No wonder they managed to hold off Xishan Base for over a month and remain unscathed!”

“So it’s thanks to the shelter your company built. That explains everything!”

Wu Huiren added confidently, “Xishan Base may have been unable to breach that shelter, but Yangsheng Base certainly can. Leader, leave this to me!”

For Wu Huiren, this was an unmissable opportunity to prove himself.

Yangsheng Base operated under a strict hierarchy: the higher one’s rank, the better the food, housing, and resources available.

Xiao Honglian eyed him closely. “So, you know the shelter’s weaknesses?”

Wu Huiren responded, “Zhanlong Security is a top domestic brand. We’d never compromise our clients’ homes. However, since we constructed the shelter, we understand its structure and materials well.

“With access to the property and a large operations vehicle, we can cut through its walls!”

Transporting such a vehicle from Yangsheng Base to Lu River District would be challenging, but with their ample fuel reserves, it was feasible.

With Wu Huiren’s knowledge of the shelter’s layout, breaching its defenses was entirely possible.

Xiao Honglian nodded. “Very well. You’ll accompany us on this mission. If you succeed, I’ll promote you to command your own unit!”

Wu Huiren’s face lit up with excitement.

“Thank you for your trust and support, Leader!”

However, Xiao Honglian couldn’t help but frown in puzzlement.

“No matter how strong or uniquely built that shelter is, professional tools should be able to breach it.”

“In that case, why didn’t Xishan Base manage to destroy it? Even explosives would have done the job...”

Chapter 389: Xingtian

The arrival of Wu Huairen delighted Xiao Honglian, as his information provided her with greater insight into Zhang Yi’s shelter.

However, it also deepened her doubts.

While Xishan Base lacked access to heavy equipment like operations vehicles, they still possessed an arsenal of weapons. It made no sense that they couldn’t breach a shelter.

In this world, there was no such thing as an impregnable fortress.

So why was Zhang Yi’s shelter still standing strong?

“Could it be that Zhang Yi and his companions are so powerful that Xishan Base couldn’t even approach them?”

Xiao Honglian knew she had to proceed with caution. Acting carelessly without understanding her opponent’s strength could lead to disaster.

She waved Wu Huairen away to prepare and spent a long time deliberating alone.

Eventually, she made a firm decision.

“If there’s truly a risk, Yangsheng Base won’t shoulder it alone.”

“I’ll make sure the other factions get involved, too. That way, not only can we share the risk, but we can also prevent them from attacking my base while I’m away.”

While acting independently might allow her to claim all the spoils, a wise strategist knows to balance profit with caution.

High-risk, high-reward tactics were for gamblers, and gamblers often met terrible ends.

Her first move was to contact her old ally, Wei Dinghai, leader of Chaoyu Base.

Yangsheng Base and Chaoyu Base shared a strategic partnership and were the closest of Tianhai City’s factions.

Moreover, Wei Dinghai had a personal vendetta against Zhang Yi, as one of Chaoyu Base’s superhumans, Wang Ruixuan, had been killed by him.

When the call connected, the two exchanged pleasantries before Xiao Honglian cut to the point.

“That guy, Zhang Yi, isn’t simple. He was able to hold off Xishan Base for so long, and I suspect he might have been involved in their destruction.”

“Neither of us can handle him alone. What do you think about joining forces?”

Wei Dinghai had already sent scouts to investigate Zhang Yi and the shelter but came up empty-handed. He, too, hadn’t dared attack.

Hearing Xiao Honglian’s suggestion, he chuckled.

“If we’re going to strike, just the two of us won’t be enough. Let’s drag everyone else into this fight as well!”

Xiao Honglian's smile grew wider.

"Great minds think alike."

The two leaders turned their attention to the other factions: Followers of the Snow God and Qingpu Base.

The Followers of the Snow God appeared to be a disorganized cult, while Qingpu Base, made up of steelworkers, was a conservative force.

Both factions were significant players, and if they attacked Zhang Yi while Yangsheng and Chaoyu focused elsewhere, it would be disastrous.

In particular, the Followers of the Snow God, long excluded and resented by Tianhai City's other factions, were notoriously untrustworthy.

The best strategy was to tie everyone to the same war effort.

Xiao Honglian suggested, "If we join forces, persuading them to attack Zhang Yi should be easy. I'll handle Qingpu Base, and you take care of the Snow God cult. Deal?"

Wei Dinghai hesitated briefly. "If we all move together, dividing the spoils afterward will be tricky."

Xiao Honglian snorted and laughed. "Xishan Base's territory is enormous. No single faction could swallow it all, and we're already struggling to stabilize our current areas."

"All I care about are the material and machinery plants in Lu River District. Those are non-negotiable for me."

Wei Dinghai chuckled. "Fair enough! We don't need those. But we'll take more of the food stockpiles and expect extra fuel from you later."

After a round of negotiations, the two leaders reached an agreement.

They each set off to convince their respective targets to join the campaign against Zhang Yi.

Qingpu District lay in the northwest of Tianhai City.

Once home to vast forests and the renowned Qingpu Steel Plant, its underground shelter, Qingpu Shelter, had been built beneath the factory.

The population here consisted mainly of loggers and steelworkers.

Though they weren't professional soldiers or bodyguards, their raw physical strength and battle readiness made them a force to be reckoned with.

Inside a workshop at the steel plant, a man in his thirties sat on a lathe.

As was common among steelworkers, he looked older than his years, making his exact age difficult to determine.

Clad in a gray work uniform, his unkempt hair only emphasized his high hairline.

His dark face was marked with sparse stubble and acne scars, a testament to irregular sleep patterns.

This man wouldn't stand out in a crowd of factory workers—he seemed entirely ordinary.

One leg propped on the lathe, he tore pieces off a steamed bun and threw them on the ground.

Two figures crawled on the floor: a scrawny, balding man and a long-haired, doe-eyed individual.

Both wore heavy iron collars around their necks, panting like dogs as they wagged their heads in a humiliating display.

Each time the man tossed a piece of bun, the two figures scrambled and fought for it, saliva dripping from their mouths as they bit and clawed at each other.

The sight brought a delighted grin to the man's face.

Outside the workshop, a group of people in white combat uniforms approached.

The green leaf emblem on their chests marked them as members of Qingpu Base.

Upon entering, they glanced at the ridiculous scene on the floor and couldn't help but smirk.

"Boss, someone from Yangsheng Base is here to see you."

The man feeding the "dogs" looked up. "Oh? That Xiao Honglian? What does she want?"

"She says it's something important. We don't know the details—it's above our pay grade."

The leader of Qingpu Base, Xingtian, jumped down from the lathe.

"Fine, let's see what she has to say!"

As he turned to leave, the two "dog-men" grew frantic, straining against their chains.

“Woof! Woof! Woof!”

Panting with their tongues out, they gazed up at Xingtian with fawning eyes, desperate for more food.

Xingtian glanced back, amused by their pathetic display.

“Director Liu, Supervisor Sun, you’re excellent at playing the part of dogs. I can’t believe I wasted time letting you live as humans before!”

He tossed the remaining bun to a subordinate. “They haven’t eaten in three days. Feed them for me. Make sure they stay alive—good dogs are hard to come by!”

The subordinates grinned. “Got it, Boss. Don’t worry!”

As Xingtian walked out of the workshop, the sounds of barking gave way to chilling screams.

Chapter 390: The Alliance

Xingtian strolled leisurely out of the workshop, his hands stuffed into his pockets.

Despite the bone-chilling cold and the thick, overwhelming snow, he seemed entirely unaffected.

Workers in combat uniforms stood guard in the area, and when they spotted Xingtian, they saluted him in greeting.

With a grin, Xingtian waved back, continuing his relaxed pace until he reached the factory’s office.

Inside, the temperature was warm and comfortable. The steel factory, with its abundant coal supply, no longer produced steel but used the resource to heat water for central heating, ensuring the place stayed cozy.

At the office door squatted a young girl in a small combat uniform, doodling in the snow with a stick.

In front of her lay a massive white wolfhound, easily ten times the size of a normal dog, comparable to Hua Hua when in its giant form.

The enormous dog, however, lay meekly in the snow, watching the girl intently. Its submissive demeanor was devoid of ferocity, its eyes instead radiating a kind of goofy innocence.

Noticing Xingtian's approach, the dog tilted its head back and let out a loud howl.

The little girl looked up as well, her round, white face breaking into a sweet smile when she saw him.

“Dad!”

Xingtian laughed and strode forward, scooping the girl into his arms and adjusting the fur scarf around her neck to shield her face from the cold.

“Didn’t I tell you not to come outside? It’s too cold out here. If you must come out, at least wear your hat and scarf!”

The girl, Zhou Lingling, was Xingtian's adopted daughter.

Her father had been one of Xingtian's coworkers, who had died in a tragic accident years ago. Xingtian had taken her in afterward.

"It's not that cold!" Zhou Lingling said with a sweet laugh. "The factory is warm!"

Xingtian pinched her chubby cheek. "If you catch a cold, you'll regret it!"

Placing her back in front of the big dog, he said, "Play with Lele for a bit. Dad has some things to take care of. I'll come back and join you soon."

Zhou Lingling nodded obediently and squatted down again, resuming her doodling in the snow. Her soft, childlike voice rang out, "Lele, this is 'one,' and this is 'two.'"

Lele, the giant dog, gazed at her with a conflicted expression. It genuinely couldn't understand what she was teaching.

Xingtian entered the office, which had once belonged to the factory director. The room's decor exuded understated luxury—no dazzling gold, but the redwood desk, rosewood coffee table, and complete Qinghua porcelain tea set spoke volumes about its high-class taste.

Taking his seat on the sofa, Xingtian turned to the communications officer waiting for him.

"Boss, the person's been waiting for quite a while."

Xingtian shrugged nonchalantly. "If she needs something from me, she can wait. What's the rush?"

Despite his words, he reached over and pressed the connect button on the communicator.

The screen immediately displayed Xiao Honglian's exquisite face.

Propping her chin with her hand, she looked visibly annoyed.

"Xingtian, you're certainly hard to get a hold of. Making me wait this long!"

"Why, thank you!" Xingtian chuckled mischievously, his demeanor laced with an air of roguishness. "Nobody's glued to their communicator all day, you know. Now, what do you need from me? Get to the point."

Xiao Honglian rolled her eyes, but she knew this was just Xingtian's nature. Before the apocalypse, he'd been nothing more than a small team leader at Qingpu Steelworks—direct, coarse, and unapologetically straightforward.

She got straight to the matter.

"Xishan Base has been wiped out. What's Qingpu Base's position on that?"

Xingtian scratched his chin and said casually, "The northeastern part of Xishan District borders us. I assume that area doesn't interest you much."

"Xishan's territory is huge; no one can take it all at once. Why don't we all sit down and figure out how to split it up?"

Xiao Honglian smiled.

"That can be arranged. But there's one issue we need to deal with first."

"There's a powerful faction entrenched in Xishan's former territory. Until we eliminate them, moving in will be too risky."

“My people and Wei Dinghai’s both suffered losses at their hands.”

Hearing this, Xingtian’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“There’s someone that strong in Tianhai City?”

“Someone who not only took a bite out of Xishan Base but also dared to take on both your bases at the same time?”

Xiao Honglian nodded gravely.

“Indeed, there is.”

“Our investigations show they’re not a large faction like us. Instead, they’re a small, elite team with several powerful superhumans.”

“They’re fortified in a shelter as strong as a military bunker. Even Xishan Base couldn’t break through.”

Xingtian stroked his chin, processing the information.

Qingpu Base had always kept a low profile and had never encountered Zhang Yi before, so this was his first time hearing about him.

He replied cautiously, “If they’re as strong as you say, we can’t just rush in blindly.”

“You know as well as I do—marching into unfamiliar territory for a battle means losing a third of our strength before we even start.”

Xiao Honglian countered, “Which is why we’re inviting you to join us in attacking them!”

“Yangsheng Base and Chaoyu Base have already agreed. If you nod your head, we’ll launch a combined assault.”

“Once we three are united, we’ll force the Followers of the Snow God to join in too. Together, we’ll crush this faction and divide Xishan and Lu River Districts among us. What do you say?”

Hearing that the three major factions were teaming up, Xingtian felt a bit more reassured.

“So, it’s the faction that had that big conflict with Xishan Base?”

“If Xishan Base, with all its firepower, couldn’t break through their defenses, what makes us think we can?”

Anticipating the question, Xiao Honglian replied confidently, “The person who built that shelter is now with Yangsheng Base. I have a way to break their defenses and storm inside.”

Raising an eyebrow, Xingtian saw potential in the plan.

If the western factions of Tianhai City united, there was nowhere they couldn’t conquer.

He also realized that Xiao Honglian and Wei Dinghai were reaching out to him not just for strength but also to neutralize Qingpu Base as a potential threat to their flanks.

This was a deal he couldn’t lose.

“I’ll think about it,” Xingtian said, rubbing his stubbled chin. “But I’ll need more information about that shelter.”

Xiao Honglian nodded. “That’s fair. Take your time to consider. I assure you, this will be immensely profitable for Qingpu Base. You won’t regret it.”