

I! Cleaner 181

Chapter 181 Carriage and Carriage_1

Certainly. Here's the translated text with the required formatting and tense adjustments:

A robin with a diamond crown... a royal emblem?

Looking through the small window at the back of the carriage, the young woman saw the robin emblem engraved on the front of the luxury carriage and her face darkened. The cheerful smile with a hint of slyness on her face instantly transformed into boundless anger as a storm approached.

"Behind us... it should be Prince Joshua's carriage."

Watching the overturned freight carriages being shoved off the road and the small merchants who hurriedly picked up their goods with angry yet resigned faces, the middle-aged noblewoman's expression also turned a bit sour.

Though equally displeased with the prince's behavior, upon seeing the anger growing deeper in the young woman's eyes, she hurriedly warned,

"Princess Veronica, you went out in private today, without a retinue, and not even the Guard Troops.

If you go out now, not only will you disrupt the Duke of Lionheart's investiture ceremony, but if the Rebels find out you are here, it will definitely cause a major uproar!"

"Hmm... I know..."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, the lively and cheerful young girl was completely gone, returning to her usual solemn and dignified demeanor.

After glancing again at the luxury carriage behind her, the young woman... or rather, Princess Veronica withdrew her gaze, her expression calm as she instructed,

"Drive the carriage off the road and let Joshua's carriage pass first. After the investiture ceremony ends, have someone write a pamphlet from the small merchants' perspective about today's events and make it sound as tragic as possible."

The middle-aged noblewoman was slightly startled upon hearing this and asked in confusion,

"Are you planning to complain to Your Majesty with the pamphlet and ask him to restrain Prince Joshua's behavior?"

"No, in past financial disputes with the nobles, my father owed Joshua's mother too much, so he was overly indulgent towards him. Even if he knew Joshua did such things, he would at most just scold him with words."

The princess shook her head, gazing at the rapidly passing luxury carriage, and said blandly,

"If you truly want to solve the problem, this pamphlet should be given to the Lower House, to those members who are always finding faults with me. Give them the opportunity to make an issue of it.

No matter how much I advise Joshua, it would be useless. Only when the entire royal family's reputation is thoroughly damaged and substantial interests are forcibly taken away will my father's slap reach Joshua's face, making him realize what should and shouldn't be done."

"Your Highness, you truly are..."

After hearing the princess's words, the middle-aged noblewoman couldn't help but chuckle and then shook her head as she glanced at the distant luxury carriage,

"*Given Your Majesty's temperament, Prince Joshua is in for a tough time. If you are compelled by those members to yield something, Prince Joshua probably won't have a carriage to ride for half a year.*"

Would just getting a slap and not having a carriage to ride for half a year be considered tough?

Upon hearing the noblewoman's words, the princess didn't speak but looked through the window at the dozens of overturned carriages on the roadside and the scattered cargo smashed on the road.

A light rain had just fallen the night before, and even on meticulously repaired paths like Redwood Avenue, the roadside could not avoid being muddy, with ponds of water here and there.

Among the goods transported by these small merchants, the porcelain and lamps directly shattered need no mention. Things like coal, flour, and spices, they can't come into contact with water either.

The velvet ribbons and similar items meant for decorating the investiture ceremony that got stained with mud wouldn't be accepted by the Ryan Family, meaning they'd certainly made the trip for nothing.

Moreover, the Charl Department Store, in order to protect itself, had been forced into low-price sales for more than half a month already, leaving small merchants struggling. Supplying the Ryan Family's investiture ceremony was a rare opportunity for them.

If I guessed correctly, many of them owe money on their goods, or even took out loans, and now Joshua's guards overturned everything onto the roadside.

If I ignore this, more than half of these carriage owners might go bankrupt. Those who are now crying while gathering goods on the roadside might soon end up in the Capital City's slums.

"Forget it, I shall not attend the investiture ceremony."

After glancing at the ribbons in the mud and the crying merchants by the roadside, the princess couldn't help but shake her head in resignation and waved her hand dismissively,

"Let's go, we'll find Joshua's Guard Troops first and make him compensate these people. Otherwise, someone among them might..."

"Make way! Move aside quickly!"

"How did the freight wagon get onto the fast road? Get it off now!"

"Push them aside! The Duke's carriage is behind us, and we're delaying the investiture ceremony's time!"

Hearing the commotion coming from behind, the princess's brow furrowed again. She leaned out of the window and looked back.

This time, the newly arrived carriage, pulled by eight tall and vigorous char horses, nearly occupied the entire ten-meter-wide road. Its opulence surpassed Joshua's carriage.

The mahogany carriage engraved with a crowned lion crest was decorated with gilded bronze nails, inset with contiguous jewels, and the white steel wheels bore beast-like imprints, leaving lion paw print patterns on the ground. Every aspect was crafted to perfection within the regulations.

The Duke of Lionheart's carriage? Troublesome...

Seeing the road thrown into chaos yet again, the princess sighed inwardly.

To avoid that scoundrel Joshua, most of the carriages in front had moved off the fast lanes. Many had just barely returned to the road, and restoring order would take at least twelve to thirteen minutes, making it impossible to evade again in time.

As for the new Duke of Lionheart, if he wanted to reach Ryan Manor within the usual time, he might have to mimic that scoundrel Joshua and forcibly shove these carriages aside, staining yet another batch of goods...

"Stop where you are!"

Just as the princess hesitated over whether to reveal her identity and discuss with the Duke to buy some time for these small merchants, a head suddenly popped out of the carriage window, halting the guard preparing to overturn the carriages.

"Why rush people? Isn't this road wide enough... hmm..."

Looking at the half-occupied fast lane and estimating the width of his own gaudy carriage, realizing it indeed wasn't quite enough, Leon silently swallowed his words and turned to glare at the perspiring richly dressed old man beside him, speaking discontentedly,

"I said there's no need to take the carriage. Walking wouldn't take long. It's just that you all fuss too much, making me return for this whole grand show... Look! Now we're blocked!"

Feeling stifled by Leon's words but having no real recourse, the previous duke's old butler could only smile and persuade,

"Duke, riding the 'Lionheart Car' to the manor is a tradition of our Ryan Family and part of the investiture ceremony. Please endure it a bit longer, just a little longer!"

Chapter 182 Either... or... _1

Sure, here is your translated text:

Endure? Why should I endure anything? I don't even want the Duke's title, so why should I care about your crappy traditions?

With utter disgust, Leon glanced at himself in the mirror, seeing his face painted ghostly white, and the usually polite Leon couldn't help but roll his eyes at the old butler.

He originally thought that by simplifying everything and compressing the long-winded inheritance ceremony into one day, it would save him a lot of trouble. Who knew that even the simplest version of the ceremony would be an ordeal, with the attire and makeup alone tormenting him for over two hours.

Not only did he have to change into a ridiculously cumbersome outfit corresponding to nobility, but they even stuffed a specially made padding between his legs, filling him up supposedly to enhance his "masculinity."

Besides that, he had to clip on false hair, apply lip balm, have eye makeup and face wax, and even slather a thick layer of lead powder on the exposed skin of his forehead and neck. After much refusal, he finally got them to swap it out for a harmless paste.

And just when he managed to sort these out, he had to sit in this so-called meaningful carriage, traveling down the main road of Redwood Avenue, relying on the tire pattern to leave the "Lion's Footprint," symbolizing the new Duke of Lionheart arriving at his domain...

After all this nonsense, he was already irritated beyond measure, yet the inheritance ceremony hadn't even started!

Complete and utter bullshit!

Using his sleeve, he dabbed some water, harshly wiping off the jumble of makeup on his face, then twisted open the carriage door handle and leaped out directly.

I absolutely must not follow their way anymore; who knows how many more torturous and bizarre procedures await me if I keep going?

"Duke, your makeup! Your makeup!"

"What makeup? I'm done with it!"

Yanking off the wig from his head and roughly wiping the markings on his face, Leon glared menacingly at the furious old butler chasing after him,

"Either I go like this, or you find someone else to be the Duke. You choose!"

Do I even have a choice?

Watching as the new Duke, having run out of patience, began throwing a tantrum, the old butler realized he wasn't joking. Forced to stamp his feet tenaciously, he then clutched his chest in bitter plea,

"I...I'll obey you, alright? But at least return to the carriage..."

"I'm not going back!"

His patience completely exhausted, Leon, looking disdainfully at the carriage filled with jewels and exuding a nouveau riche aura behind him, replied irritably,

"The carriage is too ridiculous, and besides, it can't even pass through. Either get me another carriage or find another Duke!"

The old butler shook his head repeatedly upon hearing this, face filled with despair,

"Your Grace, this really can't be changed! Every Duke, upon inheriting the title, must leave the 'Lion's Footprint' on Redwood Avenue. It is tradition! If you switch the carriage, how will the Lion's Footprint..."

"What bullshit 'Lion's Footprint,' isn't it just the tire marks? Roll it over yourself with a wheel, and don't use it to mess with me!"

"This...this...this really cannot be changed! There's never been such a precedent..."

Having finally wiped off the cream mixed with pearl powder from his face, Leon, unwilling to make any further compromises, said maliciously,

"Either there's no precedent, or there's no Duke. Which do you want?"

I... I want to die!

Observing the new Duke, who had evaded both maids and guards, now walking towards the estate, the old butler felt as though the world was spinning around him. If not for the need to maintain appearance, he likely would have beaten his chest and wept tears of anguish.

Old Duke! You left after choosing this oddball, but he's still here to torment us! Why didn't you take me with you back then?

Just when the old butler was clutching the carriage, lost in painful despair, a voice from the Duke called out ahead.

"You, come over here!"

After disembarking and taking only a few steps, Leon saw a heap of overturned carriages on either side of the road.

Waving the old butler over, Leon waited for him to catch up, huffing and puffing, then pointed at several shattered boxes of porcelain beside the road, furrowed his brow, and complained,

"Look at what you've done. Not only are you driving people off the road, but why are you smashing their goods? Who pushed them down? Hurry up and compensate them!"

"Your Grace... this... this wasn't our doing."

Hearing he might have to pay up, a guard with a dark complexion couldn't help but speak up in defense after sneakily glancing at Leon's expression,

"These carriages were already overturned at the roadside before your carriage even arrived. It was probably the group ahead that drove them off."

The group ahead?

"Your... Your Grace."

Managing to catch a breath, the old butler first queried a servant, then explained, face pale,

"The carriage ahead was likely Prince Joshua's, the one that passed by as we were waiting for you to board at the intersection."

Oh, so it was that one which almost splashed me with mud.

Hearing the butler, Leon recalled the other ostentatiously attention-grabbing carriage drawn by eight horses and couldn't help clicking his tongue in disgust.

Nobles, royal family... tsk... not a single good person among them!

Looking at several distressed merchants crying by the roadside, and considering it wasn't his money, Leon, adhering to the principle of being as generous as possible, said,

"Then pay them, after all, if not for delivering goods to your family, they wouldn't have encountered him. It's reasonable for the Ryan Family to bear some compensation."

"This..."

"What do you mean 'this'?"

Having slept poorly and been thoroughly harassed, Leon's mood was particularly foul. Turning around, he squinted at the old butler and growled,

"Either you pay the compensation, or find someone else to..."

"Pay, pay, pay! We'll pay everything!"

Having been threatened with abandonment several times by Leon, just the sound of the words "or" had the old butler's heart, already nearing its limit, pounding chaotically.

Firmly clutching his erratically thumping heart, feeling he would lose ten years of his life today, the old butler grabbed Leon's arm with a tearful face and beseeched,

"Your Grace! I'll agree to anything you want to do! Just please don't say 'or' anymore, alright? The Ryan Family won't manage without you! I'm old... my heart isn't good, I really can't take this..."

Ah, this...

Seeing the old butler's face slightly purple, grasping his arm tightly with a look that said he'd kneel on the spot if he dared to refuse, Leon hesitated.

Logically speaking, although in soul vision, this old butler wasn't a good man either, mostly engaging in schemes and political maneuvering, he hadn't directly committed any heinous acts. And at his advanced age, was it really right for Leon to relentlessly torment the old man?

But... Leon truly hadn't planned on becoming the Duke. Once the inheritance ceremony began and everyone gathered, he intended to find a way to reject it. And seeing the old butler's suffocatingly purple face, could he bear it when he discovered what Leon intended?

"About that... I have something I think it's best to inform you about in advance. Please, don't get too worked up when you hear it..."

After hesitating briefly, Leon went over to support the butler's back, then cautiously leaned in and whispered to the somewhat "startled" old butler,

"Once everyone's gathered later, I plan to propose to the Princess, using the entire Ryan Family as a dowry. That way, they can either choose another Duke or end up with nothing at all. What do you think?"

"..."

"Oh shit! Don't faint! Stand up straight! Oh man, why are you foaming at the mouth now?"

Chapter 183 Right up my alley_1

The new Duke of Lionheart was indeed... not very noble...

Watching from afar as Leon, carrying the old butler who was foaming at the mouth, hurried towards the enormous carriage, the middle-aged noblewoman couldn't help but pull her lips into an extremely speechless expression.

Although she didn't know what exactly was said to cause the old butler to faint from anger on the spot, she vaguely heard the "either...or."

At this moment, the only thought in the middle-aged noblewoman's mind was that the Ryan Family was truly out of luck. Having gotten such an unconventional new Duke, the Ryan Family was probably counting down to its doom.

Hmm... thinking about it this way, Princess Veronica actually wasn't too bad.

Although she sometimes lacked decorum and couldn't help but do some outrageous things in private, at least she could communicate normally most of the time. In important situations, she could listen to advice and wouldn't run herself ragged like the Duke of Lionheart did to that poor old butler...

...

"Haha, this trip was truly worth it!"

Unlike the somewhat gloomy middle-aged noblewoman, after closely witnessing this farce, Princess Veronica quickly pulled herself back, promptly shutting the carriage window with a forceful and "tempestuous" laugh.

After quite a while, once she'd laughed enough, she raised her hand to wipe away the tears at the corner of her eyes and, while gently rubbing her flat belly through her dress, complained:

"Ouch... my stomach hurts from laughing. This new Duke of Lionheart indeed knows how to drive people crazy... *Hmm... but he's not a bad person overall.*"

Looking back through the gap in the window and seeing that the Ryan Family was indeed paying compensation and even helping right the overturned wagons at the new Duke's request, a trace of admiration flashed in Veronica's eyes. She then smiled and said to the middle-aged noblewoman:

"To be honest, if he hadn't inherited the title of Duke of Lionheart but some other title, it would have been great. If he were a Marquis from the Silver Chalice or Light Shield family, maybe he could even be my prince; what a pity~"

???

Upon hearing the princess's words, the middle-aged noblewoman couldn't help but shiver violently, then replied stiffly:

"Your Highness? You're... you're not joking with me, are you?"

Seeing the middle-aged noblewoman's terrified expression, Princess Veronica couldn't help but smile, shook her head, and replied:

"No, I'm serious, I really think he's quite good. Putting everything else aside, if I had someone like him as my prince, life would certainly be interesting."

Interesting... more likely life-threatening! If he really became your prince and passed on his penchant for turning things upside down to you, I'd probably lose at least ten to twenty years of my life!

"Princess Veronica!"

Watching the princess with bright eyes, realizing she was actually quite interested in the Duke of Lionheart, the middle-aged noblewoman quickly spoke to prevent her fate from aligning with that of the unfortunate butler:

"He's really not suitable for you! Even if the Ryan Family turns into an empty shell, they are still the nominal leader of the old nobility. All of the old nobility with marital ties to the Ryan Family wouldn't tolerate the Ryan Family getting close to you!"

"Hehe, don't worry, I understand that."

Through the carriage's rear window, Veronica looked regretfully at the lion-engraved carriage. Seeing the nervous expression of the middle-aged noblewoman opposite her, she joked with a smile:

"Look how tense you are... those words were just said in passing. I wouldn't casually choose someone to be my prince."

"Well... speaking of choosing a prince, my father actually leans more towards marrying me off compared to letting me pick one. He has mentioned quite a few candidates to me recently, like the fourth prince of the Kingdom of Morna, the grand duke from the Kingdom of Heisen, or possibly the leader of the Labor Party from the Kingdom of Orleson.

"So unless something goes wrong, I should end up choosing one out of these few... Hehe, to be honest, purely on the conditions alone, they don't necessarily beat the Duke of Lionheart."

...

Hearing the princess's words, the middle-aged noblewoman's expression froze slightly, then she fell into a deep silence.

If Princess Veronica got married off, not only would she be far away from home and the kingdom, but the candidates selected by His Majesty, though all grand nobles with immense strength, were almost all pushing forty years of age.

Moreover, that fourth prince of Morna was once married, but his wife died in childbirth; the grand duke of Heisen had a leg that was crippled in a falling accident when he was a child and seemed to have a somewhat extreme and sinister demeanor; and the leader of the Labor Party from the Kingdom of Orleson was also said to be difficult to get along with.

Though with Princess Veronica's abilities, even if she were married off, she would likely not suffer losses and might even seize the opportunity to steer their backing forces towards the kingdom.

But a political marriage solely maintained by interests, given such a great disparity in the conditions of both parties, would naturally be devoid of happiness. So if she indeed got married into such a situation, Princess Veronica's latter half of life might not be very pleasant...

...

"Hmm? How come as we were talking, you're starting to worry about me?"

Seeing the face full of concern and reluctance on the middle-aged noblewoman, the princess couldn't help but feel a slight warmth in her eyes, then smiled and comforted:

"Don't you know my capabilities? It's not just in the neighboring kingdoms, places where I can easily lean on forces; even if I went alone to marry across the sea, I could still live quite comfortably. Rest assured!"

Chapter 184 Right up my alley_2

Yes... No matter where you go, you will have a good life, but... will you be happy?

After looking at the princess, whose face was smiling but whose eyes seemed calm and indifferent, the middle-aged noblewoman couldn't help but grit her teeth and then lowered her voice to ask,

"Your Highness, do you really have to marry outside the country? Can't you stay? Even... even if it's with the Duke of Lionheart?"

"It's not a matter of whether I want to get married or not, but rather what my father thinks, because from the beginning, this kind of thing was never up to me to decide."

Upon hearing the middle-aged noblewoman's inquiry, the princess raised her eyebrows slightly, then spoke calmly,

"After failing to seize the Department of Finance, my father may seem to have stepped back, handing over the royal family's manpower to me, but he has never given up the idea of completely controlling the kingdom.

And to control the kingdom, it's nothing more than legislation, personnel, military power, and financial power. Joshua's mother happens to be the Minister of Finance's sister, so after a few years when he grows up, as long as they agree to let him inherit the throne, it's very likely that the Minister of Finance will support the royal family.

Moreover, by that time, no matter if my reforms succeed or fail, they should thoroughly anger the old nobility and the Lower House. Father only needs to announce the cancellation of my eligibility to inherit the throne, marry me off to another country, and he can easily quell everyone's anger.

By doing so, he can take over most of the power I've seized from the old nobility at the lowest cost, gain strong support from outside the kingdom, pave the way for Joshua's succession, and turn the Minister of Finance to the royal family, thereby completely controlling the Department of Finance.

Haha, just a failed marriage of the eldest daughter can bring so many tangible and intangible benefits. Knowing my father, he would never let such an opportunity pass."

"This... how can this be?!"

After listening to the princess's deductions, the middle-aged noblewoman couldn't help but stand up abruptly, her eyes filled with anger as she said,

"You've done so much for the kingdom over the years! Even if His Majesty doesn't let you inherit the throne in the end, he shouldn't treat you like this! And besides, if it were someone else inheriting the throne, it would be one thing, but Prince Joshua, he just... well... it's just too much!"

"This isn't a matter of being excessive or not."

Princess Veronica shook her head, smiling as she said,

"As the king's daughter, before I was even born, I already had everything that ninety-nine percent of this country's people dream of, but as a cost, I also lost some things.

Besides, you actually don't need to feel sad for me. I've only lost the right to choose my marriage, but Joshua is truly the pitiable one. Due to father's overindulgence, Joshua has even lost his mind. Isn't he worse off than me?"

"At a time like this, how can you still crack jokes?"

Seeing the princess seemingly accepting her fate and even having the mood to joke with her, the middle-aged noblewoman couldn't help but stomp her foot,

"Your Highness! Why aren't you angry at all! Are you really going to accept it just like that?"

"What else can I do if I don't accept it?"

Hearing this, the princess's eyes flickered for a moment and then she replied calmly,

"If I want to reject such a future, should I immediately overthrow everything and make every effort to connect with the old nobility? Or should I try to lean towards the Prime Minister in the parliament and let those so-called 'economic bills' that wantonly exploit ordinary people pass?

Or perhaps offer a bounty and hire someone to assassinate my brother? Or should I launch a coup, lead the military into the royal palace, and personally hang my father on the gallows?"

...

*Seeing the princess's expression calm to the point of indifference, with eyes revealing deep fatigue, the speechless middle-aged noblewoman felt a lump in her throat, and her vision suddenly blurred.

She had looked after the princess for so many years, and as a child, she used to be a very lively child, always playing wildly in the royal palace garden, often getting covered in dirt, and never feeling sad even when being scolded, her face always carrying a sun-like brilliant smile.*

After growing up, although she still liked to smile, unknowingly, her smile changed in nuance, smiling gently, helplessly, self-deprecatingly, and wearily... as if she no longer smiled genuinely from the heart like when she was young.

In her memory, when was the last time she saw such a brilliant smile? Three years ago? Five years ago? Or even longer?

"Oh dear! Look at you! Getting all worked up just talking about it!

What I just said were all guesses, and even if it happens, that's a long way off, and besides, there might be other opportunities in these few years~"

Seeing the noblewoman whose eyes were slightly red after hearing her words, with her mouth beginning to uncontrollably curve downwards, seemingly wanting to throw herself over and cry on her shoulder, the princess couldn't help but smile and then teased,

"For instance, if the Duke of Lionheart is charmed by seeing me one day and against all family pressure, proposes to me with the entire Ryan family as a dowry, then the situation would be completely reversed.

Facing the opportunity to completely control the Department of Road Administration and the military, father might arrange for Joshua to marry a female monkey and then kick him across the sea, welding the throne onto my behind~"

"Pfft!"

Hearing the princess's cold joke, the middle-aged noblewoman couldn't help but burst into laughter, uncharacteristically disregarding etiquette, she reached out and pinched the princess's waist, her eyes still red as she complained,

"How dare you say that! The Duke of Lionheart hasn't even turned twenty this year, and you are already twenty..."

"Oh no!"

Seeing that some of the kingdom's top secrets were about to slip from the middle-aged noblewoman's mouth, the usually composed princess finally panicked, rushing to cover her mouth, gritting her teeth and threatening,

"We agreed not to talk about this! If you dare mention it again, I'll take you with me to marry across the sea! And tie you to a fishing rod to catch sharks on the way over!"

"Mm... I won't mention it! Is that not enough? You... please move your chest a bit... you're suffocating me..."

...

The two inside the carriage seemed to have reached some kind of understanding and avoided discussing future marriage topics, instead playfully sparring in a relaxed manner.

Meanwhile, the carriage adorned with the lion insignia at the rear, after a pause of over twenty minutes, finally resumed its movement, swiftly passing through the path cleared by small merchants, carrying a reluctant duke towards the end of Redwood Avenue to the Ryan Manor.

Once that excessively luxurious Heart of Lion carriage departed, the two inside the double-wheeled carriage calculated the time for the succession ritual, realizing they were almost late for the opening. They then moved from the cargo path to the noble-exclusive avenue.

With the coachman continuously accelerating, the sightseeing double-wheeled carriage sped along, its wheels nearly falling apart, barely entering the gates of Ryan Manor before the sun fully rose.

"It's alright, we made it! It just started!"

Stepping down from the carriage using the footstool, handing a maid the invitation with a false identity, and seeing the manor's main building door still open, the princess, eager to watch the spectacle, quickly lifted her skirt and sprinted off, with the middle-aged noblewoman persistently advising her to slow down.

"I'm going ahead! Hurry up a bit too!"

"You! Wait!"

Seeing the princess running hastily with skirts lifted, her run still noticeably "magnificent" despite the covering cape, the middle-aged noblewoman couldn't help but stomp her foot in frustration, wishing to pull her back for several etiquette lessons.

But as Princess Veronica ran further and further, worried her identity might be revealed, the middle-aged noblewoman could only let out a helpless sigh or two, then followed suit, lifting her skirt and running after her, breathlessly reminding her,

"Vi... Vinnie! Posture! Mind your posture... huh?"

Seeing the princess suddenly halt by the door, standing there dazedly, the middle-aged noblewoman felt a chill of fear, thinking that Princess Veronica's identity had been exposed, she hurriedly rushed over to help cover up, only...

"Slap!"

From inside the main hall, came an incredibly loud slap.

The arriving middle-aged noblewoman watched with horror as the newly appointed duke, who should have been receiving guest congratulations, single-handedly lifted Prince Joshua, spat harshly on his swollen face, and coldly sneered,

"Trying to prevent me from becoming this Duke? Okay! You better make good on that!"

Chapter 185 Precision Stepping on Mines_1

Time moved slightly backward to when the Lionheart carriage was still stuck on the road.

Important guests had already arrived, but the crucial Lionheart carriage, bearing the new Duke, had yet to make its appearance. The new head of the Ryan Family and the only remaining elder were on the verge of losing their minds.

"Has old York gone senile!"

Unaware that his fellow "Ryan Three Elders," the old butler, had been tormented by someone's elementary school-style sentences to the point of a heart attack and was taken directly to the hospital, the rotund and plump family head, dressed in a specially tailored large tuxedo, couldn't help but complain,

"He said he's served the old Duke for so many years, been through all sorts of special occasions, and absolutely wouldn't mess up. That's why I agreed to let him handle it. But just taking people out and bringing them back by carriage, such a small matter—how did he manage to delay the time?"

"Don't worry, let's wait a little longer."

Compared to the new head of the Ryan Family, the family's elder was obviously more composed. After sending two chamberlains to urge him on, he frowned and said,

"Our new Duke is different from the old Duke. He's someone from the lower echelons who never received a noble's education. It's inevitable for him to make a mess in this kind of grand ceremony. We can only trust old York now and give him a little more time."

"Give him more time? Who's going to give us more time then?"

Peering through the gap between the curtain tassels, spotting some impatient expressions on the guests' faces in the hall, the Ryan family head let out a sigh and said, with a lamenting expression,

"If I'd known this could go wrong too, I wouldn't have set so many procedures beforehand. It would have spared him from some troubles, and we wouldn't be on such a tight schedule, with no room to spare!"

"Don't worry, the more at times like this, the more you need to keep your calm."

Taking a slow sip of the tea beside him, the Ryan elder pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket, wiping the tea stain from his white beard, and calmly advised,

"The new Duke is somewhat reckless, and he doesn't understand what it means to be a qualified noble at all. If we want him to cooperate with us willingly, we must first let him understand that even though he is the Duke of Lionheart, the Ryan Family cannot continue without the help of the three of us."

So, it's actually a good thing that the ceremony is complicated. It can temper his character and let him know our importance. Without us stepping in to arrange it, he wouldn't even be able to handle the inheritance ritual. This way, he will know his boundaries when dealing with us in the future."

"I suppose you're right..."

Somewhat persuaded by the elder's words, the Ryan family head hesitated for a moment, then eventually nodded.

"Alright! Then let's do everything according to the previous plan. You keep sending people to urge them, and I'll go to the front hall to calm down those impatient guests."

"Hmm, go ahead."

...

When the two Ryan elders reached a consensus, with one sending people to fetch the new Duke and the other trying to stabilize the guests, the time continued to pass, but the ceremony had yet to start. The guests on the main building's first floor were growing extremely impatient.

"Heh, our new Duke certainly knows how to make an entrance!"

Noticing the growing frowns around him, a certain Earl, known throughout the Capital City as a "petty nobility" because of Leon, couldn't help but sarcastically remark,

"Everyone here has marital ties with the Ryan Family. Many have been associated with the old Duke for a lifetime, and half are actually his elders, with some even older than him by two generations.

In light of the recently deceased old Duke, we, the elders, woke up at the crack of dawn to support him, traveled under the stars to attend the ceremony, and are we just going to wait like this?"

Although the Earl's remarks were blatant, almost as if he had "I'm stirring up trouble" written all over his face,

the truth was that everyone here, attracted by the stink of benefits, was a flock of crows drawn to feast on the Ryan's "corpse." They all knew each other's "credentials," so there was no need to fake nobility.

Secondly, having woken up early to attend the ceremony only to be left hanging like this was infuriating. When the Earl finished, not only was there no opposition, but someone even chimed in in agreement.

"Indeed, the Ryan Family did poorly this time."

"It's not that they did poorly; they didn't consider us affiliates, did they?"

"After all, they're one of the Kingdom's pillars. Why would they care about us minor nobles?"

Instigated intentionally by some and cooperated with by others with ulterior motives, when the Ryan family head emerged from backstage, the entire hall was already in chaos, full of candid criticisms and sarcastic comments.

"Everyone! Please, please calm down, and listen to me first!"

Hearing the uproarious accusations in the hall, the Ryan family head broke into a cold sweat, quickly raised his voice, and shouted,

"Sorry, sorry, today's ceremony was indeed arranged in haste. The Duke was delayed on the road due to certain matters. It's our Ryan Family's inadequacy, neglecting to host you esteemed guests properly.

But the reason for this is to express our gratitude for your attendance by preparing meticulously. Unfortunately, complexity often leads to issues. We hope you longtime friends and relatives will overlook it due to our longstanding relations.

Furthermore, besides you all, Lady Anne representing Prime Minister Leonard and Prince Joshua representing the Princess are also present. Please give them some face and bear with us a little longer. I sincerely thank you all for your generosity!"

As the Ryan family head completed his speech, the once noisy hall suddenly quieted down.

The reason was simple: though hurried, his words were highly effective in controlling the situation.

Without hesitation, he first apologized, acknowledged his mistake, and soothed emotions. Then, with a tactical turn, implied the delay was not intentional neglect but out of utmost respect for everyone, skillfully reclaiming the moral high ground.

He then pointed out the Prime Minister and the Princess's presence, implying that causing further trouble would disrespect them, suppressing instigators like the petty Earl. Finally, by thanking everyone for their tolerance, he completely blocked the option of "intolerance."

It must be said, the ability of the Ryan Three Elders to climb to power after the Ryan Blood Night, becoming the actual controllers of the Ryan Family, wasn't solely due to seniority but because they indeed had some skills. This hasty series of moves from the Ryan family head certainly proved his rhetorical prowess.

Unfortunately, although his words successfully appeased 99% of the people, they managed to anger the most troublesome person among them.

"I am no one's representative!"

Upon hearing "Prince Joshua representing the Princess," the elegantly dressed young man standing in front of the guests, engaged in conversation with the Prime Minister's wife, couldn't help but scowl. Ignoring the discreet tugging of his female companion, he unhesitatingly retorted,

"Watch your words! If you must mention representation, then I represent the royal family, not anyone else!"

Chapter 186 Who is the winner?_1

Mouthy idiot!

Seeing the solemn front hall and the unmasked anger on the young prince's face, the elder of the Ryan family backstage couldn't help but curse silently, then hurried out to replace the one who had stepped on the mines precisely, smiling benevolently to smooth things over,

"All the same, all the same, no need to rush.

Whether it's Prince Joshua or Princess Veronica, both are children of His Majesty the King and can rightfully represent His Majesty and the royal family. Today, no matter which of the two attend, it is an honor for the Ryan Family.

Haha, speaking of which, the last time I saw Prince Joshua, he was only about seven or eight years old. In the blink of an eye, he is already able to represent His Majesty and attend the title succession ceremony of our Ryan Family. Time flies by so fast!"

Hmph! How can I be the same as her? You old geezer, selling age and seniority!

Watching the white-haired old man rush out from the backstage, trying hard to smooth over the situation, Joshua—with two irregular freckles on his cheekbones that seemed like dirt—narrowed his eyes, seemingly wanting to say more, but someone pinched him harshly at the waist.

"Your Highness!"

Hearing the slightly angry low call from his etiquette teacher and seeing the slightly panicked expression on his female companion's face, the freckled boy grudgingly bit back the reprimand that was about to spill out and impatiently urged,

"Fine then! When can your new duke make it here? Ask him to hurry, don't waste our time!"

"Almost there! The Duke should arrive shortly!"

Seeing that they had finally appeased the arrogant and volatile young prince, the two elders of the Ryan family simultaneously breathed a sigh of relief. They then stood up, guiding the guests back to their original positions, chatting with the freckled boy with smiles, and the tense atmosphere in the hall returned to harmony...until the commotion of horses neighing came from outside the manor.

"Duke! You have finally... hmm?"

Spotting the figure of someone he had been eagerly waiting to see, the expectant elder quickly went to meet them, eager to follow through with the remaining procedures.

However, upon meeting up, they discovered that the duke had changed his appearance since leaving; not only was his makeup wiped off, his carefully chosen accessories removed, and the specially tailored suit changed, but there was also a large stain on the front!

Damn it! The duke looks like he's fleeing from a disaster; how can the ceremony proceed? Is this how old York handles things?

Listening to the whispering among the guests in the hall and feeling the eyes resembling thorn pricks on his back, the elder of the Ryan family felt his world spinning!

"Duke!"

Seeing the stain on Leon's chest, the head of the Ryan family couldn't help but angrily and incredulously demand,

"What happened to you? Where's your makeup? Your clothes? Old York?"

"Uh..."

Seeing the desperate eyes of the two elders before him, Leon, who had barely spared the old butler from being sent off, felt guilty and replied awkwardly,

"The old butler... he suddenly had a heart attack, and I barely saved him. He is now lying in the car, and this stain on my chest is from when he had a fit and spat saliva..."

Oh... He was perfectly fine when he left. Did he just coincidentally have a heart attack?

Hearing Leon's explanation, the two Ryan elders exchanged a glance, both seeing deep helplessness in the other's eyes.

"Don't worry! There's still a way!"

Hearing the increasingly loud discussions in the hall, the elder of the Ryan family took a deep breath and instructed the panicked head of the family,

"You first find a way to calm the guests. I will take the duke to the back to redo his makeup and change clothes, then come out again. Maybe then it can..."

"No need to go to such trouble, I'll just say a few words."

Although he wanted to add, "or else... or else...", considering the two old men were quite advanced in age and might be provoked into further health incidents, Leon suppressed the urge to elaborate, instead pulling away the hand of the family head and striding toward the hall.

"Duke? Wait for a moment!"

"Wait! What... what are you going to do?"

Of course, what I want to do is to get rid of this unfortunate duke title!

Ignoring the two elders chasing him hurriedly, Leon pushed through the crowd of guests, stepped onto the main stage of the ceremony, and addressed the crowd below,

"I am here to announce something. If you insist on me being this duke, then I intend to use the entire Ryan Family..."

"Scoundrel!"

A familiar shout interrupted Leon's words as a notorious earl from the Capital City emerged from the crowd, compared him to the freckled boy with a dark face, and sinisterly provoked,

"Daring to arrive late for the succession ceremony, delaying the esteemed guests for this long, you don't offer any apology?"

You are... oh, so it's the little troublemaker.

Recognizing the speaker by the emblem pinned to his chest, Leon couldn't be bothered to reply, but he did glance at the pair of male and female guests in the front row.

The lady on the left in the plain gown seemed to be the Prime Minister's wife, whom he had seen in the newspaper photos with him, looked quite pleased; as Leon caught her gaze, she even nodded and saluted actively.

Whereas the half-grown child on the right with the "dirty" spot on his face must be Prince Joshua, who had once splashed him with mud and toppled a caravan on the road. This brat was glaring at him angrily, only restrained by people beside him.

Best not to come out! Saves me trouble!

...

Sadly, although Leon only gave a brief glance at "the esteemed guests," and immediately withdrew his gaze intending to finish quickly and abandon the unfortunate title,

the eyes are windows to the soul, and his seemingly had more transparency than others; even just a glance conveyed his inner disdain.

"How dare you!"

After meeting Leon's gaze for just a moment, with eyes showing three parts contempt and seven parts disgust, and underneath, a fierce looking down that couldn't be hidden, Joshua, already filled with suppressed fire, exploded.

Shaking off the arm of his companion, the freckled boy angrily looked up and scolded,

"You are nothing but a lowly commoner, who stumbled upon immense luck to inherit a title, and you dare look at me with those eyes?"

"..."

Are you an idiot?

Merely glancing at him resulted in an onslaught of incomprehensible insults, leaving Leon not even having the time to get angry, only feeling utterly bewildered.

Reasonably speaking, characters likely to explode with just another look like this disappeared twenty years ago; not even third-rate dramas use such a cliché for villains, yet here he was encountering one today?

Damn it! I must blind those damned eyes of yours!

Witnessing firsthand as Leon's gaze shifted from disdain, to doubt, then to sudden comprehension, finally revealing a hint of pity like that for a fool, Joshua, already stoked with fury, saw his anger flare like a roaring fire.

"You lowly..."

"Prince Joshua!"

It wasn't just Leon startled by the sudden outburst from the freckled prince; snapping back from shock, the etiquette teacher immediately stepped in, grabbing Joshua and sternly admonishing,

"Mind your poise! Don't shame the royal family and your sister!"

"Shut up!"

Pushing aside the etiquette teacher who stepped on a landmine, the freckled prince snapped with bulging veins,

"She is her! I am me! Don't bring Veronica's stuff to me! I am myself, not her copy!

And you!"

Looking at the man on stage who genuinely looked down on him, and feeling his self-esteem battered, the freckled prince stomped toward the main stage, raging as he walked,

"You festering commoner! Illicit fruit hung from a crooked tree! Black-haired mongrel mixed among dogs!

As a wild-born duke, you dare scorn me? Believe that I can have you removed from being duke! Tomorrow you could be packing up your wildlings and leaving the Capital City. I...

"Ah!"

After swinging his arm with all his might, landing a resounding slap that sent him spinning sideways, Leon felt considerably eased. Amid the ensuing silence, he lifted the freckled prince by his collar and spat viciously on his "dirty spot."

Raising his sleeve, he stretched it to wipe harshly at the spot with his saliva, realizing it wasn't dirt but his natural freckles. Leon, somewhat disappointed, withdrew his hand, patting Joshua's rapidly swelling left cheek under his terror.

"Want me gone as duke? Alright, you'd better do as you say! If not, I'll consider you my grandson!"

...

I might know why old York suddenly had a heart attack...

Watching the new duke who not only spat on the Prince's face but even threatened to be the King's father, the head of the Ryan Family felt his heart rate wildly accelerate, rushing past 180 and constantly pushing toward 200 beats per minute.

"Elder... Elder, think of something quickly!"

In the tight moment, it wasn't just nine deaths for one life but rather being better off dead, the head of the Ryan family turned to their only hope, but...

"Thud!"

Before the head could turn, the oldest of the three elder Ryan members, the very last pillar, had already rolled eyes up and collapsed on the carpet, mouth askew and twitching, seemingly predicting the Ryan Family's tragic fate.

Worse still, the new duke, who had landed the Ryan Family in deep trouble, casually tossed aside the trembling Prince, openly declaring to the bewildered guests,

"Listen up! If you insist on me being this duke, then I propose using the entire Ryan Family as my dowry to marry Princess Veronica! At worst, we...

"Okay!"

A clear voice rang from the back as a woman utterly unexpected in such a setting stepped swiftly into the front hall. Under gazes ten times more bewildered than before, she joyously responded,

"I accept your proposal! From now on, you're my prince!"

Chapter 187 Where are the people? Are they all dead?_1

Faced with the sudden outburst, which killed the "competition" with just one sentence, everyone at Ryan Manor was completely stunned.

From the Prince Freckles, who was thrown to the ground, to the middle-aged noblewoman behind the princess who almost fainted on the spot, everyone who witnessed this scene could only widen their eyes uncontrollably and then instinctively open their mouths...

"Huh?????"

[Under the witness of Prince Joshua and half of the kingdom's nobility, First Princess Veronica personally agreed to your proposal. You have obtained the Gold Level Identity Badge "Prince of Lutung."]

[Prince of Lutung: A prince of the Kingdom of Lutung, husband of First Princess Veronica. Although you do not qualify to inherit the throne, your words and actions can to some extent represent the royal family's will.]

[Wearing Effect: As a prince of distinguished status, within the Kingdom of Lutung's territory, you may request anyone of lower status to salute you proactively.]

[Advancement Route: If your marriage to Princess Veronica is maintained long-term and remains intact even after she inherits the throne, this badge will automatically advance to Heterochromatic Badge "Man Behind the Queen (Rice White)."]

[Hidden Traits (no need to wear): Because this is purely a political marriage, Princess Veronica is quite fond of you but lacks a sufficiently deep emotional foundation. Thus, she will not interfere much in your private life.]

" ... "

Could she really be a princess?

After closing the automatically popped-up new badge, Leon opened his mouth, watching the voluptuous beauty striding towards him from outside the door, not knowing what to say for a moment.

The investigators from the Purification Bureau had just left yesterday, and the suspicion on me regarding the Ryan Blood Night hasn't been cleared. Logically, I should act cautiously now and quickly shake off the identity of Duke of Lionheart.

But... this was a Golden Badge! And it even had a clear Advancement Route, likely leading to an Abnormal one. If I changed my mind immediately, the badge wouldn't be taken back, would it?

...

"Apologies, the visit is a bit sudden, sorry for disturbing everyone."

While Leon hesitated on the stage, unsure whether to advance or retreat, a certain princess who seized a great opportunity had already walked briskly to the main stage.

After nodding in greeting to the nobility who were dumbfounded by her sudden appearance, Princess Veronica gently lifted the hem of her simple long skirt and gracefully curtsied.

Then she straightened up like a swan, turned lightly, and extended her white arm covered with a thin veil towards Leon on the stage, her cheeks slightly red as she gazed into his eyes, conveying a determination of breaking the boats.

I originally just wanted to watch the fun, but I didn't expect such a windfall waiting for me. This man before me, a few years younger than I am, is the last piece to saving the kingdom!

If I can leverage this marriage with him to successfully take over the political legacy of the Lionheart Family, it would be worth it even if it means completely offending the old nobility today or inviting the mad assassination of the rebels!

"No! I don't agree!"

Seeing the man on the stage hesitate slightly and then actually reach for his sister's outstretched hand, a prince with a severely swollen left cheek couldn't help but shiver all over, showing deep terror in his eyes, immediately raising a loud objection!

As the king's offspring, political literacy was naturally a crucial compulsory course. Although Joshua was arrogant and volatile, he was not completely foolish. After the initial shock, he immediately understood the meaning of this "hand-holding."

If that damned Duke of Lionheart successfully wooed Veronica by offering up the entire Ryan Family, it would mean that half of the kingdom would fall into his sister's hands. Their status would instantly reverse, with him ending up as the one abandoned by their father completely!

If Veronica were ruthless, he wouldn't even have a shot at inheriting the throne and might be thrown across the sea to feed the monkeys!

No! Absolutely not! Whatever it takes, I cannot let her succeed today! Never!

"Veronica!"

After drawing everyone's attention with two loud shouts, disregarding the still-faint pain from the slap mark on his face, Prince Freckles sternly rebuked,

"Father has already set the scope for your selection of a prince, and you must choose from those people! By agreeing to the Duke of Lionheart's proposal now, you are defying Father's orders!"

"Is that so?"

Watching Prince Freckles, who suddenly jumped out to cause trouble, Veronica curled her lips, maintaining the pose of extending her arm to Leon, responding unhurriedly,

"No choice, Duke of Lionheart is valiant, kind, young, and handsome, especially when he slaps someone in the face. It made me fall for him at first sight. Since love has come so suddenly, I can only disappoint Father's sincere intentions.

What's more, as his most beloved daughter, being a little bit willful regarding my lifelong decisions, I believe he won't blame me. He will probably even feel happy for my happiness... don't you think so, Joshua?"

Hearing his sister's loaded response, a dark expression immediately crossed Prince Freckles' face.

Damn it! That old guy would indeed be glad, but it's not because of your so-called happiness. It's because the leader of the old nobility suddenly went mad, bringing the Department of Road Administration and the military to side with the royal family!

This is troublesome. It seems she's determined to seize the opportunity to swallow up the Ryan Family's inheritance. This path seems to be a dead end now!

"Where are the people of the Ryan Family?"

Seeing his sister determined to marry the Duke of Lionheart, even if bringing up Father couldn't suppress her, and knowing that the Duke was audacious and wouldn't fear his threats, the unwilling Joshua quickly switched targets, trying to find the actual controllers of the Ryan Family to pressure that damn duke.

Coldly scanning a group of young golden haired people around him, Prince Freckles didn't even bother pretending, continuing to look for someone with decision-making power while sharply questioning,

"Is there no one left in the Ryan Family? Are you just going to watch this bastard duke wreak havoc? Do you willingly allow him to give away the entire Ryan Family?"

But even with his face already torn, no one from the Ryan Family stood up, responding with a stretch of silence and the guests' murmurs and whispers.

"Say something!"

Seeing the Ryan Family still not emerge in such circumstances, the anxious Prince Freckles knitted his brows and shouted angrily,

"Are you really just going to watch? Is the Ryan Family all dead? No one dares to stop his nonsense?"

"..."

"Don't bother looking, there really is no one left in the Ryan Family."

Watching the young wolf baring its fangs, trying to find someone to suppress him, Leon on the stage felt strange and couldn't help but remind,

"The former duke's butler had a heart attack and is being treated in a carriage outside; the only remaining elder is quite old, and when I slapped you, he couldn't withstand the shock, passing out directly;

as for the new head of the family, when your sister agreed to my proposal, I believe he clutched his heart and fell as well... ah, the one lying at the door should be him."

"..."

Huh???????

Chapter 188 Heartbeat Moment_1

"Poof."

Looking at his younger brother's face, swollen on one side, with an expression that was two parts shock, three parts confusion, and five parts incredulous amusement, the Princess bit her lip tightly, her face turning red as she inadvertently let out a small sound from the corner of her mouth.

Etiquette! Mind your etiquette!

It was as if she heard the psychic transmission of some middle-aged noblewoman. The amused Princess pinched her own thigh hard, barely holding back her laughter with the help of pain, and then raised the back of her hand higher towards Leon, speaking softly with a hint of reproach:

"My dear Prince, how long must you make me wait here?"

"..."

Gazing at the Princess below the stage, her pretty face flushed (from holding in laughter), her eyes filled with allure (from stifling laughter), with a notably dazzling white chest (that part was real), Leon hesitated for a moment before finally bending slightly to take her hand voluntarily.

It wasn't that I craved power, nor was I captivated by beauty, but... this was the Golden Badge!

And moreover, the Princess was the first in line for the throne. As long as he maintained this superficial marital relationship with her, the moment the Old King passed away, the Golden Badge would be upgraded to abnormal color. How could anyone refuse that?

Success!

Grasping Leon's hand, simultaneously seizing the Ryan Family's legacy and the future of the entire Kingdom, Veronica felt a sudden release, as if a shackle that had been crushing her was instantly lifted.

Taking a step onto the main platform, intertwining her fingers tightly with Leon's and standing by his side, Princess Veronica's charming face couldn't help but flush with excitement once again.

With this one-of-a-kind opportunity, she could completely assimilate the inheritance left by the Ryan Family, ensuring the royal family and her own power could control the Department of Road Administration and the military, allowing her long-desired reforms to proceed!

Next, she would clear away years of accumulated issues, find solutions to the fiscal deficit, and rebuild the military that had nearly been eroded by the Ryan Family, leading the Kingdom back to strength!

The Kingdom of the future would never again be like it was six years ago, when it crumbled instantly on the battlefield, and an invading army forced the displacement of more than half a county's citizens, displacing nearly a million people...

"Boom boom!"

With a Contamination Value that already exceeded 3, though Leon's physical conditioning wasn't enough to grant him completely non-human capabilities, his sensory abilities had already been significantly enhanced.

When the Princess stood by his side, aside from her increasingly rapid breathing, Leon vaguely heard her escalating heartbeat.

"Boom boom! Boom boom!"

Seeing the Princess with a somewhat unfocused gaze and increasingly flushed cheeks, feeling the humid warmth from her soft palm and her rapidly climbing body temperature, Leon couldn't help but frown slightly, softly inquiring:

"Your Highness? Are you all right?"

"You can just call me Veronica, or even Vini."

With nearly a decade of intense yearning about to be fulfilled, and the country she deeply loved finally on the brink of dawn, the intensely excited Princess gripped Leon's hand tightly, responding with eyes full of joy:

"I'm fine, really fine! I could even say I've never felt better than I do now!"

"Prince... no! Leon! I really must thank you, and on behalf of the entire Kingdom! Although I'm still unclear why you proposed to me, I can assure you, your choice was the right one! I... I seem to be a bit too excited..."

"Boom boom! Boom boom! Boom boom!"

Though still firmly clasping Leon's hand, as the heartbeat grew more intense, the Princess's body began to unconsciously lean against him, eventually looping her arm around Leon's and softly resting her head on his shoulder, speaking quietly with a blushing face:

"Support me, Leon... please support me? Perhaps... maybe I'm just too happy, I'm feeling a little dizzy now... and my heart is racing a bit..."

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, when the Princess leaned in, her glossy and full lips brushed slightly against Leon's earlobe, spreading searing warmth like contagion to Leon's ear, turning it red as well.

And her soft breath as she spoke tickled Leon's ear, causing his heartbeat to quicken as well. Leon felt his heart pounding like a drum, frenetically hammering against his chest and speeding up, the sound growing louder and louder...

"Boom boom boom! Boom boom boom! Boom boom boom!"

At some point, the entire hall fell silent again. Neither the whispering guests nor the Prince with eyes full of resentment made another sound. Instead, they all instinctively clutched their hearts.

What's happening to me?

Feeling the heat and flush rising in her cheeks due to the rushing blood, the Prime Minister's wife, standing in the front row like Prince Freckles, touched her unusually red face in confusion and looked toward the chamberlain at her side, hoping he could help her leave the increasingly stifling hall for some fresh air.

But before the Prime Minister's wife could speak, the chamberlain's legs gave way, and he stumbled forward a couple of steps before collapsing in front of the stage, struggling unsuccessfully to rise.

His collapse seemed to trigger some strange switch, as the hall was immediately filled with the thuds of falling bodies.

Like a collective drunken stupor, the hall's guests wore strange flushes, staggered a few steps, and then toppled in all directions...

"Poison! Someone's poisoned us!"

At that moment, someone finally perceived the anomaly. Prince Freckles, sprawled on the floor, flipped over, glaring at Leon on the stage like a hungry wolf, and roared with fury and despair:

"It was you! You poisoned us, didn't you?"

Idiot! This has nothing to do with poison, it's clearly an attack from an Anomalous Object!

Ignoring Prince Freckles's wild speculations, listening to the drum-like heartbeats resonating throughout the hall and sensing the ever-increasing blood flow within him, Leon, also feeling quite uncomfortable, took a deep breath, supported the now disoriented Princess to the side, and pulled out a small mirror from his coat, shaking it at himself.

"Woof~"

Along with Young Ha's understanding bark, a shopping bag with a goat's head and a black broom with cat paw prints on the handle instantly appeared in Leon's hand.

'Kid, we've figured it out a bit and realized your luck seems quite bad indeed.'

Peering through the holes in the shopping bag at the scene of chaos in the hall, the Black Goat summarized reluctantly:

'You really are a magnet for trouble, just like that Conan Demon God you mentioned. Wherever you go, something has to happen. No matter what you plan, nothing goes smoothly.'

'Enough with the nonsense, let's get to work!'

Touching the Black Goat's horn, Leon quickly surveyed everyone's soul status in the hall, finding them all "normal," which deepened his frown. He issued a mental command via "direct message":

'I suspect this is an attempted assassination of the Princess by the Rebels, but I couldn't locate the person deploying the Anomalous Object. Their "range" might exceed my vision.

However, it's also possible they used some means to evade soul-detection abilities after acquiring my information, so keep watch for me!'

Chapter 189 True·Heartbeat Moment_1

He neither attacked nor ran away? Quite cautious indeed.

Feeling the heartbeat on the main stage that was getting faster but still not moving and staying in place, an old man among the guests, dressed slightly shabbily and with a face full of pain, raised an eyebrow in surprise.

His ability temporarily "enhanced" the heart of everyone within range, accelerating their blood circulation.

If the opponent became overly tense or retreated immediately when sensing danger, the enhanced heart would receive double stimulation, causing the blood flow to surpass the body's limit, rendering them incapable of resisting.

In simple terms, the faster someone moved within his ability's range, the quicker they would fall, just like the two old men from the Ryan Family.

During the ten minutes his ability slowly took effect, they ran around, chatted with guests, and chased the target back and forth twice. Emotionally, they were continuously stimulated, combined with their poor health due to old age, so they collapsed even before his ability fully activated.

Yet the target on stage, although affected by his ability, had a heart less impacted than others, at about seventy percent. Combined with a physique slightly above an ordinary person's, he had not yet lost his ability to act...

"Seems I'll have to apply more pressure!"

Apologizing to his companions internally, the shabby old man applied pressure with his palm on his own chest, causing his frail body to tremble.

Simultaneously, the whole hall of people shivered along with him.

"No... I can't anymore..."

"Help... Help..."

"I don't want to die!"

Since everyone's physical strength varied, some could still lean against pillars or other objects to barely stand. However, under the sudden rush of blood to the brain, they all clutched their chests and fell, unable even to plea for help.

Now, Leon was the only one still standing in the entire hall.

...

Success!

Feeling the heart on stage racing towards its limit, the shabby old man couldn't help but smile subtly.

Even if you saw through my ability and knew the more you move, the quicker you fall, it did not matter. Whether you ran or not, you would still collapse from holding out!

"Step, step, step."

Hearing footsteps suddenly echoing from the stage, feeling the heart finally moving, the shabby old man smiled knowingly.

"Finally losing composure?"

Unfortunately, it's too late. Although my ability is highly limited, not only in small range, lengthy activation time, and indiscriminate of friend or foe, failing to escape immediately upon sensing abnormality means you've already lost!

"Tap."

Surprisingly, the footsteps on the stage didn't last long or even leave the main stage at all, stopping instead at a spot suitable for addressing everyone present.

"Ladies and gentlemen."

Glancing at the guests below, confirming they'd mostly lost mobility, Leon took a deep breath and loudly asked,

"Why don't you rise and salute the Prince?"

???

Are you mad?

Hearing Leon's question, the shabby old man hiding among the guests almost laughed aloud.

These people were under his ability, their hearts almost driven to death; how could they stand and salute now? At this moment, he thought only he who wielded the ability could...

Wait? Only I can stand now?!

Realizing something was amiss, the shabby old man trembled, eyes filled with terror, wishing he could go deaf.

But it was too late.

As Leon's words fell, the shabby old man, previously lying in pain, suddenly released the hand pressed to his heart, sprang up from the carpet, and respectfully bowed to the target he planned to assassinate, face full of fear.

"Greetings, Pr..."

"Bang!"

The shabby old man, just standing, seemed grabbed by an invisible giant hand and bent backward at a sharp angle, hitting his head with a "bang" and passing out.

...

"Seems it's him."

Feeling his heartbeat stabilize and confirming the anomalous object causing it to accelerate had stopped, Leon's frowning brow finally relaxed.

Beckoning to the fallen shabby old man with his fingers, he used the power of the Holy Spirit pendant to drag him over and searched his body, finally finding a hard metallic object near his heart.

[Name: Heartbeat Moment (Enhance, Synchronize)]

[Appearance: A pacemaker made from flexible brass embedded in the chest cavity of a patient, driven by high-concentration whale oil injections at regular intervals, with an extremely intricate internal structure.

If you listen closely, you should hear the hiss of a micro-steam engine operating and the meshing sound of dozens of micro-rods driving gears.]

[Ability: Heart Enhancement, Heartbeat Synchronization]

[Cost: None]

[File: A precision instrument smuggled from Croak, the City of Machinery, to help patients with congenital weak hearts maintain their heartbeat. Just the material cost is enough to buy a hundred-acre sugar cane plantation.

Due to its exorbitant cost, each user gains a healthy body and escapes death from a weak heart but cannot avoid the greed of marauders.]

[Evaluation: Although this anomalous object's ability is extremely concealed and nearly impossible to detect, if you don't have a heart several times weaker than normal, it's advised not to use it.]

[Contamination Value: 2.5]

[Through personal observation and summarization, you've gained a lot of intelligence on "Heartbeat Moment," activating the heterogeneous badge "Materialist Soul (Crimson)."

Understanding the activation rules of "Heartbeat Moment" greatly increased your resistance to this anomalous object, allowing you to block its deeper influences.]

...

So... its ability is to first enhance its heart, then forcibly synchronize all hearts within range?

Tearing open the shabby old man's shirt to look at the complex and intricate device, Leon hesitated but refrained from removing it. Instead, he took a rope and tied the unconscious man up.

Instructing the Black Goat to keep watch for abnormalities and to notify him immediately if anything arose, Leon took out the [Plague-Infected Blood Band] obtained from a female prisoner, first wrapping it around the man's leg to temporarily deprive him of leg health, then around the back of his head to heal his head injury.

"Ah! My... um?"

After his concussion healed, the groggy shabby old man felt sharp pain in his leg but couldn't scream as a salty old rag was stuffed into his mouth.

"I have a question for you."

Tossing the other sock into his portable mirror, Leon, with one shoe back on, looked at the despairing man and asked rapidly,

"Are your accomplices nearby?"

"Indeed, there are more... So including you, how many rebels possessing anomalous objects are around? One? Two? Three?"

"Only two people? Then..."

Chapter 190 Recruitment doesn't have to be new, as long as it works_1

"Kid, the gun!"

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Just as Leon was leveraging the Black Goat's ability to quickly extract the intelligence he needed, a blond guard who had fainted outside the door suddenly pulled out the nail gun from his waist and fired four consecutive shots at Leon's head, forcibly interrupting his interrogation.

Blond? Could Ryan's family also be joining the Rebels?

Relying on the shield of the Holy Spirit pendant to block all four nails, Leon watched as the blond guard, swift and deft, replaced the gas canister, preparing to shoot at him again. Feeling that something was off, Leon furrowed his brows and aimed his invisible long nail, initially intended for the guard's head, at the nail gun in the blond guard's hand instead.

"Crack!"

With a sharp metallic rupture, the newly replaced gas canister exploded instantly, and the rapidly spreading compressed air pushed the blond guard, sending him flying backward into the wall behind him.

"Damn it!"

Looking at his nail gun, with the air channel split and rendered unusable, the blond guard cursed bitterly. He then threw the nail gun toward Leon and rolled his eyes before toppling groundward.

At the same time, another guard, who was in Leon's blind spot, suddenly stood up, pulling out a nail gun from his waist and firing four nails at the back of Leon's head.

"Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Indeed, that member of Ryan's family was merely being controlled, not another Rebel's true form. As for the other Rebel's ability, it must be some way to forcefully control others' actions.

Upon hearing the noise, Leon turned his head back and looked at the nails scattered on the ground and the guard still shooting at him from a distance. He couldn't help but take a deep breath, cold sweat streaming down his back.

No wonder the Cleaner's death rate is so high. When facing opponents armed with various peculiarly powerful Anomalous Objects, especially those who could control Anomalous Objects, even the slightest negligence could be fatal!

If I'd just acted on impulse and used the Holy Spirit pendant to kill the blond guard, not only would I have wrongly killed an innocent controlled individual, but if I'd thought the enemy was dealt with and retracted my shield to conserve energy, I'd have gotten a bullet straight through my head from this blind-spot shot!

...

Damn it! This ability is so annoying!

Watching Leon in his invisible shield, ignoring "his" shooting and instead scanning the surroundings intently, the person controlling the blond guard gritted their teeth in frustration.

Having depleted all the nails in the guard's gun without breaking Leon's shield, he had to switch to a new body and continue shooting at Leon from another blind spot.

Toward the end, even before the preceding body pulled the trigger, and the nail left the chamber, he had already switched to a new body to continue shooting, the "bang-bang" of gunfire almost forming a continuous sound.

Yet, unfortunately, no matter what position he shot from, even those impossible blind spots, he could not penetrate the invisible "turtle shell" surrounding the target. Hundreds of nails were stopped, not one falling within half a meter of the target.

How could he be killed?

Watching the potential "hosts" in the hall getting taken down one by one by the target, leaving almost no one unarmed, the second Rebel helplessly lowered his nail gun.

No wonder Barton and Samantha both fell into his hands. Although his ability is simple and brutal, it supports both attack and defense with a strength clearly surpassing ordinary firearms.

In a surprise assassination, I could think of a way to catch him off-guard, but in this situation where he's prepared, my abilities were completely countered!

Have they given up? Then it's my turn!

After the gunfire quieted, Leon looked at the middle-aged guard who had voluntarily stopped shooting in the distance and calmly asked:

"Tell me, is your true self nearby?"

?!!!

Here it is! That deadly interrogation method!

Upon hearing Leon's question, the middle-aged guard was startled and immediately resumed shooting, switching to another body to continue firing, trying to mask the devil-like interrogation with the noise of the gunshots.

Unfortunately, even with that slight delay, Leon already got the answer he wanted.

"So your true self is nearby."

Turning to look at another guard behind him, breaking the nail gun in his hand, and cutting off the deafening gunfire, Leon's lips curled slightly upward before continuing to inquire:

"Is your true self in the hall?"

"Not in the hall, huh? Then in the manor? Outside the manor?"

"Not in any of those places? Then in the core building area? Still near the main building? So the target is close to the hall but not in it?"

"So, if your true self is near the hall... what does your true self look like? Man? Fat? Thin? Elderly? Young?"

"..."

With Leon's calm questions, the people controlled by the second Rebel grew increasingly terrified.

Even if I switch bodies and play dead lying on the ground, Leon's questioning only slowed slightly, continuing steadily and constantly.

It seemed as if a fierce tiger was unraveling the layers surrounding me; with each question of his, another layer of my disguise was easily peeled away, reducing the barrier between me and the tiger's maw by one more layer.

Initially, I merely heard the "tiger's" voice, but as more layers of "protection" fell away, I gradually felt the powerful pressure from its claw.

Gradually, I seemed to smell the metallic blood scent from its mouth and felt those sharp teeth, hanging with bits of flesh, lightly tracing my goose-bumped neck through the last layer of gossamer-thin protection...

...

"A slender, somewhat short young man outside the hall yet very close by?"

Recapping the answers, Leon tilted his head in thought, showing an expression of realization.

"If you entered Ryan Manor without entering the hall... then your disguised identity should be as a servant or an attendant, right? I recall seeing a rather short attendant unloading the footstool from the carriage earlier... could that be you?"

"..."

He knows! He knows who I am!

Seeing his true self exposed and overwhelmed by the slow-tightening noose, the tormented Rebel nearly lost his sanity.

"Devil! You're a devil!!!"

A certain corpulent woman lying trembling at the door suddenly jumped up and screamed at Leon, tears in her eyes, before collapsing back down.

Simultaneously, in Leon's soul vision, a terrified soul dashed out of the hall, as if pursued, and hastily jumped into a new body, then sprinted madly towards the outside of the manor!

Never again! I'm never coming back!