

I! Cleaner 281

Chapter 281: Explore the Bottom_1

"Subscribe to the newspaper!"

After waiting in line at the subscription window of the post office for half a day, Leon finally squeezed to the front of the counter. He handed over the pre-written list of newspapers and magazines to the clerk and spoke rapidly,

"Renew all of these, top off for two weeks. I want double issues of all newspapers, both entertainment and political-business quality editions. The magazines should be platinum versions with special editions and supplements."

"Alright, I'll handle that for you right away."

Taking the newspaper subscription form filled out by Leon, and glancing at the long list of newspaper and magazine names, the previously exhausted clerk, who had been somewhat indifferent in his service, suddenly beamed like a freshly bloomed trumpet flower.

After clicking the counter's dials for a while according to the newspaper names on the subscription form, the clerk smiled broadly and said,

"Sir, the total cost for renewing these newspapers and magazines is 7 Silver Wheels and 9 Copper Wheels. Do you happen to have our post office's stamp card? If you're a long-standing customer with us, based on the volume of your subscription, you won't need to queue up at the gift area for stamping. I can directly stamp the new card for you here."

"Thank you for your help."

Hearing the clerk's words, Leon couldn't help but let out a long sigh of relief. He then took out a stack of stamp cards he found in the director's drawer and handed them over to the clerk through the side slot of the window.

The so-called stamp cards were essentially covert rebates offered by various post offices and newspaper agencies to retain loyal customers. Upon subscribing to a type of newspaper for the first time at the post office, you could receive a corresponding thin iron card. After that, each time you renewed your subscription for a type of newspaper at the post office, you could use a machine to stamp the card.

When the subscription time was long enough and enough stamps were accumulated, the post office and newspaper agency would give out corresponding gifts and renewal discount vouchers, or invite participation in annual viewing, like-minded reading clubs, and other special events, considered as exclusive benefits for major customers.

Under the dissatisfied gazes of the people lined up, the clerk behind the counter, "licking big customers furiously," even neglected his basic duties. He pulled out a stamp machine from under the desk and placed each of Leon's stamp cards on it, stamping them one by one with a hum.

Shortly after, having finished stamping all the cards, the clerk, without even wiping his sweat, returned the stamp cards with a smile and thoughtfully reminded,

"Sir, the stamps for your subscriptions to 'Wine Traveler,' 'The Sun News Public Edition, Quality Edition,' and 'Charming Focus' are already complete. You can head directly to the gift area to collect your gifts. I

just checked for you. The gift for 'Wine Traveler' is a small bottle of selected Chardonnay dry white wine. The gift for 'Charming Focus' is a Charm Card from Meikou Lingerie, which allows you to try new lingerie in advance and offers a 30% discount on purchases. As for 'The Sun News Double Editions,' the gift is a Temporary Access Pass, which you can use to visit reporters and editors of interest at the newspaper office opposite to ask about secret news not printed due to space or policy issues."

"Thank you."

Taking the stamp cards back from the clerk, Leon, having finally completed the "task," couldn't help but relax slightly. Following the clerk's guidance, he went to the gift area and collected the three stamped gifts.

Naturally, the small bottle of wine and the lingerie discount card were to be brought back to the director. If his guess was correct, she must have been eyeing these for a long time. Otherwise, she wouldn't have specially asked him to subscribe to the newspaper for her despite being busy at the headquarters meeting. However, this access pass...

Looking at the access pass in his hand, adorned with a golden gear-shaped sun emblem, Leon hesitated momentarily at the street side before deciding not to board a public carriage. Instead, he walked towards the Sun News newspaper office across the street.

As for newspapers, Leon had never had the money to subscribe to them nor much interest in them in the past. Even if he occasionally needed some news, he would read others' old newspapers, so naturally, he didn't have any particular journalist he wanted to visit.

However, after rifling through the director's newspapers yesterday and discovering her clipping embarrassing photos of him, Leon found a name in those articles about him that piqued his interest in visiting.

Nicole Collins.

If he remembered correctly, the name of the person who was the only Anomalous Object holder not present at the Rebels meeting was Nicole, and the old Owen couple, who treated little Baskin as their own child, had the last name Collins. So...

Could it be possible that the journalist who wrote several incriminating articles about him was the twelfth member of the Rebels?

Although he seriously doubted the roots of that Sun journalist, Leon's usual habit was to play it safe and wait until the director or Senior Emma returned before taking action.

However, since he had received a pass from the stamp card, giving him a legitimate investigation excuse, along with the dual protection of Yang Xin and the director's hair, scouting in advance shouldn't be an issue, right?

...

"Phew... your undercover work these past few days almost suffocated us!"

After Leon took the Black Goat out of the small mirror and placed it into the shopping bag he carried, the Black Goat, who had not made a sound for a while, couldn't help but complain,

"Isn't the undercover mission over? Why do you still stuff us into that broken mirror? Can't you just carry us around like before? Let me tell you, that broken mirror is really suffocating. Other than a second-rate heart no one cares about, there's just a senseless puppy. There's not even a living creature to chat with us! It's so boring in there!"

"Alright, I'll try to carry you more."

Although the Black Goat wasn't exactly a good buddy, as a past comrade who fought alongside Leon and helped him through the most dangerous "rookie period," it held a certain position in Leon's heart. This small request certainly wasn't a reason to refuse.

And receiving Leon's promise, knowing it wouldn't have to be stuffed back into the boring Mirror World, the Black Goat immediately perked up. After chuckling a couple of times, it unexpectedly took the initiative to ask,

"Kid, let's get straight to the point. Whose soul do you want me to check this time?"

Hmm? In the past, although the Black Goat cooperated, it always demanded things in return. It never talked this easily. Looks like it's been really suffocating these past days.

Thoughtfully looking at the Black Goat, whose attitude had dramatically changed, Leon, while presenting his stamp card and access pass to the Sun News's gatekeeper, replied,

"It's a journalist named Nicole. I suspect she's the Anomalous Object holder of the Rebels and plan to check her out... Follow the usual procedure. Once we find her, if she lies, just give me a heads-up."

"Got it, leave it to us!"

Afraid that Leon might find it troublesome and stuff it back into the desolate Mirror World, the Black Goat decided to demonstrate its "value" and actively began to scan the souls within a kilometer radius.

"Hmm?"

After scanning the area and seemingly discovering something amiss, the Black Goat's expression changed dramatically, and it hurriedly urged,

"Quick! Put us back!"

Chapter 282: Following the network cable to your door_1

"Mm?"

Just as the Black Goat suddenly reneged and demanded Leon retract it immediately, a female reporter wearing a wide-brimmed wool hat in The Sun News newsroom suddenly felt something, reached back to touch her own buttock, and a look of astonishment appeared in her dark, glossy eyes.

"Nicole?"

Even though her movements were large, the female reporter didn't make a sound—there wasn't even the rustle of clothing, so she went unnoticed. Only her colleague's sleeve brushed against her, noticing something was off, and they tilted their head to whisper a reminder,

"Be careful, the director is holding back, itching to yell at someone. Don't get yourself caught!"

"Uh-huh, but don't worry, he won't be his arrogant self for long."

Nodding slightly at the kind-hearted warning of her colleague, she habitually pulled down her wool hat, tucked a wayward tuft of hair at her temple, then scrunched her nose at the supervisor who was frowning during his lecture, and then, turning her head, said with a playful grin,

"Old Martin has no standing in his family; he really can't support himself at home. Beaten dead by his two-hundred-pound shrew of a wife, he can only take it out on us during meetings.

So, getting scolded a few times now is nothing. Next month, when I become the head of the news department, I guarantee we won't have a single pointless meeting just for impotent old men to vent their frustration!"

"Uhh..."

Tickled by the female reporter's words, her colleague next to her bit down on their cheek to stop themselves from bursting into laughter, managing to hold back with a face flushed red.

Catching her breath after stifling the laughter, the female colleague couldn't help but whisper a complaint,

"Nicole, don't get me in trouble. If I'd laughed, Old Martin would probably point at my nose and scold me for an hour!"

"Sorry, sorry."

Offering an apology with no sincerity at all, the female reporter casually flipped her wrist, pulling out a theater ticket, and placed her genuine apology into her colleague's hand.

"Take this as my apology, okay?"

Is this... a ticket to the Morning Star Troupe? And signed by Master Wilde, allowing for a backstage handshake after the performance!

Sneaking a look at the ticket in her palm, the female colleague was overjoyed but quickly became suspicious, skeptically looking at the smiling female reporter,

"Not okay! You're suddenly giving me such an expensive ticket, it must mean there's trouble you need help with, or you want me to cover for you!"

"Correct! You're so smart!"

Winking playfully at her, the female reporter gently clasped her legs together, her face bashfully flushed akin to having powder dusted on it, shyly saying,

"Well... I stayed up late yesterday. This morning, afraid I couldn't hold up, I drank a few more cups of coffee, and Old Martin's nonsense is unusually abundant today, repeating for over an hour and still not finished, so could you maybe..."

Understood, she needed to relieve herself and required someone to cover for her, right?

But today's the pitch meeting. When it's time to stand and present the story ideas, if Nicole isn't back, I'm afraid I'll have to take double the scolding for her.

Double the scolding... a ticket signed by Master Wilde... Ugh! It's worth it!

Hesitating for a while while gripping the ticket, the female colleague sighed, pocketing the ticket, before sliding her chair forward a bit to shield most of the female reporter's body.

"Come back quickly!"

"Mm-hmm-hmm, you're the best, Maggie~ mwah~"

Blowing a sincere kiss to her friend, the female reporter, having found her decoy, leaned her upper body slightly backward, using her colleague's body to block others' view. She then discretely extended her booted foot, deftly nudging open the slightly ajar back door of the conference room.

"Screech~"

With a faint creak from the old door hinge, the female reporter, who had been sitting primly at the table just a moment ago, quietly slipped out of the conference room without anyone noticing her departure.

...

Did she already leave?

After slipping out of the meeting room and hastily making her way to the newspaper office's entrance, feeling the vanished presence, the female reporter knitted her brows and asked, with no one there to hear,

"Didn't you just tell me you sensed another part of your information? Where did it go?"

There was no response for a long while.

When the female reporter's patience was nearly exhausted, a lazy-sounding voice finally sounded slowly.

'It ran away.'

No kidding! I came over and didn't see anyone, of course, it ran away! The question is where did it run to!

Grumbling with a slightly darkened expression, the female reporter irritably demanded,

"Direction! Location! Features! Quick! Tell me whatever you know! Stop making me ask! Where did the other seventh of you go?!"

'...'

"..."

'I don't know.'

"..."

That damn lazy demon!

Squandering a precious autograph ticket only to come up empty at the entrance, the female reporter stomped her foot in frustration but found she had no way of dealing with the part of the demon too lazy to make a sound, so she had to grit her teeth and start back toward the newspaper building.

Annoying demon! If I bother with you again, I'm a fool!

'By the way.'

Just as the female reporter was swearing silently, an invisible furry goat tail floating behind her rear leisurely spoke,

'There's someone from the Purification Bureau waiting in your office.'

?!!!

Hearing the goat tail's reminder, the female reporter's eyebrows raised slightly, then completely ignoring her recent oath, she asked with a tense voice,

"Who's waiting? How many people? Are they here to arrest me or what?"

'...'

"Speak!!!"

'Male, one, your fan.'

"Ah???"

...

"This gentleman collected three years' worth of double subscription stamps and received a pass to our newspaper, Mr. Lyon."

After introducing Leon's identity, the cheerful guide gestured toward the female reporter wearing the wool hat, smiling as they continued,

"This is reporter Nicole from the news department. Over the six years since joining the news department, she has written over four hundred pieces of public news and more than a hundred twenty in-depth reports, immensely popular with our readers at The Sun News.

Nicole's reports attract a large loyal readership, be it in the public edition or the quality edition. However, there aren't many readers like you who subscribe to both editions and continuously for a full three years... You two chat now; I won't disturb you further."

Following a pointed introduction lifting both parties' "status," the guide promptly exited the office without lingering.

After the guide left, the two, both trying to guess the other's identity, stood in silence for a moment before the female reporter spoke first,

"Mr. Lyon, you..."

"I came this time to ask you a few questions."

As Leon spoke, he pulled out the prepared newspapers from his shopping bag, laying them out on the table,

"Charl Department Store's Big Sale, One Man Hospitalized by 'Large Sum'"

"Shocking! The Lane Family Slaughtered Last Night, and the Murderer is This Person"

"Duke Can't Beat Cabbage? A Comprehensive Look at the Lane Family Crisis!"

"Publicly Slapping the Prince, the Lane Family's New Duke Suspected of Having Mania!"

"Beauty Over Power? Duke of Lionheart Suspected of Joining the Royal Family!"

"..."

"I just want to ask you."

Pointing at the newspapers on the table, Leon, watching his counterpart's expression, asked with palpable dissatisfaction,

"In just over a month, you've written about me eight times, all in a negative light, so what exactly is it between us? When writing a report and sourcing material, do you have to fixate on just one person to milk?"

Chapter 283: Feeling the ground also involves skill_1

So it turns out they're here to pick a fight with me...

After listening to Leon's aggressive questioning, the female journalist's previously tense back slightly relaxed.

Great, bring it on! As long as they're not here to arrest me!

"Mr. Lyon... No, the soon-to-be Prince Consort of the royal family, the Duke of Lionheart! It seems you have a slight misunderstanding about me."

After calming herself a bit, the female journalist smiled and said,

"Firstly, I only wrote seven reports about you, not eight. Secondly, imagine if you were the journalist for The Sun News and stumbled upon the news I found, wouldn't you have written a few articles too?"

Of course, I would. I'd probably write even more than you.

Upon hearing the journalist's retort, Leon's face involuntarily turned slightly embarrassed, realizing that he had indeed been causing quite a stir, making it quite normal for a journalist to focus on him.

But luckily, that wasn't the main point. My true purpose wasn't to question the news reports, but rather to probe into the background of this suspect 'Nicole the journalist,' who might be a member of the Rebels.

...

"Okay, I admit my recent activities have been indeed newsworthy topics."

Wool hat, turtleneck, professional suit, small leather shoes, thick shawl... The clothing was covering almost everything, with nothing exposed except for the hands with light pink nail polish.

Strange, the walls of The Sun News office have metal heat pipes installed, and it's not cold inside. Wearing so much seems a bit odd, doesn't it?

While carefully observing the female journalist in front of him, Leon rolled his eyes in feigned anger and said,

"But none of your articles ever said anything nice about me, some even border on slander!"

"You're exaggerating~"

The female journalist shook her head, likewise observing her "opponent" as she smilingly reached out and tapped the newspaper on the table.

"Although in the eyes of many, The Sun News can only be considered an entertainment paper, even for political and business publication issues, most stories are mere speculation. Personally, I still value the authenticity of the reports. For example, in the reports about you, I refrained from making any definitive conclusions on uncertain situations, using terms like 'suspected,' 'possibly,' or 'according to the writer's guess,' don't you agree?"

Her hands were so white, with skin so smooth and tender they seemed almost translucent.

Not responding to the journalist's question right away, he pretended to be looking at the newspaper text while actually glancing at her hand, squinting his eyes slightly.

This skin quality seemed way too good.

Although it was wintertime and the capital city's winter was cold and dry, and the wind outside The Sun News office was strong, her skin should have been slightly dry after just coming in from outside, no matter how good it was.

This unusually radiant skin shouldn't appear on a day like today... Considering the identity of an Anomalous Object holder, her hand might have some special "issues." Maybe later, he could find an opportunity to shake hands and see if it's some sort of Anomalous Object.

"Alright, I admit you have a point."

Retracting his gaze from the "newspaper," Leon's expression slightly softened as he pulled out an older newspaper from his shopping bag and placed it on the table.

"The 'Sewage' Incident a Deliberate Act? Thomas Ryan: The Evidence Is Fabricated"

"Miss Nicole, you wrote this report too, didn't you?"

Is this... the incident where the Ryan Family, together with two other aristocrats, intentionally poured sewage into public water pipes in an attempt to seize Charl Department Store?

He remembered after writing this report, he handed over the evidence he had found directly to the royal family's Minister of Justice, so despite the Ryan Family's strong denial, they were subjected to a rigorous investigation led by the Princess, fined about thirty thousand Gold Wheels, and forced to sell off the hydraulic company's operating rights at a low price.

So... that was all just a ruse. The reason this new Duke of Lionheart was picking a fight was actually this report that caused the Ryan Family considerable losses?

Recognizing the newspaper Leon produced, the female journalist frowned and, looking at the new head of the Ryan Family before her, nodded with a blank expression.

"Indeed, I did write it. Is there some question you have with this report?"

"I do have some questions for you."

While pondering where the Black Goat mentioned "Yangwei" might be, Leon narrowed his eyes and said,

"The main question concerns the evidence. Can you tell me where exactly your evidence came from?"

"Mr. Lyon, if you've carefully read the report, then you should know that I clearly stated the source of the evidence right there."

Feeling uncomfortable being scrutinized by Leon's excessively "sharp" gaze, the female journalist furrowed her brows and said,

"When the Charl Department Store's money box collapsed and injured someone, I received news and rushed over for an interview. I found that piece of evidence right there in the shopping plaza. Whether you believe it or not, this is the truth!"

"I believe, of course, I believe."

Leon nodded and, with an equally expressionless face, said,

"But did you ever consider why such important evidence would appear there without reason, and that you would just happen to find it? Could it have been deliberately placed there by someone?"

"So, you suspect I took someone's money and deliberately exposed the Ryan Family's dark secrets?"

Vaguely "understanding" what this new Duke of Lionheart meant, the female journalist's demeanor turned unfriendly, crossing her legs and leaning against the chair back as she sarcastically chuckled,

"Your Grace, firstly, regarding the data about the hydraulic company, do you truly know nothing at all? If you're unclear on such a critical matter, I suggest you do a self-check. At least according to my investigation, the punishment the Kingdom imposed on your Ryan Family could have been considered lenient.

Moreover, if you believe my reporting of falsehoods led to your Ryan Family's penalty, then you should probably file a complaint with The Sun News's dispute resolution department, and then take it up with the news administration... Well, the complaints window is to the right as you exit, take the stairs down."

Raising her hand to gesture Leon towards the dispute resolution department's location, the female journalist straightened up with a look that seemed frightened, batting her eyes as she said with mock fear,

"Your Grace, even though the Ryan Family is almost done for, they are still not someone a little journalist like me can afford to provoke. If you file a suit, I will definitely plead guilty and compensate you for defamation, with the maximum amount being... thirty Silver Wheels, if I recall correctly?"

"Tsk tsk, a whole thirty Silver Wheels! Just multiply that by ten thousand, and it'd almost be enough for your Ryan Family's fine, wouldn't it? This penalty is just too large, and I, the daring little journalist, have definitely learned my lesson. Please, could you spare me?"

"..."

Expert at fanning the flames, this person seems to be a master provocateur.

Looking at the journalist, who was begging for mercy in words but actually provoking intensely, Leon stayed silent for a moment. Contrary to what she expected, he didn't explode in anger but instead picked up a stack of old newspapers he had asked the guide for earlier.

Under her puzzled gaze, Leon flipped to the article titled "Charl Department Store's Big Sale, a Man Hospitalized by 'Heavy Coin'" and pointed to the backside buried under a pile of money, then turned his body, back to her, and asked,

"Miss Nicole, does this figure look familiar to you?"

"..."

Looking over at Leon's backside and the old coat matching the color in the photograph, the female journalist's eyes widened in surprise.

"That... unfortunate guy nearly buried under the pile of money... was actually you?"

"It was indeed me, so, in fact, you've written eight reports about me over this period. Seven were in The Sun News's political and business editions, with this one in the entertainment section. Plus..."

Turning back, he looked at the surprised female journalist and slowly said,

"The evidence you picked up was what I brought to the shopping plaza. Originally, I intended for Charl Department Store's owner to come forward with the sewage issue. But I ended up in the hospital unexpectedly, and the evidence was left behind in the plaza, eventually picked up by you, who came for an interview."

"..."

"..."

Seeing Leon in front of her, seemingly genuine, the female journalist was momentarily stunned before murmuring,

"So... you came here to..."

"I came to thank you."

Grasping the unusually tender hand of the female journalist and shaking it vigorously, a radiant smile slowly spread across Leon's face. With extraordinary warmth, he fervently said,

"Thank you, you really helped me a lot!"

"..."

Chapter 284: She is her, she is just her_1

So... you weren't here to pick a fight? You even came to thank me? Then just now...

Looking at Leon, who was shaking her hand vigorously, and recalling her own sarcastic provocation earlier, the female reporter's ears suddenly turned red as she felt a strong sense of shame.

The person who successfully grabbed her hand didn't fare much better. After reading the intelligence provided by [Materialism], Leon's pupils instantly contracted!

...

[Name: Untouchable Hand (Flesh, Energy, Soul)]

[Appearance: A delicate, white female hand that emits a faint white glow at night. It cannot be damaged by cutting, chopping, freezing, burning, voodoo curses, or mental willpower attacks.]

[Ability: Flesh Untouchable, Energy Untouchable, Soul Untouchable]

[Cost: Permanent loss of the user's original hands]

[File: The hands of a nun who devoted her life to the Secret God. From birth, she was chosen as one of ninety-nine "Secreterers," with her features completely sealed and destroyed.

Although she lived in this world, during her entire lifespan of one hundred and fifty years, she never had any interactions with the world, besides touching with her hands, truly being a "Secreter that Never Existed."

Near the end of her life, members of the Secret Church removed her hands intending to offer them to the Secret God, but the Purification Bureau's Gemini Sub-bureau arrived and killed all the believers in the Secret Church stronghold, sabotaging the sacrifice.

After completing the cleansing task, the director of the Gemini Sub-bureau found the nun, who didn't even have a name, amidst the bodies behind the altar, and gifted her with an "Anomalous Seed." In exchange for the inability to ever touch anything, she was granted a day and night of restored senses and perceptions.

After the nun died, the [Untouchable Hand], born from her obsession, was stored in the Gemini Sub-bureau's warehouse. Decades later, Gemini Sub-bureau Level One Cleaner Nicole Colman, who lost her original hands during a mission, became the new user of the [Untouchable Hand], continuing to this day.]

[Evaluation: An Anomalous Object with terrifyingly low upper and lower limits. While it can resist all contact below the True God, it must be actively activated and used to block, meaning only those with terrifying physical fitness and reflexes can unleash its true power.]

[Contamination Value: 28.1]

Twenty-eight contamination value! A Level One Cleaner from the Gemini Sub-bureau!

Seeing the prefix before "Miss Nicole" in the [Untouchable Hand] file, Leon's mind buzzed, and many things that hadn't made sense suddenly connected, clearing the fog clouding his mind.

Indeed, with the Aquarius Director's habit of keeping contingencies, it was impossible for him to leave the Rebels unattended, allowing them to perish under the Red-haired Director's nose. He would certainly find a way to keep a fallback in case they slipped up, getting caught entirely by the Virgin Branch.

The contingency he sent was probably the person in front of him, Miss Nicole. This female reporter was not a Rebel member at all, much less the daughter of old Owen and his wife, but a Level One Cleaner of the Gemini Sub-bureau. Most likely, like himself, she used some Anomalous Object to infiltrate the Rebels!

Also, when the Rebels held their meetings earlier and she was missing, most likely she went to eliminate Senior Emma's enemy, allowing Senior Emma to be taken by the central bureau. And the one who broke into the Purification Bureau, taking the fake photos yesterday, certainly was her!

As for the evidence...

Observing the beads of sweat forming at the female reporter's brow and her overly thick clothing in a warm room, Leon's judgment was solidified further.

If Miss Nicole were to remove her clothes now, her body would surely be covered in bandages; the reason for wrapping herself tightly was to cover the wounds made by the director's hair!

Furthermore, her ears were reddening with embarrassment, yet there was no significant change in her face's color, possibly due to makeup or another Anomalous Object to conceal a pale complexion from blood loss—consistent with the thief's situation.

Lastly, the Black Goat had once said its tail represented laziness and secrecy, implying an ability to erase traces from leaving the body, which matched exactly what the thief did yesterday, so...

It was her! It was her! It was indeed her!

What a find, initially, he just came here recognizing a familiar name, hoping to uncover the secrets of the last Rebel member, yet he stumbled upon such a big fish!

...

"Sorry, I really didn't think of how to explain earlier, which probably led to a misunderstanding."

After slightly calming his tumultuous emotions, Leon released the delicate hands with a contamination value of twenty-eight, swiftly switching to [Elite Performer], and began to eagerly explain,

"Actually, I didn't know about my connections with the Ryan Family at first, and even now, though I'm forced to inherit the Duke's position, I wasn't planning to be a proper noble. Joining the royal family was just an excuse to get rid of my ducal identity."

"I see..."

Seeing that Leon did not dwell on her earlier "criticisms," the female reporter felt slightly relieved, nodded awkwardly, and said,

"Then you... you truly are unique... hehe."

"No, even though I'm unique, you're even more special!"

Catching the female reporter's hands again and giving them a firm shake, Leon, while discreetly unbuttoning her wrist, spoke with a blend of three-tenths sincerity and seven-tenths insincerity,

"Miss Nicole, do you know how many newspapers and reporters I sought out to get this story out in the open?"

Before the female reporter could reply, having caught a glimpse of a bandage's corner inside her sleeve, Leon exclaimed with "excitement,"

"Nine! I contacted exactly nine newspapers in one day, running through almost all those big-name, bold newspapers in the Capital City, and yet not one dared to publish the story, some even tried to arrest me and directly seize the evidence!

This was so... incredibly dark! Damn Ryan Family! I still get angry thinking about it!"

"..."

The female reporter, facing the scathing new Duke of Lionheart, who was condemning the Ryan Family, slightly opened her mouth, seemingly wanting to say something but unsure how to proceed, so she simply kept her mouth shut and gave a vague nod.

"Miss Nicole, I knew you would disapprove of such matters as well and would take action to expose them! Ah! If I had found you and The Sun News earlier, I wouldn't have had to go through so much hassle!"

Upon hearing the female reporter's "agreement," Leon wasted no time in singing her praises, calling her the savior of the Kingdom's media industry and the last conscience in the Capital City's press circle.

Leon, with three parts sincerity enhanced by the [Elite Performer], made the compliments sound incredibly genuine, almost to the point of idol fanaticism, causing the female reporter to squirm and repeatedly wave her hands modestly,

"Stop, stop, I just happened to be in the right place at the right time, really not as great as you say. My reports... um... also have many shortcomings."

"Haha, you're being modest, though there are indeed some minor shortcomings."

Leon, recalling something, nodded and smiled,

"For example, in your news pieces about me, Miss Nicole, you were relying solely on hearsay, lacking firsthand information, so there were some slight inaccuracies... So, Miss Nicole, would you be interested in doing an exclusive interview with me?"

"An exclusive interview?"

"Yes! An exclusive interview!"

Leon smiled and said,

"Though I've inherited the Duke's position, I still have a very unique role within a minor division of the police department. Would you be interested in interviewing me there, in a couple of days when you have time?"

Chapter 285: plans to deal with Nightmare_1

"Your invitation was downright stupid!"

After Leon's interview request was promptly rejected by the female reporter, he could only leave with a face full of regret. As he boarded the public carriage back to the Purification Bureau, the Black Goat couldn't wait to squeeze out from the carriage window. At first, he chattered a few words, then regretfully commented,

"If you wanted to set a trap to catch her, you could have just invited her to your place for the interview, or to the Ryan Family. Then, with both Senior Emma and the Red-haired Director aware of your plans, catching her would have been a piece of cake.

But you went ahead and invited her to the Purification Bureau for an interview. That woman is with the Rebels and under Aquarius, still badly injured and avoiding you all. How would she dare come to the Bureau to interview you?

Let me tell you, when you made that invitation to the Bureau, the reporter's face turned pale with fear. Once you looked away, she was sneakily glancing at you full of suspicion. It's clear she's already starting to doubt you!"

After a long barrage of chatter, followed by a stupidly foolish overall assessment of Leon's proactive invitation, the Black Goat smacked his lips, not yet satisfied, and said,

"Kid, now you realize how important I am, don't you?

If I could have gotten out earlier to secretly remind you, you wouldn't have alerted her. Now that this has happened, setting a trap for her in the future will be difficult. What a shame!"

Yeah, yeah, yeah, you're right about everything!

Glancing sidelong at the Black Goat, Leon calmly replied while jotting down the recently acquired intelligence in his notebook,

"Do you think it's possible that I actually didn't intend to catch her?"

"???"

"A live spy with an exposed identity is far more useful than a captured dead one."

Leon replied without looking up as he continued writing notes,

"If she still has contact with the Aquarius Director, she could be used to send false intelligence. We might even be able to find Aquarius Director through her. Isn't that more useful than capturing her?"

I suppose so...

After mulling it over for a moment, the Black Goat nodded slightly but still protested,

"Since you're not planning to capture her, wasn't it unnecessary to mention the Purification Bureau? You invited her there, and now she's suspicious you're setting a trap for her, making her more alert!"

"It's a good thing she's become more alert."

Thinking about the intelligence he had just seen, Leon's brow furrowed slightly as he set down his charcoal pencil heavily, feeling the pressure as he spoke,

"After all, she's a Level One Cleaner. According to the Director, Senior Emma—as an Elite Level One Cleaner—is capable of destroying most of the Capital City in a day if no cost is spared. She could probably kill me in a flash.

A character as dangerously powerful and whose abilities are unknown, like her, carries enormous risk. Jerry's friends can track her movements, but they can't stop her from causing destruction. I fear only the Director could subdue her instantly.

Knowing the Director's situation, it's impossible for him to drop everything else and keep watch over her all day. So, the safest approach is to keep her alert and cautious without making her flee, all because she still has a sliver of luck in staying."

"..."

In such a short time, you came up with all that?

After hearing Leon's plan, the Black Goat smacked its lips, suddenly finding this kid somewhat unfamiliar.

Having gradually grasped some power and been influenced by both Emma and the red-haired woman, Leon had notably changed. He was no longer the raging fool he once was.

This sly dog was much more cunning now, scheming against others constantly. He was becoming more like those clever operators at the Purification Bureau, full of complex schemes. Even the ideas he excreted must be twisted as his mother's gnarled threads.

"Fine."

Harboring nothing but ill intent as he glanced at Leon's backside, the Black Goat curiously asked,

"What are you planning to do next? Head straight back to the Bureau to wait for Emma and that Red-haired woman to return?"

"Next..."

Pondering for a moment, Leon circled something in his notebook with the charcoal pencil he crafted himself, hesitantly saying,

"I'll first return to the Bureau to discuss the situation with Senior Jerry, then go find the Princess to break off the engagement."

...

The sun had set.

With the fading sunlight, the embers and smoke that followed the war swept through like streaks of deep gray, painting patches of shadow across the streets and alleys.

After several brutal battles, this once-bustling city had been reduced to ruins. On its crumbling streets, broken mechanical parts lay scattered. In collapsed buildings, fractured steam pipes weakly spewed grayish-white noxious smoke.

Dust, smoke, ashes, rust, blood, cries!

A desolate yet searing wind howled through the streets and alleys, bringing with it the acrid, smoke-laden, scorched scent that hung in the air, tormenting the tearful eyes of the survivors. It was as if the city, devastated by war, was mourning its own death.

This is...

Realizing the shattered city before her, a city she had been to only once, but knew all too well, had left Veronica, who now appeared six or seven years younger, slightly stunned. She couldn't help but bite her lip hard.

This is my dream—the fractured city before me is the former county seat of Laine County, Cornwall City, which was utterly destroyed by war.

During the homeland defense war six years ago, the Kingdom and the mechanical troops from the Ice Plains Nation Ashito clashed eleven times in Cornwall City, flattening the once-thriving metropolis. Even including those who had fled early, more than half of Cornwall City's residents were killed or injured.

Before her lay the aftermath of the sixth siege, the day before the seventh round when Ashito was set to counterattack. In the following two hours, she would experience the most intense nightmare of her life.

Despite the desperate resistance to move forward, the dreaming Princess found herself unable to control her actions, compelled to follow her former self, accompanied by numerous Guards and ten combat medics, toward the dilapidated factory at the end of the street.

It was a sugar refinery bombarded repeatedly. Cornwall's rainbow candy was once spread throughout the Kingdom, resembling myriad hues in children's dreams.

But after six sieges, this factory with sweet memories had half-collapsed, its bullet-riddled walls echoed with the remaining steam hissing in the pipes, surrounded by the shattered machinery's remnants.

In stark contrast to the bleak scene, the floor was covered in vibrant syrup, and within the warehouse that once stored these syrups hid dozens of civilians who hadn't managed to evacuate, hoping for an unlikely rescue.

The dreaming Princess heard the weak cries for help, anxiously directing the Guards to pry the door open, personally pushing aside the deformed door frame and rushing in first.

The sunset's glow streamed through the broken windows, casting mottled shadows in the half-destroyed room. A child, smeared in filthy syrup, clutched their doll, timidly glancing over at her, surrounded by thirty-some other survivors.

Seeing her target for this trip, the dreaming Princess sighed in relief, showing a gratified smile. Yet the waking Princess, fully aware that she was dreaming, looked at the doll in the girl's hand, its face shattered, eternally smiling in lamentation, and bit her lip tightly.

"Boom!"

With a tearing screech, hundreds of bombs filled with alchemical fuel streaked their ghastly white tails through the dark red dusk, tearing apart the evening sky, falling upon Cornwall City's streets. The sugar refinery with its half-collapsed structure was obliterated, its vivid syrup turning into a raging orange blaze.

"No!!!"

Just before the vivid flames could fully ignite, the sleeping Princess shot up from her bed, eyes wide open.

Though she managed to escape the dream, shaking off this nightmare that's tormented her for six years before that agonizing moment arrived, her thin nightgown was drenched in cold sweat, clinging to her skin, making her shiver uncontrollably.

"Hoo..."

After catching her breath for a while, leaning wearily against the bedhead, the Princess calmed her racing heart, not attempting to go back to sleep. Instead, she got out of bed, drank a glass of cold water that had long cooled, then sat at the desk, opening the documents pending approval, silently picking up a quill.

The King of Nightmares' curse.

Every direct blood descendant of the royal family, once reaching adulthood, would be plagued by nightmares throughout their lives, endlessly reliving their deepest regrets and pain in incredibly vivid nightmares.

Yet, in a way, it's for the best.

After approving the document at hand, the Princess looked back at the iron doll smiling on the shelf behind her, silently pausing before picking up another document.

Though the King of Nightmares' curse is painful, it continually reminds me. It forces me to never forget everything from the past and always remember what I must do.

...

As the Princess diligently worked, the pile of documents on her desk gradually diminished, while the oil paste in the lamp slowly vanished.

When a slight "crack" sounded, the lamp's glow flickered slightly, and a soft call from the maid echoed from the door.

"Your Highness? Are you still awake?"

"Not yet."

After trimming the lamp's wick to rekindle its dimming light, the Princess continued approving documents, warmly inquiring:

"What is it?"

"Princess Veronica... it's your dear... um... Mr. Leon has arrived. Do you want to see him now?"

Chapter 286: Consider_1

"Is this the princess's bedroom?"

Led by the maid, Leon was brought into the bedroom of the princess. Although it was somewhat impolite, he couldn't help but take a look around to inspect the room's arrangement.

Unlike a certain Prince Freckles's dazzling room, which was obviously expensive at first glance, the princess's bedroom was more like another office rather than a typical bedroom.

A surprisingly large desk, coupled with a bookshelf crammed with various documents, occupied nearly forty percent of the space. Beside the desk was a huge drawing board filled with dozens of memos and reminders written in ink.

In the iron filing cabinet next to the drawing board, there was a pile of files with stamps and signatures, along with blank papers stacked half a person's height and a large number of unopened ink bottles at the bottom. It seemed like two bottles had accidentally been broken, staining a large part of the wool carpet black.

This is a complete workaholic...

Glancing at the wrinkled nightgown draped over the chair and the thick blanket on the bed that had clearly been slept in but not yet tidied up, Leon blinked. He felt like his image of the princess had slightly collapsed.

In newspapers, Princess Veronica was dignified and mature, yet privately... she was actually somewhat sloppy. Hmm... there were also several unwashed coffee cups on the table, and it looked like they had been sitting there for days, with the leftover coffee already congealing on the cups.

"Uh... please don't misunderstand."

Seeing Leon staring at the coffee cups on the table, the maid hurriedly explained on behalf of the princess,

"There are many important things in Princess Veronica's bedroom, so generally, we are not allowed to come in. Because it's not suitable for us to come and clean up, usually, the princess handles it herself.

But this time, the sudden external visit left quite a bit of work accumulated. As soon as the princess returned, she was busy, so it looks a bit messy, but normally, the princess is a very tidy person."

Yes, an external visit.

The princess's sudden "disappearance" these past few days had, after modifications by the Brain of the Evil God and the Illusion Can, turned into a sudden secret visit.

Aside from the directly involved princess, and Joshua, who had been punched three times due to the princess's memory loss incident, no one knew what truly happened in these days.

There was no turmoil, nor any sign of it. It silently modified the memories of tens of millions, even hundreds of millions of people. This thing was truly terrifying...

"I see..."

Nodding towards the maid, Leon marveled at the terrifying efficacy of the Illusion Can and inquired,

"Where is Princess Veronica?"

"The princess went to the inner room to change her clothes."

The maid answered,

"You indeed came a little late. The princess was wearing a nightgown, which is inconvenient for meeting guests, so..."

"It's not that it's inconvenient for meeting guests; it's just that I took a brief nap before, and I sweated a bit, so I wanted to change my clothes, that's all."

Accompanied by slight footsteps, the door to the inner room of the bedroom opened. The princess, wearing a snug nightgown, walked out slowly with a delighted smile at Leon and said,

"Besides, given our relationship, you don't really count as a guest."

"You must be joking..."

...

After the maid took the initiative to leave and close the door, noticing the glimpse of fair skin peeking from the princess's collar, Leon awkwardly turned his head slightly and then proactively said,

"Your Highness, I have recovered the memories I lost during that time, so..."

"Call me Veronica."

After correcting Leon's address, the princess took his hand and led him to the balcony, sitting down on the sofa by the bed. She then smiled sweetly and said,

"So you're here to ask about the wedding date?"

"Uh... actually, I'm here to apologize..."

Instinctively scooting a bit away, distancing himself from the warm body emanating heat beside him, Leon took a deep breath. In the gentle scent of iris in the air, he said earnestly,

"Princess Veronica, during that time, I didn't have the memories I initially had, so I didn't know the reasons or consequences, but now I have remembered. I'm sorry. I wasn't sincere when I proposed to you."

He briefly explained the relationship between himself and the Ryan Family, as well as the whole story about wanting to get rid of the Duke of Lionheart's status by directly proposing to the princess, thus forcing the Ryan Family to find someone else to be the duke. With a sincere look, Leon said,

"Princess Veronica, you are indeed a remarkable woman, but this was merely a coincidence from beginning to end, and I also do not intend to start a family, so please reconsider about the engagement between us."

"All right."

After carefully listening to Leon's words, the princess, being subtly rejected, was neither surprised nor angry. Instead, she smiled and nodded, then asked in return,

"I am willing to reconsider, but could you first not be in such a hurry to leave? Would you stay and consider it with me?"

"..."

Uh, this... the consideration I meant was to let this matter slide, not for you to really consider it

Looking at the princess who deliberately "misunderstood" his words, Leon opened his mouth hesitantly but couldn't find a reason to refuse and just nodded slightly.

"Very well. Since you agree, let's first consider why you would reject this marriage."

As if not talking about her own marriage, Princess Veronica winked at Leon, smilingly saying,

"First of all, I am quite confident in my appearance and figure, so it's definitely not because I'm too ugly and not up to your aesthetic standards, right?"

Hearing Princess Veronica's words, Leon instinctively glanced at her.

The princess's royal blue nightgown was elegantly tailored, and apart from a not-too-deep shallow V-neck at the collar, there wasn't any "aggressive" design. It was a conservatively enveloping nightgown that would not be out of place if worn outdoors.

But... for some people, no matter how the clothing itself is, it has to give way to the somehow innate charm when worn by her.

When slouching lazily against the back of the sofa, the originally classical and mild shallow V-neck of this gown was forcefully pushed up by the prominent curves. When sliding to the lower edge, due to the snug fit, it created a rather striking disparity.

Finally, when the material itself, being adequately soft, managed to experience the enormous contrast, gentling the curve onto her waistline, a luscious round full moon unreasonably leaped out.

Although this full moon quickly sank into the soft sofa, not fully unveiling its true appearance, the rich and mature elegant lines exposed between the sofa's shielding still induced a stir, enough to make anyone's heart skip a beat involuntarily.

"You are indeed very beautiful, but such matters are complex and not just about..."

"Mr. Lyon."

She softly called out to Leon, naturally interrupting his resistance. Princess Veronica, slightly scolding, said,

"We are not arguing but seriously considering our future relationship. I accepted your suggestion to reconsider this, so please don't interrupt me, alright?"

"Okay..."

"Then let's continue."

After regaining control of the dialogue, Princess Veronica gave a sly smile and then said,

"Since you admitted my charm and are even attracted to me, do you resist our marriage because you find my personality annoying?"

"No, but..."

"As long as you don't find me annoying, that's good."

Seizing the conversation again, Princess Veronica said smilingly,

"Since you don't look down on me, is it because of my status, or the troubles that marrying me might bring? Or... do you sense an issue with why I accepted your proposal and think that I am not genuinely interested in you but in the Ryan Family behind you?"

"..."

These... actually do have some...

Hearing Princess Veronica mention these, Leon couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief, then slightly nodded, admitting her assumption.

...

Even ignoring my status as a transverser, the differences between me and Princess Veronica are unimaginably vast. The drastically different social classes and experiences leading to different understandings nearly doom us to have no common topics; being close friends is challenging, let alone becoming partners.

Moreover, aside from this, our respective "job natures" are completely unsuitable. As for the nature of her princess status, which implies endless trouble, seeing her relationship with Joshua, if I truly got involved in the royal family's internal strife, there'd certainly be endless vexing matters.

Most importantly, her agreement to my proposal was entirely due to the value of the Ryan Family and the support the position of Duke of Lionheart could bring her. It really has nothing to do with me as a person. All she desires is the Duke of Lionheart, not Leon Laine.

If I were just an old nobility, she would indeed be an excellent partner, but since I neither want to seize power through my noble status nor want the original lives of Anna and the others to be completely disrupted, no matter how wonderful the princess seems, she is not the right person for me.

"I see."

After scrutinizing Leon's eyes and vaguely guessing part of his thoughts, Princess Veronica pondered briefly and then nodded before saying,

"I roughly understand why you don't want to marry me, and I understand your views... however, I have one last question."

Looking into Leon's eyes, the princess sat up slowly and gently asked,

"Since I am not your ideal wife, can you tell me what your ideal wife is like?"

Chapter 287: Fishing Princess_1

"What is my ideal wife?"

Hearing the Princess's question, Leon, who had never considered this question, was momentarily stunned but then began to ponder over it.

First of all, she definitely needed to share a common language with him and be easy to communicate with. At the very least, their values couldn't differ too much; otherwise, life would be filled with trivial conflicts, and he might as well stay single.

Secondly, her looks and figure couldn't be too poor. After all, finding a wife wasn't the same as making friends; if they weren't attracted to each other at all, there was no point in discussing anything further.

Lastly, she had to get along well with Anna and the others. The relationship with his sister-in-law had to be harmonious, she had to like children, and she also needed to accept his job at the Purification Bureau, being mentally prepared for a husband who might die at any time...

...

"Mind if I summarize a bit for you?"

After hearing Leon's words, the Princess couldn't help but smile, then cheerfully summed it up, "You talked a lot, but you only have three conditions—someone you can talk to, someone pleasing to the eye, and someone who can accept your family situation... Did I get that right?"

"..."

It was true...

"Then it's simple."

Seeing Leon nodding in agreement, the Princess, who had spent years navigating the political circles and knew how to negotiate, smiled and said, "Even though I haven't interacted much with you, I'm very satisfied with your family conditions, I get along with Anna, and you can't deny my charm. So, even if I'm not the ideal one, I meet two-thirds of your conditions, right?"

Unaware that the Princess swapped the concept, turning three veto criteria into scoring items, Leon thought for a bit and nodded again without opposition.

If you don't oppose at this stage, you won't be able to escape~

Seeing Leon already starting to follow her line of thought, the Princess's lips curled slightly as she continued her strategic approach, "As for the ability to talk, I feel you have slightly biased thoughts on this."

Hearing the Princess's words, Leon couldn't help but curiously ask, "What do you mean?"

"It's a bit too idealistic."

Her well-proportioned and firm legs crossed at one side, sitting gracefully on the sofa, the Princess gazed into Leon's eyes and seriously explained, "Between people, it's inherently impossible to 'talk' perfectly. Even if people have very similar views, there will inevitably be disagreements over some details.

Just like those who follow me, hoping to change the Kingdom, even if everyone's goal is the same, they will have their own ideas and some completely different, even conflicting, demands."

Using the "Princess's faction" as an example, she shared her perspective. Afterward, seeing Leon seemingly in deep thought, Princess Veronica spoke gently, "Building a family is the same, Leon. You can't expect to find a wife who thinks exactly like you, and never have arguments throughout your life; that possibility is really too low.

Even if you truly find one, as you both encounter different people and things, your thoughts will slowly change, and it's impossible to stay completely aligned. Then what will you do?"

"I..."

"You will feel *pain* because of the constant conflicts, and you will also find it hard to completely let go due to the unwillingness to abandon all the *experiences* with her.

So rather than facing all this in the *future*, find a smart-thinking partner from the beginning, someone who, despite having differences with you, is willing to listen to your thoughts and knows how to reach a consensus with you... Am I right?"

"..."

It seemed like something was off... but apparently... nothing was seriously wrong either?

Following the Princess's line of thought for a while but finding no obvious flaw, Leon couldn't help but nod in agreement.

"Right? Such a pity, I'm clearly very fitting for your conditions, yet you still want to think it over."

With a light faux-angry complaint, the perfect candidate, who was both "smart and sensible," "pleasing to the eye," and could "accept family situations," didn't rush to reel in her fishing line but instead slightly loosened her grip, letting Leon reflect while grinningly changing the topic, "Speaking of considering... Leon, besides me, do you have any other 'candidates'? Could you tell me about them?"

Other candidates?

Hearing the Princess's words, Leon's mind uncontrollably flashed several figures.

The first one that popped into his head was a striking redhead...

Stop! This one must be stopped early!

Recalling the piles of empty bottles in the director's office and the times he almost drowned in wine vats during drinking sessions, Leon felt a chill run down his back and quickly squashed this dangerous thought.

Excluding the director, which was no different from marrying a sea of wine, then it was Senior Emma, gentle, mature, good to him, fair-skinned and pretty, strong and capable, with a huge guillotine in the house... Uh...

Thinking of that room full of blood-stained torture tools and the 2.5-meter-high hanging execution guillotine, Leon shuddered and sensibly abandoned this idea.

Then... Yisha?

But the secret police work is incredibly busy, undoubtedly leading to more separation than togetherness, and she was also a master of kicking, even though her character was excellent and she was very loyal, making her a number one friend. Yet, truly marrying her would mean a life of chaos, potentially breaking both the egg and the basket... No way! No way!

The little rich girl, Amy?

Uh... While she apparently had a bit of interest, he felt somewhat lacking on his side, and their current interaction wasn't much either, seemingly not too suitable as well...

After considering it in his mind, Leon found himself somewhat speechless that among the opposite sex he interacted with frequently, excluding his sister Anna, the most suitable candidate for a partnership appeared to be the Princess right in front of him.

Regardless of anything else, with the Princess's skills, keeping a peaceful household was at least guaranteed, and her acceptance of a possibly die-at-any-time husband was remarkably high. Furthermore, if anything actually happened to him, she could take good care of his siblings, so...

...

Almost there~

According to her previous investigation, if evaluated by those three standards, among the women Leon had access to, none could meet her conditions better than she did.

Noticing Leon's eyes wandering before finally settling back on her, the Princess, who had anticipated this, flashed a sly smile and slowly closed the loop, "Didn't you think it through a lot but realized eventually that I am the best option, right?"

"..."

"Relax, I'm not one of those love-obsessed little girls; I don't mind being your second choice. To me, the result is much more important than the process."

Scooching a little closer on the sofa, moving into a slightly more intimate distance, the Princess gently took Leon's hand and spoke softly, "I know, you might want a purer marriage, feeling that the engagement between us is mixed with too many other things and thinking my objectives are too strong.

But, except for you, all my other 'choices' would require leaving the Capital City, or even the Kingdom, abandoning everything I've worked so hard for over the years.

So whether you believe it or not, in my heart, none of these 'choices' compare to you; you are my only option for a Prince."

Pressing Leon's hand against her heart, letting him feel her heartbeat, the Princess lifted herself to kneel on the sofa, looking down at the avoiding Leon with seriousness, "Leon, I am very sure that you are my best choice, and I'm confident that I can be your best choice as well!

Trust me, even if you're not ready yet, don't outright reject this marriage. Give both me and yourself a chance!"

"..."

Feels like we... might've gotten the script flipped, huh?

Chapter 288: Poor Leon, was....._1

"..."

Did we somehow get the wrong script in this play?

When Leon prepared to come and break off the engagement, he had mentally prepared himself in advance, imagining that the Princess might flatly refuse, impose harsh conditions, or even resort to threats and bribes.

But what he hadn't expected was that the Princess would choose to "reason" with him and even launch a confident and assertive pursuit...

Could this count as pursuit?

...

"I admit, if I had to make a choice right now, we... do seem quite suitable..."

As he was being cornered into the sofa by the ever-approaching Princess, Leon, who shrank back like a timid housewife, summoned the strength of his steely resolve to pull back his hand and continued to resist arduously,

"But I don't necessarily have to make a choice, at least not right now... Your Highness, you really are wonderful, but right now I still..."

"Since you're not in a hurry to make a decision, why are you rushing to reject me?"

Facing Leon's "last-ditch resistance," the Princess didn't rush to press harder but instead adhered to the military tactic of "surround on three sides, leave one open," offering a way out,

"I'm not forcing you to immediately accept this marriage. I just don't want you to cut it off too hastily.

Leon, if you're in no rush to decide, why not maintain the current state, give us more time to get to know each other, and not reject fate's gift so readily."

"You still believe in fate?"

"I didn't before."

The Princess smiled,

"But since fate brought you to me, I'm willing to trust her this once."

"..."

Please stop, please stop, I'm really about to surrender...

Faced with the Princess's relentless combination of soft words, hard tactics, and awkward flirting, Leon, who found himself retreating step by step, finally couldn't resist her wave after wave of advances and had to raise his hands in surrender,

"Then... let's leave it at that for now?"

"Let's leave it at that for now."

Having successfully repelled Leon, who came to break off the engagement and recaptured all lost ground, the Princess pulled up the shallow V-neckline of her nightgown, then sat up straight and cheerfully redirected the discussion,

"Also, regarding the matter of you helping me regain my identity, I haven't had the chance to thank you yet. For this, what kind of thank-you gift would you like?"

"No need for a thank-you gift..."

Hearing the Princess's words, Leon, who had just breathed a small sigh of relief, immediately became vigilant again, quickly waving his hand,

"I'm a cleaner for the Purification Bureau. According to the agreements between the Bureau and the royal families, it's my duty to ensure the safety of royal members, so..."

"The cleaner's thank-you gift can be waived, but the Prince's thank-you gift is still due."

"..."

Apparently taking great pleasure in Leon's reaction, the Princess, leaning against the sofa's backrest, chuckled and then reached her fair and delicate fingers into the neckline of her nightgown.

"Um... I should really not bother you."

"Why are you running away?"

Amusedly holding onto Leon, who was trying to leave, the Princess Veronica lightly placed a somewhat old pendant into his palm, speaking reminiscently,

"This is a pendant my mother gave me... Rest assured, it's not something with immense sentimental value, nor something that, by accepting it, you must marry me—it's just a small token of goodwill."

Gently holding Leon's hand, ensuring he grasped the pendant still warm with body heat, Princess Veronica said earnestly,

"When my mother gave it to me, she hoped it would bless me with safety and success. Now I'm giving it to you, hoping it will keep you safe as well."

"Thank you..."

After feeling the pendant, which wasn't an Anomalous Object and had no special effect, but still felt quite warm, and looking at the Princess, who had been cunning before but now seemed especially sincere, Leon hesitated a bit, then spoke somewhat hesitantly,

"Actually, if it's just the Ryan Family's inheritance, the support from the Department of Road Administration and the military, and a seat in the Upper House that you want, you might not necessarily have to marry me..."

"Leon, I'm definitely going to get married."

Not waiting for him to finish, the Princess interrupted, gazing at him with a serious face,

"This country cannot be entrusted to Joshua—he doesn't have the talent for it. So, I want to and must become the next Queen!

A stable family and an heir to carry on the royal bloodline are indispensable criteria to becoming Queen. Since I must marry and start a family with someone, why can't that person be you?"

" ... "

...

Measuring the progress of luring him, seeing it was essentially complete, the Princess, who had previously feigned retreat, immediately showed her true colors and launched a fierce final assault!

"To be honest with you, before and after you succeeded as the Duke of Lionheart, I conducted very thorough investigations into you."

Once again taking Leon's hand, the Princess Veronica admitted her scrutiny of him, her face giving off a reminiscent glow,

"Though, at the time, I only intended to seize back some control over the military following the fall of the Ryan Family, with no other intentions toward you.

However, after you publicly proposed to me at the succession ritual, I quickly realized you were my ideal candidate for Prince!"

Looking at Leon, who was a bit surprised, the Princess spoke warmly of her assessment of him,

"Leon, you truly are wonderful—not only hardworking, reliable, emotionally stable, and family-oriented, but you also take on responsibilities, never leaving your sick sister behind and even risking your life to save her by joining the high-mortality Purification Bureau.

After joining, you worked diligently, courageously, fearless in the face of danger, advocating for victims during the sewage incident, with almost no desire for power, remaining indifferent to the title of Duke..."

Oh, goodness...

Hearing the Princess's assessment of himself, Leon blushed and modestly said,

"I'm really not that great..."

"And you're particularly humble."

"..."

"I admit that when I agreed to your proposal at the time, it might have been more for the seat of the Ryan Family, but after careful consideration, I am now very sure that you are the best Prince I could find—with you gone, I would definitely regret it in the future!"

Seizing Leon for a bout of genuine praise and expressing her determination to have him, the Princess momentarily dimmed her eyes inwardly, her mood turning somewhat downcast as she said,

"Unlike me, who can only choose you, you have other options besides troublesome women like me. It might be unfair to tie you to me prematurely.

But... but I truly don't want to miss out on this opportunity!"

Gazing into Leon's eyes, the Princess shifted from her previous decisiveness, her bright eyes glistening with tears, speaking softly,

"This is the only time I'll have the chance to choose my husband with my heart. I admit, I did use some tricks just now, but I really had no other choice.

When I first heard you came this time to break off the engagement, I panicked completely, my mind in a whirl, so I instinctively used the most familiar means to try to keep you...

I... Leon, please don't be angry with me, okay? If you reject me, then I... I..."

Chapter 289: Doll and Total_1

Did I...get tricked?

Leon stood at the gates of the Royal Palace, holding the small gift Princess had given to Anna. He had refused the royal carriage that could have taken him home and felt his emotions were incredibly complex while the night wind blew around him.

That cunning woman...

All the questions he had initially raised, such as the vast cognitive differences, the busyness of both their work, the troubles brought by his princely identity, and that she truly desired the Ryan Family rather than himself... none of these issues, the real reasons that made him want to reject this marriage, seemed to have been addressed in the end.

Even though the situation had not changed a bit from before, he not only failed to call off the marriage, but had also found himself firmly committed by her. Carelessly, he promised not to blame her, not to abandon her, to give her a chance, and never be the first to suggest breaking off the engagement.

Had he not retained some part of his sanity at the critical moment, he might have even set the wedding date on the spot, getting utterly ensnared by the cunning Princess.

Yet strangely, even knowing he'd been thoroughly duped, whenever he thought of the Princess's gentle words, her sleeve wrapped around him, and those eyes filled, at least seemingly filled, with him, he just couldn't get angry at her no matter what...

Men...ugh!

After cursing himself internally for being weak, Leon sighed, feeling both his demeanor and mood become increasingly complex, as he descended the steps.

...

Phew... looks like Leon won't attempt to call off the engagement again anytime soon.

As Leon reluctantly admitted to the failure of calling off the engagement, he descended the steps gloomily... or not quite so gloomily, for a certain master strategist, who was glancing over from the balcony, couldn't help but let out a long sigh of relief.

Those who seek status often value face highly, so giving proper respect first usually influences their attitude; those who want power are more practical, requiring immediate benefits to reach consensus; those who crave wealth are realistic, but if you present a promising vision, they'd even accept empty promises. The hardest to deal with, however, are those who want nothing at all.

Fishing requires bait, but Leon neither wanted status, power, nor wealth, and to him, even her identity as a princess was somewhat of a burden.

So if he had adamantly insisted on breaking the engagement no matter what, she would indeed have been helpless, only able to watch this big fish slip away, waving its tail before returning to the sea.

Fortunately, to propel Leon to the position of Duke of Lionheart, she had done extensive research and understanding, which allowed her to barely grasp his weakness...

A soft heart, coupled with inadequate thick skin.

Even when fully determined to break off the engagement, his character would not allow him to speak harsh words, providing her with room to maneuver and pull. This even let her actively display goodwill, making direct rejection difficult for him, stabilizing the situation.

Then, by proactively revealing her bottom line and stating that he was her only choice while appearing helpless and weak, making "actively breaking the engagement" seem a guilt-ridden choice, Leon, given his nature, would surely find it impossible to voice it.

What a despicable woman I am...

Watching Leon's figure fade into the distance, the Princess on the balcony stayed silent for a moment, a slight apology reflected in her shining eyes.

Sorry...

But even with various ulterior motives, every word I just said was true. Marrying you indeed is my best choice, possibly my only choice, because only the marriage with you has the power to change the Kingdom.

Six years ago, I arrived a step too late and couldn't save those who died in the war, their figures consumed in the flickering orange flames have since become recurring nightmares, torturing me night after night.

And if I were to take a step too late six years from now and miss my chance to change the Kingdom, a far more painful nightmare would surely descend again, given the Kingdom's current state.

Maybe it's selfish, but I really don't want to regret it again!

Watching as Leon gradually disappeared, his silhouette swallowed by the night, the Princess let out a gentle sigh before departing the balcony. She returned to her desk, opening unfinished documents.

On a shelf behind the Princess, an old half-shattered tin doll silently watched her figure as she worked at her desk, a slightly sorrowful, eerie smile on its face.

...

"The Duke of Lionheart's Night Visit to the Royal Palace, A Fortunate Event Approaching?"

"A Historic Private Meeting, Princess's Faction to Seize Power!"

"Beauty or Power? The Love Affair Between Lion and Robin!"

"Shocking! Night Tryst Between Duke of Lionheart and the Princess, Could They Be Planning a Marriage of Convenience with a Child?"

"..."

"Gentlemen, those who have come here must already be aware of the news."

A man in a brown suit leaned over a table covered with newspapers, their headlines varied but all concerning the same event, and spoke with furrowed brows,

"I won't waste words. The reason for calling you here is to discuss one thing—what are your plans for this fool of a duke, who boldly proclaims he's offering the entire Ryan Family as a dowry to marry the Princess?"

What do we plan to do? Isn't the question what can we do?

Amongst the Old Nobility invited, after exchanging glances for some time, an elderly Earl with a head full of white hair stood up, indignantly suggesting,

"Of course, he must be deposed!

Seven of the Kingdom's seventeen main departments are already controlled by the royal family. If the Ryan Family's Department of Road Administration and Military are also handed over, then more than half the departments will be under her command! Moreover, with the Ryan Family holding a vice-presidential seat in the Upper House, even if we join forces with the Lower House, we might still be unable to contend with the Princess! So, we must depose him! If that fool remains seated as Duke, what does the future hold for us? Do we just live at the mercy of others?"

"But the question remains, how to depose him? And who is to carry it out?"

After the elderly Earl finished speaking, another noble beside him sighed and said,

"After the Ryan Blood Night, nearly everyone eligible in the Ryan Family to stand up is gone, leaving only an old patriarch who never had real power and maybe a barely elected head of the family. But during the new Duke's ascension ritual, the former Duke's butler suffered a heart attack, the only remaining patriarch had a stroke out of anger, and the newly elected family head was so frightened by the Duke of Lionheart slapping the Prince that he fell gravely ill and has yet to recover. There's no one left in the Ryan Family to stand up."

Chapter 290: The map is very long_1

Indeed...

After listening to this, the old nobility present in the room couldn't help but nod, showing expressions of helplessness.

The Duke of Lionheart's succession ceremony was of course not something to be missed, and more than half of the old nobility there had been present at the event, witnessing firsthand how the "Three Elders of the Ryan Family" fell, and they were well aware of the Ryan Family's current situation.

According to the traditions among the old nobility, if one wanted to depose the current Duke of Lionheart and bring in a new duke, it was necessary for a person with a status high enough from the "Ryan People" to step forward and take the lead, before the "in-laws" could follow suit.

Although this might sound somewhat old-fashioned, as if the fire is already at one's feet yet one must first find a raft before taking action, this was indeed one of the "unspoken rules" that the old nobility had to adhere to.

After all, within the old nobility, there were many who had conflicts with each other, and even some feuds that had lasted for centuries. If these unspoken rules were not followed and one moved at will, the entire old nobility could collapse due to internal conflict before the Princess could even take action.

"We can't worry about that much anymore!"

Looking at the newspapers on the table with headlines that made one's scalp tingle, a younger member of the old nobility stood up, proposing somewhat anxiously,

"Even if no one from the Ryan Family can take the lead, we can't go on like this. Everyone knows what the Princess wants. If she really succeeds in the end, we might not even qualify as royal appendages, only to be strangled by her bit by bit!"

No matter what happens later, we must find a way now to remove this troublesome duke! At the very least, we can't let him take the Ryan Family's resources and seats over to the Princess, or else it will be too late!"

"That's what I think as well."

Another "young and vigorous" member of the old nobility stood up, nodding in agreement,

"Compared to those old rules, it's more important to stop the Princess right now. We're no match for the royal family in terms of support, and we can't compete with the Lower House's commercial guilds in terms of wealth. If we don't act now, it will be too late."

"I second that!"

"Well... I have no objection."

"Agree, even if it doesn't work, we have to try!"

"Wait, calm down."

Just as the old nobility were getting up, expressing agreement to forcibly replace the Duke of Lionheart, another older nobleman stood up, reminding them,

"You must not forget, even if we could pass a vote in the Upper House and forcibly replace the Duke of Lionheart, someone still needs to sit in that position."

"That's not important!"

The young noble who spoke first said loudly,

"It doesn't matter who sits in the Duke of Lionheart's position, as long as it's not the current one."

"No, that does matter a lot!"

The old noble shook his head and said,

"Have you not looked at the Ryan Family's genealogy? Do you know? If you pass a vote in the Upper House and forcibly replace the current Duke of Lionheart, according to the line of succession, the next Duke would be his own younger sister."

"Then take a vote and remove his sister as well!"

The young noble said fiercely,

"It's not a problem to concede some more benefits. Compared to being choked by the Princess's new decrees or competing with the Lower House businessmen, the cost of replacing two successive dukes is entirely acceptable, as long as we can remove this pair of siblings..."

"After removing that pair of siblings, there's another pair still waiting!"

The old nobleman snorted coldly,

"Take a good look through the Ryan Family's genealogy! After her, the next in line to succeed as Duke would be the current duke's younger brother, and then another of his sisters.

Heh, changing four Duke of Lionheart appointments in one day, you think the royal family is dead just watching you force these changes?"

"..."

After consulting some closely related nobles and receiving a definitive answer, the young noble who proposed the forced replacement couldn't hold it together anymore.

"So this family of four is putting a stranglehold on this path to change? Are we just going to do nothing and watch?"

"Sitting by idly is certainly not an option, but acting directly won't work either. This is such a good opportunity. With the Princess's character, she will definitely be on guard, not leaving us any chance."

"So what you're saying is, there really is no solution?"

"There is a solution."

Once most people's attention gathered around, the old noble finally unfurled his "Map of Yan Country," squinting as he spoke,

"But before I discuss my idea, I must remind everyone that our Duke of Lionheart is far from as simple as he seems.

Although he seems like a fool who doesn't understand the rules and acts recklessly according to his whims, just lucky.

But let's calm down and think from his position. Even if he doesn't hand over the Ryan Family, does he have the ability to keep it safe?

Without this incident, aside from holding the empty title of duke, what else would he have left? Would the Ryan Family's situation be any better than it is now?"

After posing these questions, the old noble watched as the others began to think along his lines, their faces gradually showing a sense of realization, and he continued analyzing with narrowed eyes,

"To be honest, I think our Duke of Lionheart is the truly clever one.

From the very beginning, he understood that he had no ability to keep the Ryan Family. Whether he tried to make allies of us in-laws or strained to maintain the Ryan Family, in the end, nothing would be left.

But his mind was clear. Knowing he didn't have the ability, he straightforwardly distanced himself from us, shamelessly proposing to the Princess, bringing in someone capable of defending the Ryan Family."

"After all, we don't need him to acquire the Ryan Family inheritance, so he as a duke is worthless to us. But to the royal family and the Princess, his duke status is the only entry ticket, worth every effort to win him over.

And because of our presence, the royal family can't fully take over the Ryan Family, having to use his Duke of Lionheart title to compete with us for the Ryan Family's resources. This has instead created a subtle balance, allowing him to control the Ryan Family.

Tsk, tsk, our Duke may not really understand how to be a noble, but he definitely knows how to do business, how to sell himself to the right target and at a great price."

After expressing his admiration for Leon, the old noble paused briefly to give the crowd a moment to think, then picked up a newspaper from the table, lightly patting the words "Princess" before making a suggestion in a loud voice,

"Gentlemen, it's time we learn from the clever Duke and seek out a more suitable 'buyer' for ourselves... What do you think of Prince Joshua?"

Prince Joshua?

Hearing the old noble's suggestion, the crowd couldn't help but frown, with someone unable to resist directly opposing,

"You want us to fully turn to the royal family? How is that any different from surrendering to the Princess? Wouldn't we still be controlled by the royal family?"

"First of all, I'm only suggesting turning to Prince Joshua. Moreover, since when did the Princess represent the entire royal family?"

Asking this meaningful question, the old noble then completely unfolded the "Map of Yan Country," revealing a "dagger" he had prepared in advance, and asked,

"Gentlemen, consider this carefully. Is what our Princess wants the same as what the entire royal family wants? And is what the royal family wants the same as what Prince Joshua, and the Queen and Minister of Finance behind him, want?"

Glancing at the crowd who seemed to grasp something, the old noble leisurely explained,

"Or to put it more clearly, besides the throne, what the Princess wants is to limit the power of us nobles, which is also the desire of the whole royal family. So in the past, the Princess could represent the will of the entire royal family.

As for the Queen and the Minister of Finance supporting the royal family, it's because they received the King's promise, believing the Princess would be married off, and the entire Kingdom's future would belong to Prince Joshua. Naturally, they were happy for the Princess to help him clear obstacles.

But now, not only is the Princess not married off, but she has also acquired enough power through her marriage to the clever Duke to sway the entire Kingdom. The situation is quite different.

Right now, the Princess is strong and, with the King who wants to curb the old nobility's power applying pressure, even if the Queen and Minister of Finance are unhappy, they dare not make rash moves at this time.

However, if the old nobility collectively turns to Joshua, giving our Prince a strong arm of support... Can the Princess still represent the will of the entire royal family?"