

I! Cleaner 501

Chapter 501: Assassination Attempt Face-to-Face

"You... what exactly do you want to do?"

Unaware of the changes happening outside the carriage, Prince Freckles huddled on the seat, looked at Leon across from him with some trepidation, and barked sternly, though lacking confidence:

"Don't think that just because you're from the Clean-up Bureau, you can do whatever you want!"

"There is an agreement between the royal family and the Clean-up Bureau. If you do anything to me, not only will the royal family hold you accountable, but the Clean-up Bureau will send down an investigator, and then severely punish you!"

"Ah, yes, yes."

Not bothered by Joshua's itchy-threat-like words, Leon was touching the horn protruding from his cuff link, carefully scanning the surroundings near the king's palace.

Looking out through the compartment wall from the carriage, in the soul vision shared by the black ram, clusters of soul flames, in various shades, flickered steadily as usual. Everything seemed normal around the few streets near the king's palace, with no noticeable anomalies.

It seems that the rebels were discreet enough not to attract attention. The king's palace remained completely unsuspecting and unguarded, not realizing the actions unfolding on their side. So far, everything was progressing smoothly.

Furthermore, more than a hundred elite rebels with some military training had successfully infiltrated nearby.

Compared to the soul flames of ordinary citizens, the soul flames of these rebels, ready to storm the king's palace, were visibly more "lively," bouncing restlessly and excitedly.

Although due to patrols and outposts, these people couldn't truly approach the palace, or even enter the square directly facing the palace, and could only stay on the outer streets farther away.

Now that the manpower is in place...

After glancing at the eager souls and then at the still relaxed king's palace, Leon couldn't help but clench his fist with determination.

Everything is set!

Next, as long as he successfully infiltrated the king's palace and brought Luke, who could control others' bodies, inside, helping him "replace" the palace guard captain, these pre-arranged rebel members could immediately dash across the square and storm the palace.

Although more than a hundred people seemed too few, for such an "inside-outside coordination" situation, it was more than enough. Forming a line in front of the palace and then charging inside was not a coup but a suicidal rush.

Those often executing coups should know that a real armed coup involves a small, elite strike to swiftly control major targets and threatening personnel before anyone has time to react, to complete the task thoroughly. That's the key to success.

The difficulty lies in how to avoid troops, hide the small squad effectively, and suddenly attack from a lethal enough distance. After executing the armed assault, suppressing the resistance of hostile forces and stabilizing the situation quickly is what matters, rather than how to break into the palace.

These preparations should all be in place before action begins. When it comes time to actually execute, from start to finish, only one or two hours should be enough. Any longer would mean the operation has failed.

After all, people aren't stupid; if you openly gather to assault the palace, even the commander of the capital garrison, no matter how foolish, can't be completely oblivious.

Using tricks like digging up roadbeds or blocking streets becomes meaningless against organized military forces, at most slightly delaying them. Getting a two-hour window would require incredible luck.

Considering the distance between the palace and the garrison camp, if they can't make it in an hour and a half, the old King would be furious enough to leap from his wheelchair and strangle the commanding officer himself, followed by whoever put a pig in such an important position.

So, we must speed up a bit!

After mentally going through the plan and confirming there were no obvious loopholes, Leon released the horn, revealing a gentle smile.

"Prince Joshua."

In the uncertainty and suspicion of Prince Freckles' expression, Leon, always bearing him no good will, pointed to their feet in a friendly manner, and said:

"Your shoelace is untied."

Huh?

After hearing Leon's words, Prince Freckles was momentarily stunned, then reflexively leaned forward to look at his feet.

While he was bent forward, Leon, sitting across, pulled out a small silver hammer with a cushioned end from his cuff link.

The Aquarius Director's abnormal item holder, Luke, could take over someone else's body with his consciousness once they were unconscious. However, following the routine before his own chief went to the dream realm, he left an abnormal item in the palace that could isolate such abnormal "intrusions."

Hence, an "unconscious" person had to carry Luke's consciousness in advance and bring Luke into the palace, giving him the chance to knock out the palace guard captain and assume his identity to redirect the palace guards.

Only with the guards mostly redirected could the more than a hundred rebels ambushing on the outer streets charge into the palace and seize the old King.

As for the unconscious person... who else but Joshua?

...

However, just as Leon was about to swing the little silver hammer to help Prince Freckles take a good nap, for some unknown reason, the carriage they were in suddenly decelerated, followed by a violent tremor.

In this abrupt halt, Joshua, who was already leaning forward, was launched from his seat, lunging forward and hitting the empty spot next to Leon, even breaking his nose.

Feeling the sharp pain on the bridge of his nose and smelling the blood from his nose, Prince Freckles was just about to burst out in anger when he heard a muffled bang from behind.

Surprised by the sound, Joshua turned his head to look, and was horrified to find someone holding the hammer usually used to ring bells in parliament, slamming it where he had been sitting, leaving a big dent in the soft leather seat.

Judging by the swing of the hammer, if not for the sudden stop, this solid swing would have surely hit his head directly!

"You, you... what were... you trying to do?!!!"

Seeing Joshua across, petrified and stammering, Leon couldn't help showing a sheepish expression.

Though he had planned the armed coup, to send Joshua across the sea to marry a monkey, attempting an "assassination" only to be discovered right in front of him was incredibly awkward.

"Um..."

Looking at the terrified expression on Joshua's face, Leon pulled the hammer out of the leather seat and said awkwardly:

"Do you think my hammer looks nice?"

"..."

Of course not! Even a fool could tell you were planning to hammer me with this thing, right?!

Seems there's no way to fool him...

Looking at his brother-in-law, who didn't believe a single word or punctuation mark, Leon sighed, grabbed the frantic Joshua trying to open the carriage door, tossed away the little silver hammer, and silently clenched his fist.

Never mind, I've gotten used to it.

My luck has always been lousy; having a plan go smoothly without any hitch would be strange, but missing him with a swing doesn't matter much...

Knocking him unconscious works just as well.

Chapter 502: The Tin Palace

"Help!"

"Murder!!!"

Joshua, who was "assassinated," fortunately managed to twist open the carriage door handle, but his collar was grabbed by Leon from behind. Despite struggling several times, he couldn't break free. In his desperation, he could only struggle tirelessly while shouting for help.

The carriage driver, not being deaf, naturally couldn't remain unresponsive to such a racket in the carriage.

Hearing the guest's calls for help, he quickly slowed down and stopped. Then he opened the small window between the driver's seat and the carriage, cautiously poking his head in for a look.

"Gentlemen... what are you doing?"

"Nothing."

After covering Joshua's mouth with his hand, Leon replied calmly looking back:

"We're just playing around. You can keep going... What's wrong with your face?"

Huh?

The carriage driver was taken aback by the question, then reached out with a metal hand like a round ball to touch his somewhat rusty face, full of confusion, and said:

"Guest, is there something on my face?"

"..."

It's not that there's something on your face, it's what are you exactly?!!!

Seeing the metallic head with an eerie shine poking through the little window, and those hollow eyes turned into brown glass, the two people in the carriage couldn't help but gasp in unison.

"Mmm! Mmm mmm!"

Already startled by Leon's "assassination," Prince Freckles was further shocked by the creature poking its head from the window. His fear reached its peak, causing him to go limp and collapse onto the carriage floor, eyes wide with terror at the ironskin driver, unable to speak for a while.

Though Leon was also startled by the ironskin driver, his two-month journey as a Cleaner had significantly trained his psychological resilience. This level of abnormal event was not enough to leave him thunderstruck.

After composing himself, Leon first reached out to close the carriage door, then picked up the now limp Joshua and placed him back on the seat opposite, before cautiously asking the carriage driver:

"Can you tell me how it feels when you touch your face?"

What kind of question is this again?

Though puzzled by Leon's question, knowing that the guests he picked up from outside the parliament building were unlikely ordinary people, the carriage driver replied honestly:

"It feels pretty much the same as usual, cold and hard... Oh, right, my face might have rusted a bit recently; probably needs a touch of oil."

Rusty recently...

After hearing this somewhat eerie reply, Leon's eyes narrowed slightly.

The driver already considers himself an ironskin person rather than a human with soft skin, indicating that his perception has been confused. This means the anomalous object causing his change likely has a relatively high status.

Should I touch his face?

Deciding temporarily to abandon the idea of knocking Joshua out, Leon hesitated whether to reach out and touch the perplexed ironskin head but ultimately gave up on the notion.

After all, if the object that turned the driver into an ironskin doll spreads through contact, directly touching would be akin to delivering yourself to danger. Without confirming the cause and type of anomalous object, minimizing contact is safer.

"Indeed."

Glancing at the ironskin driver's face, Leon noticed some reddish-brown rust stains on his neck and under his chin, and nodded kindly:

"You've got some rust on you; it definitely needs some maintenance."

"Haha, never mind that."

After hearing Leon's words, the ironskin driver chuckled sincerely, his strange voice with a touch of metallic sound replied:

"Maintenance is for esteemed people like you. We just use some canola oil to prevent rust. Besides, with a job that involves exposure to the elements, no matter how much maintenance I do, rust is inevitable."

"That must be tough."

Adhering to the principle of not alerting the other side before confirming the source of anomaly, Leon engaged in light-hearted conversation while holding Joshua's hand to push open the carriage door, then said with a straight face:

"Oh, I suddenly remembered something, could you pause here and wait for me a bit while I check outside?"

"Ah, okay!"

Upon hearing Leon's words, the ironskin driver nodded in agreement, then turned his creaking neck as the brown glass eyes fixed intently on the Prince Freckles on the ground.

"Guest."

With a chin touched with reddish-brown iron rust slightly pulling up, revealing a stiff and dull smile unique to toy dolls, the ironskin driver tilted his neck that couldn't turn much due to iron joints, eerily speaking to the terrified Joshua:

"Would you like a warm towel?"

"Aaaaah!!!"

Though appearing human, the ironskin driver's actions were just unsettling enough to trigger the uncanny valley effect, shattering Joshua's already fragile psychological defenses.

With a scream, Joshua lunged toward the carriage door, tumbling out as he instinctively sought to distance himself from this uncanny carriage.

Yet when Joshua got up off the ground, face ghostly pale ready to flee, a mere glance was enough to make him plop back down.

The palace, the parade ground, the plaza, the streets... this place he'd seen countless times, now had all sorts of ironskin people everywhere!

The guards supposed to be holding weapons at the palace gates were replaced with two squads of tall black ironskin soldiers, their iron-gray thick uniforms becoming truly black-gray iron, now part of their bodies.

On the carriage routes outside the palace, steam carriages raced by, yet the horses pulling them had become ironskin horses with toy-like ball joints.

The once smooth movement now became jerky due to the changed joints, and every distance the ironskin horse reset its limbs, causing the carriage behind to jerk to a halt.

Beyond that, the plaza guards, well-dressed nobles, pedestrians on the streets, stray dogs stealing goods, merchants cursing and chasing...

All things once alive now transformed into ironskin dolls, even though the palace surroundings remained bustling as usual, cold iron gray was visible everywhere, devoid of any warm hue belonging to a body of flesh and blood.

"This... this..."

This isn't a normal anomalous object...

Squinting into the farther distance, looking at a group of children still transforming into ironskin figures at the street's end, Leon couldn't help but take a deep breath.

Not only the carriage driver was turned into ironskin, but all living beings in the vicinity, and the effect was expanding continuously, besides...

Looking down at his still flesh and blood hands, rubbing them together feeling the cold, hard texture, Leon's brow furrowed deeply.

Am I also an ironskin person?

Chapter 503: This Door Must Not Be Opened

Leon noticed the same anomaly on his body. After pondering for a moment, he turned back to look in the direction of the palace.

Although it's not entirely clear what's going on, it's estimated that over ninety percent of this anomaly's source is in the palace. As for why he can make such a judgment...

Let's just say, thankfully, he has a good habit of learning diligently in both his past and present life.

Squinting at the distant citizens being transformed, estimating a rough arcuate boundary, Leon took a charcoal pencil from the mirror world, along with a map of the palace vicinity he obtained from the rebels, and drew a half-decent accurate arc on the map.

According to the work knowledge taught by senior Emma, anomalies with such wide-ranging effects generally have two modes of activation.

Either everyone who satisfies the conditions is immediately affected, like his Heart of Ambition, or it spreads outwards in a ring from the center of the anomaly holder.

Now, the citizens near the palace have all turned into Ironskin People, but those further away have not been completely affected, showing a clear sequence. Therefore, it can be determined that the activation mode of this anomaly is the latter.

Since the range of the anomaly is known to be a circle, and it is continuously expanding from a certain center, next comes a classic geometric problem.

Given an arc of a circle, how do you find the center of the circle?

The answer is to make points A and B on the arc, connect AB, draw the perpendicular of AB, then find point C, connect BC, draw the perpendicular of BC, and where these two perpendiculars intersect is the approximate center of the circle.

After sketching on the map with the charcoal pencil, seeing the two intersecting perpendiculars converge at the palace, Leon marked a big X on the palace, identifying the approximate location of the "iron anomaly".

His initial guess was correct; that thing should be inside the palace.

It can also largely exclude parts like the Glory Square, the royal gallery, the museum, the royal stables, the Foreign Office area, and all other buildings in the front half of the palace complex, directly locking onto the rear part's sleeping quarters.

According to the information he received, the princess should be under house arrest in the sleeping quarters, and it would be best to head over quickly. Moreover... the coup mustn't stop!

...

Looking at the X on the hand-drawn map, Leon stretched his seemingly normal but cold, hard iron hand, immediately deciding to continue his action.

Although he doesn't know the effect of this "iron anomaly", with his Heart of Ambition's substitute-death ability, the risk of danger is not great.

Considering his identity as the leader of the rebels, even if the Heart of Ambition doesn't activate, he can declare war on the Kingdom on the spot, activate the War Cornerstone's combat undying effect, gaining another layer of Undying Body.

If a double-layered Undying Body still couldn't save him from this sudden "iron anomaly", then he might as well admit it was fate.

Moreover, even if not considering the possibly-dangerous princess, such a good coup opportunity doesn't come often.

If the director hadn't received news from the Snow Maiden and discovered that the female reporter following the Aquarius Director suspiciously entered the Demonic Soul Abyss, heading to the dream realm to capture her, it would have been difficult to lead the rebels to storm the palace.

It's known that the director's hair must be somewhere in the palace.

Once the director's Slaughter Blood Hair detects the anomaly's aura approaching, with the director's speed, it's estimated she could be at the palace in less than half a minute.

Only with her gone to another world, unable to detect the aura here, can Leon lead the rebel anomaly holders to raid the palace. At any other time, it would have required a sacrifice of lives.

So facing this heaven-sent opportunity, whatever the iron anomaly is, it's worth Leon taking a gamble!

"Guest?"

Leon, who had lifted up Prince Freckles and gotten back onto the carriage, looked at the Ironskin coachman whose mouth moved slightly, revealing a simple yet somewhat unsettling smile.

"Have you finished your business?"

"Yes, it's done."

Nodding to the Ironskin coachman, Leon said:

"Keep going forward. The palace doesn't allow carriages from outside to enter. Just stop at the registry after passing through the square in front of the palace... This is for the fare."

"Alright!"

After taking the Silver Wheel from Leon, the Ironskin coachman's smile grew more genuine, and the parked carriage started moving forward again with the grating screech of iron horses.

It's just that because the joints of the iron horse could never function like real horse joints, the carriage, upon restarting, braked sharply every so often, causing Prince Freckles to turn pale as he huddled on the seat.

Hmm... It seems like that previous emergency brake that let Joshua unexpectedly avoid his hammer strike happened just like this.

Understanding the reason, Leon, under Joshua's terrified gaze, pulled out the small silver hammer stuck in the seat, then said with a slightly concerned face:

"Are you feeling dizzy? Would you like me to help you sleep for a bit?"

"..."

Seeing the small silver hammer in Leon's hand, the already numb Prince Freckles shivered, instinctively wanting to get off and run, but remembering the cold and eerie iron world outside the carriage, he couldn't bring himself to move.

Although staying on the carriage might lead to a beating, at least his captor still resembled a human, and considering his status as a prince, it should be... perhaps... unlikely he'd be killed... right?

But those creepy Ironskin People outside, he wasn't so sure about. A Cleaner might not kill a prince, but those things might not care about his status, so choosing between the two, staying on the carriage to be beaten seemed safer.

"Uh... could you put away the hammer?"

Mustering some mental preparation, staring at the shiny hammer in Leon's hand, Prince Freckles wailed:

"Like before, could you just use your hand?"

"..."

"As you wish."

...

"Bang!"

Just as Prince Freckles successfully negotiated some leniency, a piercing racket continuously emerged from the seemingly calm sleeping quarters at the back of the palace building complex, causing the face of the female officer guarding outside to turn pale.

"Clang!"

Judging from the sound, it seemed that the desk had been overturned by the princess!

"Clang!" "Crashed!!!"

That sound... it should be the dismantling of the bed frame, and it's probably completely taken apart!

"Bang!" "Squeak——"

It's over. Most likely the cabinet has been toppled by the princess, cutting the carpet and starting to drag heavily on the floor! What... what should be done?

And as the female officer outside was anxious and pacing, wanting to peek inside but helpless, a series of angry footsteps echoed from the corridor.

"What's going on!"

Listening to the constant ruckus from Princess Veronica's bedroom, the queen arrived after being informed, yelling angrily:

"Is this how you watch over her? Letting her wreak havoc inside like this?"

"Your majesty..."

At the queen's scolding, two female officers quickly knelt, and one of them had the courage to reply:

"The door was locked from the inside by the princess. We... we don't have the key, and we dare not enter..."

"Useless things!"

Scowling at the responding female officer, with an air of frenzy, arrogance, and five parts of imperiousness, echoing Joshua's demeanor before getting beaten, the queen shouted in anger:

"Someone! Break the door open! I want to see what nonsense she's up to in there!"

Chapter 504: Doll? Doll!

Following the queen's command, two guards hurriedly stepped forward and, as ordered, lowered their shoulders and rammed against the locked door.

It was unclear whether the strength of the two guards was substantial or if there was a problem with the door itself; after just a couple of impacts, the spring mechanism inlaid in the door gave a cracking sound and broke, and the thick, three-finger-wide door swung open.

As the window of Veronica's bedroom faced directly opposite the door, just when the door was knocked open, blinding sunlight streamed through the window and shone directly towards the door, causing those standing in the corridor to instinctively close their eyes, then...

"Hmm?"

Before the queen could open her eyes, a voice suddenly inquired right beside her ear, so close that even the coolness of the other party's breath brushed against the queen's earlobe.

"Why have you come?"

"Ah!!!"

Startled by this near whisper, the queen's exquisitely made-up face abruptly turned pale, and she staggered two steps back, during which she stepped on the hem of her bright red dress and almost fell directly onto the floor.

Startled to death!

Looking at her daughter standing by the door with her back to the sunlight, wearing a bizarre smile with a hint of grievance while silently watching her, the queen, still shaken, took a few deep breaths and, thinking she was embarrassed, blushed in anger, and furiously scolded:

"Are you a ghost or something? Can't you make any sound when you walk?"

"I'm sorry."

Faced with the queen's scolding, Princess Veronica lowered her head and apologetically said:

"I startled you, I'll be careful next time."

"..."

Seeing that the princess did not retort as usual, nor did she make any teasing remarks with a smirk, but instead apologized compliantly, the queen standing outside the door was momentarily taken aback and felt a bit out of place.

Her lips parted slightly for a moment; once she realized, she nodded blankly, subconsciously responding with a hum, and then looked at the princess across from her with some bewilderment.

Strange, why didn't she retort this time?

Could it be that this confinement has made her docile? Or has she finally accepted her fate, given up the idea of contending with my Joshua for the throne, and is now trying to curry favor with me for a better life once she's married off?

But... if she's trying to appease me, shouldn't she stay quietly indoors? Why make such a racket smashing things?

Unable to figure out what exactly this stepdaughter of hers intended, the queen, after pushing her way into the bedroom and seeing the furniture fragments scattered around, decided to drop her pretense, and relying on her superior status, directly admonished:

"Don't think you can sweet talk your way out of trouble! Why are you smashing things? Are you discontent with my and your father's decision?"

"I wouldn't dare."

Upon hearing the queen's question, "Veronica" blinked her emerald-like eyes in alarm and shook her charred arm before the iron-skinned doll in its intricate, imposing red gown, saying:

"You are my mother and the queen of the Kingdom, your status is far superior to mine, how could I possibly be discontent with you? If you don't want me out, I really shouldn't be out; confining me is your rightful authority."

"..."

Hmm, something feels odd... Is this what the real Veronica would say?

Gazing at the seemingly compliant princess, the ferocity on the queen's iron face hesitated momentarily, then she blinked her ruby eyes and opened her porcelain-trimmed iron lips, warily saying:

"Stop pretending, you must be up to something! But I'm telling you, whatever you plan, it's already too late!

Joshua went with his uncle to the upper chamber of parliament early; according to the agenda, they're already discussing the succession order over there; now even if you try to pull some tricks, you wouldn't change the course of events. Joshua's already taken over your... the royal family's affairs!

I'm telling you, from now on, no matter what you do, the next King will only be Joshua. You might as well give up!"

"You are right."

Blinking her glassy eyes, "Veronica" nodded and earnestly replied:

"Joshua's talents are indeed remarkable, far beyond my capabilities. No one else can be the next King but him; in terms of character, talents, or wisdom, he surpasses me significantly."

"..."

Upon hearing Veronica's words, the queen was silent for a while, then her iron face suddenly flushed with a tinge of angry crimson.

Damn it! There's no one more insulting than you!

Joshua may be my own flesh and blood, but can I, his mother, not know his nature? Are you praising him, or are you trying to disgust me, as if you're spitting in my face?

Damn it! Even if you retort like before, smirking as you mock me with a couple of lines, it would be better than praising him stiffly like this! Don't be so disgusting!

"You're way out of line!"

After stomping her foot angrily twice, the infuriated Ironskin Queen no longer cared to figure out why the princess was smashing things. She turned around intent on leaving, but "Veronica" grabbed her arm.

"Where are you going?"

Seeing the Ironskin Queen in front of her, eyes filled with anger, "Veronica" blinked before suggesting apologetically:

"Did I say something wrong that upset you? How about this, I'll give you a gift as a proper compensation."

Saying this, she reached into the ruins of the shelf, picking up a beautiful doll dressed in thin pajamas with a face full of surprise and anger, and handed it to the Ironskin Queen, full of apologies:

"I've kept this doll for six years. Today, I'll give it to you as an apology, and you can do whatever you want with it."

"Get lost! Who wants your lousy doll!"

With a slap sound, the doll "Veronica" handed over was swatted away by the furious queen, crashing onto the floor, a large gash carved by splintered wood on its shoulder. Blood oozing from the wound stained the carpet a large patch.

Yet it seemed the Ironskin Queen did not find a bleeding doll to be strange, completely ignoring the doll showing pain on the floor, and instead glared at "Veronica" angrily, saying:

"I'll definitely talk to your father about this! Damn it! Let go of me, don't pull on me!"

When hearing the Ironskin Queen's words, "Veronica" released her grip on the queen's arm as if electrocuted, even stepping back half a step.

However, "Veronica" did not care, instead quickening her pace to catch up to the queen who stormed off, asking cautiously:

"What's wrong? Don't you like my gift?"

"How about this, if you don't like it, you might as well just burn her!"

"Mother? Why are you ignoring me?"

"..."

I'll ignore you to hell!

Overwhelmed by "Veronica's" sarcastic demeanor, the Ironskin Queen suddenly turned her head, shouting angrily:

"You... huh?!!!"

"Is there something you want to say?"

With her cold palm tightly covering the queen's mouth, the "Princess Veronica," with half of her face missing, finally showed a happy smile, dragging the struggling queen along as she happily said:

"Mother, the light over there isn't good. If you have anything to say, why don't you come over here with me and say it.

Although I'm not your real child, I'm still your daughter! So as long as you can speak and give a command, I promise to listen to whatever you say, alright?"

"Mmm! Um um um!!!"

Facing "Veronica," who seemed to have lost her mind, the queen widened her eyes in panic, struggling and mumbling for help to the guards following behind.

However, those guards with equally metallic faces seemed to see nothing, following behind unhurriedly, not a single one stepping forward to save her.

Even if attracted by her muffled cries, at most they would look up, and upon seeing no command given, would lower their iron-grey faces again, continuing to follow behind the two, fulfilling their duty to protect the queen.

"Mother, look, the flowers in the royal garden have bloomed, could you help me pick one?"

As the Ironskin Queen struggled, "Veronica" dragged her to an open window, pinning her against the windowsill, and under the queen's terrified expression, shoved her out.

"Ah!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Thank you, mother, you're so kind."

Watching as the queen fell from the window over twenty meters high, smashing onto the stone floor of the garden and shattering to pieces, "Veronica" nodded with satisfaction, then turned around to smile at the Ironskin Guards behind her, saying:

"Where is my father? It's been so many days since I last saw him, I kind of miss him."

Chapter 505: A Club to the Head

It seems middle school geometry is still valuable...

After getting off the carriage that only operates within the inner palace, Leon looked at the outer wall of the sleeping quarters, now coated with a layer of iron, and once again confirmed his earlier judgment.

The abnormal object causing the changes should be in the palace, and its location is roughly where I calculated it to be—most likely right in front of me in these sleeping quarters.

Outside in the squares and streets of the palace, only the "living beings" like pedestrians and horses were affected, but inside the inner courtyard of the palace, even "dead objects" like the walls and buildings have started to become iron-like.

Although the stone path underfoot still feels like stone, the floating dust and grime on its surface have, at some point, turned into dark brown rust marks.

Although the distant garden is still lush, it feels significantly less lively. The leaves at the treetops no longer sway with the wind, and rather than a carefully constructed garden, it resembles a gigantic metal bonsai.

But the biggest change is right in front of me, the sleeping quarters.

The originally quaint, solemn architecture with a weighty sense of history has suddenly become much more smooth and frivolous. Large pieces of dark red iron have appeared on the pointed top, and the tall, elegant windows have become short, chubby, and round, losing their clear edges; they have almost turned into a completely different form.

This bizarre transformation is like gluing together the distinct joints of a human hand with some immensely powerful glue, then kneading all the bones and flesh into a sphere, exuding an odd vibe everywhere, standing out so incongruously compared to the other buildings around...

"Chief!"

While Leon was feeling the black goat's head, examining the palace with soul vision, Joshua, having stepped off the carriage, quickly caught up, exclaiming with a shocked expression:

"What on earth happened here? Why's the palace suddenly like this?"

You ask me, who should I ask? I want to know too!

After glancing back at "Joshua," whose face still bore a slap mark, Leon replied:

"An abnormal object must have been triggered.

I just took a good look and didn't see any conspicuous abnormal souls, so it's likely that the thing causing the palace to change like this has no 'user' and is an abnormal object running amok due to losing control."

"Then... what should we do? Shouldn't we halt our action?"

"We can't halt."

Using the soul vision granted by the black goat, after discovering the Princess's fluctuating soul flame in her bedroom, Leon couldn't help but breathe a slight sigh of relief and then strode forward, saying:

"This is probably the only opportunity for those of you with abnormal objects to participate in a coup. If we stop now, who knows how hard it would be to recreate a scene like this again.

Furthermore, Princess Veronica is still within the range of this abnormal object. Her succeeding the old King would result in the least damage to the Kingdom. If anything happens to her, we'll have to prepare for the worst.

If that happens, even if we succeed in the end, very, very many people will die; the whole Kingdom will be severely weakened. It might take two or three generations to recover, so now we can only grit our teeth and move forward."

"Got it!"

After nodding vigorously, "Joshua," looking a bit tense, asked:

"Chief, should we protect the Princess first to ensure nothing happens to her, or should we knock out the Guards' Captain, let me take over his body, and have him distract the Guards so that our men can storm in?"

Save the Princess first or find the Guards' Captain?

Looking at the Princess's anxiously, frightenedly dancing soul flame, which yet remained in the room without moving, Leon decisively said:

"Let's do both at once!"

We'll split up. Something strange seems to be happening on the Princess's side, and I need to check it out to make sure she's safe.

As for Luke, you're currently in the Prince's body; the Guards' Captain won't be overly cautious with you. If you launch a surprise attack, it shouldn't be hard to knock him out."

"Alright! I'm on it!"

Upon hearing Leon's instructions, "Joshua" nodded. The two had reached the entrance of the sleeping quarters, so he took a deep breath, mimicking the usual demeanor of Prince Freckles, and approached the guards, pompously demanding:

"Where's your Captain? I need to see him; take me there quick!"

Upon hearing "Joshua," the Ironskin Guard standing by blinked, seemingly awakening from a dream, and lifted his ceremonial baton, striking "Joshua" hard across the head.

No one had expected the palace guards to actually attack the Prince, and caught off guard, this blow landed solidly on "Joshua's" head, causing him to collapse with a thud.

What the heck?!!!

Stunned by this senseless blow, Leon hurriedly pulled the fallen "Joshua" up and found him unconscious from the strike, immediately looking at the guard with disbelief.

"Why did you hit him?!!"

"Your Highness!"

Facing Leon's angry question, the guard holding the baton hastily saluted, blinking his glassy eyes, confusion openly displayed on his iron face:

"He's a commoner, dressed in criminal garb, approaching the sleeping quarters so rashly—of course, he had to be struck away!"

But that's Joshua's body, what nonsense are you talking?

Upon hearing this, Leon couldn't help frowning, but as he was about to speak, something hit him suddenly.

Both Luke who inhabited Joshua's body and himself are holders of abnormal objects with contamination values, so they're unaffected by cognitive tampering and retain normal human perceptions, able to distinguish between humans and Ironskin People.

Even when checking his own body, his self-image appeared completely normal in his sight. Without physically touching, they couldn't even sense that they had become Ironskin People, seeing each other as normal.

As for Joshua... he doesn't have an abnormal object, but he visited the headquarters of the Clean-up Bureau and saw a bunch of abnormal objects; just from that trip, he must have gained a small contamination value, thus also gaining the ability to distinguish humans from iron.

But the Ironskin Soldiers in front are different.

These ordinary people, influenced by the abnormal object and believing themselves to be Ironskin People, if they showed no suspicion upon seeing us, it proves that in their view, both Joshua and I are probably Ironskin People as well.

And this observation between Ironskin People doesn't seem to be based on their physical bodies; their senses seem to lean more towards the soul, or maybe identity, status, or profession.

So while Luke inhabited Joshua's body, in the eyes of the Ironskin Guards, he isn't Joshua the Prince, but a "commoner criminal approaching the sleeping quarters," hence the unhesitating blow.

This is a problem...

Watching Luke, unconscious from the blow and automatically separating from Joshua's soul, Leon sighed and then pinched hard on the point between Joshua's nose and upper lip.

"Ah!"

Involuntarily shouting, the unconscious Joshua shot upright, while the nearby Ironskin Guard rubbed his eyes, then exclaimed in shock:

"Your Highness? You... you were just..."

"Ah!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

The scream from high above interrupted the guard's words.

A doll in a bright red gown, with an iron skin, screamed as it fell from the outer window of the chambers, crashing with a thud far away, startling Leon.

"What was that?"

"Reporting to Your Highness."

Upon hearing Leon's inquiry, the Ironskin Guard blinked his hollow glass eyes and answered deferentially:

"If you mean who the one who fell just now was... It should be the esteemed Queen."

"..."

"Huh?"

Chapter 506: You're Out!

"Your mom's dead."

Looking at the Ironskin Queen on the ground, Leon couldn't help but sigh.

This wasn't an insult; it was merely stating a fact.

The Ironskin Queen had fallen from a great height, landing directly on the stone tablet beside the garden, shattering into pieces, with some parts even scattered into the garden. Not far off, a large iron butt clad in red shorts was hanging on a tree branch, seemingly dead beyond doubt.

"..."

How...how could this happen...

Seeing the Ironskin Queen broken into pieces on the ground, Joshua, who had woken up not long ago and whose mind was still in a fog, couldn't help but move his lips, feeling a bit like crying.

But after trying to work up some feelings, and with two downward turns of his mouth, he found he couldn't cry, so he just stared dazedly at the fragments of the Ironskin Queen.

Even though Leon had explained that this large red iron doll could very well be the real queen, there was still a big difference between an iron doll and a person, making it difficult to truly stir up the emotions.

...

This is truly...an utterly unexpected development.

Although he had a terrible impression of the queen and an average one of Joshua, at the end of the day, the dead were supposed to command respect, and Leon, who had a decent level of morality, refrained from speaking ill. Instead, he helped pick up the queen's iron head and handed it to the bewildered Prince Freckles.

"Here, take this."

Due to the Ironskin Guards' unique senses, they didn't recognize Luke temporarily inhabiting Joshua's body, thwarting his plan to take over as the guards' leader.

However, the good news was that while the Ironskin Guards didn't recognize the prince's body, their obedience to him as a prince was incredibly high.

It seemed that for the Ironskin People, once transformed, the priority of "tags" like identity, status, and occupation was elevated to the highest level, such that commands from people with higher status and duties could not be defied.

If they were regular guards, there would be a million reasons why he couldn't redirect them from their posts. But for guards transformed into iron dolls, as long as their orders didn't conflict with those of someone with higher status, they had to follow them.

So now, it seemed that he didn't need Luke to command these guards to leave their posts, thus allowing the rebels waiting outside the palace to storm in, which could be considered a blessing in disguise... or perhaps indeed a blessing?

Seeing Joshua sitting dumbfounded on the ground with the queen's iron head, Leon couldn't help but sigh helplessly.

Though it seemed a bit cruel to think this way, for him, the queen's demise was indeed a good thing, and the fact that she died due to an anomaly was even more so.

Nonetheless, while both Joshua and his mother were unpleasant, witnessing his own mother's sudden death was somewhat harsh for the young Prince Freckles.

"My condolences."

Considering that they were all human, Leon patted Joshua's shoulder as a gesture of comfort, then took out the [Witch's Broom], climbed on, and prepared to fly to the window of the princess's bedroom to check on the situation, but...

"Ah!!!!!!!"

Accompanied by a hysterical scream, the iron head in Joshua's hand suddenly opened its eyes, furiously shouting:

"I'll kill you! Damn Veronica! How dare you push me off the building!"

"What the hell!"

Wait... You were hanging on a tree, and you didn't die? Your soul was quiet just now!

Shocked, Leon turned back and looked at the iron head that bizarrely came back to life, swearing in Joshua's arms, and couldn't help but say with extreme speechlessness:

"You're still alive?"

"Of course I'm alive! If she hasn't died, then why should I... are you... that Duke of Lionheart?"

With a blink of the red ruby eyes on its face, a touch of malice crept onto the Ironskin Queen's face as she suddenly shouted with full malice in her eyes:

"Great timing! I now order you! Go upstairs immediately and kill that damn..."

Wait! You're going to command me?!

Upon hearing the Ironskin Queen's words, Leon's eyebrows suddenly raised, recalling how the Ironskin Guards at the palace door exhibited exceptional obedience to him as a prince.

This isn't good!

Though he appeared human, it was only through his own eyes; in reality, he had been affected by the anomaly as well. According to the "Ironskin People" rule he had discovered, an Ironskin person of higher status could easily command one of lower status.

And when it came to status, the queen, who ranked just below the old king, was clearly above him, a prince chosen by the princess, so there was no way he could let her finish her command!

Here you go!

In Joshua's stunned gaze, Leon, who was already preparing to leave, suddenly turned and raised his leg, executing a powerful kick that sent the iron head flying out of Joshua's hands.

With ten points in his Contamination Value, Leon's physical ability had already surpassed that of ordinary humans. The force of that kick was astounding, and the speed terrifying, issuing an extremely sharp whoosh as it sliced through the air.

Facing this kick that exceeded human limits, the vengeful Ironskin Queen didn't even manage a scream before her nose was slammed into, her entire head shooting up like a meteor, streaking into the palace's garden and completely disappearing.

"?!?!?!?!?!"

Seeing his biological mom being kicked and disappearing with a whoosh into the Iron Garden, the unfortunate Prince Freckles was dumbfounded.

From the Ironskin Queen crashing to the ground with a thump to taking off with a bang, though it all happened within a brief two minutes, for Joshua, it was a bizarre experience of unparalleled twists and turns.

Within those short two minutes, the emotional upheaval in Joshua's heart was indescribable, but if forced to summarize, it would likely consist of three stages.

My mom's dead?

My mom's alive?!

My mom flew!!!

"Plop!"

Until he heard the splash of a heavy object falling into a lake from an unknown distance, the Prince Freckles, whose mom had died, lived, and then catapulted away in those two minutes, finally snapped out of his trance, scrambling over the fence and running frantically toward the artificial lake in the garden.

"Mother!!!!!!!"

"..."

It's not my fault; your mom started it.

Watching Joshua run into the garden crying, Leon couldn't help but shake his head helplessly.

Kicking someone's mom away face-to-face was indeed overly harsh, but if he didn't kick, allowing the Ironskin Queen to give her command would have been more than just overly harsh.

"I need to ask you something."

Leon quickly walked back to the palace entrance and addressed the Ironskin Guard still standing there:

"What happens when you Ironskin People go into water? Do you die?"

"Not quite."

The Ironskin Guard shook his head and replied:

"We'll just rust, and if we stay in too long, movement will be difficult until we get polished again."

That'll do.

Nodding at the response, Leon gave orders:

"Do me a favor, the queen fell into the lake; get all the guards to go into the garden and help Prince Joshua fish out the queen. After retrieving her, stay in there and swim for a while before coming out.

Also, find a couple of the fastest guards to the street at the palace gate and see if there're any rebel lurkers; if there are, tell them they can now storm the palace."

"Understood, I'm on it!"

Chapter 507: Confrontation

When a certain prince kicked the iron-clad head of the queen, and then directed the guards to open the door to invite the robbers, "Princess Veronica" had already led the queen's attendants to find the old king who was reading in the study.

"Hmm?"

Noticing the familiar figure outside the study door, the old king, whose body was covered in rust and even his glass eyeballs had a murky hue, frowned and said:

"Didn't I order you to be locked up for a week? Who let you out?"

"Mother let me out."

Outside the door, the princess gracefully bowed, her green glass eyes full of gratitude, and said:

"Because I knocked over a cabinet and made some noise, mother was worried I might have been hurt inside, so she had me released."

Mother?

After listening to the princess's explanation, the old king's frown did not ease up at all; instead, it furrowed even deeper.

"Veronica."

After calling out the princess's name, the old king, who was basking in the sun by the window, placed the book he was holding on his lap and then asked gloomily:

"What exactly are you trying to do?"

"Father?"

The princess outside the study raised her eyebrows in surprise and asked with some confusion:

"I'm not planning to do anything. Why would you ask that?"

"..."

Not immediately replying, the old king waved his hand towards the attendant behind him, signaling him to turn his wheelchair to face the door, directly confronting the princess outside the study.

Then, the old king, with his back to the sunlight, lifted his head. On his rusted iron-clad face, his murky gemstone eyeballs, like a hawk, stared at the princess and said word by word:

"You never called her mother before!"

"Oh, I see..."

The princess at the door blinked, her clear and bright gemstone eyes meeting the old king's gaze, smiled, and said:

"Now is different from before. The next king can only be Joshua, and I no longer have any chance to inherit the throne, and I will be married off far away.

And a princess like me, when married far away, whether life is good or bad depends on the attitude of the kingdom towards me. To avoid losing support from the kingdom after marriage, of course, I need to start pleasing Mother and Joshua."

"..."

Throughout listening to Princess Veronica's reply with furrowed brows, the strange feeling in the old king's heart not only didn't disappear but became more intense.

Although the current situation is as Veronica said, a princess married far away would certainly struggle without the kingdom's support, so she should indeed work hard to strengthen her relationship with Joshua and his mother, but...

Is this something Veronica would do?

Looking at the princess who was still smiling in front of his interrogation, although no matter how he scrutinized her, she was indeed his daughter, the old king just couldn't convince himself; he always felt something was wrong.

The Veronica in his memory, although not inflexible, was actually very stubborn in many ways, with a temper much more stubborn than it appeared.

If she could figure out something like this and was willing to bow to the queen and Joshua for a better future, why didn't she bow to me earlier?

If she was willing to abandon those silly notions and continue fulfilling her duties as a princess, always putting the royal family first, the throne would surely be hers, and Joshua wouldn't even stand a chance!

"You're not Veronica!"

Gripping the wheelchair's armrest firmly, the old king narrowed his eyes and sharply demanded:

"Speak! Who are you really?"

"Father?"

The "princess" outside the study blinked and said in surprise:

"What are you saying? How could I not be Veronica? I am your daughter!"

"No way!"

The old king retorted without hesitation:

"Veronica is much more arrogant than you. Although she manages to remain polite, she's never respected my queen, let alone Joshua.

Someone like her might compromise temporarily for her absurd ideals, but would never bow to someone she looks down on just for a better future!"

"Father, you've misunderstood."

Facing the vigilant old king, the princess at the study door sighed and said:

"People always grow and change... I was indeed like that in the past, but I've come to understand now.

Although Joshua and mother's abilities mean nothing to me, they have the finance minister and your support behind them, so I should give them due respect.

Therefore, I am not respecting them per se, but the things that support them... Do you understand what I mean by saying this?"

"..."

People always grow and change...

Upon hearing Princess Veronica's explanation, a hint of hesitation flashed through the old king's eyes. After a long silence, it seemed he was convinced; his rigidly straight back relaxed slightly, leaning back into his wheelchair.

"What a pity..."

Shaking his head slightly, the old king in the wheelchair sighed with a weary expression:

"Now, everything is already fated, and I can't change it even if I wanted to... In terms of both ability and character, how could Joshua ever compare to you? You've always been my preferred heir, oh, how much better would it have been if you'd grown up a bit earlier?"

"Father..."

Watching the regret and sighs on the old king's iron-clad face, which seemed genuine, the princess outside the study bit her lip and then, somewhat agitatedly, walked into the study.

"It's not too late!"

Looking at the old king in the wheelchair, Princess Veronica earnestly said:

"You are the only king of this country. As long as you are willing, it's never too late!"

"I..."

As if moved by the princess's words, the old king, whose back was not as straight as before, leaned powerlessly against the backrest and sighed:

"Whether it's you or Joshua, you're both my children. Since I've already promised him... Hmm? Joshua?"

As if realizing something significant, the old king looked at the door in shock and confusion, asking with a perplexed expression:

"Weren't you in a meeting at the parliament? How did you suddenly return?"

Joshua returned?

Hearing the old king's words, Princess Veronica's expression slightly froze, and she instinctively turned her head to look towards the door.

At that moment, the old king, leaning against the backrest, suddenly pulled out a large-caliber nail gun from beneath the wheelchair seat, aimed it at the back of the iron-faced princess's head, and unhesitatingly fired a shot!

Caught off guard, the iron-faced princess was knocked to the ground by the immense force from behind. Before she could get up, the old king behind her coldly raised the gun and fired again.

The sound of four gunshots echoed, and the iron-faced princess's shimmering metal right knee joint was not only deformed by the impact but firmly locked by four nails, rendering her completely immobile.

"Guards!"

Throwing the nail gun to the attendant behind him, the old king in the wheelchair raised his rust-stained, yet shockingly steady hand, pointing at the iron-faced princess on the ground, and shouted:

"Arrest her for me! And send someone to Princess Veronica's room... No! First, check on the queen to see if she's still alive!"

Chapter 508: Dignity and Victory

"Yes!"

As if he didn't find anything wrong with the scene of "father and daughter in conflict" before him, after hearing the old King's order, the attendant behind him immediately responded, then got up and rushed towards the fallen princess, preparing to restrain her, however...

"Bang!"

A muffled sound of metal collision was heard, and the fallen princess raised her slightly scorched metal arm, delivering a heavy slap to the attendant's face.

In the squeaking sound of twisting metal, the neck of the metal guard immediately twisted 180 degrees in the wrong direction, and the body below the neck instantly lost control, kneeling down with a thud before the princess.

"You are really heartless."

After trying to stand up twice but failing because her right knee joint was stuck, the Ironskin Princess spoke with a somber expression:

"No matter what, I've called you 'father' many times. You actually shot at me directly?"

"..."

Glancing at the Ironskin guard whose head was twisted and kneeling on the ground, and then at the others outside the study who were unresponsive to his orders, the old King in the wheelchair remained silent for a moment, then looked up and coldly replied:

"Stop pretending. No matter how many times you call me 'father', you are not my daughter!"

"Alright then, since you are the King of this Kingdom, whatever you say goes."

Slightly shaking her head, the Ironskin Princess staggered towards the door, reaching for a hefty ceremonial sword from a metal guard's waist, then proceeded towards the old King, curiously asking:

"If I'm not mistaken, there was actually a moment when you believed my words and really thought I was your daughter. But in the end, you still shot... Could you please tell me, why did you change your mind?"

"..."

Watching the Ironskin Princess walk towards him holding the sword, the old King's metal cheeks moved slightly, then nodded and admitted:

"There was a moment I believed Veronica really came to her senses, but after thinking about my life, I immediately knew you could never be my daughter.

Whether it's me, Veronica, Joshua, or anyone else, for us royal family members, once we set our minds on something, there's never a possibility of 'coming to our senses'. No one in hundreds of years has defied this rule; it's the curse flowing in our veins!"

"I see."

Stepping with a limp through the study, reaching the old King, the princess holding the sword thoughtfully nodded:

"No wonder you only advised me once or twice. After realizing I persisted in my views, instead of trying to change my mind, you directly began preparing for Joshua's succession.

Is it because you thought trying to advise me would only make me wary, make me guard against you, so you chose not to persuade, but instead tried to support me, making me think you agreed with my views?"

"Not just that."

Sitting up straight in the wheelchair, the old King coldly said:

"My real concern was that after discovering my firm stance, Veronica would temporarily pretend to be compliant, and after I handed the throne to her, would then proceed with her own plans, siphoning the royal family's bloodline to sustain the Kingdom..."

Monster! Tell me! How do you know about such things? I've only privately advised Veronica a few times, no one else should know the specifics, what on earth are you?"

"I told you, I am your daughter."

The metallic fingers pressed the spring, discarding the ornate scabbard, as Princess Veronica held the unsharpened ceremonial sword, gently questioning:

"By the way, although your legs can't move and you can't escape from me, are you not going to resist?"

Father, since a long time ago, I have wanted to see your fearful, desperate, or regretful expression. Could you please grant your daughter this small wish before you die?"

"..."

Hearing the princess's malice-filled query, the old King simply closed his iron eyelids, covering the two murky-colored gemstone eyeballs. Immediately, a fierce sound of rushing wind echoed in the ears, and the dark world before him started spinning...

...

"Father, you are too old."

After slicing off the Ironskin King's head with a single sword strike, looking at the slumped body on the wheelchair, "Princess Veronica" shook her head and pointed the sword tip towards the attendants and guards outside the door:

"If you were a little younger, and your eyes a bit keener, you would have noticed the abnormalities in the guards outside."

Those soldiers?

Hearing the princess's words, the old King's head that had rolled to the ground suddenly opened its eyes widely.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, in order to prevent them from listening to your orders and attacking me, I had no choice but to cut off their ears in advance."

The Ironskin Princess cheerfully explained:

"You probably guessed what happened to you, but what you don't know is that my 'rule' is related to identity, status, and power. Within my rules, those with higher status can forcibly command those with lower status, and I am not exempted even myself."

In this aspect, the Queen was actually much harder to deal with than you. After all, if I wanted to kill her with a sword, as long as she screamed 'don't', or even begged for mercy in tears, I would have to immediately stop.

But you are different. Your dignity doesn't allow you to engage in behavior that damages the dignity of the royal family. When I walked towards you with the sword, you wouldn't panic and scream, nor would

you cry and beg for mercy. You would simply close your eyes and wait for death, allowing me to sever your head.

And when I chopped off your head, your 'status' and 'power' died with it, which means that no one in this Kingdom will be able to defy my orders anymore."

"..."

As if realizing something, a trace of regret appeared on the face of the old King. The Ironskin Princess smiled with satisfaction and said:

"Dear Father, thank you for your dignity, which granted me the final victory."

"..."

"Are you saying this to see my regretful expression?"

Glancing at the princess looking down at him, the head of the old King coldly said:

"I don't know why you hate me so much, but you haven't won yet!"

The Twelve Kingdoms have an agreement with the Clean-up Bureau that only those with our bloodline can be the King of the Twelve Kingdoms, so even if you kill me it's useless. Once the Clean-up Bureau notices the abnormality in the palace, you will be immediately..."

"The Clean-up Bureau won't do anything to me."

Wielding the heavy iron-backed sword again, the Ironskin Princess smiled and said:

"I wasn't lying earlier, I am indeed your daughter Veronica.

And as you said yourself, according to the agreement between The Twelve Kingdoms and the Clean-up Bureau, only those with the corresponding bloodline can be the King of The Twelve Kingdoms.

So, if I move quickly enough and kill off all the royal bloodlines before they arrive, what do you think the people from the Clean-up Bureau will do?"

Chapter 509: Is It Really So?

What? You want to kill all the royal family?!!!

Upon hearing the words of "Princess Veronica," the old King finally couldn't hold back, his eyes widening as he angrily rebuked:

"How dare you?"

"Why wouldn't I dare?"

Seeing the old King in front of her, no longer maintaining his lofty demeanor due to her words, "Princess Veronica" couldn't help but curl her lips, expressing delight yet regret as she said:

"As expected, in your heart, what's most important is always 'the glory of the royal family' and 'the sovereignty of the King'—things like that. I, your daughter, have never been within your consideration.

Hmm... but it's not that I've never been there. When Mother was not sick and could still help you like Joshua's mother did, your paternal love towards me was real."

Looking at the old King, who was angrier than when she had beheaded him, the Iron Princess couldn't help but shake her head, coldly summarizing:

"But once Mother passed, and my maternal family's resources were drained dry like the Ryan Family now, completely losing their value, I, a daughter who couldn't provide any resources, was no longer qualified to receive paternal love.

You were a decent father and never stingy with your affection. It's just a pity your affection was conditional, requiring me to first submit my value."

"You?"

After listening to "Princess Veronica's" analysis of this father, the expression of the old King on the ground slightly froze, then he asked with doubtful eyes:

"You... how do you know these things? Are you really Veronica?"

"Father, I've said so many times, I am Veronica!"

Looking at the old King, still skeptical, the Iron Princess sneered:

"However, I am not your loving daughter who cherishes family ties. Although I hate to admit it, strictly speaking, I should be considered the dark side she voluntarily suppressed."

"What do you mean?"

"It means I am the collection of those thoughts she doesn't want to acknowledge."

The Iron Princess looked down upon the old King, her face devoid of expression, and said:

"Have you never wondered why your daughter seems to never show any negative emotion?"

When she lost her mother and needed comfort the most, being neglected by you, she never complained; She did her utmost to be a good princess but hardly received any praise, she never felt too disappointed.

Though fully supporting the royal family, she was still provoked by her stupid brother and criticized and reprimanded by an even more foolish stepmother; she never cursed them with resentment.

Even when you expressed the intention to strip her of her years of efforts and marry her off, her first reaction was to find a solution rather than having a big fight with you... don't you find it strange?"

"I..."

"No more 'I', you should truly thank me for having such an excellent daughter.

Seeing the old King somewhat shocked, with guilt flashing in his eyes, the Iron Princess shook her head:

"Since she picked me up six years ago and kept me in her bedroom, the hope that I represent—changing the Kingdom and ensuring tragedies do not recur—became her inner reliance.

Over the years, she has felt anger, she has complained, but those surging negative emotions, that resentment and unwillingness were suppressed by the hope and ideals I represented.

But those impulses and malice she suppressed with reason never simply disappeared upon seeing me. She endured you for six years, and all the suppressed feelings accumulated in me over these years.

When you confined her to her bedroom, all these things accrued over six years finally surpassed the limits her reason could suppress. As her inner resentment grew beyond kindness and reason, that's when I had to suppress her!"

"..."

So... it was the incident three days ago that triggered Veronica, becoming the last straw that awakened the anomaly in her bedroom?

After listening to the Iron Princess's tale, the old King's face couldn't help but show deep annoyance, he looked at the "daughter" in front of him, murmuring with regret:

"If... if only I had known earlier..."

Hearing the old King's words, the Iron Princess briefly paused, a hint of struggle flashed in her emerald glass eyes, yet...

"I shouldn't have confined you in the bedroom!"

"..."

Indeed, someone like you is wholly impossible to feel regret.

After a moment of speechless silence, as if something that had been tethered broke suddenly, a humane smile appeared on the stiff iron face of the "Princess."

Subsequently, her twisted leg joint, hit by the nail gun, weirdly restored, even gained a touch of non-metallic softness and agility, suddenly adding a trace of human essence.

"Thank you, my father."

After moving her joints, now much softer and hardly different from a human's, the Iron Princess smiled and said:

"Sorry, I deceived you earlier. Actually, I am not Veronica, but I am indeed an anomaly revived by her repressed dark side."

"???"

Looking at the angry and shocked old King on the ground, the Iron Princess, increasingly human-like, thanked him with a smile:

"As a direct descendant of the Thirteen Royal Families, Veronica's will is far more resilient than I expected, even now preventing me from completely killing you."

If it weren't for you, personally killing her last bit of innocence, I fear I would still be entangled with her for a long time, even potentially suppressed by her, failing to kill all the royal family.

Haha, looking at it this way, you are truly my father, as without you, I probably wouldn't be born at all. And to thank you for your kindness to me..."

Within the old King's remorseful expression, the Iron Princess once again raised her ceremonial sword, swinging it down directly.

"I will give you a painless end!"

...

Could it be... I was really wrong?

Looking at the "Princess" with eyes no longer hesitant, the old King's jewel-like eyes finally showed lingering regret as she swung the sword toward his forehead with a smile.

If... if I could have been better to Veronica, if I could have cared for her a bit more, even... even trusted her a bit, would the situation now be different?

But... everything is too late now...

"Bang!"

Just as the old King, full of remorse, looked at the descending ceremonial sword, prepared for death in despair, the window beside them suddenly exploded, a surging airflow enveloping shattered window frames and glass shards, crashing directly into the study.

Chapter 510: Thirty Years East of the River, Thirty Years... Oops, Wrong Story Set

What the... the old King has been decapitated already?

Controlling the airflow carried by the [Witch's Broom], after blasting away the armored princess holding a ceremonial sword, Leon looked at the old King's armored head on the carpet and couldn't help but hiss, feeling a bit of a toothache.

Upon entering the bedchamber and finding the princess, discovering she had been turned into a doll, he immediately thought of the Queen who had been pushed down the stairs and instantly understood the ultimate target of this armored abnormality.

Although it wasn't bad for him that the old King has kicked the bucket, considering he still wasn't clear about the situation with this abnormality, he worried that there might be serious consequences after the King was finished, so he suppressed his selfish desires and rushed over immediately.

In order to save time, he didn't even climb the stairs, but flew over directly on the [Witch's Broom], but ultimately he was still half a step too late as the old King had already followed in the Queen's footsteps.

This is truly...

Strictly speaking, the Virgo Division under the Bureau of Public Order technically counts him as part of law enforcement, so is it really destiny for the police to always arrive a step too late?

...

"Ahem!"

As Leon turned into the study through the window shattered by the storm, picking up the old King's head with a hint of disdain, the armored princess, who was blasted outside the study wall, opened her eyes again amidst the rubble.

The Clean-up Bureau's people sure arrived fast... but it doesn't matter anymore.

Shoving the sofa off her body, the armored princess stood up, looked at Leon who was trying to reattach the old King's head, and said with a cheerful tone:

"Don't bother, even though he can still talk, his 'identity' and 'status' are already killed by me, so even if you put his head back on, he can't order me around anymore."

"..."

Turns out it's another undead class abnormality...

Seeing the twisted legs and feet recover quickly, even the shards of glass embedded in her body were pushed out of her, Leon couldn't help but frown, then firmly gripped the [Witch's Broom].

His [Lust Dream Invader] was taken by the Director for use by the Snow Maiden for protection, now in his hand, the only abnormality with supernatural damage capability left is the storm of the [Witch's Broom].

Two months ago, even with this thing in his hand, he would be chased by a group of ordinary people, but now his Contamination Value is near ten points, just a bit short of reaching the level-2 Cleaner threshold, and he had made significant progress.

Although the upper limit of [Witch's Broom] is not high, under the propulsion of ten points of Contamination Value, it should still have no problem to whip up a storm to suppress the seemingly no-special-abilities "princess".

"Boom!"

Just do it!

Following the teachings in [The Emma Remnants Scripture], "communicate with your opponent as little as possible when unnecessary," Leon immediately activated the [Witch's Broom], stirring up an intense gust from top to bottom, pressing the armored princess firmly onto the carpet.

Immediately after, Leon charged forward without hesitation, reaching out his right hand towards the fallen armored princess.

The pajama doll that Veronica turned into, he touched it all over a few times but couldn't get any information out, so the body of this abnormality must be the armored princess right in front of him.

As long as his hand could touch her, he would know what she really is, then he could formulate a strategy based on the information, or even directly "purchase her" and swiftly resolve this abnormality outbreak!

Heh heh.

Seeing Leon bursting in and pouncing directly towards her, the armored princess chuckled under the pressure of the storm and slightly opened her mouth.

"Stop it."

In the instant he saw the armored princess's lip movements, Leon's body abruptly froze, turning into a statue completely motionless, even the storm of the [Witch's Broom] came to a halt with him.

"My dear prince, you're quite impulsive."

Climbing up from the carpet, the armored princess extended her now soft hand to touch Leon's cheek, then pointed at the [Witch's Broom] hanging behind him, smiling as she ordered:

"Go ahead, break that thing first, then come back and talk with me."

"???"

As soon as the armored princess finished speaking, Leon's body involuntarily turned back, grabbed the retreating [Witch's Broom], and snapped it over his knee with great force.

With the sound of a crack, this broom, which had rendered great service, was snapped into two pieces.

"..."

Damn it... this broom was rented from that witch! The ownership wasn't even with me!

"Don't be angry~"

Seeing Leon's slightly annoyed expression, the armored princess giggled, "You started it, I just gave you a little punishment... sweetie, the other me is in your hands, right? Could you hand her over?"

Not good!

Upon hearing the armored princess's words, Leon's heart jolted slightly.

To ensure Veronica's safety, he had placed the doll that she became in the mirrored world, but now he cannot disobey her commands, if he truly hands Veronica over...

Hm?

Seeing his hand unmoved, not reaching for the cufflink as ordered, Leon narrowed his eyes slightly, suspecting he had figured something out.

Could it be... since she also counts as "Veronica", orders related to Veronica can't be enforced?

"Are you unwilling?"

Seeing Leon narrow his eyes to assess her, the armored princess chuckled, as though she didn't mind at all, saying:

"If you don't want to listen, then don't. Now I've already replaced my father, becoming the one with the highest status in the Kingdom. She can't make any impact anymore."

Replace... identity... I get it.

Hearing the armored princess's words, Leon seemed to have thought of something and finally opened his mouth for the first time since entering the study.

"Hey!"

"Hm?"

Seeing Leon suddenly call out, the armored princess raised her eyebrows, tilting her head with a smile, "What's up?"

"Nothing much, just wanted to tell you..."

Glancing at the old King on the ground, Leon said, "Our relationship is over, the engagement is canceled."

???

What... are you talking about?

Before Leon spoke, the armored princess had imagined many scenarios; whether Leon would curse out loud or plead desperately, logical persuasion or menacing threats would not sway her.

But what the armored princess never expected was that the first thing Leon said was that their relationship had broken down and he wanted to cancel the engagement!

"And another thing."

In the armored princess's stunned gaze, Leon informed her:

"I'm the leader of the rebels, and now I'm staging a rebellion."

"..."

So you've seen through my 'rules', realizing that my power relies on identity-based stuff, so you're severing the engagement with the princess to negate the identity inferior to mine, then declaring yourself as a rebel to escape control from this "queen" me?

Heh, your mind works pretty fast, but the idea is still a bit naive.

Looking at Leon seriously declaring rebellion in front of her, the armored princess couldn't help but laugh silently.

If all it took was casually shouting and announcing a rebellion to escape control and regain freedom, that would be ridiculous, my power isn't such an easy thing to break.

Though the rebels are indeed opposed to the Kingdom, having the identity of rebel leader might lift restrictions from 'status', merely stating it isn't enough.

To use this method to rid control, at the very least your 'identity' must be a rebel, your 'status' must be that of the rebel leader, and you must actually be conducting rebellious acts, perfectly fitting this 'role' for it to work...

Hm?

Ah?!!!