

I! Cleaner 561

Chapter 561: Countermeasures

"Hmm, I already know the Clean-up Bureau is investigating me."

After listening to the moderator's reminder, the girl wearing the white owl mask nodded slightly, then chuckled lightly and said:

"More surprising than them sending people to investigate me is the fact that they only sent people now. It seems that, although the Clean-up Bureau has many strong individuals, their efficiency is frighteningly low."

"Don't be careless."

After the girl codenamed Xue Xiao finished speaking, the person in the main seat frowned and said:

"Don't forget how the Ophiuchus Sub-bureau and the East Carleighbwen Kingdom disappeared. Although the Clean-up Bureau has deteriorated considerably over the past few hundred years, its foundation is still strong enough. If you truly push them to the brink, no one knows what kind of things those people might pull out."

Moreover, according to the information provided by 'Little Dog,' the investigation targeting Crolock Kingdom might be a joint mission carried out by two Zodiac Branch Offices, which means, in the worst-case scenario, you might even face two 'Pseudo Pillar God' level humans simultaneously."

"Thanks for the reminder, I'll try to be more cautious."

The girl with the white owl mask smiled slightly upon hearing this and said:

"However, before you gathered us, I had already roughly guessed that someone from the Clean-up Bureau might be coming to investigate me."

The Crolock Kingdom, under my control, is almost completely sealed off to the outside, and the channels are very limited, making the number of outsiders extremely low. So if there are any strange visitors, they are still easy to spot.

In addition, although these guests from the Kingdom of Orleson refused to use the identity recognition cards I provided and instead used a method I didn't understand to secretly move between various blocks, successfully avoiding my surveillance,

they appeared in places they shouldn't be without travel records frequently enough to essentially shout at me directly, indicating they have issues."

The Kingdom of Orleson?

Hearing this, a member of the Slaughter King Association wearing a yellow bull mask beside Xue Xiao couldn't help but slightly change expression and suddenly spoke up:

"That should be people from the Scorpio Branch. Although most of my followers in the Kingdom of Orleson have gone dormant and cannot frequently transmit messages, they can still conduct some basic surveillance activities.

Many high-level members of the Scorpio Branch, including the branch chief 'Puppeteer' Edward, Level 1 Cleaner 'Thread Man' Algy, and Second-level Cleaner 'Smooth Path' Mona, among a total of 5 cleaners, have not appeared recently for cleaning activities.

And the method Xue Xiao described, which allows people to traverse different blocks of the Crolock Kingdom without the use of identity recognition cards, should be the exclusive abnormal object of 'Smooth Path.' The people who infiltrated Crolock Kingdom are probably them."

"Indeed, now that we know who the opponent is, it becomes much easier."

After the yellow bull mask finished speaking, the person in the main seat nodded slightly in satisfaction and said:

"Relay the information regarding the Scorpio Branch to Xue Xiao privately later, so she can be prepared. As for the others, what can you say? Is there anyone in charge of surveillance areas where high-level cleaners are showing any unusual movements?"

"..."

After the person in the main seat finished speaking, the members of the Slaughter King Association around the long table pondered for a moment, then shook their heads one after another, either admitting they didn't know or indicating no abnormalities.

That's a bit strange then.

Looking at the Slaughter King Association members who offered no feedback, the person in the main seat couldn't help but frown.

According to the information provided by 'Little Dog,' the investigation targeting Crolock Kingdom should be a joint operation by two Zodiac Branch Offices. So why is it that only the cleaners from the Scorpio Branch are showing unusual movement?

"Well... I do have a discovery."

At this moment, a Slaughter King Association member wearing a Dongya mask hesitantly spoke:

"However, it's not a high-level cleaner, but a Level 3 Cleaner... Leon Laine took on a diplomatic mission and went to the Crolock Kingdom as a prince. He's probably already there by now."

Leon Layne, huh...

Upon hearing this somewhat familiar name, a group of Slaughter King Association members couldn't help but fall into a brief silence.

The Glutton God Leon, the Clean-up Bureau's hyena, the humanoid glutton demon... The average lifespan among Slaughter King Association members is exceedingly long, and although they've encountered many crazed cleaners throughout their long lives, not many are as crazed as he is.

Especially after learning from the moose that this person, seemingly merely out of simple hunger, decided to viciously kill and eat the Guardian Hound of Death, forming a deadly enmity with the entire Realm of the Dead, in most Slaughter King Association members' minds, Leon's name became synonymous with madness.

"He is special."

After a brief contemplation, the person in the main seat made a decision and said:

"Although he's been with the Clean-up Bureau for a short time, this person cannot be viewed as an ordinary Level 3 Cleaner. He should be regarded as a Level 2... no, better yet, directly treated as a Level 1 Cleaner, and a top-notch elite who can take over a Non-Zodiac Branch Office Chief role.

From now on, any news about him should be raised three levels in terms of importance. If it is discovered that he is close to any of the twelve royal families and is in close contact, the mask can be activated to call for an emergency meeting.

Although the relationship between the Scorpio Branch and the Virgo Branch is extremely poor, considering that he once fought alongside 'Puppeteer' Edward, the possibility of the Virgo Branch getting involved is not low... Xue Xiao, be prepared for an encounter with both 'Puppeteer' and 'Scarlet Hair Lady' at the same time!"

"Understood."

At this point, Xue Xiao, who had been acting rather relaxed, slightly furrowed her brows with a touch of seriousness, then asked:

"So what do you think I should do to respond? Should I keep delaying by blocking information, pretending the royal family is not under control? Or... should I find a way to deal with the Puppeteer and that Leon, the Level 3 Cleaner, before the Scarlet Hair Lady arrives?"

"Focus on delaying as much as possible for now."

After some thought, the person in the main seat suggested:

"We are all blocked outside the Watcher's Palace and cannot provide direct support to you, while Scarlet Hair Lady is the second most dangerous among all the branch chiefs and surpasses all in terms of destructive power, coupled with the unpredictable and complex abilities of the Puppeteer, going head-to-head is not a good choice.

Currently, the Clean-up Bureau should have some guesses about the situation in Crolock Kingdom, but they have not fully confirmed it. That's why they're only sending people to investigate. Before the Director of Taurus ascends to the palace, they probably won't have any room to deal with you.

And considering the preparations on Aquarius's side, we're actually also waiting for the Director of Taurus to ascend to the palace, so for now, the best result is to maintain the current situation, keeping the Clean-up Bureau from confirming the situation in Crolock Kingdom.

With the Clean-up Bureau's current indecisive approach, unless they are pushed to the absolute edge, they are most likely to temporarily compromise, not breaking the seemingly stable situation for the time being, and only act after the Director of Taurus ascends. This will temporarily resolve your troubles."

"Alright."

The girl with the white owl mask nodded slightly, indicating her agreement with this solution. However, after some contemplation, she asked again:

"But what if they actually discover something?"

"Then act directly."

The person in the main seat glanced at her upon hearing this and coldly said without hesitation:

"The worst thing to do when taking action is hesitating. Maintain the status quo if possible, but if it becomes apparent that you cannot maintain it, do not harbor any wishful thinking. Whether it's the Puppeteer or the Glutton God, if anyone discovers you, kill them without hesitation!"

Chapter 562: Throwing a Tantrum

"Honorable Prince, I am the Foreign Minister of Crolock Kingdom, you may call me Edison."

While the Slaughter King Association decisively set the tone and opted to eliminate anyone who found the problem, Leon had already followed the guidance of the third prince to the conference hall in Administrative Zone Three.

Upon seeing Leon enter, a neatly dressed middle-aged man with sharp eyes and a competent demeanor facing the oval meeting table, first nodded politely to him, then gestured toward the empty seat opposite him with a welcoming gesture.

"Please have a seat. Next, matters concerning the hijacking of our Sky Clipper in your country, the burning of the Boarding Tower rented to your nation, and the loss of vital cargo will be discussed and resolved between me and you.

Additionally, other members of your diplomatic mission do not have the privilege of attending the discussion. Please follow Prince Andre's attendants to the lounge at the corner and wait."

Without any pleasantries or courtesy, not even a hint of conversation, everything had been assertively arranged. The Foreign Minister quietly opened the booklet in front of him and, with a stern face, said:

"Honorable Prince, the first topic we must discuss is your country's security issues.

In critical locations around the Royal Capital, there are organized armed rebels who can easily bypass your country's sentinel posts and attack facilities belonging to us... Please provide a reasonable explanation to me and Crolock Kingdom as to why such an absurd situation has occurred."

"..."

Explain what? Tell you how I borrowed the uniform and credentials from Yisha, then led the rebels to attack the Boarding Tower and burn the Sky Clipper?

Observing the Foreign Minister who eagerly commenced his "offensive" before Leon even sat, Leon's lip twitched slightly, feeling as though he had met a certain Prince Freckles; his right hand itched slightly instinctively.

Although he had heard prior to his arrival about Crolock Kingdom's assertive foreign attitudes due to their strong technological prowess and national strength, leading to often aggressive and domineering conduct.

However, having barely spent two hours since disembarking the Sky Clipper, enduring three sequential affronts left Leon somewhat displeased.

Particularly the Foreign Minister with a stern iron face, he had neither uttered harsh words nor made provocative statements, yet his manner conveyed an unmistakable sense of refusal.

Although Leon had never considered face as important, representing the face of the Kingdom of Lutung as an emissary, being so casually dismissed was undeniably challenging.

"Honorable Prince?"

Seeing no response after a while, the Foreign Minister raised his head, observing Leon neither sitting nor speaking, but merely squinting his eyes while gazing intensely at him, his brow furrowing into a "JII" character, he reluctantly urged:

"Later, I have to receive the ambassador of Kingdom of Orleson in this conference room, so please cooperate and don't waste my time."

"..."

Ah... Veronica, you really need to put forth some effort.

Hearing the middle-aged man's nearly scolding reminder, and seeing the undisguised displeasure on his face, Leon slightly shook his head.

Inter-country relations are far more "wild" than interpersonal relationships and more adhere to the law of the jungle, where only when one's fist is hard enough can one's backbone be straight.

Currently, aside from a considerable population, energy industry, and industrial base being decent, other aspects of the Kingdom are quite neglected, resulting in them barely considering the Kingdom as significant, along with Leon himself being regarded dismissively.

...

"The matter of the Boarding Tower is not my responsibility."

As the serious middle-aged man's brow furrowed tighter, Leon pulled out a chair and sat down, then calm and collected, responded with the pre-prepared statement:

"Our mission comprises two groups. The group responsible for handling this matter is the other group of the mission. You can speak with the other ambassador when they arrive. I'm here to buy technology."

"???"

Entirely unexpected by such a response, the Foreign Minister of Crolock Kingdom instinctively froze, then glanced down at the agenda booklet in his hand, looked up and frowned:

"I did not receive a similar notification, nor is there such an arrangement in the agenda booklet."

"Then add it."

Before boarding the Sky Clipper, Leon did not wish to stir up trouble, preventing the Kingdom from facing sanctions from the Crolock Kingdom, so he likely engaged in evasive conversation.

Having experienced an absurd hijacking and listened to the plights of the robber siblings, learning about the situation in several Floating Crystal Mines, he was prepared for intense agitation and did not need to suppress his feelings.

"Give it here!"

Amidst the Foreign Minister's bewildered expression, Leon stood up and seized the agenda booklet from his hand, then used the pen on the table to make a couple of marks casually rewrote a few lines in the original format, then tossed the agenda booklet back.

"I added the procurement matter for you. I plan to acquire technology for long-distance communication. If you have any questions, ask quickly; later, I'd like to take a stroll outside. Don't waste my time!"

"You... you..."

Facing the prince who cannot be described as impolite but certainly disregardful, the serious middle-aged man turned ashen with anger and, after stammering twice, slammed the table hard.

"Absurd! Rude! Do you know what you're doing? This action is blatant provocation! You will..."

"It was you who provoked first."

Having endured silently along the journey, Leon, holding in fury, crossed his arms and sneered while questioning:

"Do you realize that I've tolerated you for a long time?"

From the moment I disembarked the Sky Clipper, you started causing trouble! Even an identification card takes forever to prepare, and now there's arrangement after arrangement with you showing me attitude... I know Crolock Kingdom is formidable, but do you truly assume others have no temper?"

"You!"

Watching as Leon kicked his chair away and stood up, with malicious intent fixed toward him, the Foreign Minister of Crolock Kingdom felt as though Leon genuinely had the intention to fight, and his momentum wavered as he desperately argued:

"This is a meeting between countries! It's not a street brawl; your conduct is unprofessional!"

"You were the ones unprofessional first!"

Leon slammed his hand on the table and furiously asked:

"Aside from a useless prince with no inheritance rights, the entire reception process was skipped; is this professional? You couldn't even prepare a few identification cards, wasting my time; this is how you define professionalism?"

And you, you are proficient in posturing, yet you have no clue why I'm here nor what you should discuss with me as the Foreign Minister; is this your professional standard?"

"..."

Ah... Is it really our fault? Not only were the identification cards unprepared, but we also misunderstood their purpose?

Seeing Leon's furious demeanor, having been intimidated by him, the Foreign Minister involuntarily shrank his neck, then forced himself to argue:

"What you mentioned were merely reception and agenda arrangement issues, which can be discussed later, but they cannot justify your rude behavior! I am the Foreign Minister of Crolock Kingdom; you must afford me basic respect! At least... refrain from using foul language!"

"I'm not using foul language!"

"..."

Chapter 563: Rendezvous

Day, it's just a slip of the tongue.

Seeing the bewildered look on the face of his foreign minister, Leon, who had spoken too hastily, coughed deliberately, then indignantly declared again:

"In any case, your Crolock Kingdom is simply too much! You've shown a complete lack of basic respect for a prince, and I even have reason to suspect now that you have no sincere intention to communicate with us!"

No... How do you have the nerve to say that?

Having sat in the position of foreign minister for almost ten years, this was the first time the stern middle-aged man encountered such an absurd envoy. As he came back to his senses, he couldn't help but feel a surge of anger, and he shouted furiously:

"What exactly do you want to do!"

"I already told you, I want to buy something, preferably the technology as well."

Pointing to the agenda book in the foreign minister's hands, Leon said nonchalantly:

"You mentioned before that our area has poor security, with rebels constantly on the move. Recently, they even attacked the royal palace, it's simply outrageous!

To deal with these arrogant rebels, I plan to purchase some long-distance communication equipment. Once their whereabouts are discovered, we can immediately encircle them. In addition, I'm planning to equip it at important places like the boarding tower, to prevent being attacked and unable to provide support in time."

So... he really did come to buy things?

Seeing Leon speak so matter-of-factly, the foreign minister hesitated for a moment, then reluctantly suppressed the anger in his heart and spoke patiently:

"Then you'll have to wait a bit. I haven't received a procurement request here, nor am I responsible for the transfer of technology, so regarding this thing you want, I need to ask the person in charge to find out how many similar technologies there are and which ones can be transferred."

"Tsk, the efficiency is really poor!"

After adding a disdainful remark, which made the foreign minister's eyelid twitch uncontrollably, Leon waved impatiently and said:

"I agree, go and ask then, I'll wait for you here... Remember to make it quick and don't let me wait too long!"

"..."

"Do you have any other questions?"

No questions, but if you can actually purchase what you want, I'll kneel down and knock my head in gratitude!

Glaring at Leon angrily and making a vow silently in his heart, the foreign minister snorted with annoyance, not bothering to argue with this fool anymore. He grabbed his agenda book and stormed off, slamming the door heavily as he left, his anger was evident.

Safe, finally got him to leave.

As the sound of the disgruntled foreign minister's footsteps faded, Leon, who had just been looking impatient, smiled slightly. He then stood up, walked to the side behind the foreign minister's chair, and reached out his right hand toward the file cabinet filled with various odds and ends, politely greeting:

"I am Third-level Cleaner Leon Laine, representing the Virgin Branch in this investigation task. I humbly ask for guidance from the two seniors."

"..."

Faced with Leon's polite greeting, the foreign minister's file cabinet couldn't help but tremble slightly... or rather, the green plant placed on top trembled oddly.

Immediately after, at the top of this pot of green plant, a vermilion onion-shaped bulb slightly opened, revealing two amazed male faces. One male head, the size of a grain of rice, struggled to emerge from the bulb, looking at Leon in shock and said:

"How did you know I was here? Did the director tell you about my ability in advance?"

"Director Edward didn't mention these things."

After scrutinizing this peculiar green plant, Leon, with eyes full of surprise, gently shook its taro leaf-like leaves as a handshake gesture. He then smiled and replied:

"But according to the agreement between him and our director, we don't need to set a meeting place for this task in advance. After I arrive in Crolock Kingdom, two seniors will take the initiative to contact me.

And in the absence of a prior agreement, as an envoy sent by the Kingdom, there are only three places I would definitely appear, namely the air harbor where the Sky Clipper landed, the meeting hall of the foreign minister, and the accommodation arranged for me by the Crolock Kingdom.

However, the air harbor is overcrowded, and its terrain is very open, which is not suitable for secret contacts. Without contacting me, it is also difficult to determine where exactly the Crolock Kingdom has arranged for me to stay, so only the foreign minister's meeting hall is most appropriate."

I see...

After listening to Leon's explanation, the two "little flower men" in the green plant involuntarily exchanged a glance, with a hint of surprise evident in their expressions.

Although they had heard from the director before that this Third-level Cleaner's capabilities were astonishingly strong, they didn't expect that even before official contact, he had already displayed his skills by "digging" them out in advance. Not to mention the talent in dealing with abnormalities, but at least his mind is quite sharp.

...

It seems my "debut" went quite well?

After observing the expressions of the two "little flower men," Leon confirmed that his display of intelligence had indeed achieved the desired effect, and he couldn't help but let out a slight sigh of relief in his heart.

According to the director, the Scorpio Branch had dispatched elite members this time. Besides Director Edward personally leading the team, they also brought an elite Level 1 Cleaner, on par with Senior Emma, who could step up as a sub-branch director anytime, along with three seasoned Second-level Cleaners.

Although Leon's dossier was quite dazzling, its confidentiality level was a bit too high, so for these veteran cleaners, he was still a newcomer with only three months of service. To ensure they valued his opinion, it was very necessary to appropriately show some strength and flex some muscle.

"Two seniors."

After establishing initial contact with the Scorpio Branch and achieving the predetermined goal of demonstrating strength, Leon politely asked:

"I've already dismissed the foreign minister, and our time is relatively ample. So, could you please tell me if you've made any findings in these few days since you arrived?"

"We do have some results..."

Upon being discovered by this so-called dangerous and crazy newcomer, the two cleaners from the Scorpio Branch were somewhat apprehensive, but seeing Leon's polite demeanor and hearing his courteous inquiry, they relaxed a bit, and then responded:

"Among the cleaners who came with us, there's someone named Mona. She can move freely within this city. In the past two days, she took the Director and Alger to tour the original location of the Gemini Branch and check the situation there."

The original location of the Gemini Branch?

Hearing this, Leon couldn't help but blink and then proactively asked:

"How is the situation? Are the cleaners and abnormal objects from the Gemini Branch still there?"

"A lot of the stored abnormal objects are gone, but the people are basically still there."

The two "little flower men" sighed in response, and the slightly younger-looking middle-aged man spoke with a puzzled look:

"Mona checked the archive room of the Gemini Branch and discovered that there were even six or seven mission records in recent times. Apart from the absence of a sub-branch director and the lack of a few high-level cleaners, the entire Gemini Branch is actually still operating normally."

Chapter 564: Morning Glory

Is the Gemini Bureau still operating normally?

Upon hearing the middle-aged flower man's words, Leon couldn't help but be slightly taken aback.

Leon and Nicole had imagined many outcomes for the Gemini Bureau, such as partial escape, complete capture, or even total annihilation, but they never considered that the Gemini Bureau could still operate normally.

After all, Atifei-01 had directly "attacked" the Gemini Bureau and seemingly taken control of the Crolock Kingdom's royal family, almost openly opposing the Clean-up Bureau. Why keep those Cleaners around?

"Are the people at the Gemini Bureau being controlled?"

After pondering for a while, Leon could only come up with this one possibility and tentatively asked:

"For example, did they have something strange implanted in their brains, or were they influenced by some abnormal object? Or maybe the relatives they care about are residents of the Crolock Kingdom and were directly captured?"

"I'm not sure."

The two flower men shook their heads in unison, and then the older flower man spoke:

"Director Edward thought about capturing someone from the Gemini Bureau for questioning, but none of us are good at that, nor do we have the ability to erase memories afterward. Doing so would definitely alert the other side.

Considering that the situation with the royal family is still unclear, Director Edward temporarily abandoned this plan and decided to first determine the royal family's situation and the location of Atifei-01's main body."

"Do you have any results? Have you determined the situation with the royal family?"

"Um... not yet..."

The two flower men exchanged a helpless glance and said:

"The geography of the Crolock Kingdom is too complicated, with over eight hundred districts that frequently change. Mona's ability consumes a lot, and the director and the team spent several days but only investigated about thirty districts.

And the worst part is, the Crolock Kingdom will hold a celebration in a few days, at which time most of the districts will rearrange and reposition. The districts we've investigated will likely be all for nothing once they move."

"..."

So you basically did a pointless investigation?

Leon shook his head in extreme frustration, then carefully inquired about the progress made by the Scorpio Director and frowned:

"Senior, with Director Edward's current method, it's taking too long, and whether it'll succeed largely depends on luck. If unlucky, you might keep being stalled indefinitely."

"Director Edward has mentioned similar concerns."

The middle-aged flower man nodded and said helplessly:

"However, after discussing, we truly couldn't come up with a better approach. Considering the royal family members of the Crolock Kingdom may already be controlled by Atifei-01, we opted for a more gradual approach to avoid provoking it and risking the royal family getting hurt."

Come on, with an investigation relying solely on luck, you'll be probing until the Watcher's Palace is in ruins if you want to find anything.

"Seniors, my words might sound harsh."

In response to the slightly tense expressions of the two flower men, Leon frowned and said:

"But your method definitely won't work. I even suspect the other side has already noticed you and is stalling for time.

So, I hope you can help me contact Director Edward so I can discuss and see if we can try my method first."

"Well... that could work."

After exchanging a look, the middle-aged flower man propped himself up on the petals on both sides, climbed out of the green plant onion-sized bulb, dug a small hole in the flowerpot, and placed a tiny seed inside.

He then covered the soil back and took out a miniature watering can from somewhere, sprinkling some water over the seed.

"Puff"

With a barely audible sound, a plant with short, soft hairs on its stems sprouted, gently poking through the soil. In Leon's surprised gaze, it coiled around the edge of the flowerpot, unfurling a bud toward him.

Is this... a morning glory?

Watching the plant, which completed its entire growth and sprouted numerous pink, red, and purple trumpet-shaped flowers in less than two seconds, Leon blinked in amazement. Then, at the middle-aged flower man's gesture, he bent down and tentatively spoke:

"Sir Edward?"

"..."

After a "delay" of several seconds, the closest morning glory to Leon actually emitted the surprised voice of the Scorpio Director.

"Leon?"

Wow, not only can they shrink and hide in a flower, but they can also use a morning glory as a speaker. This is quite an interesting ability.

Taken aback, Leon glanced at the middle-aged flower man in his leafy attire and responded:

"It's me."

"Of course I know it's you."

The Scorpio Director's voice, sounding a bit puzzled, came from the other side of the morning glory:

"But aren't you supposed to be just off the Sky Clipper, dealing with the Foreign Minister? Why suddenly contact me?"

"I managed to send the Foreign Minister away, and after exchanging with..."

Glancing at the two flower men, Leon continued:

"After exchanging with the seniors, I sensed something was off, so I wanted to discuss whether we could change our investigation method."

Want to change the investigation method?

After listening to Leon, the Scorpio Director across the morning glory went silent for a few seconds before speaking:

"Give me a reason."

"The reason is... we might have already been exposed."

Recalling the common knowledge about the Crolock Kingdom learned from the female journalist, Leon frowned slightly and said:

"The seniors just told me that the investigation was abnormally slow due to frequent district changes in the Crolock Kingdom. However, while it's true these districts move frequently, it shouldn't be this excessive."

"Explain in detail."

"In detail, among the six types of districts in the Crolock Kingdom, the areas for living, residential, administrative, and research have relatively stable personnel flow, so there's usually little need for them to move.

Only the production and military areas frequently change positions due to significant raw material and goods movement, requiring frequent realignment with areas like the spaceport."

Other than the production and military areas, the other districts shouldn't move frequently?

After listening to Leon, the Scorpio Director on the other side of the morning glory briefly recalled the condition of the investigated districts over the past few days, his brows instantly furrowing.

Districts that usually don't move were suddenly shifting positions frequently, which could only mean one thing: to slow down their investigation process. The initially covert investigation was very likely already being observed.

"I understand your point."

Judging that their actions were likely exposed based on Leon's information, the Scorpio Director paused briefly and then said decisively:

"What's your plan?"

"I plan to secure a 'safety net' first."

After pondering for a moment, Leon said:

"The worst-case scenario for the bureau would be if the Crolock Kingdom's royal family were wiped out, reducing the effectiveness of the Watcher's Palace.

Since we now have the status of a diplomatic mission, allowing us lawful contact with the royal family of the Crolock Kingdom, we might as well avoid the worst outcome and seize the opportunity to catch a few royal family members first!"

Chapter 565: Plan Finalized

In order to prevent the hostage from being kidnapped, why not simply become the kidnapper and tie up the hostage first?

After hearing Leon's suggestion, the corner of the Scorpio Bureau Chief's mouth twitched heavily twice, feeling that familiar sensation returning.

Although that's exactly the situation, and even if the Bureau later finds out that we've attacked the Crolock royal family, they would probably not deem us in violation, this seemingly problematic suggestion from Leon inexplicably makes people feel uneasy.

"Leon."

Instinctively feeling something was off but unable to pinpoint exactly what, the Scorpio Bureau Chief on the other end of the trumpet hesitated and said:

"Your plan isn't wrong, but it's somewhat aggressive, let me think it over first..."

"Lord Edward, time is pressing!"

Leon held onto the trumpet trying to retreat, and earnestly reminded him:

"Don't forget, the Aquarius Director has connections with the Crolock Kingdom, who knows how much information he has sold out. If he has indeed said everything, I am unsure if your identity is exposed, but my identity will undoubtedly be exposed.

If we can't seize the opportunity while they're feeling lucky and haven't forbidden us from contacting the royal family, to catch a few royal family members first, once they realize they can't cover the situation and choose to take our royal family members as hostages, it will be us who are in a passive position."

Indeed...

After hearing Leon's reminder, the Scorpio Bureau Chief on the other end of the trumpet couldn't help but clench his fists instinctively.

Before taking on this investigation task, the Sagittarius Director drew three bottom lines for him.

The best scenario, of course, is that he smoothly finds out everything, and the royal family of the Crolock Kingdom is unharmed, minimizing the impact; if things are really not possible, then choose to prioritize safeguarding the royal family members of the Crolock Kingdom;

And if things become extraordinarily troublesome and even the royal family members can't be fully protected, then the Bureau's last bottom line is to preserve the lineage of the Crolock royal family, to avoid weakening the effectiveness of the Watcher's Palace.

The three bottom lines drawn by the Sagittarius Director require action from high to low, but Leon's suggestion, on the contrary, is to start from low to high, intending to preserve the lineage first, then consider safeguarding the royal family, and finally try to understand the situation here.

If I were to put it into words...

Leon's method is indeed very aggressive, but if you think about it carefully, it seems more reliable than the Sagittarius Director's idea?

"Lord Edward!"

Seeing the Scorpio Bureau Chief remain silent, Leon thought for a while, then proactively took a step back and said:

"If you think the situation is still manageable, not to the direct execution point, then continue with your original plan, and as for the matter of kidnapping the royal family, leave it to me!

But as the price for me taking this responsibility, I hope you can provide some help, at least guarantee the safety of Nicole and me, even if you don't directly show up, okay?"

"..."

If I can't make a decision, then you go ahead and do it, taking the responsibility too, I just need to help?

After hearing Leon's words, a subtle emotion flickered through the eyes of the Scorpio Bureau Chief on the other end of the trumpet, and then he inadvertently displayed a tinge of self-mockery.

It seems that over the years, I have become too complacent; even though my strength has grown stronger, almost a decade without any injury, my decisiveness has not improved, becoming more indecisive, and my courage has been overshadowed by this new Cleaner.

Thinking of this, the Scorpio Bureau Chief couldn't help but take a deep breath, a rare sense of boldness appearing on his face, and he loudly said into the trumpet on his shoulder:

"Alright! We'll go with your plan! Hmm... but remember to take responsibility, at the time don't say I commanded it!"

No way, courage is courage, but avoiding responsibility when possible is better.

After all, this Leon kid is rather peculiar, who knows what this might turn into, I don't want to end up like Olivia, with the performance locked in last place in just the first month of the year.

"Alright!"

Not minding the Scorpio Bureau Chief's careful thoughts, seeing him agree to back up his plan, Leon nodded in satisfaction and then began to discuss:

"Lord Edward, my strength is not as great as yours, so if you don't show up, the number of targets to kidnap should be reduced... how about the third prince of the Crolock Kingdom?"

The third prince? Andre?

Hearing Leon's words, the Scorpio Bureau Chief recalled for a moment, then said:

"If I remember correctly, he is the member of the royal family responsible for receiving you? You plan to kidnap him?"

"Yes."

Leon nodded and said:

"Nicole told me that the Crolock royal family has long since been reclusive and hasn't shown up in recent years. Currently, the only confirmed member of the royal family is him.

And according to customary diplomatic etiquette between kingdoms, outside the standard reception process, if I intend to tour, I would also need a royal family member to accompany me.

Once the diplomat returns, I will directly propose to tour the Crolock Kingdom, creating ample opportunities to be alone with him, directly capturing him would be the simplest plan."

Using the excuse of needing a guide for touring to lure out the third prince Andre, then directly taking the opportunity to capture him?

After hearing Leon's simple but feasible plan, the Scorpio Bureau Chief pondered slightly, then nodded and said:

"I think it's doable, as for after kidnapping the prince... Ruben, Frankie!"

As he said this, the Scorpio Bureau Chief called out the names of two second-level Cleaners, then ordered nonchalantly:

"You two will modify your original task, starting now, your task is to cooperate with Leon, help him kidnap Prince Andre, and then use your skills to hide him well!"

"..."

After hearing the Scorpio Bureau Chief's order, the two second-level Cleaners, who were at a loss beside him, couldn't help but exchange a glance, seeing a mutual astonishment on each other's faces.

Chief, didn't we agree earlier, that if we just keep this big shot Leon in check and stop him from causing trouble, we would be credited? How come you suddenly changed your mind and started working with him?

"What's wrong? Do you have any questions?"

"No..."

"No problem..."

Seeing their boss being easily swayed by a few words, directly changing the task from protecting the royal family to kidnapping the royal family with Leon, the two second-level Cleaners couldn't help but gripe internally, while hurriedly shaking their heads to ensure the task will be completed.

"Then it's settled!"

Seeing the two second-level Cleaners having no objections, the Scorpio Bureau Chief decisively made the decision:

"Just in time, the Crolock Kingdom is preparing for a festivity, invite the third prince over tomorrow, and directly proceed with the kidnapping, if something goes wrong I'll cover for you!"

Chapter 566: Swapping Roles

Whew... Hosting ambassadors is really a bothersome task...

Unaware that the ambassador he received today already had plans concerning him, after a whole day of diligent work, Andre, the third prince of the Crolock Kingdom, pushed open the door to his room, not feeling too exhausted.

"Andre brother~"

As the door was opened, a crisp cry came from inside the room.

The third prince squinted his eyes and found a beautiful girl with fair skin, who turned her head from a huge lounge chair by the window and teased with a hint of mockery:

"Weren't you going to meet that Prince Leon? Why did you come back so soon? Didn't you again slack off dealing with those matters and slip away early?"

"It's not exactly slipping away."

Shaking his head unperturbedly, the third prince stepped into the room and replied while hanging his coat:

"My task was just to welcome him, the rest isn't my responsibility. He can go talk to the Foreign Minister himself, staying there wouldn't make a difference for me."

"So you did slip away early, didn't you?"

The girl blinked her emerald eyes, then laughed playfully and said:

"When she heard you agreed to host the ambassador, Mother was so relieved and said that her favorite son had finally grown up and would do a good job this time. But now it seems her relief was a bit premature~"

"No worries."

The third prince slowly walked to the window, stretched out his arms to enjoy the afternoon sun, and said indifferently:

"It's her fault for having such unrealistic expectations of me, especially now that the entire kingdom is taken over by those Atifie duplicates. Whether I work hard or not makes no difference, the final outcome is insignificant anyway... Go, go! Hurry up and get up!"

Seeing the girl who still wouldn't let go of his lounge chair, even after he walked over, the third prince impatiently urged:

"If you want to sunbathe, do it in your own room, stop coming here and hogging my chair!"

"My room is on the other end, there's barely any sun left now!"

"Then go get a different chair, there are recliners for guests to sit over there!"

"No way!"

Firmly gripping the chair's armrests, the girl who seemed about thirteen or fourteen shook her head vigorously and said:

"Those chairs are so hard and uncomfortable. This big lounge chair is way better! You go sit on them yourself! And also! Move a bit! Don't block my sun!"

Tsk... What a nuisance...

Seeing his sister clinging stubbornly to the armrests, refusing to get up, the third prince could only tut in resignation, fetch another chair, place it on the balcony, sit on it, and then lazily close his eyes.

The sun was just right.

The sun at around four in the afternoon wasn't as scorching, but when the golden sunlight, passing through the greenhouse's clear glass, splashed on his body, it still carried a warmth that made him feel lazy all over, slowing even his breathing.

Unfortunately, this leisurely relaxation didn't last more than a few minutes before it was interrupted again.

"Andre brother~"

While the prince, having worked diligently for over two hours, started to enjoy the afternoon sun, the girl on the lounge chair suddenly scooted her butt his way, then reached out with her foot to tap his calf, and asked with curiosity in her eyes:

"What kind of person is that Prince Leon?"

Good grief... you're so bothersome...

Glancing unhappily at his sister who disturbed his rest, Prince Andre answered with displeasure:

"A man."

"Speak properly!"

Not satisfied with such a perfunctory answer, the girl blinked her emerald eyes, pouted, and said discontentedly:

"If you keep answering like that, I'll pester you! I'll come here to take your chair during the best sunny afternoons from now on!"

"..."

What a nuisance...

Knowing that his sister is capable of doing just that, and if he doesn't placate her, he will certainly have no peace in the future, Prince Andre could only sigh and answer helplessly:

"He's a very strange person. Clearly, the strength behind him isn't that formidable, but his style is very aggressive; moreover, he seems to harbor strong animosity towards the entire Crolock Kingdom."

"Huh? So you mean he dislikes me?"

Seemingly startled by this answer, the charming girl looked a bit aggrieved and said:

"I've never met him before, nor done anything to him. So why would he dislike me?"

"Are you even listening?"

Hearing this, Prince Andre couldn't help but glare at her.

"I said he harbors animosity towards the entire Crolock Kingdom, not just a single person!"

"It's no different~"

Hearing this, the charming girl tilted her head, then stroked the snowy owl mask placed on the deck chair and said with blinking eyes:

"Aren't I the entire Crolock Kingdom now?"

"Hmm..."

Listening to the charming girl, Prince Andre pondered for a moment, then nodded and said:

"That's not wrong... Anyway, he gives me a different vibe compared to the people from the Kingdom of Orleson.

Those cleaners from the Kingdom of Orleson always act so cautiously on the surface, afraid that any outrageous move would draw our direct attention.

But this guy is really odd. Clearly enlisted for an investigation by the Clean-up Bureau, which requires caution, yet he seems to disregard all that, behaving and speaking with high flair.

Since disembarking from the Sky Clipper to now, I arranged a couple of troubles for him, and he never held back, retaliating without hesitation. I get the feeling that he's looking forward to stirring things up."

"Really... He sure is a strange one."

Nodding in agreement, the charming girl tapped her fingers, resembling green onion stalks, lightly on the wooden snowy owl mask, and then proposed with keen interest:

"Andre brother, since you don't want to do the hosting work, why don't I go entertain him for you tomorrow?"

You entertain him for me?

Hearing her, Prince Andre furrowed his brows and turned his head to remind her:

"Atif, human behavior is unpredictable. I don't know if he might harm you, and your body has just been made; be careful not to let it get damaged."

"It's fine. If it breaks, we'll make another one!"

The charming girl blinked her emerald eyes and counted with her fingers, laughing cheerfully:

"It's not all that hard to make a person, about sixty-five percent oxygen, eighteen percent carbon, three percent nitrogen, one and a half percent calcium..."

Although some materials are hard to extract, once you understand human composition and combine it with the peculiar abilities of those abnormal objects, creating a person is quite simple."

"..."

"Speaking of which, I owe it to the Aquarius Director for the knowledge that allowed this body to be made so quickly; without the counterweight from the Aquarius Director containing that knowledge, who knows how long it would've taken for me to have a body~"

Stretching lazily, the charming girl got up from the lounge chair, walked to the window, and looked toward the direction of District 3 next door, her emerald eyes filled with anticipation:

"Remember the Aquarius Director mentioned, the knowledge in that counterweight was supposedly handed over by this Prince Leon, so I've wanted to meet him for a very long, long time!"

Chapter 567: Delivered to the Door

One night passes without a word.

Early the next morning, as the warm yellow winter sun had just crossed the skyline pieced together with metal and earth, spreading over the long street filled with gears and copper pipes, Leon and the female journalist had already left the accommodation arranged by the Crolock Kingdom and boarded the oddly shaped tram.

Due to the rather complex planning between different sectors and frequent changes in locations, the Crolock Kingdom has almost entirely abolished private transport nearly a hundred years ago, switching to a comprehensive network of trams.

In addition to the Crolock Kingdom's dual-layered city structure, except for several special roads like deliberately open airways, small floating cars are also completely banned from flying, so even visiting foreign envoys cannot enjoy the special treatment of "chauffeur service" and have to rely on public transport just like everyone else.

However, compared to ordinary citizens, Prince Leon, as an envoy, still received a little privilege—like being able to have breakfast on the tram.

...

"Wait a minute... while you were in the Crolock Kingdom, did you eat this stuff every day?"

Stirring the purplish pink meat paste in the bowl with a fork and pressing down on the green and yellow mixed vegetable puree on the plate, squeezing out a pool of greenish juice, the appetite-less Leon put down his utensils, turned to the female journalist next to him, and asked with difficulty:

"Regardless of whether this thing tastes bad or not, I just want to know one thing now—what's the point of using a fork for this cold mush they serve?"

"Well... it may not look appealing, but it's still very good for your health."

Upon hearing Leon's speechless criticism, the female journalist, a former native of the Crolock Kingdom, was instantly embarrassed, then helplessly explained:

"I'm not entirely sure of the specifics, but supposedly many years ago, the Science Department of the Crolock Kingdom, relying on Atifie-01's computing power, discovered the optimal food ratio for human health.

After completely eliminating the original food and enforcing it for ten years, the Crolock Kingdom's annual medical expenses were directly reduced to 15% of what they used to be, and it's even said that the average lifespan could increase by six to ten years."

But if living longer means eating cold mush for sixty years, I'd rather live a shorter life...

Scooping a spoonful of unseasoned vegetable puree and stiffly forcing it into his mouth, feeling its bizarre texture like half-chewed cud forcibly taken from a goat's mouth during regurgitation, Leon's facial features involuntarily twisted.

Honestly, I've never understood the Aquarius Director more. Anyone who eats this semi-fermented wet garbage for over a hundred years would definitely start going insane!

Sigh! Forget it, it's only for a few days anyway.

Suppressing his disgust, Leon swallowed the life-supporting meal in his mouth, digging into various mushes without tasting them, while using his finger to touch the black goat's horn, leveraging soul communication to ask:

' Let's not talk about the food... Nicole, are you ready for the operation?'

' Ready.'

Upon hearing Leon's inquiry, the female journalist first glanced inside the carriage at the few reception staff following herself and Leon, then nodded slightly:

' I know all the cleaners at the Gemini sub-bureau. If someone is protecting Prince Andre, no matter who it is, I'm confident I can subdue them first.'

' As long as you're confident.'

Nodding at her words, Leon reached into his pocket and tapped the little flower inside with his fingertip.

' What about the two seniors? Are you ready?'

' No problem.'

' We're ready too.'

Receiving Leon's soul wave, the two Second-level Cleaners hiding in the flower bud also responded affirmatively.

' Great, before we start the operation, let's go over each of our tasks one last time.'

Blinking, Leon spoke seriously:

' According to the plan I discussed with Director Edward, when we meet Prince Andre, I'll ask him to take me on a tour of the Crolock Kingdom festival, trying to create a chance to separate him from his guards amidst the crowd.

After that, Nicole will handle the cleaners possibly accompanying him, and I'll take the opportunity to knock out Prince Andre and hand him over to Senior Ruben, who will then use the Flower Fairy to hide him in a flower bud and take him away.

Meanwhile, Director Edward and several other seniors are stationed in the 05 living area three districts away to back us up. If something goes wrong, Senior Frankie will lure us away and directly send us to Director Edward, who will assist in our immediate evacuation... Is there any problem with any of this?'

' No problem!'

The female journalist nodded slightly, swallowing the vegetable mush in her mouth.

' I'm ready.'

In Leon's pocket, Ruben, dressed in a leaf outfit, patted his chest.

' Rest assured, everything will definitely go smoothly!'

Also hiding inside the flower, Frankie, with a miniature fishing rod on his back, made an okay gesture and confidently assured:

' As long as Prince Andre appears, we're guaranteed to catch him!'

...

"I apologize."

An elderly attendant dressed in formal attire bowed towards Leon and the female journalist, his expression slightly apologetic as he spoke:

"Prince Andre suddenly caught a cold last night and is now running a high fever, so he might not be able to accompany you to the festival."

"..."

What rotten luck...

Looking at the sincerely-faced elderly attendant in front of him, Leon's mouth couldn't help but twitch hard, his face turning as green as the vegetable mush churning in his stomach.

To facilitate today's operation, I had a hard time persuading the Scorpio Bureau Chief, preparing meticulously for half the night, not only memorizing the map of the festival blocks but also planning an escape in case of an ambush.

And just at the crucial moment when the bullet's loaded and the trap's set, the prey unexpectedly didn't leave its burrow and stayed home napping!

"Are you sure he caught a cold?"

Having prepared his bow and arrow only to miss the shot, seeing before him the soul visibly dancing as the elderly attendant obviously lied, the disappointed Leon couldn't help but darken his face and say:

"Why do I feel like your Prince Andre just simply doesn't want to come out?"

"This... you must be joking..."

Hearing Leon's questioning, the elderly attendant's eyelids couldn't help but twitch slightly, awkwardly chuckling twice before insincerely saying:

"His Highness Andre is usually... quite diligent, but unfortunately, his health has always been poor since childhood, so catching colds occasionally is inevitable. I hope you can understand."

"Heh, how do you expect me to understand that?"

Since the target Prince Andre wasn't present, Leon naturally had no interest in touring the festival, directly feigning "indignation":

"How many times has this happened now? Even though our nation's strength is nothing compared to your Crolock, I'm still a Prince! Isn't it outrageous that you can't even arrange for a single royal member to accompany me?"

"Sir Leon~"

Just as the prince was about to make a scene and leave, a crisp greeting suddenly came from afar.

"Apologies for being late."

Nodding apologetically towards the somewhat surprised Leon, a young lady, strolling over with a group, lifted her skirt corners gracefully to give a standard ladylike curtsy, then with a smile like a blooming flower said:

"I am Feiliya, the sixth princess. Andre's brother is unwell, but to show respect to Your Excellency, a special envoy was sent to find me so that I could accompany you for the festival... Is this arrangement to your satisfaction?"

Chapter 568: Compass and Watch

Sixth Princess Feiliya?

Looking at the young girl in front of him, dressed in a long gown and smiling beautifully, Leon raised his eyebrow slightly, then turned his head to exchange a glance with the female reporter.

Have you heard of this princess?

Not really sure... but her hair color and eye color are the same as Prince Andre's, so she should be a direct member of the royal family indeed.

Then let's catch her! Anyway, it's just to guarantee it, as long as it's the royal bloodline, whoever comes is the same!

In less than 0.1 seconds, after reaching an agreement through eye contact, the "angry" Prince Leon's expression softened, and he nodded slightly with satisfaction:

"That's more like it... let's go, I can't wait to see what your celebration looks like here."

"Alright."

Looking at Leon, whose expression bore slight arrogance and was very different from what she understood, the girl named Feiliya blinked her green eyes, then lifted her slender arm and slightly indicated toward the area being decorated for the celebration, smiling as she introduced:

"This way, Your Highness... actually, the celebration in our Crolock Kingdom isn't much different from yours, they are all for commemorating some rather important days.

But compared to your country, the celebrations here don't celebrate the founding day or the birth of some historical celebrities, but instead, they tend to commemorate the appearance of some key technologies."

"What do you mean by key technologies?"

"They are important researches that changed the era and have continued to be passed down till now."

After bringing Leon into the district preparing for the celebration, the lively young girl pointed at the colorful signboard hung at the highest point, with a hint of longing in her eyes, she said:

"For example, this recent celebration is to commemorate the discovery of the Hover Crystal. Without the mining and utilization of this mineral, there wouldn't be today's City of Machinery, Crolock."

Hover Crystal, huh...

After hearing Feiliya's words, Leon slightly furrowed his brow, recalling the robber siblings temporarily left at the residence, hidden in two orchids.

For Crolock Kingdom, Hover Crystal is indeed extremely important. Without such a strange mineral that can greatly reduce weight, it would be impossible to create this miraculous city capable of moving and assembling freely.

But for places like the Floating Crystal Mine, the existence of this thing is an immensely huge disaster, and in Cheshire, the hometown of the robber siblings, as well as other Floating Crystal Mines, who knows how many people have been left destitute because of this thing.

"Leon, sir."

After standing and looking under the colorful signboard for a while, the girl with green eyes spoke eagerly:

"Actually you arrived a bit early; the celebration hasn't yet started. We are just doing some preliminary preparations, and the real 'Floating Day' is two days later.

At that time, not only will the bustle be dozens of times what it is now, but we will also temporarily lift the restrictions, allowing several districts above the celebration area to move aside, and permit the machines powered by Hover Crystals to soar freely. If you are interested, I can accompany you then to take another look."

"Then, I'll trouble you."

Responding perfunctorily, Leon chatted idly with Feiliya, while reaching to adjust his ram's horn, glancing at the guards trailing the two of them.

The soul strength of these guards is fairly normal, although some are more vigorous, they are still within the realm of ordinary people, mixing with a cleaner is unlikely.

As for the other people on Celebration Street, they all seem normal too, and most of their souls appear to be... somewhat happy?

Looking at the surrounding soul flames, which are higher in terms of "purity" and stability when the flame leaps slightly compared to the Royal Capital, Leon's brow slightly relaxed.

Compared to most ordinary people who have just emerged from the subsistence line in the Kingdom, Crolock Kingdom undoubtedly has abundant material conditions, and since there's less need to worry about livelihood issues, the souls here are much "stable," just like the Princess Feiliya beside him, appearing relaxed and simple...

Hmm... but somehow it's a bit weird...

Staring at Princess Feiliya's soul flame and noticing its stability and purity, Leon's brow furrowed once more.

It wasn't strange at a glance, but upon closer examination, Princess Feiliya's soul seems somewhat overly "orderly."

The souls of most people are noisy, this is unrelated to one's good or bad morality, it's simply that they cannot control their thoughts, and inevitably their mind wanders when not focused.

And emotionally they always seem chaotic, even if they are exhilarated, they inevitably get frustrated due to unforeseen, trivial reasons such as bad weather today, or a leaf of chives on the teeth of someone they like, dampening their previously high spirits slightly.

But Princess Feiliya's soul gives a feeling of... a very "perfectly rounded" feeling, happiness is just happiness, longings are just longings, joy is just joy, with absolutely no extraneous emotions mixed in.

If one must describe it, others' souls are like a compass held in hand, although they strictly adhere to the operating rules, they inevitably change direction due to the holder's subtle arm tremors.

While Princess Feiliya is like an extremely precisely adjusted watch, no matter how much the person wearing the watch sings, dances, or raps, it always ticks second by second, looking very...

Precise!

A unique precision that belongs to "artificial products!"

Having finally found the words to describe this strange sensation, Leon's pupils suddenly shrank, looking at her with suspicion.

He remembered Aquarius Director said that the royal family of Crolock Kingdom has been controlled, and upon receiving this information, he naturally assumed that this control was in the "physical" form of house arrest.

But looking at Princess Feiliya's soul... could it be that the control mentioned by Aquarius Director is not imprisonment or hijacking, but some kind of soul restraint and modification?

"Leon, sir?"

The girl with green eyes seemed very perceptive; Leon's brief moment of losing composure was detected by her.

Raising her head to look at Leon, the lively young girl asked somewhat puzzledly:

"What's wrong? Did I do something wrong?"

"Nothing..."

Glancing at her soul filled with pure "amazement" and no other mixed emotions, Leon blinked, then smiled:

"I was just thinking about something, got a bit distracted."

"I see."

Having noticed that Leon, who hadn't discerned her true identity since earlier, was looking around a lot, the lively young girl couldn't help but smile smugly inside, and then blinked her big eyes, politely and full of curiosity, asking:

"Leon, sir, can you tell me what you were thinking about just now?"

"Sure."

Glancing at Feiliya's soul, with thoughts and emotions interlocked like a smooth gear set, Leon nodded with a smile.

"I was just thinking, a girl as cute as you, if she gets punched, she'd probably cry for a long time, wouldn't she?"

Chapter 569: Stimulation and Computation

What?

After listening to Leon's thoughts, Feiliya's originally precise and smooth soul suddenly experienced an extremely bizarre disruption, as if a heap of sand were poured into a tightly meshing gear set, almost directly getting stuck.

What does it mean... A cute girl like you, if punched, would certainly cry for a long time? I've been so polite to him, and I look so cute and respectful, why would he want to punch me?

What is his motive for doing such a thing?

What is the purpose behind this statement?

Where is the logic in all this?

What feedback should I provide?

How should a human react?

And at the moment when Princess Feiliya was at a loss for how to react, her expression completely frozen, a deafening rumble seemed to resound like the simultaneous stamping of tens of thousands of horses, twenty-three blocks away in an underground building buried under a lake.

"?!"

"What's going on?"

"Atifei-01 has started computing?"

Noticing the abnormal operation of the number one machine intelligence, seemingly engaged in some very complex calculation, all the humans in the underground building who were initially attending to their respective tasks suddenly became alert, stopping their work and swarming like ants towards the largest control panel in the main hall.

Meanwhile, behind the huge glass façade of the main hall, the gigantic apparatus wrapped in strange gelatinous material and immersed completely in the lake water was operating at an extremely terrifying speed.

In that enormous apparatus, which is on average more than fifteen meters high and occupies an area nearly the size of two football fields, countless hair-thin metal connecting rods were rapidly pushing, like pounding garlic, according to their own sixteen milled grooves, driving the billions of gears at the ends to continuously spin.

Those grain-sized gears would pause, almost imperceptibly to the naked eye, every sixty-fourth of a second, and at the moments these precise gears paused, the sliding grooves tangent to them would briefly open, touching the dot matrix grid responsible for recording data behind, leaving rows of puncture points several times finer than pinpricks...

"What's happening?!"

Seeing the gigantic apparatus which had mobilized almost one-twentieth of its regions, the scholars who hurried over were quick to surround the control panel, launching an indignant denunciation against the fifty-plus operators who looked dumbfounded.

"Stop it quickly! Do you know how much energy is consumed by computing in such a state for even one second?!"

"Who applied for Atifei-01's computing permission? Damn it, the consumption of number wheels and dot matrices is too rapid!"

"Speak up! What are you bastards calculating?!"

"Silence!"

Picking up a fallen chair from beside him, slamming it twice onto the side of the metal instrument panel, drowning out the scholars' denunciations with the loud noise, a middle-aged man with graying temples, whose collar was embroidered with half a mechanical clock, and who appeared of quite high status, angrily spoke:

"Shut up! Listen to me first!"

"No one applied for Atifei's computation today! The calculation currently ongoing was initiated by itself!"

Initiated by Atifei itself?

After hearing the shift manager's explanation, the scholars couldn't help but look at one another, yet they didn't quiet down but instead erupted in a more intense uproar.

"How could that be! With Atifei's computing power, it wouldn't struggle even if recording the scales of every fish in this lake!"

"Yes, the last time it calculated travel data for 1.3 million people, the mobilization extent was only about a third of this!"

"Could it be that 'measurement of world's basic elements' project again?"

"It shouldn't be, wasn't it said that with the current conditions it couldn't fully compute, and it stopped after calculating just over sixty?"

"Everyone shut up!"

Once again hammering the metal instrument panel, suppressing the scholars' clamor, the gray-templed person in charge frowned tightly and spoke:

"This is Atifei's own computation, meaning we can't stop it, hurry back to your own work, don't block the control room! Get out! Scholars below level three, out!"

After cursing a couple of times, chasing away a portion of the scholars, the person in charge returned to the console and began questioning Atifei-01, trying to find out what exactly it was computing.

After a delay of several seconds, the crazily running machinery behind the glass façade finally slowed down slightly, and soon, from the speaking tubes on either side of the instrument panel, came a female voice around thirteen-fourteen years old synthesized from rapid knocking sounds.

"Question, what motivates a psychologically healthy male human to unprovokedly attack a cute young female, and attempt to calculate the precise duration of her crying?"

???

What the hell kind of question is this?

Listening to the lifelike confused tone simulated by Atifei-01, the remaining scholars in front of the console looked at each other in bewilderment.

Unprovokedly attacking a cute young female and then listening to her cry... isn't that beastly behavior? Are you sure this thing is mentally sound?

"I might know the reason..."

Just when the scholars, with an average age of over forty, were collectively stumped by Atifei-01's question, a twenty-something female scholar in the corner of the main hall hesitantly raised her hand.

"I guess this might also be a form of affection... right?"

Under the gaze of numerous bigwigs, the young female scholar with the lowest level scholar badge hanging on her chest shyly said, blushing:

"My sister gave birth to a child last year, and when I saw that child's rosy little face, I couldn't resist the urge to pinch it secretly... I feel it might be for this reason..."

A form of affection?

After hearing the young female scholar's guess, the other scholars in the main hall recalled and immediately revealed an expression of sudden realization.

Indeed, they've perhaps done similar things themselves; upon seeing particularly cute little children, there's indeed always a strange urge to tease or bully them slightly.

Noticing the consensus expressed by the scholars, Atifei finally obtained the answer and ceased its frantic computation, and the gigantic apparatus behind the glass façade also quieted down again.

Subsequently, twenty-three blocks away, Princess Feiliya, who had been standing by the roadside for a while, raised her beautifully crafted little face, wrinkled her nose at Leon, and smiled tentatively with a tinge of shyness.

"Thank you for your affection, but it'd be better if you didn't do this."

"???"

I want to hit you, and you actually thank me? And with such embarrassment?

Watching as Feiliya, after a brief chaos, gradually restored her original precise mechanical feel, losing once again the 'human warmth' in her soul, Leon couldn't help but frown, then confirmed his speculation.

Indeed, the royal family of the Crolock Kingdom has been thoroughly controlled, and that intelligent machine named Atifei-01 might have found a way to harness the abnormal object, exerting influence over the souls of the royal family members.

Thinking of this, Leon couldn't help but glance at Princess Feiliya with pity.

What a good child she is, obedient, cute, and polite, yet she has been controlled by the abnormal object; surely this warrants some assistance. As for how to help...

Recalling the moment of deliberate provocation earlier, the way Feiliya's soul finally lost its precision and began to waver like a normal human's, a flash of realization appeared in Leon's eyes.

She needs stimulation! She needs to be thoroughly stimulated!

Chapter 570: Who Controlled Me? And Whom Did I Control?

"Boom!"

Behind the glass curtain wall, the giant machine, which had been silent for less than thirty seconds, began to operate wildly once more.

"Not good! Atifie is calculating again!"

"Someone! Quick, someone come!"

"Question."

Amidst the worried expressions of the scholars, the metal tubes on either side of the main console once again emitted the puzzled inquiry of Atifei-01.

"If all the wood on a ship is replaced little by little until none of the original wood remains, is the ship still the same one?"

No... What kind of absurd question is this?

Faced with Atifei-01's puzzling inquiries, in order to calm it down quickly and save energy, the scholars, from various technical disciplines, had to engage in a lively debate, hoping to come up with a somewhat reasonable answer.

However, before they could reach a conclusion, the rumbling sound from the lake suddenly grew louder, and another similarly perplexing question came from the metal tube.

"Question: if there is a barber who only shaves those who cannot shave themselves, can he shave himself?"

"???"

"Boom!"

"Question."

Without giving the scholars any time to think, as the rumbling sound of the giant machine grew louder and louder, Atifei-01 again asked dazedly:

"A person who is very skilled at finding joy amidst hardship died from exhaustion, could he possibly have died from joy?"

"?!!!"

"Boom!"

"Question."

When the temperature of the lake water reached the warning line, the red lights around the main console lit up in batches, and amid the frantic expressions of the scholars, Atifei-01 asked in slight pain:

"Why do humans suddenly decide they should buy chickens and basketballs after purchasing a pair of suspenders, and feel it's completely reasonable? What's the connection between the three?"

Who knows what's the connection here!

Faced with Atifie's increasingly incoherent questions, the elite scholars rushing from Research Zone 1, realizing something was wrong, were nearly driven mad.

"Protection mechanism! Quick, activate the protection mechanism!"

Having given up answering those outrageous questions, the person in charge, seeing the flashing red warning lights becoming faster, could only shout at the top of his lungs amid the deafening rumble from the machines in the lake:

"Don't let it keep calculating! Activate the protection mechanism! Make it skip questions it can't calculate, just like the other subordinate units!"

"It can't skip!"

After trying to activate the protection mechanism twice with no response, the sweat-drenched operator said in terror:

"Atifie has the highest authority! It refuses to initiate the protection mechanism and wants to call on more computing power!"

"Then disconnect it immediately!"

Grabbing the operator's collar, his face turning purple, the person in charge roared:

"Disconnect all remote communication technologies! Don't leave a single one! Seal off Zone 1 temporarily!"

"But if we do that..."

"No buts! Go disconnect the communications immediately! If we're late, this year's energy will be calculated away by it!"

"I... I'll go right away!!!"

...

"Princess Feiliya?"

Watching the girl who suddenly lowered her head, her slender shoulders starting to tremble slightly, Leon, who was paying for suspenders, couldn't help but raise his eyebrows slightly.

"What's wrong? Are you feeling unwell?"

"I... I..."

"Or let me ask differently."

Watching her shake like a sieve, yet profoundly devoid of mechanical senses, with a soul free of rigid routine, Leon couldn't help but inquire with slight anticipation:

"Do you feel a sudden lightness in your mind, a sensation of being released from certain control?"

"..."

Not lightness, but I definitely want to be relieved sooner...

Under Leon's expectant gaze, Feiliya instinctively stepped back half a pace, her beautiful big eyes filled with an inherent fear.

This human... he is really too peculiar!

All the data she had accumulated over the years to cope with human behavior patterns had undergone tens of thousands of validations, absolutely conforming to the human race.

Yet, all those numerous validated items, when applied to this male human before her, seemed entirely inapplicable, none of them could normally apply.

Not only could she not predict his behavior, understand his motives, she couldn't even hear the feedback calculations after his actions, this is simply...

Hmm? Wait! Could this be what's called fear?

Felt through, not via any computation but spontaneously generated uncontrollably, a strong impulse to distance herself from this man, Atifie's big eyes revealed a hint of delight.

Emotion! This is human emotion!

Ah! And there's more!

This must be the feeling called surprise! These two emotions are not calculated, but rather, influenced by the physical body, spontaneously generated in the soul through the interaction with him! I... I seem to understand humans a bit!

Having discovered the change within herself, Feiliya's heart was suddenly filled with immense joy, unable to resist looking back up at Leon with eyes brimming with surprise.

Who would have thought that just speaking with him could lead to such great "evolution"! Then if I could stay by him and interact a bit longer...

Uh... maybe not...

Seeing the emotion in Leon's eyes, which was probably called "eager anticipation," Princess Feiliya's smile froze slightly before she decisively negated her recent reckoning.

Although continuing to interact with him might yield some gains, it feels like something possibly more important could be lost.

Moreover, Zone 1 has temporarily disconnected its Connection with me, so now I've lost the main body's assistance and can't compute those crazy questions he's asking. If I keep listening, I fear my brain might burn out!

"Sir Leon."

After taking a deep breath, Princess Feiliya lifted her skirt to perform a standard lady's bow, then forced a smile as she spoke:

"I'm suddenly feeling unwell, perhaps... perhaps I've caught something from Andre's brother, so if you don't mind, may I temporarily excuse myself?"

As if fearing Leon might refuse, she hurriedly added:

"I have other brothers and sisters. If Prince would still like someone to accompany him, I can have them come over right away!"

"No need."

Seeing his target seemingly wanting to leave, Leon's eyes narrowed slightly, then, amidst Feiliya's frightened expression, he took a sudden step forward, resolutely grabbing her wrist.

"Don't be afraid, I'm saving you."

Watching the girl that looked like a deer caught by the forelegs, trying to struggle backward with eyes full of fear, Leon switched on the [Reliable Older Brother] badge to enhance his persuasion while sincerely speaking:

"Though you might not believe it, or feel any abnormality, Princess Feiliya, you have actually been controlled by Atifei-01!"

"..."

Ah???