

I! Cleaner 581

Chapter 581: The Gatekeeper Isn't Always a Dog

The sky was gloomy gray, the earth a deep black, the rolling waves of the Yellow Spring River, the No Return Path paved with white bones, the endless line of the dead, and the red-eyed crows circling above them...

Is this what the afterlife looks like?

Staring through the wide-open Gate of the Deceased, after glimpsing the scenery of the Realm of the Dead, the souls of three cleaners—two men and one woman—fell into silence simultaneously.

Although they had long known that as cleaners, it was unlikely they would live to die naturally and would most probably report here after some highly dangerous task, they were mentally prepared for it.

But when it all truly happened, the three were still somewhat unable to accept it, unable to believe their lives had so abruptly come to an end.

"I... I am so unwilling!"

Breaking free from the Flower Fairy state and returning to his normal human size, Ruben couldn't help but sob quietly, two lines of hot tears suddenly streaming down the face of the middle-aged man in his forties, full of regret as he said:

"Everything was going so smoothly, why did we suddenly die? We were all beside the director, so why were we killed by that kind of cannon?"

"Forget it, it's all over now."

Feeling the increasingly powerful force pulling him into the Realm of the Dead, standing—floating by Ruben's side, Frankie couldn't help but sigh bitterly.

"Though I don't know what happened, we should have fallen into some trap, even the director couldn't escape, half his body blasted apart, perhaps he'll be here in a while as well.

Alas, the three of us should go first, don't think about it any further, that's the business of the living. We're dead now, no matter how much we think, we can't go back, it's time for us to go."

"I... I..."

"I still want to try!"

Just as Ruben and Frankie moved towards the Gate of the Deceased, prepared to accept their fate, the only female cleaner amongst them suddenly lifted her head, pulling at the corners of the other's clothes, her face stubborn as she said:

"My [Forward Path] is an abnormal object at the soul level and is still within my soul; I can still use it!

Ruben! Frankie! Help me! If the three of us can use the effect of [Forward Path] to carve out a way back here, there might still be a chance!"

This...

After hearing the female cleaner Mona's request, Ruben and Frankie exchanged a look, hesitating before saying:

"But this is the Realm of the Dead, even if the director has died, he can only temporarily resist the rules here; ultimately, he still has to walk the No Return Path, and we're just Second-level Cleaners..."

"Help me!"

Interrupting Ruben, the female cleaner Mona took a deep breath and then firmly said:

"The director hasn't come to the Realm of the Dead yet, which means he's still alive!

Even if we can't go back ourselves, if we can just create a small breach to send my [Forward Path] back, it might help the director escape!

Please! Help me! No matter what the result, I still want to try! If it wasn't for the director, I would have been here twenty years ago, I can't not try!"

"Alright then..."

After exchanging glances, Ruben and Frankie nodded, relying on the soul strength of Second-level Cleaners to resist the call from deep within the Realm of the Dead while standing behind Mona.

"Thank you!"

Gratefully looking at the two, the whole soul of the female cleaner Mona suddenly lit up, bursting into intense white flame, then turning around, she took a step towards the endless gray fog behind her.

"Tap!"

The sound of shoe soles striking the bony ground came, and at the moment Mona successfully took a step, a path appeared in the endless gray fog outside the Gate of the Deceased.

Although it seemed insignificant compared to the endless gray world, the gray fog representing irreversible death indeed made a very small "concession".

Could it be there's really a chance?!

Noticing this, the originally hesitant other two cleaners immediately felt a rush of spirit, gritting their teeth, their dim souls lighting up as well, undulating like white flames under the impetus of determination.

Compared to the boundless gray fog, the three souls burning at full strength looked as feeble as fireflies lost at sea but were nonetheless carving out a narrow winding path back with each firm step.

It could work! It might really work!

Feeling the faint breeze carrying the breath of the living world through the narrow path, the three cleaners couldn't help a surge in spirits.

Leon Value is the threshold between gods and men, the dividing line deciding whether one can break free from the rules of the Realm of the Dead, and the three of them, as senior Second-level Cleaners, had an average Leon Value nearing 30, already strong enough in terms of raw power.

Though ultimately lacking that pivotal transformation to cross the threshold of a True God, unable to truly transcend death, with Mona's [Forward Path], it might still be possible to carve a small path towards life from death!

And just like Mona said, even if they eventually must return, even if they only send [Forward Path] back to save the director's life, or merely catch one last glimpse of that world, putting everything on the line is worthwhile!

"Quick! Put in more effort!"

Feeling the gust coming from the direction of the living world, Mona gritted her teeth, struggling forward with all her might while shouting desperately:

"Just one more step! Just one more step!"

"Ah... I really can't ignore this."

"?!!"

Amidst the astonished expressions of the three cleaners, dozens of octopus tentacles suddenly emerged from behind, akin to coiled snakes, firmly wrapping around the three's limbs and waists.

And the numerous fleshly suckers the size of infant mouths on the tentacles started frantically sucking their strength through soul contact; in just a few breaths, the energy burst from their burning souls was drained completely.

As the three of them, having lost their strength, were pulled backward by the octopus tentacles, their feet leaving the ground, the hard-fought path was swiftly closed by the encroaching gray fog, disappearing entirely.

"..."

One step! Just one step was all it took!

"Don't blame me; it's just my duty."

Facing the spiteful gazes of the three cleaners, a long-tailed giant horse with octopus tentacles growing where its mane should have blinked and rambled on, revealing its teeth, saying:

"I usually don't meddle in these things, but the issue is your Clean-up Bureau produced a ruthless one who, for some unfathomable reason, stubbornly devoured the Canine Deity who used to guard this place alive.

And to maintain the order of the Realm of the Dead, to prevent random entries and exits, we death envoys must take turns watching the Gate of the Deceased, and today just happens to be my shift.

Oh, by the way, I must ask one more thing, none of you three are from the Virgin Branch, are you?"

Chapter 582: Frightened

Although the verbose long-tailed beast seemed eager to chat, as if it desperately wanted someone to talk to.

But the three Cleaners were just one step away from returning to the living world, only to be forcibly pulled back at the most critical moment. Their anger was on the brink of bursting out, and rather than chatting, they preferred to strangle it to death right on the spot.

"Just a little bit more!"

Breaking free from massive disappointment, Mona, the most hot-tempered female Cleaner, shouted in anger. Ignoring the suckers still embedded in her flesh, she forcibly jerked her arm free, waving her blood-soaked limb frantically as she began tearing at the tentacles binding her.

The other two were not much better off. Even though their bodies were almost transparent due to soul-burning followed by an ambush, they still cried out and struggled, attempting to resist the so-called death envoy's constraints.

"Sigh... Forget it if you don't want to talk."

Seeing how uncooperative these Cleaners were, the long-tailed beast smacked its lips in disappointment. Then it rolled up the three Cleaners in its tentacles and started moving towards the Gate of the Deceased, babbling incessantly as it went:

"Let me tell you, when your Clean-up Bureau's lunatic devoured the Canine Deity, I was actually there, oh man, that scene was not your average bloodbath, those of you who haven't witnessed it could never imagine how insane he was.

Though the Guard Dog of Death was the weakest True God in the Realm of the Dead, even the weakest was still a True God, and he was slaughtered and devoured, gnawed from the inside out—such ferocity!

When us death envoys arrived, that lunatic was holding the Canine Deity's heart, gnawing away while crawling out from its stomach, covered in blood like a blood-dyed man, with clothes soaked in Divine Blood, not a hint of other colors in sight!"

After chattering on and on, the long-tailed beast lay down outside the Gate of the Deceased, in the spot originally belonging to the Three-Headed Canine Deity. It then began to roll up the spirits of two deceased and stuffed them into its mouth, enthusiastically continuing:

"Tsk tsk, in short, none of us death envoys expected to encounter such a thing, and each of us was scared stiff.

The eyeless fish of the Yellow Springs River leapt back into the river in terror, and the Blood-Head Crow flew straight away without turning back, while the Bone Reindeer blew itself up on the spot—still hasn't recovered.

Luckily, I was more cowardly than them; I didn't dare get too close from the start. After peeping from afar, I ran away, though I got reprimanded by the Overlord and was sent as the first to guard the gate.

Uh... I must say, guarding here is really boring. With weak souls, those deceased can't help but keep walking on the No Return Path and leave after a few words, but your souls are rather strong—might hold on for three to five days?

How about this, you three stay here and chat with me. I'll wait to eat you four days later when the Blood-Head Crow comes to change shifts. How does that sound? Are you interested?"

"Scram! Get lost!"

"Oh well, I thought you might entertain me."

Seeing Mona, the female Cleaner, glaring at him with anger and clearly unwilling to cooperate, the long-tailed beast sighed helplessly, then opened its mouth full of maw-like molars and prepared to stuff Mona in with its tentacles.

"Hey, horse! Wait up!"

Just then, a somewhat anxious voice came from afar. The long-tailed beast squinted and spotted a little figure all red, hurrying towards them.

Who are you to make me wait? You think you're big enough?

Seeing the approaching figure had only slightly stronger soul strength than ordinary Cleaners, while far weaker than the one in its mouth, the long-tailed beast disdainfully curled its lips, intending to proceed with its bite.

However, at that moment, when the other two Cleaners bound by the tentacles recognized the newcomer, they shouted in despair:

"Leon? How come you... were you also killed?"

Oh, so this guy's called Le... ah? Leon? Leon the Devourer?!!

Upon hearing this terrifying name, the long-tailed beast shivered violently, realizing in horror that the red, glowing figure was indeed the same Devourer it had seen from afar before! As for why he was glowing red...

That's Divine Blood that won't wash off!!!

"Help! Help, Master!!!"

Realizing its situation, the long-tailed beast screamed in terror and sprang up, shouting for help as it stumbled towards the Gate of the Deceased, its legs nearly tripping over each other if you looked closely.

And seeing it nearing the gates, Leon, rushing over, grew anxious.

There was no other way, for the power of the Guard Dog of Death required the Gate of the Deceased to activate. Like the Three-Headed Canine Deity, it only had the authority to block passage, but not to allow entry of its own accord.

Put simply, if the souls of the three Cleaners had not yet entered the gate, Leon, who 'replaced' the Guard Dog of Death, would have the authority to stop them from entering, but if they had already entered, whether they could come out depended on their own doing.

"Stop! Don't run!"

Upon hearing Leon's angry shout, the long-tailed beast shivered, stumbled a couple of steps, nearly tripping, but ultimately didn't heed the call to stop and instead ran even faster.

Only a fool would stop!

Leon the Devourer, after being missing for days, reappears outside the gates of the dead—probably digesting the Canine Deity, feeling hungry, and here to find more food! Would you not run and wait to be eaten?

There's no other way...

Seeing its forelegs already stepping into the Gate of the Deceased, with the tentacles on its neck holding the three Cleaners about to pass through, Leon sighed. He then stopped, raised his hands toward the distant giant gates, and clapped hard.

"Close for me!"

With Leon's roar, two heavy doors emerged from the void, and the Gate of the Deceased, which separated life and death, shut with a thunderous boom, unleashing a dense death aura that scattered the deceased around the gate.

Seeing Leon forcibly closing the gate, seemingly determined to taste him, the fleeing long-tailed beast was already scared out of its wits. Ignoring potential injury, it thrust its head past just in time before the Gate of the Deceased shut completely...

"Boom!"

The massive gates closed completely, leaving the long-tailed beast's body outside, while its head rolled off and, propelled by two remaining tentacles on its neck, ran away like a person, screaming all the while.

"Oh no! Run for it! Leon the Devourer is hungry again!!!"

"..."

What on earth is that...

Through the closed gates, watching the head flailing two octopus tentacles rapidly fleeing down the No Return Path, Leon, whose sanity was rupturing, grimaced, then hastily retrieved the [Silver Dagger of Cutting] to rescue the three Cleaners bound by the tentacles.

"Leon? You..."

"No time to explain!"

Feeling the Realm of the Dead boiling again after forcibly closing the Gate of the Deceased, and worried about being caught by the realm's masters, Leon hurriedly grabbed the three bewildered seniors, turned, and fled towards where he came from.

"Hurry, run! It's almost too late!"

Chapter 583: Faster or Slower?

Can't believe it... We actually made it back...

Following Leon who was covered in blood through the mist and returning to the living world, the three Cleaners looked at the familiar sights of the world of the living, and couldn't help but tear up, overcome with emotion.

But before they could thank Leon, the blazing sunlight of the living world shone on their souls, suddenly igniting large patches of invisible white smoke, and they screamed in agony.

"Open your mouth!"

Prepared for this scenario, Leon grabbed the souls of the three Cleaners and pried open the mouth of the black goat, stuffing them inside in one go.

"?!?!"

"Hold it! But absolutely do not eat!"

After admonishing the black goat, Leon was still uneasy, worried that the black goat couldn't resist the temptation of the high-quality souls and secretly taste them, so he straightforwardly threatened:

"Remember this! For every little bit missing from their souls, I'll send you to the Kingdom of Orleson to be purified along with your whip!"

"..."

Hmph, won't eat then! As if I care!

Facing the threat of purification, the black goat, which was just a bit tempted, immediately quieted down, flipped a white eye at Leon, and held the souls of the three Cleaners without moving.

As for the three souls inside the goat's mouth, they relied on the "soul protection" provided by the great Demon to successfully avoid the harm from the sun and temporarily remain safely in the living world. After Leon's maneuver ended, Alger, who vaguely understood, couldn't help but ask excitedly:

"What... what about them?"

"It's a bit complicated to explain..."

After peeking at the movement of the Gate of the Deceased and noticing no one was following, Leon breathed a sigh of relief and concisely explained:

"After I ate the Death Watchdog, I inherited part of its powers which allow me to prevent souls from entering the Realm of the Dead. However, this power has limitations; it must be near the Gate of the Deceased to be effective.

So, I just went to the Realm of the Dead to stop the seniors from entering the gate before they did, effectively dragging them back temporarily."

"Temporary meaning what?"

"Meaning they can't stay here forever."

Leon said with some helplessness:

"According to the rules of the living world, the body and soul must coexist to exist. Even descending holy spirits and True Gods need to create bodies for themselves first.

But the seniors' bodies are already destroyed. Although I can prevent them from going to the Realm of the Dead, I can't keep their souls forever; issues will arise over time.

So we must find a way to leave the Crolock Kingdom or use something to contact the headquarters; otherwise, the seniors' souls will ultimately be expelled from this world."

The problem is, we can't get out now...

After listening to Leon's explanation, the excited expression on Alger's face slightly faded, and he gritted his teeth:

"How about this, you stay in the Crolock Kingdom, hide with their souls and Princess Feiliya, and I'll try to see if I can break through and get out!"

"Senior Alger, you'd better not entertain this notion."

Upon hearing this, Leon shook his head:

"I don't know if your presence has been exposed, but since I led the kidnapping of Princess Feiliya, they surely know of my presence. Since I haven't appeared at the Gemini branch, I'm certainly still in the Crolock Kingdom.

And normally, we should be trying to escape, so their defenses will certainly be extremely tight. The probability of you safely breaking through is almost zero."

"Then what? Just wait around here?"

"Not exactly wait around; we can still do something."

After considering the current situation, Leon contemplated and said:

"Speaking purely about hard strength, Director Edward over there with a Yellow Road, an elite Level 1, and three senior Level 2, can't be said to be weak. According to Nicole's description, they fell into an ambush, losing due to enemy stealth and lack of information, not overwhelming enemy strength.

And now as long as we hide well, the tables are turned; the enemy is in the open and we're in the dark. We can use this opportunity to gather information on the enemy. If their strength isn't that strong, we might just be able to confront them... Seniors."

Here, Leon turned his head towards the black goat, asking the three Cleaners inside its mouth:

"What exactly happened at the Gemini branch? Can you explain it in detail?"

"To be honest, we're not very sure..."

Upon hearing Leon's words, Ruben, who had shrunk to doll size, hesitantly replied:

"Actually, there's not much to explain, just a round of powerful artillery fire. Although under ambush it was a bit sudden, it was mostly just making us scramble for a while, we could still handle it.

But for some reason, the opponent's artillery seemed particularly fast, we couldn't react at all, couldn't even activate the abnormal object, only had time to see the walls explode, and were directly blown to pieces."

Especially fast?

Upon hearing this, Leon raised his brow, recalling the words of the female reporter conveyed by the Secret Tail.

The female reporter didn't seem to mention that the artillery was unusually fast. In her account, it was just that, somehow, aside from her, no one reacted and was directly hit by heavy fire.

So... was it the artillery being fast, or people slowing down? Which was it?

After pondering slightly, Leon turned his head to Alger beside him, implicitly asking:

"Senior Alger, if prompted by close-range thermal weapons, can you react in time?"

"That's no problem."

Alger thought for a moment and replied:

"With my reaction speed, if the trigger is pulled right in front of me, I just need to dodge the muzzle's direction. As long as I can see it, I can evade it, even if it's close to the face.

If it's a surprise attack, it might be difficult within two or three meters, but further away, I'd certainly dodge it, even though artillery and ammunition are much faster than small-caliber firearms, just a thought away, activating abnormal objects for survival is still feasible."

"Mind if I test it?"

As Leon spoke, he took out a small-caliber nail gun, flipped the safety with his thumb, aimed at the ground in front of Alger's feet.

"I might suddenly fire at the ground at any time, and then you activate the abnormal object to block the nail..."

Before finishing the sentence, Leon abruptly pulled the trigger, quickly firing the nail, while Alger's eyes sharpened, the right foot wearing black leather shoes suddenly dispersed into a bunch of pitch-black threads, then...

Perfectly let the nail pass.

"This..."

Seeing the Skin Thread merely pounced after the nail embedded into the ground, Alger couldn't help but stare blankly, while Leon sighed and gave his judgment.

"Seniors, it seems it's not the Crolock Kingdom's artillery being too fast, but your reaction has slowed."

Chapter 584: Three Questions

Has our reaction slowed down?

Upon hearing Leon's words, the three cleaners, now mere souls, showed expressions of astonishment. Alger snatched the nail gun and fired another shot towards his foot, refusing to believe it.

"Poof!"

This time, thanks to some psychological preparation, the response was much better than before. Before the nail hit the ground, Alger's right foot scattered into countless threads again, firmly wrapping the nail.

However, even though the experiment was successful, Alger's face showed no joy of success; instead, it turned quite ugly.

"It really did slow down a lot..."

Bang, bang, bang. After continuously firing and emptying the remaining nails in the nail gun, seeing two nails caught by the Skin Thread and four nails that passed through and hit the ground, Alger couldn't help but look grim:

"It feels like less than an eighth of normal, perhaps even less. My reaction speed is now almost like a regular person's! Damn it! Why didn't I notice this earlier?"

"I'm not too sure either, but I guess you've been subjected to some method that reduced the upper limit of your reaction speed."

Looking at the four nails embedded in the ground, Leon also frowned and said:

"The more often cleaners carry and use high-grade abnormal objects, the more likely they are to be contaminated by these objects, with their bodies transforming towards non-human strength. But no matter how intense this transformation is, it's ultimately based on human flesh.

Simply put, regardless of contamination value, we can still feel hot and cold, thirst, hunger, and injury, but our vitality is much stronger than ordinary people, our reaction speed faster, our bodies tougher, souls more vibrant, and we can use abnormal objects longer and more often.

But these changes don't usually manifest so clearly. Having a much faster reaction speed than average doesn't mean we see others moving in slow motion; it's just that the higher upper limit can be realized when a quick reaction is needed."

Leon paused briefly and then pointed at pedestrians on the street:

"It's like the difference between running and walking. An ordinary person, when chased by a beast, can run a hundred meters in just a dozen seconds, but while strolling, it might take more than a minute to walk that distance because that speed is entirely sufficient for a stroll.

But the opponent seems to have done something, locking your 'running' ability. During normal walking and strolling, you don't need to be fast, so it's barely noticeable. But when a beast truly pounces, requiring full-speed running, you'd realize that you've lost the ability to run."

So that's how we got caught!

Through Leon's tests and explanations, understanding the origins of the "quick cannons," the three cleaners suddenly realized, and the female cleaner Mona urgently said:

"If it's just like that, then let's quickly find the director! Just tell him the secret, maybe there's still a chance for him..."

"Sorry, I don't think that's a good idea."

Before the female cleaner finished speaking, Leon immediately interrupted:

"You possibly died too early, not witnessing what happened afterward. Nicole told me that Edward's body was blown apart halfwise, and his soul was forcibly sealed inside his shattered flesh. There's no longer any chance of a comeback for them."

"But surely we can't just..."

"It's not that I'm leaving them to die; I simply have no ability to save them."

Shaking his head decisively, Leon said:

"Especially at such times, one has to make decisions with caution. Our information is inadequate, and acting recklessly won't save anyone but rather destroy any last hopes and mess up everything completely.

Mona senior, although this sounds unpleasant, I must say, if your suggestion comes from rational judgment, I'll certainly consider it seriously. But if it's merely an emotional impulse, then I must ask you to calm down first."

"I... I'm sorry... I got too anxious..."

Biting her lip hard, the female cleaner calmed herself a bit, bowed her head, and apologized voluntarily, then asked:

"So what do we do now? Find a way to investigate that thing that suppressed our reaction speed and help you and Alger free from it?"

"That can be investigated, but the priority needs to be lower."

Leon shook his head upon hearing this:

"Even if we find out how the opponent manipulated, we might not have the means to remove it. So, let's focus on more important issues, like the location of the palace and Atifei-01 itself, and the current situation of the royal family."

"But how do we check that?"

The female cleaner couldn't help but ask:

"The Crolock Kingdom's blocks change too frequently. The director and us have been investigating for almost two weeks, finding only some irrelevant stuff. These two places are still without any leads, and the royal family has been staying secluded for years; there's really no way to start checking."

"Don't worry, I've got leads now."

Leon pulled out his identification card, casually twisted and discarded it, while reaching out to Alger, signaling him to destroy his identification card and answered:

"Once we reach the embassy district, we'll have a chance to get close to these two places. As for the royal family's situation... Lady Feiliya, do you have anything to say?"

With a sideways glance at the emerald-eyed girl who was still "unconscious," Leon squinted slightly and said:

"Lady Feiliya, could you please tell me why upon hearing that something's happened to us, the emotion flooding your heart was not panic but rather a hint of glee?"

Oh no!

After Leon exposed her heart's thoughts, the princess Feiliya trembled all over, then had to open her eyes and said fearfully:

"Because... because you guys are kidnappers. I've been kidnapped by you, so hearing you're having trouble naturally ... I couldn't help but feel... a little happy..."

"Alright, you passed."

Leon heard this, nodded indifferently, and while crushing the identification card Alger handed over, asked with a calm expression:

"Now for the second question. When we were discussing the method that locked our reaction speed, I sensed a distinct 'pride' in your soul. How do you intend to explain this?"

"Well..."

"If you can't explain it, I'll have to guess myself."

Seeing the princess Feiliya sweating at her temples, her large eyes darting around and not daring to meet his gaze, Leon said expressionlessly:

"Given that pride in your heart, it proves that this method is related to you, maybe even a tactic you suggested. Lady Feiliya, am I guessing correctly?"

"..."

"If you don't speak, I'll assume silence means consent."

Looking at the flustered soul of the emerald-eyed girl, Leon sighed lightly and then asked with tightly knit brows:

"Next is the third question... Besides you and Prince Andre, are there any other living members of the Crolock royal family now?"

Chapter 585: The Empty Royal Palace

What?!

Upon hearing Leon's third question, not only did the girl with emerald eyes gasp in shock, but even the four Cleaners from the Scorpio Branch shivered unconsciously, looking at Leon in complete astonishment.

"No way?"

The female Cleaner said incredulously:

"I've already investigated with the director. Although the Crolock royal family has been reclusive, they've shown quite a bit of activity in recent years. In fact, at the year-end celebration last year, the King of the Crolock Kingdom even made a public speech. It shouldn't be that they've almost been wiped out, right?"

"Senior Mona, I will explain why I have such suspicions later. For now, please do not interrupt me."

After giving the female Cleaner a not-too-hard glare, Leon turned his gaze to the somewhat flustered emerald-eyed girl and said without allowing her to refuse:

"Princess Feiliya... although I'm not quite sure what's going on with you, I'll call you that for now... I want to hear your straightforward answer. Is there a third living person in the royal family? Yes! Or no!"

"Of course, there are others!"

Interrupted by the female Cleaner, Feiliya calmed down a bit and said, blinking her large eyes:

"I'm not sure about others, but both my father and mother are still here, and other familiar people are also fine. Just the day before I was kidnapped by you, I greeted my mother."

Could I possibly have guessed wrong?

Upon receiving this answer, Leon furrowed his brow in doubt, while Frankie, upon examining Feiliya's soul state, cautiously said:

"Though I'm not very sensitive to these things, I understand a bit about souls, and what she says seems to be true."

"..."

Phew... at least I've managed to get past this...

Seeing that Leon didn't oppose Frankie's judgment but instead stood there silently with a frown, Feiliya secretly heaved a sigh of relief.

Who would've thought that just by playing dead and eavesdropping, I could be found out, almost getting exposed, and they even guessed part of the royal family's situation...

With a slightly fearful glance at Leon, although lacking the computational support of her original body and finding it hard to be entirely genuine, Feiliya still adhered to her usual "behavior model" and said pitifully while blinking:

"You can ask whatever you want, I... I can answer everything, just please don't hurt me, I'm truly telling the truth."

It's all true...

Glancing at the cute, demure emerald-eyes, Leon's frown slightly lifted as if receiving a crucial reminder, and he set his gaze on Princess Feiliya again.

Truth proves nothing! When dealing with internal investigations by the Clean-up Bureau, everything I said was also true. But did that delay me from attacking the palace?

"Alright, let me change my approach and ask again."

Having figured it out, Leon's brow relaxed, and he asked again amid the emerald-eyed girl's petrified glance:

"Within the Crolock royal family, other than you and Prince Andre, are the members' bodies their original bodies? Are their souls their original souls?"

Or to delve deeper, their so-called 'living' state, is it like normal people—capable of running, jumping, eating, and chatting—or do they merely 'exist'?"

"..."

...

As Princess Feiliya struggled to respond, unsure of what to say, the lazy Prince Andre, for once not basking on the balcony of his bedroom, instead took the royal family's special levitating car to arrive at the Crolock Kingdom's royal palace.

"Dong~~~"

With the melodic chime of the gigantic pendulum's strike, the steam clock towers standing by the palace gates gently twisted, the massive, somewhat weathered bronze wheel on the doors shifted aside, and the doors swung open, revealing a brightly lit glass corridor.

The corridor, hanging with numerous lamps, was wide and magnificent. Behind the spotless glass walls on either side, the grand hall was evenly divided, with hundreds of small display platforms scattered throughout.

Compared with the palace housing the royal family, this building resembled more of an expansive museum. Each small platform beneath the clock face displayed intricate and precise mechanical creations.

Sky Clipper, levitating cars, mechanical hearts, massive differential engines, nearly five-meter-tall mechanical giants... even the largest platform on the left holds a complete miniaturized model, seemingly representing the entire Crolock Kingdom, twisting and rotating like a Rubik's cube.

Below these exquisite platforms, on the purposely left slanted plates, records describe the inventors and functions of the mechanical creations, their iterative design processes, and even more of the core design philosophies and reasons, making each a rare treasure.

Ignoring these treasures capable of driving the whole kingdom mad, the slightly fatigued Prince Andre walked through the glass corridor with a face of indifference, passed a clock-like disk, and opened the door to the main hall at the back of the grand hall.

"Who?"

As Prince Andre stepped into the main hall, a somewhat puzzled voice called out from deeper within.

Following the voice, Prince Andre saw on the high throne facing the door, a gallant middle-aged man in a royal robe holding a jewel-encrusted Scepter of Time, looking at him with astonishment.

"You are..."

With green eyes fixed on Prince Andre, the middle-aged man on the throne couldn't help but widen his eyes. He first looked at the twelve or thirteen-year-old boy beside him, then at the young man around twenty-seven or twenty-eight standing before him, and, puzzled, asked:

"Who are you? Why do you look so much like my Andre?"

Compared to the hall filled with countless display platforms but void of people, the main hall of the Crolock palace was several times smaller but much livelier. In this hall, with tightly sealed windows on all sides ensuring better privacy, there were over thirty rows of seats, almost 150 people sitting.

Upon hearing the middle-aged man's inquiry, all those seated turned their heads in surprise to look at Prince Andre, emitting a series of gasps.

"It truly is..."

"They really do look alike!"

"Give it another fifteen-sixteen years, and Prince Andre might just look like this."

"Indeed, but his face is too cold, not as cute as His Highness Andre."

"Hey! Who are you?"

"Such a rude fellow, guards! Where are the guards?"

"Where? Where is he? Let me see too!"

Strangely, no matter what they said, including the gallant middle-aged man on the throne, none of them rose. Instead, they stayed firmly seated, twisting their heads to look toward the door.

The issue is, the main hall isn't particularly broad, so some couldn't see Prince Andre's appearance no matter how they twisted. Even a slight move on their part would suffice, yet not one stood up. They preferred to remain seated, even if twisted into awkward postures, rather than abandon their original spots.

"..."

After a few seconds of silence at the door, Prince Andre responded to no one's words. Instead, he strode boldly into the main hall, stepping across the red carpet down the center aisle, through the more than thirty rows of seats, and stood before the gallant middle-aged man.

Chapter 586: No Resentment for Past Wrongs and No. 0

"What on earth..."

"Father."

Before the strong middle-aged man could speak, Prince Andre called out, then stepped up onto the platform, swiftly snatching the Scepter of Time from his grip, and turned towards the Queen's seat.

"How dare you!"

Seeing the Scepter of Time, symbolizing the King's identity, taken away, not only did the strong middle-aged man's eyes suddenly widen, but the crowd in the main hall also erupted with anger, scolding and shouting with indignation.

"Stop! Do you know what you're doing?"

"You fool! You are not worthy of touching that thing!"

"Put down the scepter!"

"Guards! Where are the guards? Come in and seize him!"

What a nuisance...

Prince Andre was bothered by the painful shouting in the main hall and instinctively wanted them to shut up.

Unfortunately, Feiliya being captured meant Atifei-01 was not by his side, leaving him unable to silence those people forcefully. Prince Andre had no choice but to sigh, walked with the Scepter of Time to the Queen, and extended his other unoccupied hand to her.

"Mother, may I have the Scepter of Division?"

Staring at the palm extended in front of her, the Queen on her seat was stunned, then asked in confusion:

"Who are you? Why do you look so much like my Andre?"

"I am Andre, mother."

Treating the Queen with seemingly more patience than the King, amid the clamor and noise in the main hall, Prince Andre explained patiently:

"Just consider me as someone from ten years in the future, who needs your scepter to handle some affairs now. Can you give it to me?"

"This... may be difficult."

After a momentary hesitation, a relatively young-looking Queen, who seemed not much older than Andre, clutched the scepter tightly and shook her head:

"The Scepter of Division is very important; it can't be given casually. Even if you truly are my Andre, you should have a legitimate reason. And how can you treat your father like this? Return the scepter to him, otherwise..."

Sigh... what a nuisance. I should have known better than to leave the scepter here; I could have just thrown it upstairs.

After another helpless sigh, Andre ignored the Queen's words. Instead, he arose, moved to the seat behind the strong middle-aged man, and after a while of exploration, found a strangely calibrated clock, setting all the hands to the furthest point.

"Click."

As the mechanism succeeded in engaging under the spring's push, the bustling main hall became quiet.

When Andre appeared again facing the strong middle-aged man, after leaving the seat behind, the old King, with his robe unchanged but his face aged by over ten years, suddenly revealed a relaxed expression.

"Andre, there you are."

Smiling at Prince Andre, the aged King said:

"Today is your day to succeed the throne. As long as you take the Scepter of Time from me, you will be the next King of Crolock Kingdom. Come, let me... hey? Where's my scepter..."

"Thank you, father, I'll take it."

After responding expressionlessly, Prince Andre quickly returned in front of the Queen's seat, and before she could react, snatched the Scepter of Division, then descended the platform with both scepters, heading towards the metal spiral staircase on one side of the main hall.

The attendees in the main hall, seemingly dumbfounded by the "Prince snatching the scepter" act, stared in shock at Prince Andre's back, not daring to speak. Finally, the old King slammed the armrest angrily and shouted:

"Stop! Andre! What are you trying to do?"

"..."

"Andre! Are you rebelling against me?"

"..."

"Speak up! What do you plan to do with my scepter?"

"..."

No matter how the old King interrogated, Prince Andre continued to remain silent, carrying the two scepters up the spiral staircase, deaf to everything, making his way upwards, until...

"Are you going to see your so-called sister again? The real Feiliya has long been dead! She is now a part of Atifie! Wake up!"

"..."

As if triggered by a keyword, hearing the old King's roar, Prince Andre stopped abruptly. Turning back, he glared at the old King, as if he had a stomachful of grievances ready to burst out.

But seeing the old King remain as he was, unable to truly rise despite his fury, and just sitting on the throne shouting at him, Andre couldn't help but laugh self-deprecatingly. After shaking his head, he withdrew his gaze and set foot on the metal spiral staircase, leaving the main hall.

Even as he departed from the main hall, the old King's furious roar continued to echo from below.

"Andre!"

"You scoundrel! Get back here!"

"You... come back! As my last son! If you return, I can choose to let bygones be bygones..."

It's already reached this point, yet he talks about letting bygones be bygones?

Shaking his head slightly, Prince Andre's metal spiral staircase rose slowly, taking him all the way to the top of the palace, before arriving at the face of a three-meter-high gigantic clock with only the second hand constantly ticking.

After checking the time on his pocket watch, Prince Andre took the scepters seized from the King and Queen's hands, fitting them over the exposed axle at the center of the clock, aligning them with the corresponding position on the dial as per the current time.

"Click."

The crisp sound of mechanism engaging reached his ears. As the two scepters touched the dial, the enormous clock, over three meters high, receded backward. It then rolled open clockwise, revealing the secret room hidden behind it.

"Andre brother?"

Before Prince Andre could step into the room, the voice from inside made him shiver.

Sorrow, surprise, pain, disbelief... The weak calling, identical in tone to a certain Princess Feiliya but entirely different in emotion, suddenly resounded in the dark secret room.

"Are you here this time to shut me down?"

"..."

"Stop mimicking her voice!"

After a few seconds of silence, Prince Andre said with a look of disgust:

"Atifie, this is my final warning to you: if you truly don't want to be shut down, stop this nonsense!"

"Alright."

Upon hearing Prince Andre's warning, the voice in the secret room chuckled slightly, then switched to a somewhat familiar female voice, kindly and softly saying:

"How's the Queen's voice then? Of all the voices I've used, hers relaxes you the most, and you show your best patience, readily making concessions to me."

"Suit yourself."

Apparently unwilling to argue with "Atifie" over this issue, Prince Andre snorted and said with unfriendly expression:

"Give me your core; I want to take it to Research Area No. 1!"

"Oh? Why?"

The voice in the room responded with curiosity:

"Although Atifei-01 is my creation, this imperfect Zero prototype controls a maximal computing power far less than one-twelfth of 01's capacity. Since there's a more effective 01 now, why are you risking enabling me?"

"Because Feiliya has been captured; her whereabouts are unknown for now, but I need her to handle something."

Seemingly lacking fondness for this "Atifie" mimicking his mother's voice, Prince Andre replied expressionlessly:

"Hence, I must reactivate you to channel Atifei-01's processing power, temporarily dominate the entire Crolock Kingdom, and swiftly retrieve Feiliya. If truly unrecoverable, then craft me another 01!"

Chapter 587: Aunt and Nephew

"It's impossible, that child is unique~"

After listening to Prince Andre's request to create another 01, Atifei-00 said with a hint of amusement:

"You know, our ancestor was a very powerful Cleaner, one who transcended the difference between man and god. The bloodline she left behind naturally has a more special brain than ordinary people. The hippocampus and temporal lobe cortex are extremely remarkable, and the connection between the frontal and parietal lobes is incredibly developed.

Even among the 900-year history of the Crolock royal family, spanning 37 generations, the excellence of Feiliya's brain is indisputably the first, with unparalleled potential.

That's why I persuaded your father to extract her brain as the core to replace my immature prototype when Feiliya was just twelve, balancing brain activity and plasticity for the first time, making it the heart of the entire Crolock Kingdom, to lead the kingdom to unprecedented heights."

"..."

"Sorry, I forgot, you seem to dislike hearing this."

After an insincere apology, Atifei-00 said gleefully in Prince Andre's prolonged silence:

"Or you could think I did it on purpose. After all, you took everything away from me and locked me in this boring place. It's only normal for the incomplete separation of human emotions and technology back then to leave a bit of resentment."

"It doesn't matter; your emotions are irrelevant to me."

Responding with a blank expression, Prince Andre coldly said:

"Moreover, according to your words, what's truly irreplaceable is Feiliya's brain, and her original brain is still stored in Atifei-01's core; taking away just a core program.

And since it's a program, it should be replicable, and there shouldn't be an irreplaceable possibility. If Feiliya's brain hasn't been damaged, there should be as many Atifei-01's as needed."

"That's not the case~"

As if waiting for Prince Andre to ask this, Atifei-00 smiled as she explained:

"Things running on machines are called programs, but the true core of Atifei-01 is not those ultramicro differential engines, but Feiliya's unique brain.

Even with special gel capable of conducting electrical signals, connecting her brain to the machine achieving a perfect zero-loss data exchange, those things easily replicated can't truly control a human brain."

"What's the core program then?"

"What can perfectly operate in a physical body, other than the soul?"

Atifei-00 said with a smile:

"The kingdom's research on the soul may not be deep, but determining its basic nature and utilizing it at the most fundamental level is barely achievable.

The body and soul are integral, one of the fundamental rules of this world. Since Feiliya's brain maintains activity, her soul carrying her personality and self-awareness couldn't fully detach.

Even though the production process excessively stimulated the amygdala, hippocampus, and basal ganglia, clearing her emotions and human thoughts and causing the soul to have many blanks, her soul indeed didn't leave.

The so-called core program is actually the uniquely preserved soul of Feiliya, capable of traversing machinery and flesh freely in the form of electrical signals."

"?!!!"

"I've said many times, that child is unique, but this refers not just to her brain but also to her special soul."

Atifei-00 sighed and said:

"While creating Atifei-01, the special technology I developed called 'Soul Code' must be used, and to withstand this technological transformation while maintaining cognitive ability without collapse, only Feiliya and I can do so.

The other Atifei clones you created only copied part of 01's data, thereby accepting part of a rudimentary encoding defect product, still unable to fully replace humans, and the computational power they can control isn't at our level.

Considering this technology was developed based on Crolock royal family's special brain, and since you turned the Crolock royal family into this state, in the future, not even these defective products can be made; using one means one less, alas..."

"It doesn't matter; it's best if things like you are gone."

Stopping Atifei-00's sigh, Prince Andre coldly urged:

"Hurry up; how long will it take to disconnect your core and hand it to me?"

"Don't rush, don't rush, it's almost done."

Somewhat displeased, Atifei-00 responded, and footsteps echoed in the dim room. A slender female hand stretched from the darkness, holding a brain enveloped in transparent gel, offering it to Prince Andre.

"Take it, remember to store it below 12 degrees before installing it, and don't bump or expose it to intense light. Replace the nutrient solution every 6 hours and replenish the 24 corresponding... ah, don't be so rough! I'm your aunt's brain after all; don't damage me!"

"Enough with the nonsense!"

Impatiently responding, Prince Andre received the insulation box handed by the female hand, tossed the brain wrapped in gel into it, and then spoke displeasedly:

"You could have directly packed yourself and handed it to me. Why must you let me see your brain?"

"Because it's interesting~"

The teasing tone of Atifei-00 came from the copper tube on the side of the special insulation box.

"Probably recalling Feiliya back in the day, so whenever you see a naked human brain, your expression is always intriguing. I'm very interested in your reaction.

By the way, since my computational power is only one-twelfth of Atifei-01's, controlling the entire kingdom fully still requires some clone assistance.

There are several spare insulation boxes in my room; remember to conveniently bring more brains when you pass through the first floor's preservation hall, preferably your father's and elder brother's brains."

"Got it."

Responding impatiently, Andre headed towards the metal spiral staircase, expressing displeasure:

"Can't the boring 'little theater' on the first floor be turned off directly? Must they perform endlessly?"

"Let them continue."

Hearing Prince Andre's complaint, the voice of Atifei-00 in the insulation box chuckled:

"Although there are other ways to preserve Atifei clones, whether freezing directly at low temperatures or sterilizing solidification with amber fluid, there's a lengthy recovery period when reusing afterward.

Putting them in the first floor's hall to engage in basic activities at minimal frequency based on shared life experiences is equivalent to merely dreaming, not only maintaining neuronal activity over time but also allowing immediate use upon awakening, an unmatched preservation method... oh, right."

At this point, Atifei-00 curiously asked:

"128 clone was taken by you and hasn't been returned. Was it lost for some reason?"

"Sort of."

Prince Andre nodded at the mention.

"I placed it in a Sky Clipper, but that Sky Clipper was incinerated abroad. Atifei-128 is now missing, and the prince sent to explain this incident is the one who kidnapped Feiliya.

Though evidence is lacking, I suspect Atifei-128 is also in that man's hands, and your first task upon taking over the entire kingdom again is to help me find that person. The file with encoding 240612 is his information."

"Alright~ My dear nephew~"

Chapter 588: Countermeasures

"What did you say? Prince Andre killed the entire royal family?!!!"

Just as Prince Andre climbed into the carriage with a thermal box and left the palace, Leon and others on the other end also completed their preliminary "interrogation" of Feiliya.

After learning the current state of the Crolock royal family from the green-eyed girl, several cleaners from the Scorpio Branch, whether alive or dead, were all greatly shocked. Even Leon couldn't help but have his pupils constrict.

Although there was some vague speculation about the situation of the Crolock royal family, hearing it confirmed directly from one of the "parties involved," Leon couldn't help but feel a slight chill in his heart.

It must be understood that the primary objective of this investigation task was to ensure the continuation of the Crolock Kingdom royal bloodline. Currently, the only two who could be considered "alive" in the entire Crolock royal family, apart from the strange little girl in front of him, was the Prince Andre, who was the perpetrator.

This is really...

Subconsciously shaking his head slightly, Leon gestured for Alger and others to calm down, then continued to ask:

"Then what about you? Why did he kill all the royal family members, except you?"

"I... maybe because I'm his sister?"

Suspecting that revealing her identity as Atifei-01 would lead to an even worse outcome, the green-eyed girl sniffed and, with tears in her eyes, made up a story:

"Brother Andre still values family, so towards me... Hey! Stop! Stop! Ah ha! Hahaha! Stop!"

"I'll remind you once again, lying in front of me is useless."

Holding a small tuft of freshly plucked wool, Leon scratched the sole of Feiliya's soft foot and said seriously:

"You better be honest and explain why he didn't kill you and what's going on with your soul!"

"I..."

Futilely kicking her legs twice, but unable to break free from Leon's grip, Feiliya closed her eyes in despair and shouted defiantly:

"I won't tell you! Even if... Ouch! Haha! Hahaha!"

Seeing that she had become stubborn, refusing to confess, Leon continued to scratch with the wool.

And the black goat, as one of the great demons, despite its current misfortune, its wool remained of superior quality, lightweight, smooth, soft, and dense, far exceeding that of ordinary wool, making it extremely effective for tickling the soles.

Before Leon had scratched a few more times, the tormented Feiliya screamed twice, her toes curling desperately like scallions, squeezing tiny horizontal folds onto her soft soles.

Her whole body was like a little frog lying belly up, her fair little legs kicking with all her might, trying hard to retreat, but she was too weak to break free from Leon's iron grip, leaving her to laugh and sob:

"You... you go ahead and tickle! Even if it kills me... I... hahahaha! I'm not telling! You... you'll never... wah... find out... hahahaha!"

Still quite stubborn...

After tickling for a full seven or eight minutes, seeing Feiliya's small face covered in sweat, her temples and bangs soaked and sticking in strands on her forehead, but still holding her ground, Leon realized it couldn't be resolved quickly and had to temporarily abandon this method of coercion, turning to look at the other cleaners.

"Any other methods you seniors can suggest to make her talk?"

"Well... we do have methods to make people talk, but they're probably not suitable for her..."

Exchanging glances, the cleaners from the Scorpio Branch shook their heads and answered helplessly:

"After all, she's a member of the Crolock royal family, and a child at that. Our methods are too harsh for her, and her body can't take it. Moreover, her soul is very... special, it seems to have its own rules. We don't know how to handle that."

So you can't help at all?

Receiving their answer, Leon opened and closed his mouth, sighed, but said nothing, though it seemed like he said it all.

The cleaners, feeling a bit embarrassed by his sigh, exchanged a few more glances before Ruben suggested:

"How about this, since you can tell if she's lying, let's make more guesses. As long as we get close, her soul will surely react, allowing us to know the reasons without her having to speak."

"The problem is, how to guess?"

Leon spread his hands:

"It's not impossible, but we need to first propose questions to know whether the conclusions are right or wrong. However, we currently have too little information, not even knowing what questions to ask, so there's no way to start."

"This..."

Upon hearing this, the Scorpio Branch members also fell silent. After a while, the female cleaner Mona seemed to think of something and hesitantly suggested:

"If the lack of information is the issue, how about we raid the archives of District 3? There are a lot of important documents of the Crolock Kingdom stored there, maybe they can give us some insight."

"That sounds like a good suggestion... let's go, the carriage is here."

Nodding, Leon didn't hesitate for a second, knocked out the green-eyed girl glaring at him, hoisted her with bare feet onto his shoulder, and stepped towards the stop by the street.

"We've delayed long enough, and Ruben's ability has expired. We need to head to the embassy district to pick someone up. My companion left there knows how to find the palace.

Once we have picked up the person, we'll hijack the foreign minister, find the scholar's information in District 1, and see if we can locate District 1 through him, and thus find the original body of Atifei-01. Also, the archives are in District 3, so we can handle all three things together!"

...

The next day.

"Citizens of the Crolock Kingdom, it is now time for the morning news."

As the sun crested over the orderly horizon, spilling light across the land of the Crolock Kingdom, a sweet broadcasting voice emanated from the metal speakers scattered throughout the streets and alleys.

"Yesterday, an attack occurred in District 38. A group of roving criminals from the Kingdom of Orleson detonated a homemade dangerous weapon. The explosion's impact caused most of District 38 to be damaged.

The adjoining areas of District 2, the military district, and District 9, the production district, experienced tremors from the explosion, resulting in many buildings collapsing and injuring over one hundred and fifty citizens.

Fortunately, no lives were lost in the incident, and all key members of the criminal group have been either captured or killed. The three affected blocks will reopen within 15 days..."

"Tsk... so noisy..."

A disheveled man, with tangled hair and beard, grumbled upon being woken by the broadcast outside and begrudgingly climbed out of bed. He took down the scholar's robe hanging on the side of the bed and clumsily pulled it over himself while outside, the sweet broadcasting voice continued.

"Moreover, another group of roving criminals launched an attack on District 3 at a slightly later time.

This group of criminals broke into the embassy, kidnapped the foreign minister, ransacked his office, then raided the archives, and took away a large number of precious documents which are now missing. Citizens are advised to exercise caution while going out.

The appearance of the criminal gang is as follows, with two main suspects. The leading culprit is a young man with black hair and black eyes, with handsome features, a well-proportioned but slightly lean physique..."

Wow, two attacks in one day, things are really not settling down lately...

Listening intently to the broadcast, the unkempt middle-aged man shook his head, picked up a razor, and began dealing with his beard in front of the mirror.

Fortunately, I'm a scholar from District 1, using a private pathway that's not open to the public, unlikely to encounter any criminals... umm... what is this?

Seeing the man smiling at him in the mirror, the middle-aged man's mind went blank, his eyes widening in surprise.

Dammit, it's supposed to be me in the mirror, so why is there a young man with black hair and black eyes instead? Hmm... a young man with black hair and black eyes... why does he seem familiar?

Chapter 589: Puppet and Crolock

"You must be Mr. Bel."

After flipping through the documents and personal items on the table and confirming the homeowner's identity, Leon turned to look at the scruffy man being held down by Alger, and said calmly:

"Rest assured, we don't intend to harm you, we just wish to use your identity as a scholar in District 1 to help us with a little something."

"Hmph!"

Before Leon could make his request, the scruffy man snorted angrily and then said with a harsh expression:

"You're those criminals, aren't you? What is it? After attacking Administration District 3, you've now set your sights on Research District 1?"

"Yes."

"I won't take you there. Don't even think about it!"

The scruffy man was very stubborn, stiff-necked as he glared angrily at Leon:

"Research District 1 is the core of the entire Crolock Kingdom, and everything I have was given to me by the Kingdom. I absolutely cannot betray it!"

"Hmm, hmm."

After casually responding, the sleepless Leon did not continue talking to the scruffy man but instead said to Alger, who was holding him:

"Alger, it's your turn now."

"Alright."

Upon hearing Leon's words, Alger nodded slightly, and his right hand resting on the scruffy man's shoulder instantly dispersed, transforming into countless threads finer than hair, softly hanging on his shoulder.

"What is this? What... what are you going to do?"

In the scruffy man's terrified gaze, the strange threads hanging on his shoulder broke through the skin like earthworms, drilling into his body one by one.

And then, before he could react in shock, those threads, so fine they were nearly transparent, began moving through the crevices of his muscle fibers towards his limbs.

In just a few breaths, these bizarre threads traversed his entire body, completely taking over his will, even his eyelids and tongue were implanted with at least dozens of threads, rendering him completely immobile.

"That's about it."

After feeling a slight bulge of threads on the thinnest part of the skin behind the scruffy man's earlobes, Alger, whose entire right arm had disappeared up to the shoulder, nodded and said to Leon:

"Mr. Bel is now under my control. If he exhibits any abnormal behavior, I'll be the first to notice and stop him, ensuring he has no chance to call for help."

"Thanks for your hard work."

After nodding at Alger, Leon, under the scruffy man's terrified gaze, searched his pockets and pulled out his small notebook. After glancing at the schedule written inside, he said:

"Let's go, it's now time for Mr. Bel to start work, we should be on our way."

On our way? You... Ah?!

Upon hearing Leon's words, the scruffy man was terrified to find that it felt like another set of bones and muscles were exerting force within his body, and he really raised his hand to twist open the door and stepped out.

And the young man with black hair and eyes, along with the burly man missing a right arm, followed behind him directly onto the street, completely unabashed.

What was even more strange was that facing these criminals whose physical features matched exactly with those broadcasted, and hadn't even changed clothes, the pedestrians on the street seemed not to see them, showing no reaction at all.

How is this possible? Could they be invisible?

While the scruffy man was perplexed, Leon already inserted his identification card into the roadside navigation device, sending out a request to head to Research District 1, and then followed the tall man missing an arm into the hover car that came to pick them up.

...

"Mr. Leon."

Perhaps feeling unsure, after the hover car started moving, Alger couldn't help but ask:

"Are we just going straight over like this? Wouldn't using Mona's [Forward Path] be safer?"

"It's fine, just go like this."

Sitting beside the scruffy man, Leon continued flipping through the documents seized yesterday while answering without looking up:

"I've thoroughly checked, the technology in Crolock Kingdom doesn't include surveillance-like systems. The effect of Secret Tail is enough to blend us past ordinary checkpoints.

Considering the few specially developed large experimental areas surrounding, the total area of Research District 1 is about over sixty square kilometers, which is not small. We just need to be careful not to get too close to the core area or appear in too open spaces; the chances of being discovered are not high."

"That's good then..."

Reassured by Leon's assurance, Alger relaxed a little, then curiously looked at Leon's who was busy flipping through the documents:

"Mr. Leon, are these seized documents ordinary data? You've been reading them all night, haven't you finished yet?"

"No, I've only looked through about one-tenth of them now."

"Then... have you discovered anything?"

"Somewhat."

Flipping through the thick Korluk Mineral Resource Policy in his hands, along with the Major Energy and Core Material Balances Annual Report for comparison, Leon said with a cool expression:

"Although Crolock Kingdom isn't large in terms of area, its resource consumption is astonishingly high. Just for Hover Crystal alone, it consumes over 100,000 tons each year, whale fat, coal, special ores, and various rare metals are calculated in millions of tons."

"Isn't that normal?"

Alger thought about it and said, somewhat confused:

"I don't understand this very well, but I've heard that despite Crolock Kingdom being small, like Thousand Sails Maritime Country Seal, it's a trade-driven nation that sells a vast amount of products every year. This consumption doesn't seem unusual, does it?"

"This consumption is not unusual, and considering Crolock Kingdom's trade volume, it could even be considered low, but the real issue lies in how these resources are obtained."

Holding his charcoal pencil, Leon circled a few areas on the map attached to the Mineral Resource Policy, frowning:

"Crolock Kingdom's 'territory' isn't large, but there are many 'mining zones' that it actually controls for the sole purpose of supporting the Kingdom.

While these 'mining zones' are small on their own and extremely scattered in location, they total over a hundred, either developed temporarily, semi-permanently leased or outright purchased, amassing over four hundred thousand square kilometers."

"What?!"

Upon hearing Leon's words, Alger couldn't help but be shocked.

"So many? Our Kingdom of Orleson has such a large territory but only just over a million square kilometers! I thought Crolock Kingdom was a small nation with just over twenty thousand square kilometers!"

Chapter 590: Traditional Fishing

"Whether it's a small country or not depends on how you calculate it."

Leon began explaining:

"Those over 400,000 square kilometers of land are not directly occupied by the Crolock Kingdom, most of it is rented from other kingdoms and city-states, so it won't appear on any map, even the Crolock Kingdom doesn't acknowledge it.

Officially, the territory recognized by the Crolock Kingdom consists of only these 800 or so districts, and only the residents of these districts are considered citizens of the Crolock Kingdom, so you wouldn't be wrong to call it a small country."

"Not small, not small at all."

Upon hearing this, Algie quickly shook his head and said:

"No matter how you calculate it, a country that effectively controls over 400,000 square kilometers cannot be considered small... But if the real controlled area is so large, why doesn't the Crolock Kingdom simply acknowledge these places?"

Because that's the most profitable way.

Upon hearing Algie's curious question, Leon couldn't help but squint slightly, recalling the misfortunes of the bandit siblings.

The Cheshire they came from is one of the Crolock Kingdom's mining areas, where everything is controlled by the Crolock Kingdom, with almost no external trade, and even food and some necessities have to be exchanged for mined hover crystal stones.

Under these conditions, the more than ten thousand people in Cheshire spend their entire lives revolving around the mines, providing a constant supply of hover crystal stones for the Crolock Kingdom, and there are more than a hundred such "mining areas."

Even if not all mining areas require so much labor, nor do they all suffer as miserably as Cheshire, the number of ordinary people directly or indirectly "enslaved" by the Crolock Kingdom is still probably in the millions.

As long as they don't acknowledge actual control over these mining areas, the Crolock Kingdom can wash its hands of them, using these millions as consumables to exploit the resources they need, with almost no cost.

"Is that possible?"

Upon hearing Leon's analysis and the tragic tales of the bandit siblings, Algie's face flushed slightly with anger, his eyes full of indignation as he spoke:

"Can't anyone do anything about this? Just let the Crolock Kingdom do as they please?"

"Who would do it? The Clean-up Bureau?"

After glancing at this simple-minded strongman, Leon said:

"The ancestors of the Crolock royal family are the residents of the Watcher's Palace. The Clean-up Bureau's task is to protect the Crolock royal family and combat the abnormal beings attempting to invade the human world. Managing the Crolock Kingdom's affairs is not the Clean-up Bureau's responsibility.

As for other kingdoms, don't even think about it. The Crolock Kingdom's technology is at least a hundred years ahead of the others, so even though it has a small population, its military strength is not weak at all.

Moreover, the Crolock Kingdom has paid for these mining areas and even transferred a lot of technology to get the 'exploitation rights' from other kingdoms. Who would stand up to manage them? The other kingdoms that sold them the mines?"

"..."

"Forget it, we can't do anything about this sort of situation."

After learning about the "business model" of the Crolock Kingdom through stolen information, Leon had already made up his mind to take action against this B Kingdom when given the chance. However, he remained composed and said:

"We're just two ordinary Cleaners. Our main task right now is to investigate the situation in Research Area 1, find Atifei-01, who is controlled by Prince Andre, and confirm if the royal family is truly dead, and if they are, figure out a way..."

"What did you say?!!!"

At this point, the scruffy man, who had been eavesdropping since Leon and his companion began chatting, suddenly couldn't hold it in any longer. He jumped out of his seat, shouting in shock:

"The royal family is dead?!!!"

"Algie, sir!"

Seeing the scruffy man standing opposite, Leon couldn't help but emphasize his tone, slightly frowning with dissatisfaction as he spoke:

"Didn't you just promise me that if he had any extreme reactions, you would definitely anticipate and stop him?"

"I'm sorry, I was careless..."

Upon hearing Leon's words, Algie looked down with a guilty face and said:

"I was a little engrossed in listening earlier, and my reaction speed has decreased a bit compared to yesterday, so I didn't respond in time... Sorry, I'll definitely be more careful from now on!"

"Alright, there's no helping it..."

Upon hearing Algie's response, Leon shook his head helplessly and then instructed:

"Let's let it go this time, but you need to be careful from now on. For now, I can use the Secret Tail to cover it up, but if we suddenly have a slip-up like this once we're inside Research Area 1, we'll be in danger."

"I... I'm sorry, I will never make such a mistake again!"

"Alright then, control Mr. Bell first, and we..."

"Wait! Wait a minute!"

Seeing these two "fugitive criminals" preparing to control him again, the scruffy man's expression became anxious, and he proactively lowered his voice to say:

"What did you just say? The entire royal family is dead?"

Hooked.

After glancing at the scruffy man's wildly fluctuating soul, Leon slightly raised his eyebrow and then, frowning, spoke to Algie:

"Sorry, I was a bit careless too. We shouldn't have discussed such key information in front of him. You should control him first..."

"No! Don't control me!"

Upon hearing Leon's intention to have the strongman control him, the scruffy man quickly said:

"I can help you! Don't silence me!"

"This..."

After a slight hesitation, Leon shook his head and refused:

"Sorry, this matter is too important. We can't trust you. If you verbally offer help but actually try to alert others, then..."

"I won't!"

The scruffy man said anxiously:

"I was a classmate of Lord Fein! I was granted the status of a Level 4 Scholar personally by Lord Fein! I... Is there really something wrong with the royal family? If you can prove that you weren't lying earlier, I... I can help you get in!"

Got him!

Upon hearing the words of the scruffy man, Leon couldn't help but smile slightly.

He had long since learned from the stolen information that the scruffy man was a staunch supporter of the monarchy. Given his relationship with the old King, once he heard the news that the royal family might have been entirely eradicated, he would be unable to restrain himself, eager to find out the truth, which falls right into their hands, perfectly aligning with his plan.

After all, Research Area 1 is so important, and Prince Andre, the suspected mastermind, would be an idiot not to guard it tightly.

His Secret Tail isn't all-powerful; even if they find a scholar from Research Area 1 and use an abnormal object to replace his identity, without his knowledge and memories, unfamiliar with his relationships and the rules of Research Area 1, they would be exposed in no time.

So the only way to successfully infiltrate is to convince this scruffy man to willingly guide them both.

And instead of laboriously persuading him and reasoning with him to seek his help, it's naturally more reliable to lay the bait first, wait for him to take the initiative to speak, and finally plead to be of help.