

Beautiful 691

Chapter 691: Country A is the culprit?

Apparently, the head of state gained nothing but lucrative words, yet he was relieved to see that Ling Qingyu had no strings attached to the funding.

The large wealth in the treasury could be applied wherever they saw fit, without needing her approval.

This facilitated their interests and made him hesitant to pursue the 'toll fees' of the medical island.

Although, compared to the annual payment, Ling Qingyu's immense buyout outshone like the sun to the moon, the money was not insignificant enough to be dismissed.

As Ling Qingyu had anticipated the worst, greed became the driving factor working against her.

Despite her strong temperament and unignorable aura that demanded deference, the president remained fixated on her wealth.

Regardless of the advantages previously gained, he still wished to extract more. Ling Qingyu would not fault them for their greed, but they must also be prepared to face her wrath.

Nevertheless, the head of state could not directly confront Ling Qingyu when he was already relying on external support.

He had to imply his intentions and proceed indirectly to avoid raising alarm. Thus, he redirected the conversation to the airport attack.

"Madam Ling, I am merely curious—might you have any insight into the identity of the attackers?"

"Oh? I was under the impression that Your Excellency had already been briefed by your subordinates," Ling Qingyu replied, shifting her weight to the other side of her hip.

"I have been, but the prevailing speculation is that the perpetrators were mercenaries. We remain unaware of their employers. As such, I had hoped you might possess further information," the man responded, reaching for the drink on the table.

An odd gesture, suggesting unease akin to Ling Qingyu's own posture adjustment.

"That is quite a bold conjecture," Ling Qingyu said with a faint smile, glancing out at the scenery beyond the glass wall. "However, I would advise Your Excellency to await confirmation before pressing me further."

"Oh? Then you are aware."

"I did not say that, Your Excellency," Ling Qingyu replied calmly.

"Madam Ling, your silence is rather troubling, especially when such an incident coincides with your presence here."

"Mr. President, such implications must be substantiated by evidence. Otherwise, they risk damaging our relations."

"Please, Madam. The entire nation mourns this tragedy. Any assistance you can offer would be greatly appreciated," he said, almost pleadingly.

Had Ling Qingyu failed to notice the greed and manipulation beneath his words, she would have remained blind for ages.

Attempting to obtain something from her without compensation—Ling Qingyu sneered internally. She recognized the dual approach and discerned his aims.

One motive was to capitalize on the coincidence, hoping Ling Qingyu would feel compelled to assist out of guilt for the kindness extended to her, should she be involved.

The other was that any intelligence Ling Qingyu held could prove pivotal in the political arena.

His position stood on the brink of collapse with the news of the attack spreading. If he acted swiftly and strategically, bolstered by critical intelligence, his approval ratings might stabilize his future.

Every bit of foreknowledge was valuable. The resources controlled by Ling Qingyu could serve as decisive support.

By attempting to subtly coerce her through moral obligation, the outcome would likely yield benefits. Thus, why not proceed confidently?

"Well, I do have a hypothesis, based on the reports presented by my subordinates," Ling Qingyu said, still withholding admission. "However, I must caution Your Excellency—small nations possess little diplomatic leverage before greater powers. It would be wise for your government to tread carefully."

The president straightened his posture and was about to pursue the matter further when a sudden ringing tone interrupted him.

It came from his private communication device—only a few individuals had access to that line and would call under urgent circumstances. He had informed his close confidants that he was engaged in an important meeting.

Now that the call had come, he cast a somber glance at Ling Qingyu. From her composed expression, it was clear that she had anticipated this moment long before it arrived.

The man felt as if he had lost the initiative, and a sense of foreboding occupied his mind. As the ringing intensified, he finally answered the call.

"Hmm, yes... I understand. I agree... I'll discuss with my ministers. Control the scene and don't tell others... Yes..." The President nodded repeatedly, casting glances at Ling Qingyu—likely whenever a key statement was made.

He sighed heavily and looked at her. She responded without the slightest disturbance.

"So, the goal of the attack is complicated?"

His tone resembled a confirmation more than a question. Ling Qingyu wasn't surprised that the President already harbored relevant suspicions.

Country E might be poor and lagging in terms of state machinery when compared to superpowers. However, their intelligence service was not to be underestimated. Although their processes might have taken longer and fallen behind the stronger nations, the intelligence service still activated once the entire mechanism switched into war mode.

No nation welcomed the rise of separatists or dissidents. They invested heavily in intelligence to prevent mishaps, protect national interests, and safeguard themselves. Even if their military, economy, or politics seemed weak, their intelligence could still perform with competence.

The President had either understood or guessed the attackers' objectives based on their foreign characteristics. The possibility that Ling Qingyu had been the target had diminished after reviewing the attackers' methods and movement patterns during the incident.

Even though many assailants blended into the local ethnicity, the corpses left behind painted a different story. The presence of mercenaries further supported this theory.

There was no way separatist insurgents could afford to hire mercenaries for a terrorist attack. They gained little aside from spreading fear among the public. In fact, such an attack, if launched by rebels, would be counterproductive. Public outrage and renewed national solidarity could increase his approval ratings—assuming he handled it properly.

In the days ahead, with moral high ground, the nation might even reclaim some previously lost territories, aided by the international stage. Unless the rebels were utterly foolish, no one would sabotage their own strategic goals. That was the conclusion of the intelligence service.

The President understood what it implied—an invisible third party had likely intervened and sought to ignite conflict. There was a 60 percent chance that hidden hands were manipulating the situation.

If not for Ling Qingyu and her subordinates intervening, thwarting the assault and securing evidence, the perpetrators might have gotten away without consequence.

Lacking evidence, the blame would inevitably fall on the nearest enemies—the separatists.

But what if the black hand had already infiltrated the state machinery? Cold sweat trickled down the President's spine at the thought of becoming a puppet in someone else's play.

With the right reasons and "proofs," he would have no choice but to issue orders—even against his own judgment. In that case, the attackers had already succeeded.

So—what was the true identity of the attackers? Which group possessed the power to orchestrate such complications and still align the outcome with their interests?

These thoughts pounded in his mind relentlessly.

"Madam Ling, which organization is manipulating us?"

"Must you even ask?" Ling Qingyu replied casually while inspecting her nails. "View it from the perspective of who stands to gain the most—follow the trail of interests, narrow the list based on capabilities, and the answer will present itself. Now tell me, what would be your next course of action had they succeeded?"

"War."

"And what does war bring? Kindly list only the benefits."

"Wealth—for the arms suppliers. And for the military-industrial complex, particularly if the war is prolonged, which it would be in our case," the President answered without hesitation.

"In that case, don't you already have your answer?" Ling Qingyu leaned forward and snapped her fingers.

"No... there are too many possibilities. Even your own country is not beyond suspicion," the President said, watching her reaction closely.

"Your Excellency has quite the imagination. But allow me to assure you—today, I am not acting as an agent of Country C. I stand before you as a businesswoman seeking a mutually beneficial agreement between our sides.

"Country C currently has no interest in this region; they are preoccupied with logistical challenges and are achieving greater returns elsewhere. Country R could be a possibility, but it is too distant and, frankly, relations between your nations have deteriorated in recent years due to your foreign policy positions."

The President already understood whom Ling Qingyu was implying. After filtering through the major powers with deep cooperative ties to his country, only Country A remained.

Given Ling Qingyu's earlier bold critique of his nation, the answer could not have been more apparent.

Perhaps it was not the ambition of a nation as a whole, but rather a smaller faction within—one acting on its own interests. After all, like his own government, theirs was not a monologue either.

"Country A?"

"Who else then?" Ling Qingyu spread her hands. "My subordinates overheard their language during the panicked retreat. Coupled with the bodies and their tacticians' skilled conduct, the evidence is compelling. Of course, I'm merely offering a suggestion. It depends on the additional intelligence you receive."

"Haha, Madam Ling speaks as if it's simple. Even if we knew the truth—how could we respond, other than war? We must answer the tragedy somehow."

The Head of State clicked his tongue bitterly, like an aggrieved widow yearning for a lost loved one.

"Given your impressive background, I believe you'll be able to reassure the public soon and deliver an answer that satisfies all parties."

"I'll gladly accept your kind words, then. Hopefully, Madam can extend her assistance through her channels."

"So long as you name a price and promise to abide by our covenant," Ling Qingyu chuckled.

Chapter 692: Sudden switch in wind

"I truly have no idea how to proceed from here," the man murmured, shaking his head as he stared into the distant scenery, lost in thought.

Ling Qingyu raised an eyebrow but offered no comment on his indecisiveness. Only those who had occupied such a position could fully comprehend its burdens—even if her perspective came from a higher dimension.

No one held the right, nor possessed the correctness, to judge others unless they had acted from the same position.

What she intended to say next would be meaningless unless there existed a collective group whose interests aligned with the President's and who were willing to communicate sincerely.

"May we speak in private?" Ling Qingyu asked, glancing deliberately at the deputy minister who stood nearby, pretending to busy himself.

The targeted man frowned and sighed. Although his official rank was high, Ling Qingyu's action would damage his prestige and wound him gravely once word spread that he had stood in opposition to a potential major donor.

He would need significant time and effort to recover his footing. Those already eyeing his position would not hesitate to act.

This woman was clearly retaliating.

"Is it that important?" the President asked, not minding her vengeful undertone, though his eyes gleamed with interest.

"The fewer who know, the better," Ling Qingyu replied calmly, as a matter of fact.

In truth, this was not merely an act of vengeance for her earlier mistreatment. What she was about to reveal required utmost confidentiality.

Given the extent of corruption—thoroughly exposed by Athena—Ling Qingyu had no desire to invite trouble through loose words.

As for why she was helping the President, it was simple: her goal was to ensure the group responsible for the attack, would think twice before interfering or chasing her affair in the days to come.

She hoped to mess things around and burden them with solving Country E's moves, believing the group dared not escalate the matter.

The President contemplated briefly before motioning for everyone to leave. One by one, the men and women exited until only a single soldier remained—a man without rank insignia, wearing a red beret.

Xiao Yue remained as well. Ling Qingyu cast a glance at the President, who gave her a small, reassuring nod, indicating this man was his most trusted confidant.

Ling Qingyu pulled out her AR glasses, carefully concealing the flicker of emotion that crossed her features. She cleared her throat gently and glanced at the President playfully to recover her composed demeanor.

After all, within the augmented reality feed of her glasses, Athena had just unearthed crucial intelligence.

The man the President trusted so deeply was not entirely loyal.

He had aligned himself with a revolutionary group and had been waiting silently for the right moment to act. Many like him occupied critical positions—although none had yet reached the national echelon.

Still, this man could relay sensitive information to the group and had formed a wide-reaching intelligence network.

The organization had remained hidden, patiently waiting for the right time, with its members rarely connecting unless absolutely necessary. This soldier, it seemed, was even a leader among them.

Knowing this background and seeing the trust the President placed in him—Ling Qingyu had to resist the urge to laugh.

Truly fascinating. This trip had unfolded like a political drama, complete with palace intrigue and foreign manipulation, all revealed to her in broad daylight.

She had gained a front-row seat to a compelling series of events, and she intended to keep watching, observing how these pieces would shift in the future.

The President's eyes narrowed slightly when he noticed a brief pause and a flicker of hesitation in Ling Qingyu's gaze after he vouched for his subordinate's loyalty.

Just as he began reconsidering his own assessment, Ling Qingyu spoke.

"Would you like to dismantle the entire network behind the attack? I can provide you with multiple locations of their strongholds."

"You can? You already have this information?" the President asked, eyes widening as he exchanged a tense glance with his subordinate, whose expression had grown visibly uncomfortable.

Indeed, to witness an outsider wield such depth of insight—surpassing even native officials—was a chilling revelation.

How vast was Miss Ling Qingyu's power?

How deeply embedded was her organization within their own borders?

These questions echoed relentlessly in the minds of the two men. But neither dared to probe further.

Sensing their unease, Ling Qingyu relaxed her posture and smiled meaningfully.

"Why wouldn't I be able to, Your Excellency? You underestimate me too much. Sometimes, what we see isn't the truth, Mr. President. Don't you agree?"

"Even if we knew the truth, do we dare to sever those ties?" the President chuckled bitterly.

He couldn't help but recall Ling Qingyu's earlier comment about smaller nations before giants. It rang painfully true.

The reality was even harsher than her words implied. While superpowers might restrain themselves from overtly bullying smaller states—mindful of image, reputation, and the risk of giving rival powers an opening—the larger narrative still had to align with their desires.

Ling Qingyu didn't answer directly. She only shrugged slightly.

Whether or not the President acted, was entirely up to him. She wasn't opposed to stirring up trouble, but she wasn't keen on creating unnecessary messes either.

Everything should follow the current. Losing the initiative—now that was the hallmark of failed politicians and foolish businesspeople.

"In any case, I won't be staying long," Ling Qingyu said as she stood slowly. "I'll give you a number to reach my alias if you decide to request the intel. For now, I'll offer my public condemnation of the terrorist attack and my condolences to the victims. I'll be flying out soon once our covenant is confirmed. So, let's focus on the deals we came to discuss."

She turned slightly, her gaze drifting toward the artificial wildlife park beyond the glass wall.

"You also have a busy schedule ahead. Why not be transparent with your team now, to avoid any misunderstandings later?"

"Huh..." The President momentarily lost his composure and responded weakly. "What is Madam Ling implying?"

Ling Qingyu walked gracefully toward the glass wall, placing her palm softly against its cool, polished surface.

She slowly traced the outline of the scenery outside, admiring its carefully curated beauty.

"You and I both are aware of the reason why I requested the meeting. You may not be planning anything yourself," she said, hands clasped behind her back, "but your stakeholders and followers might have their own opinions—especially after digging into my background."

The President's expression tensed. "No, no, Ms. Ling. I assure you, despite the earlier... mishaps during the welcome, we are genuinely interested in deeper cooperation and mutual protection of our rights," he said hastily. He had no desire to create more enemies—especially now, with the political storm reaching its peak.

"I admit, we did test you," he continued, rising to his feet and trying to speak righteously. "We had to determine whether your presence would benefit us or become a liability in disguise. As leaders of our people, we have a duty to ensure our people's future."

Ling Qingyu masked her sneer.

Who didn't know how to speak noble words in such a position?

Any seasoned official could put on this kind of performance. The temperature in the room shifted so quickly that Xiao Yue and the nearby security guard found it difficult to adjust.

One moment, swords seemed ready to clash. The next, peaceful negotiations unfolded—gracious words, even promises of cooperation.

Then, just as suddenly, the air turned cold again.

The knife had reached the neck.

Xiao Yue sighed inwardly as she looked at Ling Qingyu's mature figure, her silhouette outlined elegantly against the glass wall, sunlight from the ground casting a soft glow.

There was no time for either man to entertain lustful thoughts or allow their minds to wander toward anything improper.

Ling Qingyu's voice carried weight with every word, laced with veiled threats that became sharper the longer she spoke.

"I understand greed. I understand the pursuit of wealth. I understand self-interest," Ling Qingyu said, pausing briefly.

"But spare me your bullshitery. We have a clear conscience. Even though your mineral reserves are rare and valuable, I haven't even thought that far ahead."

Her eyes locked with the President's. "There's no need to argue, Sir. I've long been aware of your interest group's true intentions—of their opinions about me and the underhanded schemes they've been planning."

She didn't bother softening her words. She didn't give him the slightest face.

Maybe—maybe—she would've respected him if he had the courage to act on her advice and dismantle the group responsible for the terrorist attack.

At least then, he would've shown a spine. Just a little.

But for figures like these, spineless and compromised, force worked better than diplomacy.

She didn't need mutual understanding—she needed results.

And her plan, naturally, involved carefully calculated threats to ensure she got exactly what she came for.

The reason Ling Qingyu tolerated speaking this far was simple: to craft and maintain her image.

Compared to reckless figures who barked threats and ruined negotiations with brute arrogance, her style—politeness hiding a sword's edge—carried far greater weight. It was controlled, deliberate, and unnervingly effective.

The President stepped forward, standing beside her, both of them facing the same scenery. Yet while Ling Qingyu's expression remained composed, his was visibly tense.

He couldn't understand how the atmosphere had deteriorated so quickly. Just moments ago, things had seemed promising.

What he didn't grasp was that Ling Qingyu's earlier humility wasn't submission—it was strategy. She acted courteous to leave no openings for accusations in the future. No matter how history was recorded, she would remain blameless on the surface.

Perhaps his tone had softened as their conversation deepened, perhaps he had even grown to admire this noble and talented woman. The more cards Ling Qingyu revealed, the more he learned to fear.

But admiration and fear could never sway her. Her mind was made.

She would not waver.

And she would not spare him—nor the interest groups lurking behind him.

They needed to be beaten hard enough to remember their place.

"Madam, you must believe in our generosity," the President said, forcing a smile. "How could we possibly intend to harm you? Your visit is the greatest help this nation has received..."

Chapter 693: Ling Qingyu's Solution

"Oh? Perhaps I heard everything wrong," Ling Qingyu said with a tone of schadenfreude. "I heard there was a group planning to threaten me during my visit—by showing force and exploiting my youth to instill fear, hoping I would accept your proposal. Am I wrong?"

"That..." The President paused, unsure whether to admit or deny. He knew Ling Qingyu wasn't bluffing—she had clearly received solid intelligence.

This woman had demonstrated a deep intelligence network embedded within Country E—so much so that she had uncovered things even their own agencies couldn't find. Her awareness was no longer in question.

As she had stated, similar conspiracies had been discussed—radical voices had even considered using direct force after discovering that Ling Qingyu's identity was "nothing special."

He had been among the conservatives—those who advocated for a peaceful approach or a wait-and-see stance until more information could be gathered.

This meeting was always meant to test her depth and resolve. But the President now realized the stakes were far higher.

Besides, they already had unknown enemies lurking, whose intentions only sowed further instability in the nation. Just one Ling Qingyu was enough to threaten their collapse. What if there was more?

Everything urged him to appease her. He could sense her disapproval—her dissatisfaction radiated beneath her calm demeanor.

Maybe it was his past attitude toward foreign terrorism that had worsened this dialogue.

As for her words about not being interested in the country's mineral resources, the President dismissed them as a polite farce.

After all, Country E had nothing else to offer. Its economy and international relevance hinged almost entirely on its natural resources.

Ling Qingyu's buyout had temporarily boosted the economy and brought prosperity. But no sane person—especially a businessperson or a capitalist—would operate without profit in mind.

In her speech, she had mentioned benefits multiple times. He knew better. Even the possibility of monopolizing the entire country's network was higher than generosity.

Still, the President was silently grateful for his own indecisiveness—it had stopped him from allowing the group to outright provoke Ling Qingyu.

After all, what kind of person treats trillions of dollars like toilet paper?

Only a fool would assume someone like that could be ordinary. Those idiots in his circle had been too deceived by appearances.

When gods fight, mortals suffer.

Now, Country E had become the playground for one god who was snooping around... and another godlike existence who seemed utterly dissatisfied.

"There must be some mistake somewhere," he finally said. "Extremists exist in every country, and I have to balance multiple parties with conflicting interests." He tried to excuse himself. "You have to understand my predicament, Madam."

He had no desire to probe further into the intel she had received. The deeper they went, the more it would cost him. Of that, he was sure.

Ling Qingyu didn't even bother acknowledging his pitiful attempt at feigned innocence.

A flock of birds wouldn't gather without sharing similarities.

From the start, this man had seen her as nothing more than a young businesswoman—someone who could be molded at will by powerful hands.

She recognized that look—the same one seen in tyrants wielding guns at civilians and scholars alike. Like Politicians who considered merchants as sheeps.

In their minds, force was the supreme truth. Once they issued commands, others would obey out of fear.

Right or wrong could be twisted and imposed as they pleased.

Perhaps it hadn't reached that extreme with Ling Qingyu, but their plans had involved underhanded means—just as she had stated openly.

"Frighten me. Coerce me into signing your deals. Then even if I fly out of here, the deal is done—you've already pocketed the money and secured annual revenue before I even take control of the medical city. Happy cooperation!" Ling Qingyu mocked, mimicking their wishful fantasy.

"I don't care if you were instigated by others to test my depths, or if you intended to devour my wealth without spitting out even a bone. Even the slightest thought is an offense to me. And I will remember it—and repay it, sincerely."

Noting the silence, Ling Qingyu chuckled and continued,

"How about I narrate your few options? For instance—subtly placing me under house arrest until an agreement aligned with your interests is reached.

"Formally, you might've just considered my entourage—barely a dozen people—easy targets to handle. But your initial plan failed when you realized my guards' capabilities and numbers.

"So, you resorted to increasing your troop presence to apply pressure, attempting to replicate your strategy... until you saw things through and changed your mind.

"But from the beginning—despite all your caution—you were already walking down the same road."

Seeing him about to interrupt, Ling Qingyu raised a finger and gently wagged it.

"Please, don't quibble that the increased troops are meant to protect important guests from further terrorist attacks. Flexibility in interpretation never changes.

"Maybe those guards are for safety.

"Maybe I'm just overthinking.

"Who knows... but yourself? I'm not interested."

"Then, Madam, what do you wish for? What compensation do you desire from our poor state?" the President asked blandly.

Ling Qingyu's assertion of dominance laid the foundation for negotiations. As long as he satisfied her conditions, the status quo could be maintained.

"Please don't portray the situation as if I were a pirate squandering a poor town to the brink of collapse. I have a clear conscience," Ling Qingyu stated firmly, cutting off any future narrative that might frame her as the aggressor.

"I bought the islands—territory over which you have no total control or governance—at a fair price, with additional fees, precisely to ensure we could meet and secure our deals. It opened the opportunity for your people to profit from the sale."

"I only hope our sellouts don't reach the public. The loss of land to a foreigner would jeopardize our image as national leaders. Sovereignty is a sacred word."

"I agree, Mr. President. We don't want unexpected variables spiraling the situation out of control. It's because of that mutual respect that I came here when I got the chance."

"I'm pleased we are settling terms peacefully, Madam Ling," the President replied with a renewed smile. His worries seemed to fade—though the sweat beading on his forehead betrayed the strain beneath his composed facade.

Now, he believed he understood Ling Qingyu's goals.

"I assure you, our previous agreement will be honored and respected."

"So long as disguised pirates and questionable 'safety concerns' don't tarnish the reputation of my medical city," Ling Qingyu added casually, subtly exposing the underhanded tactics of certain politicians—throwing dirty water while maintaining plausible deniability.

She wasn't afraid of such moves. She could protect the island without any cost. Maybe they wouldn't attack her directly but isolate the island so that important resources would be cutoff. Airlifting them would cost a huge toll even with the presence of Athena's moneyprinting machine.

But why waste effort on bandaging symptoms... when she could eliminate the root?

Besides, she had better uses for her strength.

"I can assure you with my position that such problems will never occur in the first place," the President swore.

"What if you're no longer sitting in that chair?" Ling Qingyu teased, though her words carried weight.

"Then... I'll do my best to advise those who are."

His confidante—the only guard present—frowned slightly as the conversation deepened.

Though he tried to remain composed, Xiao Yue had already read his thoughts.

Unwillingness? Anger?

After all, to him, this felt like a capitalist oppressing a nation.

A shameful theater. A public entity kneeling before a private one.

Xiao Yue stifled a giggle, amused by his fragile pride.

Did he even comprehend the benefits Ling Qingyu had already delivered?

It wasn't her robbing the national wealth—it was the elites.

The money she had invested was more than enough to sustain Country E's growth for two, maybe even three decades—if managed properly.

Once development stabilized, incomes would soar, and GDP would spike like never before.

If anything, Ling Qingyu could one day become the patron saint of this country.

Besides, the islands they sold hadn't brought the slightest benefit—aside from a marginal increase in land and sea control. Their maritime trade and ports lacked the necessary infrastructure and talent for expansion.

The coastline wasn't stable enough to foster prosperity, and numerous unresolved issues continued to hinder progress.

If there had been valuable minerals beneath the waters, foreign mining companies would have already arrived long before Ling Qingyu took over—exploring the seabed and extracting every ounce of wealth available.

Any future battles Ling Qingyu might have to face for the sake of the medical city would only bring unwarranted disasters—headaches she neither needed nor welcomed.

Unless, of course, this entire region had been deliberately reserved for her by Miss System—twisting the threads of national destiny to conceal untapped, precious resources.

After all, Ling Qingyu was the daughter of destiny, and it was only fitting that she received the same divine favoritism as those protagonists in stories.

Xiao Yue had witnessed firsthand just how spoiled she truly was—the more time they spent together, the clearer Miss System's intentions became.

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"Not enough," Ling Qingyu said, shaking her head.

Did she need to fly here every time someone else took office?

Country E's strength just wasn't there yet.

"Not enough?" The President blinked, confused. What more could this woman want? Had he misread her again?

"What if your nation goes back on its sacred words? Where would I go to cry?"

"I don't think you need to worry that much, Madam. By that time, your network will be so entrenched in our systems that politics won't be able to separate from your businesses," the President replied smoothly.

A beautiful picture.

What he really meant was that, over time, Ling Qingyu would come to control nearly everything.

"Unfortunately, you're forgetting the extremists you mentioned earlier, Your Excellency," Ling Qingyu replied, folding her arms as she gazed at the faint reflection of the President on the glass wall.

"If you never solve the root of the issue, it will regrow and stir up trouble again and again. And you expect me to believe that your nation won't turn on me in the future for control?"

Her voice was calm, but the warning was clear.

"No matter what, I'll always be at a disadvantage—as a foreigner.

If I were truly exploiting this place, swallowing benefits without even spitting out the bones, then fine, I could accept being dragged into the tug-of-war of your political arena.

But you—along with anyone who has even a sliver of understanding—know exactly what I've paid here."

Her tone dipped a notch colder.

"And you still haven't explained how you plan to persuade your vested interest groups."

She let the silence hang for a second. Then, she offered a solution.

Calmly. Even kindly.

"In case you have trouble persuading them... how about I convince them in your stead?"

"Elena?"

Chapter 694: Elena's first action

"Elena?" Ling Qingyu called out to her second daughter, who wore black-tech spectacles with a gleam of excitement.

"On it, Mom. It's always best to kaboom first and talk later. Some people only speak properly after a little shock therapy," came Elena's cheerful response.

Her voice brimmed with delight—just from delivering fire support for her mother, even if only once.

Ling Qingyu's lips twitched slightly. She hadn't even said anything yet, and Elena already understood.

And what did her daughter meant by kabooming first? This must be the last resort, always. Plus, it had been for so long Elena hardly acted. It was understandable for this little girl to become exhilarated from her request. She must have been seeking her words.

How long had she been waiting for this? With Elena's inherently violent streak, the result wasn't surprising. Ling Qingyu never expected otherwise.

Her call drew the President's attention.

"I beg your pardon?" he asked.

"Your Excellency, how about we enjoy a little show before continuing our discussion?" Ling Qingyu smiled faintly. It wasn't a suggestion.

Though clueless about what this woman had in store, the President kept his composure and followed her gaze, turning toward the distant natural contours.

Elena's voice came through again, precise and professional:

"Locating Mom's position and triangulating the intended target using visuals from her AR glasses.

"Target selected. Satellite confirms no human life detected. Simulating blast radius and post-impact results. Seventy percent wildlife impact, zero civilian casualties.

"Objective: Shock and Awe. One round, deterrence only. Weapon: Simple Railgun mode, single-fire. Requesting authorization to engage."

"Granted," Ling Qingyu murmured, her eyes scanning the augmented data and animations rendered by Elena's calculations.

The designated hill was isolated enough to minimize fallout—danger close, but within safe margins. Elena didn't need further instructions. She knew exactly what her mother wanted and executed accordingly.

She'd chosen the perfect site for both spectacle and psychological impact—visually impressive, yet far from any major consequence.

Ling Qingyu didn't even want to know what "Simple Railgun" meant. Judging from the simulation, it was already terrifying enough.

She also realized—with a slight pang of regret—that she'd never actually tested Elena's accuracy before this moment.

Still, Athena hadn't raised any concerns. If both she and Elena approved the numbers, things should be fine... right?

Xiao Yue, who had been eavesdropping on the entire exchange, could barely contain her excitement. She'd finally get to see Elena in action—bragging rights for life, especially against Tang Ziyi.

Noticing Ling Qingyu's and her secretary's strange behavior, the President and his guard exchanged confused, wary glances. Neither could grasp what was about to unfold.

The looming silence only heightened the tension, gnawing at the President's nerves. He had suffered enough shocks for one day. He didn't have the patience for games—but he also couldn't afford to offend Ling Qingyu.

Just as he opened his mouth, Ling Qingyu raised a finger to her lips, silencing him gently.

"Shhh. Your Excellency, where's your patience? Let's take a moment to breathe, shall we? Just watch that beautiful hill over there..."

He swallowed and drew a deep breath, glancing uneasily at the spot she indicated. It was a scenic view—peaceful, picturesque. Nothing about it should warrant intense attraction. But that made it all the more suspicious.

As his nerves approached the breaking point, Ling Qingyu remained unbothered. Her earlier tension had long since vanished, leaving only a sense of anticipation.

Then, Elena's voice returned, cheerful as ever:

"One round, inbound. Happy Package en route. Don't forget to leave a five-star review... Splashdown in 85 seconds. Counting."

"Copied. 85 seconds. Standing by," Athena's cool voice chimed in, taking over the monitoring.

She prepared to track and capture the projectile the moment it emerged from the sea—no easy task for a satellite, but Miss System's gear wasn't ordinary.

Her satellites were boutiques of precision—generations ahead of their time, never designed with limits in mind.

...

Far from Ling Qingyu's position—thirty kilometers off the coast and a thousand meters beneath the sea—schools of fish, both small and large, wiggled through the depths.

The aquatic creatures circled aimlessly, seemingly trapped in an invisible loop, as though something obstructed their natural paths.

At such depths, little could be seen—only faint flickers of light shimmered down from the surface. But beneath the veil of darkness, a colossal shadow loomed.

A brief glint of reflected light revealed it—a silent, man-made vessel cruising through the deep.

It barely disturbed the current, its presence so subtle that even the marine life swam close without fear. A submarine—shaped like a nuclear-class, yet so massive it dwarfed every known vessel on Earth.

Its sleek form hinted at overwhelming military power. Even though it was hidden, any expert would instantly recognize the subtle bulges along its surface—concealed turrets and missile silos masked by the hull.

Were the world to discover its existence, panic would surely follow. Size didn't always equate to superiority—but in this case, it was synonymous with absolute lethality.

Suddenly, a deep sonic click echoed through the waters, startling the nearby creatures and sending them fleeing. The sound, produced by a shifting mechanism, carried the primal weight of a giant stirring from sleep.

One of the hidden turrets on the submarine's upper hull creaked open, releasing a stream of bubbles and an eerie metallic screech.

A long barrel extended outward and slowly rotated, aligning itself with a distant coordinate. The submarine began to ascend—not rapidly, and with no intention of surfacing.

It halted at around 500 meters below the surface, still submerged, still watching.

Then, the turret came to life.

A pale cyan light ignited at the base of the barrel, tracing its way forward in a concentrated line. The upper and lower segments of the turret flared with intense brilliance. Energy pulsed visibly through the conduit for a second or two—then, it fired.

In that instant, the ocean held its breath.

A thunderous shockwave followed, rupturing the silence with brutal force. The blast rippled across the radius, shaking the very fabric of the sea.

Fragile aquatic life, too slow to escape, perished instantly from the sudden pressure shift. For a moment, even the ocean current was disrupted, stilled by the sheer force released.

The projectile pierced through the sea like a spear of light, launching skyward in a column of foamy waves, staying underwater barely a second.

A localized tsunami spread outward in its wake, marking the departure of the destructive payload as it arced toward its calculated target above.

Once in the sky, the projectile followed its predetermined trajectory, linking with the satellites above to maintain course. Hypersonic shockwaves tore through the air with deafening velocity.

Moments later, the submarine quietly sank back into the depths, retreating toward the seabed like a guilty phantom—as if the colossal underwater tremor had nothing to do with it.

No human technology detected what had occurred. Even military-grade satellites tasked with monitoring the region failed to pick up the slightest trace—not the sonic boom, not the flash, not even the projectile itself.

Too fast. Too small.

Perhaps the only witnesses were aboard a nearby fishing boat. The sudden, violent turbulence tossed the fragile vessel in wild arcs, pitching it dangerously with each passing wave.

The captain and crew fought desperately to stabilize the boat, confused and terrified by the sea's sudden fury. They shouted to the heavens, praying fervently to their respective sea deities for mercy.

Thunderclaps echoed above. The sky rumbled. None of them could explain what was happening. They only knew one thing: the sea was angry.

...

Ling Qingyu, standing calmly, spoke of the landscape's beauty—vividly describing the contours of the hill and marveling at nature's quiet grandeur, as if she were truly enraptured by the view.

Despite the strangeness of it all, the President maintained his composure and listened politely—until she fell silent.

The silence wasn't without cause.

Athena's voice arrived with crystal precision: "Impact in ten... nine... eight..."

"A pity, isn't it?" Ling Qingyu chuckled, though there was a heaviness to it. "If only we could've skipped the trouble, that hill might've been spared. Not my fault."

"What's a pity?" the President asked, sensing something ominous without knowing why.

"Three... two... one."

In the very next second, both Ling Qingyu and Xiao Yue—thanks to their quick, godlike vision—witnessed a black object descend from the sky and smash into the top of the hill.

The moment the black object struck the crown of the hill, there was no explosion—at least, not in the traditional sense.

For a brief instant, all sound vanished. The world seemed to hold its breath.

Then—

BOOM.

A delayed shockwave erupted outward, deafening and vast. It cracked like the heavens themselves were splitting open. The air distorted in a dome, expanding violently with a concussive blast that flattened everything in a 300-meter radius.

The top of the hill didn't just collapse—it vaporized. The impact crater, almost surgically precise, was several dozen meters deep and scorched in a perfect circle. Molten earth sprayed like liquid fire, arcing through the sky before solidifying mid-air into blackened shards of glass and ash.

The lower flanks of the hill shattered as the kinetic energy rippled through the geological layers. Stones and soil—once compacted for centuries—were atomized near the epicenter, while the outer ring was launched skyward like debris from a volcanic eruption.

A secondary shockwave followed, spreading a ring of wind like a horizontal cyclone. Dust, trees, and anything loose were thrown away as if by an invisible god's wrath. Birds and insects that hadn't already fled dropped lifelessly from the sky. The air smelled of ozone, scorched minerals, and burnt foliage.

Then came the sound delay—reaching the observers half a second later. It hit their ears like a sudden thunderclap after lightning, compressed air howling with unnatural fury. The President instinctively covered his ears, staggering from the unexpected force.

A mushroom cloud of pulverized stone and vaporized minerals began to rise slowly into the atmosphere, casting a long shadow across the land below. The upper rim of the crater glowed faintly, thermal energy radiating from the sheer velocity of the projectile's descent.

Xiao Yue blinked in awe. Even she hadn't imagined this level of violence. "This... is just a railgun's simple mode?" she murmured, a touch of disbelief and reverence mixing in her tone.

Ling Qingyu remained still, her expression unreadable, watching the silent inferno consume the hilltop. She hadn't moved an inch. Only her hair swayed slightly, caught in the gust of localized mini-earthquake.

She and Xiao Yue, prepared for the impact, barely flinched and stood their ground. The others weren't so lucky

The President, meanwhile, gawked at the scene with wide eyes, knelt on the ground from losing balance. "What on Earth?!"

Whether his legs gave way from fear or the trembling earth—perhaps only he knew. For all the diplomatic wars, internal turmoil, and political disasters he had survived, nothing prepared him for this.

This wasn't power. This was absolute dominance.

Ling Qingyu's voice broke the stunned silence, casual and emotionless. "This is your first and last warning, Your Excellency. Next time, I won't aim for the hill. Tell them if they are ready to court disaster and believe they can keep me here, this will be their last fate."

Athena's calm voice followed, as if reporting the weather. "Confirmed: impact successful. Target annihilated. No human or civilian casualties. Damage radius within calculated margin."

Elena: "Mom, You must not underestimate me again."

Only then did the rumbling subside. The hill, once a proud natural monument, was now a gaping wound in the earth.

Chapter 695: Wolf in sheep skin

The rumbling outside had stopped, but the panic had just begun. Seeing the President stuck on the floor as if he had no strength to safeguard his composure, Ling Qingyu sighed pretentiously.

"Now you know the source of my confidence." She removed her glasses, massaged the corners of her eyes, and put them back on, contrasting the weary atmosphere.

No one saw her finger shaking slightly while holding the spectacles for a brief second.

However, nobody had the mood to pay attention to the smallest detail to spot the awkwardness.

Noting the explosion outside and its relevance to Ling Qingyu, the President's only security guard, whom he trusted, immediately reached for his gun.

No idea what struck his mind to dare to pull out a handgun at her. Ling Qingyu noticed it and naturally, Xiao Yue, who had been paying attention the whole time, picked it up.

The latter slammed onto the man, hurt his wrist, and then punched hard in the abdomen. She snatched the gun from the holster and disassembled everything, ejecting every bullet from the magazine.

One by one, each time a casing fell onto the floor and rang out a pang, fear gripped the President more.

The security guard wasn't feeling well—helpless. He knew the woman had spared him. His body had set into panic mode once she took action, like a prehistoric beast staring at its little prey.

The sudden transformation from a lively, elegant, educated secretary to a devil filled with killing intent stunned the guard.

The murderous aura surrounding this woman exuded suffocation. He was also a veteran and had killed many people, but his momentum could never reach hers.

He didn't regret his impulsive action, drawing his gun to take the initiative. After all, he couldn't control the subconscious reaction when threatened.

He only sighed at his misjudgment and underestimation of the weaker genders. Hopefully, his behavior hadn't offended the two ladies.

On the other hand, the President wanted to curse at his subordinate and glanced at Ling Qingyu with trepidation.

He understood Ling Qingyu's strength and her backing, as well as where her confidence of everything being under control originated.

The saying "truth prevailed under the power of cannon" could never be refuted. Although he knew nothing about the weapon used by Ling Qingyu, the message was clear.

He also scolded his fellow politicians and their interest groups for reaching their claws too far, completely forgetting his original neutral attitude of wait-and-see.

"Alas, don't blame me, Your Excellency. Sometimes, my hands are forced," Ling Qingyu said for the first time after the shock, ironic to the extreme.

She turned around and gazed downward at the helpless head of state, totally losing his image. She didn't condescend to him nor make fun of him.

Her tone still gave due respect to a head of state. "Now that I've stated what I desire, I hope we'll have a pleasant cooperation and conversation the next time we meet again. Hopefully, no messes will bother me by then."

Ling Qingyu walked past the figure on the floor and paused her step. "Ah, right. If you change your mind about dealing with 'terrorists,' don't hesitate to call this number."

She picked up a pen from the table and wrote a number on a blank paper, presented by Xiao Yue in tacit understanding.

"And don't try to even think about harming us, just because we are in your country. To tell the truth, even without support, we can get away without a scratch."

Pa.

She slammed the thin paper on the furniture and strode toward the doors without waiting for any response. Xiao Yue teased the guard with her eyes and warned, "Please control the commotion. Don't let panic settle in among your guards, just for the sake of their lives. My warriors won't take a chance."

The bodyguards outside entered in panic, looking around. Ignoring the men in uniform, the two ladies left with style, punching through the lines.

When the guards acted to stop them, the head of security, who was disarrayed, stopped them. "Halt!"

The lead guard regained his composure and scolded everyone on the radio channel after ordering his men. He ensured the message of staying calm several times.

Then, he paid attention to his embarrassing President. "Sir, what do I need to do?"

"Help me up to the chair," murmured the paralyzed head of state.

"Yes, Sir. Here." The guard helped him move.

"Thank you." The President heaved a huge breath and recollected his thoughts. "Escort the lady personally and ensure no further messes."

"But Sir," the guard wanted to argue.

"Go! There are others to help me here."

"Yes, Sir."

The head guard stiffened his posture, saluted briefly, and sprinted after the two figures who had already vanished into the hallway.

The President remained seated, hand trembling slightly as he reached for the untouched glass of water on the table. The weight of what just transpired bore down on his chest like a thousand stones.

He gulped down the water, but it did nothing to wash away the taste of fear lingering on his tongue.

Across the ruined hill visible from the shattered windowpane, dust still hung thick in the air like a tattered shroud. In the distance, sirens began to howl—delayed, as if even emergency services struggled to comprehend what had unfolded.

The President wiped his forehead, drenched in cold sweat. His vision blurred for a second.

He knew, deep in his bones, that whatever entity Ling Qingyu represented was far beyond his nation's ability to control or resist. This wasn't politics anymore.

This was survival.

He slumped back in the chair, gaze hollow, murmuring to himself:

"God help us... what have we invited into our land?"

Outside, Ling Qingyu and Xiao Yue walked steadily, their calmness a stark contrast to the chaotic scramble of security forces flooding the corridors behind them.

Xiao Yue glanced sideways, a mischievous grin playing at the corner of her lips.

"Do you think he'll call us soon, Qingyu-jie?" she asked in a whisper, bouncing a bullet casually in her palm—one of the guard's disassembled rounds.

Ling Qingyu smiled faintly, her eyes clear behind the glasses.

"Of course. Fear sharpens loyalty better than greed ever will."

"Please wait, Ma'am."

The head of the President's personal security quickened his pace to catch up with them. "Please, allow me the honor of escorting two beautiful ladies—to avoid any trouble."

Ling Qingyu smiled politely, gesturing with her eyes for him to walk ahead.

"My pleasure."

The man bowed slightly, his tone and deference a stark contrast to how she had been treated upon arrival.

Sure enough—respect was not something one requested. It was seized. When the quiet presence of her operators had been insufficient, the terrifying blast earlier had helped... immensely.

All around them, maids and minor officials scurried like rats from a sinking ship, whispering feverishly as they passed.

No one, except those in the know, truly understood the stakes involved.

Perhaps it wasn't so different outside either. Even the security personnel with military backgrounds weren't spared from fear and rumors.

Maybe her girls were hopping around outside, reacting to the unknown explosion.

Well, Athena should have already begun containment measures. If anything, her operators thrived under chaos.

If not, Tang Ziyi would have plenty of reason to be disappointed after those relentless, nerve-grinding training regimens.

Following the security chief's lead, Ling Qingyu let her thoughts drift to Athena's new findings—and decided to speak directly.

"I must admit, I didn't expect the President's most trusted man to have such... interesting associations."

The guard stiffened. His heart skipped a beat and his step nearly faltered.

Witnessing how Ling Qingyu peeled back secrets like flipping pages of an old book, the man couldn't help but plunge into a spiral of anxious thoughts.

His reaction—trying to stay close, trying to glean more—betrayed everything.

"Don't worry," Ling Qingyu continued, her voice light but deliberate. "I'm not interested in reformists... or coups. As long as my interests are protected, you can plot whatever you like."

The man jerked his head around instinctively, scanning for nearby ears. His hand twitched, clenching slightly.

"You must be mistaken, Miss," he managed through gritted teeth, lying more to himself than to her.

Ling Qingyu smiled, as if humoring a child.

"Radicals, conservatives, reformists—doesn't matter who wears the crown. I prefer to deal with those who still put their nation above themselves. If you need help, call the number you were given. After all,

a neighbor with a heart for justice is far better than one rotted by greed and corruption. It's only a matter of time before a rotting house collapses."

The man almost stumbled, but Ling Qingyu and Xiao Yue pressed on, unfazed.

"I wouldn't speak so freely if it endangered either of us," Ling Qingyu added softly. "You don't need to worry."

Beside her, Xiao Yue suppressed a smirk.

Lost and conflicted, the guard had no idea how he had managed to send away the two gods.

He only recovered after the convoy scurried off, leaving behind exhaust fumes, his eyes never moving until it disappeared out of sight.

The flames ignited by Ling Qingyu's words repeatedly echoed in his mind like a spell cast by illusionists.

His ambition rose whenever he imagined a future where he received Ling Qingyu's help from all sectors.

Would the original plan happen earlier, like Ling Qingyu said, if he gained her support?

No, he rejected the possibility with regret. Capitalists mustn't be trusted. He could use her, but he must stay vigilant against any ensnarement.

At the same time, he and the President shared the same designation for Ling Qingyu: this lady wasn't a sheep, but a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Businesswoman, my foot... She was definitely someone connected with the World Government or beyond.

Chapter 696: Deeper stakes

Other than the three powerful nations, with Country A taking the lead as the superpower, there was indeed an organization that went against the huge tide:

a collective alliance named the World Government.

Initially, the World Government was founded by the former powerful countries and their allies after defeating their opponents mentioned above, aiming to ensure long-lasting peace.

Of course, the peace had to be guaranteed according to their own interests.

The Second World War broke out across multiple continents — no land was spared.

The difference lay in the stakes involved, the number of casualties, and the extent of involvement by the warring nations.

Country A, which joined last after being provoked, exploited the advantages of being a latecomer and led the coalition to end the war.

Hence, it secured its high status around the world by assisting others with economic growth and security.

To bolster trade and swiftly revitalize the global economy, Country A invested heavily, aiming to achieve an interdependent situation between nations, albeit with itself maintaining supremacy.

Alyssia, with its deep heritage and history — where the war had begun and spiraled out of control — lost its legendary status of a century-long hegemony by the end of the war.

Its population plummeted, and its military strength weakened tremendously.

Although guarantees of sovereignty and security were promised by Country A, relying on others never truly worked, especially when the other two nations were eyeing the position of superpower.

Decades later, Country A emerged victorious and attained the status of superpower and world police.

However, its two opponents in the east weren't willing to give up. Even in defeat, they were like lean camels — still stronger than many.

While Country R was set backward in time, suffering political turmoil and transforming from a republic to an authoritarian state, Country C rose, owing to its large population and talent pool.

Here, population resources proved to be the most valuable asset in any civilization.

Long ago, in ancient times, countries with massive populations tended to rely heavily on manpower.

"Rely" was a light description; "waste" would be a more appropriate term. Every accomplishment had been speedrun by corpses.

They tended not to care about human death, leading to a mindset where they believed they owned such an abundant supply of talents that losing a few didn't matter.

As the wheel of time rolled on, scarcity eventually exposed this weakness.

In addition to chilling the people's hearts, the neglect of individual talents weakened critical steps necessary for a civilization's progress.

Country C recovered well after realizing its unique advantage. Occupying around 20 percent of the world's population, the upper echelon would have been fools not to exploit this perk.

Of course, initially, many talents were poached by outsiders offering lucrative wealth and grand visions.

After all, for so long, talents hadn't been properly treated as humans. Sometimes, feudal suspicions had led to countless tragedies.

At least compared to western continents, witch burnings and executions by burning at the stake didn't happen, as they contradicted local beliefs.

However, societal punishment norms still existed: being ostracized for strange behaviors, offending common sensibilities, or possessing knowledge that made one "out of the ordinary."

Particularly extreme were the cases where ruling parties intentionally suppressed academic circles out of fear.

In any case, modern society eventually understood that population was a priceless resource.

Compared to Country A, R, and C — with their vast lands and massive populations — the Alyssia Continent paled in comparison.

If Country A challenged R or C in terms of lining up and peeing, the latter would have flooded the former without breaking a sweat.

Thus, the Alyssia Continent became the one that prioritized human rights and welfare above all, seeking to attract more immigrants to boost its economy and strength.

Still, time and energy weren't on their side. Unwilling to be used as pawns by others, they had to run while others walked — but would the latter really just walk?

Time waited for no one, and the same applied to civilizations. Whoever showed a lack of breakthroughs or extreme conservatism would suffer greatly.

History had spoken of these fundamentals over several cycles, even if humankind never learned from them: arrogance and isolationism — thinking themselves superior and believing they didn't need others.

In order to challenge and secure their status quo, the Alyssia Continent united and formed a union, strengthening scientific, economic, and military ties.

Countries bonded together to stay vigilant, resist oppression, and prevent sabotage by certain parties. These nations, with strong inheritance, weren't willing to cower before a baby civilization with less than 300 years of history.

As a result, each member state's voice became powerful due to their numbers in the World Government, even if veto powers still existed.

Their influence spread to other continents, causing many to seek their shade — to be protected and rapidly developed through investments by the union.

In this way, the Alyssia Union quietly shone its light, gradually building both soft and hard power incognito, while Country R found itself under the spotlight for its authoritarian regime and the spread of dictatorial influence worldwide.

Country R suffered thorough sanctions and suppressions; no one wanted another empire to rise again.

By the time Country A noticed the Alyssia Union's secretive moves, the latter had already launched from the platform.

Naturally, complete decoupling was impossible — hurting each other would only allow others to take advantage.

Not to mention, the Alyssia Union acted strictly according to the rules implemented by the victors; they had broken none of them, leaving no excuse for others to act.

The organization grew stronger alongside the existence of the World Government.

Eventually, the World Government became their voice, with nations from other continents joining as well.

Later, as the threat of the World Government rose, Country A, R, and C "declared" peace and turned their muzzles toward the World Government instead.

Even though peace was proclaimed, unconventional wars broke out — terrorism and surgical battlefields across foreign lands.

Thus, nations rich in resources attracted disasters.

Leaders with vision managed to align with the World Government and protect themselves, but for those already embroiled in conflicts, it was hard to manage.

Despite its ideals and ambitions, the World Government couldn't ignore the three powerful nations.

Still, if the World Government couldn't act openly, they wouldn't allow the three nations to go smoothly either.

In any case, Ling Qingyu was directly considered to be a member from a family related to the World Government.

The family must have been a hidden, powerful one too, based on the inexplicable strength she had shown — armed securities with veteran-level experience, advanced equipment, and devastating final firepower.

The President and the head of his bodyguards couldn't even identify the weapon types — it was technology far beyond what was available to the world.

Even though Ling Qingyu came from Country C, her distinct physical genetic features made associations difficult.

Her height, the blend of eastern and western traits, and her blue eyes set her apart.

As for the traditionally powerful and wealthy aristocratic family clans, nobody associated her with them.

They were too weak to exercise such powers now. Diplomatic soft pressure, business disruptions, and even assassinations were within their reach — but direct hard power against a state, even a weakened one, was far beyond them.

Neither the Rothschilds, nor the Rolux, nor the Washington clans — the President had made contact with them before, in somewhat gray areas.

Thus, the only plausible connection remaining was to the World Government.

Ling Qingyu's actions seemed to contradict Country A's hidden plans.

Although she had done nothing overt, her mere exposure had overturned conspiracies and ruined plans that might have taken years to mature.

Meanwhile, the head of the President's bodyguards — the undercover agent, someone deserving of a Hollywood adaptation — considered cooperating with Ling Qingyu, but was adamant about the balance of cards.

Yes, Ling Qingyu held many cards, while his side had none, apart from resource interests.

Still, small nations had their dignity. Even pawns had to fight hard to gain respect.

Nevertheless, he discovered the dire state of his country, despite his reluctance to admit defeat.

Even if he could cleanse the country's corrupt regime and wash out the filth, would Country A, a superpower, allow it?

Reformists were indeed planning a coup, just as Ling Qingyu had said — and that was why her words had scared him to death.

If word got out, everything they had done and sacrificed would be in vain.

Once Country A got involved — even if only a small faction or group moved — they wouldn't be able to handle it.

The hidden parties merely needed to support the rebels, the former rulers, or simply divide everyone until puppets emerged.

When he thought more deeply, he realized that gaining Ling Qingyu's help could balance their wronged fate — but at the cost of indebting themselves to her hands in the future.

However, could Ling Qingyu truly represent the entire World Government? Or was she part of a particular clan?

He had to investigate further and interact with her more in the future.

This matter must be discussed with other members before any decision was made.

Besides, he had his worries.

Would the World Government truly support a coup leader — a party that gained power through illegitimate, military means?

Wouldn't their existence directly oppose the motto of the World Government?

In any case, the corrupt government had received approval through public elections, despite the manipulations behind the scenes.

In terms of legitimacy, the reformists' prestige was still insufficient.

Alas, after contemplating so much, his head hurt.

He had to placate his disgusting President and hide himself deep.

Ling Qingyu's words reminded him of her stance.

She had indeed expressed her willingness to support his group — but she also supported their enemies.

The reformists needed to make a choice quickly.

Otherwise, with Ling Qingyu's support, the corrupt regime would strengthen its power and solidify its foundations.

Chapter 697: Generational Wealth and Ling Qingyu's idea

Ling Qingyu had no idea she had been misunderstood—and that, thanks to the two's overthinking, her identity had already reached a mythical level.

Inside the convoy, silence prevailed.

No one chatted, as if still unable to recover from the overwhelming display of Elena's firepower.

If not for Athena's timely assurance, they would have panicked like everyone else, scrambling to find Ling Qingyu in a state of fright.

But now, they trusted Athena's calm statement that Ling Qingyu and Xiao Yue would come out in one piece.

Well, at least vertically, like before—not horizontally.

Everyone was still immersed in the recent event, too stunned to even notice the scenery outside.

After all, the so-called "fire support" they had witnessed had shaken their understanding of warfare.

You call this fire support? Or air support?

Heck, this was strategic-level fire support.

Perhaps their boss had a unique definition of "fire support," especially since Ling Qingyu herself was already absurdly powerful.

They had seen her 'zealots' before—especially during the hostage rescue with Tang Ziyi, where the team slipped in and out clean.

So, maybe in her dictionary, "levels" were just suggestions.

Ling Qingyu and Xiao Yue were silent too—very different from the confident demeanor they'd shown during the meeting.

Each silently blamed Elena after receiving such a jaw-dropping surprise.

Compared to the other operators, the duo had it worse—they'd witnessed the destruction firsthand instead of watching the aftermath.

And now, they were dealing with... unstable knees.

If not for the risk of public embarrassment, they might have hugged each other just to calm down.

They were supposed to be the strongest ones here, after all.

When the entire hill disappeared into nothingness and a localized earthquake struck, even Ling Qingyu and Xiao Yue—despite their calm appearance and strong lower-body control—nearly collapsed like the President had earlier.

Thankfully, Athena's forewarning and Ling Qingyu's own orders had lessened the impact.

Still, her trembling fingers were hidden just well enough to preserve that carefully maintained "Presidential CEO AURA."

Her pretense held strong.

In the coming days, the medical city likely wouldn't suffer nuisance events like pirates trying to rob incoming logistics.

Maybe the island's previously declining deterrence could be renewed—with Ling Qingyu's presence alone frightening off malicious eyes.

Oh right, she almost forgot to inform Carol that her nephew had been rescued.

Though the woman looked a bit older now, she still matched Ling Qingyu's type.

Curvy, tall, and slender.

If news of the terrorist attack reached Carol's ears via the media first, Ling Qingyu would have to explain—though, honestly, comforting a beauty didn't sound like a bad chore.

Provided, of course, Xiao Yue didn't tag along like a disgusting lightbulb.

If Xiao Yue ever heard her inner complaints, a bump on her head would probably be the least of her punishments.

Ling Qingyu sent a message to Carol to confirm her nephew's safety. She also asked Athena to share a more detailed—but non-classified—report, including the airport attack and its links to the man involved.

The reply was swift—full of gratitude and renewed loyalty.

Carol even promised to ensure the hospital would function better than ever.

Ling Qingyu smiled.

Rescuing the boy on a whim wasn't such a bad decision after all.

Like it or not, she would've had to deal with the terrorists once her plane landed at the airport anyway.

Either way, she'd gained an unexpected favor and the full loyalty of a subordinate she might not have interacted with much otherwise.

And in case she couldn't go personally, having someone dependable to delegate to... was a win in itself.

Not to mention, in addition to scaring local officials from planning anything disadvantageous, Ling Qingyu truly realized the combat capabilities of her daughter—Elena.

Tang Ziyi's description now seemed like an understatement based solely on Elena's basic firepower. Which conventional unit could withstand an attack like that?

Sure, logistically, Elena couldn't sustain a prolonged war, but wiping out an entire army through sheer firepower alone wasn't beyond her.

Unless the enemy dispersed and waited out Elena's mana exhaustion, her daughter was practically invincible.

Well, Ling Qingyu mused, maybe she could start walking sideways like a crab and bulldozing through all liabilities.

Of course, she didn't know she was underestimating Elena's self-sufficient productivity. The submarine could produce and supply enough ammunition to support a small campaign.

It seemed she must contact Elena more often. This ship-daughter might be even more outrageous than Athena.

Oops. She must have committed a great sin in her past life to end up raising two daughters who casually toyed with global balance.

While most mothers feared their kids getting into trouble or destroying property, Ling Qingyu feared the day her children accidentally triggered world-ending events.

She sighed, imagining her hair graying before she even hit her mid-thirties. So much for golden fingers.

Alas, sometimes being too invincible brought its own burdens. Ling Qingyu lamented, but Miss System didn't spare her Versailles behavior.

[So, you want me to reduce the monthly rewards?]

'Of course not, my dear System. Please allow me to express my joy cynically,' Ling Qingyu hurriedly backpedaled.

[Hmph. As the world turns, great strength must serve deeper responsibility. Destiny made you rich so you could do something for the world.]

'I'll never forget your teachings,' Ling Qingyu swore and flattered her sugar mommy without hesitation.

Even if she wouldn't need Miss System's help in the future, who would ever complain about receiving more wealth?

More importantly, Ling Qingyu gradually understood the ambition and path Miss System wished her to pursue.

All those private merits she earned? They might have been a calculated deception, designed to lure her into becoming a force for good.

Miss System didn't need feedback from mere mortals like herself. Ling Qingyu often wondered—why her?

Regardless of such complexities, the convoy was now heading back to the airport.

Ling Qingyu didn't feel at ease leaving her close confidantes behind, even if over a dozen Spirit Fox operators were guarding them diligently.

Logic aside, emotions weren't easily suppressed.

On the way back, there was little to see aside from the same desolate scenery. The harsh living conditions of the people no longer evoked sympathy from her.

Her mindset had surpassed that of her former self. Rather than drowning in negative emotions, Ling Qingyu understood her actions were paving the way for a better future in Country E.

She had done her best and had no room left for guilt. Perhaps the country would grow beyond what its people had ever imagined.

And now, she finally understood why some people viewed others as pawns on a chessboard.

Like when she had implicitly threatened that guard by exposing his spy work—she had seized the initiative and his lifeline in one stroke.

She had invested in two factions. Whichever won would bring her surplus gains. Personally, she preferred the reformists' victory.

Her investment would be far more efficient, and her hidden influence stronger, if she worked with those aiming for change. The potential returns were incomparable.

Sure, risks like betrayal or broken promises were inevitable, but after her display of power and methods, she doubted the reformists would dare challenge her—so long as she didn't cross their bottom line.

Ling Qingyu wasn't some unscrupulous businesswoman chasing profit at the expense of people's lives or the environment.

Those blatant capitalists were short-sighted, thinking they were saving money by cutting corners.

In truth, long-term profits vastly outweighed the gains from such destructive shortcuts.

What many failed to understand was that money meant nothing without a functioning system and healthy circulation.

If no one could afford to spend, the capitalists' wealth would become meaningless. Generation of wealth was achieved through contribution, not exploitation.

Who cared about a rich family in a village if that family did nothing? No one.

Only when a family built roads, created jobs, ran the local economy, gave donations, and grew alongside the community would the villagers be willing to serve and protect them.

Such a family would gain immense prestige and reputation, becoming a de facto source of authority.

All nobles throughout history had begun their rise this way.

No one was born a noble.

Sometimes, a show of power was necessary—to let the public, and especially those with ill intent, know who was in charge.

The proper approach was always a balanced one: a knife in one hand, and grace in the other.

But over time, those political hands—once raised to protect—grew stained with dirt.

Eventually, they lost their original purpose and became tyrannical, harming the very people they were meant to lead.

It was the later generations—those who bullied others by relying on inherited power—who ultimately destroyed the legacy and strength of their ancestors.

Philosophically speaking, everything is destined to end through self-destruction in one form or another, only to be seized by outsiders.

Nothing is eternal—except for nothingness itself.

Likewise, the more Country E developed through Ling Qingyu's investment, the more she stood to gain—as long as the policymakers didn't meddle and sabotage her interests.

Of course, that scenario was nearly impossible to avoid, inevitably pushing Ling Qingyu to intervene directly.

In the end, she would have to assert her influence, attain veto power, and secure her wealth.

Chapter 698: Forced Conscription

After complaining bitterly about Elena, Ling Qingyu finally had the time to glance at her surroundings.

Earlier, when she came from the airport, she'd been preoccupied with countermeasures against the entrenched old politics.

Alas, she had done everything she could—but in the end, she resorted to violence when she realized cooperation and diplomacy appeared weak and ineffective in protecting her precious medical facility.

From the President's expression, she could tell he didn't care much about her affairs. To him, the situation seemed manageable as long as he could maintain a delicate balance.

But that wasn't what Ling Qingyu came to achieve. What was the point of her visit if everything was left unchecked?

It was only after she expressed her dissatisfaction that the President finally paid attention. She wasn't content being seen as just a middlewoman for capitalist enterprises or a businesswoman chasing profit.

Even though she had deliberately showcased her absurdly powerful intelligence network, the level of apprehension she provoked still fell short of her expectations.

In the end, it took obliterating an entire hill to secure the result she truly desired.

Negotiating from a position of overwhelming power was exhilarating.

Now she truly understood the difference between dealing with private domestic officials and negotiating with a foreign government as an outsider.

Without the perks of being backed by a powerful motherland—or so she should call it—Ling Qingyu would've been subjected to all kinds of bullying, especially like those from a smaller, weaker nation.

She realized that many of the benefits she should have received would've had to be given away just to please the higher-ups and safeguard her business.

Sure, wealth played a major role in influencing outcomes—but as Ling Qingyu always believed: wealth without strength meant nothing.

People tended to chase massive short-term gains rather than wait for long-term, sustainable rewards.

To the average person, a huge number now always looked better than a greater number accumulated over time—even if the math said otherwise.

So, by blowing up a hill, she instantly made a statement—one that forced others to submit.

Even if they knew she wouldn't truly exterminate them, they couldn't help it.

It was like regular negotiations: yes, the outcome came through conversation, but the smaller side would always feel restrained in front of a bigger force that could slap them to death in an instant.

It was instinct—buried deep in human DNA. People yelled at the weak but spoke politely to the strong.

And now, Ling Qingyu was exactly that—the strong. The President of Country E regarded her as a nemesis he had to appease.

Maybe she wouldn't blow up the nation, but she could drag it into chaos or topple the government if she chose to support the opposition.

To his credit, the President was farsighted. Just the suggestion that she might support the reformists—perhaps even arm them—was enough to make him tread carefully.

Ling Qingyu was petty in the truest sense. She'd been led around, made to take extra steps, wasting time on fruitless talks.

And the small offenses had piled up—until they reached a breaking point when they tried to search her and Xiao Yue.

Now, she simply wished to topple the regime—peacefully, if possible.

According to Athena's analysis, the reformists actually held higher popularity, though they remained hidden to avoid suppression.

She didn't deny it—she was a narrow-minded woman. Anyone who offended her would face retaliation.

It was only a matter of when, not if.

If not for wiping Miss System's butt, Ling Qingyu wouldn't have bothered visiting a chaotic place far from home, let alone matching wits and auras with petty officials.

Threatening and hurting others was the last thing on her mind.

Dead Tiger Gang: ???

Bankrupted businesses and industries: ??

Province N victims: ???

Ahem. Ling Qingyu coughed inwardly, trying to cover her thoughts from Miss System by flooding her mind with unrelated imagery.

Hmm... Carlo in a sexy scarlet evening gown with a high slit didn't seem like a bad distraction.

That blond hair, those seductive glances that lured her into committing crimes—even if Carlo had no weapons at all.

Well, in any case, the visit to Country E hadn't turned out that bad.

It was never wrong to rake in extra profits when others rolled out the red carpet.

The abundant mineral resources alone would fuel her industrial expansion and bring her vision of a self-sufficient empire closer to reality.

Lower costs and total control over logistics meant she wouldn't need to rely on anyone. And since the mineral deals would involve the government, deeper cooperation wasn't impossible—especially with Gu Yi's quiet approval.

Perhaps Gu Yi would even pull a few strings on her behalf, if she hinted at the possibility of opening future investment opportunities in Country C—under her watchful, stabilizing hand.

Her empire would gain prestige, reputation, and step boldly onto the world stage.

She had nothing to lose here.

Through the tinted window—opaque from the outside—Ling Qingyu caught sight of soldiers dragging a few men into the back of a truck with rough force.

Women and elderly cried and begged. There was no sound, but she could guess what was happening.

It had taken place in one of the rural villages her convoy had passed.

Given Country E's ongoing war and deteriorating internal stability, forced conscription of able-bodied men had become routine.

Of course, Ling Qingyu had never seen any official government mandate announcing it publicly.

But behind the scenes, to maintain military manpower, unlawful methods were a given.

Her convoy definitely drew attention.

The imposing formation led by two Aegis 2.0s and escorted by black SUVs sent a loud and clear message.

This wasn't a group to mess with—certainly not like the helpless civilians the military was used to pushing around.

Everyone's mood had clearly darkened, and Ling Qingyu could understand why.

The girls in her unit had once served as special police officers. Even if they were no longer officially tied to the government, the enforcement duties they once carried out still held meaning.

The values they upheld and preached stood in contrast to silently watching civilians being dragged away.

Thankfully, none of them were foolish or naive enough to believe they could save everyone.

Ling Qingyu was quietly grateful for that—and gave credit to the devil instructor behind their training: Tang Ziyi.

Responsible for every part of their development—technique, tactics, strategy, culture, and physical fitness—Tang Ziyi had turned them into something far more grounded than idealistic girls with badges.

"Would you say men suffer the most in any era?" Ling Qingyu asked idly, elbowing Xiao Yue.

"Huh? Philosophical again?" Xiao Yue rolled her eyes but gave it a moment's thought. "I guess it seems that way. Are we back to talking about gender?"

"Well, just thinking," Ling Qingyu muttered, her gaze distant. "Watching those young men dragged off to be cannon fodder..."

"Rather than just 'men,' I'd say the weaker parties are always the ones oppressed," Xiao Yue shrugged. "But if you look at it from the perspective of the powerful, especially families of status, then women were often the ones who suffered the most."

"How so? Look at the conscriptions—aren't men being bullied more? Not to mention all the societal pressure they face."

"True, in the current era," Xiao Yue said with a soft smile. "But I believe time will bring change."

"What do you mean 'in the current era'?" Ling Qingyu turned to her, curious now.

"Do you really think men were the sole providers in ancient times?" Xiao Yue raised an eyebrow. "Let's forget the titles like 'head of the household' and other social labels for a moment. Think of a regular family—a husband, a wife, and their children. How did they actually survive?"

"Do you really think men were the sole providers in ancient times?" Xiao Yue raised an eyebrow. "Let's forget the titles like 'head of the household' and other social labels for a moment. Think of a regular family—a husband, a wife, and their children. How did they actually survive?"

Ling Qingyu tilted her head, waiting for her to continue.

"Before the industrial revolution, there was no such thing as a housewife or househusband," Xiao Yue said. "In a peaceful era, both men and women worked. Together. Farming, small business, weaving, trading—everything was about mutual effort. A family couldn't survive on a single income. That whole concept didn't even exist."

Ling Qingyu hummed in thought. "Then things changed..."

"Exactly. Later on, society shifted. Industrialization, centralized economies, male-dominated workspaces. Men went out to earn while women stayed behind, slowly caged by growing societal norms. From partners to dependents. And once that dynamic was reinforced long enough, it started looking like women were leeching off men—even if it wasn't their fault."

She looked out the window before turning back to Ling Qingyu. "But you were talking about war earlier, right? Conscripting men and how they suffered."

"Yeah," Ling Qingyu nodded. "Families torn apart. Men sent to die. That's why I said they suffer more."

"Do they really?" Xiao Yue's voice turned sharper. "Let's forget the frontlines. Do you think women don't suffer just because they weren't forced into uniforms?"

Ling Qingyu remained silent.

"Who believes women came out unscathed?" Xiao Yue continued. "Especially in lawless villages and rural provinces. You've seen the state of Country E—what makes you think soldiers won't raid villages for women too? If men are dragged off to be cannon fodder, women become... free prostitutes. That's the ugly truth. No salary, no supplies—officers need a way to control the troops. What do men want most in chaotic times? Money, beauty, power. The promise of those three is enough to keep soldiers loyal. So yes, villages get rampaged. Women—unrelated, innocent—are taken. Not by invaders, but by their own army."

"Even if such things don't happen blatantly in cities, they're not immune," Xiao Yue added bitterly. "They just hide it better. Reputations matter in towns, where eyes are watching. But in remote places? Law doesn't reach. Nobody cares."

Ling Qingyu frowned slightly, processing her words.

"So, don't ask if men suffer more," Xiao Yue finished. "Ask instead—who suffers differently. Because war never spares the weak, and women are always among the weakest in these systems. Let's not talk about the worst ancient times, if you know enough, modern era is no less barbaric, unfortunately Qingyu."

Chapter 699: Men or Women. Who suffer more?

Ling Qingyu leaned back, arms crossed, brows lightly furrowed. "Still... I've heard plenty of arguments from the other side. Men do say they had it worse."

Xiao Yue glanced over, motioning for her to go on.

"Like, dying in war. Getting tortured as POWs. Carrying the weight of being the breadwinner. Most men throughout history weren't nobles or kings. Just peasants or soldiers thrown into battle with a spear and no armor."

"Mm," Xiao Yue nodded, letting her speak.

"And unlike women, they couldn't cry for help. They weren't allowed to be weak. No room for emotional outbursts. No excuse to run. Everything expected of them was to shut up, suffer, and sacrifice."

"That's true," Xiao Yue agreed. "But keep going."

Ling Qingyu tapped her fingers against her arm. "Some men say women always had an easier ticket in peace times. Marry a rich guy, stay at home, avoid the battlefield. Even now, they argue women get lighter punishments in court, priority in rescue, sympathy in public."

"Ah, the ol' 'women have it easier' list," Xiao Yue smirked. "Ready for my side?"

Ling Qingyu gave a short nod.

Xiao Yue's tone turned solemn. "Let's start with war. Yes, men die in combat, but women don't survive whole either. You think it's easy to be raped? To have your body taken over and over, sometimes by

your own country's army? And when it's done—not only do they suffer the trauma, but society blames them. Chastity was worshipped. Even if they lived, they were considered dirty. Unmarriageable. Their families disowned them. Some were drowned in pig cages to 'restore honor.' You call that surviving?"

Ling Qingyu frowned.

"And let's talk about choices," Xiao Yue added. "Most men at least had some chance. Rare, yes. But a soldier could climb the ranks, win merit, rise in status. Women? No ladder. No promotions. No battlefield glory. Just... silent obedience. That's why many disguised themselves as men to enter the army. Not to fight—just to survive."

She shifted slightly in her seat. "The shame women endured was deeper. Selling their bodies wasn't a tactic—it was often the only way to eat. To protect a child. To not starve. Sure, some men were raped too, and yes, they were also used. But for women, this was the default. Their value in ancient times was often tied only to beauty or fertility. In war, that meant being a reward—or a resource."

Ling Qingyu remained quiet.

"Oh, and those 'easy marriages'?" Xiao Yue snorted. "More like business deals. No love. No say. If the husband was cruel, tough luck. If she escaped? Branded a whore. The legal system didn't protect her. Not even her own family would take her back."

A pause.

"Even in peace, it wasn't easy. Sure, women might avoid the battlefield, but not oppression. They couldn't inherit land. Couldn't go to school. Couldn't travel without a man. Couldn't speak in court. And when they could finally learn or work—centuries later—it was still under restrictions."

She leaned back. "So yes, men suffered. And they carry their own burdens. But women? We suffered differently. Deeper. With fewer exits."

Ling Qingyu looked away for a moment, gazing out the window again.

"I don't know who suffered more," she finally said. "But I guess... if suffering was a mountain, then men climbed it with heavy armor, but at least on a path. Women were thrown in, blindfolded, with wolves waiting below."

Xiao Yue gave her a knowing smile. "You're starting to get it."

Ling Qingyu took a long breath, her fingers tracing the edge of her tablet. "Alright. Let's forget about history for a second. What about now? Modern era. Do you still think women have it worse?"

Xiao Yue gave a half shrug. "It's more complicated. Compared to ancient times, both genders have it better. But the trauma didn't vanish—it evolved."

Ling Qingyu leaned in. "Go on."

Xiao Yue tapped her temple. "Women might have legal rights now, but that doesn't mean equality. People say we're free—but then punish us for living freely. If you work hard and climb the ladder, they say you slept your way up. If you stay at home, they say you're wasting your life. If you're assertive, they call you a bitch. If you're quiet, you're weak. It's like... no matter what we do, someone's pissed."

Ling Qingyu smiled faintly. "Sounds like my daily life."

Xiao Yue chuckled. "Yeah, well, you're an outlier. The rest of us? We still get groped on buses. Still get told to smile by strangers. Still walk with our keys between our fingers at night."

Ling Qingyu hummed. "Men have a point too, though. Some are overworked to death. Pressured to provide. Told to never cry, or express weakness. And in a divorce, they often lose custody. In school, boys lag behind in literacy. Suicide rates are higher among men."

Xiao Yue nodded seriously. "All valid. That's the part modern feminism often forgets. Gender issues cut both ways. Men suffer in silence. They bottle everything up because society taught them emotions are weakness. That's why some explode, or shut down entirely. We're all paying the price for outdated roles."

She added, "But here's the key difference—women were always fighting for something: rights, safety, autonomy. Men are now fighting against losing their traditional dominance. It's not the same kind of battle."

Ling Qingyu paused. "So men feel like they're slipping... while women are still climbing."

"Exactly," Xiao Yue replied. "And the climb isn't done. Sure, we can work and vote, but try walking into a boardroom of twenty men and see how many actually listen. Or how many stare at your chest instead of your words."

"So," Ling Qingyu said slowly, "no side has it easy."

"No," Xiao Yue agreed. "But the pressures are different. One gender is crushed by expectation to win and dominate. The other is crushed trying to be taken seriously."

A brief silence passed between them, broken only by the hum of the vehicle.

Ling Qingyu finally muttered, "...Maybe I pity both."

Xiao Yue glanced at her. "That's fair. Just don't forget which side was never allowed to choose their fate."

Ling Qingyu smiled faintly. "As expected of a former warlord, you're not making it easy for me to stay neutral."

Xiao Yue grinned. "Good. Thinking shouldn't be easy."

Ling Qingyu leaned her head against the seat, gazing outside at the endless road ahead. "So, men and women both suffer in different ways... still doesn't answer why nothing seems to change."

Xiao Yue folded her arms and sighed. "Because power doesn't care who suffers. It just wants to stay in power."

"That simple?"

"That cruel," she corrected. "You know, it's not even about gender most of the time. It's about hierarchy. Wealth. Influence. Whether you're a poor man, woman, or even child—if you're weak, you're disposable. Always have been."

Ling Qingyu narrowed her eyes. In the distance, another checkpoint loomed. Soldiers dragging out a youth barely of age. An elderly man shouted nearby, quickly silenced by a rifle's buttstock. No cameras. No witnesses. Just another forgotten village.

She didn't say a word.

Xiao Yue saw it too. "Those boys? It's not just that they're men. It's that they're poor."

"Used like pawns," Ling Qingyu muttered, voice low. "Their lives just become meat for war... no names, no choices."

"And if they resist, they're traitors," Xiao Yue said bitterly. "If they flee, they're cowards. If they cry, they're weak. Their entire worth measured by how much they bleed for someone else's flag."

"While the daughters they leave behind," Ling Qingyu continued quietly, "become currency for the victors. Taken to please the ones holding rifles."

"And what of justice?" Xiao Yue said. "Who answers for them? Who punishes the officer who turns a blind eye while his men pillage a village? Who buries the girl when her family abandons her for shame?"

"You know what I learn from Ziyi which angers me most regarding your topics? Westerners always say women had it easier. That they weren't sent to the frontlines, weren't made to fight and die. That being spared was a privilege."

Xiao Yue's brow arched. "Spared? You mean like the Chinese women were 'spared' during the Japanese occupation?"

Ling Qingyu scoffed, bitterness rising. "Yeah. Tell that to the ones raped to death in Nanking. Tell that to the comfort women who spent years tied in shacks, used until they couldn't even cry or till liberated from death."

Silence lingered again. The topic was heavier; luckily, these terrible events didn't occur to the most tragic extent as Ling Qingyu studied in the previous life.

Ling Qingyu exhaled softly, her tone sharp now, like steel beneath silk. "In the end, the weak suffer. That's the only truth. There's no privilege in being weak. Whether you're a man, a woman, a child... the powerful will devour you just the same. And history will pretend it was all necessary.""

"And so the poor keep fighting. The weak keep bleeding. While the rich and powerful write poems about sacrifice over their wine glasses." Xiao Yue nodded and her jaw tightened. "And the powerful make rules to stay powerful. No matter the century."

"Then let them hear this," Ling Qingyu said, her voice suddenly colder. "If the game's rigged, I'll rewrite the game. Since I have come here, fate has told me to act. All journey begins with a single step and it shall begin from here."

Xiao Yue smirked. "Now that's the Ling Qingyu I know."

Their convoy rolled past the checkpoint without slowing—black SUVs untouched, soldiers straightening like puppets tugged by invisible strings. No one dared block the path. They didn't know who sat inside, but they felt it: someone important. Someone dangerous.

Ling Qingyu turned away from the window, her expression unreadable.

"The strong will always oppress the weak," she said softly. "Until the weak have nothing left to lose. Then they'll fight back. —not because they want to win, but because they can't stand crawling anymore."

She didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to.

In that silence, even the air seemed to tremble.

Two operators at the front acted nonchalant but in their heart, a fire called ideology burned ferociously after listening to the heavenly conversation.

Serving Ling Qingyu and discovering her true ideals assured their loyalties weren't in vain. Even if a leader treated subordinates well, who didn't want a leader with passionate goals that would plant a flag to the known order.

The car kept moving, through a country rotting at the roots, where the powerful still fed on the desperate.

Chapter 700: Silent continued debate? - I

Even though Ling Qingyu had made a solemn promise in the vehicle, the journey had already begun the day she transmigrated into this world.

It started within a city, gradually expanded to a province, and would soon envelop a country—judging by her actions so far.

Even when only glimpsing the surface—mere book covers, not the depths—Ling Qingyu felt a growing resistance to accepting everything as the universal law of the strong preying on the weak.

What Xiao Yue had said earlier shed light from a different perspective. The saying "You can never truly understand another unless you've experienced it yourself" struck deeper in Ling Qingyu's heart than ever before.

She had long understood the essence of that phrase since arriving in this world. Now, it illuminated her thoughts even more.

As Xiao Yue mentioned, in ancient times, suffering was downplayed—for both men and women.

Most tales revolved around main characters, glorifying their deeds and achievements while ignoring the corpses that paved their path.

Even sufferings, most of the time, were highlighted on men. It wasn't surprising since history had shown women were considered as decorations or pets, not human beings in the old era.

Nobody knew or told these women's lives afterward. What was the living condition and experience after surviving the tragedies?

Even those who were sold as tributes, their situations could only be imagined from a bystander's eyes.

In addition, ancient armies were starkly different from today's ideologically grounded modern militaries—though not all modern nations adhered to such ideals.

Country E, for example, was a clear case of a failed military institution: one that oppressed its civilians and abused its power. Other poorer nations with low living standards were likely similar.

Historically, military forces rarely existed to serve and protect the public. To put it politely, they were the obedient dogs of the elite.

This sentiment was echoed in old sayings comparing the military to bandits—some even claiming the military was worse.

After all, from the people's point of view, bandits stole quickly and often feared retaliation from the "official gang." But the military?

They looted thoroughly and shamelessly, especially during times of war.

That's why war often came hand-in-hand with famine and disaster. And looting didn't stop at food or money—it extended to human beings, for slavery, exploitation, or even consumption.

Sexual tools to indulge in the soldiers' pleasure to vent their stress. Or pure cannon fodder to use as human shields, taking in damages from enemies' attack to preserve strength.

The worse case referred to cannibalism.

The common people suffered doubly—first from war, then from the skyrocketing cost of food due to manipulated markets.

Ironically, the very soldiers who stole their food would often return as sellers, peddling it at extortionate prices to the same victims they had just bullied.

In the end, everyone endured torment—everyone except the aristocrats, who enjoyed the luxuries paid for by the blood of others dying in their wars.

Ling Qingyu didn't have to look too far back into history. Modern conflicts still bore the same grotesque patterns.

Reports and footage of war crimes were still surfacing in various parts of the world.

Many cases showed a column of soldiers storming into a village under the pretense of hunting down enemies.

They might retaliate their losses on the weak and justify their vengeance while committing crimes.

Too many to count where soldier raided villages and rampaged everything. Loots, pure killings to sadistic desire or to find women.

The villagers had no moral ground to protest or legal means to resist. What could they do at gunpoint?

That was why most village leaders, in times of conflict, tried to appease whichever soldiers came—regardless of allegiance.

They'd offer food, money, or, in the extreme cases, even willing women—anything to pacify the soldiers and spare their people further suffering.

Willing or volunteers as in everybody knew how that worked in reality.

Out of the public eye, tragedy attracted no pity or justice. When reports finally surfaced, the dead became just numbers—enemy body counts or propaganda to sway international opinion.

The innocents always bore the brunt of it, despite international laws and humanitarian standards.

In this world, at least, the World Government took more vigorous actions to prevent such horrors.

But unless the atrocity reached an intolerable scale, the World Government often had little incentive to intervene.

And more often than not, crimes were well-hidden, buried without a trace—until a whistleblower cracked open the silence.

Yet out of the many atrocities, how many ever came to light? People could only guess and extrapolate upwards.

According to Athena, Ling Qingyu had read a report from a year ago that had shocked the international community.

Four teachers, working near a separatist conflict zone, had been raped and murdered.

Protests erupted. The government first denied the charges, blaming the separatists. But too many eyes and ears on the ground contradicted their story.

Still, the regime stuck to its narrative—until mounting protests and pressure from the World Government demanded justice.

Even then, they only ordered the military to investigate itself. Naturally, no evidence was found. Just some "ordinary crimes" unrelated to any soldiers.

Such outcomes were all too common. How many victims continued to suffer in silence around the world?

In war, no one was truly spared—except for a select few with vision, superior status, or foreknowledge to avoid danger or send others to die in their place.

Ling Qingyu had studied the history of her past world, where World War I and World War II brought unprecedented casualties and devastation in remarkably short spans of time.

Civilian deaths from direct violence, war-related famine, disease, and genocide numbered in the tens of millions.

Even World War I, often seen as less devastating to civilian populations due to the manner in which it was waged, still resulted in 10 million deaths.

World War II, on the other hand, claimed over 40 million civilian lives.

These numbers only reflected civilian casualties—excluding military deaths entirely.

Statistics showed that civilian deaths often outnumbered military ones. Estimates placed civilian fatalities at 60 to 65 percent of total war-related deaths.

The numbers might never be perfectly accurate, but the scale remained valid.