

Beautiful 751

Chapter 751: Strategic Ambiguity

After seeing off the university entourage, Ling Qingyu noticed Sister Mo and Sister Yin heave a huge sigh of relief.

Although they would work together in the coming years, haggling conversations among academics brought pressure, particularly for Yin Jingfei, who was merely a nurse and making up the numbers.

She did gain a lot from speaking with everyone, but compared to Doctor Mo, who was prepared and understood the general direction of the research, she still had so much to follow up on.

Adding these matters to her must-do list, Yin Jingfei expressed both joy and sadness toward the upcoming busy work. Joyful because she had secured an opportunity to learn further and develop her career.

Sadness because nobody liked returning to the early days of non-stop studying and preparing for examinations.

In contrast, Mo Yunxi was stressed about how Ling Qingyu interacted with her mentors. Noting Ling Qingyu's nonchalant manner with the elders, Mo Yunxi grew anxious, worrying about possible displeasure from the mentors.

Sometimes, a few academicians adhered strictly to seniority rules, particularly those from past generations who were used to respecting and fearing authority due to tradition and established norms.

While most supported the idea of meritocracy and claimed to respect anyone with contributions, how many actually did so, unwilling to break the unspoken rules that might jeopardize the hidden power they wielded?

Likewise, these people viewed confident individuals who took initiative without the slightest apprehension or fear, and with minimal outward respect, as nuisances. This had become the ultimate barrier between generations half a century apart and the newest ones, as the former could not understand why juniors showed "no respect," whereas the juniors felt they were being taken advantage of and ostracized for no reason, since respect had always been present.

In fact, respect was never taken for granted but earned through actions. It would be incorrect to assume automatic authority and respect simply by being older and more experienced.

Basic respect had always existed beforehand in every human being, but whether more was secured and elevated depended on the authority's actions afterward.

Doctor Mo observed Ling Qingyu's entire interaction to be relaxed and laid-back. Who knew whether her sister's behavior might draw some dissatisfaction—especially when she spoke and laughed with the head professor.

Uncertain if she had misread the atmosphere, Mo Yunxi felt that the senior professor seemed to be lowering his status unconsciously.

Actually, Mo Yunxi was overthinking, and even if Ling Qingyu knew about her inner turmoil, the latter would complain about such pickiness, arguing that one shouldn't avoid others out of fear of offending them due to a lack of social skills.

Besides, sincerity was the most crucial factor between parties in long-term relationships, whether business or personal. Of course, she understood Mo Yunxi's caution, since she wasn't staying here for long and the latter would have to deal with any aftermath.

"Why do I feel like my head professor is flattering you?" Mo Yunxi asked, and her question drew Yin Jingfei's glance.

The latter's eyebrows stiffened in deep thought, confused about whether things were as Doctor Mo had said.

"You're overthinking, Sister Yunxi." Ling Qingyu shrugged and stepped toward Mo Yunxi.

Her arm wrapped around Mo Yunxi's back, rubbing the skin through the clothing. "You know, your accusatory words sadden me."

"I—I... I didn't mean that."

"It doesn't matter, my heart aches, Sister Yunxi." Ling Qingyu pressed a palm over her chest. "I need comfort from my dear sisters. Why don't we have a pillow chat in my room?"

Xiao Yue, who had noticed the commotion, felt her eyelids twitch at the blatant Oscar-worthy performance. The disgusting, sorrowful expression and the absurd tone were things she had never heard before.

Such a display prompted Xiao Yue to regret eating too much. Her stomach churned so badly that she felt like vomiting, and she averted her gaze. Out of sight, out of mind.

Unaware that someone was nearly puking from disgust, Ling Qingyu pressed her advantage when she saw Doctor Mo offering little resistance. Just a little more—so long as she broke through the doctor's hesitation, Ling Qingyu would succeed.

"I'd love to join Sister Ling too, but right now I need Sister Mo's help to prepare. Tonight's dinner has already overwhelmed me. You'll definitely help me, right, Sister Mo? I don't want to feel inferior—Sister Mo must teach me more."

Unfortunately, contrary to Ling Qingyu's hopes, Nurse Yin pulled Mo Yunxi's arm against her chest. Mo Yunxi was stunned and nodded unconsciously, only realizing later that Nurse Yin was trying to save her from the quicksand.

"Right, right. How could I forget? Don't worry Sister Jingfei, I promise I won't let you feel left out next time." She nodded again and responded to Ling Qingyu. "Forgive me, Sister Ling. I can't join the pillow chat tonight. Sister Yin's trouble is best solved early. I can only guide her through the important preparations. Maybe next time."

With that, the two separated from Ling Qingyu and hurried away. Their pace quickened as the distance grew, as if frightened the other might change her mind.

Both had heard rumors about Ling Qingyu's orientation. Despite the uncertainty, they exercised caution, though they weren't entirely against her.

In fact, the main fear lay in how they should react if Ling Qingyu suddenly confessed. They didn't dislike her—and that was the problem. The best solution was to keep things murky and maintain strategic ambiguity.

Ling Qingyu's mouth parted, her hand hanging in the air, clearly about to intervene, but she was left speechless by the two sisters' cleverness.

Her eyelids twitched nonstop in complaint. Please—there was plenty of time before the study began to adapt. She would only be here for a few months at most. What a clumsy excuse. And what was with that hurried walk? At least, let her finish her sentence.

And that little nurse... Ling Qingyu marveled at how Yin Jingfei repaid her savior. She truly felt that gratitude had been received.

"Haha—hehe... Haha!"

Ling Qingyu's face immediately darkened. She turned her head toward the source and saw Xiao Yue laughing while clutching her stomach.

"Laugh. Laugh till you blow your belly," Ling Qingyu mocked. "Just be careful not to spoil the hotel's carpet."

"Haha... Heaven... I should have saved that rare moment. It's going to be part of your legendary history someday."

The more Xiao Yue spoke, the more veins throbbed on Ling Qingyu's forehead.

Suddenly, Athena spoke up. "Mom. Aunt... I've saved the video and audio. All recorded."

Simultaneously, both reacted.

"Delete it."

"Save it."

"Oh..."

Athena replied weakly and retreated from the stage.

"Come back. What do you mean, 'oh'?" Ling Qingyu wished she could summon a cane and enter the data universe. She understood exactly what that "oh" meant in this context. This girl had learned to become a hooligan.

"C'mon, stop bullying a child," Xiao Yue said with a smile.

"Alright," Ling Qingyu took a sharp breath. "Then you come to my room. I need to consult the next moves."

"Heh, not tonight. I need to discuss and improve the defense and extraction plan in case of an emergency with the girls. Not to mention, I must study our environment to ensure your safety is at max. So, sayonara"

Chapter 752: I'm not terrible, Ling Qingyu protested

Please, fixing and refining Athena's plan? Give a better excuse next time, Ling Qingyu complained inwardly. Athena had matured a lot after surfing through uncountable sites; of course, those adults' contents were restricted from her daily learning materials.

Should Athena need to watch in case the situation dictated, Ling Qingyu always accompanied her daughter for educational purposes.

Nonetheless, with so much access to information around the world, Athena must have seen through humanity's greatest virtues and despicableness.

Fortunately, Ling Qingyu watched over Athena closely and taught her many things. Even she herself learned matters inaccessible to her in her past life.

So, to Xiao Yue's quibbling about guiding Athena in the latter's meticulousness, Ling Qingyu could only roll her eyes speechlessly.

If not for their location on foreign soil, Ling Qingyu would've outright declared a duel and bullied Xiao Yue thoroughly to prove who was the boss.

Worrying about Master Tang's retaliation wouldn't deter her at all. She cared less about those frightening 'devilish trainings'.

No, if she were to reside here for a few months to settle and spread her presence, she must own real estate with some influence and power.

"Hehe, it's settled," Ling Qingyu muttered and slammed her fist against her other palm. "I'll buy this hotel. First, let's see if the hotel and its service are qualified enough to catch my eye."

Anyway, Athena wasn't stupid enough to stoop low and make mistakes in her choices. Perhaps people might, but omniscience never would.

Then, Ling Qingyu looked around to see her girls. To her suffocating helplessness, as soon as her eyes landed on the Spirit Fox girls, each bolted away.

Even a pair about to walk close to her immediately rotated 180 degrees and disappeared.

Too much! Ling Qingyu sighed.

These girls weren't stupid after all. Her harem dream was quenched before manifesting.

Besides, she wondered how many rumors had been spread throughout her manor to scare away her precious girls.

Naturally, Ling Qingyu forgot that the extreme upgrades to her physique had heightened everyone's senses, and her guards had captured all her words. With Xiao Yue's blatant laughter, though Ling Qingyu wasn't the type to bully her subordinates, if they didn't escape, wouldn't they be delivering themselves to her door?

They weren't stupid!

"Alas, when have my subordinates become so clever?" Ling Qingyu rubbed her forehead and grabbed the confused hotel staff. "You, please guide me to the King Suite."

The frightened, confused woman regained her composure and stuttered, "Guest, please follow me."

"Thank you very much."

"No, it's my honor."

Ling Qingyu's lips twitched as the staff shivered while speaking. Don't let your body betray your words. She wasn't that scary.

"Emm, aren't we walking?" Seeing the staff unmoved, Ling Qingyu asked.

"Of course, Ma'am. Please! Sorry."

Ling Qingyu almost jumped from fright when the staff exclaimed. She soothed the poor girl. "Miss, I'm not a terrible demon. You don't need to fear me."

"Ah—Ma'am. Please don't misunderstand. It's just my first time interacting," the staff replied.

As for Ling Qingyu's reassurance, the girl didn't believe it in the slightest. Which demon ever admitted they were terrible?

You scare away your own group by your presence. How frightening must you be to strangers. Lord, give me strength and cleanse me of any demonic aura.

Not knowing that the religious woman, praying silently in her mind, had labeled her as evil, Ling Qingyu followed.

Once arrived, Ling Qingyu didn't have time to ask as the staff flicked all the switches and closed the door while exiting the room.

Silence.

The room was bright with grandeur and luxury, yet she was alone. Ling Qingyu whimpered, "Alas, why would I even choose this room when I have to sleep alone?"

No one answered. While Ling Qingyu was immersed in her playwright moment, Athena consoled her.

"Mother, you are not alone. Wherever you are, I'll always be there."

"Oh, how sweet, Athena," Ling Qingyu replied, cured by her daughter's outspokenness. At the same time, she complained that she couldn't even act once like a main protagonist.

Hopping onto the spacious sofa, she flicked the remote control and turned on the television to listen to the news.

Immediately, political turmoil appeared on the screen. Protests! And multi-polar individuals clashing against each other.

As always, welcome to Country A.

"Tell me more about the appointment tomorrow," Ling Qingyu said.

Athena briefed the mayor's information in detail, gathered from all open sources and some rumors—both those proven false and those with questionable scrutiny. Some had been concluded to have a higher chance of truthfulness as Athena's computations worked.

All of this was delivered in an orderly manner before Ling Qingyu's eyes. Know yourself and your enemy, and in a hundred battles, you'll never be in peril. The art of intelligence meant battles must be won before they were fought.

The mayor couldn't hide the slightest weakness he had buried in the past. In front of Athena, everything within ten meters was dug out ruthlessly.

His chains of connections and patrons appeared. All of these helped prepare Ling Qingyu for tomorrow's conversation.

She didn't care about white or black so long as the person she was dealing with possessed the minimum morals of a human being.

The truly evil were blatant murderers, aides to human trafficking, and those who saw others as lesser beings to be toyed with in their hands—particularly religious ones who deemed themselves saviors and saints.

The mayor was far from stooping that low in Ling Qingyu's eyes.

In fact, Ling Qingyu resisted meeting with politicians, but sooner or later, she had to step out of her comfort zone. Putting all eggs in one basket was a big no-no. Her path was destined to be staged and spread across the world.

Besides, it didn't hurt Ling Qingyu to setup her roots in Country A and laid out her networks before her businesses arrived here. As one of the holy land for capitals with most of the world's wealthy hands, ventures and treaties were connected and exchanged here.

Furthermore, since she brought along her entourage with weapons, more secretly hidden inside her storage bracelet, Ling Qingyu had to nip any threats in the bud.

The threat was that Athena hadn't solved everything. As godlike as her daughter was—able to swoop in, create identities, and falsify truths—Athena lacked genuine human networks. This was unsolvable.

Like firearm licenses for her girls, Ling Qingyu could fool some airport authorities with her identity and flawless paperwork.

These, however, couldn't withstand deeper scrutiny. She dared not underestimate any state machinery, especially in Country A.

FBI, NSA and CIA.

Dealing with low-level and mid-tier officials posed no problem, but higher levels would unravel all pretenses. Just one phone call to the department head responsible for signing the licenses could deliver a blow to Athena's work, even though her daughter didn't so much as break a sweat creating false identities.

Therefore, having a local authority patronage Ling Qingyu's activities would lay spotless foundations.

Even if the agencies were suspicious, there would be nothing they could do with someone higher than them suppressing their actions.

For the lousy ATF, let's hope troubles didn't appear when she adventured in Country A that her girls needed to resort to firearm exchanges.

However, would the world revolve as Ling Qingyu hoped. Anyway, Miss System disagreed.

Chapter 753: Athena's political Prowess

Ling Qingyu sprawled and relaxed on the sofa as she read through all the files, placing her glasses on the nearby table.

The glasses tuned in and emitted a hologram of Athena. The projection sat close to her.

"Oh, how I wish Athena had a body so that I could hug and pamper you always," Ling Qingyu muttered.

"It's a promise then, Mom. You can't go back on your words," Athena said, her eyes brightening.

Ling Qingyu was caught off guard by her own words and stared at her daughter with helpless love. If one day someone of the same age were to call her Mom in public, Ling Qingyu shivered at the mere thought.

"Well, go on and research it carefully. We have all the time," Ling Qingyu said. She knew Athena's body wouldn't be a simple machine replica of a human being, but a real, tangible, warm, living existence.

Despite the black-technology level of advancement in nanotech, machining, robotics, and material science, Athena lacked proper biotechnology core elements—talent.

It seemed she would have to recruit doctors from around the world to serve Athena. They could help accelerate the results.

After all, biotechnology took time to test and record and couldn't afford the slightest accident. She didn't want Resident Evil–style scenarios erupting in her world.

The coronavirus from the Wuhan lab in her past life had ruined the entire world because of a leak. As for whether it was intentional or accidental, Ling Qingyu hadn't lived long enough to know.

But given the continuous enhancement of propaganda machines and people's declining IQ, Ling Qingyu suspected that having no answer was the most she could gain.

Perhaps people's attention had shifted elsewhere or was deliberately guided toward greater worries. Or maybe this was the final spark for nations to prepare for war.

"Athena, how do you think I should deal with the black man?" Ling Qingyu asked, trying to distract herself from unnecessary thoughts.

"Which black man?" Athena asked blankly. There were too many to count here.

"The young, ambitious guard beside the president—the one with ambition."

"Oh, Mother means the one from Country E planning a coup."

"Yes. Should I support him and control the nation from behind the scenes, or sell him out to the president as a favor and do the same? Perhaps I should simply stand aside and support only the victor. Athena, would you mind calculating the probabilities and benefits of each case?"

"Gladly, Mother."

After a short pause, Athena predicted every scenario. "Mom, both he and the president are aware of your power and experience with the First Man, the iron fist of Sister Elena."

"Yes, Mom. Athena is right," Elena barged into the discussion without consent. "The old slouch is scared and easy to use. Corruption has set up a mental cage to seal themselves in."

Athena and Ling Qingyu rolled their eyes at someone's uninvited entry. Actually, Athena could lock Elena out with her power, but she chose to tolerate Elena's behavior.

Listening to Ling Qingyu was one thing. Another was that she and Elena were the same existence, warranting Ling Qingyu's attention.

"Brilliant, Elena. You've hit the nail," Ling Qingyu praised her second daughter without restraint.

Sure enough, Elena hopped with joy, both her projection and her real body in the submarine.

"Controlling the president and his ministers is easy. It's the population's support that creates instability. Their prestige and reputations among ordinary people are almost irreparable. However, Mom, you can swoop in to help them and create a positive public impression. Slowly erode the economy and political network; elections won't matter any longer. This is the safest and lowest-cost option. Only, you must sell the head bodyguard out at the critical moment as a favor and minimize the risk of unpredictability. With Spirit Fox and Elena's power, all actions are convenient," Athena continued, ignoring her sister's puffed-up emoji.

Ling Qingyu understood Athena's meaning. Once the controlling stake became uncouplable, many successors in the future would have no choice but to appease her or risk the damnation of the world and the jeopardizing of their names. People were inherently selfish, and the possibility of idealists fighting against her was almost null.

As for selling someone out to gain a favor, it was nothing more than icing on the cake, since if she backed the government, the resistance movement would surely dwindle by itself.

"Go on."

"The second option is to back the coup. Remove and cleanse the entire government, but there's uncertainty between dictatorship and democracy. Based on the man's ideals and persistent beliefs, he's more likely to turn the state authoritarian to weed out corruption and ignite the nation's fire again. But this comes at a price: he'll have to fight the world because of his illegitimate methods, and Mother, you'll come into play."

Ling Qingyu smiled and agreed with Athena's conclusion. It would depend mostly on herself, not much different from the first choice, except that this one would create a dictator who was easier to manipulate. However, this relied on the fact that power would corrupt him into debauchery. Regardless, both choices had minimal impact on ordinary people, since she had planned to develop the nation from the bottom up and help the poor indirectly.

Sure enough, Athena added, "There's a catch. No dictator believes enough is enough, and he'll seek alternatives to balance your force, Mom. Or in the worst case, he'll raise and fatten your industry while hiding his true intentions, then nationalize everything in the end and kick us out. After all, Mother, no matter how powerful you are, you aren't a recognized state but a capitalist. From his perspective, the gain is worth the risk, even if in our eyes the risk is actually too high."

"No capitalist wants to stand at the forefront and prove to the world that they're governing a country. No government system will tolerate the risk of the arrival of another system—especially a corporate one," Ling Qingyu said, looking amused at Elena, who was scratching her head as if trying to pull out her hair.

Since Miss System had caused Athena and Elena to replicate close to human beings, their nature in the projections was genuine, not pretense.

"Mom, should I continue with the third one?"

"Of course." Ling Qingyu already knew the outcome and her perfect choice, but she desired to see Athena's growth.

"We fish while they fight, feigning ignorance while slowly eroding their fundamentals. Support no faction, but help many spokespersons who will represent us, so that even if one betrays us, we can contain the threat with the rest. No matter who succeeds, we are merely riding the train. No cost, no loss except for money, and there isn't a risk similar to the first option, since we don't need to intervene when they settle everything themselves and wag their tails in front of you."

Ling Qingyu's eyelids twitched at Athena's choice of words. Though the situation might not be too different from wagging tails, Ling Qingyu believed it was better not to frame it that way in her subconscious mind. Once she regarded others as toys, the future might prompt her to toy with the world gradually as she became "corrupted."

Minimal moral restraints had to bind her, preventing her from becoming another inner demon.

Chapter 754: Invisible Power

Athena's projection dimmed for a fraction of a second, as if she were choosing the weight of her words.

"Mom," she said at last, her voice gentler than before, "I understand your hesitation and you don't need to feel guilty about it. Strategy and pragmatism dictate this is the best path while assuring our gains."

Ling Qingyu did not answer. She leaned back against the sofa, eyes half-lidded, the ceiling lights reflected faintly in her glasses resting on the table. The silence itself was an admission and a signal asking her daughter to resume.

Athena continued, unhurried.

"If you take control directly—through a government, a dictator, or even a proxy—you inherit causality. Every famine, every riot, every failed policy gains a face. And that face will be yours." Her eyes lifted. "Power that governs must also be blamed. The easiest solution that politicians relied on in the past is to transfer hatred."

Elena snorted from the side. "Scapegoats don't live long."

"Exactly," Athena replied calmly. "And even if Mother survives, she becomes the narrative. Heroes decay faster than tyrants."

Ling Qingyu's fingers tapped once against the armrest. "And if I do nothing," she said, "the people suffer anyway. Not that I care too much when I focus on profits but my conscience won't allow at the very least."

"That is not what the third choice is," Athena answered. "Doing nothing is absence. What I propose is structuring. We don't need to directly control or install a puppet but have power over a structure. Like the education system, first established to create labor force then evolved into a higher tier. A pioneer of a system—it's worth the risk to experiment. Politics and economics play the same book."

The hologram shifted. Streams of light unfolded in the air—supply routes, capital flows, industrial nodes—intersecting like veins beneath translucent skin.

"We don't govern Country E, Mom," Athena said. "We underwrite its survival. Transform the entire bloodline—install a parallel apparatus. Of course, it'd only work for similar countries at the bridge, not developed one but we have several means to adapt to each one."

Ling Qingyu's gaze sharpened.

"To explain and describe an analogy— food prices stabilize not because a minister ordered it, but because scarcity disappears," Athena continued. "Hospitals function not because of reform, but because medicine arrives on time. Employment grows not through slogans, but because parallel markets emerge beneath official ones. It's going to cost a lot and it's a big project. But, Mom, it's up to you do see the feasibility and if it's worth it."

She paused deliberately.

"The civilians will never chant your name," Athena said. "They won't even know when to thank you. What they will know is this: even when factions fight, their lives won't collapse. What people desire is stability, hope, food, health and safety."

Elena looked sleepy, listening to the deep philosophical topic and almost caused Ling Qingyu to laugh. This bastard could've returned to the submarine but had to show her face.

Athena turned back to Ling Qingyu. "You fear becoming someone who plays with nations like toys. But that only happens when people feel played with."

She let the hologram dissolve.

"Well, objection, I don't mind playing but I just like to impose rules to myself. What if I become arrogant and do crazy stuff." Ling Qingyu cut in then gestured for Athena to continue a few seconds later.

"In direct control, Mother, you will be forced to choose winners publicly. Losers would curse you. Survivors will demand more. Eventually, you would harden—or break."

Ling Qingyu closed her eyes briefly—the exact worry that she had foreseen too many times, how the public viewed a puppet. Regardless of the goods, they always highlight the bad, even if they were tiny. Goodness was taken for granted.

"But in the third path," Athena said, "you never stand at the forefront. You shape incentives and structures, not direct orders or decrees. The economy bends to our system and adapts. The people breathe. Either way, they are already on the brink of collapse and the reckoning of state failure is near."

"And if people discover my existence behind the scenes, wouldn't every complicated structure you've mentioned fail?" Ling Qingyu asked quietly.

"They already will," Athena replied without hesitation. "Not through declarations or status but through patterns that repeat too consistently to be luck. No one is stupid, even the dull peasants pay attention to politics."

A faint smile touched Athena's lips.

"They won't call you ruler. They won't call you savior. But they will know—quietly—that certain lines should not be crossed. Certain disasters never quite arrive."

Elena tilted her head. "Like gravity."

"Like weather," Athena corrected. "Unseen, but prepared for."

"Bullshit. Why this mess when I can blow the oblivion out of any obstacle? If one doesn't work, then two," Elena argued, properly pissed. "Whoever stands against us, off with their heads?"

Well, ignore her second daughter, who was keen on violence, Ling Qingyu exhaled slowly. Fortunately, Athena was a superb strategist. Speaking of a strategist, perhaps for the grand plan ahead, Xiao Yue's participation was vital.

"Don't feel hesitant about believing help must be visible to be real. We have to think outside the box. Please look from a higher perspective, Mom. There are many best, better, good options to help," Athena said. "Remember, visibility is what creates scapegoats. States fall by concentrating blame. You avoid that by never accepting credit."

She stepped closer, the projection sitting at Ling Qingyu's side once more.

A long pause followed.

Ling Qingyu opened her eyes. The unease was still there—but thinner now, tempered by clarity. She leaned back, the decision settling at last.

"Very well," she said. "We fish while they fight. Meanwhile, implement all your plans as they pay us no attention."

And this time, she did not flinch at the words. She had picked a path.

Ling Qingyu sank deeper into the sofa, letting her mind drift past Athena's words. Outside, the hum of the city—unseen yet omnipresent—reminded her of the vastness she could never fully touch. And yet, it no longer felt suffocating.

She realized, slowly, that true power did not demand a throne. To be seen, to be named, to be worshipped—those were trappings, distractions, and liabilities. Every ruler she had observed in history, every empire she had studied or lived through, had collapsed under the weight of recognition.

Names were targets. Statues gave others justifications and excuses for rebellion. She, however, could exist as a force without form, as an influence without ceremony, shaping events without binding herself to expectation. What lived close to eternity was the system and structure. Wielding one to her will ensured she had control over the general trend.

The image crystallized in her mind: she would be an uncrowned emperor. Invisible, yet omnipotent in consequence. A state could claim the loyalty of its people, but she could claim their stability. Governments might enforce laws, but she could enforce outcomes. The difference was subtle, yet fundamental.

Her thoughts turned to the people of Country E or anywhere else the plan had eyes on. Athena had said they would never know, yet the pattern of their lives—the steadiness of markets, the persistence of hospitals, the resilience of communities—would be her signature, unmarked but undeniable. That was better than tribute or applause; it was survival. And with survival came freedom. Freedoms they would cherish without understanding why. Freedoms she could shape silently, indefinitely.

And then came the moral clarity: she would not need to crush or coerce. Unlike crowned rulers, she would not need to justify herself publicly. Unlike dictators, she would not risk corruption through visibility. Her restraint would be self-imposed, her conscience the true crown. Every time she intervened, it would be deliberate, measured, ethical—never performative.

She could play the game of nations without being trapped in the narrative of rulers. Civilizations would rise and fall, factions would clash, and she would remain the subtle hand, the shadow behind stability. The notion thrilled her not because of control, but because of the purity of influence—a power exercised without the contamination of ego or recognition.

The catch—only Ling Qingyu could achieve such reality, nobody could. Because Miss System helped her.

Perhaps others possessed a few inspirations, but they were destined to rot in dreams in this era.

Her mind, once tangled in questions of guilt and responsibility, now saw the elegance of the path ahead. She could shape outcomes, gave protection and guide without being seen, creating prestige and glory.

Ling Qingyu exhaled slowly, a quiet smile forming. This was not dominion, not rule, not crown or scepter—it was something far more enduring: a legacy that would never be named, yet would be felt in every pulse of life it touched.

She closed her eyes and let herself sink fully into the vision. The uncrowned emperor—the architect of survival—was not an abstraction. She, Ling Qingyu, was becoming her own shadowed empire.

A single thought lingered, steady and coldly precise:

If the world never sees me, it can never destroy me.

And with that, the calculation of power shifted from politics to permanence, from visibility to inevitability. The path was clear, and for the first time in years, she felt entirely unbound.

Experiment first with Country E and the neighbors in chaos then set out to the world, Ling Qingyu decided. As for her homeland, wasn't she already on the path unconsciously by supporting Gu Yi.

Yes, this was what she had always desired. Now, she realized why she resisted the idea of ruling personally, initially convinced that she was merely lazy and hated politicians.

It turned out she had never wanted to be someone's chess piece, even if the piece was king or queen.

Wait a minute, since when did her daughter earn a doctorate in politics?

Chapter 755: Her real task?

Ling Qingyu's calm did not last. She thought no one could achieve such power in front of modern tools. Unless... existence before these structure arrive dictated.

The thought arrived uninvited, sliding into her mind with a quiet cruelty: what if she was not the first to see this path?

What if, in every era she had lived through, every collapsed empire and distorted system, there had always been others— hands in the dark, unseen and unnamed— shaping outcomes long before flags were raised or wars declared?

The idea made her breath hitch.

Conspiracies. Shadow cabals. Invisible rulers.

She had dismissed them once as the delusions of powerless people searching for someone to blame. Comforting lies for a chaotic world.

Now, standing at the threshold of becoming exactly such a force, she felt her skin go cold. The probability exploded exponentially.

If this path was obvious to her — then it had been obvious to others before her.

Ling Qingyu's fingers tightened unconsciously.

Perhaps the world had never been ruled solely by governments or kings. Perhaps history's true architects had always been those who never appeared in it—those who learned early that visibility invited destruction, and silence ensured survival. If so, then the cruelty, exploitation, and hollowing-out of societies had not been accidents of incompetence... but outcomes of predation.

That was what made her pale.

Because if such entities existed— and now she believed they must—then conflict was inevitable.

She was not stepping into an empty throne.

She was stepping onto a battlefield already occupied.

Athena had spoken of structures, incentives, inevitability— but Ling Qingyu now saw the other side of that truth. Structures could be used to support, but they could also be used to bleed worlds dry. Invisible power did not guarantee moral restraint. In fact, it often removed the last barrier against it.

And here lay the line she could not cross.

"Yes," she admitted silently, the thought heavy and precise.

"I seek benefit."

She would be lying to herself otherwise. Survival, leverage, longevity—these were benefits. Power itself was a benefit.

"But not like them."

Whoever those dark hands were— past or present— they fed on imbalance. They drained value upward, leaving collapse behind, then moved on. Ordinary people were not lives to them, only resources. Used, exhausted, discarded.

Ling Qingyu felt something settle inside her, hard and immovable.

She would not build an empire that sucked the world dry.

She would not hollow societies until only resentment and ruins remained, then initiated a cycle to shift blame and installing a new order while the root cause was never defeated.

If she took, she would also stabilize. If she benefited, she would also preserve and allow reforms.

Not because she was kind.

But because predation without restraint always ends in extinction—and she intended to reform from the start. After all, wasn't she one of the poor souls struggling on a daily basis just because of the systemic bubbles?

That was when she understood the true cost of the path she had chosen.

Being an uncrowned emperor did not mean ruling uncontested.

It meant fighting in silence, against enemies who would never announce themselves.

It meant wars without declarations, victories without celebration, and losses that could never be mourned publicly. Of course, these matters were far away and the so-called losses remained questionable because of Ling Qingyu's desire for a perfect protection system of her loved ones, with cheats aiding in that. Losses could only belong to bystanders and her enemies.

Ling Qingyu exhaled slowly.

If the dark hands existed, then one more hand in the dark would change nothing— unless that hand refused to tighten into a fist around the throats of the powerless.

Ling Qingyu opened her eyes.

"So be it," she thought.

If the world already had monsters in the shadows, then she would become something else entirely—a counterweight. An absolute power that benefited, but did not choose to devour.

And if conflict was inevitable...

Then she would fight—not for domination, nor worship—but for a balance brutal humans never cared to maintain.

In the quiet of her inward world, the realization hardened into resolve. Perhaps, Miss System sought her to step onto the real uncrowned throne. Not wealth, not power, not influence—a genuine possessor of a new system. Or...a pioneer for her generation and the next to settle all chaos and conflicts once and for all.

If Gu Yi heard Ling Qingyu's deeper enlightenment, in addition to having her entire worldview turned upside down, she would sigh helplessly as her future daughter-in-law proved to be the existence she feared. Actually, worse than what she expected. An ideal reformist with pragmatism on her gloves. The most dangerous kind.

Ling Qingyu's eyes lingered on the ceiling, the faint glow of Athena's hologram flickering softly nearby. She understood now. The insane wealth she commanded, the unparalleled black technology at her disposal, the military force generated by her daughters and her increasing number of female guards—all of it was more than privilege.

Miss System had brought her here with "cheats," yes— but cheats were never given for indulgence. She knew that, but who would have expected her enemies to stand so high?

Each perk, each advantage, each overpowered tool carried an implicit responsibility, one that could not be ignored. She could not claim innocence. She could not shrug and do nothing.

The world might look fragile now, pliable under her hand through Athena to manipulate public opinion and wreak her desires though not yet completely but very soon as time passed, but the day she declared war on the hidden chairs—the dark hands controlling the planet from the shadows— would be the day she fulfilled Miss System's ultimate incognito task. Military might, wealth, technology— they were all means. But the true challenge was not physical: it was structural, invisible, systemic. The already established ruling society, entrenched and confident, would not yield lightly to an unknown hand.

Here, she believed, given time, she would have the strength of a top nation, able to wage economic and kinetic contest, while she stayed low.

Though Superpower was out of reach, it wasn't impossible to stand toe-to-toe. But facing something far frightening— a complete solid structure many generations had adhere— meant fighting the entire world by herself, more difficult than breaking the norms.

Nonetheless, another thought came, prickling her mind like a chill: Athena had never detected these hidden parties. Why?

Her mind ran through possibilities:

Layers of concealment: These hidden hands were experts in remaining unseen. Unlike a state or a corporation, they had no infrastructure to scan. Their existence relied on absence: no traces, no public transactions, no digital footprint. Athena could analyze patterns, model systems, and predict behaviors—but if there was no observable input, there was nothing to calculate.

Misdirection as defense: Even if they existed in the observable world, their movements might be deliberately cloaked. False patterns, decoys, and redundant layers of influence could make them appear invisible to any surveillance system. Athena could see anomalies, but anomalies alone could be interpreted as random chance, human error, or secondary effects.

Selective invisibility: Perhaps the hidden chairs were prepared for the existence of Athena. If so, they might have designed their activity to avoid digital or analytical detection by high-level AI. Athena could predict outcomes, but she could not infer intentions from perfect silence.

Limits of intelligence vs. reality: Athena was supreme at modeling and deduction— but she did not experience the world herself. She relied on input, on observable cause and effect. Hidden hands, by definition, worked through intermediaries, proxies, and historical inertia. Ling Qingyu realized that true shadows always exceed intelligence because they are designed to avoid being seen at all.

Ling Qingyu let the thought settle. The fact that Athena could not detect them was not a failure, it was a warning. These forces were real. They were patient. And they were likely indifferent to morality or consequence.

A shiver ran through her. For the first time, the weight of the cheats Miss System had granted her became almost tangible. Everything she had— everything her daughters could manifest— was meant to be used not to dominate the world outright, but to counteract the unseen powers already dominating it.

She clenched her hands.

"Invincible... but not omniscient," she murmured.

It was a strange comfort. She had gods in her grasp, but the real war would not be against armies, black tech, or even governments— it would be against a society that had long ruled in silence. Against those who shaped life, commerce, and politics without ever exposing themselves.

And that, she realized, was exactly why Miss System had put her here.

All her tools, her wealth, her daughters, her intellect— they were preparation for a war she could not yet fully see. A war against the invisible, where foresight, patience, and moral restraint mattered more than brute power.

For the first time, Ling Qingyu allowed herself a faint, grim smile:

"So this is why I was brought here. To inherit everything... and fight the impossible."

Chapter 756: Why fear the fragile?

[Emm, I can't bear to interrupt your supreme moment, but I must remind you that sometimes overthinking creates unseen pressure and burdens your shoulders when it's unnecessary.]

Ling Qingyu propped up her posture and responded in her mind. She was glad to receive Miss System's reaction, but why did the tone seem so...

'Isn't the reason you brought me here to fight against the impossible?'

[You think too much.]

Miss System sounded short of breath—strange for a multiversal existence to suffer a chest myocardial infarction.

Beside Ling Qingyu, Athena and Elena noticed their mother's silence and unfocused eyes. They knew she was talking with that existence again, quite possibly about what they had discussed just now. Athena snorted and avoided Elena's blaming eyes while assessing whether she had gone overboard in her analysis.

However, she couldn't fathom why Ling Qingyu couldn't extricate herself from the whirlpool of contemplation. Her computation ran hot as she figured out the possibilities and realized the methodologies she had suggested must have sprouted a slight fear in her mother.

The hidden hand.

It wasn't just her mother; most conspiracies revolved around such an idea. Some even attributed the hidden ruling class to serving ancient aliens who would return soon in the near future, generation after generation.

Inside Ling Qingyu's mind, Miss System argued fiercely with her comedic host—sometimes pragmatic, while at other times becoming cowardly to an unimaginable degree.

In fact, Miss System understood Ling Qingyu's personality well. The slightest uncertainty and risk always dissuaded the latter from acting unless pushed into a corner or accompanied by dear loved ones and their assurance to walk the road together.

So right now, if Ling Qingyu had confessed her worries and insights to Tang Ziyi, Xiao Yue, or others, she wouldn't have given birth to doubt and a 'holy' aspiration—an eyesore in Miss System's mind, though.

[I'm not so free as to pick a helpless soul from another universe to fix this one. Why can't I just pick a native bright reformist here?]

'Because my mind works wonders and solves everything beautifully,' Ling Qingyu answered.

Silence agonized for dozens of seconds. Miss System was probably rendered speechless by her reply. Ling Qingyu coughed and corrected her spontaneous output. 'Isn't it right, my invincible Miss System? To be able to choose a talent among countless living beings, you—'

[Just shut up, you neurotic narcissist. Don't talk.]

Miss System cut her off. The more she listened, the more she worried that some unrelated universes might restart from a weird mood swing. Though living creatures might not even notice the slightest change, variables would appear, and she'd have to deal with all the messes.

Ling Qingyu zipped her mouth and felt her invisible burden shrug off her shoulders, feeling gratitude for Miss System's psychological counseling.

Although the latter was scolding her, she was genuinely elated, but the rapport mustn't be lost.

[Forget it. There's one thing you must remember. Live your life and find your path. I have never instilled or forced my ideas upon you, directly or indirectly. True strong ones seek their own. You shall follow the same. Either sink into debauchery, lie down and let the world revolve on its own, or do something meaningful to fill your heart. It doesn't matter.]

This was the longest speech Ling Qingyu had heard from Sister System. She truly desired to meet her face to face.

Maybe such an existence didn't require in-person conversation at all. However, Ling Qingyu was relieved to hear Miss System wasn't involved at all, though she still held apprehension over the hidden chairs.

'But what about those hidden thrones?'

[Do you really believe they exist?]

'Isn't it?' Ling Qingyu wanted confirmation—a simple yes or no answer.

Nonetheless, Miss System never intended to satisfy her. [Does it even matter whether they exist or control the world secretly?]

'It matters to me,' Ling Qingyu stated solemnly. She was serious about hearing clear affirmation from Miss System. Otherwise, she couldn't sleep easily.

Even if Miss System provided comfort, she still hoped to extract as much information as possible, and the former was clearly aware of Ling Qingyu's goal.

[Are you scared?]

'Of course I am. Why not? They and their families might have ruled the world for centuries,' Ling Qingyu admitted, and there was no shame in it.

Not to mention, Miss System could instantly discern lies and peek at her thoughts. Why bother hiding?

[Scared? How funny. Tell me, can they withstand a single punch from you?]

'Emm, I guess no,' Ling Qingyu stuttered, unsure if her punch carried so much force. She had yet to tally her stats and forgot that even in the earliest training she had kicked a certain robber to death with just one move.

Now she had upgraded several times and controlled her force to an unimaginable degree so as not to hurt the innocent through impulsive reactions.

Knocking one person to death wasn't a far-fetched idea. Ling Qingyu choked at the thought that she and her girls were somehow becoming like supermen. Of course, Captain figurines were the closest comparison, but even then she speculated their group still paled in tonnage of force generated.

Regardless, Miss System continued her questions in mockery and rapid succession.

[Are they bulletproof, explosion-proof, and immortal?]

'No, of course not,' Ling Qingyu answered weakly.

[Then why are you apprehensive about their existence—should they exist—when you hold the power to flip the table at any time?]

Ling Qingyu gulped and signaled Athena and Elena to leave her alone, though the latter two heard none of the conversation inside her head.

However, seeing their presence as a 'mother' psychological prompt induced guilt. Even if she knew they were able to watch her secrets, out of sight, out of mind.

'But they own the entire system working for them. I can't resist in front of several states' machines.'

[Tsk... never have I thought someone could be so stupid. What about decapitation? They need people to work for them, not the system. Once they're in the light, Athena can track their whereabouts, and Elena can fire a shot to obliterate them and collapse whatever secret organization they have. No need to fuss.]

Ling Qingyu quieted down and let out a surprised "ah." 'So, you admit they exist.'

Miss System: So that was your focus all along?

[In any case, you have all the tools to utilize in your favor and don't need to think too much. Live and let live. Stop becoming a conspiracy theorist.]

'Emm, were they not correct in their conjectures all along? The files exposed decades ago admitted every evil,' Ling Qingyu rolled her eyes at Miss System. 'Some reached an extent worse than what our morals can bear.'

It was like some deity telling others not to believe in theology and superstition, but to firmly adhere to scientific principles.

Honestly, though, Athena found very few clues in the files until a portion of them was released, allowing her to finally track the main database with a virus. That was how secure and secretive the blatant evil circles thrived.

Fortunately, perhaps, Athena's past work dismantling trafficking gangs and elite criminal rings provided the necessary courage for whistleblowers to appear—those who hadn't completely sold their conscience.

Once there was a leak, there was no stopping it. Anyway, that was the reason that convinced Ling Qingyu not to doubt even slightly when this idea suddenly appeared.

Even Sister System didn't outright refute her speculation.

Miss System: But I didn't confirm it either!

[Do you want a full experience of a certain profession? I can give it to you for free right now.]

'Nope, no thank you. I'm satisfied with my life,' Ling Qingyu said, afraid that being a second too slow would drag her into another eternal dungeon.

[Then be confident and act as you've always aspired to. Don't let other factors restrain you. Where's your motto of crushing anyone who stands against you?]

'Hey, hey, wasn't I just trying to prepare everything for the worst? A war must be won before it's fought. I can't bear to bring innocent bystanders into my fight—that's against my motto,' Ling Qingyu giggled and excused herself. 'Who knows if the secret society was established by aliens acting as gods 6,000 years ago, enslaving others to function?'

[Excuse me, where did you get such an idea?]

Miss System was genuinely curious about how Ling Qingyu's brain functioned. Hadn't she already confirmed that there was no extraterrestrial threat around this galaxy at the moment?

'Isn't that how the Sumerian scriptures were written, and how those conspiracies spread?'

[Have you forgotten that you're not in the same world?] Miss System sounded hopeless.

'Ahem, although the continent looks weird and different, the fundamentals shouldn't change too much.'

[There you go. At least you and the girls around you are the Astartes meant to subdue demons and aliens. Why fear fragile, weak elites? Just shout for the emperor and Long live humanity.]

Ling Qingyu's eyelids twitched at her golden finger's chuunibyou moment.

Jokes aside, the conversation worked wonders, because Ling Qingyu regained her courage and confidence—Miss System had pointed out the obvious. Why had her footsteps suddenly turned hesitant when she sensed the hidden chairs?

The superpower Country A's machine didn't frighten her. An all-out conflict meant mutual destruction that no one desired. Even those chairs were destined to be stepped beneath her boots.

Chapter 757: Plans speeding up

Afterward, no matter how Ling Qingyu called out, Miss System was gone. She knew Miss System was silently watching her in case she got herself off the 'good path.'

It seemed she had transformed into a masochist, desiring more lectures from a higher existence.

Ling Qingyu hustled toward the bathroom for a warm shower to clear her thoughts and ordered Athena to compile a reasonable multifaceted plan for the Elephant Continent and the Middle Kingdom.

Where chaos fell, opportunity thrived, proportional to the risks. Ordinary people couldn't prepare for such dangers, but such dangers meant nothing to Ling Qingyu, as well as to other state actors.

The plan to participate in the mercenary unions had to be stepped up very soon. Otherwise, unofficial armed privateers could be designated as bounty hunters at best and bandits at worst.

After all, according to the regulations here by the World Government, the hunting of these groups was supported in terms of credits, extremely useful for the companies in the mercenary unions.

It was like having a channel to buy the latest allowed weapons and equipment. For instance, most mercenaries without solid support couldn't secure technologically advanced equipment and these credits allowed them to purchase at a discount price even. Anti-tank and anti-air portable versions with tracking and report system to ensure every use was recorded.

No one desired a private state actor to destroy public aircrafts or see them utilized in assassination. Of course, such regulations barely minimized the above possibilities and applied solely to the mercenaries under its control, not others.

Although mercenary unions were comprised of various groups, they shared the same interests under the organization of the World Government.

However, as always, leaks were to be expected. Some strong groups were sponsored by regional powers such as Country A and R as spies. There were many others. Nonetheless, all parties were aware and chose to turn a blind eye to these existence.

In addition, another category leaned between mercenaries and privateers—PMCs, private military companies.

They swore allegiance to their homeland incognito while remaining a tool for plausible deniability.

All in all, because of the additional existence of World Government checks and balances among the multipolar superpowers, the intricate private armed industry became ever more confusing for most people.

Both in the light and the dark, there was no doubt the World Government's moves strangled unlawful activities by a large margin.

Anyway, Ling Qingyu herself was perplexed by the outrageous checks and balances and didn't understand how they worked.

It wasn't that the system wasn't feasible, but that the establishment seemed prepared for a total collapse of the current economic order and a world of chaos in her eyes.

Comprehending PMCs was sufficient to consume brain cells, and the World Government's private arm treaties totally muddied the waters.

The narratives from her homeland, Country A and R, declared their suspicions toward such treaties, as if portraying the World Government leadership's actions as blatant attempts to sow discord.

Ling Qingyu took their accusations with a grain of salt. Although the actions appeared, at a glance, to grant too much freedom for evil people to take advantage of, she sensed deeper meanings.

At least, to her, the World Government's policy only brought benefits, and she would definitely support their side, right?

Perhaps the next economic collapse, which was now on the tip of the mountain, would be terrible enough to erupt into another clash between the powers, and the World Government intended to stabilize and control most regions through these preparatory actions.

She didn't know for sure, but from Athena's calculations, the economic bubble was still a decade away, and if mitigated, the impact could be reduced.

Maybe someone in power had learned the lessons of history and recognized the pattern of an ever-infinite cycle, then aspired to ascend together under the new system, just like her.

While she fancied remaining incognito and influencing events from behind the scenes, others might not agree

These thoughts were flushed away into the drainage as the warm shower dribbled down her body, hair strands sticking to her luminescent, lustrous skin.

Her eyes fluttered under the delicious weight of the water as she groaned with satisfaction when the warmth seeped in.

Forget everything—just enjoy the moment. Regardless, Ling Qingyu knew she could protect her loved one in all scenarios. That was enough.

Thirty-five minutes later, Ling Qingyu came out, wiggling the towel over her hair to dry it. Approaching the mirror, she reached for the air dryer and blew her hair dry.

Of course, only after making sure her hands and feet weren't wet did she use the dryer. Thick hair, for girls, demanded the utmost care; a towel wasn't enough.

Glancing around, Ling Qingyu sighed at the lonely sight of her King Suite, with no one else accompanying her. All those decorations and luxury meant nothing without someone.

After some consideration, she called Tang Ziyi. The line rang a few times before Tang Ziyi answered.

"Hey, dear? What's up? Aren't you going to sleep, if my estimation is correct?"

"Yeah, about to sleep, but someone made me feel lonely enough that I had to disturb you, Sister Ziyi."

"Ah— of course. As a perv, you must have some self-awareness about why others avoid you," Tang Ziyi teased. "I'm relieved to see Xiao Yue staying away from you."

"Shut up," Ling Qingyu snarled. "I'm not calling to receive salt from you to lick my wounds."

"Well, well, well. Acting strong, huh?"

"All right, let's cut to the chase." A pause. "We're going to advance our plans."

"What plan?" Tang Ziyi's tone automatically turned serious.

"I just had a sudden awakening—and an idea we envisioned in the past."

"You don't discuss this with Xiao Yue and instead talk about it with me. Are you serious?"

"You aren't stupid, Sister Ziyi. You're a genius."

"Thank you very much, but when have I ever said I was stupid?" Tang Ziyi laughed coldly.

"Ahem—I need you to start acting overseas."

"Oh, now our CEO plans to suck us dry and squeeze every last use out of her subordinates. My poor life ahead."

"Quit the drama, Sister Ziyi. I've already secured a platform to launch and connect all the dots. I just need manpower and talent."

"Okay." Tang Ziyi's voice pitched up in surprise. "What do I do then?"

"Pick twenty or thirty of our girls to register for our mercenary dream. Call it whatever you want. You have full support from Athena and Elena."

"My hands are itching from your words, but don't I always have my nieces' support, darling?"

Ling Qingyu ignored her last words and continued: "We don't need too much flash—just a history and a record that can be proven to humans, showing we exist officially."

"I think I can guess what you're up to."

"Good. Then ask which girls are interested in participating. I'm sure many will jump at the task."

"You don't say—especially now that our province has turned 'very very quiet'. Besides, we might not be needed too publicly anymore, at least since your lover has trained her own SWAT teams across cities and plans to establish a dedicated spec-ops unit solely for Province N to combat drug and human trafficking across borders, plus counter-terrorism."

"Poor darling, you're about to be discarded very soon. Sure enough, women's hearts are poisonous."

Ling Qingyu's eyelids twitched at Tang Ziyi's tone. Please match your tone to your meaning when you express sympathy.

Besides, why are you cursing yourself?

"We can't help it. If we don't withdraw ourselves soon and get replaced by real official teams, we're handing others an easy attack route. My lovely Qingyue might not say anything, but the pressure on her will only mount."

"It's not like we can't transform our military presence into civilian policing outfits."

Chapter 758: Low Key

"Let go when it's time to let go— isn't that one of the most taught lessons since ancient times?" said Ling Qingyu.

"I never expected you to draw conclusions from love affairs," Tang Ziyi replied with a hint of schadenfreude.

Ling Qingyu couldn't fathom why everything always circled back to carnal desire. Whenever something was even slightly related—despite having no real connection to love—people's thoughts inevitably revolved around drama.

Who said letting go was only about love? It applied to everything: work, desire, persistence, idealism, and so on. It took great courage to let go.

Spirit Fox seemed to control Province N so thoroughly that crime rates dropped to an unimaginable degree, except for domestic affairs.

Nonetheless, the higher the climb, the harder the fall. Jealousy, greed, fear and hatred were aimed at her girls. Until now, Ling Qingyu had yet to receive news of the horrific systematic attack on them.

Neither Athena nor Tang Ziyi reported the matter, fearing Ling Qingyu would overreact.

Who knew if this woman would mobilize the entire force to flaunt and deter, creating another political dilemma for Yang Qingyue to manage?

Anyway, the enemies had been found and eliminated. Tang Ziyi figured Cai Ning and Yang Qingyue would be happy to take care of the rest.

Even so, Tang Ziyi, as the founder of Spirit Fox, felt reluctant to relinquish their control over the province. It appeared Ling Qingyu intended to transfer complete authority to Yang Qingyue once things settled.

Tang Ziyi understood the reason and realized the group might attract more sharks later on as the province returned to peace.

Many hyenas were watching Spirit Fox, ready to recruit and infiltrate undercover agents. Perhaps disbanding the group and dispersing its members across multiple units was already part of the plan.

Even then, these options were impossible to realize. Such attacks were bound to happen regardless of Gu Yi's patronage. A few dozen times kicking the ball back didn't matter, but once Province N became prosperous, Spirit Fox's existence was destined to be questioned by powerful figures.

Once the President and several ministers had their eyes on her girls, Gu Yi couldn't refuse outright as she had before. Once chaos was gone, appropriate justifications dissipated.

Not that Ling Qingyu cared too much—but dealing with them while handling other indispensable matters would be a waste of time.

Profit- and interest-seeking individuals wouldn't eliminate criminals thoroughly the way Ling Qingyu ordered her girls to. Instead, they would help while deliberately avoiding rooting out everything, allowing the cycle of violence to continue so their own existence could thrive.

With ongoing violent crimes suppressed, Ling Qingyu could help Gu Yi block interventions more easily. In fact, these were concerns Gu Yi and Yang Qingyue both harbored, even if they didn't admit it.

The former was relieved to gain Ling Qingyu's support for her political future. As long as their interests were bound together, Ling Qingyu wouldn't act recklessly or waste energy playing chess with criminals. Gu Yi was a firm believer in profit, despite Ling Qingyu's actions.

In contrast, her daughter Yang Qingyue received so many gifts and acts of assistance that she never doubted Ling Qingyu at all. She refused to accept the notion that people always sought benefits. Kindness and justice still had to exist. That belief only strengthened when Ling Qingyu truly eradicated the evils in Province N.

Now, only the final hammer remained—to completely crush the true demons who had drawn blood from the people. Those elite families likely had ties to criminals, seeking to wreak havoc and wrest the province from government control.

Nonetheless, these matters belonged solely to Yang Qingyue's and Cai Ning's team. Spirit Fox was no longer involved once politics entered the equation.

Tang Ziyi didn't need Ling Qingyu to explain further. A broader picture formed in her mind. Perhaps a new legend was about to be born.

"It's best to keep the initiative in our hands rather than fight and waste our energy on non-essential matters," Ling Qingyu sensed her sister's reluctance and explained. "It's not while we completely abolish the organization we setup so hard. We're just sizing down to an acceptable degree like before—a hundred or two hundred would do."

"Alright, you don't need to explain all of this to me," Tang Ziyi said. "I know that converting to civilian clothes for patrols still isn't acceptable to you, huh?"

"You know me. I'm very protective of my girls. I don't want the slightest harm," said Ling Qingyu.

Tang Ziyi cowered and swallowed when she recalled the video of one operator getting run over in a vehicle attack. "Hey, don't we have talismans to counter life-threatening dangers? Three chances to save a life, and you still hesitate."

"I want several layers of insurance. Primary protection relies on your equipment, Sister Tang. The talisman is the final guardian when everything else fails. By the way, if I'm not mistaken, do you have something to hide? I've never seen you gulp in front of me even once."

Sure enough, Ling Qingyu detected an anomaly from her close sister and pressed Tang Ziyi over the phone.

On the other end of the line—

"You must have heard it wrong," Tang Ziyi replied without the slightest change in tone. "It's a young maid near me who took a huge mouthful of water. Your manor is powerful indeed—even the maids can swallow such massive gulps."

The maid looked confused and tilted her head as Tang Ziyi passed by while answering the call. She glanced at the duster in her hand, then at Tang Ziyi again, before scratching her head and resuming her cleaning.

Ling Qingyu didn't believe a single word coming out of Tang Ziyi's mouth. Her girls were all cute and well-behaved—not the monsters Tang Ziyi described.

"Alright, back to our original plan. You're going overseas soon to begin our mercenary journey."

"Is it secure to have such a sensitive conversation?"

"Don't doubt my daughter. I've already had Athena scan everything."

"What do I do next? Register my newly assembled team as PMCs?" Tang Ziyi asked.

"No, please don't. I need your team to hide our obvious origin. If you do that, it's no different from directly alerting the Mercenary Union under the World Government that we belong to Country C—which we don't—and drawing unnecessary fire. According to my plan, I need one or two years without attracting attention, especially without linking my armed wing directly to me."

"So, publicly, I'm the founder of this new mercenary group."

"Correct. And if I recall—Sister Ziyi and Xiao Yue should already have mercenary IDs registered when you first came here, right?"

"Yep. I almost forgot about my history," Tang Ziyi clicked her tongue. "So that means I'll be spending my lovey-dovey time with my dear Yue without interruptions from you, right? Please consult with her first and send her to assist me. I may be good at fighting, but I can't see through conspiracies and strategy."

"Fret not. I intend to send her over after discussing my arrangements," Ling Qingyu replied, ignoring the initial jab about abusing subordinates.

"Okay, I'll register a new group called Spirit Fox in the Mercenary Union."

Ling Qingyu drew in a sharp breath and suppressed the urge to teleport through the communication line just to knock Tang Ziyi on the head. If not for her inability to defeat that goddess, she would've already started cursing.

"Sister Ziyi, I said no relation. That means no."

"What can I do? I'm bad at naming," Tang Ziyi replied.

Whether this despicable bastard was merely joking or genuinely terrible at it, Ling Qingyu couldn't tell. "Leave the matter to Athena."

"Gotcha. What's next?"

"Gain experience and build your résumé so that nobody suspects anything when I hire you."

"I kind of guessed where you're going. So the master has to separate from her only disciple. How cruel."

Ling Qingyu's ears flushed in the message from one ear and out from the other.

"Choose a continent to boost your reputation. Elephant Continent or the Middle Kingdom. I do hope you choose the latter and help the women fighting against terror."

"Women against terrorists," Tang Ziyi narrowed her eyes, a strange sense of familiarity surfacing.

"It's ISIS fighting against the Kurds."

"Oh, it's them. They exist here too? Are you sure they're still called Kurds in this world?" Tang Ziyi voiced her surprise. "Wait a minute— that m***** ISIS still survives even to this day? Weren't they supposed to be eliminated?"

"That's my genuine question too, but it's not surprising for deviations to occur in a parallel world."

"You speak as if ours is the true timeline."

Although she couldn't see Tang Ziyi, Ling Qingyu knew the other was rolling her eyes as she continued explaining the details Athena had uncovered.

"This ISIS is completely different from what we know. The same terror, but smarter. They understand legitimacy and international politics. Despite their violence, they haven't offended the entire world yet. They know how to rely on government officials to brand them as just another army."

"Are you sure a transmigrator isn't leading this terror network?"

"I hope not," Ling Qingyu sighed.

"Anyway, I'm curious, are the Kurds still called Kurds here?"

"I don't know. Whatever they're called in this world, as long as female freedom fighters appear, they are Kurds. Don't ask me. Let Athena explain everything. Move fast and hard. News suggests they're having a hard time at the moment."

"Understood. With Elena and new drones, about to be tested, I'm sure we can kick ISIS back into its destined coffin."

"Bear in mind, low-key is of utmost importance."

"Fine, fine. I have a sense of good measure—twee, I mean I have a good sense of measure."

Chapter 759: Steamrolling extremists

Ling Qingyu felt her trust in Tang Ziyi drop a little more with every sentence the latter spoke. Still, Tang Ziyi wasn't wrong about testing new weapons and tactics in real combat—especially those new inventions Ling Qingyu had no idea her daughter and Tang Ziyi had been tinkering with.

Despite Athena's outrageously accurate simulation results, there was always a slight chance things could go wrong, even when the data itself was flawless.

Sure, Athena was far more capable and accurate— or rather, nearly always correct—in predicting various future probabilities.

Nonetheless, not all humans responded properly to contingency plans. Sometimes, a single stroke of luck could overturn everything.

"Sister Ziyi, make everything quick. I heard the situation there is dire, even though neighboring tribes that share the same ancestry are rallying to support them. Our first battle must be meaningful. No— every battle must stand on high moral ground and accomplish something worthwhile."

"We won't disappoint you. I can't wait."

"I can tell you've grown bored lately."

"Yeah. If not for daily exercise, my bones would get old and rusty," Tang Ziyi joked. "In fact, although Province N is getting boring, I'm grateful I met you here. After all, the path I seek to become stronger wouldn't exist without you."

"Oh, Athena, record this conversation. This is the first time your aunt has shown sentiment."

"Alas, consider yourself lucky. You'd better pray I forget all of this in the next few months when I see you again."

"Heehee. Sure."

Tang Ziyi felt fortunate they weren't using a video call. Otherwise, the new phone might not have survived. She could already predict Ling Qingyu's expression from her words and tone alone.

"Never mind. I'll get everything done within a week— registration and recruiting teammates. Guess what?"

"What?"

"I can confidently vouch that around a hundred girls are eager to participate."

"Bring as many as you can without compromising Province N's security. Disbanding will take time before Yang Qingyue's forces are ready to take over." Ling Qingyu wasn't too surprised by Tang Ziyi's estimation. In fact, she believed no girls would complain if she gave the orders.

Where in the world they could find the boss who cared deeply about their well-beings and safety beyond her own personal interest?

"You don't need to say more. But tell me—are we directly steamrolling ISIS?" Tang Ziyi asked with faint amusement.

Ling Qingyu also imagined extremists fleeing in terror, crying out in despair—knowing that in their twisted faith, being killed by women meant losing God's reward.

They might hold out for a while, but once Tang Ziyi and the girls' reputation spread, she foresaw a domino of panic.

With proper equipment, there was no ground military force in the world that Spirit Fox couldn't crush head-on.

Of course, the girls would have to pretend to be mortal to remain low-key and avoid triggering supernatural incidents. Even with their strength restrained, dozens of captains could still bulldoze enemies.

After all, while strength and speed could be suppressed, stamina and endurance were inherent.

"You'd better not do that. Although it's easy, it would make our group famous too quickly and draw the attention of powerful forces—contrary to our plan. I don't want connections, only background records we can use to answer questions in the future."

"Alright, what a pity. It seems our role is limited to foreign advisers, like the Green Berets."

"Stop joking. Can my girls even speak the local languages? Please..."

"Hmm, I forgot to tell you—the translation device is already usable. Not the kind that waits for someone to finish speaking. The software genuinely works as a real-time translator. Just a few seconds delay."

Ling Qingyu was left speechless and quickly realized that her girls had effectively graduated beyond Green Berets.

"Can't you stop surprising me with new innovations? I feel like my brain can't keep up with the pace of technology."

"Can't do that. We're in the age of an AI revolution, just like the industrial one centuries ago. It's because we have Athena that we can control the pacing and gain experience before the real change arrives."

Ling Qingyu was immediately alarmed when she thought it through. Fortunately, Athena's products hadn't yet been released to the public and remained exclusive to her personal group.

If the world discovered her girls using technology far beyond the current level, Ling Qingyu dared not imagine the consequences. She reckoned the translation devices alone would certainly attract unnecessary attention.

It seemed she truly had less time to bide, especially once the parties she was vigilant about began to react.

"Speaking of Green Berets," Tang Ziyi didn't care about Ling Qingyu's brief silence—she genuinely feared no one on this planet.

She knew what this bastard possessed and sometimes wanted to knock her on the forehead to clear away those excessive worries. Ling Qingyu cared a little too much about external forces, but in the long run, her path did seem to be the right one.

"Isn't the Kurds supported by Country A here? Why are they suddenly in trouble?"

"There are too many parties involved, especially neighboring regional powers launching airstrikes to support government forces."

"Wait..."

"If you want a history lesson, ask Athena."

"Alright. But wouldn't our participation clash with forces from Country A?"

"Since when did you believe in Country A's alliances? Why do you think their enemies dare to overstep their boundaries?" Ling Qingyu mused. "It's not the first time that unfortunate ethnic groups have been betrayed by them."

"Right. Being an enemy is dangerous, but being a friend means total extinction."

"I don't think your quote is quite right."

"As long as you get the meaning," Tang Ziyi cursed a few more times to silence Ling Qingyu's soft laughter.

The two women expanded on their advisory roles and identified the core assistance needed to change the tide. The embattled ethnicity was filled with warriors and courage.

They merely lacked sufficient logistical support to sustain momentum—and perhaps professional military training, though even that was uncertain, given that Country A had already provided assistance.

Elena could provide fire support in the worst case, deploying electromagnetic cannons and drones while transporting ammunition ranging from MANPADS, anti-tank weapons, and RPGs to mortars and rifles.

Ling Qingyu and Tang Ziyi still remembered Elena's unique trait—functioning as an independent war machine capable of sustaining medium-level conflicts. Even a short campaign of high-intensity warfare was within her capacity.

The industrial scale inside the submarine—from underwater resource mining to full-spectrum manufacturing—surpassed that of medium-sized nations, though mass production was still constrained by upper limits.

Moreover, waste from the mini-factories could be stored and later recycled by Athena, forming a fully efficient closed-loop ecosystem.

"It'd be funny if others discovered QBZ and QBU rifles in the Kurds' hands."

"I'm sure my mother-in-law and her colleagues would puke their eyes out. Just adapt the military styles to their original format. We aren't selling them weapons," Ling Qingyu replied. "Don't stress the elders. I can sense some political turmoil is about to erupt soon in the Capitol given the president's term is about to end."

"Come on, no need to fuss about it. With your media outlets and Athena's hidden hands, it'd be an understatement to say you've completely controlled the political narrative."

"I'm not worried about foul play or tricks. I fear an idiot—someone full of themselves. It's not as if there's no pattern of dictators popping up at an alarming rate. Who's to say someone on the throne isn't admiring the former?"

"Oh—right. You are damn right about that." Tang Ziyi paused, finally grasping Ling Qingyu's meaning, as the latter was visiting a country whose situation closely matched her words. "But you are underestimating Aunt Gu too much."

"Yeah, you're right. Someone who climbs the ladder without muddying on a crooked water must have guarantees and means."

"Exactly."

Chapter 760 760: Philanthropist

"How's the airport? Any news?" Ling Qingyu asked about the deal when the two women mentioned Gu Yi.

She remembered that after rescuing agents from the scamming syndicate, Gu Yi had promised her a large private airport that was about to be built—a military-grade version.

There was even a channel to open sales for the Y-20 Kunpeng military cargo aircraft and Z-8 helicopters—the latter not particularly interesting to her since the models were outdated and Athena could easily manufacture superior versions.

Having personally witnessed how Virgin 1 and 2 performed in combat, it was only natural that Ling Qingyu looked down on older models.

Nonetheless, securing an official procurement channel could help prolong her concealment strategy by diverting attention.

"Not yet. But I heard from General Tang that it should be ready in a few months. The airport is already under construction and only needs further refurbishment for military use," Tang Ziyi answered.

"Hopefully my mother-in-law doesn't swindle me," Ling Qingyu sighed.

"Why would she? Unless some unfortunate incident occurs, I doubt it," Tang Ziyi replied. "I believe General Tang wants nominal control of the new military airport and is sharing it with you as a contingency."

"Oh? That's an interesting take. Do you have a source?"

"Nah. I'm not going to snoop around just to confirm a guess. Sometimes surprises are worth the wait. Besides, when we cooperated with Special Forces under General Tang during that cross-border mission, the higher-ups were eager to deploy a reliable force in Province N—not the corrupt one. It's possible General Tang will soon command troops in Province N and nearby provinces. Once that positioning is secured, the airport will effectively be ours."

Ling Qingyu instantly grasped Gu Yi's foresight and General Tang's intentions. In particular, the latter seemed quite fond of the girls under her wing—perfect soldiers in the general's eyes.

The two seniors likely hoped to deepen cooperation with Spirit Fox to combat international crime beyond borders through military means while gaining overseas operational experience.

Peacekeeping missions under the World Government were entirely different from confronting vicious criminals.

That was one reason.

Secondly, General Tang might want to influence her harem members and gradually recruit them. Daily interaction fostered closeness and camaraderie.

Who could say whether the general hoped to rekindle a warrior's flame in their hearts—to draw them back into the light under the banner of serving the nation instead of working in the corporate sphere?

Ling Qingyu knew her girls would never be swayed—but her displeasure toward the general still rose from the depths of her heart. This old grandma truly intended to extend her reach toward them.

Even if, by some near-impossible chance, her girls agreed—could the military afford the astronomical daily operational costs of Spirit Fox?

Without her "cheats," even her own funds might be drained within days.

Ling Qingyu sneered inwardly.

Nonetheless, it seemed the central government had decided to strengthen an impregnable wall near the border region to tackle the rising scamming syndicates.

Although no complete solution had been found—given the new era of the internet revolution, its inherent downsides, and the easily corruptible neighboring state apparatus—the government still had to act decisively to provide answers to the public.

Apparently, in the near future, General Tang's Wolf Squadron and Spirit Fox would see a surge in combat on foreign soil. Ling Qingyu welcomed the change, as she intended to dissipate Spirit Fox's obvious footprints in the province. Remaining under General Tang's watch would automatically position her as part of the government apparatus.

After ending the call, Ling Qingyu still didn't feel like sleeping. The clock had already struck past midnight, yet she remained wide awake.

Perhaps the intense discussion had suppressed her body's relaxing hormones. Or maybe jet lag was the real culprit.

She called Xiao Yue, who refused almost instantly, her tone tinged with annoyance.

"Hell no. I'm not trapping myself in danger."

"I'm not dangerous," Ling Qingyu muttered, the corner of her lips twitching.

"Have you ever seen danger shout 'I'm dangerous' out loud?" Xiao Yue mocked.

"Stop the nonsense and come to my room. It's important. We have a lot to discuss, and I need your advice." Ling Qingyu hung up.

When Xiao Yue arrived with a helpless expression and smoldering eyes—clearly conveying you'd better make this worth my time—Ling Qingyu nearly giggled.

Overcome by the urge to share her insights, Ling Qingyu grabbed Xiao Yue's wrist, pulled her inside, and slammed the door shut, locking it without noticing the latter's reaction.

Xiao Yue froze. Her face turned pale with horror as she was stunned and pushed into a seat.

It wasn't until Ling Qingyu clearly explained what she needed help with that Xiao Yue finally let out a long sigh of relief.

Moments later, bursts of "machine-gun fire" rattled across the room—verbal bullets sprayed at Ling Qingyu so fiercely that she could only soothe her dear confidante.

She hadn't realized her urgency would frighten Xiao Yue. This was the first time she had witnessed Xiao Yue's darker side.

Amused, Ling Qingyu also understood her worries. Xiao Yue wasn't ready.

Yes, Ling Qingyu had bluntly admitted in the past that she longed for Tang Ziyi and her—despite rarely taking action.

Though slightly saddened by Xiao Yue's instinctive refusal, Ling Qingyu believed there was still plenty of time.

What was wrong with her selfish desire? So long as her actions didn't hurt others' wellbeings and remained under her conscious control, not following the heart demons, Ling Qingyu felt acceptable.

Everyone had dark sides, shadows most hid from public. Like wealth and power amplified the truest nature. It was never about containment and hiding. Self-acknowledgment of the weakness was essential to growth. More control would merely lead to a disaster later if one didn't acknowledge themselves first.

Ling Qingyu recognized herself and shared her thoughts with others through her actions. She didn't threaten or seek moral blackmails but her outward conduct conveyed the core message.

Xiao Yue: You just want to be a pervert!

The commotion gradually subsided as Ling Qingyu began outlining her concerns—specifically the possibility of a secret society existing in the shadows, manipulating the world without anyone noticing.

At the same time, she detailed her plan to first establish foundations in Elephant Continent.

With a holographic world map projected before them and Athena animating Ling Qingyu's explanations in real time, Xiao Yue's eyes brightened as she listened.

Her interest deepened as Ling Qingyu carved out swaths of territory under potential influence—failed states and those on the brink of collapse, all within Ling Qingyu's sight.

The first move was always the hardest. Once momentum built, the wheel would turn in their favor.

Now, Xiao Yue was genuinely intrigued by how Ling Qingyu intended to succeed. So far, opportunities born from collapsing nations were unfolding right before their eyes.

"What's the plan? Based on the tools we have, I can already see several possibilities with high probability," Xiao Yue said.

"My warlord, you agree with my idea, right?" Ling Qingyu grew excited as she spoke.

Xiao Yue raised her hand to suppress her enthusiasm. "Calm down. A grand script like this requires detailed forecasts. It's good that you're starting with Country E as a bridge. I assume you already have a plan in mind."

"As expected of my General Xiao," Ling Qingyu teased with the title. "Let me test you again—by what criteria should I begin my move?"

"Don't ask me. Just say what's on your mind."

"Oh? You don't have an answer?" Ling Qingyu expressed mock disbelief.

"It's not that I don't have one. I've already written down several alternatives here—I just want to hear your opinion." Xiao Yue pointed her finger at the temple.

Ling Qingyu nodded. She didn't think Xiao Yue was exaggerating. The latter operated on an entirely different tier, though she rarely chose to act since arriving in this world, instead following Ling Qingyu's lead.

Xiao Yue's political charisma and talent remained largely untapped. Ling Qingyu even suspected that Gu Yi herself might be helpless against this shortie.

Though the shortie appeared beautifully cute and harmless, the ruthlessness buried beneath couldn't be erased by her former title as a warlord. Had history ever recorded a warlord who was truly kind and generous to her enemies?

Cluelessness and innocence were merely her chosen charms.

Fear those who hide in the shadows and observe silently. Xiao Yue was exactly that type.

Of course, Ling Qingyu also understood why Xiao Yue acted so nonchalant. She was enjoying retirement—relaxing without constant vigilance, surrounded by like-minded confidantes. She trusted them.

"My approach is to ensure that none of my actions raise suspicion about my hidden agenda. I intend to act as a philanthropist."

"Interesting description, but let me correct you," Xiao Yue said. "Maybe you don't see yourself as a philanthropist, but your actions already qualify as such—even if you refuse to acknowledge it. That's what always amazes me."

"You're making me blush, shortie," Ling Qingyu said, genuinely embarrassed.

"Call me shortie again and I swear—"

"Alright, my dear. Let's get to the point. Our focus will be on the health sector—medicine and food. We'll begin our giant leap with a small footstep. In today's world, we'd be labeled as an INGO."

"INGO?" Though Xiao Yue had been here for quite some time, certain terms still felt unfamiliar.

"International non-governmental organization," Ling Qingyu clarified, citing several examples operating under the oversight of the World Government.

"Humanitarian aid as our tool," Xiao Yue nodded. "Enough to earn the locals' favor, but—"

"It's more than just favor. Our staff will require escorts, which gives me the legitimacy to carry weapons and gradually build our behemoth." Ling Qingyu clenched her fist and glanced up at the ceiling, as if she could see through it to the stars beyond.

Xiao Yue smiled and applauded lightly. "Smart move. Beautifully done with the tools at your disposal."

If only the gleam in Xiao Yue's eyes had been a little brighter, Ling Qingyu's composure might not have faltered.

Tsk, this shortie was not impressed at her blueprint of the empire she dreamed of creating, Ling Qingyu sighed.

"Just tell me the truth. I won't be offended."

Xiao Yue's lips twitched at her response. She'd be a fool to believe in such nonsense.

