

Beautiful 761

Chapter 761: Simplicity is overlooked often

Xiao Yue pouted, her eyes glazing over with suspicion and mockery, forcing Ling Qingyu to raise her palm as if swearing an oath.

"Alright. You own colossal satellite constellations, Athena's godlike reach, Medicinal Island with cutting-edge technology and connections, immense wealth—and what, a nanoprinter?" Xiao Yue paused. "And that's the plan you came up with? Just that? Think outside the box, Ling Qingyu."

Ling Qingyu nearly cringed and shrank under Xiao Yue's bluntness. Every word struck her like a hammer, forcing her head to droop lower as if her confidence were being shattered.

Seeing her reaction, Xiao Yue gasped. "What?! Do you expect me to compliment you?"

"At least I expected softer words from you," Ling Qingyu muttered.

"Well, I believe my words are very neutral and impactful," Xiao Yue rolled her eyes.

"It's your tone, alright?" Ling Qingyu felt exasperated, though she didn't truly mind the outburst.

Now that Xiao Yue had pointed it out, Ling Qingyu reconsidered everything carefully. She had failed the most fundamental rule—know yourself and know your enemy.

No matter how thoroughly she calculated her opponents' capabilities, if her understanding of her own power remained vague, she would never achieve true greatness.

"Come on. It's just that my expectations of you are high—that's why I feel like scolding you," Xiao Yue said. "You're destined for something greater than what you're currently envisioning."

"I know. I am the new conqueror," Ling Qingyu replied, slipping back into her narcissistic mode and earning Xiao Yue's helpless look.

"However, you did see things clearly. For that, I'll give you credit," Xiao Yue conceded. "Survival needs always prevail, regardless of the status quo—prosperity, desperation, fragile statehood, and so on."

She continued, "Food and medicine are the foundational pillars of civilization. Controlling them means leveraging real power. But the number one resource you've overlooked is water."

"Water? Isn't it everywhere—abundant..." Ling Qingyu paused, suddenly realizing how fortunate she had been in both her past and present lives to have never experienced water scarcity.

She had read about it in historical accounts, but no matter how detailed those descriptions were, they failed to replicate the true horror.

"Yes, water is abundant—everywhere. But you see, human greed is what destroys equilibrium. Everyone knows that evenly shared resources, prosperity, and wealth would bring peace and happiness. Yet no one truly does it. And even when attempts are made throughout history, they fail."

"Human greed is endless. And some people are more selfish than others," Ling Qingyu acknowledged. She understood the fundamental principle behind the 80–20 distribution.

From capitalism breaking away from aristocratic authoritarianism to socialism and communism—none could function perfectly if humanity's inherent flaws weren't accounted for, if systems relied solely on the idealism of saints.

The most reliable answer to anything in the universe was simplicity—staying grounded.

"Right. Continent E and the Middle Kingdom don't lack water resources, but they're either robbed away, overexploited, or managed through inefficient practices that ignore long-term consequences—the risks behind short-term achievements. By themselves and by others."

"Isn't the primary cause natural factors, like desertification?"

"We won't drift into irrelevant debates," Xiao Yue replied calmly. "Desertification does occur naturally, but humans are the dominant driver—deforestation, overgrazing, and even wars."

"So, little—ahem—my dear Yue," Ling Qingyu corrected herself the moment she noticed Xiao Yue's expression shift. "Water is the core component I must focus on for leverage. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. Never ignore water, food, medicine, and healthcare. Whoever controls and hoards them can leverage everything—provided they have the means to deter others and protect themselves."

"Water scarcity, huh?" Ling Qingyu smiled, realizing the value of consulting Xiao Yue. She truly had underestimated the strategic weight of water resources. "With Athena's research capability and proper investment on my part, there's no way I can't pioneer advanced water technology. Thank you, Xiao Yue. I almost overlooked the real advantage."

"It's good that you can admit your mistake," Xiao Yue returned the smile. "Never underestimate simple matters. Sometimes, they're the only life-changing variables—just waiting for the right opportunity."

Ling Qingyu nodded, accepting Teacher Yue's guidance without the slightest resistance. As expected of a former warlord who had managed resources and governed vast territories during chaotic times, Xiao Yue instantly grasped what Ling Qingyu ultimately intended to accomplish.

Even from just a rough blueprint, Xiao Yue had already discerned the bigger picture.

"Besides water, food, and healthcare, with your advantages, we can manage sanitation, telecommunication and internet access, energy and infrastructure, education, and micro-finance."

Ling Qingyu's eyes widened and her jaw dropped. Woah, she never expected she could influence and control these sectors so thoroughly.

Of course, she had plans for some of them, but not as thoroughly as Xiao Yue had listed so plainly.

The two of them in this room understood far more complexities behind each term. Water, sanitation, food, and healthcare weren't as simple as humanitarian aid.

They were purposefully packaged as INGOs to hide the real ambition and set up initial grounds. Sure, many people would receive immense help and be able to sustain themselves later on, as Ling Qingyu wouldn't forget to teach a person how to fish.

However, in return, she desired something far more powerful.

Likewise, telecom, internet, energy, infrastructure, education, and finance provided essential services. For instance, wells, water purification plants, and sanitation systems were welcomed without suspicion because of the needs. Yet, they could be used to control populations or create dependency.

Providing mobile networks and internet access gave control over communication, surveillance, and propaganda channels.

Education could indoctrinate future generations into her core principles and spread the ideology. As for finance, although it seemed to empower locals with financial services despite unstable and dangerous regions, it bound communities to her power, controlled economics, and ran a parallel economy.

At this, Xiao Yue and Ling Qingyu exchanged a knowing glance without further explanation. Some words didn't require clarification between confidantes.

Ling Qingyu's plan exceeded mere control and dependency. The main ambition was silent and kinetic power projection.

Her dream of building huge mercenary corporations like Atlas and Umbrella from the games truly began now as both exchanged and affirmed ideas.

The water projects could serve as logistical hubs for her group. Education could filter out talent for her use.

Energy and infrastructure allowed loopholes for her to establish standards and platforms which she could later influence from the shadows. Medicine and healthcare would raise her group's prestige and influence the locals, gradually eroding the government's authority.

Afterward, Ling Qingyu laid out her plans for a parallel government apparatus to seep across Continent E and the Middle Kingdom.

Xiao Yue raised her brow and praised her wholeheartedly, inwardly surprised at the beautiful chessboard laid before them. Both women tried to simulate how the world's geopolitics would react to their campaign.

The conclusion was to bid for as much time as they could, hiding until others realized it was too late. Unfortunately, data concealment was nearly impossible in the modern age unless Athena tweaked the records.

Nonetheless, this merely elongated the timeframe Ling Qingyu possessed to keep up the momentum, not to erase or completely obscure her plan.

Anyone with a sane mind, sharp eyes, and attention to detail, backed by strong support, could spot the discrepancies at any time. Such was the reason she completely separated Tang Ziyi's connection from her Spirit Group.

After all, superpowers like Country A, Country R, and even her homeland, Country C, were too sensitive to economic statistics after the upheaval caused by the growing World Government in power—the globalist faction.

No party would allow another hidden leverage to appear on the chessboard. Besides, sovereignty was far more complex than resource management.

Legitimacy, narrative, and consent—even manufactured one. It was the human factor, that was the hardest to articulate and control.

Of course, these worries weren't too dangerous since Ling Qingyu merely longed for her uncrowned emperor plan. She wasn't after being a ruler but a pioneer in the new system she envisioned.

Chapter 762: Only interest endures

Ling Qingyu didn't bother to care about legitimacy issues or human factors. She had no such worries.

The reason lay in her methods, because she never intended to support a single entity. Although she never sought to oppress people, resistance would always exist if a single party reigned.

Such was the reason republic and democratic nations utilized multi-party or dual-party systems—to transfer hatred, in addition to preventing authoritarian cliques from forming again.

Likewise, most people were a collective group of sand bound together through interests. And she planned to transform her Spirit Group into that hidden interest.

Establishing many smaller organizations was far better than one large group with centralized and efficient management.

In her plan, with Athena's oversight and a thorough new system devoid of redundancy, efficiency was the key component of her building blocks.

Like a corporate style—which might not sound applicable to nation-building, much less an alliance of future states.

After all, governance required the utmost attention to detail with no room for mistakes, since mistakes would cost far more than money could compensate.

In corporate culture, she could afford to fail. But failures in national governance suggested terrible losses of savings for ordinary people, to say the least—and at worst, many would lose their lives.

Redundancy ensured such situations were minimized, with multiple layers of oversight to the point of exhausting people.

However, Ling Qingyu chose a middle ground, because Athena solved numerous problems—even if relying on AI sounded unreliable and seemed to discourage human participation.

Of course, this was because Athena behaved better than human beings, lacking the slightest sign of machinery—and she was her own daughter. If she didn't pamper her family member, who would?

Unlike capitalist corporations that always sought profits over humanity, Ling Qingyu's reliance on AI didn't mean she abandoned manpower. Although these topics were far from her current goals—since the nations were amid collapse, much less possessing industrial capabilities—Ling Qingyu already had a plan in mind.

She would never allow a collective power grouping under her watch. So long as enough benefits were given, people could be easily satisfied.

Only ambitious parties would think about forming large groups, which would then lead to rebellion or threaten her in the future for their own agendas.

Hence, Ling Qingyu merely planned to teach the people more than just basic survival, but not beyond that. Higher technology was destined to be restricted—not because she didn't trust them, although that was partly true—but because she knew for a fact that selfish individuals would find a way to arm themselves and then kick her out.

Perhaps, they might portray her as a notorious villain and ruthless colonizer rallying the population in the name of nationalism as propaganda, completely forgetting who had pulled them out of despair. She didn't desire gratitude much less partook a thankless task.

In her past life, Japan was such a nation, though it was an outright extreme comparison. Most people wouldn't agree with her, but from her perspective, the nation had indeed compensated the countries it had terrorized in the past through direct monetary payments and financial economic aid.

For ASEAN nations and Korea, huge direct compensation followed, with the government even attempting to compensate victims who had suffered under their brutal militarists—particularly those subjected to the infamous use of comfort women. Nonetheless, these efforts were hindered by the victim states, which requested that the money go through their governments along with the original amounts.

Those sums flowed into national investments and rebuilding efforts, followed by Japanese economic aid and donations to make up for the past. Investments came later as well, though many argued that Japanese capitalists also benefited from such actions, making the topic prone to endless debates over who gained more.

However, in the 21st century, these governments began to stir up historical grievances among their people again in order to redirect their citizens' hatred. Alas, the most commonly used tool since ancient times—nationalism—remained effective, as people rarely learned the deeper lessons.

During those years of compensation, ordinary families often didn't know that the Japanese government had made payments, because they never personally received what they believed they deserved.

As for why China was the least compensated, the matter was far more complicated than most assumed. A deeper analysis revealed the turmoil of the civil war era, during which the recognized government merely requested warships, while Mao himself and his supporters were more concerned with securing recognition for their government.

Not to mention, internally, some believed that without Japan, it would have been nearly impossible to weaken the original rulers—much less allow the revolution to succeed. A cold, agonizing truth.

Moreover, it was clear Japan's status as puppet under US which prevented any support to the communist countries.

In any case, deeper investments and business cooperation followed, working together to revitalize the economy—another form of economic aid through infrastructure investment, loans and transfer of technology. As for how much Japan truly felt remorse toward China, that remained uncertain among the ruling classes.

After all, century-long historical antagonism was far harder to resolve than younger generations imagined.

The only despicable aspect, in her view for Japan, was the reluctance to fully acknowledge historical truths, leaving younger generations unaware or blind to the atrocities. Worst of all was the lack of an unequivocal official apology for certain crimes. As for why the nation hesitated to confess, Ling Qingyu paid no heed.

After all, if she pursued that line of thought further, it would spiral into endless controversies—every nation demanding apologies from another when history was examined closely. No one's ancestors were entirely innocent.

Regardless, she believed it was a mistaken notion among the public to think that Japan had never offered compensation for its mistakes—an idea easily manipulated by politicians while people failed to think critically for themselves.

Not that Ling Qingyu couldn't understand or sympathize with the grievances. She, too, disliked those who ignored their mistakes—much less the fact that some war criminals had never faced proper tribunals.

Maybe, most victims genuinely wanted a simple real apology and public recognition from the Japanese government rather than the financial aspects. Hopefully, a word of apology appeared in her past world soon than the denials. Some ordinary people in public had come to realize and sincerely felt remorse.

Hopefully such good transformation didn't become ruined by political manipulations and geopolitical tensions. Alas, Ling Qingyu even wanted to know how her nearly volatile past life had changed from Miss System.

Of course, compared to Germany's performance, Japan's was inferior in every context—at least from a simplistic worldview. Nothing in geopolitics was ever straightforward, no matter how ordinary people imagined it to be. The complications behind the scenes weighed far more than the revised history found in textbooks.

If one truly wanted to point fingers, the US couldn't escape responsibility either. Likewise, former colonies and their conquerors all shared their share of burdens.

In any case, from this context, Ling Qingyu understood never to rely too much on others' gratitude. Many experiences had taught her that people easily forgot and sometimes became tools for the ruling parties. One moment they might support you because of benefits; the next, they would grow angry because others had "shed light" on you as the evil manipulator.

Setting aside morality and basic rights, Ling Qingyu believed that her plan compensated for every aspect and excelled in comparison to others. She dared to swear that no one else would treat them better than she would—and she wasn't being narcissistic.

Otherwise, if one ignored the corrupt nature and behavioral flaws within those systems, countries in Elephant Continent and the Middle Kingdom would have developed far more with their abundant resources.

Therefore, crucial core resources must not be handed over easily, despite the moral dilemma of extracting what belonged to others. Alas, managing a country wasn't easy—much less an alliance—even if she had no intention of sitting on the throne, thereby minimizing such risks.

Hearing Ling Qingyu's concerns, Xiao Yue affirmed her initial contemplation of a ruler's game—playing a balance between a failed state government and her parallel underground version of control.

Had she known Ling Qingyu's caution stemmed from the comparison with Japan, she would have fought hard—even with a high probability of losing—to prove why flowers could be reddened. This warlord was destined to become enemies with devils if she ever returned to her own world.

However, at least she could dream of saving her compatriots from atrocities through Ling Qingyu's hands and preventing future tragedies.

Seeing Ling Qingyu pause in thought, along with the cute expression that made her want to ruffle her hair, Xiao Yue asked, "What's wrong?"

"Aiya, I feel like my head is about to go bald from considering so many angles. Heck, I never realized playing Civilization is so hard in reality. Why do games make it so easy to raise my ambitions? Huh?"

Xiao Yue covered her lips and giggled at Ling Qingyu's frustrated complaints. She didn't comment further because she understood Ling Qingyu's inner persistence.

What the latter truly wanted was nothing more than to release some of the pressure that had built up before reality shifted.

Chapter 763: Should I be happy with your praise?

After all those discussions, Ling Qingyu's face turned grim, and she smiled helplessly as if mocking herself.

Xiao Yue raised her brow and asked, "What's wrong? Are you feeling burdened about avoiding others' attention on us?"

"Nope. We don't even need a distraction. It already exists. What I'm fighting against is my conscience."

"We already have a distraction?"

"The whole world's upper beams are crooked and cooked right now," Ling Qingyu sighed as she grabbed her tablet.

She tapped a few times on the screen and showed it to Xiao Yue, whose forehead scrunched up as she read the files. Anger, then calmness, and finally acceptance crossed her face.

The exact reaction Ling Qingyu had experienced. The final mood of acceptance came from the fact that the ludicrous slave trade had never truly been abolished.

Human trafficking, despite all measures, persisted into the modern era. The systemic battle against it merely slowed it down instead of eliminating it entirely.

Don't think demons didn't exist. They walked among us—sadists, pedophiles, and worse. Of course, Ling Qingyu already knew devils lived among humans, but it was still a shock to see how many famous and influential people were on that list. It delivered a gruesome blow.

Especially when ruling parties were involved. It wasn't something that happened solely in the West. Her motherland, as well as many others, had their own buried filth. Disgusting cults thrived. The ruling class was often the same. In fact, rulers were frequently the first to break rules, playing with ordinary people like gods to mortals. They feasted on that sense of superiority.

Psychologically, many fancied seeing others weakened and trembling before them—being worshiped and feared. Deep in their bones, most seemed to crave such feelings.

She wasn't too surprised since her girls had dealt with many sex trafficking rings before, but those were merely low- to mid-level operations.

The higher elite involvements were already under her radar, and Athena's intelligence worked closely with Gu Yi. Official battles were best left to her. Should she request kinetic or silent options, Spirit Fox was ready at any time.

"Well, perhaps I'm not from here and haven't spent too much time here, so it doesn't shock me as much," Xiao Yue said.

"Perhaps you've seen more direct horrors in your time," Ling Qingyu replied, understanding her. Xiao Yue nodded.

"I couldn't disagree. But in my time, most wouldn't have been able to accept that someone they admired and served turned out to be evil."

"We don't need to look far to see how fans collapse when their favorite idols are exposed as criminals."

"Well, I don't know about those," Xiao Yue joked about her antique generation. "What puzzles me is your wry mood when you show me this. Why the hesitant expression when you're already mentally prepared? I don't believe for a second that a cold-blooded person like you is affected by this news."

"Woah, woah, little Yue. I'm not cold-blooded," Ling Qingyu argued.

"Then why?"

"Because I'm going to exploit it as a distraction to benefit me."

"Hold up, Qingyu." Xiao Yue looked speechless. "That's it? That's the reason for your hesitation?"

Ling Qingyu nodded imperceptibly. Xiao Yue nudged her forehead with a finger, and Ling Qingyu smiled wryly. "Bring back my former ruthless sister."

"Alright, it's just my mood, but I'm not going to let it inhibit my plans. I'm not that weak."

"Good," Xiao Yue sighed in relief. "Then your concern isn't about exploiting it."

"No, it's the morals in conflict."

Xiao Yue instantly understood.

After all, Ling Qingyu's reluctance was purely psychological. Most of her crushed opponents had been dealt with cleanly by striking at their weaknesses and exploiting her advantages, regardless of right or wrong.

In business, the winner took it all, as long as her actions didn't affect or destroy families outside her interests.

Well, technically, neither she nor her past self had done so—except for a very few who lost their properties after offending her.

Here, by making use of the attention drawn to those files, Ling Qingyu intended to rapidly form her system while ensuring the flare continued burning.

"What are you fussing about? It's just riding the tide and the timing. You aren't muddying the water," Xiao Yue shrugged and glanced at her with disdain. "You might be ruthless, villainous, and pragmatic, but you aren't despicable. You're only evil to your enemies—and perhaps to the real demons."

"Wow, Mom. Aunt's praise fits your magnanimous aura." Athena's voice cut in, no longer able to bear the silence.

Ling Qingyu's lips twitched. What villainous? What evil? She refused to accept such descriptions.

And you, my daughter... she inwardly hoped Athena to hurry up with creating her body so she could manifest physically soon.

Naturally, Ling Qingyu understood Xiao Yue's meaning—she didn't involve innocents or create chaos that could have benefited her while ruining many lives. She could have. Yet she didn't.

With Athena, truth and falsehood could appear before the world at her decree. Doing nothing and simply watching everything unfold while she focused on her own matters seemed like the most appropriate choice.

Nonetheless, considering her habit of taking advantage of the timeline, she figured she could offer silent help—such as disclosing information that shouldn't remain hidden through Athena. She would merely amplify the effect.

"Alright, just for my peace of mind, I'll provide some support."

"As long as you're happy," Xiao Yue smiled. "What idea?"

She wasn't surprised by Ling Qingyu's plans.

"I mean, should the justice system fail, there's no shortage of willing righteous vigilantes," Ling Qingyu shrugged. "Athena will act like a case officer, assisting with logistics and intelligence."

"Yes, Mom. From what I've investigated, many ex-military personnel are quietly grouping together to form social organizations to help people with their expertise. Online, they claim it's about healthcare, law, and technology. However, I highly doubt they'll stop at just that."

"See that, Sister Yue? I don't even need to do anything—they'll seek their weapons themselves. Maybe after a few difficulties, we'll step in."

Hours passed. Dawn nearly arrived as the two women and Athena continued discussing and imagining future scenarios until Xiao Yue finally yawned.

"Tired?" Ling Qingyu asked, not waiting for an answer. "Come and accompany me to bed."

"No thanks. I still have a duty to fulfill." Xiao Yue bolted upright as if her earlier drowsiness had been an illusion.

"Eh, you're not going to rest?" Ling Qingyu almost laughed in speechlessness.

Please, do you have to be so afraid of me?

"In front of a kind boss, how could I neglect a task I've already spoken of?" Xiao Yue turned her back to her. "Have a sweet dream."

"You too." Ling Qingyu gave up trying and watched the door shut. Out of caution, she locked it and collapsed onto the bed.

Athena turned on a calm, soothing melody for her mother, and Ling Qingyu drifted into sleep.

The next day, Ling Qingyu left half of her guards behind as Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei headed to the university, while she and Xiao Yue planned to meet the city officials.

Someone had explicitly sent word through the airport director. It would be somewhat impolite not to reciprocate without a proper excuse. Not that she cared too much—but it didn't hurt to pay a visit.

When Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei departed for the university with bright smiles, Ling Qingyu and Xiao Yue headed to the government building after Athena made a call.

There was no delay. The mayor's secretary was already waiting at the entrance and politely invited them inside.

Of course, Ling Qingyu didn't bring all her girls—only two for the sake of image. Since she could fight while outnumbered and outgunned, and with the ridiculous security measures she possessed, her confidence had risen sharply.

The invincible perk further accentuated her aura.

The discussion was nothing more than pleasantries and the officials persuading her about investment potential. Ling Qingyu responded that she needed time to survey and consider before making a decision—an elongating, ambiguous technique of gentle refusal.

However, she added the possibility of a small donation for public health. "Small" was measured by Ling Qingyu's wealth, but the amount was still significant even for the officials.

Regardless, the officials would reap reputational merit from the public and prestige in their political careers.

She also hinted at the possibility of financially supporting their next election campaign. This brought the relationship closer.

When the officials asked whether Ling Qingyu had any needs, she exchanged a favor—requesting that her entourage be legally permitted to carry weapons within the city and possibly the state, citing the need for self-protection in a dangerous, gun-prone environment.

The officials didn't refuse such a minor favor and were happy to oblige. They never asked why Ling Qingyu sought their patronage despite her girls already possessing gun licenses.

Politicians were rarely stupid. Questions that yielded no answers only pushed others away.

Now, Ling Qingyu no longer needed to worry about human factors if her group were scrutinized by federal agents.

Furthermore, she hoped the mayor could look after Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei. Throughout the entire meeting, Ling Qingyu did the talking while her secretary, Xiao Yue, carried herself like the real boss.

In any case, both sides were satisfied with the initial exchange. A great morning to begin the day.

From now on, she wouldn't need to feel tense when dealing with federal agents in the future—particularly the CIA and the faction she had offended by eliminating their operatives, at least within the political spectrum.

Kinetic and covert attacks still required vigilance. Ling Qingyu welcomed them to test her guards anytime. The sense of dread brought by their legendary vaporized after experiencing once their methods.

Still, she must prepare to fend off non-conventional ways— poison the simplest technique.

Chapter 764 764: First love???

For the rest of the day, Ling Qingyu and Xiao Yue returned to the hotel and accompanied Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei after the latter two had settled their necessities.

Since they had arrived in Country A, it would be a pity not to tour around. From monumental historical sites to museums, the group visited nearly everything.

The girls witnessed no muggings, no gunshots, and no pickpocketing. Of course, aside from the carefully chosen locations, it was the heavy-duty SUV convoy that deterred criminals.

Ling Qingyu wasn't about to believe that safety and security ranked high here. She had experienced it once in the former Province N; she thoroughly understood how difficult it was to separate infested hives.

Yang Qingyue had succeeded due to numerous coincidences in her favor. An ordinary official would have struggled from day one and soon given up under the pressure.

She had met Ling Qingyu. She had a powerful mother who could exert pressure and instill apprehension in foes. She also had a capable childhood friend and a network within the intelligence system.

Nevertheless, the entourage drew attention everywhere—a group of women with excellent figures and attractive faces. Each of their temperaments radiated with intensity.

Both men and women alike were drawn in. It couldn't be helped when her girls were cool and handsome. Some raised their phones to record, eliciting frowns from her girls.

Naturally, Ling Qingyu knew she herself was the most talked about. Her beauty, even among her attractive confidantes, overshadowed everyone. She feared they would definitely on those shorts and crazy posts, had she not asked Athena to appropriately control the electronic footprint of themselves.

Whispers and gossip were bound to erupt, but the crowd held their breath when Ling Qingyu's gaze swept in their direction. They felt as if invisible hands had tightened around their necks.

It couldn't be helped—when Ling Qingyu grew annoyed with the overcrowding, her emotions influenced those around her.

Oblivious to everything, Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei were beyond excited, prompting Ling Qingyu to shake her head secretly. What was there to see besides historical legends? Everything here was urbanized.

However, perhaps only Ling Qingyu felt that way, as the other girls were enjoying the tour. Even if they were responsible for security, who said they couldn't indulge while working?

In fact, Ling Qingyu preferred the campus area, where the infrastructure wasn't so congested, allowing space for natural-themed parks and playgrounds for children.

Meals were taken at the hotel. Noting the excellent staff service, elegant decorations, and prime location, Ling Qingyu decided to buy the entire hotel outright. She would continue observing for another week.

Yes, she had become the crazy rich Asian she once hated and mocked in movies. Except Ling Qingyu always felt somewhat disappointed that her dream of face-slapping never truly happened. Somehow, it never occurred to her.

The next three days were no different, as they continued touring around the state—mainly within the current city. The armored convoy was bound to raise suspicion among local law enforcement.

Fortunately, the mayor had handled everything. Whenever officers searched the plate numbers, the system flagged them appropriately.

After all, racists, fascists, and tyrants alike were typical bullies who feared the truly powerful. They would never make rookie mistakes that could ruin their lives—especially when it came to major capitalists.

Actually, these bullies— bootlickers— dared not confront them in the first place without checking the system because they weren't willing to commit offense to the powerful.

Even if Ling Qingyu's group were criminals, no one volunteered to check, unless pressured from above.

During those tours, Ling Qingyu temporarily forgot about everything—her ambitions and her worries. She stayed grounded in the moment, indulging herself with her girls. Neither she nor Xiao Yue mentioned their previous discussions.

If Tang Ziyi, who was busy planning guerrilla operations, smuggling routes, and building relationships, knew about her leisurely freedom, Ling Qingyu shuddered at the thought.

Nope. She would never tell Tang Ziyi the truth. She had no desire to be dragged into accompanying clandestine operations.

In the end, the joy ended on the sixth day. The time came when Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei could no longer spend more time with her. Both had to attend classes and learn from their mentors.

Not that they couldn't skip classes. Everyone was an adult, and no one strictly enforced attendance. However, respecting mentors and elders was the bare minimum.

Even though the professors wouldn't have minded—and might have even smiled if a doctor and nurse pair played around—Ling Qingyu was their biggest donor, and only fools would drive away their sponsors. Still, Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei chose to remain humble and continue learning.

After all, the pursuit of knowledge never ended at any age.

Their respectful behavior earned approving nods from the professors. With disciplined and talented students, along with a wealthy background supporting their research, what more could they ask for?

Furthermore, the head professor was beaming with pride, puffing out his chest as he strutted past other departments with his nose held high.

His arrogance infuriated his colleagues, leaving them helpless as envy burned within them like molten lava. He mingled in front of their eyes repeatedly that a ban was issued in his name from entry to their department.

However, the professor beamed even more brightly with pride. His display of satisfaction became a burden for Ling Qingyu, as other departments began seeking her presence.

Several professors even contacted Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei, befriending them in hopes of building connections with her.

Heck, she never knew academicians could sometimes be so obsessed with money in their pursuit of knowledge.

Ling Qingyu silently greeted Mo Yunxi's head professor inside her mind and had to avoid meeting his colleagues in case she was maneuvered into attending invitations.

Though she doubted they could manipulate her directly, Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei were more susceptible to such approaches.

Although donations didn't cost her much—the amount could be recovered within a week, or a month at most, with Athena's assistance—she wasn't keen on sponsoring projects unrelated to her interests.

Perhaps data was valuable, but with Athena, she didn't need to personally participate to obtain it.

Besides, given the perilous elite control and the despicable nature of certain capitalists, Ling Qingyu doubted that the final research products would align with the innovators' original intentions.

Unless she owned the laboratory and its resources, she had no intention of investing in the health sector. This visit was merely to support and uphold her confidantes' reputations.

Ling Qingyu was someone who held a slight grudge after being exploited by her motherland; she had even halted her initial plan of upgrading the country's technology because of it.

If not for Gu Yi, Ling Qingyu might have withdrawn entirely—lying low while gradually decoupling and monopolizing sectors so her group could sustain itself independently elsewhere.

It might be arduous for ordinary businesswoman but she was fully equipped with cheats to hassle the struggle like nothing.

Much less this foreign Country A, despite its thriving opportunities for capitalists. Not to mention, she was disgusted by the numerous networks exposed in those rumored files.

Except for the university circle, nobody felt saddened by the end of accompanying Mo Yunxi and Yin Jingfei. The doctor and nurse were immersed in their new adventure.

Meanwhile, Ling Qingyu recently received an email from one of her alumni. Yes, she had traveled here to attend the reunion next month—something she had been unable to do in the past despite relentless invitations.

Despite her repeated absence, the invitations had never stopped over the years. Now that she had agreed to attend, many were surprised.

Naturally, some admirers from her university days still lingered, clinging to unrequited feelings. Perhaps the reason her former self had refused to fly to Country A was to avoid them. Among them, one man was the most persistent—and he was the one who emailed her.

Unfortunately, this guy had helped her greatly in the past. When she established the foundation that would later be headed by Tao Ling, he contributed the most by connecting her with legal practitioners.

Despite living overseas, his network still extended across Country C. Most importantly, his advice had refined and polished both Athena's framework and her own setup.

Vice versa, of course—she never owed anyone, nor did she like to.

Then why had both her former and current selves tried to distance themselves from him? The answer lay beneath a convoluted love triangle. Well, Ling Qingyu had been the innocent bystander.

Regardless of her firm rejections, the man had persisted throughout their university years and continued to make his presence known from time to time.

She couldn't completely cut off a friend simply because of romantic complications, could she? Especially when he had never crossed the line.

The email was meant to catch up and inquire about her whereabouts. As soon as Ling Qingyu responded, his reply arrived almost instantly, as if automated—complete with a booked location for them to meet.

In fact, Ling Qingyu had slight complaints about her predecessor. No matter how clearly the former self had expressed rejection, there was always a trace of incongruity—as though she held a favorable impression of him, perhaps even a hint of intimacy beyond mere friendship. First love or like perhaps?

At the time, her zeal to return home and her ambition to confront her cheap father—so that her mother and aunt could stand tall again—had overshadowed everything else.

Luckily, her inherently guarded heart had built strong defensive walls. She prioritized business and never indulged in love. Otherwise, the current Ling Qingyu would be vomiting blood in frustration.

She wondered whether her so-called fiancée and this lawyer were meant to be love rivals in some dramatic novel, existing solely to escalate the tension.

Yep, this man was a lawyer. Quite interesting plot between ruffians god of war protagonist and scholar.

Provided she wasn't the heroine.

Chapter 765: Xiao Yue guessed it

It wasn't that such drama mattered anymore, but Ling Qingyu felt embarrassed at the thought of others discovering the subtle relationship from the past.

Although Xiao Yue and Tang Ziyi knew that wasn't the real her, that wouldn't stop them from teasing and suppressing her in the future.

Imagining the sight of herself being mocked and bullied during an argument because the opposite side held on the nuclear leeway, she hissed and inhaled a sharp breath.

No, she'd never hand a knife to these two, especially these two.

Now that the invitation had been sent, Ling Qingyu had no more excuses. Not to mention, continued refusal and dodging would make her seem as though she had a guilty conscience.

Coincidence or not, the reunion gathering was near the state where she was currently staying—only a five-hour drive away.

But her worst prediction came true: that guy was also in the same city as her. Quite understandable, since the city was one of the most prosperous in the world, boasting one of the highest GDPs per capita, far surpassing many nations.

The elite circle and major businesses clustered in this city. As a lawyer, it was no surprise that he remained in such a networking hub.

Delay was out of the question.

Inside her king suite,

Ling Qingyu rubbed her temples after placing her phone on the short table. Opposite her, Xiao Yue noticed her unusual reaction and asked,

"What's the matter? Has the cat got your tongue?"

"Quit it, shortie. Even you can't solve the mess I'm dreading right now."

"Oh..." Xiao Yue elongated her tone and leaned forward.

"Don't even bother trying. I'm not saying anything." Ling Qingyu shook her head and paced back and forth.

In fact, Ling Qingyu shouldn't have been affected by such drama. The situation and the script were almost laughable—if only she weren't the main protagonist.

She had already resolved the divorce plot, and now she was facing the 'first love' arc. Crap, give her a break. Please.

Some might say the solution was simple: act natural, don't pursue anything, stay at ease, and let things flow.

Heck, if only it were that simple.

Actually, the current Ling Qingyu wasn't troubled at all. Based on her usual demeanor, she would have acted cold and ruthless, nipping the issue in the bud. Short-term pain was better than long-term suffering.

Nevertheless, she knew her predecessor's favorable impression had almost escalated into something ambiguous. To clarify her stance without hurting him made her brain buzz.

She couldn't outright declare, "We should stop and focus on ourselves," could she? Neither side had ever expressed anything explicitly—only through actions and subtle behaviors.

As for why she had sought his help regarding legal matters—please, maintaining relationships was the most difficult part of dealing with people. Even if she had already become acquainted with renowned lawyers in her own country, certain steps were essential for etiquette and courtesy.

As long as it didn't drain her too much or affect her work, Ling Qingyu was willing to abide by the bare minimum.

She possessed the power and prestige to disregard certain rules, but when it came to her former classmate, she couldn't behave tyrannically or feign ignorance.

Besides, her main concern didn't stem from the man at all—but from her close female friend during university.

Due to her high IQ—apparently inversely proportional to her EQ :D—and her inability to mingle easily, Ling Qingyu had often been ostracized. Her distant demeanor pushed away many who might otherwise have befriended her.

It was that female friend who stood out and remained by her side despite her odd behavior. She had helped Ling Qingyu immensely during the early stages.

Yet fate seemed to mock them. Her friend liked that man and had confided in her. So when the man later showed interest in Ling Qingyu, her friend likely felt betrayed, suspecting that Ling Qingyu had done something behind her back.

And Ling Qingyu had never been skilled at explaining herself. Unsurprisingly, a misunderstanding formed. From a small misunderstanding, it grew into something fabricated and distorted. Finally, grievance.

That had been the best friend who helped her the most.

Perhaps... but the current Ling Qingyu didn't dwell on what her predecessor had felt back then.

She only cared that she must tread carefully now, so as not to further offend that friend. Consider it a gesture of gratitude for having taken care of her former self.

A ridiculous love triangle—and her only complaint was this: why was one woman making things difficult for another?

It wasn't even that complicated. One simply had to ask directly.

Honestly, Ling Qingyu would rather not meet any of them or participate in this drama at all. Looking back at the timeline, she wondered how on earth she had agreed to attend the reunion.

"Stop pacing around. I know you've got a pair of big ones—you don't need to brag," Xiao Yue said, rolling her eyes.

"Woah, woah. I never expected envy to come out of your mouth." Ling Qingyu chuckled in exasperation, glancing downward before patting her chest lightly. "Those who've never experienced it will never understand the difficulty of carrying such weight."

Xiao Yue puffed her cheeks in annoyance, glaring up and down at her. "Get lost. I've had enough of your so-called jiggle physics."

"Please stop exaggerating." Ling Qingyu gave up and sat opposite her. "I apologize if I've created an inferiority complex in you."

She knew Xiao Yue was merely redirecting her irritation. Perhaps this warlord was lowering her guard, preparing to swoop in for answers.

"Are you sure you're not going to confide in me? It's not healthy to keep everything bottled up," Xiao Yue advised.

As expected, Ling Qingyu smirked at her own accurate guess. "It's better if you don't know the truth. Otherwise, my future life may never be peaceful."

Xiao Yue narrowed her eyes, curiosity intensifying. "You do realize I can just ask Athena what this fuss is about."

"I knew you'd say that. I've already ordered my daughter to hide it from everyone except me."

"So long as you understand that your actions aren't affecting our family in any way, then it's your decision."

"I promise," Ling Qingyu replied.

Xiao Yue nodded and stopped pressing. It seemed Ling Qingyu's concern wasn't related to their affairs—more personal than anything else.

By elimination, Xiao Yue guessed it involved her former classmates. Continuing the line of thought, Ling Qingyu usually didn't care much about interpersonal relationships.

Wait—that was the current one, not the former.

Realization struck Xiao Yue suddenly. The final answer had to be some sort of romantic debt—or something of similar gravity like unrequited awkwardness. She believed the former was more likely. Her pupils widened as she clutched her stomach and burst into laughter.

"Oh my dear! Qingyu, you actually have a day like this... Bring back my manipulative queen!"

Ling Qingyu's expression darkened as she tried to ignore the ringing mockery. She sighed heavily.

Alas, what she had tried to conceal had still been noticed by this infuriating bastard. Yet, Ling Qingyu's reaction just confirmed Xiao Yue's conjecture—at first the probability barely hang around 60 percent. Now it switched to 90.

"Holy shit, I guess it spot on. Come on, meet your old flame soon." The warlord who pretended to laugh hard earlier soon giggled and hiccuped hard. The humorous melodic signature from her lips didn't sound pleasant to Ling Qingyu's ears.

Chapter 766: Mentalist's manipulation? Draft

Ling Qingyu's eyelids twitched nonstop. Her lips pressed into a thin line, her pupils brimming with irritation. Her plan to hide her dilemma had failed before it even began.

Very soon, that bastard surnamed Tang would know about her predicament, and Ling Qingyu dared swear—on that male stallion's cockroach-like fate—that the news would spread to the women closest to her, including her mother and aunt.

Lin Fan: Huh?!

Once word reached her mother and aunt, their persistence in urging her to marry might resurface. What a disaster!

Xiao Yue was indeed a troublesome little fox. And that continuous laughter only stung Ling Qingyu further.

"Alright, drink some water and calm down before we talk." Ling Qingyu pinched the bridge of her nose and looked away from the unbearable sight.

However, Xiao Yue continued choking with laughter, shaking her head uncontrollably. Ling Qingyu stepped forward and smacked the back of the little warlord.

Bang!

"Ouch! What was that for?" Xiao Yue glared and snarled.

"A cure. See?" Ling Qingyu shrugged.

"Hiss... I suspect most of that was revenge," Xiao Yue muttered, rolling her eyes.

"You doubt my love too much."

Xiao Yue responded with a middle finger. Ling Qingyu blinked calmly. "No need to thank me. You're welcome." She returned to her seat.

"You know what? Since we're all lonely and available, why not use our leisure time more efficiently?"

"Your 'efficiency' is stepping on my face, okay?" Ling Qingyu said in exasperation. "And leisure, my ass."

"Come on, it's the first time. I want to hear you talk about your story," Xiao Yue said coyly, resting her hands on her knees.

Ling Qingyu could withstand hard attacks, but against a soft approach, her spine wasn't nearly as firm. Of course, that softness was reserved for women only.

"It's actually nothing unusual—just a young maiden's curiosity and tender feelings." Ling Qingyu shook her head and briefly recounted the story.

After she finished, Xiao Yue stared at her blankly, dumbfounded. "That's it? That's all?"

Her voice rose in disbelief. Such a bland story—and it had thrown Ling Qingyu into mental turmoil.

"What do you mean, 'that's it'?" Ling Qingyu shot back.

"There's no excitement. Nothing but teenage feelings. Nobody confessed, and there was no relationship." Xiao Yue sighed and collapsed onto the couch, utterly listless. "What part am I even supposed to gossip about?"

No, sis. The real problem lies in that last word, doesn't it? Ling Qingyu rolled her eyes.

"By the way, how did you know so quickly? It was as if you read my mind," Ling Qingyu asked.

"It's not hard at all. Just experience and the mentality of an observer. Trust your intuition, support it with logical reasoning and facts, then find evidence to back it up."

Ling Qingyu's lips twitched. "I feel like I understand every word you said, yet somehow you've told me everything and nothing at the same time."

Xiao Yue chuckled and explained in a simpler way. "I make a vague guess and test it on you while watching your reaction. Your response confirms my suspicions. Then I dig deeper and present it with confidence. Once confirmed, I press further on that assumption. Slowly, I get a general idea of what it's about."

"That still doesn't explain how you stamped me with 'romantic debts.'"

"Like I said—observer's mentality. Intuition is the sharpest weapon. Use it well, and it works wonders. My intuition told me you wanted to keep this problem secret. Based on your past behavior, you've never hidden anything related to strategy or business. Through logical elimination..."

"Alright, I get it. Logical reasoning combined with sharp intuition and a bit of psychological probing to extract more intel. Sounds like interrogation techniques, to be frank."

"It is indeed." Xiao Yue smiled.

"It seems my future life won't be easy to hide from you." Ling Qingyu sighed in despair.

"Stop acting."

In the end, Xiao Yue offered a solution that eased Ling Qingyu's tension. The latter prepared for the meeting, deciding not to bring too large an entourage.

Three vehicles should be enough.

"Three SUVs? Are you trying to make a grand entrance?" Xiao Yue argued.

After some back and forth, they compromised. Two it was.

The rest of the team would remain at the hotel, on standby in case something went wrong. It was part of the standard operating procedure initiated by Tang Ziyi for contingency planning.

Since the meeting would take place in a wealthy business district, the security level was relatively high. The daily gunshots reported on the news never occurred in that area.

In the backseat of the vehicle, Ling Qingyu gasped in frustration. "Why are you following me when I'm meeting my friends?"

"Why? Am I not allowed?" Xiao Yue raised a brow and lowered her voice. "Or are there secrets you want to keep? You can trust me to stay quiet."

"Give me some privacy, sis. I don't want you to ruin it."

"It's not a date. So what if I tag along?" Xiao Yue replied provocatively. "I'm your secretary. I'm supposed to assist you and stay by your side at all times."

Ling Qingyu pushed her away lightly and gave up arguing. "Whatever. I never knew you were this gossipy."

It seemed her plan to kick Xiao Yue out for some freedom would have to be expedited. Perhaps this little fox should join Tang Ziyi's desert operations sooner rather than later.

The two SUVs arrived at the destination and stopped at the entrance. Ling Qingyu and Xiao Yue stepped out and surveyed their surroundings.

Upon noticing the uniformed staff—a valet parking attendant—Ling Qingyu sighed at the affluent habit of handing car keys to strangers.

It was something she could never fully understand. What if someone with malicious intent exploited the system? There were inherent risks involved.

She truly couldn't imagine casually tossing her keys over, returning later to retrieve the car, and driving off with complete peace of mind. Absolutely not.

Still, Ling Qingyu admitted that such roles created employment opportunities for those in need. And who knew—someone ambitious might even expand their network through such positions.

Chapter 767 767: Ling Qingyu's weird persistence

Upon hearing Ling Qingyu's name, the staff promptly led her and Xiao Yue to a private room with an elevated scenic view. Or so the advertisement wrote it down.

A high-rise vantage point, surrounded by towering buildings and overlooking a long rectangular park. Nothing particularly special, Ling Qingyu thought—just another stretch of urban infrastructure.

She whistled softly as she followed behind the staff member's graceful figure. The voluptuous sway of the woman's hips was undeniably pleasing to the eye—balanced proportions, elegant curves beneath the fitted uniform.

Ling Qingyu's nerves relaxed instantly. Though she was already surrounded by many beauties and had grown somewhat immune to visual temptation, she still appreciated the different allure brought by other nationalities.

After all, most of the "goddesses" around her shared the same nationality—except for Sofia. She still hadn't had the time to properly speak with the captured Persian cat.

Right—Sofia was also present, going to be seated at a separate nearby table with her partner.

Meanwhile, Xiao Yue's forehead throbbed visibly as she watched her overly appreciative confidante. She genuinely worried about how their subordinates perceived their flirtatious boss. Fortunately, most of the girls had long since adapted to Ling Qingyu's harmless quirks.

In any case, their boss never bullied or exploited them—if anything, she pampered them excessively. They all knew Ling Qingyu possessed desire, but lacked the audacity to act on it.

Thus, Sofia and her partner exchanged amused smiles and followed along, while the other two guards remained in the vehicles outside, having brought meals to pass the time.

Despite her wandering gaze, Ling Qingyu noticed a few passing staff members casting strange looks. Their expressions ranged from pity to subtle mockery, even though they tried to conceal it.

Naturally, Ling Qingyu understood that their attention wasn't directed at her—but at the staff member guiding her group.

Her brows furrowed slightly. The beautiful staff member seemed to be the subject of workplace tension. Still, it wasn't her concern. Work environments were never free of grievances.

At the same time, Ling Qingyu refrained from immediately assuming fault lay with the woman. She had seen and experienced too much to judge hastily. There was no need to look far—her own half-sister had endured similar treatment: doing nothing wrong, yet blamed and crushed by an ignorant crowd.

Perhaps, she mused, the "beauty filter" that generated favoritism also worked in reverse. And perhaps that same filter was at work on her own perceptions.

In her opinion, beautiful and attractive faces often elicited more tolerance and acceptance—even for minor misconduct—so long as moral boundaries weren't crossed.

Once the elevator doors closed, Ling Qingyu noticed the smile plastered across the staff member's face. Yet her eyes lacked luster, silently crying out with exhaustion and a fading sense of hope.

Staring at the reflection in the mirrored wall, Ling Qingyu spoke softly. "My dear, you look very beautiful."

"Ah—" The staff member patted her chest in surprise, visibly startled. "Thank you, Miss. You're far more beautiful. Compared to your group, I'm nothing but a mayfly."

"Don't underestimate yourself," Ling Qingyu replied gently. "I don't know whether others' opinions are affecting yours, but believe in yourself—and in nature's gift."

"Your words made my day, Miss." The staff bowed gratefully, her face brimming with appreciation.

Even so, Ling Qingyu still sensed reluctance beneath the gratitude—a subtle detachment, as though the woman was merely going through the motions. Ordinarily, Ling Qingyu would not pry when someone preferred silence.

But the nagging in her chest refused to subside.

Intuition—the most mysterious tool of humanity—often wielded by mystics and dismissed by skeptics.

Several times in the past, it had guided her well. Once she stopped forcing logic to dominate it and instead allowed herself to ride its tide, logic and evidence would follow naturally to complement her instinct.

Her perception had changed. She noticed what she previously overlooked. Just as Xiao Yue had read her so easily earlier, wasn't intuition simply another facet of calculation sharpened to its peak?

"Usually, I wouldn't interfere when someone clearly wants to be left alone," Ling Qingyu said calmly. "But this time, I must insist."

Her words startled the staff member, who instinctively stepped back and folded her arms as if shielding herself. "Miss, with all due respect—"

"It's just my intuition nagging me," Ling Qingyu sighed at the guarded posture. "Otherwise, why would I step beyond my boundaries and risk being misunderstood?"

She didn't withdraw her gaze. There was no aggression in her eyes—only understanding, warmth, and a quiet form of care.

The staff member hesitated. Why would a stranger show kindness when familiar faces only kicked her down?

Ling Qingyu glanced at the ascending floor numbers and waited. If the woman truly didn't want help, she would stop. Forcing assistance upon someone often led to counterproductive results. She had already extended the opportunity; whether it was accepted lay in the other's hands.

"Sorry, Miss. I didn't want to talk about it because I thought... I thought..."

"You thought I'd judge you from a moral high ground. Yes?" Ling Qingyu offered a faint smile.

Xiao Yue and the others listened quietly, careful not to add pressure. They were long accustomed to Ling Qingyu's sudden involvement in others' affairs. Most of the time, such encounters were anything but simple.

"I—I didn't mean it like that."

"Hey, calm down," Ling Qingyu said gently. "Why don't you tell us about yourself?"

Athena remained silent; Ling Qingyu had given no signal yet. So, she knew nothing about the woman's information. Sometimes, knowing too much did more harm than good.

"Actually... it doesn't matter if Miss knows," the staff member said after a pause. "They look at me like this because I was one of the redacted victims exposed in those files."

"You're not referring to the files we're thinking of, are you?" Ling Qingyu glanced at Xiao Yue, whose eyes sparkled with curiosity. Sofia frowned faintly, pity flickering across her features. The other Spirit Fox member looked completely confused. What files?

"Yes," the staff nodded. "The scandal that's been ongoing for so long and only recently exploded."

"I'm sorry," Ling Qingyu replied softly. "I shouldn't have asked and reopened old wounds."

"No, it's fine, Miss." The woman seemed relieved to finally speak without sensing judgment.

Many had sympathized with her, but she could still feel blame hidden beneath their words. After enduring darkness, her senses had sharpened.

Very few had offered genuine concern or practical help. Like now—she had secured this job at the hotel through a friend's network after escaping a former colleague whose gaze alone filled her with pain.

But somehow, they had found her again. She couldn't simply move away.

"Can you tell me more?" Ling Qingyu placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

The earlier admiration in her gaze had long since faded. In its place was quiet resolve. Whenever her intuition stirred, the matter was never simple.

The staff member drew a slow breath.

"It wasn't anything. I was just stupid... or maybe I deserved it."

"Hey," Ling Qingyu interrupted gently, her tone firm but warm. "Everyone goes through moments only they themselves can truly understand. No one else has the right—or the moral ground—to look down on you."

She held the young woman's gaze. "You live for yourself. Not for others."

The staff member nodded slowly, swallowing whatever self-condemnation lingered in her throat. "Years ago... I worked as a young model."

Before she could continue, the elevator chimed and the doors slid open. Instantly, she straightened her posture, smoothing her expression into professional composure as she guided the group toward the private room.

Fortunately, no one had arrived yet. The panoramic view outside the glass walls looked impressive at first glance—but in Ling Qingyu's opinion, it was merely another arrangement of steel, glass, and trimmed greenery.

With time to spare, Ling Qingyu gestured for the staff member to sit beside her and motioned for her to continue. Xiao Yue, Sofia, and Sofia's partner also took seats nearby.

Technically, Sofia and her partner were meant to dine outside while securing the room's perimeter as internal security. But at this moment, they remained within earshot.

The beautiful staff member looked flattered—and slightly panicked—to be invited to sit among them. Life had long since crushed her youthful arrogance. Harsh lessons had hammered into her the rigid reality that classes existed—and that crossing invisible boundaries could invite consequences.

Seeing such a rare humane side from someone among the wealthy elite made her question her long-held perceptions.

This young, beautiful, affluent lady—with her soothing aura—reminded the staff member of her mother from childhood. So gentle. So reassuring.

Bit by bit, her defenses lowered.

Simply speaking to Ling Qingyu felt healing, as though the weight pressing against her heart had finally found a place to rest.

With supportive gazes, Ling Qingyu and the others listened as she summarized her story.

It was nothing unusual. A teenage girl longing for freedom and wealth, striving to climb upward.

Her beauty, figure, and natural charisma—gifts she had been born with—smoothed her path.

But such gifts also attracted the gaze of predators.

Chapter 768: Money isn't evil, it merely amplifies

Under the guise of a company-sponsored vacation, a young woman—curious about the glittering world of the wealthy—unknowingly stepped into a trap.

It wasn't that she hadn't been cautious. She had heard the rumors, the whispered warnings about the entertainment industry. She had been careful—at least, careful in the way someone inexperienced could be.

But her trusted agent had reassured her. With gentle persuasion and seemingly reasonable explanations, he painted a convincing illusion of safety.

By the time she boarded the plane, it was already too late.

When men from elite circles approached her—men whose names carried weight in business and politics—she was powerless against them.

What shattered her most wasn't only their cruelty. It was the sight of her agent smiling, conversing with those demons as though conducting ordinary business. Gratitude in his eyes. Satisfaction.

She soon realized she wasn't the only victim. There were others. Many others.

Those who endured quietly, offering little resistance, were "compensated" and eventually released.

Those who resisted to the end... met far worse fates.

She didn't know every detail, but the crude jokes those predators exchanged were enough to fill in the blanks.

And the ones who later tried to speak out—especially those with some public influence—were swiftly silenced.

An accidental fall.

A drug overdose.

A tragic misfortune.

She had been too terrified to even tell her parents, afraid that speaking up would drag them into hell with her. These men were powerful—so powerful that their combined wealth could destabilize economies.

People said unity was strength.

But did people truly unite?

Only when everyone was affected.

What hurt her most were the whispers from colleagues—the blunt accusations that she "deserved it" for boarding that plane, for accepting a company-sponsored trip.

As if it were that simple.

Then what about employees in legitimate companies who were sold out by their bosses during overseas retreats? Were they foolish too? Did they deserve to become prey?

Victim-blaming was easier than confronting real culprits.

It spared people from admitting their own fear.

Ling Qingyu watched the young staff member tremble, her voice breaking into quiet sniffles. She reached out and gently rubbed her back.

"See?" Ling Qingyu said softly. "Don't you already know in your heart how absurd those accusations are? If you know they're cowards, why let their words wound you?"

Her tone remained steady. "I know you're strong enough to judge right from wrong."

The woman lowered her head in silence.

She understood, deep down, why those words still hurt.

Those who had never experienced such darkness could not truly empathize, no matter how sweet their words sounded. They had never felt the suffocating closeness of fear.

Most preferred to stand on moral high ground—calmly analyzing, rationalizing, speculating—like judges in a courtroom where they bore none of the consequences.

Like the so-called experts on television rehearsing war simulations—calculating projected casualties and destruction as if they were merely numbers on a spreadsheet—without the faintest understanding of what such losses meant to ordinary families.

If even experts could behave that way, trusting politicians who governed entire nations with greed became even harder. Of course, genuine and righteous leaders did exist among the ruling class—but they were a minority.

"I feel like you have something to ask me. Or... are you worried you might offend me?"

"Yes, Miss." The woman nodded feebly. "May I?"

Ling Qingyu tilted her head slightly. "Go on."

"I really don't wish to upset you but I must ask. Forgive my offense. Are you rich? How wealthy are you?"

Ling Qingyu blinked at the bluntness, then a faint smile curved her lips. Before she could respond, the woman hurriedly added,

"If it's private or inconvenient, you don't have to answer. What I truly want to know is... what do the rich think of us? Of our situation?"

"You're asking why people in our class do nothing?" Ling Qingyu asked calmly, immediately grasping the core of the question.

"Yes... Are we just tools? Playthings in your— their—eyes?"

Instead of answering directly, Ling Qingyu asked, "What do you think of me?"

"You seem kind, gentle, caring." The woman hesitated. "I don't believe you're evil."

"You 'seem,' hmm?" Ling Qingyu's gaze sharpened slightly. "Do you mean I'm not necessarily what I appear to be?"

"They were the same too..." The woman trailed off.

Ling Qingyu sighed softly. She understood.

"I can't give you a clear answer," she said after a moment. "But I can give you one perspective. Why should they care? What does it matter if a hundred or a thousand suffer—so long as they themselves remain unaffected? As long as the devils involved know their limits and the façade of order continues, many will choose comfort over confrontation."

The staff member's face turned pale. Her lips parted in shock.

But then something in her expression shifted.

Yes... why should they care? Even ordinary people often turned away when the problem wasn't theirs. Selfishness wasn't exclusive to wealth.

Seeing the woman's silence grow heavy, Ling Qingyu added gently,

"That's the stance of the indifferent—not necessarily mine. Not all are heartless. Some do act. But such matters are complex and deeply concealed. Even among the wealthy, information is compartmentalized. You might sense something wrong, but without concrete evidence, intervention isn't simple."

She paused before continuing.

"As for why you feel most rich people are evil... I'm afraid the answer may disappoint you. It isn't wealth that creates evil. It's human nature."

Her voice remained steady.

"In this world, how many truly walk with integrity and strong morals? Even among the vast population, genuinely good people are rare. Why would the elite class be any different?"

She leaned back slightly.

"Money amplifies what's already there. A kind person with resources may become philanthropic and protective. But someone with hidden malice?"

Her eyes darkened just a fraction.

"They simply gain the power to act on it."

Somehow, Ling Qingyu's blunt honesty shattered the staff member's mental blockade. She was no longer drowning in resentment over the world's injustice, nor obsessing over why karma seemed so selective in punishing evil.

It was as if a crack had formed in the rigid shell of her perception—and light seeped through.

Unaware that she had just become someone's unexpected mentor, Ling Qingyu casually grasped the woman's palm and began kneading it.

"Ah—Miss!" the staff cried out in surprise.

"Though I'm not one of those degenerates—and I want nothing to do with them—I'm still sorry you had to experience such a disaster," Ling Qingyu said softly. "Remember this: despite our selfishness, what makes us human is the will to protect humanity itself. Class and wealth shouldn't matter when it comes to that."

She squeezed her hand once more.

"We have a saying where I'm from—survive a calamity, and fortune will follow. So cheer up, young lady. And never doubt your beauty."

The staff flushed as the kneading continued. Xiao Yue, Sofia, and Sofia's partner all protested at once, accusing Ling Qingyu of shamelessly taking advantage.

"Thank you for your kind words," the staff replied shyly. "But isn't my beauty what brought disaster upon me?"

Ling Qingyu laughed. "If that were true, then what am I?" She pointed at herself without the slightest trace of modesty.

Here we go again. The girls exchanged helpless looks. Her narcissism had returned.

"Miss is the most beautiful person I've ever seen," the staff said solemnly—though she had to suppress a twitch at the corner of her lips to keep from laughing.

"See? She said so." Ling Qingyu flipped her hair dramatically and winked. "Unlike my so-called friends here—no loyalty at all."

Snickers burst out among them, the tension dissolving completely. The three girls weren't merciful when they slammed Ling Qingyu's boast. All of them consoled the staff's heart, making her realize being beautiful was also a part of herself. Denying it meant denying herself.

The staff knew it was impossible to grow truly close to someone of Ling Qingyu's status. Still, she allowed herself to indulge in this fleeting warmth. She couldn't help envying Xiao Yue and the others.

"I'm certain you're one of the good ones among the wealthy," she said earnestly.

"Wow, I've been given the 'good person' card." Ling Qingyu placed a hand over her chest theatrically. "What should I do? I don't want to lose this rare connection."

"I'm serious, Miss. I never thought I'd meet a truly noble family among the elite."

Perhaps Sofia and her partner didn't radiate obvious wealth. But Ling Qingyu and Xiao Yue carried something else—confidence, authority, an innate nobility of temperament.

Ling Qingyu's confidence stemmed from wealth, connections, personal capability—and secrets no one else knew. Xiao Yue, on the other hand, was a warlord in all but name. Neither of them resembled ordinary socialites to attract men like gold-diggers she had seen many times, pretending as wealthy ladies.

"A pity, my little sister," Ling Qingyu said suddenly, addressing the staff with casual affection. "I'm not a good person. I'm a villain. I'll do whatever it takes to achieve my goals. I don't care about the process—only the results."

"Villain?" The staff rolled her eyes and shook her head. "No matter how convincingly you say that, I trust what I see. You're more than just some pragmatic enabler."

If someone like this young miss called herself a villain, then perhaps the world's definition of villainy had gone astray long ago, the staff thought.

In her eyes, Ling Qingyu possessed not cruelty—but greatness restrained by will. The bearing of someone meant to rule, yet capable of lowering herself to comfort a stranger.

She cheered up that humanity still lived on.

Chapter 769: William

"So, ignore them and focus on yourself," said Ling Qingyu. "In case the bully goes too far and gets out of line, fight back. But I suggest you treat them as starving dogs sniffing."

Picturing the scene described by the young miss, the female staff almost laughed. Her evil colleagues all transformed into animals in her eyes.

Ling Qingyu smiled as she watched the girl laugh and added, "Of course, that doesn't mean a human body doesn't need a healthy environment."

The female staff nodded. She enjoyed the conversation, but her workplace wasn't friendly enough to spend private time chatting. She also had some hesitation, as she didn't like disappointing friendly, kindhearted customers.

Ling Qingyu noted her expression and put on a pair of spectacles. The female staff's eyes widened, never expecting the young, beautiful, wealthy lady to have problems with her eyesight.

A question popped up — then how could she have praised her as beautiful?

"My eyesight is good. You don't need to doubt my praise of your attractiveness," Ling Qingyu joked. "It's just that too much work has consumed my eye power, so the doctor specified that I wear glasses when I need to concentrate, like when reading."

While Sofia and her partner agreed instinctively their boss had worked hard to achieve the current status, Xiao Yue humphed and rolled her eyes— too much work her foot.

Someone who threw her work to her subordinates and lay flat deserved such description? This was the insult to all hard workers.

Ignoring Xiao Yue's opposing expression from the corner of her eyes, Ling Qingyu scrolled through her phone in pretense, while in fact she was communicating with Athena silently.

"Let me write down my phone number. You can contact me if you need any help." With that, she took out a small piece of paper and a pen from her purse.

Through her AR vision, Athena directly generated a number that could proxy to her phone. Digitally, her daughter could create any virtual number with layered proxies, each linking to the caller's identity so Ling Qingyu could immediately know who was who.

The female staff murmured in surprise and glanced at the others, who returned comforting smiles. "For me?"

She was still puzzled when her hand received the paper from Ling Qingyu. Her gaze was quickly drawn to the number. Given her experience, she didn't recognize the country code, yet the remaining digits seemed unusual. Still, she didn't think the lady before her would waste her time teasing her regardless of how strange the numbers were.

To her querying gaze, Ling Qingyu answered, "If you ever need help, don't hesitate. There's nothing wrong with relying on someone and asking for help. There might not be many willing to help, but I am willing, and that's enough. Just don't forget to reach out."

She patted the staff's back. The woman expressed her gratitude, clutching the thin slip of paper. Though it was unconventional to see someone of her status without a contact card, having to scribble her information instead, the staff didn't think much of it—much to Ling Qingyu's relief. She was slightly embarrassed that her business contact card wasn't suited for this woman's situation.

However, time didn't allow her to continue, as the room's entrance swung open. Everyone stared toward the doorway and saw a gentleman, momentarily frozen at the threshold in surprise.

He stepped a couple of steps backward, craning his neck to look at the room's name above to check if he had entered the room and scanned his eyes again at several figures.

When his eyes landed on Ling Qingyu's figure, a smile crept onto his face as he immediately called out, "Ling... Long time no see. It's great to see you again."

"It's been a while, William. I'm happy you invited me here," Ling Qingyu stood up and replied.

"Hey, don't say that. I'm honored to be the first to see you again." William approached, gesturing for a hug, but Ling Qingyu denied him with a shake of her head.

"Eh— it's just a hug. Come on, Ling." His face looked dejected, drawing pity from the female staff. Too bad it didn't include Xiao Yue, Sofia, and her partner—much less Ling Qingyu.

"No means no. Quit your lousy acting." Ling Qingyu didn't bother with politeness. "Have a seat and give me a moment."

"Please."

Ling Qingyu turned toward the female staff. "Unfortunately, I can't spend more time with you, but remember—if there's ever any need, even a new job with a better environment, I can help you."

"Of course, Miss. Thank you very much." The staff bowed, her tear-filled eyes blinking with gratitude.

"Also, be proud of your beautiful face and figure. To be honest, without them, I might not have been so keen on digging the way I just did," Ling Qingyu laughed.

A genuine, beautiful smile returned to the staff's face.

"Oh right, could I ask a favor? Please guide my friends to another table that I booked nearby." Ling Qingyu gestured toward Sofia and her partner.

"With pleasure, Miss." She led Sofia and her partner toward the next table, but William interrupted.

"Hey, hey, it's alright. Since they're Ling's friends, why don't you eat with us? Just the two of us would be too boring."

"Please don't say things against your will, William. Ignore him and enjoy your meal."

"Gotcha, Boss. We'll bleed your wallet dry," Sofia teased.

"Go ahead and gobble. It's just a mediocre expense."

After the door shut, William said, "It's not good to treat your friends that way, right? I'm really fine."

"Don't worry. Those girls have some topics they want to discuss in private." Ling Qingyu waved her hand lightly and took a seat, though she didn't reject the word—friends.

William didn't press further and looked toward Xiao Yue.

"She's my close aide, a true confidante—Xiao Yue," Ling Qingyu introduced.

"Nice to meet you, William. I've heard so much about you from Qingyu." Xiao Yue's tone carried a hint of schadenfreude.

Ling Qingyu almost slapped Xiao Yue on the head for messing around. Though she had spoken about William before, it wasn't the way Xiao Yue had framed it. Damn shortie.

"Oh, Ling. I can't believe you talk about me," William laughed.

"Oh, it can't be helped when my close sister asks who I'm meeting today. I also invited Astrid."

"Astrid?" William straightened his spine. "She..."

"Why? Can't I call my closest classmate who helped me throughout my studies?" Ling Qingyu frowned.

"Of course not. It's just..." William showed a trace of guilt.

"You didn't tell her about me, did you?" Ling Qingyu concluded without waiting for an answer and changed the topic. "When are you two going to work things out? It's been so long."

"You know, Ling. Astrid is my friend and colleague. I just can't see her the way I see you." William stared at Ling Qingyu, trying to see if she would blush at his indirect confession.

Unfortunately, he was doomed to be disappointed. In terms of orientation, she was straighter than a ruler.

Ling Qingyu didn't return his gaze and responded, "There's no fate between us. Don't waste your time, William."

"Alas, you're always the same. I thought back then I had pried open your defenses." William shook his head.

Ling Qingyu glanced at Xiao Yue's gossipy eyes and chuckled helplessly. "Time passes so fast. We've both grown into who we are now."

"Yeah. I thought you'd venture here and never return."

"I have responsibilities."

"You haven't settled your enemies yet?"

Xiao Yue looked surprised at how the former Ling Qingyu had once confessed parts of her past so openly—unlike the current one, tight-lipped to the bone.

"They're not even in my eyes right now. I can do whatever I want, and I quite enjoy how nervous they are about when my knife might fall on their necks." Ling Qingyu smiled eerily. "But too bad—I made a stronger opponent while chasing my dream. That's why I asked for your help and advice on recruiting legal professionals. Thank you for your assistance."

"It's alright. We're old friends. That's the least I can do."

Now that Ling Qingyu scrutinized William carefully, she had to admit he wasn't bad at all. In fact, he was quite handsome and attractive to women. His work charisma and gentlemanly vibe fit most people's image of a dream lover.

Otherwise, why would the former Ling Qingyu's heart have cracked for him—and her besties fallen for him completely? Plus, a lawyer at that and the peak at the social ladder.

Some chitchat followed, especially as they reminisced about their university days, until Ling Qingyu pressed a button to call for a server.

It couldn't be helped when her intuition sensed Xiao Yue's growing annoyance from hunger. She had to satisfy her cute shortie first and avoid any unnecessary offense. If Xiao Yue spread the wrong words out of resentment, Ling Qingyu would definitely be dizzy from dealing with the rumors afterward.

William casually asked about her work, and Ling Qingyu merely listed her fashion and design brands, as well as her automobile and supermarket industries, leaving out the more confidential and powerful ventures.

Some secrets must be kept even if they weren't secrets at all.

Chapter 770: Reminiscing

Even then, William was dumbfounded by Ling Qingyu's list of companies. From a single entity, she had far outgrown what he had anticipated—and much faster than expected.

His already waning appetite completely disappeared. He put down his utensils and gazed at Ling Qingyu with wide eyes.

"Ling, your success is enough to fill a best-selling book," William praised.

Ling Qingyu chuckled and denied it calmly. She knew her success already existed, but Miss System's assistance had intensified and accelerated the process to an immeasurable degree.

Wealth—yes. Connections and networks—gradually, as she expanded her enterprises and contended with opposing interests.

Arms and her current level of control—not at all. Frankly, it would have taken at least a dozen years to barely reach her present position on her own.

For that, she was deeply grateful for Miss System's contribution—the multiversal being that had helped her achieve her vision and protect her.

"Far from that. It's just luck and opportunity. I'm no different from others," Ling Qingyu replied.

"Luck is also part of strength," William said.

A knock interrupted them, and the door swung open. Ling Qingyu already knew the visitor—Astrid, her classmate.

Ling Qingyu inhaled deeply as her eyes fell on the approaching golden retriever. Well, calling her cute was a bit of an exaggeration.

Dressed in a professional grayish-brown suit, an office-style shirt with a white underlayer, and a fitted long gray skirt, her figure and beauty hadn't changed in the slightest since Ling Qingyu remembered—aside from a more mature temperament.

A pair of blue eyes and golden hair cascading down her back, an alluring straight nose, and beautiful lips—Ling Qingyu had never expected her former classmate to become so stunning.

Her figure supple and curvaceous almost making Ling Qingyu pity Astrid why simping over a man. Only same sex ushered in true love.

Too bad, she was never meant to be hers. This one was absolutely straight.

Standing up, Ling Qingyu called out joyfully, "Astrid. What are you standing there for? Come here."

Yes, Ling Qingyu would never admit she had once been jealous when this beautiful lady had her eyes completely on William.

Look at that bastard—smug yet distant. How dare he treat her goddess-like classmate that way?

Xiao Yue clicked her tongue after sensing someone's unusual enthusiasm. The other two in the room assumed her delight stemmed purely from the reunion.

"Ah—Qing... Qingyu. Hi. It's been a while," Astrid replied with a hint of estrangement. Yes, Astrid, who had once been more familiar with her, addressed her properly, unlike William, who simply used her first name—and Ling Qingyu hadn't bothered to correct him.

Regardless of Astrid's deeper opinion of her, in front of a beautiful woman, Ling Qingyu didn't mind any offense and stepped forward. Without hesitation, she closed the distance and launched her attack.

"Long time no see, Astrid. I've missed you a lot." Ling Qingyu hugged the stunned Astrid, whose hands hung awkwardly in the air.

Whether that last sentence was true or not, it was the essence of her tactics, Ling Qingyu thought smugly.

She pulled Astrid close enough that planets collided— there was barely any space between them, rubbing her back slowly down along her spine to her waist, back and forth, as she breathed in the faint fragrance at her friend's neck.

Xiao Yue slapped both palms against her face and covered her eyes. As expected of this bastard to take advantage—she couldn't bear to watch.

However, William's eyes lit up with delight. Although he liked Ling Qingyu, the sight of two girls in such close intimacy brought him unmistakable enjoyment.

"Qingyu, you're hugging me too tight. Let go," Astrid gasped, trying to push her away, but the other woman's strength was monstrous. She couldn't move her even an inch.

"Nope. Unless you properly love me dearly, I won't let go." Ling Qingyu made a shameless declaration. Meanwhile, she silently cursed her predecessor for throwing away such a beauty just for a man. Hmph.

If her predecessor could hear her complaint, a rebuttal would have struck back instantly—at least she wasn't a polygamous pervert targeting every beautiful woman she saw.

Astrid sighed helplessly, losing all measures against her shameless friend. In her eyes, Ling Qingyu had indeed changed so much that she could barely recognize her.

Where was the usual stern, serious, low-EQ girlfriend? If not for the cold aura still engraved in her bones, she might have thought someone was impersonating her.

So Ling Qingyu wasn't showing off or provoking her? Astrid wondered in confusion, recalling her irritation when she had received an email out of the blue from Ling Qingyu, informing her of a meetup with William—and inviting her along. It appeared she had to discern carefully.

"My dear Astrid, why so stiff? Have a seat." Ling Qingyu pulled her into the chair closest to her, preventing Astrid from moving toward William.

"Ling, that's not fair. You give Astrid a hug but reject our friendship?" William complained, suppressing the slight discomfort from not having told Astrid about the meeting. Indeed, he had informed her that Ling Qingyu was already in Country A—but not about today's meetup.

"Hmph, can you even compare? One is a lousy man, the other is a fragrant supermodel." Ling Qingyu retorted, grasping Astrid's forearm.

She then introduced Xiao Yue, whose eyes shot her a blaming look. Ling Qingyu decided to ignore it.

Ling Qingyu's warmth rendered Astrid speechless, and she responded numbly to her words. She hadn't sensed the slightest strain in her relationship with Ling Qingyu.

It seemed she was the only one who had taken things too far and too seriously. In truth, Astrid felt grateful that Ling Qingyu had informed her.

Thinking of the frenemy who had emailed her, Astrid's heart turned sour. The one she admired hadn't given any regard to her feelings at all.

Wait—was Ling Qingyu's goal to create antagonism between her and him?

Fortunately, despite her powerful intuition, Ling Qingyu possessed no psychic ability to read minds. Otherwise, she might have been flabbergasted by such a love-struck train of thought.

Still, Ling Qingyu felt a trace of annoyance at Astrid's simping. Not that she cared about standards or comparisons between partners. But as far as she knew from their university days, Astrid wasn't a simple character.

Having immigrated from the Alyssia Continent to study here, Astrid's family background was exceptionally strong. Just how strong remained unseen, and Ling Qingyu wasn't interested in using Athena's power to pry into it.

Nonetheless, Astrid's surname alone was powerful—and long enough to intimidate anyone. So long, in fact, that Ling Qingyu could barely remember the names that followed Astrid except for one part: von.

Yes, that von—with its old, traditional aristocratic flavor. Just by the name alone, Ling Qingyu believed her mother's Roux lineage paled in comparison.

So technically, from a rational perspective, William wasn't worth the prize at all. However, love was never purely rational. That much she understood and didn't dwell on right or wrong. It was just Ling Qingyu's urge to slap someone out of envy—for attracting a powerful and beautiful princess.

Not to mention, Astrid might have escaped from those rigid rules and etiquettes on purpose because of William, choosing to live "mediocrely" for his sake.

An aristocratic lady falling for a common man and seeking to grow together. A pity—it was merely her own wishful thinking.

The trio avoided deeper topics and instead reminisced about their university years—an age still innocent and shielded from life's heavier burdens. Among the conversation, only Xiao Yue noticed Ling Qingyu's subtle behavior of initiating topics and deliberately drawing Astrid's attention whenever the latter's gaze seemed to drift toward William.

Suddenly, William mentioned a name that sounded both familiar and unfamiliar to Ling Qingyu.

"Who's Kate?" she asked.

William's mouth fell open before he sighed. "I feel sorry for Kate, having a classmate like you."

Even Astrid rubbed her forehead. Seeing their defeated reactions, Ling Qingyu blushed. "Is everything alright with her? What happened? You're making me nervous."