

Great Master 571

Chapter 571: Reason!

Acker, sitting there, did not respond.

He did not even meet Arthur's gaze.

Sitting there, he was just like any ordinary middle-aged man from Old Town, not only ill at ease but also slightly anxious.

Arthur did not ask directly.

Because there was no need!

It was not just that he had already given two obvious hints—

The first was "sincere gratitude."

The second was "opening a store for Alvin on West Mok Avenue."

Arthur believed Acker had understood.

Arthur believed even more that Acker would not refuse.

Because he was the father of Alvin and Alma.

And because Acker had promised his wife, Lady Bana.

As for why did Arthur value Acker?

Apart from being talented himself, naturally, it was because of the journey to Inner Bay.

He was returning to the family of his mother.

With the "Blood Mark," he possessed a true identity!

And this identity meant that the Golden Lion Family would not come openly.

But in the shadows?

Who could guarantee?

Moreover, considering the encounter of Alvis Hamlet, who went by the alias Dorn, some people in the Golden Lion Family did not mind playing dirty.

Of course, the most important was that the Old Lion had the famous "Blood Shadow's Thorn" by his side!

How could Arthur not be cautious!

Even the snakes in the bushes must be wary of the daggers in the shadows!

And what is better at understanding an assassin than another assassin?

Naturally, it's an assassin from the same school.

"Blood Shadow's Thorn" came from "Assassin. Bloodflow."

The Acker in front of him was also from "Assassin. Bloodflow."

Therefore, Acker was the best companion for Arthur's journey to Inner Bay.

And other than these reasons?

Of course, it was about making an impact!

The Old Lion had people from "Assassin. Bloodflow" by his side.

He also had people from "Assassin. Bloodflow" by his side.

Others would subconsciously compare him to the Old Lion.

This mentality was what Arthur needed.

If it were not for the lack of time, Arthur would have loved to completely clone the people around the Old Lion, making everyone equate him with the Old Lion.

Only in this way, could he better take over his family.

And because of this, Arthur had gone through great efforts to recruit him.

Now that most of it was completed, Arthur felt a slight relief in his heart.

So, the time that followed was really just about dining.

Arthur particularly liked the pickled radish skins.

They were not only crunchy but also had an indescribable sour and spicy taste, somewhat stimulating but appetizing.

Paired with the soft and sticky meat porridge, it truly felt like a perfect match.

Marinda also expressed her approval for this.

When Arthur picked up his fifth bowl, the lady had drunk two bowls.

Alma was greatly surprised by Arthur's appetite.

You see, their bowls were literally big sea bowls, two sizes larger than a human face, ordinary people would be full with just one bowl, even a big eater would have only two bowls, and more importantly, even a big eater would need to rest after taking a sip, right? How could someone like Lord Kledos drink five bowls in one breath?

But, Alma did not mind.

The girl was actually very happy.

Alma simply thought this was Arthur being unpretentious, showing no airs, and genuinely enjoying her cooking.

Also, Alma now understood why her brother had just instructed her to use the biggest pot and definitely make extra.

As the bread delivery man of No. 2 Cork Street, Alvin understood Arthur's appetite very well.

But when Arthur picked up his seventh bowl, Alvin couldn't sit still anymore.

Because...

The meat porridge in the pot was almost gone.

In that moment, the young bread apprentice wanted to go buy some Food.

Although their family was poor, they would not let their guests go hungry, especially a guest who had saved their family.

However, he was stopped by Acker.

"You keep company with Lord Kledos, I'll go buy it," said Acker.

Alvin did not refuse, he could see his father's embarrassment in front of strangers.

"Alright, please be careful," Alvin advised.

Acker nodded, then smiled at Arthur and Marinda before heading towards the door.

This retired assassin needed a little time to seriously think things over.

And going out to buy Food was just right.

Of course, regarding what exactly Spirit Medium Arthur liked to eat, Acker was well aware—after all, not long ago, Eivor had praised the Spirit Medium's culinary skills to the skies.

If that was the case...

He would go a bit farther then.

Acker quickened his pace.

Arthur, sitting in the room, inexplicably felt a sense of foreboding.

"What's wrong?"

Marinda sharply noticed Arthur's sudden pause.

Although it was fleeting, she captured it.

Of course, Arthur couldn't possibly admit to his unsettling premonition.

The young 'Spirit Medium' set down his large bowl and gazed affectionately at Marinda—

"Can you cook porridge for me in the morning?"

His gentle voice made Marinda's skin crawl, almost causing her to spit out the porridge she had just swallowed.

However, the lady guessed why Arthur had done this.

Alma!

This girl had been sneaking glances at Arthur since the beginning.

Others hadn't noticed.

But Marinda did.

How could a girl in the throes of first love resist a hero-saving-beauty scene, especially when the man was handsome, graceful, and had an amiable demeanor?

If it weren't for her knowing this rogue's true nature, she would have been enchanted by him.

So, Marinda was not surprised.

What truly surprised Marinda was Arthur's attitude toward this situation.

The proactive avoidance and his candid reminder to the other party.

This made Marinda appreciate him.

'This rogue, he's actually not too bad,' Marinda thought to herself.

You see, the other men of South Los in such a situation would likely 'not let it go.'

After all, those men were 'so unattractive it's deadly.'

Moreover, Alma was not unattractive.

In fact, she could be considered beautiful.

Mysteriously pleased, Marinda nodded—

"Yes, I will.

As long as you want to drink it, I'll make it for you."

Marinda nodded again.

A smile tugged at Arthur's lips, and his eyes deepened with affection.

Marinda didn't look away but returned his gaze with equal affection.

Some people say that love can't be faked.

Then that person must be fortunate.

Because, he or she hasn't met someone like Arthur and Marinda.

But that person also must be unfortunate.

Because, he or she is very likely to have already encountered someone like Arthur and Marinda.

Arthur and Marinda seemed fully invested in their performance.

Alvin and Alma, on the other hand, kept their distance.

Alvin always felt awkward.

Alma felt even more awkward.

The clever girl noticed the lady's gaze and knew she had misunderstood—she was merely surprised by Lord Kledos's appetite and meant nothing more.

But then, it was not the right time to explain.

It was only—

"I'll go see where father is."

Alma left the room.

Alvin made sure his sister was just standing outside the door and hadn't gone far, then turned back to speak casually with Arthur again—or more precisely, to seek advice.

The young baker's apprentice wanted to understand the upper-class's attitude toward baked goods from Arthur.

Regarding this, Arthur had little knowledge.

To Arthur, the 'upper class' in South Los meant the Countess.

He hadn't even seen the Countess, much less knew about her taste preferences.

But Marinda knew.

The lady began to explain to Alvin.

And Arthur?

He went back to scraping the pot.

About ten minutes later, Arthur earnestly set down his bowl.

"Thank you so much; it's been a long time since I've had such a satisfying meal!" he said.

Had he had enough?

No!

But he had smelled a familiar sourness.

Precisely, it was the orange juice Eivor had made!

With orange juice around, could cupcakes and marmalade sandwiches be far behind?

Arthur certainly didn't want to taste those again.

The extreme experience of sour and sweet, one time in life was enough.

More than that?

That would be torture.

But concerning the creator of this extreme sour and sweet, Arthur was quite interested.

So, upon noticing Eivor and Acker returning together, Arthur's eyes brightened.

Chapter 572: In life, everyone eats shit, but don't chew it!

Eivor's arrival was unexpected and delightful for Arthur.

Unlike Acker who was confined by himself.

Eivor was living quite happily.

Not only did he have both a son and a daughter, a kind wife, but also a very solid fortune, owning two separate houses in Dar Alley—one for his family of four to live in and the other transformed into an inn.

The revenue from the inn alone was enough for the family's expenses.

Aside from his delusional confidence in cooking, Eivor's life could be considered complete.

Arthur once suspected that it was because Eivor's life was too comfortable and perfect that he could produce such genuinely awful food.

However, it was also for this reason that Arthur never targeted Eivor.

It's definitely not because Eivor's food tasted bad.

It was because Arthur couldn't get Eivor to willingly work for him.

Acker had weaknesses, which were easy to exploit.

Eivor, on the other hand, did not.

As for kidnapping the other's wife and children, forcing him to work?

Arthur did not consider himself a major villain and couldn't bring himself to do something like that.

More importantly, forcing an assassin to work would not end well.

If something were to happen to the assassin's wife and children?

That would be disastrous, as an assassin without any real weaknesses would be born.

Who knows what he could do?

Arthur didn't want his hard-earned power to be destroyed by the other.

But,

if he came willingly...

Arthur wouldn't turn him away.

"Father!"

Alma greeted, while taking the paper bag from Acker's hands.

The bag felt quality, unlike those flimsy hemp bags used in Old Town.

From Shire District?

Alma guessed.

But was full of doubt.

The distance between Old Town and Shire District wasn't far, but it was impossible to go there and back in just a couple of minutes, even on horseback.

'Is it a new store?'

Alma wondered.

He was curious about this store.

Not just the packaging, but also the food inside.

The sweet and sour scent, he could smell it through the bag.

The flavor...

Should be decent, right?

Alma carried the bag back to his room and laid out all the specialty foods from 'Eivor's Mobile Snack Stand' on the table.

"Many thanks, but I really am full already."

Arthur showed a bitter smile as he pointed at the large iron pot nearby, then at the food in front of him, revealing a hint of reluctance.

Anyone seeing Arthur's expression at that moment would think he was distressed from not being able to eat delicious food.

Then, Arthur truly convinced everyone of that idea—

"If possible, may I take a portion of this food with me?"

Arthur looked to Acker.

"Of course."

Acker did not refuse.

Why did he go to find Eivor in the first place?

Wasn't it because the 'Spirit Medium' liked the food Eivor made?

However, his liking for it was indeed beyond what Acker had expected.

Having eaten so much already, he still wanted to take some when leaving.

In the shadows outside the room, Eivor, seeing this scene, felt his affection for his first customer skyrocket.

'Indeed, my food isn't the problem!'

The retired assassin thought to himself.

And that was exactly what Arthur wanted.

Whether or not things succeeded in the end, he decided to boost his favorability first.

As for eating?

Eating was out of the question.

But Arthur could feed it to dogs.

He did have two decent dogs—although Death Hounds would not eat dog food, human food was always worth a try, right?

The explorative-minded Arthur decided to give it a shot.

After all, with him around, an ample supply of 'Death Qi' could always bring back Kuliqi and Kiri should any problems arise.

Meanwhile, at Acker's House, with the presence of food, dinner naturally continued.

Then—

"Too sweet!"

"Too sour!"

"Why does this sandwich taste like shoe soles and body odor?!"

Exclamations erupted one after another.

From Alvin, Alma, and Marinda.

The two indeed ate.

Marinda, however, just sniffed it and put it down.

Then, everyone looked at Arthur doubtfully.

Was this food worth taking home?

Only someone with a problem with their taste buds would do that, right?

Surely, he wasn't planning on feeding it to the dogs?

But would the dogs even eat such a thing?

They probably wouldn't, right?

Faced with skepticism, Arthur simply smiled and said—

"Don't you think this food is full of life's flavors?

Sweet, sour, bitter, spicy, and salty, a simple trio of foods endowed with them all.

It's just like a trial.

Once you're through, you'll find the beauty of the mortal world.

It also represents a reconciliation of self and life. After I tasted it once, I was so deeply moved that I didn't try it again for a long time.

Because I was thinking.

Thinking about some meanings of life and living.

Moreover, it was because of them that my strength took a major leap forward."

Arthur began spouting nonsense with his eyes wide open.

Alvin and Alma were dumbfounded.

The notion of reconciling with life, such a description, it was their first time hearing it, and they were instantly bamboozled.

Marinda was attracted by the part about 'it was because of them that my strength took a major leap forward.'

As for Acker?

He was just staring down, lost in a trance.

The retired assassin was contemplating the phrase 'it's a trial, and once you're through, you'll see the beauty of the mortal world.'

Prescribe the right cure for the illness, serve the right dish for the person.

The 'Spirit Medium's' job skill came naturally to Arthur.

Outside the room, Eivor was almost in tears.

'He understands me!

He really understands me!'

As a street food vendor experiencing poor business, if it weren't for the substantial savings from his assassin days and the wise decision to buy two detached houses upon retirement—one of which his wife skillfully turned into an inn—relying solely on his culinary skills would likely have meant his family starving.

Eivor was also somewhat confused lately.

Why didn't anyone appreciate his cooking?

Was it really that bad?

He had tasted it himself, and it was just like his mother's cooking he remembered!

Why didn't anyone love it?

But at that moment, Eivor understood.

It wasn't that his cooking had a problem, but rather that the guests had not reached the level of Arthur Kredos.

'I cook not just food, but life!'

The retired assassin clenched his fist, regaining his confidence.

No!

His confidence surged like never before.

Tomorrow, he would write what Arthur had said on the sign.

Then, he would insist on delivering food to Arthur every day.

Otherwise, how could he repay Arthur for showing him the way?

Under Arthur's persuasion, the four in the room tried Eivor's special food again. Unlike before, this time they tried a bit of everything.

"It doesn't seem as bad anymore.

Hmm?

Is this life?

Is getting used to it also a part of life?"

Alvin muttered to himself.

"Will it become sweeter after the sourness?

Is this the real essence of life?"

Alma said softly.

Acker, on the other hand, closed his eyes, seemingly truly savoring life.

Marinda, meanwhile, was munching large bites of the horse mayo sandwich.

This scene made Arthur secretly frown—

Don't chew it!

That flavor, sharp!

While it's true that everyone eats crap in life, don't chew it!

If you don't chew, you can still call it living.

If you chew, it's worse than death.

Arthur was full of sighs within, yet watched with a smile as Marinda ate two horse mayo sandwiches, drank two glasses of orange juice, and had three cupcakes.

Then—

"How does it feel?"

"A bit full."

Marinda honestly said.

Subsequently, she looked at Arthur suspiciously.

The lady suspected Arthur was deceiving her, while Arthur remained quite indifferent.

"You need more insight—so, the portion you packed to take home, keep it for your breakfast."

Arthur said this without giving Marinda a chance to argue, and then he stood up ready to take his leave.

Of course, the real business had just begun.

Chapter 573: Love Should Not Be Betrayed!

No. 2 Cork Street, outside the courtyard.

Edwin drove away in his carriage.

After Arthur and Marinda walked in shoulder to shoulder, the lady promptly pulled out her tobacco pipe—already loaded with tobacco.

Madam Susan had taken the lady's tobacco from inside Caesar Manor.

But never underestimate a smoker's ability to hide their tobacco.

Under the drawers and beneath the bed are the simplest places.

Smoke a pack down to just two, stamp on it and toss it on the dormitory floor, and no one will notice; when needed, simply pick it up again.

Of course, you could also opt to twist open the handrail of the steel pipe bed, another treasure spot for hiding tobacco.

However, Marinda didn't need any of that.

The lady had spatial equipment.

In her space, she stored 6 Jin of tobacco and 7 spare pipes.

Whoosh!

Marinda took a puff, a content expression emerging on her face, then she blew out a thick smoke ring.

"I'll come back tomorrow morning."

Marinda, pipe clenched in her mouth, waved at Arthur and ducked inside.

Old Town was theirs now.

But there were still some loose ends to tie up.

Whether it was Arthur or Marinda, they both wanted real, complete control of Old Town—and that meant someone needed to step up.

And since Urs was Marinda's subordinate, it was more appropriate for Marinda to take the lead.

After Marinda's figure disappeared, the smoke dissipated.

Arthur lifted up Pendragon with one hand and leaned back in the chair at the Spirit Medium Parlor, eyes closed, while he stroked the cat and called out, "Anna, we've got guests coming. Prepare three cups of tea—remember to add double sugar to mine."

In the dead of night, one naturally craves strong tea.

The taste of strong tea is bitter, astringent, but also sweet on the return.

But the real secret... is to add sugar!

"Do you need me to greet them?"

Ms. Anna put down her book and asked.

"No need, there's no need for all that fuss,"

Arthur said with a smile, waving his hand.

How should you face an assassin?

The world in front of him was conservative to the point of disappointment, but in his original world, the ancestors had taught him a thing or two.

Spare nothing for a true friend.

And then...

Moral hijacking.

Yes, moral hijacking.

All that buildup was just for this moment.

However, Arthur wasn't such a bad person.

He may not have had any morals, but he also knew the immorality of moral hijacking.

So, he chose to accept it passively.

He wanted Acker and Eivor to come and protect him of their own volition.

Difficult?

Very difficult!

For two retired assassins, getting them to come out of retirement was no easy task.

If it wasn't for this opportunity, even Arthur might not have had a good approach.

'Perhaps this is what my mother's spirit too is longing for—to retake control of the Golden Lion Family?

They have already tarnished the glory of the lion.

I am fitting to restore the family's honor.'

Arthur pondered silently.

Previously, he had no concept of 'his mother.'

Now?

He did.

Arthur waited in silence.

About five minutes later, the door to No. 2 Cork Street rang—

Thump, thump-thump!

With a rhythmic series of knocks, Ms. Anna went to answer the door.

When Acker and Eivor saw Ms. Anna, they were momentarily startled, then quickly reverted to their normal demeanor.

For two assassins, they had seen too many oddities before, especially during the Seven Years' War when strange events were rampant.

Though surprised to see Ms. Anna, it was just a brief wonder.

After all, they felt no malice from Ms. Anna.

That was sufficient.

"Would you like some sugar in your tea?"

Arthur, looking at Acker and Eivor, asked with a smile.

"No need."

Acker shook his head.

"Make it a double for me."

Eivor picked up the teacup and looked at Ms. Anna.

Ms. Anna led Eivor towards the kitchen.

Eivor's love for sweets was genuine, leaving space for Arthur and Acker to talk was as well.

Of course, Eivor was also interested in observing his first client from the sidelines—

"You've known about me for a while now?"

"No, I found out recently."

Facing Acker's inquiry, Arthur remained sincere.

After putting down his teacup, the young 'Spirit Medium' looked at Acker and said softly,

"I am about to travel to Inner Bay, and leaving Marinda alone in South Los, I can't be at ease.

So, before I leave, I want to sift through the possible dangers in South Los.

Only then can I go to Inner Bay with peace of mind."

After sincerity, came Resonance.

Where was Acker's Resonance point?

His wife, Lady Bana.

Arthur couldn't comment on the lady's actions, but surely they must be better than '510,000, 2 years, 2 meetings, 1 life', right?

Sometimes, loving someone isn't wrong.

It's the kind of love everyone yearns for, how could it be wrong?

But while loving that person, please also love yourself.

It doesn't need to be much, just stand in front of a Mirror and tell yourself, "You've done well, come on, have some milk tea!"

Have some milk tea, the sweetened kind.

Life is too bitter.

So bitter, the food delivery you send out is empty.

Some people really can't be called human.

After Death, there should be a judgment, right?

There will be one!

Fortunately, Acker is human,

Upon hearing Arthur's words, the retired Assassin lifted his head to look at Arthur; those cloudy eyes gradually became clear.

"Miss Caesar doesn't need protection,"

said the retired Assassin.

"Whether she needs it is her business.

Doing it is my business.

This matter is unrelated to her.

I just want to protect her."

Arthur smiled in response, which brought a rare smile to the retired Assassin's face.

A difficult smile to come by.

The kind of genuine smile that hadn't appeared in over a decade.

The kind that hadn't been seen since Bana's death.

Because—

That was his heartfelt voice!

That's exactly how he felt!

Bana loved him, he knew.

Bana hated him, he knew that too.

Therefore, he chose his current path, expressing love for Bana in a way incomprehensible to others, apologizing to Bana in a way beyond common understanding.

He hoped to see his children grow up healthy.

He hoped to be a grandfather, a maternal grandfather.

All these were about to be fulfilled.

And even better than he had anticipated.

Because of Arthur Kredos.

A man like him, with a wife he deeply loved and who deeply loved his wife in return.

If that was the case...

"I will go with you to Inner Bay!

As for Miss Caesar's safety issue..."

Acker drew out his words.

Protecting Miss Caesar was important, but Arthur's safe arrival was even more so.

Without Arthur, Miss Caesar would suffer greatly, but if Miss Caesar was lost, Arthur would suffer even more, just like him.

To prevent such an outcome, Acker had already made arrangements.

The retired Assassin, stretching out his words, looked towards the kitchen and said solemnly—

"Lord Kledos, allow me to introduce to you the successor to 'Assassin. Shadowstream': Eivor!"

Chapter 574: Mint Candy!

In the kitchen, Eivor stood helplessly holding a teacup.

Was he just sold out?

Originally, he had planned to meet his first customer, and the only one who genuinely liked his food, in a more formal way.

But now that Acker had called upon him, he naturally couldn't ignore it.

'It's just...

It's a bit of a pity.

I finally meet such a good customer.'

With a faint tinge of regret in his heart, Eivor straightened out his clothes, then walked out and placed the sweetened tea on the table. Looking at Arthur, he showed a smile on his plump face.

"Good evening, Lord Arthur Kredos."

"Good evening, Eivor—Though I've said it more than once, your food truly remains memorable to me."

Arthur replied with a smile to Eivor's greeting.

"Haha, oh come on!

Rest assured, Miss Caesar's safety is in my hands!

I swear it on my title as 'Master of Shadowflow'!"

Eivor laughed heartily, taking on the responsibility generously.

Nice!

Awesome!

The feeling of suddenly being acknowledged and praised after being unappreciated or even disliked is just too good.

And most importantly, he didn't have to hold back anymore.

Knowing that after hearing the praise in Old Town, Eivor had felt a slight regret that he couldn't hear Arthur's compliment in person, but now?

That was no longer an issue.

The recent feelings of regret and the like, all gone.

Anticipating Eivor's laughter, Arthur had already made his guesses.

Or perhaps...

When Eivor followed Acker back, Arthur had some suspicions.

Eivor must have been concerned about Acker.

But Eivor would definitely not refuse praise for his cooking skills.

In fact, confirming this was easy.

All Arthur had to do was move his lips.

Then, back in Old Town, he clearly heard the slight change in the other party's breathing.

And now he had received the other party's commitment.

What can I say?

Isn't it just like getting a 'buy one get one free' bargain?

Thinking this way, Arthur maintained a gentle smile on his face—

"May I offer a suggestion for your food?"

"Of course, go ahead!"

Eivor immediately became serious.

He was serious about his culinary skills as a retired assassin.

"Your food is a dream trial for true warriors, but for ordinary people, the purity is too high; they can't comprehend its wonders.

The most important thing is, they waste this kind of food.

So, I hope you can lower your standards to make something that ordinary people can understand.

Then, when you acknowledge them, you can go all out to make a true 'Warrior's Meal'."

Arthur said this.

"Lower the standards?"

Only those I approve of deserve to eat my 'Warrior's Meal'?"

Eivor's eyes lit up.

Right, his all-out effort in food, should not be tasted casually by anyone.

Only those he approves of are worthy.

The rest?

They can make do with the scraps!

Eivor, who had been somewhat insecure and even started to feel inferior about his cooking skills, was now overflowing with unprecedented confidence.

Who is he?

He is the 'Master of Shadowflow'!

Among assassins, his culinary skills are the best.

Among chefs, his assassination techniques are the strongest.

His assassin's creed is: Food above all!

"Lord Acker, we will probably head for Inner Bay after the Cold Winter Festival comes to a complete end—during this time, please adjust yourself."

Arthur gave Acker a friendly reminder.

Eivor, standing beside him, nodded repeatedly.

"That's right, if you appear in Inner Bay, your senior brother 'Blood Shadow's Thorn' will absolutely not let you off.

'Master of Bloodflow' is a title your teacher gave you.

He was not satisfied back then.

Now?

He's probably even less content.

He has gained honors, status, prestige, and even trained enough assassins for the Grand Duke.

And you?"

Eivor didn't finish his sentence, but Acker understood his meaning.

The retired assassin nodded.

And in Arthur's mind, he thought to himself.

'Being so deeply entwined with the "Blood Shadow's Thorn," this is really...

Great!' he exclaimed.

If previously Arthur's expectation for Acker to stay by his side was at a 10, it was now at a full 100.

As long as Acker could attract the attention of the "Blood Shadow's Thorn" for a period, Arthur could immerse himself entirely in certain matters.

And could grasp the situation even faster.

No need for too much.

Just one fulcrum was enough.

Arthur thought as much, yet the gentleness on his face remained unchanged.

Throughout the subsequent half-hour conversation, that didn't change either.

Even after Acker and Eivor had departed, it stayed the same.

Watching the two assassins disappear into the shadows, Arthur returned to the "Spirit Medium Parlor," once again taking Pendragon in his arms, whispering to himself.

"Pan, we still have another force at our disposal.

Should I be more proactive?

But if I'm too proactive...

Would I scare them off?"

Arthur was referring to "Amanda's Cat Best Friend's Home."

This power that was suspected to be the Cat Faction.

Clearly, if the trip to Inner Bay really did involve the Cat Faction, then safety would be greatly enhanced.

But ultimately, Arthur abandoned this idea.

Just as he pondered aloud.

What if he frightened them away?

Moreover, perhaps those who were once part of the Cat Faction had already settled into a comfortable life.

In that case, it was better not to disturb them.

Arthur thought to himself, lifting Pendragon up to his face, and asked directly—

"Pan, do you think your dad is being too soft-hearted?"

...

"What's your take?"

Eivor and Acker walked side by side in the shadows, Eivor asking bluntly.

Without needing specifics, Acker knew what Eivor was asking about.

"Can't see through him," he replied truthfully.

"Hmm, it's like looking at a mirror through fog.

Not purely a disguise, nor simply a mask.

A bit odd," Eivor nodded, agreeing.

Then, the retired assassin who doubled as a cook added another thought.

"But presumably not a bad person," he opined.

Acker didn't say much more, simply quickening his pace.

His son and daughter were waiting for him.

Eivor did not linger either.

His situation was similar, but the difference was, if his wife knew he vanished in the middle of the night, she would definitely smack his size 48 face with a size 38 shoe sole.

The two retired assassins hurried home at their quickest pace.

In Old Town, at Acker's house, when Alvin and Alma, the siblings, saw Acker return, they immediately gathered around him.

"Father, are you alright?" Alma asked softly.

"It's fine, everything is over," Acker said with a smile.

He didn't mention he had gone to see Arthur, he only said he wanted to bring some goodwill to the officers.

Alvin and Alma, accustomed to life in Old Town, naturally understood.

The siblings breathed a sigh of relief.

Everything had finally ended.

"Go to sleep! It's all right now!" Acker declared.

Then, he walked over to a bed on one side.

Alvin's bed was also there, the two were positioned head-to-head.

And as Alma grew older, the inner room became her own.

Entering her room and closing the door, Alma let out a sigh of relief.

'It's finally over!

Such a pity, the candy Alvin brought back was all crushed.

Next time!

Next time, he will bring back candy again!

It will surely be sweeter than this time!'

Alma hung up her coat on the wall with a touch of regret and subconsciously checked her pockets.

Then—

"Eh?"

A surprised cry escaped her lips.

"Alma, what's wrong?"

Acker and Alvin, father and son, opened the door to see their daughter and sister standing dumbfounded in the room, with a beautifully wrapped piece of mint candy in her palm.

Chapter 575 Winter Banquet!

A faint sweetness and the unique aroma of mint spread throughout the room.

Alma stared blankly at the mint candy in her hand. She didn't know when His Excellency had slipped the candy into her jacket pocket, but at that moment, she was overwhelmed with emotion.

Moved!

Warm with emotion!

It was the first time Alma truly felt such care from someone other than her family.

However, upon seeing her brother and father, the astute girl would not let them mistakenly assume anything.

Right away, Alma recounted the scene when she first met Arthur and Marinda.

"Lord Kledos is truly a gentle and kind-hearted person,"

sighed Alvin.

Gentle?

Kind-hearted?

Acker was noncommittal.

But, looking at his daughter holding the mint candy with a smile and his son with a look of exclamation, the retired assassin left the room.

He looked out the window in the outer room toward the distance.

That was...

the direction of Inner Bay.

At that moment, the retired assassin made a certain resolution.

...

'Has the candy been found by now?'

Arthur estimated the time and put down the book in his hands.

Arthur didn't have any other motives; he simply thought it was nice to make a smart, kind girl happy if he could do so effortlessly.

Of course, it was also because of his fondness for Acker, Alma's father.

For something like giving a bit of love to the children of a father like Acker and thereby greatly increasing his goodwill, Arthur would not refuse.

Just like he wouldn't refuse the supper offered by Ms. Anna.

Beef soup with noodles—it was Arthur's suggestion, and Ms. Anna recreated it quite perfectly based on Arthur's description.

"After daybreak, Arthur, you need to buy a deer steak, a whole goose, as well as fresh fruits and vegetables, and also fish and clams,"

Ms. Anna said as she placed the mixed radish skin in front of Arthur.

After tasting the mixed radish skin at Acker's house, Arthur was quite amazed and upon returning told Ms. Anna about it.

And this lady, after briefly consulting some books, replicated the side dish once again.

"Deer steak, a whole goose... it's for the 'Cold Winter Festival' feast!"

Arthur was momentarily stunned, then quickly realized.

As the festival with the longest rest period and coldest climate in South County, the 'Cold Winter Festival,' a lavish feast is prepared on the day that spans the festival.

People call it the 'Winter Banquet'!

Even the poorest of families prepare some meat for the day.

And slightly wealthier households choose to roast beef, lamb, and the like.

As for the nobility?

They treat the day as the grandest of banquets.

It's recorded that the Old Earl of South Los once roasted 373 deer at one 'Winter Banquet.'

The Old Earl didn't just invite the large and small nobles of South Los but also invited many merchants to the banquet.

Nobles, merchants, and even servants.

Someone tallied that over one thousand five hundred people attended the 'Winter Banquet' that day.

As the Old Earl was famously generous, he didn't forget the servants accompanying the nobles and merchants when inviting them.

That's why they consumed 373 deer and tons of fresh fruits and vegetables.

And the drinks?

They were beyond count.

The wine at the Count's Mansion ran out early that night, and the Old Earl immediately ordered more to be purchased.

Legend has it that two horses pulling the wine carts died of exhaustion that night.

...

Alas, with the passing of the Old Earl and the current Earl's "seclusion," such lively scenes had long been missing.

People reminisced about them from time to time, expressing their sighs.

Arthur had no comment on this.

With the gathering of information about South Los, including but not limited to readings and conversations with others, Arthur had formed a rather vivid impression of the late Earl.

A decent man.

Lacking most of the vices common among nobility.

But he was grandiose and overly fond of luxury.

It was precisely because of this that the current Countess had chosen "secrecy."

Simply put, had the current Earl of South Los not gone into seclusion, the Kledos Family's finances might have gone bankrupt a decade ago.

And even so, the financial situation of the Kledos Family was still extremely tight.

That's why Marinda seized the opportunity!

Marinda expanded her territory and influence so quickly in just two years because the Earl of South Los behind her treated Marinda as a purse, affording her considerable leniency.

Otherwise, even for Marinda, it would not have been so easy.

'However, the finances of that Countess must have improved considerably by now, right?

Especially after getting involved with the mines of South Town...

Maybe next year, we'll be able to see the Countess's "Winter Banquet." thought Arthur to himself as he quickly replied.

"Certainly, Ms. Anna.

Is there anything else you need?

I'll purchase it all at once."

"Pine branches, of course!"

Ms. Anna, floating in mid-air with her hands on her hips, appeared to express her dissatisfaction that Arthur had forgotten such an important matter.

Arthur immediately slapped his forehead.

"There's been so much going on lately, I almost forgot.

I will surely bring back a lovely, lush, and resilient pine branch tomorrow!"

At midnight during the Cold Winter Festival, the people of South Los would wear their cleanest and most proper clothes, hang the pine branches they had prepared in advance over their doorways, symbolizing health, longevity, peace, resilience, and success.

Most commoners simply chose a good-looking pine branch.

Wealthy individuals might decorate their pine branches with ribbons.

The nobles were different, though, with some painting them with gold or silver paint, and others, in a bid to showcase their status, even adorning them with gemstones; all to elicit wonder from those who saw them.

However, this was actually a boon for many commoners.

Because this was their last chance to earn money for the year.

Selling beautifully shaped pine branches.

Sometimes they attracted even larger crowds than the butcher's shop selling 'Year Pig' meat.

After all, pine branches were much cheaper than meat.

Having received Arthur's assurance, Ms. Anna then flew up to the beam at No. 2 Cork Street—this lady was contemplating how to clean No. 2 Cork Street.

It was no small task.

No. 2 Cork Street might not look big, but it was filled with secret rooms, secret passages, and other mechanisms that required great care during the entire process.

At this time, Arthur, after finishing his supper, had already lain down in his bed.

Marinda would return the next morning and his normal sleep schedule was bound to be disrupted, which was not at all favorable for Arthur, who was experimenting with the necessary sleep duration for performing the "Orange Cat" Ritual and its impact on the "Great Orange" Ritual.

Therefore, Arthur had decided to sleep early.

Ms. Anna, after making sure Arthur was asleep and covering him with a blanket, and after signalling to Pendragon not to wander around, began her overnight house cleaning.

What about during the day?

Didn't the venison, goose, vegetables, and fruits they bought need to be prepared?

As a member of this household, Ms. Anna would never allow the Kledos Family to be criticized during the Cold Winter Festival for such a manageable triviality.

While Ms. Anna was busy, Arthur opened one eye and glanced at Pendragon, who was wide-eyed and couldn't sleep at all, then turned over with a smirk on his lips—

Hey, the New Year was coming.

...

Chapter 576 Visit!

Arthur woke up due to a feeling of suffocation.

Feeling the pressure on his chest, Arthur looked down to see Pendragon, his body coiled around Arthur's neck, sound asleep on his chest.

In the midst of long breaths, Pendragon was sleeping soundly.

Arthur sighed helplessly.

He had almost thought he was experiencing sleep paralysis.

He glanced at the exceptionally clean skylight in the corridor.

The sky was beginning to lighten.

And there were faint noises coming from the kitchen.

Clearly, Ms. Anna, who had cleaned No. 2 Cork Street overnight, was preparing breakfast for Arthur and the soon-to-return Marinda.

Arthur sniffed.

It was his favorite meatball soup, pan-fried bread, and bean sprout side dish.

These were the dishes Ms. Anna had replicated after Arthur had told her about them.

Arthur had great respect for the lady's culinary Talent.

Especially when he ate the food she made, Arthur always felt as if "It's not a Miracle that I brought you back to life, it's your existence that brings miracles to me."

Who could refuse a sympathetic, all-capable in household chores, and excellent in cooking terror of a Puppet?

You say she looks terrifying?

Shallow!

Compared to those qualities, appearance is completely unimportant.

At least, that was the case for Arthur.

There were plenty of good-looking people.

But there was only one Ms. Anna.

"Ms. Anna, can you cook an egg in the meatball soup for me?"

"Of course, do you want it hard-boiled or soft-boiled?"

Ms. Anna asked, poking her head out from the kitchen.

"Um..."

Arthur pondered.

When it came to food choices, he always found it difficult to decide.

"Then one soft-boiled, and one hard-boiled!"

Ms. Anna said with a laugh.

See, isn't this kind of understanding terror of a Puppet a miracle?

Arthur, while picking up Pendragon—who was clearly awake but pretending to sleep, pressing down on him—

"Pan, you really didn't inherit any of my Talent!

Next time you pretend, relax a bit and secretly peek at me with your eyes open, what kind of trick is that?"

Arthur said, shaking the Orange Cat.

Pendragon meowed erratically in dizziness.

But escaping was simply impossible.

It wasn't until a full ten seconds later that Arthur set Pendragon down on the floor.

Thud!

As soon as he was put down, Pendragon fell onto the floor.

Puff! Puff!

The cream-colored Labrador, with pure Bloodline, couldn't hold back and burst out laughing.

Then—

Meow!

Pendragon got up, his voice turned deep, and his eyes became dangerous.

Without waiting for the two Death Hounds to react, he pounced directly on them.

Cat flying kick!

Cat spin!

Cat combo!

Under Arthur's biased commands that prevented them from fighting back, the two Death Hounds immediately started scrambling through the corridors of No. 2 Cork Street.

Fujin glanced from the beam where he rested and closed his eyes once again.

After daybreak, it would be his turn to take over Wuni's duties, so he must rest.

The two new crows, Stolas and Mapa, were staring with their round eyes, curiously watching the scene unfold.

The somewhat noisy morning of the Kledos family began.

By the time Arthur stepped out of the washroom, Pendragon had already contentedly started playing doggy bus—making Kuliqi and Kiri walk side by side while Pendragon would jump onto Kuliqi's back, then onto Kiri's, or simply lie across both dogs, clearly enjoying a position of dominance.

Arthur watched Kuliqi and Kiri carrying Pendragon back and forth in the corridor and couldn't help but smile and give a thumbs up to the two dogs and one cat.

Then, he sat down at the dining table.

He didn't start eating right away; Arthur was waiting for Marinda.

In that quiet moment, Arthur looked at the text in front of him—

"Tasting Delicious Meat Porridge with Accompanying Snacks: XP+50"

"Your 'follow what others eat' game with Marinda has attracted the attention of many young people from wealthy families who have nothing better to do, and your actions punishing the evildoers of Old Town have fulfilled the imaginations of most of the rest: XP+200"

"More people have heard of your name: XP+200"

...

Last night's meat porridge was naturally 'food made with gratitude.'

And, because it involved the Mystic Side, the XP gained had made significant progress.

As for the second item?

That would be thanks to Marinda's subordinates.

After their 'friendly communications' with reporters in the alleyways, this morning's newspapers had greatly improved in both style and excitement, resulting in a tidy XP income for Arthur.

The third daily task was, as Arthur had guessed, steadily increasing.

Clearly, before the end of the Cold Winter Festival, or rather, for a while after it, the title of Champion of the South Los Swordsmanship Competition and some of Arthur's daily deeds would become common topics of conversation at tea time and social gatherings.

To this, Arthur expressed...

Not enough!

Yes, truly not enough!

Not just the major XP earners like Wand Combat Technique, Abdel's Pyrokinesis, Stone Bullet Technique, and the slightly lesser Extreme Illusory Shadow Technique, Barbarian King's Ritual. Remnant, and Gliding Technique.

More importantly, Arthur had also added the Ritual "Great Orange" to the list.

After two days of attempts and meeting all the requirements for the Orange Cat ritual, Arthur had reduced the XP needed to promote from high tier Orange Cat ritual to Great Orange ritual to 3996, and from extreme Orange Cat ritual to 9995.

Obviously, with three meals a day as the norm, 2 XP would be reduced each day.

To make up for high tier, under this regular pattern, it would take 2000 days for 4000 points, which is about five and a half years.

If going for extreme promotion, that would be 4999.5 days, or roughly thirteen and a half years.

He couldn't wait!

He truly couldn't wait!

So, Arthur planned to power through with XP.

And he had to go for the extreme kind.

For that, he needed to quickly save up 9995 XP.

"That amount of XP...

is not easy to come by!"

Apart from winning the Champion title of the Inner Bay's South County Swordsmanship Competition and conveniently revealing his maternal family's identity as the Golden Lion Family, Arthur couldn't think of any quick solution for now.

But while there were no immediate solutions,

Arthur did have scattered ones.

"Little by little, sand forms a tower, tufts come together to make a fur coat...

It's another sort of tempering, I suppose."

Arthur murmured.

At the same time, a ring of smoke appeared and Marinda arrived punctually.

The instant she appeared, the lady overheard Arthur's soliloquy and couldn't help but ask.

"What sort of tempering?"

Arthur smiled.

This time, Arthur's smile was different from his usual gentle one.

It had a slightly mischievous air.

Immediately, Marinda felt a mix of anxiety and attraction towards the Arthur of this moment.

Originally, she had considered coming by later, but now, she involuntarily stopped in her tracks.

Then, she heard Arthur say softly,

"With the Cold Winter Festival upon us, shouldn't we go visit our elders?"

Chapter 577: A Complete Transformation

Visiting the Elders!

The original 'Cold Winter Festival' had not included this tradition, but the long holiday left many idle, and visiting each other became the most enjoyable activity for everyone.

Then, as time passed, it gradually evolved to include visits to elders while interacting with peers.

This became known as 'The Rite of Cold Winter.'

By the 'Pioneer Era', the 'Rite of Cold Winter' had become more specific.

Because—

When visiting, one would bring gifts.

Especially when visiting elders, one would bring slightly more precious gifts.

And the elders would give gifts in return.

Many said this was a trap concocted by those cunning merchants.

Others believed it was a way to strengthen blood relations.

As for Arthur, he was indifferent.

He generally went along with it, as a sort of entertainment.

However, thinking about gaining more XP, Arthur felt he needed to visit some elders in South Los.

After all, the identities of his two elders were not ordinary.

For instance: Grandma Susan.

For instance: Aunt Camille.

Arthur believed that during this dull 'Cold Winter Festival', the journalists of South Los must be desperate, and the slightest stir would cause them to swarm over.

Of course, with Arthur's cunning, even if he thought of doing so, he would definitely not straightforwardly tell Marinda.

He had to beat around the bush.

Not only was it about taking the initiative, but also because Arthur had truly never heard Marinda talk about her family.

If he didn't use such a good opportunity, how could Arthur qualify as a proper 'Spirit Medium'?

Yet upon hearing Arthur's inquiry, Marinda appeared quite indifferent—

"My father killed himself.

My mother also killed herself.

Most of the elders in my family were burned to death.

The only one who can really be considered family is probably...

Ash Bonaparte South Los."

Marinda said it lightly, but Arthur was taken aback.

He knew many who were orphaned.

But few were double orphans due to their parents' suicides, had it not been for the plot twist of 'The Centennial Birthday of my Master,' he might have thought he encountered some fated protagonist.

As for almost all the family elders being burned to death?

That fit even more with the protagonist template of the Lonely Star of Calamity.

If not for the last sentence!

The only relative, Ash Bonaparte South Los!

This name intrigued Arthur too much.

Because—

It was the name of the Countess of South Los.

Marinda and the Countess of South Los are relatives?

At first, Arthur found it surprising.

But soon it made perfect sense to him.

Only if Marinda and the Countess were relatives could their relationship be so 'close,' and could Marinda have established such a vast enterprise in just two short years.

"So that's how it is."

Arthur sighed.

Marinda, seeing Arthur sigh, scoffed.

"You're overacting, you already knew everything yet you still put on this act—before now, you might not have been certain.

But when you just asked if I would visit my elders during the 'Cold Winter Festival,' I knew, you had confirmed my mother's identity."

Arthur looked at Marinda innocently.

He really didn't know about this.

Moreover, when had he ever investigated Marinda?

In regards to his close business partner, Arthur had always been exceedingly trusting.

Seeing Arthur's innocence, Marinda curled her mouth and continued—

"Exactly!

Just as you investigated!"

My mother, she was a witch.

Similarly, the mother of our Lord Count was also a witch.

I and the Countess of South Los mentioned by everyone are cousins.

And my father?

He was the Grand Knight "Caesar" of the Knights Templar from the West Coast.

Most of my other relatives were burned at the stake by my father.

As for my mother?

She was originally to be burned as well.

But instead, my grandmother used a secret technique to send her to the East Coast.

At that time, the East Coast, although still in the midst of the Seven Years' War, had long ceased the witch hunts, leaving only some local conflicts of interest.

So, it was relatively safe.

Initially, my mother and my aunt relied on making potions to treat people and lived quite smoothly.

But a few months later, my aunt encountered the Old Earl of South Los who was dispatched on a military campaign.

Later on, my father Caesar crossed the seas in pursuit but encountered a storm and sea monsters, which killed everyone on the ship except for him; although he survived, he lost his memory and became a

beggar. He begged in South Los for several years before he ran into my mother who was returning from a medical visit."

At this point, Marinda stopped.

Some things don't need to be said completely to let people guess.

It's well known that the Grand Knight of the Knights Templar's strength was not just physical but also his iron will, capable of resisting even the Devil's bewitchment.

Yet under these circumstances, the Grand Knight committed suicide.

Add to that the suicide of Marinda's mother.

And the existence of Marinda herself.

A melodramatic soap opera had already taken shape in Arthur's mind—a memory-lost Grand Knight, a witch fueled by hatred, their love and hatred intertwined, culminating in a double suicide as the Grand Knight's memories returned.

"Geez, terrifying love."

Arthur thought to himself, though his face showed no emotion.

Not being quick to state his opinions was a lesson Arthur had learned from countless admonishments and the tireless teachings of Old Charlie.

And indeed, this approach proved very useful.

After a pause, Marinda continued —

"My mother recognized my father at that time, and then, she directly poisoned him.

Logically, my father should have died.

But the few relatives of my mother saw an 'opportunity'.

They not only cured my father but also drugged my father and mother—they needed a more perfect heir.

They brought my father and mother back to the West Coast.

Years later, my birth delighted them immensely.

I completely met their expectations, with Talent, Physique, and Bloodline all assessed as excellent, especially some powers in my Bloodline that some fellows coveted.

I had my blood drawn, and they even wanted to extract my bones and soul.

At that time, my father regained his memory, killed the guards, took me and my mother, and escaped the prison; he fled from those bastards' pursuit and once again returned to the East Coast.

Then, my father chose to commit suicide.

My mother raised me until I was sixteen and then, she also chose to commit suicide."

At this, Marinda pulled out a pipe.

Arthur raised his hand, and a flame from the candle flew into the pipe, lighting the tobacco.

Watching Marinda puffing smoke, Arthur stood aside with his arms crossed.

After a moment of silence, the young "Spirit Medium" softly said —

"If you need help, tell me.

Although I'm just a 'Spirit Medium,' I am somewhat proficient in matters like murder, arson, and destroying evidence."

Marinda initially moved by the first part of the sentence, rolled her eyes at the latter half.

Seeing Marinda's eye roll, Arthur suddenly changed his expression—

"Forgot to mention the most important thing, we are good brothers, I'll give you a 10% discount.

Considering I didn't mention it earlier, this time it's 12% off.

Remember, cash only, no credit..."

Before Arthur could finish, Marinda raised her foot and kicked towards Arthur's shin.

Unfortunately, Arthur dodged it.

Arthur dodged while laughing playfully.

And in his heart, the young 'Spirit Medium' silently called to his subordinate far in North County—

'William, there's something I need you to do.'

Chapter 578: Corpse Witch Wraith!

The grim winter of North County was bone-chillingly cold.

After a blizzard fierce enough to freeze a man to death, it seemed as though a pause button had been pressed over the whole of North County, and everyone, including farmers, hunters, mercenaries, and even the lord's patrol teams and guards, huddled at home by the warmth of the fireplace. Even those without fireplaces in their watchtowers wrapped themselves up as tightly as possible with blankets—they all knew very well that in such weather, no one would cause trouble, nor would enemies appear.

Even the most vicious bandits and robbers hibernated during this time.

Of course, there were exceptions.

During the mid-Silver Age, a war actually broke out during North County's harsh winter.

In midsummer, it was because of the "Right of the First Night."

Within the Silent Territory of North County, over 30,000 people gathered, claiming to be a rebel force of a hundred thousand.

They swept through the Silent Territory like a plague of locusts, devouring everything in their path, and their continuous victories made them believe they had everything under their control.

They did not stop their march but began a frenzied advance.

They planned to siege and conquer within North County, but the other lords, having been forewarned, all held their ground firmly.

As days passed, although numerous villages and towns were plundered, the core remained untouched and suffered no losses.

But when the first heavy snowfall of the winter arrived, half of the noisy rebels died instantly.

By the second heavy snowfall, the other half had perished as well.

Only a few leaders escaped into the wilderness.

There, they had a secret base.

The strongest among them planned to make a comeback from there.

Unfortunately, the remaining few were no longer interested in continuing the fight.

In the end, a battle erupted between them, resulting in mutual destruction.

And this turned out to be advantageous for William.

William stumbled upon this secret base, which resembled a tomb, and after a simple cleanup, he made it his own secret base.

Many important items were kept here.

It also became William's fallback option.

However, at this moment, William was eager to leave this place.

He hoped he could return to his lord's side.

For that, he took a risk.

And then—

He succeeded!

He successfully transformed into a 'Corpse Witch Wraith' from a hybrid of Semi-Corpse Demon and Lich.

This was an extremely special ritual, which both the Death Poetry Society and the Pale Hand believed impossible to succeed.

Even though there were records from the Empire era that some had succeeded.

But it had been so long ago that many believed a mistake had led to such a conclusion.

William didn't know about these.

William only knew he wanted to return to his lord's side.

Was it just about flaying his own skin?

Was it just about driving 37,699 needles, as fine as cow hairs, into his flesh?

Was it just about scorching his own organs with flames?

Was it just about branding some ritual markings on his bones?

What were these compared to returning to his lord's side?

These were worthwhile.

With a belief twisted to an unmatched extreme, William didn't care about these at all, and the result was affirmative.

William succeeded!

Moreover, he reached the high tier immediately after his 'Entry'.

At this moment, William looked no different from a normal person.

With his heart filled with excitement and thrill, he began to pack his belongings.

South Los!

He was going back!

My lord!

Your loyal servant is about to return to your side!

The mere thought of seeing Arthur again made William immediately kneel and begin praying—

"May my lord be free from sickness and calamity, and may all be well.

If there is any disaster, let it fall upon me.

I am willing to bear it all for my lord."

After his devout prayers, William prepared to get up and hasten his packing. And at that moment, he longed for Arthur's voice deep within his heart—

'William, there is something I need to ask of you.'

Without any hesitation, William knelt down on one knee again.

"Where your fingertips point is my unchanging faith in this life!"

William spoke loudly.

His voice even trembled.

Because this was truly the first time he had undertaken a task for his lord.

It was too meaningful!

How could it not be exciting?

'I want you to establish one or two strongholds in North County, and at the same time, develop a long-distance trade team to help me investigate some matters on the West Coast.

I'm sorry, but this time, for the sake of the mission's secrecy, I cannot offer you any help.'

Arthur's voice carried an apology.

William immediately shook his head.

"My lord, if I needed your help, it would be a disgrace for me.

Please be assured, when the ice and snow melt, you will see not only your strongholds in North County but also an army completely loyal to you.

They will be loyal and fearless."

William, still kneeling on one knee, said loudly.

"Good, I look forward to your performance."

Arthur said this.

And Arthur's expectation gave William endless motivation.

The 'Corpse Witch Wraith' threw aside the luggage he had originally packed, heading straight for the 'Tomb'—in his memory, less than 100 kilometers to the north, there was a den of bandits with at least 300 people, and 70 kilometers to the south was a gang of mountain thieves, with over 300 people.

"600 people?

No, that's too few!

There need to be at least 5,000 to qualify as an army.

As for strongholds, my 'Tomb' is too remote to suffice.

It must be a noble's territory!

And if it's a noble's territory, then they must not be able to communicate immediately, and the location can't be too remote, most importantly, it can't have deep roots..."

William, talking to himself, suddenly brightened up.

He thought of a territory that met the requirements.

'Silent Territory'!

After experiencing a great rebellion, followed by the 'Seven Years' War', the old nobles of Silent Territory had almost all been wiped out, and the new lord was a 'pioneer noble'.

He had no solid foundation or family legacy.

An excellent target indeed.

Thinking of this, William immediately walked out of the 'Tomb'.

The 'Corpse Witch Wraith' intended to first subdue those bandits and mountain thieves, forming the most basic force, and then use these bandits and mountain thieves to infiltrate Silent Territory, forming an even greater foothold.

As for loyalty?

As a 'Corpse Witch Wraith', William had many ways to ensure their loyalty.

"Since my lord wants secrecy, then the name William can no longer be used.

I must assume a pseudonym..."

William began pondering his new name.

While any casual name would suffice, since this was his first mission under his lord's orders, William believed the name must have some significance.

'If possible, it would be best if my lord bestowed this name.

Unfortunately, my lord is too busy.

Even communicating with him is limited to a few occasions.

Uh?

How can I complain about my lord?

If it weren't for my incompetence, why would my lord be so busy?'

Thinking to himself, William picked up a whip by his side and began lashing himself.

Ten times in succession.

Although his skin split and flesh burst, and though he healed quickly, the pain was real.

Just as William was about to continue repenting for his 'sins', Arthur's voice once again appeared in his heart, gentle yet forceful—

'From now on, your name shall be...

Sebastian Moran.'

Chapter 579: Subtle Changes Just in the Depths of Winter!

After giving William a new name, Arthur cut off his connection with William...no, with Sebastian Moran.

North County was not in Arthur's plans at this stage.

Arthur's current plans were still focused on South Los and gradually extending towards Inner Bay.

As for North County?

It would definitely be included in future strategies.

But now?

He definitely would not.

Arthur admitted he did not have enough manpower.

But he was too concerned about Marinda's situation — setting aside their strong brotherly bond, their close cooperation had long since made them inseparable.

Or to put it another way, they were two peas in a pod.

Neither could escape the other.

If something went wrong, it would truly be a lose-lose situation.

Arthur could ensure he wouldn't face any problems.

But Marinda?

Arthur could not guarantee that.

Therefore, he needed to arrange some insurance.

Moreover, it could not appear in South Los.

If it spread from South Los to the West Coast, it would be too conspicuous, not only easy for Marinda to notice but also too simple for the family of Marinda's mother to detect.

Thus, William was an apt choice.

An absolutely unsuspected choice.

After all, it was well known: he, Arthur, the "Spirit Medium" of South Los.

North County?

It had absolutely nothing to do with him.

As for Moran's loyalty and capabilities?

Arthur was even more at ease.

Moran's loyalty to him was beyond doubt, not just because of the contract but also because his excellent acting had twisted it into fanaticism.

Moreover, Moran's own capabilities had become flawless as his power increased.

After all, that was—

'A Corpse Witch Wraith!

He had actually succeeded!'

About the 'Corpse Witch Wraith', Arthur had also read related books and was profoundly impressed.

Not only because a 'Corpse Witch Wraith' could easily create skeletons, Walking Dead, manipulate Bone Spirits, Specter, and hold a significant degree of Curse.

But also because a 'Corpse Witch Wraith' was to some extent Undying.

To kill a 'Corpse Witch Wraith', one needs to annihilate it entirely at once.

Yes!

Annihilate it completely!

Not even a single piece of flesh should be left.

Not even a hair strand or a nail.

If anything was left behind, the 'Corpse Witch Wraith' would regenerate.

That 'Corpse Witch Wraith' from the Imperial Age, which many later believed to be a myth or plain fabrication, was so deemed because it was recorded in a book akin to folklore that the 'Corpse Witch Wraith' had incited a rebellion in the northern Empire that lasted two years, costing the northern Imperial legions heavily until one of the twenty Imperial Knights, 'Knight of the Holy Blood', was dispatched and ended the uprising but also plunged the northern Empire into chaos. Already ravaged by the 'Shadow Plague', the northern Empire completely lost faith in the Empire—since the 'Knight of the Holy Blood' attacked without regard for the civilians or Nobles of the northern Empire, causing the deaths of at least one hundred thousand innocents.

Most people do not accept this.

Because, as is widely known, the 'Knight of the Holy Blood' was kind and merciful, especially renowned for his tolerance.

Thus, no one believes that the 'Knight of the Holy Blood' would do such a thing.

Even the 'Blood Duke', who professed to be a descendant of the 'Knight of the Holy Blood' since the Holy Era, has said as much.

Arthur was skeptical about these wild historical accounts.

After all, if hook-sellers could become emperors in such books, what couldn't?

Such folk history might not be true, but it definitely needs to be sensational.

But Arthur was still quite happy about having a 'Corpse Witch Wraith' under his command.

And seeing Arthur's smile, Marinda raised an eyebrow—

"What are you scheming now, you rascal?"

The lady said this, her tone not one of doubt or even curiosity, but rather with a hint of teasing.

More importantly, as she spoke, she exhaled smoke rings while pulling out venison, goose, fresh fruit, vegetables, seafood, and pine branches.

The venison included two steaks, a foreleg, a hind leg, and the tenderest loin.

There were two geese, simply processed just like the venison.

The fruits and vegetables were fresh and juicy.

The seafood was also fresh.

The pine branches were green and sturdy, giving a sense of abundant vitality just by looking at them.

Besides these, there were some brightly colored ribbons.

And ...

A large box of pastries.

Just by smelling them, Arthur knew they were made by Mary.

That aroma was unmistakable.

"I was thinking about the people I invited over for tonight — I had planned to visit them personally, but I thought it best to stay by your side during such an important moment,"

Arthur said earnestly.

"Next time you lie, remember not to stare at those pastries."

Marinda said, pulling out two red ribbons.

"You go hang them at the gate and on the branches of the banyan tree."

As Marinda spoke, she lifted her hand and used the smoke to carry the cured meat, big goose, melons, and seafood to the kitchen.

"Ms. Anna, may I help?"

Marinda asked.

"Of course,"

Ms. Anna said with a kind smile.

Ms. Anna certainly didn't mind the help.

Especially when it was Marinda offering.

Marinda and Ms. Anna headed to the kitchen.

Arthur took the two red ribbons and headed for the door.

After Arthur had taken a few steps, Marinda turned her head to look at Arthur's straight back.

Arthur did not look back.

But he saw Marinda turning her head.

So—

He turned his head and stuck his tongue out at Marinda, wagging it up and down and making a "lalala" sound.

Without hesitation, Marinda raised her middle finger.

Then, both of them turned their heads and continued walking forward.

One towards the kitchen.

The other towards the courtyard.

It was only when they were separated by two doors that they both let out a slight sigh of relief.

Marinda's mind was still recalling Arthur's earlier words, "If you need help, just tell me."

And Arthur?

He was recalling the items Marinda had brought.

Though they were just food, they were essential for the Winter Banquet.

"It's not easy that this guy still remembers these," Arthur thought to himself.

To Arthur, Marinda was the kind of career-focused person who, rather than prepping for the Cold Winter Festival, would consider working till midnight during the festival as taking a break.

"Is this guy changing too?"

Arthur wondered to himself, then shook his head and while tying the red ribbons with Merlin and Gawain, he said—

"I need you guys to help me deliver a message to the Earl of South Los's head butler, Madam Susan, Lady Camille from Camille's house, and Malz.

Tell them to come for dinner at No. 2 Cork Street tonight.

Oh, and this."

As he spoke, Arthur pulled something out of his pocket.

Chapter 580: Happiness is not simple!

Red papers, perfectly square, wrapped around a one gold note.

Red envelopes!

In Arthur's hands were two red envelopes.

South Los didn't have the custom of red envelopes.

But, with the atmosphere of the Cold Winter Festival intensified, Arthur always felt that not giving a red envelope was rather lacking in spirit.

Moreover, Merlin and Gawain were also people he esteemed.

At Arthur's gesture, Merlin and Gawain took the red envelopes, opened them, and both were slightly puzzled by the one gold note inside.

"Consider it a reward for your dedication and responsible work," he said.

Arthur spoke thus.

"Thank you, sir,"

Merlin bowed respectfully.

While Gawain initially cheered,

then, seeing Merlin bowing, he sheepishly scratched his head and hurriedly mimicked Merlin's gesture, bowing as well.

"Thank you, sir."

Arthur waved his hand with a smile.

He didn't dislike Merlin's politeness and humility.

He really liked Gawain's frankness and simplicity.

"Go then, after delivering the message, you are on holiday starting today.

After the Cold Winter Festival is over, you can come back."

Normally, they would have taken their holiday two days ago, but as Merlin and Gawain were the first and second butlers, even though it was a part-time job, they had to be present during the Cold Winter Festival; only upon real retirement could they take a break.

Now, Arthur's declaration of holiday made them extremely happy.

Even Merlin, who behaved like a little adult, couldn't help but smile broadly.

After all, even a little adult is still a child.

Who doesn't want to have a holiday to frolic and play?

Watching both of them hopping and skipping to deliver the message, Arthur couldn't help but exclaim—

"The joy of a child is truly simple."

As he spoke, Arthur felt something was off and immediately corrected himself.

"It is simplicity that brings joy.

For someone like me, seeking happiness...

It's too hard."

Arthur murmured, with a helpless shrug.

A person who even has to occasionally correct his self-talk, filled with performative nuances, how could he possibly be happy?

It is not an exaggeration to say that he exhausted all his efforts.

Planning three steps ahead, which is great,

Yet,

it's not joyful.

So—

Arthur untied the red ribbons that Merlin and Gawain had tied and retied them.

He fashioned them into the shape of a bow.

The gate at No. 2 Cork Street showed no sign of response.

But the Death Serpent Banyan was different.

This tree, now promoted to a War Tree, felt odd about the red bow tied to its stout branches.

Not that the bow was odd.

But it didn't know what was funny about this.

However, if the master liked it...

The Death Serpent Banyan shifted its branches, elevating the trunk adorned with the red bow to its highest point.

The bow danced in the wind.

The winter sun shone down, making the red satin gleam with vivid color, just like a real butterfly fluttering about, while the young boy beneath the tree strolled in the sunlight, humming a tune that only he could understand.

"Stars twinkle in my dreams, bring me a little joy, bring me a little joy..."

The melody that accompanied him did not bring Arthur joy.

However, it was somewhat relaxing.

It was a relaxation that belonged solely to him.

Basking in the sunlight, he lifted his arms and rested them behind his head, squinting his eyes, feeling this rare warmth.

The cold breeze, at this moment, seemed to warm up as well.

It took Arthur a full ten seconds before he finally threw back his arms and stretched upwards vigorously, his joints crackling loudly at the moment.

Then?

Naturally, he proceeded to do what needed to be done next.

Could he possibly stay here basking in the sun forever?

Such luxury...

Would be great if it happened once a year.

Arthur continued humming as he turned and walked into No. 2 Cork Street.

He needed to send a letter to Rick Farm.

Although his trained subordinates couldn't return, he still had to send his regards.

Considering the distance between Rick Farm and No. 2 Cork Street, neither Merlin nor Gawain would do, but either Fujin or Wuni would be perfectly suitable.

As the crows flapped their wings, the "Spirit Medium's" regards arrived as promised.

When the sun set, Malz, carrying a box containing his old buddy, had already knocked on the door of No. 2 Cork Street—

"Good evening, thank you, Arthur, for not forgetting this lonely old man,"

The old sheriff jokingly embraced the police chief in front of Arthur.

"Who asked someone to decline their own child's invitation?"

Arthur spread his arms wide.

"It's better for the children to have their own families, someone like me becomes an outsider—don't expect a child's wife, or the relatives of the child's wife to care for you, cater to you like they would their own child.

Moreover, your presence would put pressure on the child.

So, why wouldn't I refuse?"

As the old sheriff spoke, he handed the gift he was carrying to Arthur.

Given the relationship between the two, visiting each other normally would naturally not require gifts.

But today was the "Winter Banquet," so a gift was indeed necessary.

As for the gift?

A venison steak Malz had prepared in advance.

"Nice gift."

Arthur said with a smile, his gaze then turned to the police chief held in the old sheriff's left arm.

The dairy cow cat had grown quite a bit, its fur becoming slicker, but evidently rarely going out, it now huddled in the old sheriff's embrace, warily surveying its surroundings.

When it spotted Pendragon in the corridor, it became even more cautious.

It was obvious to everyone.

Quickly, the police chief struggled out from Malz's embrace and dashed towards Pendragon—not to pounce, but to circle around Pendragon, occasionally jumping up and down.

"The police chief is really lively and active."

Arthur commented.

"Yes, more lively and active than you'd expect, and always without warning..."

Malz had not finished speaking when the police chief, originally running around Pendragon, suddenly acted as if it discovered it had a tail and then began chasing its own tail frantically.

Spinning, spinning, and spinning more.

And then...

It got a little dizzy.

The police chief lay down and slept.

Its own tail, having not caught up with itself, flicked madly.

Thwack!

Suddenly, the tail hit its own face.

Instantly, the police chief became angry.

It got up and resumed the chase.

Watching this scene, Arthur couldn't help but laugh out loud.

Malz just shrugged his shoulders with considerable resignation.

As for Pendragon?

It discreetly moved a step away.

A look of 'this too is a cat' hung on its face.

This made Malz, as the owner, feel even more embarrassed and slightly sorry for his cat's intellect, and he quickly went inside, handed the steak to Ms. Anna, then scooped up his cat.

"It's okay, it's okay.

Hitting itself with its own tail."

Malz comforted the police chief.

Meanwhile, Arthur looked towards West Mok Avenue.

Immediately, his eyelid twitched.