

I! Cleaner 391

Chapter 391: Turning Back is Not an Easy Path (Part 1)_1

[Name: No Return Path (Deceased, Soul)]

[Appearance: A road paved with bone bricks that are pale yellow in color, starting from the entrance of the Realm of the Dead. It passes through well-known landmarks like the "Gate of the Deceased," "Nest of Crows of Death Report," "Black and White Bridge," "Yellow Springs River," "Mortician's Corridor," "Burial Garment Mirror Lake," "Corpse Soil Black Forest," "Baigu Palace," "Sage's Cemetery," "City of Regret," and "Ghostly Mire," extending all the way to the deepest point, the "Cliff of the End."]

[Ability: Shedding of the Corpse, Soul Purification]

[Cost: Cannot be used by the living. If completely killed, or if the Contamination Value is lower than 60 at the time of death, one will automatically become a user of the No Return Path.]

[File: This ancient road has existed for nearly as long as the Realm of the Dead and was created by the Overlords of the Dead Realm, the "First Deceased." It laid the bricks by pulverizing bones from its own corpse, forged with its Soulfire.

Newly dead souls walking on it gradually shed all remnants from their previous life as they venture deeper into the realm. They remove their clothes and skin, disperse flesh and blood textures, erode bones and organs, purify will and memory, and finally leap from the "Cliff of the End," returning completely to the world.

However, among the users of the No Return Path, those who refuse to believe they have died will wander within the "Mortician's Corridor," endlessly reliving their death in this maze without an exit and witnessing the world after their demise until they accept death.

As for those who are obsessed with their identity and appearance and cannot shed the garments woven from their souls or forget their life's image, they will remain by the "Burial Garment Mirror Lake," looking at their living reflection on the lake's surface until they give up maintaining all false facades.

Those who indulge in the worship of power, or still have a longing for their flesh and blood form, will be taken to the "Corpse Soil Black Forest" to walk within it...]

[Evaluation: Don't touch it; this isn't something you should be dealing with right now.]

[Contamination Value: Stays the same as the user, granting each deceased an equal termination.]

...

Sage's Cemetery... Burial Garment Mirror Lake...

Wasn't that the cemetery where the Third Generation Director was buried, and the large lake where Senior Emma often stayed?

After recalling the scenes from before, Leon's eyebrows furrowed slightly.

According to the system's introduction, the surface of the "Burial Garment Mirror Lake" could reflect the deceased's appearance from their "previous life," and all of Senior Emma's kin were dead. She inherited the lives of her people.

When she looked at the lake, was she seeing her own face, or those of the original owners of the Crows of Death Report?

"Sorry."

After vaguely understanding why Senior Emma preferred staying by the lake, Leon slowly withdrew his hand from touching the bone bricks. He shook his head at her, who looked quite tense, and gave a slightly apologetic smile.

"Senior Emma, the information provided by my ability leans more toward 'users,' and this path can only be used by the deceased. I haven't found a way to keep it from affecting the living; sorry about that."

"I see..."

Hearing Leon's words, a trace of disappointment flashed in Emma's eyes, yet she shook her head and responded in a gentle tone,

"You needn't apologize to me. It's normal to have no means in the face of something like the No Return Path. In fact, I should apologize to you. I shouldn't have let you come into contact with something so dangerous because of... certain reasons."

"It's okay."

Recalling the solitary figure by the lake, Leon shook his head to indicate it was fine. Then he sincerely and actively spoke,

"You saved my sister's life, gave me weapons when I first joined the Bureau, taught me what to watch out for during missions, showed me how to protect myself, and even went so far as to protect me by going down with the Goddess of Fortune.

Senior Emma, I won't repeat my gratitude. If there's anything I can help you with, I hope you'll tell me. As long as it's possible to do, I'll do my utmost to accomplish it."

"I... I do have something I'd like to ask you."

After looking gratefully at Leon, Emma, whose complexion was still rather pale, took a deep breath. She then willingly held his hand, bit her lip, and said,

"Leon, my... my regrets are too many, and this road is too difficult for me. So, if possible, I hope you can walk it with me.

When we reach the Black and White Bridge, further ahead we would provoke the No Return Path. If I suddenly stop or want to turn back, you must wake me up!"

"Mm."

After hearing Emma's request, Leon nodded slightly, grasped her somewhat cold hand tightly, and then spoke with a face full of seriousness,

"I will definitely do that!"

"Thank you..."

After making an agreement, the two, who had stopped not far from the Red-haired Director, held hands once more and started to walk toward the majestic bridge, built with black and white stones, that stretched over the turbid Yellow River.

Along the wide and winding No Return Path, newly deceased souls, accompanied by the Crows of Death Report, walked forward. Some wailing in grief, some lost and at a loss, and others with eyes full of confusion stumbled toward the depths of the Realm of the Dead.

Compared to these uncertain souls whose bodies and wills were even occasionally incomplete, Leon and Emma, the only two with living, substantial bodies, who could "walk backward" on this path, should have been the heavier ones.

But when Leon dodged too late and collided "head-on" with a hunched old man, passing right through each other, he was surprised to find that he seemed to have turned into a puddle of water or even a piece of air. Something incredibly solid seemed to have passed through his body unobstructed.

"Don't worry, this is the rule of the death realm. In the Realm of the Dead, the soul is greater than everything, while the physical body doesn't exist."

Carefully avoiding a young deceased with a face full of angry blade wounds, who was walking quickly toward him, Senior Emma seemed to notice the puzzled look on Leon's face and explained,

"The world's rules are above all else. Therefore, when traversing different worlds, our souls and bodies, or rather our 'existence' itself, must adapt to the current world's rules.

Just as descending Holy Spirits and True Gods will form flesh and likewise need to breathe and eat, the living entering the Realm of the Dead with their bodies will also follow the rules of the death realm, with their existence accordingly adapting to the world."

As she spoke, she squat down slightly and stopped in front of a sobbing little girl, gently giving her a hug.

Yet this young deceased passed through Senior Emma's body as if walking through a breeze, continuing toward the depths of the Realm of the Dead.

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After noticing the non-existent embrace, Leon couldn't help but turn his head slightly, glancing out of the corner of his eye at the little girl.

Although the dead little girl didn't linger, the tears on her face had disappeared. Her once terrified expression had become somewhat calmer, and her eyes, red and swollen from crying, opened again, quietly shedding fear and sadness as she curiously looked at the road ahead.

"In the world of the living, flesh is real, and the soul is untouchable. But in the Realm of the Dead, there's no flesh, only souls are acknowledged, and the body becomes an untouchable entity."

Spreading open her palm, showing Leon the tear stains on it, Emma softly explained,

"The souls and bodies of the living are inseparable, so in the Realm of the Dead, they become almost non-existent. Only things like will, belief, or emotions can affect other dead.

As long as there's no particularly strong desire to touch a certain dead, we in the Realm of the Dead are just gusts of wind with a fixed form."

After explaining the earlier situation, Senior Emma turned slightly to look at Leon and seriously advised,

"Also, your soul's strength is not high yet. Remember not to contact the dead who seem special, like those full of resentment, regretful, or crying painfully.

The emotions carried by these dead souls are too intense. If you interact with them too much, it will affect your soul's stability. After leaving the Realm of the Dead, you might still feel uncomfortable for a long time."

"I got it."

Seeing that Senior Emma still had a pale complexion but patiently explained the precautions to him, Leon couldn't help but nod slightly. Then he gripped her hand a little tighter.

He wanted to be like Emma, who had just embraced the little girl and wiped away her tears, to bring Emma courage to fight against the No Return Path by warming her cold hand.

"Don't worry, I'm here," was it?

Feeling Leon's inner thoughts through their tightly held hands, Emma's gaze softened slightly. Then she took a deep breath, firmly grasping Leon's determined hand and stepping toward the Black and White Bridge not far away.

...

[Name: Black and White Bridge (Memory, Memory)]

[Appearance: A long archaic bridge paved with black and white bricks spanning over the Yellow Springs of the Realm of the Dead. Upon stepping onto the bridge, every new brick will reflect a portion of one's life.]

[Ability: Happy Memories, Painful Memories]

[Cost: None]

[File: After the Overlords of the Dead Realm, the Faceless Man, died, they extracted all memories of their long life and classified them into happiness and pain, crafting them into black and white bricks.

These ever-changing black and white bricks have completely different effects. Stepping on a white brick will recall happy experiences from one's life, while stepping on a black brick will recall painful experiences...]

[Evaluation: Just as one cannot know whether the following days will be joyous or sorrowful, no one can tell if a brick is black or white until they truly step on it.

No one's life is filled with tears forever, and no one's life can be filled with laughter forever. Only by experiencing all the joys and sorrows personally has one truly lived life.]

[Contamination Value: Same as the user's]

A memory player?

Habitually reaching out to touch the stone bridge's railing, after obtaining intelligence on the Black and White Bridge, Leon couldn't help but look worriedly at Emma beside him.

If his guess wasn't wrong, the reading range of the Black and White Bridge should be limited to the user's memory, while his memory of this world was only of the past three years.

Although after recovering from his illness, he began to rush around for a living, encountering many ugly and filthy situations, with many distressing and unbearable memories, thanks to his younger siblings, overall, it was barely happy. Those pains were unforgettable, but they couldn't overshadow the warmth in his heart.

The only time he found unbearably painful was when Anna unexpectedly coughed up blood in the middle of the night, urging him to conceal her death so they could continue "cheating" a pension. Because of his joining the Purification Bureau, this result was avoided.

So for him, the effect of the Black and White Bridge wouldn't be too difficult. Even if he couldn't withstand it, just thinking about the present days should help him barely get by.

But Senior Emma...

Thinking of the large tree at Treasure Flower Manor's entrance, Leon fell into deep silence.

Given her whole clan had been executed, leaving only her and her daughter, even if she fortunately steps on white bricks every time, reliving only those beautiful memories, recalling the final outcome would bring deeper torment.

And Emma, beside him, obviously knew this too. She hadn't even stepped onto the Black and White Bridge yet, but just imagining the possible scenes made her lips turn pale from biting them.

"How about... I go first?"

After a moment of silence, Leon suggested,

"I just touched the railing, and it seems that the bricks someone steps on won't change anymore. I can go onto the Black and White Bridge first to step on those white bricks for you. That might make it a bit easier for you."

Hearing Leon's suggestion, Emma's pale lips moved slightly, as if she wanted to refuse, not letting Leon endure painful memories on her behalf.

But before she could voice her refusal, a feeling of relief mixed with intense guilt transmitted straightforwardly into Leon's heart through their tightly clasped hands.

"Then it's decided!"

Gripping Emma's hand tightly, conveying back the thoughts of "It's okay" and "I'm willing to do this for you," Leon took a deep breath and stepped purposefully onto the stone bridge paved in black and white.

White brick.

As Leon's foot landed, the once misty bridge surface of the Black and White Bridge became clear. A white brick, just large enough for an adult to barely set foot, emerged quietly and warmly beneath Leon's foot.

Thank you, truly thank you!

Gripping Leon's hand firmly, Emma, with a particularly soft gaze, tiptoed to take a step forward, gently landing on the edge of the white brick that Leon had cleared.

"Brother, you're back!"

As her toes touched the ground, the world in front of Emma suddenly darkened. She found herself standing in a pitch-black alley, with every muscle that could exert force fiercely twitching in pain from fatigue that made her feel dead tired, tormenting her eyes into blackouts.

And in this world, filled to the brim with both reality and bodily darkness, the only thing still shining was the distant dim oil lamp and the pale, delicate face of a young girl, full of surprise and illuminated by the lamp.

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"Anna..."

Just like in Leon's memory, after calling out the name of the girl in front of her, Emma felt all her fatigue ebb away suddenly, like a receding tide. Even her shoulders, which seemed to bear the weight of a thousand pounds, felt suddenly lighter.

However, instead of joy and happiness, what replaced it was a lingering sense of remorse and shame.

"I lost my job..."

After drooping her head and saying this, Emma, or rather Leon of the past, explained with a face full of regret,

"I really wasn't slacking off, but I could only carry about half of what others could. The foreman only gave me half a month's wage and told me not to come back to the dock tomorrow. I..."

"You did well enough."

As the dim oil lamp and the girl's gentle footsteps came closer, a comforting voice, free of any hint of blame, whispered in Emma's ear after a warm embrace.

"Brother, it's not your fault. I know you must have done your best. I've saved dinner for you, so come on inside, eat, and get some rest..."

"I..."

"Senior Emma?"

A puzzled murmur at her ear and the warmth from a hand pulled Emma out of a memory that wasn't hers.

After shaking her head blankly, Emma, noticing Leon's slightly puzzled look, came to her senses and apologized,

"I'm sorry, I just... um... I think I might have seen a memory of yours."

Looking at the faintly glowing white bricks beneath her feet, Emma whispered,

"If I'm not mistaken, if two people step on the same brick, the person who steps on it second seems to see the memories of the first person. Leon, if you mind, I actually..."

"It's okay, go ahead."

Remembering the first time he lost his job at the dock and cried secretly somewhere before Anna consoled him warmly, Leon smiled a bit sheepishly.

"In my memories, there shouldn't be anything too unsightly, and if back then in the hospital, you hadn't saved Anna, these memories would have... well, anyway, if seeing my memories can help you cross the Black and White Bridge, I won't mind."

"Thank you..."

Holding Leon's warm, strong hand, the sincere and passionate emotion warmed Emma's heart from her hand, and her hands finally stopped feeling slightly cold, bringing a touch of color back to her pale face.

Once she was ready, Leon, who had one foot still outside the bridge, clenched his fist, then lifted the other foot to stand entirely on the Black and White Bridge.

The white brick, similarly, represented happiness.

With Leon's promise, Emma also mustered the courage to step onto the bridge with both feet.

"Big Brother!"

This time appearing in front of Emma was Leon's younger brother, who, though adorably chubby-cheeked and always wearing a serious face, looked like a little adult.

At this moment, Emma, or rather Leon in the memory, stood beside a wall, staring dazedly at a nail in it, while standing beside Leon against the wall was William, lifting his head and asking seriously,

"Big Brother, are you sick?"

Was Leon sick this time?

Hearing Leon's brother's question, Emma couldn't help but be slightly taken aback.

It shouldn't be, right? Leon stepped on a white brick; this should be a happy memory, shouldn't it?

And the Leon in the memory seemed to share Emma's confusion, shaking slightly and then saying with a perplexed face,

"No, I've been a bit tired lately, but there shouldn't be anything wrong with my body."

"Don't lie to me!"

William, the little adult, looked seriously at Leon's, then lowered his head to look at his own, also shuddering slightly before frowning and saying with a serious look,

"If you're not sick, how could it be so swollen over there..."

"Cough, cough, cough! Cough, cough, cough!"

Coughing up a storm with the loudest voice he'd ever used in his life to forcibly pull Emma from his memory, Leon, who hadn't expected the memory of the brothers "relieving themselves" by the wall to be captured by the Black and White Bridge, looked awkwardly at the somewhat dazed Emma,

"Uh, so, I was thinking, though I don't mind sharing my memories with you, Senior, but... uh... given the circumstances, it's a bit special... so, uh... could I maybe filter the content first, and then you step on?"

Through their tightly clasped hands, feeling the embarrassment boiling over in Leon's heart that made one want to burrow into the ground, Emma, coming to her senses, understood what she'd just seen.

Recalling that strange yet vividly real sensation, Emma's fair face flushed suddenly, even her delicate earlobes turned a shade of pink, and she hurriedly turned her head away.

"Alright... okay..."

"Damn it!"

I was wondering why I got so lucky this time, stepping on two white bricks in a row, only to find out this was waiting for me!

Cursing his luck, Leon took a deep breath and stepped out for the third time.

White brick, still a white brick.

This time it was Melanie who appeared; though she was mischievous and loved causing trouble, most of the time, she was a heartwarming little darling.

And the beautiful memory related to her was when he sold newspapers in the freezing rain, caught a fever the next day, and Anna ran out to buy him medicine, while Melanie, with William's help, brought back several crow eggs to help nourish her feverish brother.

Well... up to this point, it was actually quite nice, except that in the following week, his house was crazily attacked by a furious group of crows, bird droppings covering everywhere from the door to the windowsill.

By the time he recovered and went to clean with a scraper, the grayish-white dried bird droppings were over two fingers thick and needed to be tapped with a hammer before being scraped off; it took him three to four days to barely clean it up.

To this, one could only say... a warm little jacket is warm enough when needed, but when it leaks, it really leaks...

After viewing this warm yet hilarious memory, Leon couldn't help but shake his head helplessly, then squeezed Senior Emma's hand to signal there was nothing to avoid this time and that she could step on.

However, Leon squeezed a few times continuously, but Senior Emma, who was behind, didn't move forward, remaining silent. A near-overflowing sorrow flowed through their tightly clasped hands into Leon's heart.

"Emma, my daughter..."

With this heart-wrenching sorrow that seemed to split his heart in two, Leon felt a slight pain in his ears. A call, sorrowful with a tinge of anger but also full of worry and reluctance, trembled into his eardrums.

"Six years... how have you been?"

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Was this... Senior Emma's mother's voice?

After feeling the surge of Emma's inner pain through their tightly clasped hands, Leon gently reminded her,

"Senior Emma, whatever you heard, it's not real. There's no family of yours behind us, only by moving forward can we find your daughter."

"I... um..."

After hearing Leon's reminder, a pale Emma nodded slightly. Then, following the pull of the hand, she stepped into Leon's memory for the third time, and saw a little girl, covered in dirt with arms scratched and bleeding from branches, yet happily offering a nest of bird eggs for her to see.

A warmth penetrated right into her heart, gently infusing Emma's heart through Melanie's mischievous smile. Though it couldn't melt the remorse surging in her heart, it did calm her down somewhat.

The cries behind her, like weeping blood, still wrenched Emma's heart each time. But as her feet repeatedly trod on the white tiles, Leon's family's poor yet warm memories became a gentle hand. It not only cradled her heart softly but continuously tightened the strands of reason that were about to snap, giving her the courage to take steps forward.

In contrast, Leon, who held her hand, heard through their connected souls the lamenting sobs and many angry reprimands constantly coming from behind Emma.

"Sister Emma, I liked you so much, why did you harm me?"

"You are the Bauhinia Family's sinner! If it weren't for your leaked information, would we have died?"

"Traitor! How dare you still live?"

"I am disappointed to have a daughter like you."

"If you still know what shame is, turn back and see how we truly died!"

"Go away, don't come back to disgust us!"

"The last Bauhinia, fine, live on with this shame!"

"Emma, it's been six years, won't you just turn back and let me see you one more time, okay?"

Even with Emma's soul serving as a barrier and only hearing bits of the content faintly, the resentment and grievances in these voices were still more piercing than countless sharp knives.

And those soft sighs full of disappointment from Emma's direct relatives, mixed among the scoldings and accusations, chilled Leon's heart time and again.

After learning about the term "the last Bauhinia" for Senior Emma, Leon had deliberately checked some old newspapers, vaguely finding out some conditions from over six years ago.

Six years ago was the national war phase when the Bauhinia Family launched a coup seemingly allied with the invading Ice Plains Nation Ashito. There was even a claim that the invasion of the Ice Plains Nation was somehow related to the Bauhinia Family.

It was precisely because this information was leaked prematurely that the Bauhinia Family was forced to launch a hasty coup. The royal family, perceiving the crisis, had to retaliate with the harshest execution to stabilize its position, leading to Bauhinia Alman, once on par with Lionheart Lyon, dying with only Senior Emma and her daughter left.

And if the leak was truly related to Senior Emma, then with her character, she must have been tormented by guilt without end for these six years. Hearing the curses from her clan and the sighs of her family, it would be hard to resist turning back.

Furthermore, the conflict that had just erupted between the director and her seemed to have some other meaning.

Although neither of them explicitly said it, from what they were implying, it seemed Senior Emma was preparing to do something, which the director did not want her to do. She wanted to make her abandon it by forcing her to "walk the No Return Path."

Then, what could be the thing Senior Emma was driven to do by guilt or regret, and the director was trying so hard to stop her from doing?

...

"Leon?"

When Emma detected Leon's increasingly chaotic thoughts through their tightly clasped hands, her heart gave a slight tremble, and a deep sense of guilt surged up.

She only needed to wait for Leon to step on a white tile, then pass safely across this bridge of memories under the protection of his beautiful memories. Leon, however, had to face his own pain again and again.

When repeatedly encountering black tiles, he had to constantly retreat and try again until a safe white tile was found for her to step on.

And it seemed, perhaps due to not-so-good luck, as they continued forward, the number of times Leon needed to probe increased. He sometimes had to step on three or four black tiles in succession to find another white tile.

Since the two stepped onto the bridge, Emma had walked over sixty steps, whereas the number of black tiles Leon stepped on had exceeded a hundred, indicating he had relived painful memories more than a hundred times.

At such times, it should have been she, the senior, standing ahead, shielding him from wind and rain. Yet, due to her weakness and hesitation, she could only let him stand out and bear it all, reliving those painful experiences in his life repeatedly. *This is truly unworthy.*

"Let's move together."

Gently tugging Leon's hand, having witnessed almost all of Leon's wonderful life, Emma suggested with a voice as gentle as water,

"Leon, you don't have to pave the way for me anymore. I should be able to now..."

"No way!"

Hearing those still piercing words in his ear, Leon refused without hesitation,

"Don't push yourself! I can feel the state of your soul. You're only slightly stable now. If those memories get stimulated, I don't think you can hold up!"

You tell me not to push myself, but aren't you doing the same?

Gently biting her lip, Emma softly proposed,

"How about you keep stepping on the tiles for me and share your memories with me, but don't specifically seek the white ones anymore, let me step on the black ones too!

Since these tiles are the ones you step on, the memories I see are mostly yours. Only some scenes from my memories will appear, I should be able to endure!"

"Alright..."

After feeling Senior Emma's soul and confirming she wasn't just pushing herself but genuinely had confidence, looking at the Black and White Bridge already at its end, Leon nodded slightly and moved his foot, revealing a corner of the black tile beneath his foot.

Noticing Leon's action, Emma took a quiet breath and then lifted her foot, stepping onto Leon's painful memory.

"Brother."

The familiar thin girl appeared in front of Emma again, but this time, the look on Anna's face was not the gentle and happy expression she had when looking at "herself" in the past. It was calm and with a hint of subtle regret.

After a moment of silence, the girl, white as paper on the hospital bed, slightly turned her head away and, with a voice as weak and stubborn as if it could dissipate with her at any moment, quietly suggested,

"How about just not worrying about me?"

"Huff... huff... huff..."

Almost collapsing, Emma leaned heavily on Leon, the back of her beige chiffon dress soaked through with cold sweat.

Even though she had already broken free from Leon's memories, the mere thought of the suggestion made by the thin girl—a proposal as cold and frighteningly realistic as it was—recalled how she spoke about disposing of her body after death, with a calmness like discussing what's for dinner.

Emma's heart still ached like Leon's did in the past, as though it had been completely gouged out, being crushed bit by bit by someone's hands, until even breathing became nearly impossible.

Was this what Leon had been enduring all along?

After gulping down big breaths for a while, she looked at Leon, who was helplessly supporting her. Emma, who seemed as though she had been fished out of water, couldn't help but tremble as she asked,

"Leon, does it... does it not hurt?"

"..."

Leon, understanding what she was asking, slightly shook his head and then glanced at the system prompt.

[Through your observations and reflections, coupled with repeated experiences, you have obtained substantial intelligence regarding the "Black and White Bridge." The Heterochromatic Badge "Materialist Soul (Crimson)" has been activated.

Due to your deep understanding of the rules of the "Black and White Bridge," your resistance to this anomalous object has significantly increased, allowing you to block extremely deep levels of influence.]

It was impossible for it not to hurt; he would surely remember this for the rest of his life.

But with the influence being largely blocked by the [Materialism], and knowing the outcome was ultimately good, he thought about how he would tidy up at home every day, getting along with Anna and Melanie. Those pains became less unbearable.

"There's still a little pain..."

Seeing the shock and guilt in Emma's eyes, who clearly misunderstood the robustness of his inner strength, Leon felt slightly embarrassed and explained,

"But when I think about how I joined the Purification Bureau in the end, preventing things from actually reaching that point, how Anna and the others are good and waiting for me at home, still leaving me meals if I'm late, it's not so bad."

Was that so...

After hearing Leon's explanation, Emma tried to put herself in his shoes.

But no matter how hard she tried, the thin girl who calmly suggested secretly tossing her body into the sewage river to deceive the pension and support her younger siblings, continued to tear at her heart again and again.

How could it not hurt?

I only saw your memory once, and my heart already felt as if it were being cut by knives. For me, you repeatedly relived the past powerlessness and pain to help me step on the white bricks. How could you not be sad?

"Don't think about it."

Watching Emma, who seemed like she wanted to say more, Leon considered her situation and couldn't help but offer a bit of comfort,

"The past pain is gone. Rather than focusing on what we've lost or suffered, let's look at what we still have and treasure those in front of us."

"..."

Treasure those in front of us...

Emma had heard similar advice from the Red-haired Director countless times, but after sharing Leon's memories on the Black and White Bridge, experiencing his past happiness and pain,

Faced with Leon, who had lost his parents early, struggled to raise his siblings, joined the Purification Bureau for his sister, becoming a Cleaner with a high mortality rate, genuinely making efforts to cherish what he had, this oft-heard comfort finally reached her heart for the first time.

"Senior Emma?"

After looking at Emma, who was staring at him blankly, Leon released her hand and squatted slightly,

"It's only a few dozen steps to leave the bridge. Should I just carry you the rest of the way?"

"..."

Though instinctively wanting to refuse, looking at Leon's not-so-broad, yet seemingly so reliable shoulders, Emma remained silent for a while, then leaned forward, resting on Leon's back.

Once in the air, she listened to Leon's steady and powerful breathing, felt the slight thinness of his back, his heart beating like a flame warming her, and Emma's tense body completely relaxed, leaning comfortably and reaching gently to wrap her arms around Leon's neck.

Treasure those in front of you...

...

At last, they were off the bridge...

Stepping on more than twenty black tiles, turning everything black up to the bridge, Leon couldn't help but let out a big breath.

Although the influence of [Materialism] shielded him from reliving the painful memories too vividly, even torment at a "tease through the shoe" level, when repeated often, became unbearable.

After quickly walking a few steps forward, completely leaving the Black and White Bridge's range, seeing that Senior Emma hadn't spoken, Leon, who had just shown off a bit, was too embarrassed to remind her to come down, so he looked up ahead.

What met his gaze was a black cliff so high it seemed endless. This cliff, named [Death], gradually lightened in color upward, with the seemingly nonexistent top appearing directly connected to the gray sky of the Realm of the Dead.

As for [Death]'s lower end, like the dark earth of the Dead Realm, was purely black, so much so that it barely reflected any light, as if it didn't exist, giving the impression that stepping on it would lead straight into the Abyss.

Countless bright red Crows of Death Report nests appeared like fresh red berries growing on this black ground, curving from the ground up to the sky, or like drops of fresh blood oozing out from the black canopy descending from the sky in large numbers, vivid yet extremely eerie.

"Something doesn't seem right..."

Narrowing his eyes, Leon squinted at the black wall and the red Crow Nests. At the end... or rather the beginning of the No Return Path, after witnessing a massive misty door, he gently tapped Emma's thigh, signaling her to look up, then frowned slightly,

"The Director said that we just need to walk straight along the No Return Path, pass the [Black and White Bridge] and [Nest of Crows of Death Report], to see the Canine Deity guarding the Dead Realm's entrance.

But now that we've passed the bridge, reached the Crow Nest's range, and even seen the entrance, why haven't we seen the so-called Canine Deity yet?"

"It's fine, just keep walking ahead."

Hearing Leon's question, Emma, drawing warmth from the person in front to fend off the increasingly mad curses behind her, replied,

"People from the Realm of the Dead don't quite like the director, so she must have forced her way in. As the Canine Deity's responsibility is to guard the entrance of the Dead Realm, preventing the living from entering, she probably beat it up.

So we can walk a little further. If there's a fainted little dog with three heads tied up by hair on the roadside, that's most likely the gatekeeping Canine Deity.

If we don't run into it on the way, we can turn over the Crow Nests near the entrance. Sometimes, after defeating the Canine Deity, the director, fearing she'd forget where she left it, would casually stuff it into the nearby Crow Nests to avoid trouble opening the door on her return."

"..."

"Oh..."

Chapter 396: Speaking ill of others behind their back will lead to retribution_1

The director was as much of a bastard as always.

Leon clicked his tongue, somewhat speechless, before trying hard to shake the unfriendly thought from his mind. Following the method Senior Emma had taught him, he began searching along the path for the canine deity that the director had knocked out.

A comatose, three-headed puppy wrapped in red hair...

A comatose, three-headed puppy wrapped in red hair...

As the saying goes, "Heaven rewards the persistent." After silently reciting this seventeen or eighteen times, Leon finally spotted a dog that basically matched the criteria, not far ahead. As for why it was only "basically"...

"Senior Emma..."

Looking at the three dog heads, each two circles bigger than a round dining table, soaking in the pitch-black swamp by the No Return Path, Leon couldn't help but say, speechlessly,

"This dog's heads alone are this large. If we pull it out entirely, it'd be at least five or six meters long. This can't be considered a small dog, can it?"

"It's very large for us, but among the deities of the Dead Realm, it's one of the smallest in size."

Emma, on Leon's back, explained softly,

"In our world, souls exist by attaching to bodies, so the priority of the body is very high. If the size is too huge, it becomes difficult for the flesh to support itself.

So unless we encounter an Evil God or such, which can briefly erode the world's rules with special rules, it's hard to see anything massive on land."

"The rules of the Dead Realm are different from ours. Here, the body doesn't have its existence acknowledged, so as long as a soul can sustain it, the size of a creature in the Dead Realm can grow almost infinitely, even as big as a mountain.

As for the canine deity responsible for guarding the gate of the Dead Realm, it spends most time outside the Dead Realm and is one of the few deities with a physical form. That's why it's the smallest among all the True Gods of the Dead Realm."

Ah, that made sense.

Thinking about that Overlord of the Dead Realm who ground its bones into bricks, paving the path from the entrance of the Dead Realm to its deepest parts, Leon couldn't help but nod with sudden understanding.

Indeed, if that "First Deceased" didn't have an enormous body, it might not have had enough bones to grind into powder, but still...

"How should we wake it up?"

Looking at the canine deity's fangs that were longer than his own feet, Leon hesitated before asking,

"Should we just shout loudly at it? Or maybe pat it? Also, since the director knocked it out, would it even be willing to help us open the door?"

"It'll help."

Glancing at the Three-headed Canine Deity soaking in the swamp by the road, Emma spoke with a complex expression,

"Olivia's reputation in the Dead Realm is quite... remarkable. She came here many times for my sake and has communicated with the canine deity a lot. So when it sees me, it will send us out.

As for waking it, it's rather simple. The canine deity relies on its nose to distinguish between the living and the dead, and it's very sensitive to the scent of the living. So, we just need to blow a breath at its nose."

"Oh..."

Understanding Emma's euphemistic explanation, Leon marveled at the notorious reputation of his director while carefully descending from the No Return Path to the edge of the swamp, blowing a strong breath at the unconscious canine deity's nose.

"Woof?!"

Even though Leon stood seventeen or eighteen meters away from where the Three-headed Dog was sunken, as soon as he exhaled with the breath of the living, the three heads' six eyes, the twelve eyelids, simultaneously flickered.

"Alive!"

Accompanied by a still somewhat unclear mumble, the pink dog nose, the size of a basketball and closest to Leon, twitched violently. The ears, previously drooping on its forehead, suddenly stood up, lightly twisting left and right, searching for the nearby sound. The teeth, which were already somewhat exposed, bared in extreme hostility.

"How dare you venture into the Dead Realm, I'm going to..."

"Angsi!"

Noticing this, Emma, on Leon's back, leaned forward slightly, boldly confronting the six giant dog eyes glaring at them, and loudly asked,

"Do you recognize me?"

"..."

The six lantern-sized eyes, flickering with ghostly green phosphorescence, carefully scrutinized Emma for a moment. The awakened canine deity's facial muscles twitched slightly, and with a displeased expression, it said,

"It's you... Are you planning to visit your family in the City of Regret again? Didn't they say they wouldn't see you? How can you not understand what giving up means?"

City of Regret?

Hearing the canine deity's opening, Leon's eyes narrowed slightly.

If he remembered correctly, that place was for those whose regrets or grievances were so strong that they refused to move forward. It housed many dead who were unsatisfied in soul.

Until they were forgotten by all living beings, when no one remembered them anymore, or until those they regretted, resented, or held grudges against, or the events surrounding those feelings, faded away with time or death, only then would these dead leave the City of Regret and continue on the No Return Path to the Cliff of Doomsday.

So... some of Senior Emma's kin, at least a portion, hadn't "completely" moved on and continued to reside in the City of Regret, constantly harboring resentment toward her?

"This is none of your concern..."

Seemingly pained by the canine deity's questioning, Emma's face paled slightly before she bit her lip and said,

"Help us open the door, we need to leave the Dead Realm now!"

"Fine, open it for you! You damn Cleaners always like to use the Anomalous Objects in your hands to break the rules and do things that shatter the boundary between life and death!"

The giant dog head revealed a distinctly human-like disdainful expression as the Three-headed Canine Deity stared at Leon and Emma with a face full of malice,

"I'll remember your scent! When you return here as the dead, I'll surely bite you each with a big chomp! Especially you!"

"..."

???

Staring at the Three-headed Canine Deity, who was glaring viciously at him, Leon asked, somewhat dumbfounded,

"Me? It's my first time in the Dead Realm!"

"Ha, ha. Before you lie, why not first ask this woman who I am?"

With a forceful snort, blowing out the black-yellow swamp sludge from its nose, the Three-headed Canine Deity said disdainfully,

"Regarding strength, I'm the weakest among the True Gods of the Netherworld, but as for the nose, no one can surpass me.

With one sniff, I can tell that you came to the Dead Realm about three years ago, and recently you've almost entered the realm over a hundred times, only to escape back using Anomalous Objects. Am I right?"

"..."

Recently... indeed, counting the times he'd used Yang Jiao and Yang Xin to evade death, it'd been over a hundred times.

But three years ago... wasn't that when I just "arrived"?

"Ha, ha, speechless now, aren't you?"

As Leon furrowed his brows in thought, the Three-headed Canine Deity, thinking it had rendered him "speechless," grinned triumphantly, suddenly opening its mouth wide to let out an ear-splitting roar.

"Woof!"

Accompanied by the deep and forceful bark, the massive doors in the distance creaked open slightly, and Leon and Emma vanished without a trace, as if swallowed by a black hole, taken by surprise.

"Get lost already!"

Spitting thrice in the direction they disappeared, the Three-headed Canine Deity grumbled in irritation,

"Damn Purification Bureau! Damn Cleaners! And that damned red-haired woman! When she finally dies, I'll surely... Hm? Ampu?"

Catching a familiar scent, the Three-headed Canine Deity turned its head in surprise, looking at the Crocodile God emerging from the swamp behind,

"What are you doing here? You never usually... uh..."

Chapter 397: Three Wishes_1

"Not bad, quite the spirit~"

The red-haired Director, with the Crocodile God's head serving as a footrest, cheerfully inquired while facing the terrified Three-Headed Canine Deity in front of her,

"After I die, what do you plan to do? Give me a hard bite too?"

"..."

Not just one bite, I'd wish to bite you a thousand times! Ten thousand times!

Thinking such things in his heart was one thing, but saying them in front of this woman would be asking for trouble.

The Three-Headed Canine Deity, who had been beaten by the Red-haired Director countless times, knew full well when to follow his inner guidance. Facing the tightening hair around him, he quickly wagged his tail happily, causing the surrounding swamp to bubble noisily.

"I mean, when you really... come, I'll make sure to greet you at the gate personally!"

When guarding the gate, he had to fight this red-haired woman out of duty, or else abandoning the gate would easily damage his Authority. But now that he had been beaten by her, he considered his duty fulfilled and saw no need for another beating.

Escaping the confines of the Gates of Death, the Three-Headed Canine Deity swiftly transformed from a stubborn watchdog into a submissive, obedient dog. His three dog faces, larger than dining tables, were full of flattery as he said, "Madam Olivia, are you done and planning to return? Need me to open the gate for you?"

"No, I haven't finished my business."

Turning down the Three-Headed Canine Deity's offer, the Red-haired Director, with a faint smile, said,

"If you could guard the gate the way you are now, I wouldn't have to hit you so often."

"Well... My Authority involves dividing life and death, letting you in directly wouldn't sit well with the Dominators..."

"Mmm, I understand your predicament, so I never hit you too hard... Alright, let's leave the small talk at that for now."

After gazing at the massive doors that had shut again in the distance, the Red-haired Director composedly inquired,

"You said Leon visited the Realm of the Dead three years ago, is that true?"

Leon? That man with the heavy demonic scent, right!

"Yes, yes!"

Recalling slightly, the Three-Headed Canine Deity quickly nodded his massive head as he said,

"I guarantee with my Authority, he definitely came once, and that time, the scent of death was very strong. It's certainly not the feeling of being briefly captured by the Road of No Return after using an Anomalous Object to escape death. It was the kind of death that's very thorough, very complete!"

Died thoroughly...

The Red-haired Director frowned at this and continued to question,

"Then how did he return back then?"

"..."

Upon hearing the Red-haired Director's question, the Three-Headed Canine Deity couldn't help but secretly roll his eyes.

Isn't he from your Virgin Branch? How your guy came back from the Realm of the Dead, shouldn't you ask him instead of me?

Although he had a rant he wanted to voice, the situation was more daunting than a Great Dane, forcing the Three-Headed Canine Deity to stick his tongue out and respond with a smile, "I'm not really sure about that. I only know for sure he died once three years ago. Didn't you notice he didn't have a Crows of Death Report over his head? His should have flown with him into the depths of the Realm of the Dead three years ago."

"I see..."

The Red-haired Director nodded, narrowing her eyes slightly as she asked,

"Angsi, you are the True God with the strongest perception in the Realm of the Dead, I'm asking you, is Leon's soul closely bound to his body?"

"Huh?"

"What I mean is, is the soul in his body actually the original soul of that body?"

"This..."

The Three-Headed Canine Deity hesitated slightly before speaking unsurely,

"It should be... right?"

"What do you mean by 'it should be'?"

The Red-haired Director frowned and said,

"Give me an accurate answer, either yes or no!"

"Then... yes?"

The Three-Headed Canine Deity tucked his tail between his legs as he cautiously replied,

"I didn't sniff anything off, really. That death three years ago might have caused some disruptions to his soul, making his past memories very jumbled, but his soul and body should be unified."

Just some memory chaos? That's good, that's good...

...

Upon hearing the Three-Headed Canine Deity's answer, the Red-haired Director couldn't help but feel a slight relief in her heart.

She originally intended to quietly follow behind to ensure Leon and the other person could safely leave the Realm of the Dead, but after overhearing the conversation between Angsi and Leon, she couldn't resist coming out to ask a bit.

After all, the Purification Bureau is humanity's last line of defense. If someone from the Old Soil or somewhere else had really infiltrated, it wouldn't be a joke. As the Director of the Virgin Branch, regardless of how unwilling she was to doubt Leon, she had to be extra cautious about this.

Now with the Canine God's response, Leon's "innocence" was preliminarily proven, allowing her to feel slightly at ease. After all, whether Emma could overcome her inner hurdle ultimately depended on whether Leon could offer assistance.

Reflecting on the scenes she witnessed along the way, especially Emma, who usually didn't like physical contact with others, peacefully resting on Leon's back, the Red-haired Director couldn't help but sigh deeply.

According to the agreement between the Purification Bureau and the Master of Starry Skies, Cleaners are allowed to make up to three blessed wishes on their birthdays. Her first wish today wasn't actually to drink that bottle of Leon's wine but to resolve Emma's issue.

Following her inner guidance, for this wish to come to fruition, it ultimately had to depend on Leon. As long as she refused to let him and Emma leave the Realm of the Dead swiftly, allowing the opportunity for him to understand Emma's unspoken past, there was a likely chance to solve Emma's problem...

Come on, Leon, whether you can prevent Emma from doing something foolish is all on how you proceed from here!

I have risked such bad luck on my birthday, three times consecutively, just to gain this chance to resolve the issue, so don't let me down!

Oh, speaking of the three misfortunes arising from the three wishes...

Instinctively touching her still slightly burning lips, the Red-haired Director furrowed her brows slightly.

The Master of Starry Skies' curse on a Cleaner using "wishes" would instantly trigger as soon as the user followed their inner guidance to complete all the tasks required to fulfill the "wish."

According to the sequence of the three wishes being achieved, assisting Leon in obtaining a handy Anomalous Object was the first to be completed, so the misfortune resulting from that wish would appear once Leon acquired the Anomalous Object.

By the timing... would that mean losing her first kiss to Leon? Could that really be considered misfortune?

As for wanting to taste the flavor of that bottle of wine, it was today the second fulfilled wish. The misfortune as a result was very apparent; she had just tasted the flavor of that wine, only to be intensely burned, with her lips still somewhat swollen.

Emma's matter was the last to be resolved. Logically speaking, her misfortune should have struck around their departure from the Realm of the Dead, but why hadn't anything unfortunate happened up until now?

What on earth was this last misfortune?

Chapter 398: Invitation and Badge_1

"Senior Emma?"

Looking at the bustling street in front of him and the curious glances from passersby, Leon couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed as he inquired, or rather reminded her,

"We've already left the Realm of the Dead. Are you feeling better?"

"Hmm."

Emma lightly nodded her head, and seeing Leon's slightly flushed ears, she couldn't help but let out a gentle laugh before releasing her arms from around Leon's neck.

"I'm feeling much better now. You can put me down."

"Okay."

Hearing Emma's words, Leon, who felt a bit uneasy under the surprised gazes of the onlookers, quickly squatted down slightly and let Emma off his back. He then proactively asked,

"Senior Emma, would you like to come back with me to the bureau first, or?"

"I think I'll head home first."

Gently smoothing out the creased clothing on Leon's back, Emma reached out to adjust his crooked collar. With a gentle gaze and a soft voice, she said,

"Ellie must be missing me, and I want to go home and see her too, so I won't be accompanying you back to the bureau. By the way, Leon, are your siblings free the day after tomorrow?"

Would Anna and the others be free?

Upon hearing Emma's words, Leon was momentarily bewildered, then nodded and said,

"Anna won't come of age for a few more months and hasn't started job hunting yet. She just helps manage the apartment, so she should be free. William and Melanie are in school, but the day after tomorrow is a public holiday, so they're both free as well."

"Since they're all free, can they come over the day after tomorrow?"

Without seeing any signs of reluctance in Leon's eyes, Emma cautiously suggested in a low voice,

"Ellie... Her situation is quite special, so she hasn't been able to attend school and doesn't interact with kids her age. She doesn't have many friends. If it's possible, could you bring your siblings over the day after tomorrow?"

So that's how it was.

Imagining for a moment a well-behaved girl like Senior Emma, unable to attend school due to family reasons, left alone in an empty house, waiting for her mother's return, Leon felt a surge of pity in his heart.

"No problem!"

Determined to sternly instruct the two troublemakers at home not to bully the young girl, Leon patted his chest and promised,

"As long as there's nothing special happening, we'll definitely be there by eight in the morning the day after tomorrow!"

"Thank you, then I'll be on my way."

With a smile, Emma bid farewell to Leon, hailed a steam cab, opened the door, and got in. As Leon turned to leave, she couldn't help but look through the cab window at Leon's back, which, although not broad, seemed especially reliable.

She remembered the time Leon got drunk at the bureau, and she had to take him home. He had plucked a bunch of celery from the balcony, handing it to her like a bouquet, confidently declaring that age wasn't an issue, having a daughter wasn't an issue...

Were those words sincere?

...

Unexpectedly, there was an unforeseen gain!

Unaware that someone was looking at his back, Leon, after sending Emma onto the cab, eagerly opened the badge panel and looked at the new badge that popped up after leaving the Realm of the Dead.

[Escorted to the Realm of the Dead by the Sin-eating Crocodile Ampu, you, as a living being, stepped onto the No Return Path and were sent back by the Guardian of Death's Watch Angsi. Upon returning to the realm of the living, you successfully activated the hidden Golden Badge, 'The Survivor.']

[The Survivor: A being who once came extremely close to death but ultimately survived.]

[Effect of Wearing: As someone who has witnessed the afterlife, you will become extremely sensitive to the presence of death and can vaguely sense impending death.]

[Advancement Route: None.]

[Hidden Traits (no need to wear): As a living person who left the Realm of the Dead, your scent has already been firmly remembered by the Guardian of Death's Watch Angsi. Once it catches a whiff of your scent, it will awaken directly from its long slumber outside the gates of the Realm of the Dead. Therefore, unless you have sufficiently powerful companions nearby, it's best not to approach the gates of the Realm of the Dead, or you'll be fiercely bitten by all three heads!]

This was basically a death alarm!

Compared to having a vague precognition of death, getting bitten by a dog while passing through the gates of the Realm of the Dead didn't matter at all!

He didn't even know how to go to the Realm of the Dead by himself, so it was impossible to pass through the gates alone unless someone took him out. And if someone did, and he was already gone, then getting bitten would be the least of his worries. *He could deal with death's matters once he was dead!*

After reviewing the effects of [The Survivor], Leon immediately adjusted his badge panel and equipped this newly acquired badge.

Currently, Leon's badge panel had seven slots.

In them, [Materialism] took a stable position, and the similarly abnormal [Immortal in Liquor] required copious drinking to activate, so it didn't need to be equipped often. When invincibility was required, he could switch it temporarily.

Among the remaining Golden Badges, the one that made others bow, [Migratory Thrush Prince], took one slot. The sheep-gut series [I Am the Demon] and the Holy Spirit series [Deputy] both needed constant equipping, already taking up four slots.

For timely retrieval of items from the Mirror World and communication with Young Ha, [Poop Scooper], though merely an iron badge, needed frequent equipping, adding up to five slots already filled.

As for the egg-beating [Pity it's Not], the guise-deceiving [Master Performer], the secret technique inheritor [Aquarius], and the [Shooting Expert], they could only share the last two slots and be replaced as needed.

Now that the death-predicting [The Survivor] had arrived, it took up another long-term slot, which meant the remaining ten-plus badges would have to rotate in the last slot.

Having acquired a decent badge, the slots had become more strained.

Feeling the faint death auras on the surrounding passersby through [The Survivor], Leon couldn't help but let out a sigh of regret.

Pity the slot determination for [Materialism] didn't apply to anomalous objects he'd forged himself. Otherwise, he'd simply create a few more pieces of junk to meet the standard of acquiring 16 anomalous objects and unlock the eighth badge slot. For now, he'd have to make do.

With a sense of regret at not being able to exploit a loophole, Leon identified the street he was on, found that it was not far from the municipal district, and decided against hiring a cab. Instead, he walked towards the Purification Bureau.

After returning from the Boarding Tower, he discovered that Senior Emma was in trouble, following Senior Tom non-stop into the Scales Gold Sect gathering. He wondered how those Rebels and Senior Pioni were doing.

Although middle-aged Joshua hadn't lied, the door he opened for them must have been safe, and with Senior Pioni protecting them, they were unlikely to be in danger. Still, it was hard to rest easy without seeing them in person.

Oh, right, speaking of Senior Pioni...

At this thought, Leon couldn't help but touch his cufflinks, his face showing a strong sense of guilt.

Sorry, Senior. Although I didn't lose your 'brother,' your rear end might be gone, and it's probably in the hands of the Goddess of Fortune, and I don't even know how to ask for it back...

Chapter 399: Uncle or Brother_1

"Creak."

Accompanied by the grating sound of rusty door hinges, the small gate at the corner of the wall was slowly pushed open. A tall, beautiful woman with fair skin and soft features slightly bent down to pass through the doorway, stepping into the now semi-abandoned garden.

Though it was already in a semi-abandoned state, this incredibly vast garden still exuded an elegant aura. Numerous plain stones engraved with peony motifs encircled the dried-up marble fountain at the garden's center, forming several petal-shaped secluded paths.

These pebble-laden and leaf-strewn paths, clearly neglected at first glance, crisscrossed and wound outward. They passed fallen stone pillars, abandoned sculptures, a delicate greenhouse with shattered glass, courtyard walls with peeling paint, and extended to the garden's farthest corner next to the only place still maintained—a small wooden hut.

"Ellie."

After walking all the way down the path to the door of the small hut, Emma, carrying a large bag of items, gently knocked on the door with the back of her hand, which hadn't turned jade-colored, and softly called,

"I'm back. Are you home?"

"..."

As soon as Emma finished speaking, the door of the small hut was pulled open. A little girl with two light chestnut braids, each tied with a ribbon, darted out like a butterfly, landing gently in Emma's arms.

"I'm sorry to have worried you again."

Gently stroking her daughter's head, Emma said softly with a tender gaze,

"Don't worry. No matter what, Mommy won't die. As long as you're at home waiting for me, even if I really do die one day, I'll come back little by little. I will never leave you alone again."

"..."

The ribbon-wearing little girl still said nothing, only gently nodding. Then, as if suddenly remembering something, she released her arms from around Emma's waist and brought her slightly clenched right hand in front of Emma's eyes.

"Hmm? What do you want to show me?"

After placing the items she was holding on the cabinet by the door, Emma crouched down, smiling as she reached out to the little girl. The adorably cute little girl then earnestly placed her right hand onto Emma's palm, gently opening it...

"Did you catch this in the garden?"

Glancing at the tiny pink-and-blue butterfly flapping its wings in her palm, Emma couldn't help but smile with delight, but then asked, her eyes showing a trace of guilt,

"It's so beautiful... Ellie, thank you for the gift. Mommy loves it. But, what about you... Have you been okay these few days? Was it a bit lonely being at home alone?"

"..."

Hearing Emma's words, the little girl with twin braids first nodded slightly, then shook her head vigorously, giving her a big smile.

It might have been a little lonely, but now that you're back, Mommy, I'm not lonely anymore.

Understanding her daughter's nodding and shaking meant, Emma bit her lip slightly and was about to say something when she noticed the tiny butterfly suddenly took flight. The little girl had released the gentle grip on the butterfly and instead grasped Emma's bandaged right hand.

"?"

Seeing the hint of green peeking through the bandage, the little girl's clear black-and-white eyes blinked twice. Then, full of worry, she raised her hand and pointed to Emma's right hand.

"It's nothing, just a little scratch."

After lovingly kissing the little girl's forehead, Emma explained with a smile,

"Mom did encounter some trouble this time out, but it's all been resolved now. The little injuries will heal in just over a week. Don't worry!"

"..."

Hearing Emma's assurance, the look of worry on the little girl's face slowly faded, and she regained her happiness.

She released Emma's hand, quickly ran back to the room with the pink sign, and brought out a slightly crumpled drawing of two colorful little figures, presenting it proudly to Emma, who was changing shoes.

Is this a drawing from last year's birthday?

Emma unfolded the slightly wrinkled drawing, recognizing that the big and small colorful figures sat around the table, clapping happily.

Looking at the round shape on the table likely representing a cake, and the small crown on the little figure's head in the center, Emma hesitated slightly. She then squatted down with the drawing, earnestly asking,

"Ellie... do you remember when Mommy told you that on the day after tomorrow, on your birthday, a big... uncle would come?"

"?"

After listening to Emma's question, the little girl blinked her eyes in surprise.

Uncle? Isn't it a big brother?

"There's actually quite a bit of age difference between you two, and since he's Mommy's colleague, it's better if you call him uncle."

Understanding the confusion in her daughter's eyes, Emma blushed slightly as she explained, then secretly clenched her fists. Her ears burned a little as she quietly asked,

"Ellie, would you like to have... well, do you like a lively atmosphere at home?"

Feeling slightly embarrassed by her daughter's seemingly understanding eyes, Emma hurriedly changed the subject:

"I meant to say, on your birthday the day after tomorrow, besides Uncle Leon, his sister and two friends around your age are coming too. They'll all celebrate your birthday with you. Are you happy?"

"Frie...friends?"

"Yes, friends!"

Seeing her daughter's surprise mixed with anticipation, yet a slight hint of apprehension, Emma knew that she longed for friends who could talk but was worried about getting along. So, she embraced the little girl, softly comforting her,

"Don't worry. I looked into it ahead of time. Although they are lively, they're all really good kids. You will surely have fun playing with them."

Hearing Emma's assurance, the little girl couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief, her delicate little face displaying an adorable expression of excitement and anticipation.

"Th...that's good then..."

Although her voice, like a wind chime under the eaves, was crystal clear and beautiful, the little girl seemed to rarely communicate with others, resulting in her speech being somewhat slow and her pronunciation a bit unclear.

But with friends of her age coming to celebrate her birthday, the usually quiet girl still blinked with anticipation and tried her best to speak with hope,

"Do they...like flowers? I grew some in the small greenhouse...and butterflies...small birds..."

"..."

Recalling the flocks of crows throwing droppings onto the windowsill in Leon's memory, Emma couldn't help but twitch the corner of her mouth.

Rather than cute little birds, Leon's unusually lively younger siblings probably preferred climbing trees to snatch eggs... Hmm...better keep an eye on them so they don't take Ellie's favorite little birds' nests.

"Those two kids...should still like birds, right?"

Telling a white lie, Emma changed into loose indoor shoes, took the little girl's hand, and walked inside. Just as she was about to ask what happened in the past two days, she saw a large cleared area behind the garden from the small hut's window.

In the past two days...has someone been here?!

Chapter 400: The Golden Cuckoo and the Birthday

Noticing the newly cleared space at the back of the garden, Emma instinctively furrowed her brows.

The majority of the Bauhinia Family's assets had been confiscated six years ago, but this estate built by the first-generation King was not taken due to its extremely special significance.

So even though she didn't want to remember those sorrowful memories and didn't want to live in the empty estate with just her daughter, choosing to move to the small cottage in the corner of the garden instead, the estate still nominally belonged to her, and no one should be trespassing.

Could it be a break-in? But why would a thief bother to clean up the land?

With a head full of questions, Emma pushed open the window to take a look and found that not only had the back of the garden where she and her daughter lived been cleared, but there were also signs of maintenance along the carriage path from the main gate to the main building, with gravel and weeds on the ground already cleared away.

Seven or eight brand-new tire tracks stretched along the main road to the front of the main building. The broken stained-glass windows on the first floor had been removed, and even the partially collapsed servant's quarters on the roof had been dismantled. The flowerbeds in front of the main entrance were a mess of footprints.

Was someone trying to move in?!

Seeing the messy footprints in the flowerbeds and the large amount of horse manure that hadn't been cleaned up yet, Emma couldn't help but bite her lip in anger.

Even though she didn't care much about this empty house, this estate had once been her home, where she lived for more than twenty years. For someone to try to seize it without even a word was truly outrageous.

"Ellie, tell Mommy!"

After closing the back window in irritation, Emma tried to calm down, asking as gently as possible,

"What's going on behind the garden? Who's been here in the past few days?"

"In the past few days, many uncles with ladders and tools have come, and they even pushed down the big badge in the middle of the building and replaced it with a new one."

After trying to recall, the little girl gestured with her hand as she spoke,

"The badge had a small bird with a pointy beak, green feathers, and black and white stripes across its belly."

A pointy beak, green feathers, and horizontal black and white stripes on the belly... The golden cuckoo emblem?

After hearing the little girl's description, Emma turned pale at a possibility she could not accept. Without even changing her shoes, she ran out of the cottage, climbed over the garden wall, and rushed towards the main building.

When Emma walked to the front, seeing the front of the main building that was not visible from the cottage, and clearly recognizing the pattern on the new badge, her cheeks immediately flushed red, and the usually gentle eyes suddenly flared with an icy glare.

The golden cuckoo emblem!

Yes, she should have realized, there was another person besides her who had the right to live in Treasure Flower Manor!

Looking up at the curtain wall of the second floor of the main building, she saw the golden cuckoo emblem shimmering with green light in the sunset. Emma silently turned her head and found the badge belonging to the Bauhinia Family in the flower bed used as a garbage pile by the building.

Golden Cuckoo... Leonard...

Her delicate, pale fist clenched tightly and then slowly relaxed, then clenched again, repeating several times before finally letting go completely.

After staring intently at the two badges for a long moment, Emma let out a faint sigh, walked with heavy steps to the edge of the flower bed, and picked up the Bauhinia badge that had been dented at one corner from the garbage pile.

Stay calm.

More important than dwelling on the past is cherishing the people who are still here. Focus on what you still have rather than on what you've lost...

When Leon carried her out of the Realm of the Dead, she had already resolved to try to let go of her hatred temporarily for Ellie's sake and to embrace a new life.

But...

Her fingers unconsciously applied slight pressure, causing the huge copper badge to slightly deform as Emma's teeth dug into her pale lower lip, leaving a small row of deep teeth marks.

Why can't I just let it go?!

...

"Stand still!"

After helping William and Melanie tidy their clothes, straightening out the crooked little outfits, Anna squinted slightly and reminded them,

"Do you remember everything I told you before?"

"I remember."

Adjusting his little bow tie, William calmly recited,

"When we see Aunt Emma, we have to greet her, and when we see little sister Ellie, we must wish her a happy birthday, not cause trouble to embarrass our brother, and not break anything in someone else's house..."

"Most importantly, absolutely do not mention your world-conquering dream!"

After adding a line, Anna turned to look at Melanie, who was twirling and happily swirling her little dress. She emphasized with some concern,

"Your dream of being a couch potato is also not to be mentioned!"

"Got it, got it!"

Upon hearing her sister's special reminder, Melanie in front of the mirror pursed her lips, complaining with an overwhelmed expression,

"There are only a few rules in total, and you've been repeating them since yesterday. We've memorized them already, okay?"

"Memorizing them is best!"

After giving the most worrisome Melanie an eye, Anna softened her tone slightly,

"Ever since our brother got his job, Sister Emma has helped him a lot, and she's my lifesaver... Well... She's been a benefactor to our family, so you must respect her, and you absolutely must not bully Ellie!"

"We won't."

Having fixed his little child bow tie, William nodded in satisfaction and then said earnestly,

"Brother has said that in life, we may lose money but we shalt not lose integrity. If someone helps you, you must remember it well. I've always kept this in mind, although I'm not sure if Melanie can, but I definitely can."

"I... of course I can too!"

Realizing Anna's gaze was on her, Melanie, sensing danger, quickly straightened her face, imitating William's serious demeanor, and raised her hand to swear,

"If I cause trouble today, or make little sister Ellie cry, then... I'll give all this year's pocket money to William!"

Was she really that resolute?

Hearing that Melanie had made such a "vow," Anna finally relaxed a bit, went out to call for a carriage, while William couldn't help but glance at his sister.

Since she was not talented in math and got only 5 points on a recent test, anything involving numbers, such as pocket money, had been taken over by her, who declared herself a future Minister of Finance of the empire.

Now that Melanie had suddenly sworn on her pocket money, *could it be that if she caused any trouble today, she planned to rely on William's pocket money for the whole coming year?*