

I! Cleaner 411

Chapter 411: Night Raid (Part 2)

" *As an ordinary person with no abnormalities, upon hearing his own 'meow,' the sentinel from the Gold Oriole family fell under the control of the 'Nightmare Invader.' Under its influence, he directly 'dreamed' of a kitten.*

This dream cat, which invaded reality by leveraging his soul, easily knocked unconscious everyone in the duty room and left a pile of cat footprints in the house.

When the main bureau sent people to investigate, if the investigator was not careful, as long as the memory of this sentinel matched, the direction of the investigation would be directly misled, or even steered towards some 'cat transformation' Anomalous Object.

Even if no result was found at the end, and it did end up back at him, with this nonexistent target, his suspicion would be indirectly washed away somewhat. This was his second method to elude suspicion, following the alibi provided by the coachman.

And as the saying goes, where there is a first and a second, there will be a third and a fourth. As for his third backup plan...

" *Time to work!*

After fiddling with his button and bringing out the Black Goat, Leon pointed to the still brightly lit main building in the distance, and said calmly,

" *Come! Help me find someone!*

" ...

" "Crackling..."

Even though it was past midnight and dawn was creeping on the horizon, there were still people who had not entered deep sleep and were busy at their desks.

After filling more than half a sheet of stationery with elaborate, flowery script, a tired-looking man folded the paper in half and handed it to the secretary standing by the side of the desk.

" *Go, seal the letter and stamp it. Tomorrow, deliver it along with my warrant to the Mining Guild!*

" "Understood."

After carefully securing the letter handed over by the man and processing it as requested, the equally weary-looking secretary straightened up and asked,

" Mr. Leonard *sir, after your letter is delivered, do we continue to maintain ties with the Mining Guild as we did last time, or...?*

" *Don't bother maintaining ties, they're of no more value.*

After pulling another document from the pile on the desk and glancing at its signed name at the bottom, the man named Leonard frowned and said,

" *Earlier, I fully supported the Mining Guild's request to use a tax reduction policy to entice them to mine in Merino County. Merino County's spice orchards are our Kuco Family's biggest competitors.*

" *Since both mining and spice cultivation require a lot of water, as soon as the mines open in Merino County, they'll start competing for water with a few major spice orchards there. This will suppress our competitors and also reduce the Kingdom's spice production, driving up spice prices.*

" *This was the real reason I supported the Mining Guild, not because those miserable miners themselves have any value. Now that they are holding warrants and going off to mine, we need not waste more effort on them.*

" *Ah, understood!*

Having noted down Leonard Marquis' instructions, the secretary hesitated briefly before speaking with some hesitation,

" *But those miners from the Mining Guild have already clashed several times with people from Merino County because of this matter, resulting in seventy or eighty deaths. If it escalates...*

" *Then let them go to the Princess of Ashito. She is the one who encouraged the policies of the Energy Guild, so naturally, she should take responsibility.*

" *Moreover, she always wanted to bypass the Treasury and Parliament to find a source of revenue that doesn't require approval to fill the army's funding pit. These citizen-formed industrial guilds are the ones who most support her and even donated enough to arm two regiments.*

" *If a few more people die this time, it might awaken those ignorant fools to the fact that the game between the royal family and the Treasury is not something they have the right to interfere in. It might even be a good thing.*

" *And who placed this letter on my desk?*

After skimming through the earnest petition letter, Leonard's brow furrowed tightly, and he said with displeasure,

" *The Weavers' Guild actually submitted a petition, crying to me that they can't make a living and hope to get some tax relief... If their taxes are reduced, what about this year's municipal needs? The greenery in the Church District and the Arcades should have been renewed last year; if we don't collect their taxes, where will I find the money?*

" *Well, the Weavers' Guild there is indeed having some difficulty...*

After flipping through the corresponding materials, the secretary cautiously reminded,

" *Six years ago, after the loss, the Kingdom lost two maritime trade routes, including the one for transporting textiles, making it difficult to sell many things. This led to the closure of several weaving workshops.*

" *Although the northbound land route, co-managed with your... with that family, can still transport textiles, the Kingdom of Ashito heavily taxes them, resulting in very low profits. So, they may indeed be struggling a bit...*

" *Why are you talking so much today?*

Leonard squinted slightly, a cold light in his eyes, looking at his secretary with a menacing demeanor,

" *Did the Weavers' Guild give you money?*

" *They did, a bit... But these facts are also true.*

The secretary chuckled awkwardly, then spoke,

" *You know, the Weavers' Guild is made up of many small and medium workshops, which indeed can't compare with wealthy big merchants. Even a slight change can easily topple them...*

" *Then let them bear it!*

Leonard snorted and said,

" *I don't care about you taking money, but tax reduction is absolutely out of the question!*

"

"Don't think I don't know. I used to be in this business too, and if you want to make money in this line of work, it's all about squeezing the weavers dry. A single weaver can do the work of two hundred rolls of fabric, and you only need to pay them for fifty or sixty rolls."

"So instead of asking me for a tax reduction, why not just cut more water? Lower the wages to forty rolls; they won't starve. If you can push it down to thirty rolls, that's more effective than reducing taxes twice!"

"That's true, but on the weavers' side, I'm afraid..."

"Then just drive out the troublemakers. Do I need to teach them this?"

After crumpling the tax reduction application letter from the weaving industry into a ball and tossing it into the trash can, Leonard said with impatience in his eyes,

"If you can't recruit people, just go to the slums and pull some in! Those people will work for a meal. They can't handle the skilled dyeing tasks, but can't they manage the simple work of moving their arms and legs?"

Also, don't think that just because your last name is Kuko, I will tolerate you repeatedly. No matter how many benefits they give you, this matter ends here. Not a single Copper Wheel of the required taxes should be missing!"

"Alright, then I'll go tell them the day after tomorrow..."

"Go tomorrow! Also, how's it going at Treasure Flower Manor?"

After drinking a cup of refreshing tea from across the sea, Leonard rubbed his throbbing temples vigorously, and asked with his eyes closed,

"Hasn't it been tidied up for four or five days over there? Is the main building of the estate ready? Can it be lived in?"

"Well, it might take another three or four days..."

The secretary replied awkwardly,

"Marquis, you know, that place has been abandoned for six years. Except for the garden, which is occasionally maintained, most of the other areas are deserted, so..."

"Ignore whether the estate is deserted or not. Just get the living space ready for me!"

"But, with it being so deserted, won't you living there be..."

"It doesn't matter if it's deserted or not, as long as it can hold people and not collapse, it's fine."

Stopping his hand that was rubbing his temples, Leonard explained with a weary gaze,

"The princess has gained the support of the Duke of Lionheart, and besides securing the military and the Department of Road Administration, she has essentially secured a vice-chairman position in the Upper House. If Prince Joshua wants to compete with her for the position, just having the Minister of Finance's support isn't enough; he also needs a voice in the Upper House. According to the Minister of Finance, as long as I acknowledge the marriage with that woman, he can work things out to forcibly take over the Bauhinia Family's seat in the Upper House. This would level the playing field for the two princes. Moving from Verdant Feather Estate to live in Treasure Flower Manor is the first step of this operation. Even with the Minister of Finance's and the royal family's backing, my people need to be there. At least the appearance must be in place to inherit the Bauhinia Family's political legacy. Got it?"

"Got it..."

"If you understand, then go do it!"

Looking at his secretary, who was nominally his but was actually there to learn how to handle affairs and waiting for a chance to be transferred elsewhere, Leonard encouraged him with the last of his patience,

"Other matters can be postponed, but this one was instructed by the Minister of Finance. If we manage to occupy Bao Hua's seat, even His Majesty the King will strongly support it. It must take priority! So go urge them now, get the workers up and have them work overnight!"

"Understood! I'll go right away!"

The instructed secretary quickly got up and walked out of the office in haste, while Leonard, rid of distractions, put down the teacup and resumed examining the towering stack of documents on the desk. The entire room returned to silence, with only the soft scratching of the pen on paper, until...

"Crack!"

The whale oil in the lamp on the desk flickered slightly, emitting a faint sound, causing the lamp's light to flicker twice as well, startling the man busily writing at the desk.

Glancing at the empty side table, Leonard frowned slightly and called out loudly,

"Mark?"

"Where are you?"

After waiting a while without receiving a response, not even a sound from the guards stationed outside, Leonard frowned again and stood up from the desk.

"Mark?"

"I'm here."

Accompanied by a slightly muffled response, a somewhat obscured figure appeared by the door. However, the figure seemed a bit different in size, appearing slightly slimmer than the slightly overweight Mark...

"Mark?"

"Hmm."

Accompanied by an affirmative response, the figure stepped out from the shadow of the door, and the previously somewhat obscured figure returned to normal under the lamplight, completely stabilizing.

Seeing the tense body relax again, Leonard, with eyes still filled with fatigue, gave a slight smile. The secretary, with a calm expression, said, "Sir Leonard, I've arrived."

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"Hmm."

After responding blandly, Leonard scrutinized his secretary, a bit suspicious as he said,

"Where did you go? It was just a simple task, so why did it take you so long?"

"The person on duty over there fell asleep, couldn't wake him no matter what, so it took a bit longer. I also got startled by a stray cat on the way, sorry..."

After vaguely answering a couple of times, "Mark" walked back to his desk with heavy steps, continuing to review the documents he hadn't finished.

Leonard, having returned to his desk, looked at the whitening sky and suddenly felt a sore waist and back. He couldn't help but yawn and then waved his hand wearily, saying,

"Stop it, let's call it a day. I need to rest."

Tomorrow afternoon, we need to meet with the president of the Royal Capital Commerce Association to discuss imposing an additional monopoly tax on some major companies led by Charl Department Store. You should rest in the ear room, too, so you won't mess things up tomorrow!"

"Okay."

Hearing Leonard's words, the secretary stood up, following him closely out of the office and into the slightly dimly lit corridor.

As the two walked one after another into the corridor, under the indifferent gaze of the portraits on both sides, their shadows stretched longer by the light from behind. "Mark's" footsteps drew ever closer, his shadow gradually overshadowing Leonard's head, nearly engulfing him entirely.

"By the way, how's that woman at Treasure Flower Manor?"

Seemingly unaccustomed to the chattering secretary's silence along the way, Leonard uncomfortably took the initiative to speak,

"Does she still live in the garden?"

"..."

Upon hearing Leonard's inquiry, "Mark's" shadow paused slightly and no longer continued to stretch but instead subtly hummed,

"Yes, she's still living in the small wooden house in the corner of the garden with your daughter."

Your daughter...

"Shut up! Don't mention that monster! She's not my daughter either!"

Leonard's body suddenly froze upon hearing that. He stopped in his tracks, turned his head, and said angrily,

"Damn it! I clearly drowned that monster long ago! But she... Mark!!! How dare you? How dare you mention this in front of me?!!!"

"Sorry! Marquis, I'm sorry! I misspoke!"

Frightened awake by Leonard's sudden fury, the secretary, realizing he had misspoken, quickly slapped himself hard, snapping out of his incoherent, half-asleep state, shaking like a leaf,

"I... I just... I might've been too tired... Marquis... I... I..."

"Enough, shut your mouth!"

After glaring at his secretary with disgust, Leonard, while considering finding an excuse to get rid of him the next day, said with cold, harsh eyes,

"Considering you stayed up late with me and your mind isn't very clear, we'll let it go this time. But if I hear you mention a word about it again, don't blame me!"

"I... I remember, Marquis, I remember!"

Letting out an angry huff, Leonard, who had opened up the topic, simply continued,

"When I sent you to clean up the manor, did she see it? Did she say anything if she did?"

"She... probably saw it."

After a slight flicker of his eyes, "Mark" replied,

"But she didn't say anything, nor did she interfere. She just picked up the Bauhinia Family crest from the trash pile in front of the main building."

"I see... heh."

Leonard chuckled with a hint of disdain,

"After that incident years ago, I actually saw her twice more. At that time, the way that woman looked at me was as if she were looking at a dead man, making me worry for quite a while.

But now... heh, it seems the Purification Bureau's restraints on her are stronger than I thought. She didn't even dare stand up to stop it, the last Bao Hua... that's all."

"The Purification Bureau? What kind of place is that?"

"It's... a mysterious department under the police bureau."

After glancing at his secretary, who wore a face full of curiosity, Leonard was somewhat annoyed at himself for mentioning this dangerous organization but, upon thinking it over, still explained with a slight apprehension in his gaze,

"They have some unusual abilities, capable of doing things that ordinary people can't, handling cases that are particularly peculiar. But the entry requirements are extremely stringent, and most people haven't even heard of them, or if they do, they forget soon after.

I was able to know about their existence because that woman was chosen by them. So, they also put something called Word Spirit on me, which prevents that woman from approaching, thus preserving my memory of it."

"There's actually such a mysterious organization..."

With eyes full of shock, the secretary replied, "Leonard, since the woman from Treasure Flower Manor could join that Purification Bureau, she must have unusual abilities as well, right?"

"Yeah."

Unable to resist glancing back at his somewhat strange secretary, Leonard thought that even if he knew now, he'd inexplicably forget this memory tomorrow anyway. Additionally, having bottled it up for so many years, he did want to find someone to talk to a bit, so he replied,

"Though not exactly clear, I guess her ability is probably to bring people back to life!"

"Back to life?"

"Yes, back to life! She might even desecrate the souls of the dead!"

Leonard nodded, then continued walking forward, fearfully narrating,

"Back then, I... oh... the monster child you mentioned earlier, she was absolutely dead back then. Yet that crazy woman kept buying children's clothes.

When I sensed something was wrong, I thought she'd gone mad. But my people sent there actually saw a little girl within the garden's bounds! I even looked with binoculars myself, and the child's eyebrows and eyes were just like... just like that monster child from before!

Mark! Can you imagine how scared I was back then?

Damn it! If not for this opportunity being truly rare, and the orders of the Minister of Finance and the Queen being hard to disobey, *I would never have approached that damn manor by even a step!*

"Hmm, I should be able to imagine it. Even if I can't imagine it now, I should be able to see it soon."

???

"What the hell are you babbling about?"

Hearing his secretary's bizarre response, Leonard couldn't help but turn back suddenly, with eyes full of anger, shouting loudly,

"Damn it! Mark! Today, you really... how are you here?!"

"I came to see you."

A crisp, pleasant child's voice, carrying a hint of cheer, replied,

"I wanted to see what kind of person would drown me back then, and also..."

Replacing the dream Mark, little Ellie appeared before Leonard. She smiled and then, under Leonard's utterly horrified gaze, innocently asked,

"Where's my body? Where did you throw my body? Can you tell me, please?"

"Ahhhh!!!"

Chapter 414: Night Raid (Part 3)

"Ahhhhhhhh!!!"

With a hysterical scream, Leonard suddenly woke up, drenched in sweat, his face as pale as if all his blood had been drained. His luxurious silk undergarments clung damply to his back, making him seem like he'd just been pulled from water.

So it... it was just a dream...

Struggling to escape from the nightmare, Leonard looked out the window at the already bright sky. Still shaken and nearly exhausted, he collapsed into the back of his leather chair, gasping for air like someone who had nearly drowned.

It seemed he had been too tired lately, working too hard, and having just mentioned that woman had stirred up the fear inside him, leading to such a sudden dream.

Additionally, the Purification Bureau member had once said that she and he both carried the Word Spirit, preventing them from being too close and from using strange methods against each other, so there was no need to worry about her seeking revenge...

Yes... that's it!

After comforting himself with a few words, Leonard turned around, his mind somewhat settled, and feebly called out,

"Mark..."

"Mark... where are you?"

"I'm here, I'm here!"

Hearing his call, the secretary walked in from outside the door, holding a towel with a flattering expression,

"Master Leonard, after arranging the matters at the manor and returning, I found you taking a nap, so I didn't dare to disturb you. Here's a hot towel prepared by the maid. Please, wipe your face first."

"Mm... thoughtful of you..."

Seeing the secretary's completely normal behavior, the last bit of doubt in Leonard's heart dissipated. He raised his trembling hand, received the towel emitting warmth, and wiped the sweat off his face.

Seeing his bloodless appearance, the secretary, Mark, couldn't help but inquire,

"Master Leonard, did you... have a nightmare?"

"Mm..."

With a feeble response, recalling the incredibly real nightmare, Leonard, whose soul felt shaken, needed someone to help dispel his fear. He couldn't help but speak nervously,

"I dreamt... that after we finished work, as we walked along the corridor, you chatted with me a bit, then suddenly turned into that Bauhinia family's monstrous child, asking me where her body was thrown... and then..."

"And then what?"

Then I wet my pants... but how could I say that?

"Then I started running, and that monstrous child was chasing me."

Skiping over his embarrassed display at the moment, Leonard, his eyes filled with fear, continued,

"The corridor outside our door seemed to stretch endlessly, and her footsteps kept getting closer. I almost ran myself to death, just barely making it out the other end.

Yet, after falling down the stairs, outside wasn't our estate, but... was that family's estate! And after being chased out by that monster all the way to the door, beneath that big red cedar tree outside, an execution was actually happening!"

"An execution?!"

Apparently intrigued by Leonard's strange dream, the secretary, Mark, had his eyes flickering slightly, his face lacking any expression, but his voice filled with shock as he pursued,

"Could it be... the one six years ago for Bao... for that family?"

"Yes, that one... but it was a bit off..."

Leonard hesitated as he spoke,

"The place was right, but... but the person being executed was... was..."

"Who?"

"It was me..."

Recalling the horrifying scene he witnessed, Leonard's lips trembled unconsciously as he said,

"Over nine hundred of me, blindfolded and pressed down there... then one by one... one by one..."

And at first, I was still down below watching, but then, as I watched... I... I was pinned down, too, and executed, one time after another, in succession!

Ahhhh!!!"

"Don't panic! Master Leonard, please don't panic!"

Seeing Leonard unconsciously screaming, the secretary hurriedly handed over another towel, comforting,

"It's all just a dream; there's no need to dwell on it... and what happened after that?"

"Afterwards..."

Still in shock, Leonard took the new towel, wiping his face that had started sweating again; it seemed the waiting time had made this new towel not only not warm but even subtly damp and cold.

However, tormented by the nightmare to the point of his extremities growing cold, he couldn't care about whether the towel was warm or cold anymore, recounting in terror under the seemingly magical urging of the secretary's voice,

"After the execution ended, that monstrous child appeared in the street, started smiling at me, and I... I ran back.

This time, what appeared wasn't Treasure Flower Manor, but our own Verdant Feather Estate, and that monstrous child, while leisurely chasing me, told me that if I jumped down and retrieved her body, she'd let me go..."

"Did you jump?"

"I... I jumped..."

Remembering the bone-chilling cold of that lake water, Leonard shrank into his chair, shivering as he spoke,

"I remember the spot very clearly, so I found it as soon as I jumped in. Then... when I wanted to come up, lake weeds suddenly tangled around me.

Those cold, wet weeds seemed alive, coiling around my ankles, binding my hands, strangling my neck, and clammy against my face... I... I..."

"You didn't come up, just like that child back then, drowning in the lake, right?"

"Yes..."

"I see..."

The secretary, Mark, pondered for a moment, then tentatively asked,

"Could it be that you were having such dreams because the Bauhinia Family treated you well, making you feel what you did years ago wasn't quite right? So... do you feel guilty?"

Do I... feel guilty?

Leonard was stunned by this, then quickly shook his head vehemently,

"No! No! I did nothing wrong!

They only had that arranged marriage because they needed the Goldfinch Family's support, merely a union of interests, and I barely even met that woman a few times! Besides, that child wasn't even... damn it, Mark! What are you saying?"

"Apologies, I was just trying to help analyze the cause of these bizarre dreams; after all, you were indeed frightened."

Politely apologizing, the secretary gently reminded,

"Seeing you sweating so profusely, perhaps you should wipe your sweat again?"

"Mm..."

Hearing Mark's reminder, Leonard wiped his sweat with the towel in his hand, but somehow, the more he wiped, the more sweat covered his face, and the originally slightly warm towel gradually became damp, cold, and sticky, as if...

The aquatic plants that had just wrapped around his limbs and nose, drowning him in the lake!

"Apologies, preparations were a bit hurried earlier, and there's not enough hot towels; hope you don't mind."

Apologizing to Leonard, whose face turned deathly pale and lips began shivering again, the secretary "Mark" stood up, clearing the doorway to the corridor, then pointed to the little girl standing behind Leonard, smilingly reminding,

"Make do with this for now, because... it's time for you to run again."

"Ahhhhhhhh!!!"

Chapter 415: Aftermath and...

Royal Mail News, "The Marquis of Golden Cuckoo Passed Away, Queen Diane Attended the Memorial"

Commentators News, "Assassinated or Conscience Awakened? The Cause of Marquis Golden Cuckoo's Death Remains a Mystery"

Daily News, "Marquis Golden Cuckoo Drowned in the Lake Yesterday, Shouted 'I Am Guilty' Before Jumping!"

Corner Alley News, "Fell to the Prince Less Than a Week Ago, Suddenly Died at Home, Did Marquis Golden Cuckoo Really Commit Suicide?"

The Sun News, "Vengeful Spirit's Revenge? The Golden Cuckoo Family's Sentinel: That Night I Was Knocked Out by a Wild Cat!"

"..."

It seemed alright, the response was more or less what he had anticipated.

After excluding the distinctly styled The Sun News, Leon, who had worked "overtime" all night the day before yesterday and then had a good sleep at home yesterday, pushed open the door to enter his office at the Purification Bureau.

For some unknown reason, he appeared to be in an exceptionally good mood. Leon indulgently brewed himself a cup of tea, sipping it slowly as he reviewed the remaining newspapers.

The sudden drowning at home of the Marquis of Golden Cuckoo, who had just been promoted to the position of Secretary of Finance, second only in rank to the Minister of Finance, was obviously not a minor incident.

After all, while the title might include "secretary," the role had significant actual power, not only participating in forming economic policies, adjusting and controlling commercial taxation, but also overseeing the normal functioning of the market, acting as an external economic advisor, among other duties.

This position, which might sound relatively unimportant, was already at the second-highest rank in the Kingdom's five-level official system, second only to the Prime Minister and ministers of various departments.

Such a key figure's mysterious drowning directly triggered a severe upheaval in the political circles of the Capital City.

Especially those who had once supported the Princess but had recently leaned toward Prince Joshua due to the machinations of the Queen and the Minister of Finance; one after another, they were seized by fear, suspecting whether this tragic event might be a "warning" from Princess Veronica. Even those not related to the incident were extremely curious about it.

The major newspapers, knowing exactly what everyone wanted to read, naturally rushed out special issues, launching extensive reports on the death of the Marquis of Golden Cuckoo, with various theories rife for a time.

And as the perpetrator of this event, in Leon's view, apart from The Sun News' great efforts to paint a terrifying picture, attempting to write the incident as "The Vengeful Spirit of Bao Hua," the reports in other newspapers were relatively thorough.

Especially the one with the largest background, Royal Mail News, which directly stationed itself at Verdant Feather Estate, inquiring the witnesses of that day, reporting everything aside from Leon's presence with great accuracy.

...

According to the account given by Royal Mail News, the Marquis of Golden Cuckoo worked late into the night and then dozed off at his desk until morning. The secretary didn't dare disturb him, just covered him with a coat and retreated to the adjacent room to rest.

But by a little after ten in the morning, discovering that the marquis had yet to wake and appeared unusually pale, trembling slightly, the anxious secretary could no longer hold back and woke him.

Upon seeing the secretary's face, the awakened Marquis of Golden Cuckoo let out a desperate scream, shoved the secretary to the floor, then dashed through the corridor, stumbled down the stairs, shouting "I am guilty" all the while, embraced a large rock, and drowned himself in the lake.

When he was finally dragged out by many hands, as if afraid of not dying quickly enough, his mouth and nose were filled with water weeds, entangled all over, yet his face did not show much of a grim expression, rather there was a strange hint of relief.

"You truly are a genius!"

After hearing Leon read out the newspaper, the illiterate goat head placed on the office desk was filled with joy, laughing,

"Calculating one lap in over a minute, he slept for more than four hours after you left, waking and dozing hundreds of times in the dream world you created. Each time he woke, he was chased to throw himself into the lake.

Moreover, you used the secretary's face. When he woke and saw the secretary concernedly approaching, his first reaction was surely to run quickly and once more go into the lake.

After all, if he ran too slowly, he would be dragged to Treasure Flower Manor and executed over 900 times... Wa ha ha ha! Art! This is simply the art of execution!"

Having praised Leon extensively, yet feeling still slightly insufficient, the Black Goat smacked its lips in awe,

"Kid, you're truly a born Demon!

Without even touching him, just responded at his door, then knocked on that red cross, causing him to have nightmares all night and, upon waking, go into the lake himself.

Even if the people of the Purification Bureau were capable of investigating, they couldn't look into what dream a dead person once had, not to mention that when he drowned, you had already gone home and slept soundly, even stayed overnight at the bureau working overtime, writing plenty of material. Who could trace it back to you?

Tsk tsk tsk, I truly admire you more and more, only a pity you took down just him yesterday. Were you to..."

"Enough, if you can't keep your mouth shut, then go back to the Mirror World!"

After glaring at the prattling Black Goat, Leon said in irritation,

"You think the investigators at the Purification Bureau are fools? I've already done something similar with the Ryan Family before; do it once more, and even the dumbest will start suspecting me!"

"Alright, alright, I'll shut up, isn't it okay if I shut up?"

Seeing Leon raise his hand and aim at him, terrified of returning to the Mirror World to be Young Ha's urinal, the Black Goat promptly closed its mouth.

However, unable to change its bad habits, it couldn't resist speaking again after a while,

"I'm just saying, your new Anomalous Object is truly handy. It might lack a bit against those with Anomalous Objects, but when dealing with ordinary people, just making a noise can almost take them down.

And you have so many people you want to take down, why don't we work here at the Purification Bureau for that redhead woman during the day, and then go out more at night to do something for ourselves... what do you think?"

"Not much."

After carefully reviewing the newspapers and confirming that even if there were doubts, they wouldn't likely involve him, Leon responded flatly,

"Setting aside whether doing so would be discovered by the Purification Bureau, given the Kingdom's current situation, even if I could take down a thousand evildoers, there would still be the thousand-and-first emerging, mindless slaughter won't solve problems.

If it weren't for the particularly unique circumstances this time, I wouldn't have acted directly even knowing; I'd find a way to catch his slip-up and have him dealt with through the Ministry of Police or the Princess. Habitually resorting to force to solve matters isn't good."

Upon hearing this, the Black Goat seemed greatly disappointed, pouting discontentedly,

"Tsk... truly not straightforward!"

Having listened to the Black Goat's complaint, Leon sneered,

"Heh heh, if you were Anomalous Object No. 001, then I'd straightforwardly deal with all the bastards, and make everyone follow my rules... but are you?"

"I... I have great potential, as long as I retrieve what I've lost, at least as great as a... oh yes!"

Stuttering for a moment, the Black Goat seemed to recall something, its sheep eyes glinting slightly as it said,

"That female reporter from The Sun News! My tail is still with her! Now you're already so powerful, let's quickly find her! As long as we snatch back my tail..."

"Hush! Silence!"

Hearing familiar footsteps, Leon clapped a hand over the Black Goat's mouth, squeezing its babble back as he used the soul vision of the Black Goat to glance at the familiar soul approaching the door.

"Knock, knock."

Gently knocking on the door, Emma outside bit her lip, struggling to suppress the incredibly complex emotions in her heart, her voice trembling softly as she said,

"Leon... are you there? I want to talk to you."

Chapter 416: Two Hugs

Debates about why Marquis Golden Oriole had suddenly died were rampant throughout the Capital City. Due to the exceptionally complex powers involved behind the scenes and the numerous suspicious aspects, almost no one could ascertain the truth.

Yet, when she learned of Leonard's demise, Emma had no doubts or hesitation whatsoever. She immediately identified the killer's—or rather, benefactor's—identity.

"Leon!"

Upon knocking on the office door, seeing Leon's demeanor as usual with no change in expression, yet with tears in her eyes, Emma bit her lip and softly greeted him,

"I... Good morning..."

Hearing this very ordinary yet extremely special opening line at this moment, Leon was initially taken aback, then returned a rather brilliant smile to her.

"Good morning, Senior Emma!"

Looking at Leon's calm face, Emma took a deep breath to steady her swirling emotions, then clenched her fists tightly, her voice trembling slightly as she asked,

"Have you... heard about the Golden Oriole family?"

"Yes."

Seeing Senior Emma before him, obviously asking what she already knew, Leon chuckled without further pretense, directly saying,

"Congratulations, from now on, it's as if the clouds have parted and the fog has cleared."

"Thank you... really, thank you!"

Confirming her suspicions through Leon's gentle gaze, Emma felt as if the world blurred in an instant. Large, hot tears flowed unchecked from her eyes.

Taking a step forward, she gave Leon a substantial hug. Emma buried her face in Leon's shoulder, sobbing freely, and she only stopped when Leon's leg started to go numb.

However, after crying her heart out, Emma wiped away her tears and, instead of breaking into a smile, bit her lip and said seriously,

"Leon, this can't continue."

"Huh?"

Surprised, Leon hadn't asked yet, when he felt his palm slightly soften and Senior Emma's voice came through the contact between their hands.

*'The death of someone with a Word Spirit is a very serious matter. Even though the headquarters has been sealed, investigators from the central bureau will arrive within a week.

Although Leonard's status isn't high enough for them to bring something at the level of [Time and Space Retracing], once they pinpoint the suspects, they will conduct focused investigations on all "remarks" and "actions" of those suspected individuals over the past few days using distributed Anomalous Objects.

For instance, our current conversation—if you had admitted you did it upon seeing me, it would trigger [Words of Admission] or [Unspoken Words], directly marking you with the Anomalous Object they carry.

Even if you're extremely careful and haven't confessed your actions to anyone, clear [Acts of Slaughter] or [Acts of Coercion] would still be marked by that Anomalous Object...'*

After briefly explaining the Purification Bureau's investigation process, Emma, her eyes filled with worry, reminded him,

*'Leon, think carefully. Since then until now, have you directly harmed that person's body, forced him to leap into the lake with your words, or confessed the truth to anyone?'

' No.'

After clasping Senior Emma's hands in return, Leon, who had specifically inquired about this intelligence before acting, answered confidently,

' Everything happened in the World of Dreams. I only made a vague sound from over ten meters away and did nothing else, nor confessed to anyone.

Before you came, I merely had a brief chat with the Black Goat on my desk, but exchanges pertinent to that day happened between souls and wouldn't be detected by anyone.

So rest assured, Senior Emma. If I weren't confident about escaping culpability, I wouldn't have acted recklessly.'

*'As long as you're confident... but still, be very careful!'

Seeing that Leon had indeed prepared accordingly, not acting impulsively on a whim, Emma was significantly reassured. She then softly instructed, full of the guilt in her eyes,

*'Moreover, if... and I mean if, investigators come and unexpectedly find something, suspecting you, then you should candidly admit it was under my orders, absolutely do not shoulder it alone!

With Olivia absent, all matters of the Virgin Branch are temporarily under my charge. Out of personal vendetta, I gave you the relevant orders, and you, trusting your senior, carried out those orders without questioning. This way, we can minimize your liability.'

' Senior Emma, I...'

*'You mustn't refuse!'

Firmly grasping Leon's hand, Emma blinked her somewhat red eyes, stating with a serious expression,

*'I've already wronged you enough by asking this of you. If things really go south and you're still planning to bear it alone, then I'll turn myself in! At that time, as co-conspirators breaking regulations, both you and I will face internal discipline!

But if you claim it was at my behest, at least one of us will survive! Leon, later, I'll issue you a directive order in writing, and you must keep it with you at all times, understood?'

' ...'

*'Speak!'

' Alright...'

Upon seeing Leon's reluctant nod, a smile reappeared on Emma's previously serious face.

Feeling the reassuring warmth from her grasp, her heart had never felt so light, and she couldn't help but lightly reproach,

*'Leon, I suddenly remembered, was it you who taught Ellie to wish for me to spend a whole day with her on her birthday?'

' Yes.'

Hearing this, Leon couldn't help scratching the back of his head as he nodded, admitting openly,

*'I was worried you'd seek revenge on Leonard overnight after Ellie fell asleep, so I came up with a way to keep Ellie glued to you for a day.'

Then you went to the Verdant Feather Estate overnight and took care of everything yourself, didn't you?

*'Even using a child as a pawn...'

Glancing softly at Leon, Emma bit her lower lip and said,

*'When I was leaving home, Ellie asked me to ask you what you would give her as a gift. I want to see what gift you plan to use to placate her this time!'

' As for the gift...'

Seeing Senior Emma, who was usually gentle and composed, display a rare hint of playfulness, Leon couldn't help but touch his nose, then smiled and replied,

*'Give her a body like a normal child, so she won't turn transparent in the sunlight, can attend school like normal, grow up normally, and live a full life... What do you think of this gift?'

' ?!!!'

Lost in an expression of unparalleled joy, Leon gripped her hand tightly and explained his findings in detail, then apologetically explained,

*'After locating Ellie's... position, I initially intended to bring her back directly, but I was overnight at the bureau, thus shouldn't have appeared at the Verdant Feather Estate, nor should I have taken something from the lake.

Plus, with the death of Marquis Golden Oriole, if Little Ellie regained her body, it might also draw the investigators' suspicion onto you. That's why I didn't directly...'

*'Enough! Leon! Enough already!'

Suddenly releasing Leon's hand, Emma, barely able to control herself, gave him another hug, tears misting her eyes,

'You've already done so much for Ellie and me! I... I really don't know how to repay you! I... or...'

"Bang!"

Just as Emma, overjoyed to the point of tears, was about to say something, Leon's office door was suddenly flung open, and a voice brimming with excitement came from outside.

"Haha! Little Leon! Great news!"

Covered in yellow mud, with fatigue all over his face, the red-haired Director pushed the door open and entered, his expression unusually passionate,

"Aquarius... uh... you two?"

Chapter 417: Parting Gift

Seeing Leon tightly embraced by Olivia in the office, seemingly wanting to melt into his body, the expression on the Red-haired Director's face momentarily froze. She felt something inside her wasn't right.

To prevent that damned Aquarius Director from meddling with the Watcher's Palace, this mother had to descend alone into the Realm of the Dead on her birthday, squatting by the dirty Yellow Springs River for several days. Besides checking the dead passing through the No Return Path, she was watching the big crocodiles baring their teeth.

In the end, while this mother was working her ass off down there to protect the world, you two were getting it on in the office?

You... don't your consciences hurt?

"Director? You're back just in time!"

Seeing the Red-haired Director suddenly break in, Leon couldn't help but feel a surge of delight.

The night raid on Verdant Feather Estate seemed tightly sealed; there was nothing that could point back to him, except for one unstable factor, the existence of the Lust Dream Invader.

If the Director honestly registered this Anomalous Object and reported the abilities of the Lust Dream Invader, the investigator examining this incident would only have to glance at the Capital City's newspapers, know that Leonard appeared to have a nightmare before his death, and it would be easy to connect it back to him.

Luckily, the Lust Dream Invader had just been crafted, and it was made by the Third Generation Director who long resided in the Realm of the Dead, with no prior records. Not even Senior Emma knew the specific abilities; only the Director and Leon were aware, which provided room to maneuver.

If the Director were willing to go along and conceal the existence of the Lust Dream Invader, or report a false ability, this last point of suspicion would disappear, and both Emma and Leon would truly be safe.

As for whether the Director would help conceal...

...

' You two bastards!'

Dragged into the "soul chat" by Leon and Emma, and hearing about what had happened in the last couple of days, the Red-haired Director couldn't help but glare at Leon angrily:

' You really are... I arranged for you to go down the No Return Path with Emma to persuade her to endure for a few more years! Not to help her seek revenge!

With Emma's abilities, she'd only need to wait a few years to become a Branch Director. After that, I wouldn't stop her if she wanted revenge! But now? What if you two get discovered...'

' We won't be.'

Leon shook his head seriously:

' Before I took action, I had thought of the outcome and even made some checks and balances. Now the only flaw is the existence of the Lust Dream Invader, so...'

' So I have to help you cover it up and even submit a false report, huh?'

The Red-haired Director glared:

' You're dragging me down too? That's practically covering up for you, do you realize? Taurus His Excellency trusts me so much, me not reporting you is already...'

' So, Olivia, will you report us?'

' ...'

I'll report my ass!

On one hand, there's a scumbag who's already dead, on the other, a good friend avenging a woman and a loyal subordinate acting out of righteous indignation. Do I even have a choice? Should I really report you two and bury you with him?

Moreover, no matter how the investigator spins it, this case will surely be categorized as a "cold case" involving an Anomalous Object. Though not as many people died as in the Ryan Family incident, the death circumstances were too bizarre, causing a lot of uproar, impacting badly, and there'll definitely be a note in the year-end review.

Truly...

The last review ended just days ago, and already we're facing crisis after crisis? Is there any hope left for this year?

After giving Leon and Emma a resentful glare, the Red-haired Director let out an angry huff, then stormed out, slamming the door!

"Write the report yourself! Damn it! I must owe you all a big one from my past life!"

This time, it's finally cleared!

Upon hearing the Red-haired Director's words, Leon finally felt completely at ease and couldn't help but look at Emma, who was gazing back at him. The two shared a smile.

' Leon...'

Looking at the man who seemed to have a telepathic connection with her, Emma, who had been interrupted by the sudden intrusion of the Red-haired Director, suddenly felt her ear lobes heat up. She then actively averted her gaze, lowering her head slightly as she tried to speak tactfully:

' I thought about it, and I... Ellie needs...'

"Oh right, I forgot to mention!"

At this moment, the Red-haired Director burst through the door again, announcing with a hint of malice in her eyes:

"The Aquarius Director is dead!"

"Really?"

With his attention drawn back to the Director, Leon asked, filled with delight:

"Director, are you sure?"

"Sure, I saw it with my own eyes, and even exchanged a few blows with him, threw some insults at him through the Death Realm Street Lamp's light."

After glancing at her best friend, who pursed her lips with a slightly irritated expression, the Red-haired Director said with a smile:

"As we guessed, the Aquarius Director indeed had a backup plan. Just as he entered the Realm of the Dead, his soul covered by the Death Realm Street Lamp started expanding crazily, with most of it squeezing out of the streetlamp's range, leaving less than one-tenth restrained."

"What happened afterward?"

"Then I took action."

Curling her bright red hair, the Red-haired Director, who had stormed out moments ago, now cheerfully recounted:

"The portion of his soul that swelled and spilled out of the streetlamp's range was directly shattered by me, irreparable. As for the part within the Death Realm Street Lamp, it continued rushing towards the depths of the Realm of the Dead along the No Return Path.

If his soul were complete, perhaps he could wait until the Street Lamp's power weakened and struggle free, but with only a tenth of his soul remaining, he'd likely be sent straight to the end of the Realm of the Dead, directly dropping off the Cliff of the End. He's done for!"

"Oh, right, this is for you."

As she spoke, the Red-haired Director seemed to remember something and tossed over a pair of oddly shaped, semi-transparent gloves.

"This is..."

"Made from Aquarius' fingers. Technically, the material is a fragment of his soul from his fingers."

"Huh?"

"It's gross, I know, but it works."

Seeing Leon startled, the Red-haired Director curled her lips:

"Remember the God-Suppressing Forked Fingers secret technique specializing in suppressing the True God's body? Aquarius had mastered this secret technique to the extreme, causing even part of his soul to undergo corresponding changes.

And you mentioned that no matter how much force you exert, the body of the Goddess of Fortune remains unscathed, so when I cut apart Aquarius' soul, I deliberately kept the part with his fingers, asking the third generation old man to make a pair of gloves.

If the Goddess of Fortune senses something amiss and secretly hassles you, just put on these gloves to temporarily suppress the divinity within her body. Even if you can't kill her, you can make her feel some pain.

Sigh... Originally, I thought of giving this to you as a thank-you gift if you managed to persuade Emma, but now... humph! Consider it lent to you for self-defense for now! After settling the Goddess of Fortune, remember to return it to me!"

Ah, this...

Looking at the unusually precious "souvenir" the Director had brought back, Leon couldn't help but feel touched:

"Thank you, Director... When we left the Third Generation Director back then, he was already so mad. To get him to agree to help me craft an Anomalous Object, you must have endured a lot, right, Director?"

"Not really."

The Red-haired Director waved it off with a smile:

"The third generation old man was quite angry initially and wouldn't cooperate at all, but after I asked him a question, he reconsidered reasonably."

"Oh? What did you ask him?"

"Haha, I said to him—'You don't want anyone finding out that Leon's Secret Smithing Techniques were taught by you, right?'"

Chapter 418: First Try Brings Success, Second Is Weaker, Third...

""

"..."

After listening to the red-haired director's "negotiation" details, Leon couldn't help but feel a bit embarrassed.

Imagining the red-haired director, who was living quite well, threatening the square-headed old man that if he didn't help, he would spread the word about being his "apprentice" and ruin his reputation, *Leon felt a slight tinge of guilt in his heart.*

After all, even though the square-headed old man was eccentric and had a foul mouth, he was still contributing to the protection of humanity beyond his death. Using such tactics to threaten him seemed a bit inappropriate.

Apologizing inwardly on behalf of the director to the square-headed old man, and memorizing this useful negotiation tactic, Leon reached out to touch the pair of translucent, peculiar gloves.

[Name: Hand of Screams (Suppression, Resentment, Resurrection)]

[Appearance: A pair of oddly-shaped translucent gloves, specially reinforced at the knuckles, made entirely of some translucent, thorny nettle. On closer inspection, one could see countless tiny barbs.]

[Ability: Suppression of divinity, Resentment True Word, Temporary Resurrection]

[Cost: Requires no power injection—simply wearing it on the hands activates its effects. However, each time one strikes a target, the tiny barbs inside and outside the gloves penetrate both skins, injecting a large dose of soul toxin capable of suppressing divinity and causing unbearable pain.]

[File: An anomalous object personally forged by the Spirit of Forging, materials include Thoroughwort Nettle growing by the Yellow Springs River, as well as special soul fragments from the Aquarius Director of the Purification Bureau. It has a strong suppressive effect on the distribution of divinity within a True God's body. Additionally, due to anger at being disgracefully threatened, the Spirit of Forging inadvertently chose an incredibly penetrating Thoroughwort Nettle during material selection. While greatly enhancing the suppression effect, it also inflicts unimaginable pain upon the user and keeps their soul constantly alert and sharp. Upon initial contact without mental preparation, the toxin that seeps into the soul is even enough to momentarily resurrect the dead with pain.]

[Evaluation: One punch, two screams, one yours, one mine.]

[Contamination Value: 0.1]

"..."

Reading the Hand of Screams' file, emphasizing the part "enough to momentarily resurrect the dead with pain," and the evaluation "one punch, two screams," Leon's mouth couldn't help but twitch hard.

"Thank you, Teacher of the Third Generation, for your generous gift!!!

From now on, you are my only teacher in Secret Smithing Techniques! No one can stop me from promoting your fame!"

Carefully storing this item in the Mirror World and warning Young Ha never to touch it under any circumstances afterward, Leon, in a good mood after hearing the Aquarius "death news," turned to look at Emma beside him and asked with a smile,

"Sorry, Senior Emma, I didn't hear clearly earlier... What does Ellie need?"

"..."

Ellie needs a complete family, especially someone who is particularly good to her... and her mom, to make up for her years of missing fatherly love... of...

"Why are you looking at me?"

Ignoring the red-haired director's look that said, "Why haven't you scrambled yet, bestie?"—completely unaware of being an unwanted presence as a third wheel—she remained boldly in Leon's office, squinting her eyes with a slightly malicious intent, smiling as she urged,

"Say it, Emma~"

"Say what you want to say~ I also like little Ellie very much, and I'll help with whatever she wants~"

"..."

If you would just scram, that would be of great help to me and Ellie!

Emma's earlobes turned unconsciously red, glaring angrily at the red-haired director with a mischievous glimmer in her eyes, wishing she could stab her into a red-haired hedgehog with her intense gaze. But

no matter how fierce her gaze was, she couldn't bring herself to say the words that were already at the tip of her tongue.

...

There was no other reason than the fact the age difference between them was nearly ten years; even her daughter was almost as old as Leon's siblings.

Even though Leon had drunkenly said he didn't mind, if the roles were reversed, it would be like a middle-aged man, once divorced and with a child, proposing to an adolescent girl.

Perhaps Olivia could say such things, but Emma really couldn't bring herself to be so thick-skinned.

She almost managed to say it the first time because upon suddenly hearing that Ellie could return to normal, her emotions were so agitated that her emotional outbreak temporarily suppressed her rationality.

Even after being interrupted by Olivia once, she was able to speak again because of the belief in "cherishing those in front of you" and wanting to give Ellie a complete family, which barely gave her a courage boost, but was yet again disrupted by Olivia.

Once the excitement waned and the boosted courage was forcibly interrupted, it was already incredibly difficult to speak a third time, especially with a well-acquainted friend like her in the room, staring mischievously...

How could one possibly speak out?

After angrily glaring at the red-haired director several times, which were all deflected without injury, realising there was no dealing with such a shameless rogue, Emma could only bite her lip and, suppressing the heat on her earlobes and the dissatisfaction in her heart, spoke with a steady voice,

"Ellie needs peers and friends her age, as well as some normal kid activities. Can she attend a school with Melanie?"

After speaking with some difficulty, Emma, overwhelmed with concern for her daughter, calmed her chaotic thoughts and, slightly worried, continued,

"Ellie is quite introverted and hasn't interacted with peers before, nor has she attended school. I'm worried she may not adjust to a foreign environment suddenly... So, if possible, could your siblings look out for her?"

"No problem!"

Filled with thoughts of the Aquarius Director's death news, Leon, with a swelling emotion, being utterly oblivious to the dynamics between the director and Senior Emma, patted his chest and agreed heartily to the request, taking it all in stride as he replied,

"Let Ellie be in the same class as William! If possible, try to have their seats close together! As for Ellie making friends, even though Melanie's academic performance isn't impressive, she gets along well with her classmates, with the two of them, Ellie will integrate in no time."

"Thank you..."

Speaking earnestly but with a hint of reluctance, Emma, unable to endure her bestie's knowing look of two parts ripple, three parts teasing, and five parts intriguing mischief, turned her blushing face away from Leon's and the director's line of sight and somewhat awkwardly pushed open the office door, quickly leaving the room as if for dear life, leaving only a slightly trembling voice of farewell behind.

"I... I have something to do and need to leave!"

After her hurried departure, the seemingly calm two remaining in the room simultaneously relaxed their expressions.

Just as Leon was about to ask about the details of the Aquarius Director's death, contemplating whether there were any doubtful points, he felt a slight tug at his neckline, and a beautiful yet "angry with a smile" face thrust close to him.

"Three days, huh!"

Having seized Leon's collar, the red-haired director, who had been suppressing for a while, gritted her teeth, wearing a half-smile, half-grimace as she questioned,

"I was only gone for three days! You already managed to drive away my Emma? Do you have to be such an efficient jerk?"

""

Chapter 419: Interrogations and Suspicions

""

"..."

What does 'your Emma' mean... Could it be that there's something between the two of you...

"What are you thinking about?"

Leon saw the strange look in the red-haired director's eyes and guessed his thoughts. Quickly letting go of his collar, the director said with annoyance,

"Emma and I are friends, the best of friends! Um, other than that, she's also my biggest creditor, and that's all there is!"

"Oh..."

"Oh, what? Oh!"

Seeing Leon's expression of sudden realization and recalling the widespread Marquis lake incident, the red-haired director became angry and said with displeasure,

"You bastard, you're a genius at playing dumb!

And about that 'everything will be fine with William and Melanie's help'... I scoff! Emma almost wrote what she wants on her face, and I don't believe you couldn't see what she was trying to say!"

"..."

"Hurry up! Give me a straight answer! What do you really think of Emma?"

And! That female police officer from the Secret Investigation Bureau who always has lunch with you, Princess Veronica, who is nominally betrothed to you, what do you plan to do about all this?"

"..."

It seems the Master Performer doesn't work well on the director either...

Leon scratched his head and replied with a slightly awkward smile,

"Yisha and I are just friends, the kind that didn't know each other until we fought, and as for the princess, I've always wanted to break off the engagement, but she keeps talking me out of it. Three times it happened, and still no success.

And the reason I pretended not to understand earlier was mainly because of the princess...

After all, regardless of how things actually are, there really is an engagement between us. If it's not sorted out first... well, it just doesn't seem right..."

Goodness, I didn't expect you to be so compatible with anomalous demons, but morally upright in private...

Recognizing Leon's expression and confirming that he wasn't lying, the red-haired director's demeanor softened slightly. He narrowed his eyes and said,

"I don't care what your final decision is, but as Emma's best friend, you need to handle this properly. At least don't hurt her again, or don't blame me for causing you trouble!"

"Ah, well... even though I don't want to hurt Senior Emma, isn't this an abuse of power on your part and a personal vendetta?"

"That's right! So what? If you have a problem, go complain to headquarters!"

"..."

Not to mention whether complaining would work, headquarters is over seventy thousand kilometers from the surface. Could I even get there?

After seeing Leon's speechless look, the director, having vented quite a bit of anger, hesitated briefly before saying in a low voice,

"Also... honestly, I don't really want you and Emma to be together."

"Ah?"

Upon hearing this, Leon was a bit bewildered, and his mind involuntarily recalled his deep bonds with the director, along with that warm and passionate kiss in the Realm of the Dead.

Did this mean...hiss... does the director also... could I actually be some unparalleled handsome guy?

"Emma's connection to the Realm of the Dead is actually much closer than you imagine, and it's not just a simple Sin of the Precious Flower.

For years, she's the only cleaner able to enter and exit the Realm of the Dead freely and sign a contract with the True God of the Dead. Even little Ellie has some issues..."

The red-haired director said with a furrowed brow,

"Leon, I won't lie to you, when the Bauhinia Family incident occurred, I paid special attention to the situation there.

Did you know? If Emma hadn't entrusted Ellie to someone else and accidentally escaped from the Realm of the Dead, the members of the Bauhinia Family who died under that tree would have numbered exactly nine hundred ninety-nine, and that number really stuck in my mind...

Hmm? What's the matter with you? Why aren't you speaking?"

"..."

Because I just had the wild idea that... maybe... you want to compete with Senior Emma for me... How could I admit that out loud?

Using the effect of the Master Performer to suppress the strong sense of shame that surged in his heart, Leon took a deep breath and replied with a straight face,

"I just didn't expect there to be more to the story..."

But director, whether it's Senior Emma's Sin of the Precious Flower or little Ellie's Jewel Flower's Woe, I've already encountered them, and I didn't see any suspicious records. Could you be overthinking it?"

"I shouldn't be."

The red-haired director shook his head and said,

"Leon, remember, as a cleaner, you must learn to rely on your ability, but you cannot believe only in your ability!"

"I carefully compared it, and the information your ability reveals is mostly just related to the anomalous objects themselves, rarely mentioning anything beyond them, so it can only be used for reference, not as decisive judgment criteria.

For instance, let me ask you, since it was Emma's departure from the Realm of the Dead that led to the Sin of the Precious Flower emerging, but with the Three-headed Dog guarding the gate of the Realm of the Dead, how did she get past the gate guarded by that dog? Did your ability say anything?"

"Well... no, it didn't..."

Hearing this, Leon was taken aback, his brows furrowing as well.

"But I've seen in other anomalous object descriptions, the Canine Deity is mostly asleep while guarding the gate, and occasionally leaves briefly to hunt. Could it be pure coincidence..."

"Why did coincidence fall on Emma?"

The red-haired director said seriously,

"Why did that dog leave early or late, but when nine hundred ninety-nine souls, sharing the same bloodline and cause of death, each with similar regrets and grievances, gathered as one, that's when it left?

Moreover, the number nine hundred ninety-nine is very intriguing!"

At this point, the red-haired director couldn't help but sigh,

"I reviewed the dossiers, and about a thousand one hundred and four Bauhinia members were incarcerated before execution, yet in the half-month leading up to the execution, a series of exactly one hundred and five people died, leaving just nine hundred ninety-nine.

Numbers like nine hundred ninety-nine, seven, thirteen, six, three, and one hundred eleven are often associated with rituals in occultism and shouldn't be ignored.

In particular, nine hundred ninety-nine is related to 'descent.' Considering this deliberately arranged number, along with Emma's obviously overly close ties with the Realm of the Dead, it's hard not to overthink it.

Especially considering the Bauhinia Family's demise coincided with the Ice Plains Nation's invasion, and the ensuing war brought a lot of deaths, which would be the perfect nourishment for an entity descending from the Realm of the Dead."

"..."

Considering it this way... it's not impossible...

After reflecting on the Bauhinia Family's plight, Leon nodded gravely.

If one didn't delve too deeply, the Bauhinia Family tragedy seemed to be the result of Leonard's ambition with no orchestrator behind the scenes, but it all felt a bit too coincidental.

If someone else had been in charge of the trade route, if the Bauhinia Family had received the information in time, if the information had been gathered by someone other than Leonard, or if the royal family had tried negotiating before taking action, the outcome could have been different each time, but each result was the worst one.

So... was the Bauhinia Family's downfall really as simple as it seemed?

"Director."

Calling out to the red-haired director, Leon said with a furrowed brow,

"Did you share these suspicions with Senior Emma?"

"What could I say?"

The red-haired director replied with a sigh of exasperation,

"Even setting aside the lack of evidence, would I tell her that a possible Overlord of the Dead Realm is secretly manipulating events, using her family's lives for a ritual?"

As things stand now, she's still got some hope for revenge. If I shared my suspicions, letting her know that the Bauhinia incident might involve an Overlord of the Dead Realm, her chances of finding joy in this life might vanish."

"Besides, although the Marquis Goldcrest was a complete bastard, he did take Ellie away and didn't let her die directly beneath the red cedar. Maybe that's why the descent ritual was disrupted.

So if my guess is correct and a Dead Realm Overlord sought to descend, he might actually have saved most of the Capital City..."

""

Chapter 420: The Incarnate Doe

So, does this mean I've been repaying kindness with vengeance?

After hearing the Red-haired Director's words, Leon couldn't help but look a bit embarrassed.

If things were really like that, perhaps "Leon Laine" would have ceased to exist six years ago, and he himself wouldn't exist now.

So, even though that Leonard was a complete jerk, by disrupting the summoning ritual, he was, theoretically, indeed the savior of more than half of the Capital City's residents, including Leon himself.

By that calculation, he had really done something wrong, and he ought to thank him before killing him.

...

"Director,"

After inwardly thanking Leonard, Leon asked with slight hesitation in his eyes,

"By your guess, which one of the Overlords of the Dead Realm was trying to descend six years ago?"

"Why are you asking this?"

The Red-haired Director squinted his eyes upon hearing this, and asked warily,

"You're not planning to take on the Overlords of the Dead Realm like you did this time, are you?"

"How could I..."

Leon uttered speechlessly,

"Those are Overlords who've lived for who knows how many years in the Dead Realm. I'm just a little Third-Class Cleanser, how could I possibly have thoughts about such entities? I'm just asking to have a general idea."

"You'd better keep it that way!"

The Red-haired Director snorted at his words, then frowned and warned,

"If it's someone like the Goddess of Fortune, then eliminating them doesn't cause much of an issue, but the Overlords of the Dead Realm are different. Beings worthy of the title 'Overlord of an entire realm' provide indispensable help for the normal functioning of the world.

For example, the [Road of No Return], which guides dead souls back to the world, was created by 'the First Deceased' of the Dead Realm. It's due to this accomplishment that he became one of the Overlords of the Dead Realm.

Among the other Overlords, 'Grandma Crow-eye' created the Nest of Crows of Death Report, and the Mortician's Corridor for announcing death; 'Wailing Puppet' established the City of Regret and Ghostly Mire; 'Faceless Man' created the Black and White Bridge and..."

After briefly explaining the titles and achievements of several Overlords of the Dead Realm, the Red-haired Director said with a cold expression,

"As for the one who attempted to descend six years ago, it was likely the 'Beast of Flesh' among the Overlords of the Dead Realm. The locations where Emma stayed, such as [Burial Garment Mirror Lake], and the ones I took you through like [Corpse Soil Black Forest] and [Baigu Palace], were all created by it.

That... that Overlord of the Dead Realm is responsible for stripping the false flesh attire from the deceased after they come to terms with their deaths, allowing them to become pure, naked souls, significantly contributing to the return of the souls of the dead to the world.

So, we cannot truly eliminate it. Even if it had successfully descended six years ago and caused significant deaths in the Capital City, the Bureau could only force it back to the Dead Realm, and make it enter slumber; we couldn't actually kill it.

Otherwise, the three locations it created would quickly collapse, and before new corresponding rules are generated, a large number of dead souls would remain stuck on the Road of No Return, unable to return to the world, causing chaos in the operations of the Dead Realm."

So, I can't avenge Senior Emma then?

Leon asked a bit unwillingly upon hearing this,

"If a large number of dead souls are stranded, what would happen?"

"The problem would be severe."

The Red-haired Director sighed and said,

"When the Third Generation Director was still alive, the Bureau once eliminated an Overlord of the Dead Realm, which caused the Oblivion Spirit Valley, responsible for erasing the excess intelligence of the dead, to collapse. Consequently, a large number of souls were stuck in front of the City of Regret.

For the following fifteen years, even without a large-scale war, the number of new souls born worldwide dropped by about one-twentieth, without even considering the further decreasing trend.

With no other choice, the Bureau had to station a large number of Cleaners permanently in the Dead Realm, burying those overly intelligent souls to let them decompose unconsciously, until new rules were formed... That place became known as the Sage's Cemetery, and the coffin of the Third Generation Director is buried there."

"..."

What a mess... So you really did it once, huh?

Listening to the Red-haired Director recount the mess the Purification Bureau got into in the past, Leon couldn't help but hold his forehead, lamenting how this world felt like a shoddy troupe, and that every seemingly absurd "regulation" probably meant a huge accident had occurred behind it once...

"So now you understand why I didn't want to tell Emma the truth, right?"

The Red-haired Director said helplessly,

"I understand how you feel, but many things in this world are like this, destined never to have a perfect ending. For Emma, perhaps this is the best outcome now.

Sigh... Anyway, if you're really determined to have something happen with Emma, I definitely won't stop you. But the situation with her and Ellie is really too special, and you have to be mentally prepared.

Especially Ellie, I suspect she was the chosen vessel for the Beast of Flesh to descend into back then. Although the descent ritual was interrupted, once she recovers her body, even if that Beast can't descend through her, it might seize the opportunity to do something.

These damned guys never end, you finish one and another comes up the very next moment. If you're even slightly negligent, they'll sneak into the house like rats and wreck havoc, it's just exasperating... Oh right, I'm planning to grab a drink after work, you in?"

"Huh?"

Still pondering with a solemn expression, Leon was caught off guard by the Director's abrupt shift in topic, and upon realizing what she was talking about, his face fell instantly, and he shook his head without hesitation,

"No way! I've quit drinking! Besides, Director, you should also drink less, don't you remember what you promised Taurus His Excellency?"

"Tsk... no fun!"

The kind invitation to relax was immediately met with Leon's stern refusal along with a serious reminder, causing the Red-haired Director to purse her lips,

"Then I'll go by myself!

Really... I've been down there squatting for several days, even had a big fight with Aquarius, wouldn't you call that hard work? I just want to have a little relaxation, is that too much?"

"It's not about not relaxing... but drinking really causes trouble!"

Still preoccupied with the Beast of Flesh's conspiracy, Leon couldn't help but remind her,

"When you're sober, your abilities are unquestionably impeccable, but when you're drunk, you're utterly full of flaws. If someone were to invade while you're passed out..."

"Then here comes the question, I am indeed easy to handle when passed out drunk, but how would they know if I'm drunk or not?"

"?"

The Red-haired Director, already walking to the door, turned back and said with a sly smile,

"Remember, when someone has a weakness that everyone knows about, you better be careful."

Giving Leon a meaningful look, she continued with a smile as Leon watched, somewhat surprised,

"An individual who is flawless at all times cannot remain vigilant at all times, even if they're careful, there's always a chance of slipping up.

But someone who is flawless when sober and full of faults when drunk... any sane adversary will choose to make their move when she's drunk... Do you get what I'm saying?"

"..."

So, that means just guarding carefully when drunk and being slightly more relaxed usually? And... are you perhaps not actually drunk every time? Mostly fishing all along?

Seeing Leon, with eyes slightly widened in disbelief, the Red-haired Director couldn't help but smile proudly and blink her charming fox-like eyes.

"Learn from this, Little Lyon~

Though you have good talent, when it comes to mind games with your opponents, you are still too green, indeed~"