

DOROTHY'S FORBIDDEN GRIMOIRE

Chapter 4: Ring

At the bottom of the dark valley, amidst the gruesome crime scene by the riverside, Dorothy sat on a cold, damp stone, carefully reading the letter in her hand. Her brows furrowed slightly as she analyzed its contents. Truth be told, the letter's revelations astonished her.

From the letter, Dorothy discerned that the man she had just shot—a bandit leader, by the looks of him—was named Edrick. He seemed to be the head of some criminal organization in a place called Vulcan.

It appeared Edrick had been trying to join a certain organization and had even written an application. The letter in Dorothy's hand was their reply. This mysterious organization had set a special initiation test for Edrick, requiring him to abduct a 13-year-old white-haired girl at a specific time and place. Clearly, that girl was Dorothy herself!

So these bandits' primary goal in attacking the carriage wasn't money but Dorothy—a seemingly ordinary farm girl? What on earth was going on?

Dorothy pressed her fingers against her temple, once again sifting through the memories of this body's original owner. She found nothing unusual. Dorothy had always been obedient, intelligent, diligent, and earnest. She had no wealth, no special abilities, no strange patterns in her eyes, nor was anything bizarre sealed inside her. Her hair and eye colors were just slightly uncommon... So why had a mysterious organization set its sights on her?

For a while, Dorothy couldn't make sense of it. Unable to reach a conclusion, she shook her head and turned her attention to analyzing other details in the letter.

There was little concrete information about this mysterious organization, but it was clear they were up to no good. Collaborating with someone like Edrick, tasking him with kidnapping, and avoiding entities like the Serenity Bureau and the Church—nothing about them spelled innocence. The Church aside, the Serenity Bureau sounded like a government agency. If they were evading the authorities, this was probably a criminal organization. Otherwise, why would a bandit like Edrick want to join them?

The letter also mentioned the "realm of beyond" and "mystic artifact."

At this, Dorothy turned her gaze to the pile of “loot” she had just scavenged from Edrick’s corpse. She rummaged through the pile and pulled out a ring, which she had removed from Edrick’s finger earlier. Initially, she’d thought it might fetch a good price.

Holding the ring under the lamplight, she examined it carefully. It was made of bronze, with intricate designs faintly etched around its circumference. Upon closer inspection, the designs resembled tiny, eerie figures holding hands and dancing.

According to the letter, Edrick had possessed an mystic artifact called the Corpse Marionette Ring, capable of manipulating corpses. Could this be it?

With this thought, Dorothy slid the ring onto her index finger. As soon as the ring settled on her hand, she felt something unusual.

In that moment, Dorothy sensed her mind extending outward, forming two threads that reached into the distance. The threads ended at the two strange, motionless hunting dogs lying on the ground.

Seeing this, Dorothy took a deep breath. With a mental command, the two supposedly dead hunting dogs began to twitch. They stood up and slowly approached her. However, both dogs had sustained severe fractures from being thrown to the ground during the dragon shout, their movements were sluggish and halting.

So, these dogs had been corpses all along? Edrick must have been using the ring's power to animate them. No wonder they had ceased moving after Edrick's death. This bandit leader had actually possessed such a mystic artifact...

Watching the two reanimated hunting dogs stumble toward her, Dorothy felt a wave of surprise. In her original memories, there had been no phenomena like this. This mystical occurrence was entirely beyond her previous experience.

"It seems this world is not as simple as it appears," Dorothy murmured to herself, touching the peculiar ring on her hand. Then her gaze shifted to another envelope in her possession.

Opening the second envelope, she began to read the letter within. Compared to the first, this one was much shorter.

Dear Mr. Edrick,

We have received your reply and knew you wouldn't miss this rare opportunity. We have already dispatched someone carrying your reward to Vulcan, they will arrive soon. Once you succeed, simply photograph the target and drop the picture into the mailbox at 24 North Street, Vulcan.

Our personnel will verify your success through the photo. Upon confirmation, they will meet you at midnight the following day in the central woods west of Vulcan. At that time, you will hand over the target, and we will present you with your generous reward.

Our agents will remain in Vulcan for three days, awaiting your response. Best wishes for a successful operation.

After reading, Dorothy stored both letters back into their envelopes. This was clearly a follow-up response from the mysterious organization to Edrick's application. Dorothy had gleaned quite a bit of information from these letters.

It seemed the organization already had members in Vulcan—the very town Dorothy was headed to. She would need to be cautious when entering the

town later. Though she didn't know why this group was interested in her, nothing good could come from a criminal gang's interest.

With this in mind, Dorothy used a knife to cut a piece of curtain fabric from the overturned carriage. She divided it in two, using one piece to wrap up her "loot" and the other as a headscarf to cover her hair when entering the town.

With everything prepared, Dorothy set out. For extra safety, she used the Corpse Marionette Ring to animate the two zombie dogs as bodyguards. Unfortunately, their fractures were so severe that they could barely walk.

"So the dragon shouts was that powerful... These dogs can still move, but they're no longer combat-capable," Dorothy mused, watching the two dogs struggle to stay upright. After some thought, she decided to release their control. The dogs collapsed once more, and Dorothy turned her attention to Edrick's corpse.

Experimenting further, she managed to extend the ring's "mental threads" to Edrick's body, animating him. The bandit leader staggered to his feet, his eyes vacant and face pale.

"For now, you'll do," Dorothy muttered.

At her command, Edrick's corpse silently picked up the gas lamp and unfurled a black umbrella, shielding Dorothy from the drizzling rain like a servant attending a noble lady.

After packing her belongings, Dorothy departed from the scene of the massacre, accompanied by her silent "servant."