

Menu 1161

Chapter 1161: Planting Willows without Intent! (2)

Ah Guang instinctively praised his friend, but before he could finish, he noticed that his friend's expression was rather grim.

In the next moment—

Whoosh, whoosh!

Two piercing sounds tore through the air.

The "monster" that had been blasted apart by the air cannon reappeared once more.

The human skin was long gone.

All that remained was the monstrous body that straddled the line between reality and illusion.

It vaguely resembled a flying chicken.

Except it had four wings.

Its head bore a human face.

"A human-faced bird!"

Ah Guang's expression shifted as he raised his hand again.

Whoosh!

This time, it wasn't an air cannon but a powerful gust that erupted forth.

The gust swept toward the two human-faced birds.

But it was completely ineffective.

The two human-faced birds not only did not retreat but instead surged headlong against the wind.

"Zhinai, run!"

Ah Guang shouted loudly.

The duo's tag team had always been clearly delineated: he was responsible for direct combat, while Zhinai handled reconnaissance and support.

Now that the "monsters" were closing in, naturally, it fell to him to step forward.

But to Ah Guang's despair, these two "human-faced birds" also seemed to understand teamwork.

One blocked him.

The other darted straight for Zhinai.

Faced with the oncoming human-faced bird, Zhinai drew her gun and opened fire.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The bullets were unleashed in quick succession.

The bullets inscribed with talismans could deal significant damage to "monsters," but... only if they hit the target.

Six bullets.

Not a single one hit.

It wasn't because Zhinai had poor aim.

It was simply that the "human-faced bird" before her had far too many peculiar traits.

Traits that far exceeded any creature she had encountered before.

"Gah, gah, gah!"

"Become my food!"

The "human-faced bird" shrieked strangely as it looked at the helpless Zhinai, then dove downwards in a furious dive.

Zhinai fired three more shots.

But once again, not a single one hit the mark.

Nor did they slow the "human-faced bird's" speed.

In an instant, Zhinai let out a powerless sigh.

Is this the end?

She thought to herself as she closed her eyes. Then—

"Gah, gah!"

Crunch!

Amid those bizarre calls, there was the sound of bones shattering.

Zhinai instinctively opened her eyes.

Immediately, a tall and bulky figure appeared before her.

The figure was holding the two "human-faced birds" in his hands.

The neck of the one chasing her had been twisted into a pretzel shape and was already lifeless.

The other, which had been obstructing Ah Guang, now had its neck grotesquely elongated, also devoid of life.

The tall and sturdy figure turned around and walked away, carrying the two human-faced birds.

"Wait, wait!"

Zhinai called out instinctively.

But the figure had no intention of stopping and boldly disappeared into the underbrush.

"Thank you."

Zhinai shouted toward the spot where the tall figure had vanished.

Ah Guang, meanwhile, approached with an odd look on his face.

"What's wrong?"

Zhinai noticed her friend's strange expression.

"Don't you think that person just now looked familiar?"

Ah Guang asked.

"Familiar?"

Zhinai was taken aback, and then a memory came to mind.

It was at a secret gathering place in the "Inside World."

An enigmatic figure hosting the gathering had shared shocking intel with the lone wolves and underpowered groups present.

A sketch (on standard A4 paper).

At the bottom, a description was written.

Jason, an overseas Demon Hunter, the "Sword Saint."

Thinking back to the sketch's likeness, Zhinai drew in a sharp breath.

Hssss!

"That person just now was the 'Sword Saint' Jason?!"

Zhinai exclaimed in shock.

"If our memories aren't mistaken, it should be. As expected, this *is* the Hanakaiin Family's domain—no wonder someone as significant as the 'Sword Saint' was drawn here."

"With the 'Sword Saint' here, what hope is there for the likes of us?"

Ah Guang sighed bitterly.

Although he had accompanied his friend to search for the "secret medicine," it wasn't as if Ah Guang hadn't indulged in some hopeful daydreams.

If he could happen upon some secret technique by sheer luck, or perhaps find a helpless Shikigami, wouldn't that be incredible?

But alas, dreams were sweet.

Reality was cruel.

Ah Guang didn't think he could compete with Jason.

"A wasted trip."

Ah Guang mournfully rummaged through his backpack and pulled out a bottle of soda.

Gulp, gulp, gulp.

Burp!

After draining the bottle in one go, Ah Guang's mood lightened only with a loud belch.

"Let's go."

"Time to head back."

"Just in time to pull an all-nighter and finish my 'Pack of Wolves' run—using the Pedicure Knife this time, it's too amusing."

Ah Guang said as he turned to leave.

But after taking two steps, he realized his friend was still standing in place.

"Come on."

"We don't stand a chance..."

"No!"

"We have a chance!"

Ah Guang, of course, knew his friend's family situation. Regardless of the circumstances, though, some things were simply more important—he didn't want his friend to perish like this.

Hence, his attempt to persuade her was only proper.

However, before he could finish, his friend interrupted him.

"A chance?"

Ah Guang froze for a moment, then blinked at his friend's slight frown, his expression turning awkward.

"Don't tell me you're thinking...?"

"I mean, sure, your face is decent, but your figure... let's just say it's better left unsaid!"

"At least aim for an A cup!"

"But you?!"

"In the dead of night, if a child were to feel their way over, touch the left—Papa? Touch the right—still Papa! The thought alone is..."

Bam!

A heavy punch landed squarely on Ah Guang's eye.

Cutting off his words mid-sentence.

"Ow!"

"Hsss, ouch, ouch, ouch!"

"Damn, you weren't kidding?!"

Ah Guang clutched at his eye, narrowly dodging a follow-up kick.

"This is the last time."

"If you dare joke about my figure again, I'll really break you and make you my honorary sister."

Zhinai stated seriously.

Ah Guang quickly clamped his legs together and nodded repeatedly.

He'd gotten carried away earlier and let his mouth run wild.

Usually, he didn't dare push it this far.

At most, he would mutter a few things internally.

Seeing her friend's cowering demeanor, Zhinai sighed.

It wasn't for lack of trying on her part.

She drank milk every day.

She even ate papaya daily.

But the results...

Tears welled in her eyes.

"That 'Sword Saint' has no conflicts with us!"

"In fact, he's unlikely to have conflicts with anyone!"

"Don't forget how he appeared earlier—and the direction he left in!"

Zhinai redirected the conversation.

"He showed up to save us."

"The direction he left in?"

"It leads to one of the paths to the Hanakaiin Family Head's estate... could it be?"

Ah Guang realized something, looking incredulously at Zhinai.

"Rescue!"

"Exorcism!"

"The 'Sword Saint' must be eliminating the 'monsters' lurking nearby!"

Zhinai declared firmly.

"But why is he doing this?"

"What's in it for him?"

"It's not like he's planning to eat them, is it?"

"With the time he's spent here, he could've already reached the Hanakaiin estate and reaped rewards by now."

Ah Guang furrowed his brows, confused.

"Which is why... he's a 'Sword Saint'!"

"And we're just bottom-feeders!"

Zhinai said, with a glimmer of admiration in her eyes.

It was a yearning for strength.

And even more so, a longing for the righteous deeds of the strong.

"Alright, let's go."

"Hope we can keep up."

With that, Zhinai and Ah Guang set off again.

From here to the Hanakaiin Family Head's estate wasn't far.

With their superhuman speed, they reached the edge of the Hanakaiin estate's grounds in about twenty minutes.

By now, nearly 200 people had gathered there.

"So all the 'Inside World' members in the Kinki region showed up, huh?"

Ah Guang remarked quietly.

Zhinai didn't respond, instead pulling Ah Guang toward one side.

Four individuals were speaking in hushed tones there.

Noticing the approaching pair, the four immediately stopped talking and eyed Zhinai and Ah Guang warily.

"Don't misunderstand."

"We mean no harm."

"Were you also saved by the 'Sword Saint'?"

"We were, too."

Zhinai introduced herself and Ah Guang.

The shared experience allayed their suspicions.

Just as Zhinai was trying to foster a connection, several more people approached.

"Were you saved by the 'Sword Saint' as well?"

The newcomers asked.

Everyone quickly nodded.

"You too?"

Not far off, a few more people walked over.

And as they gathered, the group soon grew to ten people.

Amid the crowd of 200, their small group became conspicuous.

Especially as their numbers continued to grow.

Because among the rest, there were more who had been saved by Jason.

And among newcomers, the same held true.

Unknowingly, the number of people gathering here swelled.

As Zhinai looked at the surrounding crowd, a glint flickered in her eyes. Suddenly, she felt as if she understood what the "Sword Saint" was trying to accomplish.

Chapter 1162: Coming!

Gather the crowd!

In the name of 'saving people', gather forces that belong to oneself!

Look at the ones they've rescued!

Including her, they're all people from small families, most of whom are 'lone wolves'.

And those in groups?

They received no assistance.

They didn't even meet.

Looking at the moment, in front of the Hanakaiin Court family's territory, about 300 'Inside World' members had gathered, standing distinctly apart. Zhinai couldn't help but sigh.

She originally thought she had encountered someone who truly adhered to 'morality'.

The result...

"Another ambitious person?"

Inexplicably, Zhinai felt a bit disappointed.

It was too normal to meet several ambitious people in the 'Inside World'.

With power far beyond the imagination of ordinary people, over time, it naturally gives one a sense of overlooking all beings.

Next, they are 'nourished'.

Power is 'nourished'.

Ambition is also 'nourished'.

Some, or simply, became perverted.

The guy who attacked her at the beginning was like this.

If not for her father and brother risking their lives to save her, she would have long become something unmentionable.

Whew!

Zhinai took a deep breath.

She adjusted her mood.

Turned and walked slowly to the corner.

Did not leave this temporary small group—leaving now, would not only be deemed 'betrayal' by the small group but also coveted by other groups in the distance.

Zhinai wouldn't act on impulse.

She just minimized her presence.

As long as no one noticed her, that would be good.

As a friend, Ah Guang naturally followed behind Zhinai.

"What's wrong?"

Ah Guang asked softly, then couldn't help but pull out a bag of shrimp chips.

"It's nothing."

"Let's just see how things go."

"If something's not right, we'll slip away at once."

Zhinai replied in an even lower voice.

"Okay."

Ah Guang nodded without hesitation.

For Ah Guang, fighting was something he was good at, but other matters?

Sorry.

He needed to rely on Zhinai for everything.

The secret technique of Zhinai's family made him choose to trust Zhinai.

Just like at this moment, Ah Guang was sure Zhinai had discovered something, but he wouldn't ask immediately—Zhinai would tell him everything later when it was safe.

Of course, he would just listen to it as a story.

As for learning anything from it?

Wasn't Zhinai there anyway?

Ah Guang tore open the bag of shrimp chips, happily poured half of it into his mouth, and chewed large mouthfuls.

Crunch, crunch.

The crisp sound attracted a lot of attention.

Surrounding them were people from the 'Sword Saint faction' with 'shared experiences', and their looks carried varying degrees of goodwill.

But from afar?

It was mainly disdainful.

Malice as a supplement.

"Is that guy the so-called 'Guang Nai combo's' fat pig?"

In a gathering place a distance away, a young man remarked disdainfully.

"It should be that guy."

"Just as rumored."

"All he does is fawn over Zhinai and eat."

"Truly a fallen small family."

When these words were spoken, they were followed by progressively contemptuous laughter.

The contempt in the laughter was evident.

Even more so was the pride.

These people also came from family-type 'Inside World' members in the Kinki region.

However, unlike Zhinai and Ah Guang, whose families were on the verge of extinction,

These families had at least a dozen members, sometimes even reaching 20-30 people.

At least one-third of them had the talent to become 'Inside World' members.

Simply put, they were considered middle-class families.

Unlike Zhinai and Ah Guang's small family, whose actions required team-ups or became 'lone wolves', these middle-class families mostly formed teams within the family.

They trained in groups of three or five.

Members of the family were naturally trustworthy.

Likewise, they understood each other quite well.

Thus, they encountered very few unexpected incidents.

Much fewer than those from small families.

Especially those 'lone wolves'.

'Lone wolves' encountering an accident typically meant 'extinction'.

Therefore, these middle-class families looked down on people from small families, calling them pariahs.

Because any day, these people from small families might indeed lose everything.

A chain of contempt has existed since ancient times.

By now, it had become even more apparent.

While the middle-class families were mocking those from small families, a group closest to Hanakaiin Court's main territory was coldly watching them.

This group was not large.

They couldn't match the middle-class and small families.

At most, they only had about a dozen members.

But each carried a sense of oppression and sharp gazes.

"These bastards really dared to come!"

"I can't hold back, I want to teach them a lesson!"

One among them growled lowly.

"Calm down. The main family encountered an accident, now we can only guard here and wait for the branch family young masters to come and take charge!"

"Once everything settles..."

"Hmph!"

The leader snorted coldly.

Without further words, the inherent killing intent said it all.

Then, this leader looked beyond the gathering place of the middle-class, small families, and others.

There were a few more groups out there.

They weren't paying attention to the gathering place of the middle-class, small families, and others.

They were staring here.

The leader realized that those with similar statuses, or even more secretive organizations, knew what they wanted to do.

Chapter 1163: It's Here! (2)

They wanted to act before the branch family's young masters arrived, breaking in and seizing the resources that belonged to the Hanakaiin Family.

As a subordinate family of the Hanakaiin Family...

He absolutely would not allow such a thing to happen.

In fact, from the moment the explosion occurred, they were the closest and the fastest to arrive.

After most of the group entered the main family's territory for search and rescue, he immediately activated the 'Protective Barrier,' then led the remaining clan members to stand guard here.

Just in case.

"Stay on your guard!"

"These bastards are barely holding back!"

The leader said.

"Understood!"

The rest responded in unison.

Then, their gazes shifted to the true enemy.

Likewise, those 'Inside World' members from other major families' subordinate clans and hidden organizations were also returning the gazes from the Hanakaiin subordinate family members.

Cold, laced with murderous intent.

A stifling tension began to arise.

The night wind that had been blowing constantly became increasingly violent at this moment.

Woo, woo-woo!

Swift, howling, and bone-chilling.

A coldness that seeped into the very marrow.

Several people shivered involuntarily.

The middle-tier and smaller family members who had been chatting earlier quickly fell silent.

One by one, they hunched their necks and began cautiously edging away.

Those from middle-tier and smaller families who had survived training outside were not fools.

They knew full well that a great battle was imminent!

And as for them?

They had no standing to participate.

Even being bystanders posed a life-threatening risk.

A slight misstep could turn them into cannon fodder.

No!

Not just cannon fodder!

Mere mortals under the feet of two colossal beasts.

They wouldn't even be able to flee—just get crushed to death outright.

"Should we sneak away?"

Ah Guang shielded Zhinai behind him and asked.

"Uh... Wait a moment."

Zhinai instinctively nodded.

As if this were just like any other time, but in the next moment, she stopped Ah Guang, who was about to take her away.

Zhinai's gaze turned toward the distant entrance.

Four figures entered her sight.

Some in casual home attire.

Some wearing hunting robes.

Some in hooded sweatshirts.

Although dressed differently, each of them sent a tremor through her spirit.

Her intuition, honed by the secret techniques of her clan, warned her of how terrifying these four individuals were.

Especially the man at the forefront, dressed in casual home attire with a calm expression—he exuded an unparalleled sense of dread, like a mountain looming in the darkness of night: pitch black, deep, and boundlessly vast.

The two following behind him were equally fearsome.

The one in ordinary attire seemed gentle on the surface, yet the oppressive sharpness he exuded felt as if a blade were pressed against Zhinai's throat.

As for the one in the hoodie, a single glance from Zhinai sent chills down her spine.

She could almost hear the wails of countless tormented souls.

Hiss!

How many beings had this person slain?

Immediately, Zhinai averted her gaze and looked at the last figure.

Compared to the first three, the fourth individual seemed less terrifying but exuded a certain warmth in comparison.

The type of strong presence an ordinary person could somewhat fathom.

Simply put, a more conventional kind of strong individual.

The sort that the majority could introduce.

"Who are they?"

Ah Guang looked at the four with confusion.

"Hanakaiin Tōru, Hanakaiin Haru, Hanakaiin Itsuki, and... if I'm not mistaken, the last one is Hanakaiin Ra."

Zhinai identified each of them.

When mentioning Hanakaiin Ra, Zhinai hesitated for a moment.

Because compared to the distinctive characteristics of Hanakaiin Tōru, Hanakaiin Haru, and Hanakaiin Itsuki, Hanakaiin Ra was just too plain.

"It's over! It's over!"

"The main family has arrived!"

"We're completely doomed!"

Ah Guang's face crumpled.

Most of the people around them mirrored Ah Guang's expression.

As the four young masters of the Hanakaiin family's branch house appeared, the faint signs of retreat in everyone's hearts grew stronger.

However, Zhinai shook her head.

"That's not necessarily the case,"

Zhinai said.

And as if to confirm Zhinai's words, another figure appeared in the distant entrance.

When this figure came into view, many gasped aloud.

Especially the women, whose voices rose in pitch.

The reason?

This newcomer was simply too handsome.

So handsome it bordered on otherworldly, capable of bewitching all who beheld him.

The white hunting robe, the black hakama, and the matching hat suited him so perfectly, exuding elegance with every detail, as if crafted just for him. A paper fan gently tapped against his palm.

This aura carried a sense of leisure and refinement that was both stunning and mesmerizing.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu!

Many people called out his name.

Then, almost instinctively, they glanced at Hanakaiin Ra, who was also dressed in hunting robes.

Mmm... Plain.

A wardrobe clash isn't scary.

But whoever looks less impressive ends up the embarrassed one.

Even Zhinai, at this point, had to reevaluate her thoughts.

"Hanakaiin Ra is truly ordinary."

These words truly echoed the sentiments of the crowd.

Hanakaiin Ra twisted his neck slightly.

Why did it feel like someone was speaking ill of him?

An illusion perhaps?

Hanakaiin Ra dismissed the thought, following closely behind Hanakaiin Tōru as they approached the subordinate families' groups.

Those who had been confronting the Hanakaiin subordinate families quickly stepped aside.

While they dared confront the families aligned with the Hanakaiin, they wouldn't dare face the Hanakaiin family members themselves.

They simply weren't qualified.

And their power fell far short.

Especially with someone like Hanakaiin Tōru present.

Anyone sensible knew exactly what needed to be done.

"Master Tōru!"

The leader of the subordinate families exhaled in relief upon seeing the four Hanakaiin members approach. After bowing deeply to Hanakaiin Tōru and greeting him respectfully, he then looked to the other three.

"Master Haru, Master Itsuki, Master Ra."

All three nodded in return.

As for the favoritism shown?

They were used to it.

Hanakaiin Tōru wasn't just someone they obeyed wholeheartedly.

He commanded the respect of the entire Hanakaiin Family as well.

Hanakaiin Tōru paid no attention to his surroundings and walked straight toward the main family's 'Protective Barrier.'

This massive 'Protective Barrier' didn't just prevent outsiders from entering; it also blocked all sight and perception of what lay within.

Standing here, one could neither see nor sense anything inside.

Hanakaiin Tōru furrowed his brows slightly as if something had crossed his mind.

At this moment, Tsuchimikado Motoharu strolled over.

"Not going in to take a look?"

Tsuchimikado Motoharu asked with a smile.

Hanakaiin Tōru ignored him.

In Hanakaiin Tōru's view, Tsuchimikado Motoharu was an exceedingly troublesome figure: ambitious, capable, and keenly self-aware. Such a person, given the right opportunity, would undoubtedly soar to great heights.

Of course, if someone could rein him in, he might become a 'pillar of order and prosperity.'

But Hanakaiin Tōru knew very well...

He lacked that ability.

He wasn't one to manipulate others.

Nor did he feel inclined to.

Besides, he couldn't afford distractions right now.

He had to figure out what exactly was happening.

"Tsuchimikado Motoharu, shut up!"

"Stay away from Brother Tōru!"

Hanakaiin Ra said directly.

Meanwhile, Hanakaiin Haru and Hanakaiin Itsuki, uncharacteristically, stood behind Hanakaiin Ra in a show of solidarity.

Perhaps they often bickered in ordinary times...

But when trouble arose, they united against external threats.

Such is the unspoken legacy of a large family.

"Oh dear."

"I was just trying to lend a hand."

"Right, Hachi?"

Tsuchimikado Motoharu glanced toward a spot not far behind him.

With Tsuchimikado Motoharu's prompting, everyone abruptly realized there was someone standing there who they hadn't noticed before.

When?

How had they arrived so silently?

The crowd's hearts were filled with shock, prompting them to step back once again.

Komichi Hachi scanned the frightened individuals around him, then fixed a piercing gaze on Tsuchimikado Motoharu.

"Why?"

Komichi Hachi demanded.

"Why, what?"

"What are you saying? I don't understand."

"Why don't you offer a divination for Hanakaiin Tōru to figure out what's going on?"

Tsuchimikado Motoharu teased with a laughing tone, playing dumb.

"You know what I'm asking!"

"I want you to tell me about..."

Komichi Hachi's words halted abruptly as the young Onmyoji seemed to sense something, turning to look behind him—

Jason!

Jason had arrived!

Chapter 1164: Big Move!

After Kojiruyu Hachi was discovered, they had always been the center of attention.

The Kojiyu Family, one of the Four Great Onmyoji families, was far more mysterious compared to the Tsuchimikado, Hanakain Court, and Kusakabe families.

Not to mention ordinary people—even members of the 'Inside World' rarely got to meet them.

Adding to this was the fact that the Kojiyu Family specialized in 'divination,' which attracted increasingly intense gazes.

Those gazes carried both inquiry and greed.

Especially the latter.

It was almost tangible.

Yet they were each carefully hidden in silence.

But in reality?

It was like charcoal in the snow—a piece of black amidst the white that could never be truly concealed. The more one tried to hide it, the more conspicuous it became.

And in certain respects, the situation was the same.

Because the people around them were all the same.

They all bore the same gaze.

They all had the same expression.

Like a snow-covered landscape, as though nothing had occurred.

Hanakaiin Tōru, Hanakaiin Haru, and Hanakaiin Itsuki noticed this but acted as though nothing had happened.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu noticed this too but acted as though nothing had happened.

Even Kojiruyu Hachi noticed it and acted as though nothing had happened.

Because they were used to it.

So, when a gaze that was truly different appeared, it stood out unmistakably.

As the focal point of all eyes, Kojiruyu Hachi shifted their attention toward Jason.

And everyone's gaze shifted along, landing on Jason.

Jason strode forward.

His eyes swept over everyone indifferently and then rested on the giant protective barrier, carrying an air of contemplation.

Different!

Different!

It was like the abrupt call of truth exposed in 'The Emperor's New Clothes.'

The surrounding people frowned one after another.

Members of subordinate families quietly retreated.

Mid-sized family clans covertly spat in contempt.

The smaller clans looked on in shock.

"What's happening?"

Hui Lijing was utterly baffled.

How did their arrival immediately become the focus of everyone's attention?

Jason had zipped up his pants, hadn't he?

The perplexed female detective, unable to observe any apparent abnormalities despite her sharp instincts, simply followed behind Jason, her conscience clear.

As for Hu Qiandai?

The young lady of the 'Uesugi Family' showed no signs of faltering.

Her upbringing and the extra memories in her mind had long since guided her in knowing what to do.

Although the stares of those around her seemed peculiar, they were far less intimidating compared to the ones she'd faced on the battlefield.

Thus, Hu Qiandai not only calmly surveyed the surroundings but maintained a polite smile.

This made the onlookers involuntarily sigh in admiration.

Truly worthy of the title 'Sword Saint'?

Even the assistant by their side appeared so composed and transcendent.

The news that Hui Lijing was Jason's assistant could not be concealed.

Although Hu Qiandai hailed from the 'Uesugi Family,' the family's decline had entirely separated them from the 'Inside World.' Conveniently, Hu Qiandai still carried 'Himezuru Ichimonji.'

The long sword, which immediately appeared incredibly valuable, caused people walking alongside the 'Sword Saint' to instinctively think of one thing: a sword-bearer maid.

Yet after closely inspecting 'Himezuru Ichimonji,' many people's gazes once again revealed vile greed.

Although it had briefly dissipated earlier, it would not scatter forever.

Much like the ebb and flow of tides, it returned cyclically—that was its essence.

Because this was human nature.

Humanity had both its brilliance.

And its deeply ingrained flaws.

Especially the latter, which, once rooted, spread rapidly.

Hu Qiandai sensed this change.

Her sharp eyes swept toward several of the most intense gazes among them.

"Ah!"

"Ah—ah!"

"My eyes!"

Several agonized screams erupted from within the mid-sized family clans as four individuals toppled to the ground.

They clutched their eyes, writhing in agony, as crimson fluid spilled through the gaps between their fingers.

The surrounding crowd looked at Hu Qiandai in horror.

Hu Qiandai responded with a smile.

She even bowed slightly before calmly catching up to Jason's stride.

Whether it was due to her upbringing or those memories acquired in her mind, everything clearly instructed her: while upholding 'morality,' one must also learn resilience and other virtues, but one principle must be kept in mind above all: never ignore malice!

When malice arises—

Cut it down!

Of course, Hu Qiandai hadn't yet reached the point where she would draw her sword outright.

But the eye-sword technique was still viable.

Jason could keenly sense Hu Qiandai's actions.

Yet he showed no concern.

If others did not offend him, he would not offend others. If others did offend him, they would face annihilation.

The habits developed in 'Nightless City' had already conditioned Jason to disregard such trivial matters—even his steps didn't falter.

So, as Jason and his two companions forged ahead, their wake was accompanied by anguished cries and retreating crowds.

This included even the minor clans who had once received Jason's 'help.'

They glanced at Jason with looks of uncertainty.

It seemed... not quite as they had imagined?

Wasn't he previously the righteous and selfless 'Sword Saint'?

Why had he now become the cold and ruthless 'Sword Saint'?

"Zhinai, he doesn't seem to be quite what you imagined, does he?"

Ah Guang muttered quietly.

"Hmm, it does seem a bit different."

"Let's wait and observe for a moment."

Zhinai also felt perplexed.

The story didn't seem to be matching expectations.

Wasn't the purpose to 'subjugate'?

Why had a conflict arisen?

Even if there was the conflict just now, Jason should have stepped in to diffuse it promptly—perhaps with one or two rebukes directed at Hu Qiandai, which would have undoubtedly optimized the outcome.

But now?

He simply ignored it.

This...

Zhinai couldn't make sense of it.

Chapter 1165: Grand Gesture! (2)

And the events that followed left Zhinai even more perplexed.

"Jason!" X2

As Jason approached, Hanakaiin Haru and Hanakaiin Itsuki cried out in delight simultaneously.

Then, the two glared at each other with fury—

"He's my friend!" X2

"What's your problem?" X2

"None of your damn business!" X2

The two bellowed, repeating identical phrases three times in succession, their anger quickly escalating to action. Hanakaiin Itsuki tugged at his hood, while Hanakaiin Haru rolled up his sleeves.

"Do you have a death wish?"

"I think it's you who does!"

The heated words escalated the tension dramatically.

"Stop!"

Hanakaiin Tōru intervened.

The young leader of the Hanakaiin Family often wielded his status to restore order.

At least... outwardly, that's how it appeared.

"If you keep calling Jason so casually, I'll kill you!"

Hanakaiin Itsuki's sharp eyes glinted fiercely as he growled at Hanakaiin Haru, lowering his voice.

"Same goes for you."

"Being beheaded leaves your soul unrestful, you know."

Hanakaiin Haru mocked with a cold laugh.

"Hmph!" X2

Both men snorted disdainfully at the same time before turning away, ignoring each other entirely.

What was wrong with them?

Hanakaiin Ra scratched his head, then glanced toward Jason.

Other than being tall, strong, rugged-faced, and possessing an inexplicable charm that drew attention, there didn't seem to be anything special about him. He was downright ordinary.

"Hello, Lord Jason."

"I'm Hanakaiin Ra."

Hanakaiin Ra greeted Jason politely in his thoughts, contrasting sharply with Hanakaiin Tōru, Hanakaiin Haru, and Hanakaiin Itsuki.

As it stood, Hanakaiin Ra became the last bastion of the family's etiquette and civility.

"Mm, hello, Jason."

Jason introduced himself.

On the side, Tsuchimikado Motoharu approached.

"We meet again, Sword Saint."

Tsuchimikado Motoharu spoke forthrightly.

Their initial encounter was something that couldn't be kept secret. Rather than conceal it, acknowledging it outright seemed smarter.

"You left me with such a vivid impression."

"Thinking back, I can't help but clench my fists."

Tsuchimikado Motoharu said carefully, weaving his words masterfully.

"Then by all means, keep clenching them."

"If you don't want them anymore..."

"I'm happy to chop them off for you."

The retort didn't come from Jason but from Hanakaiin Itsuki.

Under his hood, Hanakaiin Itsuki's face was half obscured in shadow, his cold gaze fixed on Tsuchimikado Motoharu.

Despite finding Hanakaiin Haru annoying, Hanakaiin Itsuki bore no ill will toward Jason.

But this feminine-looking figure before him was a different story.

Even though there was no obvious hostility emanating from him, Hanakaiin Itsuki instinctively felt this person wasn't trustworthy.

And he wasn't alone in thinking so.

Hanakaiin Haru felt the same.

"I think both hands should be severed."

Hanakaiin Haru chimed in.

"Haha."

"Such fiery tempers you both have!"

"I wonder how the main house of the Hanakaiin Family ended up like this, yet you two still have time to bicker here. Truly fascinating... tsk tsk."

Tsuchimikado Motoharu chuckled lightly.

He concealed his face behind a folding fan.

Then, just like that, he retreated.

His goal had already been accomplished.

The rest?

It would fall to someone else.

And indeed, that's what happened.

Yubei Xiao stepped forward.

From the moment Jason appeared, this young Onmyoji had kept a close watch on him.

Now, the young Onmyoji took a step forward.

"May I take a look at your 'destiny'?"

Yubei Xiao asked.

As soon as those words left his mouth, Hanakaiin Itsuki and Hanakaiin Haru narrowed their eyes, a sharp killing intent flaring up.

For Onmyoji, accessing someone's "destiny" was strictly forbidden.

Casually peering into another's destiny implied "finality," "death."

"Yubei Xiao, are you courting death?"

Under his hood, Hanakaiin Itsuki's shadowed face twisted slightly.

Wind.

It began swirling faintly around Hanakaiin Itsuki.

Hanakaiin Haru didn't respond verbally, but his hand hidden inside his sleeve had already begun forming seals.

Hui Lijing, though not privy to deeper meanings, quickly gauged the situation and raised her weapon, aiming the barrel squarely at Yubei Xiao.

Hu Qiandai, gripping the hilt of her blade, recalled a memory that had ingrained within her the significance of the Onmyoji's "destiny-reading."

Now targeted by four individuals.

Yubei Xiao remained perfectly composed.

He continued to stare at Jason, gaze unwavering.

Jason lowered his head and met Yubei Xiao's gaze.

Then—

"No."

Jason replied curtly.

His own "destiny" was something even he didn't fully understand; thus, allowing someone else to look into it was out of the question.

Not to mention, he was well aware of "spell words" and "curses." In such situations, outright rejection was the wisest decision.

"I see."

Yubei Xiao muttered softly, walking away absentmindedly.

This display left Hanakaiin Itsuki, Hanakaiin Haru, Hui Lijing, and Hu Qiandai momentarily stunned.

What was up with him?

Jason, meanwhile, ignored the reactions and approached the enormous "Protective Barrier."

Despite possessing sensory capabilities ten times sharper than normal, he wasn't able to perceive everything within; he could only pick up faint traces.

That ambiguity prompted Jason to close his eyes.

Then—

A deep inhale!

A fragrance!

A faint, elusive scent wafted through the "Protective Barrier." Even with the barrier's obstruction, the aroma was enticing enough that Jason could imagine just how strong it would be if the barrier were removed.

Such extravagant measures!

Jason thought quietly, turning his gaze toward Hanakaiin Tōru.

This person he was meeting for the first time, yet whose reputation preceded them.

The Hanakaiin Family's most promising young talent—Jason had heard about him countless times.

Now that they'd met?

Jason's senses were flooded with danger warnings.

It felt akin to the unexplainable anxiety one experiences while walking alone at night.

Conversely, Hanakaiin Tōru was experiencing something similar.

He studied Jason closely.

Observing this man he had never regarded seriously before.

Truly fascinating.

Was this destiny?

No!

Perhaps it was better called a miracle.

Reflecting inwardly, Hanakaiin Tōru withdrew his gaze from Jason and returned his focus to the "Protective Barrier," speaking as though murmuring to himself: "Can you see what's inside?"

Though it sounded like idle reflection, everyone knew the question was aimed at Jason.

"Mm!"

"Not entirely clear."

"But I do get an idea of what that person intends to do."

Jason nodded, offering a partially evasive response.

"Such ambition... truly terrifying."

Hanakaiin Tōru nodded in agreement.

"Indeed."

Jason concurred with another nod.

The people around them seemed to understand, silently affirming the conversation's implied meaning.

Hanakaiin Ra was the exception.

The young man glanced left, then right, scratching his head with a troubled expression.

If I admit that I have no idea what's going on, will everyone look down on me?

But what exactly is happening?

As Hanakaiin Ra wrestled with his inner turmoil, Hui Lijing stepped forward.

"Jason, what's going on?"

The detective asked.

This question granted Hanakaiin Ra a sense of relief; he perked his ears and listened carefully.

"The opposing faction is executing a scheme, starting from the Hanakaiin Family's branch house overtaking the main house, leading to the 'King of Fighters Tournament,' and even the so-called 'Dread Flag' they've been involved all along."

"All of it designed to incite chaos and slaughter in the 'Inside World.'"

Jason explained with measured words.

"Why would they do that? They're also part of the 'Inside World,' aren't they?"

The detective asked, confused.

"Indeed, they're part of the 'Inside World,' but they're also the big Leader of 'Blossom Cherry.'"

Jason answered.

"What?!"

The detective exclaimed.

In truth, her shock was shared by everyone present upon hearing his response.

Jason continued.

"The existence of 'Blossom Cherry' has stirred widespread dissatisfaction within the 'Inside World.'"

"The leader is well aware of this, so they aim to redirect the 'Inside World's' focus."

"A massacre is the perfect distraction—and to normalize such slaughter, they'll provide various pretexts."

"The Dread Flag, the King of Fighters Tournament, and so forth all serve this purpose."

"Even if these schemes fail."

"The leader hasn't relented but instead resorted to more daring tactics."

"For instance—"

"Betting the entire Hanakaiin Family on their gamble!"

Betting the entire Hanakaiin Family!

A collective shock rippled through everyone's expressions.

They were astonished by the Hanakaiin Family Head's audacity.

But even more shocking was—

Crack!

The "Protective Barrier" shattered.

The Hanakaiin Family's main house territory came into full view.

Completely defenseless!

Huff!

Everyone's breathing grew heavy.

Chapter 1166: Men Die in Pursuit of Wealth, Birds Die in Pursuit of Food!

Greed!

Unparalleled, as if made tangible—greed!

Like sharp knives, at this moment, it pierces out from the eyes of everyone around!

The vassal families are like this.

The mid-tier families are like this.

The small clans are like this too.

In the dark night, these gazes resemble those of ravenous wolves.

With a strange glint, they send chills deep into one's heart.

"Everyone, calm down!"

"This is a trap!"

"It's all a trap!"

Hanakaiin Ra turned around, shouting loudly.

But it was useless.

The greedy gleam in those people's eyes did not fade; instead, it grew tinged with malice.

This touch of malice made Hanakaiin Ra's scalp tingle.

"I'm doing this for your own good..."

"It's pointless."

Hanakaiin Ra continued trying to explain, but no one was willing to listen. The malice in their eyes only deepened. Hanakaiin Ra instinctively wanted to keep talking, but he was stopped by Hanakaiin Tōru.

"They know it's a trap."

"But they're still willing to gamble for what's inside."

"Even if it means staking their lives—they'd rather die trying."

Hanakaiin Tōru lightly patted his younger brother's shoulder.

Hanakaiin Ra opened his mouth.

In the end, he said nothing.

The young onmyoji's eyes were filled with utter incomprehension.

A life—there is only one!

Why not cherish it?

Other ways could be found!

Although Hanakaiin Ra had dabbled in some tricks and schemes, in most people's eyes, his "schemes" were akin to children playing pretend.

At best, equivalent to the level of a kindergartener.

With such a foundation, Hanakaiin Ra couldn't begin to understand what all of this meant to the people around him.

"The opportunity is right in front of us—how could we stay calm? How could we not take the gamble?"

Hanakaiin Itsuki sneered.

And then, the onmyoji simply stepped aside, clearing the path leading directly to the territory.

Hanakaiin Haru did the same.

For Hanakaiin Haru, self-preservation was paramount.

And Hanakaiin Tōru?

Without moving his feet, he turned his body slightly and sat cross-legged on the ground.

"Tōru-Sama?"

The leader of one of the vassal families looked at Hanakaiin Tōru in confusion, unable to grasp his intentions.

"Let them pass."

Hanakaiin Tōru said this, raising a hand.

A chessboard materialized out of thin air before him. Gesturing again, a square stone flew toward him, landing in front of him. The chessboard slowly settled onto the stone.

Hanakaiin Tōru's eyes were fixed tightly on the board.

But there were no pieces.

Not a single one.

"Tōru-Nii, now's not the time to be playing chess!"

Hanakaiin Ra quickly ran over and said.

Meanwhile, the others could no longer hold themselves back.

The first to move were those from the mid-tier families. Exchanging glances, they swarmed toward the main territory of the Hanakaiin Family.

Next came the small clans.

Seeing the mid-tiers make their move, they followed suit.

Surprisingly, the vassal families didn't move.

The people from these vassal families all looked toward Tsuchimikado Motoharu, waiting for his command.

"May my people enter?"

Tsuchimikado Motoharu asked Hanakaiin Tōru with utmost politeness.

"Hmm."

Hanakaiin Tōru nodded.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu smiled, then waved his hand.

Immediately, the members of the vassal families began rushing inside.

In the blink of an eye, the clearing before them was left with only a few heirs from the Hanakaiin branch families, the vassal family members, Tsuchimikado Motoharu, Jason and his two companions, Zhinai and Ah Guang.

"Aren't we going?"

Ah Guang asked quietly.

"That place is filled with death."

"Nothing else."

"Only death!"

Zhinai's expression was more solemn than ever as her gaze fixed on the distant territory of the Hanakaiin Family. Through the perception granted by her secret technique, the Hanakaiin territory, already shrouded in darkness, appeared even more bottomless.

It wasn't just darkness.

There were also wails.

The kind of wails unique to specters and the Undead.

Sharp, piercing, and unending.

In Zhinai's "vision," translucent figures and skeletal samurai rose from the ground, their rage-filled cries aimed at the living, surging toward those who had just entered the territory.

Like a tide.

Unstoppable and overwhelming.

Zhinai's body trembled uncontrollably.

It wasn't because of the specters and Undead.

It was because, in the darkness, there was...

"Ah!"

Zhinai suddenly cried out in pain, clutching her eyes tightly.

"Zhinai, Zhinai, are you okay?"

Ah Guang was panicked, at a complete loss.

It was his first time witnessing his friend suffering like this because of her "perception."

"She's fine."

"She just needs to rest."

"However, she'd better not use her 'spiritual sight' again anytime soon—or she risks going blind."

Hu Qiandai quickly walked over, examined Zhinai's eyes briefly, and stated calmly.

He had no ulterior motives.

For Hu Qiandai, this was purely out of "duty."

"Thank you, thank you."

Ah Guang bowed repeatedly in gratitude.

He couldn't even fathom what he'd do if something happened to his friend here.

He had long grown used to relying on Zhinai, following her instructions.

Hu Qiandai gave a small nod, then turned to leave, but at that moment, Zhinai, leaning against Ah Guang, stood up.

"Wait!"

"Please, whatever you do—do not enter!"

"If you go in, you will die!"

Zhinai cried out loudly.

Chapter 1167: Men Die in Pursuit of Wealth, Birds Die in Pursuit of Food! (2)

At the very last moment, though she didn't see clearly what lay deep inside, merely catching a blurred glimpse was enough to tell her that place was the true essence of 'Death.'

It wasn't because of the souls saturating the death.

It was because of 'Death' itself.

It was the end of 'Life.'

"Yes, alright, thank you."

Hu Qiandai responded gently.

Not perfunctorily, but sincerely.

Yet Hu Qiandai had no intention of backing down, because if Jason entered, she would undoubtedly follow him inside.

Zhinai wanted to say something else, but a sharp pain in her eyes turned the words on her lips into a cry of agony.

"Zhinai, are you okay?"

Ah Guang asked nervously.

"I'm fine."

"Take me to the side of that 'Sword Saint.'"

Zhinai said.

In this lady's view, only Jason could stop all of this now.

Although her reasoning was tenuous, Zhinai hoped Jason would agree.

"Alright."

Ah Guang carefully supported Zhinai as they walked over.

Step by cautious step.

As the two moved, Tsuchimikado Motoharu's gaze turned toward Xiaolu Youfeng.

"Youfeng, don't you intend to divine the situation?"

Tsuchimikado Motoharu asked.

"It's already so obvious."

"There's no need to divine."

Xiaolu Youfeng replied bluntly.

Merely a desperate retaliatory attempt after an unavoidable change of plans.

As long as he didn't step into the trap, he would be safe.

With such premises, why waste energy on divination?

Moreover, there was someone far more important worth divining about.

Unconsciously, Xiaolu Youfeng looked over at Jason.

And as Xiaolu Youfeng looked toward Jason, Hanakaiin Itsuki and Hanakaiin Haru's gazes also shifted toward Xiaolu Youfeng, warning glints flashing in their eyes—though Xiaolu Youfeng might not be as infamous as Hanakaiin Itsuki, his reputation was far from stellar. Strange and unsociable were almost compliments in his case, and being a hermit was nearly a form of praise.

He conducted experiments that made people uncomfortable.

Experiments that unsettled even the 'Inside World.'

For ordinary people, he was utterly intolerable.

For someone like himself to stare at their friend, anyone would be on guard.

Especially Hanakaiin Itsuki.

"What are you looking at?"

"Look again, and I'll take you out."

Hanakaiin Itsuki said rudely.

The 'Inside World' had its rules, but strength was always the ultimate measure of value.

Ignoring Hanakaiin Itsuki, Xiaolu Youfeng retreated to the side.

No arguments with the ignorant!

This was Xiaolu Youfeng's mantra.

The brief dialogue did not affect Tsuchimikado Motoharu in the slightest.

He stepped up toward Hanakaiin Tōru.

"Aren't you planning to do something?"

"Or..."

"Are you already fully prepared?"

Tsuchimikado Motoharu probed, his gaze fixed firmly on Hanakaiin Tōru's chessboard.

But the chessboard was empty.

There was nothing on it.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu naturally saw nothing.

Yet, Tsuchimikado Motoharu did not give up.

Regarding Hanakaiin Tōru, Tsuchimikado Motoharu was extremely cautious.

In fact, up until this moment, Tsuchimikado Motoharu still suspected that all of this—right here and now—might be orchestrated by Hanakaiin Tōru and that Hanakaiin Family Head, or perhaps it was entirely Hanakaiin Tōru's handiwork.

Of course, it was only suspicion.

Not baseless jealousy or unwarranted doubts.

It was the intuitive suspicion that an Onmyoji ought to have.

"Stay away from Tōru-nii, you fox-like creep."

Hanakaiin Ra snapped at Tsuchimikado Motoharu.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu smiled faintly, then prepared to approach Jason.

Though the connection with his lord was concealed before others, such concealment never meant a lack of communication.

On the contrary, with a 'Sword Saint' present here, it would be far too strange if he didn't attempt to interact.

However, before Tsuchimikado Motoharu could speak, Zhinai had already moved in front of Jason.

Thud!

Zhinai pulled Ah Guang down to kneel.

"Please save us!"

Zhinai said.

This action left Hui Lijing and Hu Qiandai, who stood beside Jason, stunned. The two ladies immediately stepped aside, leaving only Jason standing still, his eyes slightly narrowed.

Facing Jason's narrowed eyes, Zhinai did not falter. She spoke immediately.

"Inside lies the incubation of 'Death'!"

"Once 'Death' is fully born..."

"We—and even the entire Kinki region—will be finished!"

"You are the only one who can stop all this!"

"Please!"

"Save everyone!"

Zhinai said as she bowed down, her forehead striking the ground.

Thump, thump.

Seeing his friend in this state, Ah Guang hesitated no longer. Not only did he repeatedly bow, but he also took out his backpack, pulling out cola, potato chips, shrimp crackers and other snacks to offer to Jason.

"Sword Saint, please accept these."

"They're my most valuable possessions."

"If it's not enough, I'll bring more for you."

"Please save everyone."

Ah Guang said loudly.

Zhinai's face was filled with despair.

Although she knew her friend's mind sometimes didn't function well, she never imagined that at a crucial moment like this, her friend would offer cola, chips, shrimp crackers, and other snacks as bargaining chips.

This—this was outright disrespect!

It was an insult to the 'Sword Saint'!

Not to mention asking him to lend aid; it's likely... we'll be slashed instead, right?

Thinking about this, Zhinai silently sighed.

She did not blame her friend.

Ultimately, this was her responsibility to consider.

Now, she hadn't considered it.

By extension, the fault lay with her.

And she was willing to admit her mistake.

Even if... she was unwilling to accept it.

Chapter 1168: Men Die in Pursuit of Wealth, Birds Die in Quest for Food! (3)

Zhinai closed her eyes, waiting for her fate to unfold.

And then—

Crunch.

A crisp sound.

It was all too familiar, like the crunch of a potato chip being bitten into.

Zhinai was stunned.

When she opened her eyes, Jason had already picked up another potato chip and popped it into his mouth.

"Tomato flavor?"

"Not bad."

Jason said this casually, grabbing a bottle of soda. He twisted it open and gulped it down.

Next, he ripped open a bag of shrimp chips.

They were slightly different from the shrimp chips he remembered.

The shrimp flavor wasn't strong enough.

But still, they were pretty crunchy.

Zhinai stared, dumbfounded, at Jason sitting cross-legged in front of her, snacking and drinking as if nothing were amiss.

Her brain froze.

It wasn't just Zhinai—Hanakaiin Haru, Hanakaiin Itsuki, Hanakaiin Ra, Tsuchimikado Motoharu, Xiaolu Youfeng, and Hui Lijing were all equally stunned.

What was Jason thinking?

The correct answer had already surfaced in everyone's minds.

But none of them dared to believe it.

Even if Jason was a notorious foodie, he wouldn't risk something so dangerous, right?

Hui Lijing and Hanakaiin Haru, who knew Jason well, had anxious glints in their eyes.

The Hanakaiin Court was clearly full of peril—waiting outside was the safest choice. To enter now... it was undeniably reckless!

Zhinai, however, was taken aback.

"You... you agree?"

She stammered.

"Pretty tasty."

"Remember to bring more next time."

Jason didn't even glance at Zhinai. Instead, he directed his words at Ah Guang.

"Got it."

Ah Guang nodded vigorously.

"Great."

Jason stood up and, without hesitation, started walking forward.

"Thank you!"

"I'm truly grateful!"

Zhinai shouted loudly.

"Jason?!"

The rest of them exclaimed in surprise.

"No thanks needed."

"I just want to go in and take a look myself."

"There's something in there I care about."

Jason looked at Zhinai and spoke with utmost seriousness.

This wasn't an excuse—it was the genuine reason.

The alluring aroma drifting from within the Hanakaiin Court was irresistible. Even without Zhinai or Ah Guang's pleading, he would still have ventured inside.

And with Zhinai and Ah Guang involved?

Soda + potato chips + shrimp chips—it was downright delicious.

Although lacking in nutrition, it brought indescribable satisfaction!

Jason smirked as he glanced at Hui Lijing, Hu Qiandai, and the Hanakaiin family entourage.

"Don't worry."

"I'll be fine."

"Just wait for me to return."

With these words, Jason continued striding forward without stopping.

The darkness quickly swallowed Jason's silhouette.

"Tsk, suddenly I feel like sneaking into the main house to take a look," Hanakaiin Itsuki muttered.

"I've always been watched by a bunch of people, never free to wander around."

"This might be a good chance to give it a go!"

Hanakaiin Itsuki pulled up his hood and followed ahead.

"Exactly."

"We really should take a look."

Hanakaiin Haru walked forward, now side by side with Hanakaiin Itsuki.

Hanakaiin Itsuki raised an eyebrow but ultimately said nothing.

"Even though I'm still quite weak, I know I shouldn't go in. But if I don't, I'll probably lose respect for myself," Hui Lijing murmured, checking her ammunition before stepping forward.

"Wait for me," Hu Qiandai said warmly, with a gentle smile, and followed suit.

Xiaolu Youfeng stared in the direction where Jason had vanished. The young Onmyoji said nothing and just walked inside.

"Oh dear."

"This sudden burst of curiosity."

"What should I do?"

"Of course, satisfy it!"

Tsuchimikado Motoharu muttered to himself and walked in as well.

In an instant, only Hanakaiin Tōru, Hanakaiin Ra, the subsidiary families, Zhinai, and Ah Guang remained at the scene.

Hanakaiin Ra widened his eyes and scratched his head.

Should I follow them too?

If I just stand here, doesn't that make me look like a coward?

Meanwhile, Zhinai and Ah Guang were overwhelmed with emotion.

Especially Zhinai.

Soda, potato chips, shrimp chips—how could those possibly matter to a 'Sword Saint'?

He must have already planned to enter and eliminate the dangers!

Even without my plea, Jason would've gone in!

Forget 'gathering a crowd'!

Forget 'hidden motives'!

Those were just my narrow-minded assumptions!

The 'Sword Saint' is noble and selfless!

He is the true embodiment of a 'Swordsman'!

With this realization, Zhinai remained in a kneeling position but straightened her back, her bell-like voice ringing out—

"May your martial spirit prosper!"

Chapter 1169: Ding!

The sounds behind him were sparse.

As Jason stepped into the realm of the Hanakaiin Family, his senses could clearly feel that he passed through an invisible 'Barrier'.

It was like a curtain of water.

The original 'Protective Barrier' had vanished, but the concealed 'Barrier' remained.

Gazing into the darkness ahead, Jason's eyes were scrutinizing.

The darkness before him was like mist, like smoke.

Not only did it obscure his vision, but it also carried a faint sensation of Corrosion.

Similar to his secret technique [Mist Concealment].

But the Corrosion, the toxicity was not nearly as strong as [Mist Concealment].

Of course, that might be due to the passage of time.

However, the scope was truly vast.

The territory of the Hanakaiin Family in the Kinki region was quite extensive, starting from the distant mountain's foot, reaching up to the peak, and then 20 kilometers inward, all considered the domain of the Hanakaiin Family.

It was recognized officially.

Yet, this was less than one-tenth of the Hanakaiin Family's territory at its peak period.

In that era before gunpowder appeared, the territory of a significant clan was like a 'small country'.

At this moment, the 'small country' was long gone.

What remained was the 'fragmentation' after the baptism of time.

Such 'fragmentation' had even resulted in irreparable 'damage'.

The previous explosion should have destroyed unprotected structures on the Hanakaiin Family's land.

What's left?

Naturally, they are everyone's targets.

The buildings that remained intact after the explosion unambiguously signaled to intruders that there were good things inside.

Unquestionably, this was intentional by the head of the Hanakaiin Family.

Using the entire Hanakaiin Family as 'bait'.

Seducing all the 'Inside World' members from around the Kinki region.

And these people were indeed attracted.

Greed! Anger! Delightedness!

These negative emotions seemed almost tangible.

Jason could clearly feel these negative emotions constantly emerging, continually solidifying.

Clearly, that's what the head of the Hanakaiin Family wanted.

As for what they wanted to achieve?

Jason had some speculation.

But that was a matter for later.

Now?

None of this concerned Jason.

Hoo!

He stood there, taking a deep breath.

Then, he followed the scent to the nearest smell.

Mist?

Nonexistent, with 'food' as a guide.

Corrosion?

Nonexistent, his skin was completely immune.

As for the influence of negative emotions?

Also nonexistent, as 'appetite' overwhelmed all other desires.

...

Hmm?

As Hanakaiin Itsuki stepped into the main family's territory, he couldn't help but raise an eyebrow.

"Mist, poison, and negative emotions?"

"This guy is really fishing."

"Heh."

With a cold laugh, Hanakaiin Itsuki walked away without greeting Hanakaiin Haru.

He didn't want to be with Hanakaiin Haru.

First find Jason, and then talk!

Hanakaiin Itsuki believed that even with the obstruction of mist, since he and Jason were only a step apart, even if Jason acted alone, he wouldn't go too far.

Watching Hanakaiin Itsuki leave, Hanakaiin Haru remained unmoved.

He was waiting.

He believed Hui Lijing would come in.

Hui Lijing was the type of person who was easy to understand, one look and you knew what Hui Lijing was thinking.

One second.

Ten seconds.

Thirty seconds.

A full two minutes passed, and Hui Lijing hadn't appeared.

"It seems to be the same entrance, but the entry positions are different?"

Although Hanakaiin Haru hadn't waited for the person he intended to, confirming his guess was not a total loss.

On the contrary, he made quite a gain.

After proving this point, Hanakaiin Haru started wanting to prove a second point.

Is this assignment random?

Or is it specified?

Or perhaps with a certain pattern?

The answer was obvious.

With the boldness of that family head, since the entire family was used as bait, they must have things under their control.

"Which means, this 'Barrier' in front of me likely follows a pattern, controlled by the family head."

Why not specify directly?

If a direct specification was possible, Hanakaiin Haru believed that the moment he entered, he would have been separated from Hanakaiin Itsuki.

There's strength in numbers.

This is not a joke.

Especially when individuals with Transcendent powers gather, nobody can guarantee what might happen.

Therefore, if he were the family head, he would definitely separate him and Hanakaiin Itsuki, and keep them as far as possible from the core of the Hanakaiin Family's territory.

Because, unlike others,

Even though he and Hanakaiin Itsuki belonged to a branch family, they were quite familiar with the main family's territory.

Each year, they came a few times.

Sometimes for ancestor worship events.

Sometimes for meetings.

But invariably, they knew the core territory of the Hanakaiin Family like the back of their hands.

With the mist concealing it, two familiar people breaking in was not a good thing.

"So, I am now at the edge of the territory?"

"Furthermore, it should be a place fraught with threats."

"If I were the family head, I would anticipate the branch family breaking in and make targeted arrangements!"

Thinking of this, Hanakaiin Haru stopped moving.

Instead, he sat down.

Of course, the young Onmyoji didn't do nothing.

He shook his sleeve.

Seven or eight paper-cut figures jumped out from the sleeve.

Each paper-cut figure had a round head, slightly short limbs, and an equally round body.

After jumping to the ground, these little figures first bowed to Hanakaiin Haru.

Chapter 1170: Ding! (2)

Then, bouncing and skipping, they moved into the mist.

Since it had already been set up against them.

They shouldn't act rashly.

Investigating was the best choice.

Of course, if they could find Jason, that would be even better.

...

"Huh? Where's Jason?"

Rushing into the mist, Hui Lijing couldn't find any trace of Jason, and she looked visibly disappointed.

Especially with the black mist surrounding her, it gave her an uneasy feeling.

"Be careful."

"There's something strange about this fog."

"And also..."

Hu Qiandai was cautioning her friend, but before she could finish speaking, she turned and struck—

Clang!

A cold flash swept by.

By the time Hui Lijing regained her composure, Hu Qiandai had already sheathed her sword.

Click!

With the crisp sound of the scabbard snapping shut, Hui Lijing finally noticed a humanoid monster that had somehow appeared beside them.

The creature's limbs were long and gangly, its body barely covered by tattered scraps. Its arms extended almost past its knees, and its claws were as sharp as daggers. Its mouth was filled with jagged, protruding fangs that made one's scalp tingle just looking at them. But it had no eyes and no nose—just a mouth and ears.

"This..."

Hu Qiandai stared at the monster, deep in thought.

"Why does it feel like this creature fits perfectly with this environment?"

"It's as if they were born for this very place."

Hui Lijing voiced the same thought that Hu Qiandai was having.

"Not just that."

"Look at its clothing."

Hu Qiandai had noticed something more.

Hui Lijing bent down to inspect it.

The monster's tattered clothing had long been corroded by the acidic mist, but a few clues remained—like the material, which seemed to be cotton or linen, and the stitching, which looked machine-made rather than hand-sewn.

After confirming these details, Hui Lijing turned to exchange a glance with Hu Qiandai.

The weight of severity was evident in both their eyes.

Then, the two of them crouched to continue their search.

Soon, more clues emerged.

A silver button.

A modern-crafted brooch.

And a pair of battered leather shoes.

The two were certain that these objects all originated from this monster.

The answer became glaringly obvious.

"It used to be human!"

The female detective gasped in shock.

"Yeah."

"It must have been infected by something to turn into this. The question is—was it from the group that entered earlier, or someone who had been here long before us? Maybe even someone from the Hanakaiin Family or one of their subordinates."

"If it's from the group that entered earlier... that'd be trouble."

Hu Qiandai spoke gravely.

Although, to be fair, she had only encountered the "Inside World" for the first time today.

Yet the memories that had inexplicably surfaced in her mind made her far more adept than the female detective.

In those memories, she had once led her troops in battle against creatures infected like this—monsters that resembled demons.

Not once.

But dozens of times.

In that era, such incidents occurred one or two times a year.

Sometimes, even more frequently.

Even up to her death, she had been subduing batches of these demon-like beings.

However, the demons she had vanquished were far stronger and far more grotesque than this.

The so-called "demon" in front of her?

At best, it could only be considered a defective product.

Most likely, something had been scrimped during its creation.

"Probably not."

"Those guys aren't that meticulous."

"And besides, every single one of them would be armed to the teeth."

"There's nothing resembling a weapon here."

The female detective's basic observational skills were sharp enough.

"Thankfully."

"At least it's not the worst-case scenario."

Hu Qiandai let out a sigh of relief.

Though she didn't see these defective products as much of a threat, she wasn't at her peak strength, either.

In fact, she wasn't even one percent of her former self.

Right now, she was just an ordinary person who had to rely on the "Himezuru Ichimonji" to fight.

Even though she wouldn't back down from a fight, she didn't prefer unnecessary battles either.

However, events would not bend for anyone's will.

Just as Hui Lijing and Hu Qiandai exhaled slightly in relief—

Step, step-step!

Rustle, rustle!

A dense series of noises broke out.

It was the sound of sharp claws treading on the corroded ground, stirring up sand and dirt.

Not just one set of footsteps.

Dozens, perhaps hundreds.

It was precisely because of their sheer number that the noise became so pronounced.

Hui Lijing and Hu Qiandai locked eyes.

In an instant, a unanimous decision was made.

Run!

One or two of these creatures was nothing to them.

Hui Lijing was confident she could rely on the convenience of her firearm to take them down.

But dozens—or even hundreds?

Even if she unloaded every bullet, it wouldn't be enough.

Whoosh, whoosh!

The wind whistled past their ears.

Behind them came the snarling growls of the monsters.

Their sprinting naturally drew the monsters into pursuit.

Without hesitation, Hui Lijing hurled a grenade behind her.

Boom!

The explosion shattered through the air, scattering shrapnel everywhere.

The pursuing monsters faltered, giving Hui Lijing and Hu Qiandai a chance to widen the gap.

But the reprieve lasted only a moment.

The next instant, more creatures emerged in pursuit.

And not just from behind—within the mist, Hu Qiandai could clearly sense monsters attempting to flank them.

No!

This couldn't go on!

If they were surrounded, they'd be dead for sure!

A flash of cold light flickered in Hu Qiandai's eyes.

"Jing, turn around."

"Break through!"

As Hu Qiandai finished speaking, the "Himezuru Ichimonji" was unsheathed instantly.

Clang!

A Sword Qi measuring three meters in length swept out from the blade, slicing the pursuing monsters clean in half.

In an instant, the encirclement that had been forming opened up with a gap.