

What Witch? A Deadly Apothecary!

#Chapter 1 : The Debt Collector - Read What Witch? A Deadly Apothecary! Chapter 1 : The Debt Collector

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“Miss Foster, last year you borrowed one hundred thalers from the Church. According to the term you signed, including the donation, you must repay nine thalers on time every month. You already defaulted once last month. This time, no matter what, you must—”

Leon stood before the door of the inn room, reading from the IOU in his hand, when he suddenly heard a sob. He paused, lifted his face, and looked at the woman standing in the doorway. “Miss Foster, are you listening?”

“Sir Delegate Officer, I feel deeply ashamed for being in arrears on my debt to the Church. But I truly can’t take out the money right now...”

The young woman sniffled as she took out a handkerchief and wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. “My mother back home fell seriously ill. The money at home was squandered by my father on gambling. My younger brother is only twelve—he finally managed to get into the parish school in town, but we can’t afford the food and lodging fees. That priest there has a bad reputation; they say he abuses children who can’t pay... So I’ve been working myself to the bone and scraping together loans just to barely keep the family alive. Last month, a letter came from home, and more creditors showed up at the door. I had no choice but to send all the money I had back. I beg you to show mercy and give me one more extension. Next time! Next time I will definitely pay!”

After finishing, the girl raised her tear-filled eyes to look at Leon, trying to gauge his reaction.

However, Leon was not moved by her pitiful act. He merely nodded calmly. “Oh, go on. I’m listening.”

“You don’t believe me?” The girl sensed his indifference.

“Your situation is sympathetic, but I don’t understand—if you’re really so strapped for cash, why are you renting an inn room that costs ten thalers a month? There should be plenty of more affordable places in Hamel Town.”

Leon’s gaze passed over the woman’s shoulder and into the room. This room at the Dream Moon Inn was furnished quite elegantly:

By the window stood a decent set of furniture, and it even provided regularly replaced fresh flowers. Among long-term rental inns in Hamel Town, it counted as relatively upscale.

The thaler silver coin was the most common large-denomination currency among civilians in the Noren Empire. Because a wolf's head was stamped on it, it was also called the Silver Wolf. Fifty years ago, the Empire unified the currency exchange standard: one thaler silver coin could be exchanged for two hundred fenni copper coins.

If Leon compared it to the standards of his previous life before crossing into this world, considering only food, clothing, housing, and transport, the purchasing power of one thaler silver coin in most situations was roughly equivalent to two hundred yuan from when he was a wage slave earning four to five thousand a month.

A monthly rent of ten thalers—two thousand fenni—was about as much as some laborers could earn in an entire month. This indebted woman's living conditions were likely better than those of over eighty percent of the people in this town.

"Well, you say that, but the slums have the cheapest rent. As a single woman, could I really live in a place like that? No matter what, I have to ensure my own safety..." The woman awkwardly brushed her side hair back.

"I didn't say it had to be that extreme. Surely there are options that are both safe and economical?" Leon replied, raising an eyebrow.

"About that—actually, after Mr. Ron learned about my family's situation, he took the initiative to waive part of my rent. He's truly a warm-hearted gentleman..." the woman tried to explain.

"Oh, Miss Foster, I have no interest in whatever money-saving tricks you have with the inn owner. I only care whether the money you saved can be taken out to repay the Church's debt." Leon cut her off directly.

"You—what are you implying? How rude!!" The woman caught the insinuation in Leon's words and glared at him.

"Forgive me for not being very tactful, but just this past week alone, you went out on dates with at least three different men at night. It's really hard for me not to draw some extra conclusions." Leon smiled.

"You—you were stalking me!?" Hearing this, the woman's face filled with terror, and she instinctively raised her hands to protect herself.

"That sort of thing only requires asking around downstairs a little. You're fairly well-known in this area. I also heard that when you go out with men, you're always decked

out in gold and silver. So could I take a look at your jewelry box?" Leon suddenly made the request.

If she had money to buy jewelry, then naturally she should have money to repay her loan. And even if she didn't, gold and jewels themselves could be used to settle debts.

The woman's expression shifted slightly, and she hurriedly argued, "Those... those were borrowed from friends!"

"Which friend? We can go confront them right now," Leon replied calmly.

"She... she's not in town." The woman's gaze began to dart around.

"I think you don't need to make any more excuses." Leon unhurriedly put away the IOU. "I already asked at a jewelry shop on this street. The owner personally told me that just the day before yesterday, Miss Lia Foster, a dancer at the Marigold Tavern, purchased a pair of silver earrings inlaid with emeralds there, accompanied by a middle-aged gentleman. The price was twenty thalers. I'd bet they're in your vanity's jewelry box right now, and that I'll also find plenty of things inside that can be used to settle your debt."

As he spoke, Leon started to walk into the room.

"Hey, what are you doing!?" Seeing his posture, the woman immediately sensed something was wrong and reached out to block him.

"Allow me to conduct a search. So, will you open the jewelry box yourself, or should I pry it open for you?" Leon replied simply.

"What did you say?" The woman's voice shot up. "What right do you have—"

"I do. For those suspected of maliciously delaying repayment, the Church has the right to search their residence." Leon grabbed the woman by the shoulder without changing his expression, pushed her aside, and strode into the room. "Madam, if you still don't intend to honestly hand over the money, then please step aside."

"Don't come in! Don't touch my things!!" When the woman saw Leon force his way inside, she immediately became hysterical. "Someone—someone come quick! Help! Somebody save me!!"

The woman's high-pitched screams were even louder than a crowing rooster, quickly echoing throughout the entire inn.

Before long, the tenants on this floor opened their doors one after another to see what was going on. The woman became even more theatrical, stomping her feet and shouting:

“No! Don’t touch me! Molestation! Help! Does this country really have no real men who can help me drive away this demon?”

A burst of chaotic footsteps sounded, and three men who looked full of righteous indignation soon appeared at the doorway.

At just the right moment, the woman rushed out and threw herself into the arms of the tallest of the men, tearfully crying, “Thank the gods, thank the gods you’ve come...”

Leon stood inside the room, silently watching the woman’s performance.

He had to admit, this young lady’s acting skills were quite on point—very capable of stirring up protective instincts.

The men who arrived stepped into the room, shielding her behind them and glaring angrily at Leon. Even more onlookers gathered at the doorway, gradually forming an encirclement.

Leon softly sighed, flipped open his coat, and drew a flintlock pistol from behind his waist.

When the men saw that the intruder actually carried a weapon, their expressions immediately changed.

This type of gun was single-shot, and even for someone skilled, loading it each time took half a minute.

Even if it was already loaded, facing so many people, Leon would only be able to fire once before being subdued.

But that unfired shot alone was enough to intimidate everyone present—after all, no one wanted to be the unlucky fool who got shot dead.

Leon did not aim the gun at them. Instead, he immediately took out a silver badge from his breast pocket, engraved with a four-pointed star emblem, and shouted sternly:

“Inquisitor investigation! Who else wants to step forward and try?”

The effect of that badge and those words was even greater than the gun. People inside and outside the door all turned pale.

The Inquisition was an enforcement organization within the Empire that was independent of other law enforcement bodies and loyal only to the Church.

In the impression of ordinary civilians, Inquisitors were the Church’s hounds, specialized in capturing Witches and heretics.

They always carried weapons, wore the Church's uniform, donned bird-beak gas masks, and moved in groups, kicking down doors in the dead of night, dragging people out of bed, and arresting them under the charge of blasphemy.

Then, regardless of whether the person was truly a heretic or falsely accused, their fate would only be one thing:

To be tortured in cold dungeons until their flesh was mangled, to press a bloody handprint onto a confession while unconscious, and then be dragged to the execution grounds and tied to the stake.

The men at the front who had been playing the role of gallant protectors all raised their hands toward Leon and stepped aside, distancing themselves from Miss Lia Foster. They left the girl standing there alone, staring at Leon in helpless confusion.

Whether this young lady was truly a Witch or wrongly accused, it was not muddy water they should wade into. And the Inquisitor before them was not someone they could afford to provoke.

"Get lost." Leon had no desire to waste time and snorted at the people crowding around.

Hearing this, the onlookers retreated as if granted amnesty, no longer meddling in the matter.

"Not you." Leon stopped Lia, who was trembling as she turned to leave with the crowd.

"In—Inquisitor sir..." Lia's face crumpled, her voice trembling—this time, it was no longer an act.

"So now you know I'm an Inquisitor? Then what did you think the Church official in charge of debt collection was at first? A priest from the cathedral? A menial?" Leon put away the now-unneeded gun and badge and asked her.

"I didn't know... I really didn't know!" Lia shook her head as she protested.

Leon merely smiled at that.

Most people didn't know that the daily work of the Church's Inquisitors actually had little to do with catching Witches. The vast majority of Inquisitors could go their entire lives without ever encountering a real Witch.

Inquisitors were, in truth, simply the Church's law enforcement officers.

For low-level Inquisitors like them at the bottom, bluntly speaking, there was little difference between them and town watch guards—only their jurisdiction differed.

The cases Leon handled were usually things like someone smuggling Magical Beast materials explicitly banned by the Church, or copying books that the Church had sealed, or making statements that damaged the Church's reputation...

And outside of handling cases, the most common task in their daily work was actually going door to door to collect debts for the Church.

Very few people were as clueless as this woman, so most of the time, Leon didn't need to reveal this identity that made so many people keep their distance.

Civilians often thought that Inquisitors were very far removed from their lives.

Yet they didn't realize that the so-called "errand-running delegate officers" who went around the streets issuing Church loans and collecting debts—the ones you might occasionally run into—were, in fact, Inquisitors.

"Now you know what to do?" Leon raised an eyebrow.

"Ah, I—I suddenly remembered! I think I still have some money I didn't manage to remit. It should still be here! Including last month, that makes eighteen thalers, right? I'll fetch it for you right away!" Lia flusteredly rushed toward her cabinet.

"It's thirty-six thalers," Leon coldly interrupted.

"What?" Lia froze on the spot, stiffly turning back to confirm with Leon.

"According to Church regulations, maliciously delaying repayment incurs a penalty equal to the amount delayed. You just tried to use false accusations against an enforcement officer to delay two months' repayment. Repayment plus penalty totals thirty-six thalers. That's clear enough, right?" Leon explained.

"No, that..." Lia fumbled for a moment, then forced a smile. "It was just a small misunderstanding. I don't think it needs to be that severe."

"You tried to frame a Church Inquisitor as a criminal and have people beat me up, all to bite back at the Church and continue delaying repayment—and you call that not severe? I'm only asking you to pay the fine now. If you refuse to understand this mercy, I also have an alternative."

As he spoke, Leon took out a small obsidian figurine from his pocket, just big enough to rest in his palm. It was carved into the shape of a woman draped in gauze robes, her entire body entwined with thorns, a broken spear plunged into her chest.

The woman clutched the broken spear at her heart, throwing her head back in a cry of agony, vividly lifelike.

“Do you know what this is?” Leon asked.

Lia shook her head blankly.

“This depicts the greatest heretic of the Four Great Churches—the Primordial Witch Moira. We confiscated it from a Witch. Every Witch who believes in her carries such an idol and occasionally takes it out to pray.” Leon stared into Lia’s eyes, paused, and then continued, “You are no exception, Miss Foster.”

Lia froze for a moment, then her face filled with terror. “What nonsense are you talking about? You clearly took that out of your own pocket—”

“No, no, no. This was found in your room, just now.” Leon shook his finger, cutting her off.

“You’re trying to frame me!?” Lia widened her eyes.

“Oh, so you know what framing means?” Leon laughed.

“You just said it was confiscated from a Witch!” Lia pointed at Leon and argued.

“That Witch could be you. Do you understand what I mean? Miss Foster, you now have two choices. One is to be arrested on suspicion of blasphemy and go down to the Inquisition’s dungeon to have a little interaction with us. After that, your teeth and fingernails might become part of our collection, and your property will be confiscated by the Church.

“As for you yourself, if you’re lucky, you won’t be sentenced to death and can spend the rest of your life in Saint Rosalia Prison. But a reminder—it’s actually a research facility where the Church conducts various experiments on Witches...”

By the time Leon reached this point, Lia’s face was already ashen. With a smile, he offered the second option. “Or, you can use thirty-six thalers to settle all of this right now. Now then—can you understand the mercy of the gods?”

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.