

Righteous Ps 141

The Righteous Player(s) Chapter 141

Seeing the bullet text sent by Annan, Delicious Wind Goose was startled.

Then he quickly reacted.

Yes, it is vital.

“This friend is smart. He is not bound by cognitive inertia [1]. I'm half as witty.”

Old Goose casually praised, “I didn't read the letter just now. I subconsciously thought it was the same as the letter which Child God had gotten. But it is a new environment. I really should recheck it...”

With that, Old Goose opened the envelope.

The envelope was still a fragment of Elle's diary.

Under the usual operation on Dungeon Memorizing [1], Delicious Wind Goose had already realized it.

The diary mentioned that “Amos' paintings were hung on the wall and looked like corpses outside the window.” It was already a psychological suggestion.

After Wandering Child read this letter and then looked back at the corpses in the hall, he realized that “the painting turned into a corpse.” It was precisely because of the foreshadowing of this letter that the sense of fear became more intense because of the “anticipation.”

This was a technique used in many horror games and horror movies.

The producer would mix some fragmented information in the main message and give it to the audience, using curiosity and fear to mobilize the audience's attention.

For example, the audience who “suddenly see bloodstains” would become nervous. “People who see those with their heads down from the back” would subconsciously want to investigate it. They would want to know what was within when they saw “a group of people gathered together.” After finding the “closed cabinet” and entering the “closed space,” you would want to know what was inside.

This principle had a simple application.

In the early years, there were some scary pictures or media that became popular on the Internet. Generally speaking, they all had a lengthy suspension. When the camera zoomed in at the end, the ghost would suddenly appear.

This was because when it was focused, the audience would be subconsciously curious about it. That was why people felt the horror when they saw the jumpscare, rather than being in a daze. There was no doubt that the latter situation would significantly dilute the sense of fear.

The same principle was true when a ghost suddenly haunts when the victim turned around after reaching the end. The same went for opening a door into a new and unfamiliar space. It was precisely because the sense of curiosity was aroused that a person would be exposed to those terrifying elements in a sensitive state.

Only those who have read this letter felt the fear of the painting becoming a corpse. When the shadow changes, the victim would immediately think “someone was outside the window” instead of thinking they saw it wrongly.

But, there was a problem.

This letter was on the fourth level. It was supposedly useless.

It might be the key to take away the diary in the cabinet, just like on the second level where the knife was the key to take away the tomato.

If the tomato represented food and blood, and the knife represented cutting and death, then the diary and the diary fragments must also indicate something.

—Wait, not only that.

What if the dungeon challenger got a knife in the second level but didn't enter the nightmare of the second level... but directly entered the third level?

On the third level, if the dungeon challenger had a weapon in their hands, the situation against the Brother Sledgehammer would turn out better.

If the dungeon challenger was lucky, they might be able to repel Brother Sledgehammer once.

Delicious Wind Goose murmured,

“Yes...Yes...

“If you get the clothes on the first level and the knife on the second level, then you can put the knife in your clothes. If you just walked forward without hesitation after taking the diary, you can let Brother Sledgehammer directly appear behind you.

“—At this time, the distance between you and Amos allows you to injure this enemy with a knife!”

Delicious Wind Goose was suddenly enlightened.

Annan also realized what Old Goose meant.

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“...So that's it, I totally understand now.”

Annan whispered, “The reason there is no nightmare on the first level is that there is nothing in the display cabinet on the first level.

“There is a dress on the coat rack, which implies that there is a “path beyond the nightmare.’ That is the existence of Level -1.

“The display cabinet on the second level is a tomato, and the key is a knife. After the tomato is cut with a knife, a lot of blood will flow out. This implies that the homeless men are tricked into this place because of the food. Maybe their fate ends up being squeezed into juice like a poor tomato. The tongue in the tomato may refer to Amos's witty tongue, tricking the homeless men.

“So, the dark shadows under the chandelier may be the homeless men.”

Annan thought of the blood and black mud all over the basement in Yiyi's live broadcast.

The volume surpassed two people.

But if all the homeless men who Amos tricked were killed and then thrown into the basement for bloodletting, that blood volume seemed to make sense.

Annan's fingers tapped his thigh lightly, seemingly enlightened,

“The keywords of the third level are diaries and diary fragments. The diary undoubtedly implies the key information at the 'study' pointed out in Elle's diary. The diary fragments are alluding to 'the Venerated Skeleton's ritual.' The torn-off pages in the diary undoubtedly heralded the ending of Elle's eyes and hair being taken away after the ritual was over.”

The core mechanism of this dungeon instance was nothing else but...

The display cabinet!

What was in the display cabinet represented the keyword of the nightmare on this level!

What would be placed in the display cabinet?

Painting!

After careful thought, Annan recalled the illusion that Jiu Er fell into the second level.

So those were the reasons why the small dungeon instances were displayed as “Gallery: XXX?”

Because they were actually in the illusion created by Amos's work...

—But, something still didn't seem right.

The players were playing as Amos.

So this should be Amos entering the illusion he created...

Annan suddenly realized that he, the players, and the Silver Sire's priests had overlooked an important point.

They seemed to subconsciously connect the horror elements seen everywhere in the gallery, a.k.a the dungeon instance, with the sledgehammer who pursued Amos.

But, what if those terrifying traps were not on the same side as Brother Sledgehammer?

If the endless gallery was Amos's means of escape?

It was a possibility worth considering.

In the second level, Jiu Er had already shown it to Annan. Amos could control the space in this building at will. He could easily create complex, distorted, and messy architectural structures.

Amos just lacked the means to identify the location of other people.

Then, an idea suddenly emerged in Annan's mind.

Brother Sledgehammer disappeared suddenly when he was on the second level. When he was on a pursuit at the third level, he couldn't chase into the indoor.

This might be because this complicated and terrifying gallery was helping Amos to escape!

[1] More of a Chinese Terminology in the game. To depict the process of players meticulously memorizing all the dungeon challenges while dying repeatedly and retrying the same dungeon.

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Yes, that's right!

The more Annan thought about it, the more it was possible.

Otherwise, why would Amos know the mechanism leading to the basement?

Why was Amos in the basement without the slightest sense of fear?

There was only one answer.

That was, he knew from the beginning that the gallery wouldn't hurt him!

It looked dangerous. But Amos just got to keep walking, don't stop, look back, nor hesitate to move forward.

Then, Brother Sledgehammer couldn't catch up to him at all!

Annan recalled Yiyi's action.

He became self-aware that his behavior pattern might be a bit out of the norm.

After Yiyi noticed that her abdomen was injured, her first reaction was to open her top, making it easier to move.

Since Amos was injured in the abdomen, the blood-stained coat hung on the hanger had already given some hint.

In this case, he didn't leave the gallery but just came in from outside!

“So, if Amos kept going, what would happen in the end?”

The answer was clear.

As early as “preset ending” to the True Ending, there were already hints.

To complete the ritual of the Venerated Skeleton, the condition was to let Amos die and let Elle rebirth.

In other words, Amos had to alterate (TN: Possibly in relation to Alteration Magic) Elle, the daughter of Brother Sledgehammer, and successfully gave birth to the Venerated Skeleton's heir.

Also, Brother Sledgehammer shan't kill the nanny of the deity's son.

With that, Amos could survive.

This was the True Neutral Ending (Normal End). In other words, it was an ordinary ending that had not happened in history and satisfied the wishes of the nightmare owner before his death!

Every gallery sub-dungeon instance was the kindness retained in Amos's heart... But, it wasn't quite accurate to depict it as kindness.

It was more like Amos's rebellion against the Venerated Skeleton.

Because the actual nightmare owner was the stillborn child.

“Angelo” had no consciousness and no self-knowledge. His life had not yet begun, and naturally there was no life experience sufficient to construct a nightmare.

But his parents had.

In other words, what “Angelo” knew should be at least what happened after Elle was pregnant.

It felt similar to the Nightmare: White Tower, which Annan had experienced.

People in nightmares were self-conscious...

In the timeline when Brother Sledgehammer hunted down the dungeon challenger, that was the day when the police department joined forces with a particular person to enter the gallery in the original history. Amos, at this time, had already refused to serve the Venerated Skeleton.

That was why the gallery threatened him, guided him but protected him.

The power of this gallery came from the Venerated Skeleton.

Through the prompt of the display cabinet, Amos “turned his head back” into the illusion he had created, which meant that he had repented.

Amos entered the gallery as a victim to kill the powerful “Amos” assisted by the Venerated Skeleton or ruin Amos's plan. It all indicated Amos's intention to repent.

He was Amos.

He should have a good understanding of his layout and personality.

Therefore, he should be able to defeat himself easily.

Then naturally, a dead baby couldn't be born.

The nightmare was interrupted and ended.

If he failed and was killed by himself, it meant that his repentance wasn't resolved. His memories would be washed away and start over. The rise in the erosion rate meant that his thinking was getting darker until he finally stopped hesitating and struggling. He would carry out his last evil deed at the last moment.

—Thus, the nature of this dungeon instance would be “reenactment.”

This referred to Amos's constant reenactment of the last day of his life. It was also Amos reenacting his evil deeds over and over.

—So the first reminder of the nightmare was “don't look back.”

This wasn't physically turning back.

It warned Amos not to look back.

By now, there was no room to repent.

“That's it.” Annan's eyes shone lightly as if hitting a realization.

Just like in the “betrayal” nightmare, Annan needed to empathize with John's mind and know what he was thinking. In the “White Tower” nightmare, Annan also needed to put himself into Gerald's shoes to clear the dungeon successfully.

In the “gallery” nightmare, Annan had to act as “Amos!”

If Amos's will were determined and would never look back till the end, the nightmare would be completed, and the level would be cleared.

That was the evil ending.

Simple and convenient.

As long as the dungeon challenger didn't look back, didn't hesitate, and moved forward steadily, there would be no danger.

But Annan firmly believed that there should be another way.

A “heroic” or perhaps good route!

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Otherwise, the basement ending would be unnecessary!

But obviously, Yiyi's performance in the basement ending was not a “good person.”

“...I will try to tackle the second nightmare in a while.” Annan made up his mind.

At this moment, Delicious Wind Goose had read the letter.

The content of the letter was indeed no different from the previous level.

It was still a fragment of Elle's diary...

But there was a difference!

On the back of the diary fragment, there was an extra line of dark red words written in blood:

“Don't look back, Amos...”

This handwriting was elegant, “They found me...”

Annan, who read the diary, could tell at a glance that this was precisely Elle's handwriting!

“—Nice! There's a difference in the diary fragment!”

“—As expected of Uncle Goose. I came to learn the strategy this time!”

“—The writings are so beautiful. I love it.”

“—Then you go and marry the quill. It wrote the words.”

Seeing that the diary had changed, the players became rowdy.

There were many intelligent people among the players.

Almost all came up with the strategy to “take the props from the previous level and then enter the next level.”

Delicious Wind Goose did not discard the letter.

He just put the paper back into the letter carefully and took it with him.

“I think there will be new changes with the letter on the next level. Do you believe it or not, friends?”

Delicious Wind Goose said confidently, “If there aren't any new changes, I will eat my computer when I return.”

“—Are you the incarnation of the recycle bin?”

“—Uncle Goose, you already owe me an Internet cafe.”

“—Let my computer go and eat my files.”

“—Go away and eat the online dwellers!”

“—Go away and eat silly people!”

“—Go away and eat...huh? We have a traitor!”

Annan nodded thoughtfully.

He agreed with Delicious Wind Goose.

He also believed that this diary might change further after it entered the next level.

This tone didn't seem like it was written in the diary previously, but it was revealed instead at that moment.

It was more like it was written just now.

Did Elle discover it?

When did she discover it?

There was only one answer.

Someone entered the basement, or the “Elle” in the picture frame was found!

Referring to the news in the newspaper, this should happen at the same time.

In other words, the people at Freezing Water Port Police Station might have already rushed in.

Or, they had entered the first floor.

As for Annan's consideration, the players naturally would not know.

—Unless the players pay with their affection rate.

Delicious Wind Goose didn't want to waste time any further. He no longer hesitated but maintained the pace as fast and steady as possible without having his health dropped. Then, he walked slowly forward in this long corridor.

He complied with the instructions in the letter and didn't look back.

Behind Old Goose, the ground and walls began to decay and ruin at speed visible to the naked eye. The floor cracked in crunching noise, like a fire hound crawling out of hell. It was as if a demon steaming flames crawling out of the floor, slowly approaching behind him.

Although Delicious Wind Goose did not look back, the loyal and stupid viewers still reported the situation behind him immediately:

“—Run! A mob spawns behind you, Old Goose!”

“—What is that? A supposedly three-headed hellhound but only has one head?”

“—Is this a nightmare?”

“—Your nightmare has a dog?”

“—Hmm, I think this dog is a bit like a police dog.”

“—In fact, don't you think it's pretty cute if you take a closer look?”

“—This mob looks so disgusting! Why is it discharging pus!?”

“—I think this will have an inestimable impact on young viewers.”

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Delicious Wind Goose clutched the wound in his abdomen and moved forward slowly.

The rate of decay of the walls and floor behind him gradually accelerated. The cracking on the floor approached him, making his back exposed with the scorching heat. Strange and unpleasant creaking noises sounded in the air.

But there were no signs of panic on Delicious Wind Goose's face.

Because he knew very well... After entering the nightmare dungeon instance, all players were not using the health of their external body. Instead, it borrowed all the attributes of the nightmare protagonist.

In other words, everyone's injuries, health, and movement speed were the same in this place.

Delicious Wind Goose was convinced that he had avoided all the pitfalls of health depletion in the previous level. He had not even accelerated his pace back then. His current health value was undoubtedly the optimal state when he reached the fourth level under normal circumstances.

“Don't laugh at me. This is a perfect start for me.”

Delicious Wind Goose glanced at the bullet text and sneered, “Believe it or not, when you're here yourself, it's impossible for you to have more health points than me at this level.

“In this dungeon instance, it's an instant death when the enemy hits us. In other words, the essential meaning of 'health points' in this dungeon instance is 'distance permitted for you to accelerate your pace.’”

Annan, who was watching the live broadcast outside, nodded in agreement.

What Delicious Wind Goose said was right.

In fact, this was a problem that Annan realized when he first entered the nightmare gallery.

Although Amos was injured internally, he seemed to be able to recover his health and physical strength in the gallery continuously. If he stayed still or moved slowly, health would deplete slowly.

But as long as he moved a bit faster, health points would deplete; the faster he runs, the faster the health depletion rate.

In other words, the players could only master one key resource – acceleration distance.

“I divided all traps and chases so far into three categories.”

Delicious Wind Goose walked forward with no hurries while still having enough energy to keep chatting with the silly viewers, “The first category is the level that a simple jog can pass just like now.

“The second category is similar to the situation where the chandelier falls, Brother Sledgehammer breaks through the wall and enters into an intense chase.

“In this case, you must run at full speed. If you hesitate when the chandelier falls or don't run at full speed after the sledgehammer breaks into the wall, you will at least be injured, or worse, dying immediately if you don't pay attention.

“The third category is the same situation as that of Brother Sledgehammer at the previous level – a forced mechanism to clear the obstacle.

“That's not a bug, but a necessary mechanism to be dealt with. Having the letter outside the window requires you to read it. If I guess it right, Brother Sledgehammer's appearance is the time limit for you to get the letter, open the letter and read it.

“If you don't read the letter and just run ahead, you will be forced to the second category. But the total health is limited. Once you choose to run at full speed and force yourself through the mechanism, it is equivalent to being stuck. You will be unable to clear the dungeon truly. At best, you will clear one level and enter the next level.”

Annan heard this and nodded.

Yes, that's it. Delicious Wind Goose is right.

During his dungeon clear experience on the third level, he hesitated a little when the chandelier fell.

He felt that since this dungeon instance would incite amnesia in each respawn, the traps in the first few levels shouldn't be too difficult. A slight acceleration should allow him to pass the level.

As a result, he was bruised by the chandelier and depleted a little health.

At the same time, the intensified wound directly affected his movement speed. But after Annan realized the difficulty of the dungeon instance, he did not hesitate to use full speed when Brother Sledgehammer chased him on the second level.

This directly led to the fact that his health was not enough for him to rush through the corridor at full speed when he was on the third level.

After Annan regained consciousness, he first measured the first level's corridor's length and width with his thumb and then precisely controlled the width of each step. It was because he didn't know the precise arm length and step length of Amos. The purpose was to measure the length of each corridor later and make sure that his health was enough to accelerate through the corridor. Hence, he recorded the data in advance.

Therefore, Annan chose to take the path with no paintings when he was on the third level.

It wasn't just because of the strategy Annan had gotten earlier from other sources.

But, Annan was convinced at that time that if the same chase were reencountered, the remaining health would not be enough to rush to the next level.

Somehow, he went into "Gallery: Elle Morris" by accident.

Delicious Wind Goose's technique was somewhat similar to that of Annan.

But because players could record videos and not worry about losing their memories, they tackled the dungeon more boldly.

For example, Delicious Wind Goose was betting.

He bet that since his health was full, it was impossible for him to die halfway just because he couldn't outrun the obstacle.

—If he couldn't even outrun the demons and hounds behind him, it would be impossible for anyone to run away.

Unless these demons and hounds included other mechanisms.

Even if he died in this mechanism, players could still see the contents of the mechanism. Then he was not at a loss.

Sure enough, the special mechanism had arrived.

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When Delicious Wind Goose trot down the corridor to the center, the traces of decay and ruin had almost spread to the end of the corridor.

The floor under his feet creaked and swayed. It seemed that at any time, Old Goose might step on empty air and fall.

But he still believed in the tips given in Elle's letter — don't look back.

This might also be regarded as a kind of cognitive inertia.

One would be more convinced by the clues he had obtained through strenuous efforts.

But Delicious Wind Goose had no other option.

After all, he was adventuring the unexplored part of the game.

It was expected to die under any special mechanism.

But everything suddenly changed after Delicious Wind Goose ran across the center line-

Delicious Wind Goose stared blankly at the stain on the floor, no longer moving forward but starting to move backward. The rotten floor under his feet also began to recover as if he was stepping back in time.

The most important thing was the original unpleasant music in his ears, like music coming from the abyss, suddenly turned into a melodious violin sound.

Delicious Wind Goose froze for a moment and subconsciously stopped.

—But just after he stopped.

Delicious Wind Goose suddenly realized that time seemed to have stalled.

The stain no longer moved forward, nor did it move backward. The rotten floor no longer spread and cracked, nor did it begin to recover. The violin in his ears suddenly disappeared, and the weird whispers and dog barking behind him suddenly subsided.

Probably because Annan learned music when he was a child, he was the one who reacted immediately.

To prevent bullet text from interfering Delicious Wind Goose with the weird answers, Annan did not hesitate to send out his strategy in the bullet text:

“—It's a reverse! Before halfway through the corridor, the sound of the violin, people's conversation, and dog barking are all reversed!”

“I see.”

Delicious Wind Goose stood motionless and slowly breathed a sigh of relief, “I think I also understand now...”

“The puzzle at this level may be the simplest. But it may also be the most difficult.”

Old Goose sighed and raised his head with regret, “Damn it, I shouldn't run at first. Unfortunately, it seems that I will be stuck at this level too.”

“—I seem to get it too.”

“—This corridor is symmetrical?”

“—Wait, it seems better to walk slowly.”

Bullet text was guessing the mechanism behind this dungeon obstacle.

But some smart people realized the answer a little bit slower.

“—Is it that time will move forward if you go forward, but time will go backward if you go backward?”

“Probably.”

Delicious Wind Goose praised, “While I am not dead, I will quickly tell you about the mechanism of this level.

“This corridor is a mirror image. It starts in the middle and is completely symmetrical on both sides. In other words, if I go to the end and then look back, which means I am back to the beginning.

“Take the point where I entered the dungeon as Point A, the midpoint as Point B, and Point C as the symmetrical and opposite of Point A. Then, from Point A to Point B, time will flow backward with my pace. To go from Point B to Point C, time will flow forward along with my pace again.

“I speculate that going from C to B should also be a reverse. However, going from B to A, the time should be progressing forward.

“This may be a corridor that can't go out at all by conventional means.”

Delicious Wind Goose whispered, “Here, the speed of time has nothing to do with the outside time. It is in sync with my walking pace. The faster I walk, the faster time passes.

“In other words, I shouldn't have to run a step at this place.”

As Wind Goose spoke, he took two steps back without looking back.

Sure enough, there was a noise in the air, the stains under the feet were also extending forward, and the floor cracking forward.

Delicious Wind Goose took a few steps forward. He found that the stains were receding, the floor began to recover, and a slow and melodic violin sounded in his ears.

What happened ideally confirmed his guess.

So Delicious Wind Goose stood there, lost in thought.

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Delicious Wind Goose moved forward probingly.

As he walked forward, the demons and hounds that appeared on the opposite side of the corridor also began to retreat synchronously.

When he was about to reach the end, they all disappeared.

But at the same time, the door in front of Delicious Wind Goose was also gone after the demons and hounds disappeared.

It disappeared directly, becoming a wall sealed by bricks. It was the same as trying to turn around and go back to the previous dreams.

Delicious Wind Goose boldly took a look back.

In front of him was a long and deep corridor.

The end of the corridor was not a wall but a door.

It was like an hourglass that turned upside down.

Old Goose quickly reacted,

Yes, he is back to the starting point.

“Fuck, I'm stuck.”

Delicious Wind Goose couldn't help but curse, “I don't know when I will die and how I will die!”

He rallied his spirits again and barely walked forward to the midpoint.

After that, he sat on the ground, exerted force with both hands, and squirmed forward for a while with his legs crossed.

After confirming that this mechanism was not triggered by the legs and feet but by the “distance,” Old Goose finally sighed and squatted in place, leaning against the wall. He kicked his legs on the wall on the other side like a complaining middle-aged man, thinking motionlessly.

As he had guessed, the demon and hound chasing after him stopped moving as expected.

Annan went into deep thoughts.

—He had seen this puzzle before.

This was similar to a level in the puzzle platform game called “Braid.” [1] In that level, the space axis and time axis of the player character were combined into one.

Even when the player character moved to the left, time would go backward. When it moved to the right, time would move forward. When standing still or moving in the vertical direction, time would remain still.

For now, Delicious Wind Goose was in that situation.

When he talked in place, time was still no matter how his upper body moved.

But as long as he moved forward or backward, time would change.

He could only go forward and enter the door.

But after he got closer to a certain extent, the door became a wall.

Annan was thinking too.

How can I clear this level?

Suddenly, something that surprised all players happened.

“I warned you, Amos! Don't use this gramophone anymore!”

At this moment, a layer of melodious and dreamlike female voices sounded with many echoes.

That was Elle's voice!

But unlike in the nightmare, her tone was neither a good girl nor polite.

Her voice sounded from all directions at the same time, “You don't understand its principle, and you don't know the cost of using it! The Time Stopper Eye has seen you!”

“But I have no choice, Elle. At least that master is far away in Austere-Winter.”

“Amos” took a deep breath and whispered, “But the police have already found it. We have been found! They are here!

“I vowed not to use it again, but there are always exceptions.”

After he finished speaking, he paused slightly.

Amos's face once again showed the dazzled look that belonged to Delicious Wind Goose.

“—Fuck, how did you get into cinematic graphic (CG)?”

“—Elle, where are you!? (tremor)”

“—Gramophone? There are gramophones in this era?”

“—Don't move, Old Goose, I want to listen to Miss Elle's voice! Ah~, I'm charmed to death.”

“—Wait, wasn't Elle in her teens forty-five years ago? What happens to her now?”

“—What is the Time Stopper Eye?”

The over-informed CG dialogue caused players to start discussing one after another.

It was Annan who was taken aback.

Time Stopper Eye?

Isn't this Master Michelangelo's title?

Why can I still hear Michelangelo's name in this nightmare?

Isn't this the Freezing Water Port from forty-five years ago?

Annan paused suddenly.

Yes, time and mirror...

These are indeed Michelangelo's tricks!

Suddenly, Annan realized a problem he had neglected for a long time...or instead, it was a problem he had never thought of.

Did Master Michelangelo choose Roseburg as the rebirth point? Was it on purpose?

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Was he purely based on the symmetry of spatial position...or had he planned it long ago?

Just when Annan's thoughts drifted outside the dungeon instance, Delicious Wind Goose was in deep thought after listening to Amos and Elle's conversation.

"I seem to understand something, my brothers."

As Old Goose, he walked back slowly without looking back.

The flow of time around him moved forward as he approached the midpoint; it continued to accelerate after he moved away from the end.

Bullet text ridiculed,

"—Old Goose, are you planning to leave this by walking backward?"

"—Sorry to disturb (Bye)"

"—Don't think about it. The door is already sealed. No one is allowed to leave today!"

"Don't make a noise. Just watch."

Delicious Wind Goose snorted and retreated to about one-sixth of the entire corridor.

That was when the decay traces just overgrew the floor under his feet.

Delicious Wind Goose kept going back and forth several times in this area. The bullet text gradually understood,

"—Are you looking for a cracked floor?"

Seeing this line of words, other players instantly understood.

Delicious Wind Goose was looking for "interactive" items.

There must be something in this area that couldn't be changed over time. Otherwise, it would evolve into an infinite loop.

Well, this corridor was empty, and there was nothing here.

What were the options for Delicious Wind Goose to investigate?

It turned out that there were at least two things that could be investigated even if the corridor was empty.

First, it was the wall.

Second, it was the floor!

Although the floor was cracked, decayed, and collapsing, it did not collapse and disappeared out of thin air. Rather, the floor fell to the next level.

“—At the right wall, counting to the left, the third one!”

Bullet text confirmed all this with a third-person perspective and issued a piece of advice, “It had a crack at the beginning, but it didn't fall until later!”

In other words...

Delicious Wind Goose could give it a try and pull out the plank. He could bring it to the mirror space and see what happens!

“Thanks, brother!”

Delicious Wind Goose's eyes lit up. He lowered his head and grabbed the floor plank, and plucked it out.

Both sides of it had cracked and fell.

At the very beginning, Delicious Wind Goose treated it as a trap. It was not sturdy, and it had crumbled. If Old Goose were to step on it with one foot, he would fall.

But here was the problem.

Since it was not stable enough, it could make you fall like a trap.

Naturally, it should be possible to pull it out directly!

At first, its tip was somewhat sturdy.

Delicious Wind Goose clutched the floor tightly with his right hand and walked a few steps forward.

The floor plank appeared like “in history,” with the tip rotten and falling off.

But it did not fall off this time.

It fell into Delicious Wind Goose's hand!

“I will try to see if I can smash it.”

Delicious Wind Goose whispered.

He held the board in his right hand and moved slowly forward.

As he stepped across the centerline, the violin sounded again. Time began to flow backward. The traces of decay and the demons and dogs were starting to regress.

But when he walked to the symmetrical position where he took the “floor plank in his hand,” the plank in his hand suddenly ignited a scorching black flame.

Before Delicious Wind Goose could react, it dropped out and fell to the ground. Then, it burned a big hole in the ground.

The fire only burned him lightly and took away his health with only 3% left!

But Delicious Wind Goose went into deep thoughts.

He walked forward to the end and looked back.

Then, he discovered that the only wooden board that could be removed had already regenerated.

He laughed in the end.

“This is a javelin game.”

He continued categorically, “If two items of the exact timeline cannot appear at the same time...

“Then, the dungeon wants me to throw this out before coming here.

“The dungeon wants me to pierce the monster to death with this?

“—Or he wants me to open that door by throwing this out?”

The Righteous Player(s) C145– Time Stopper Eye's Gramophone

Chapter 145: Time Stopper Eye's Gramophone

After confirming how to tackle this level, what remained for Delicious Wind Goose was nothing more than repetitive work.

Delicious Wind Goose also discovered that the black flames activated on the “javelin” after having a time conflict could easily destroy the “demons” and “hellhounds” just by a slight contact.

At first, Delicious Wind Goose threw the weapons like athletes. He would aim and launch the “javelin” vertically.

Later on, he simply threw the floor planks.

It appeared like a bowling scene... As for how many enemies he hit, it depended on his luck.

After just repeating it a few times, Delicious Wind Goose killed the enemies one by one.

The enemies couldn't even see where Delicious Wind Goose was!

“—Hey, it's the background music (BGM).”

Facing a bullet text with “???” Annan explained to the others, “Have you noticed that when time is going forward, the BGM is played in reverse; but when time is going backward, BGM is played normally.”

If this were just BGM, it would still be fine and dandy.

But the cinematic graphics (CG) cutscene mentioned that a particular “gramophone” played the music. Most importantly, it was the curse vessel Time Stopper Eye Michelangelo made. Amos even used the gramophone's power to resolve his difficulty regardless of the cost.

What was his difficulty?

—The Freezing Water Port's police station sent someone to investigate his gallery...

Annan recalled a sentence mentioned in the news:

“At 2:15 on March 4, Sergeant Hiram's investigation team was attacked in Morrison's gallery. Unfortunately, three police officers died. The two police officers also went crazy on the spot because the

scene was too cruel, and they suffered a substantial mental shock. They then died of injuries a few days later.

“The perpetrator was killed on the spot. The police station recovered the dead bodies. The identity was reported to be a mercenary from the swamp. More details, including the number of perpetrators, were still under confidentiality.”

Why hide the identity and number of the attackers?

This was of little importance to this incident. Releasing their information could distract the crowd's attention.

Unless the officials and reporters didn't know who the attacker was.

Because the attackers and they weren't on the same timeline!

There was only one attacker. It was Amos who attacked from the future and went in reverse of time!

Of course, Amos shouldn't be using pure tactics like hitting enemies with the floor plank. He might have used a gun or something. Moreover, it happened in a hurry as he failed to kill all of them.

But, there were fundamental similarities.

Because the number of “demons” Delicious Wind Goose killed was exactly five!

The police were probably not crazy at all.

It was because the wound was too abnormal to be treated... or it could be a direct kill.

As for the hounds...

It should be a police dog.

Because the newspaper mentioned that “previously, pets were not allowed in the gallery.”

As mentioned above, the police found Elle's body fragments inside the gallery.

In other words, this operation was accompanied by police dogs.

Although this was a “distortion” level nightmare with the imagery of the things inside distorted by the individual's will, some original elements were still retained.

The fourth level nightmare was the second furthest point in the timeline.

It was ahead of the Level -1 timeline position.

This story should be about Amos using the gramophone “Time Stopper Eye” made with regret. He had utilized means that couldn't be detected or avoided to kill the policemen and police dogs sent by the Freezing Water Port Police Station from the future.

“According to the pattern of the previous levels...”

Annan murmured, “At the dungeon instance of this level, the dungeon challenger should be playing as a policeman.”

But what the hell...

There's no way to avoid attacks launched from the future, right?!

The difficulty outside the gallery didn't increase too much.

But the difficulty in the gallery grew more difficult one by one.

This, on the contrary, made Annan firmer in the obsession of "I just want to clear the whole dungeon."

After Delicious Wind Goose killed all the "demons" and "hounds," he entered the following cinematic graphic (CG).

In all directions around Amos, Elle's layered voice once again sounded,

"Turn off the gramophone, Amos!"

In her sharp and high pitch, there was fear and disgust, "He is coming soon!"

As Elle's voice sounded, the surrounding space began to shine with a dark red light like an alarm.

"I will do it, Elle."

Amos was silent for a while, then turned around.

He passed through the middle of the corridor as if passing through a bubble layer.

This time, he saw the midpoint of the real T-shaped corridor.

There was a gramophone with a strange shape.

It had a copper speaker with a dark gold hue and was in the shape of a tulip, which was similar to a gramophone in the previous world.

But underneath it was not a closed wooden box.

It was a transparent crystal box.

There was no disc in it so much so that it was more accurate to say that there was nothing in it.

Inside the crystal box, only two mirrors were facing against each other.

The crank slowly rotated along with the melodious music. It was connected with three needles: gold, silver, and copper, respectively. The connection seemed to link to the middle of the crystal box.

As the crank slowly rotated counterclockwise, the three needles also rotated counterclockwise at a synchronized speed.

If one were to look at it from the front, it looked like an inverted square clock.

Delicious Wind Goose noticed that a few words were also engraved on it:

"If you regret it, move the crank. I will give you a second chance, a third chance..."

"But you won't have a fourth chance."

Delicious Wind Goose reached out and touched the gramophone.

In a trance, the item attributes appeared in front of him:

[Time Stopper Eye's Gramophone (12-hour type)]

[Type: Musical instrument/tool (Gold)]

[Description: Move the crank to shoot the soul projection into the reverse time stream.]

[Effect: Move the crank to rotate the time turntable clockwise. When the crank is released, it will temporarily render the user entering a "time-reversal walk" (temporarily enters the state of the flow of time consistent with the normal time and the time flow in the opposite direction). The effect is the same as Prophet Spell and Idol Spell of the same name. It applies to twelve hours. In this state, any contact with any creature with a weaker soul rank will cause the opponent's soul to be instantly annihilated. In the opposite situation, it will cause your soul to be annihilated instantly. You can use any remote means to attack the creature. It will not trigger any annihilation reaction when the attack is regarded as Sneak Attack (absolutely unnoticed).]

[Cost: At the first use of the curse, you acquire the "Transferred Misfortune." At the second use of the curse, the "Transferred Misfortune" receives an add-on effect "Intensify Inscription." Finally, at the third use, the user will have all remaining lifespans deducted.]

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I want that time!

—I fucking want it!

The above was the first reaction of Delicious Wind Goose after seeing the attribute window of this item.

It was also the reaction of the players who were watching the live broadcast on the forum,

“—Fuck, can high-level equipment actually involve time?”

“—So fucking cool!”

“—Calm down, everyone. This should be a plot item. It is impossible for us to get this intensely strong item outside the dungeon instance.”

“—Wait a minute, look at the price!”

“—Let me ask you, would you throw it away because of the high price!?”

“—No way!”

“—It's too OP!”

After all, the players had not yet entered the path of transcendence.

They did not realize the seriousness of the curse.

Only Annan was clearly aware of the price after reading it.

—This curse vessel was probably a lure.

The gramophone time reversal, in most cases, did not help people resolve their regrets.

At most, it could only get rid of the people who made the user regret.

This might be the last spell Master Michelangelo used in “Nightmare: White Tower” for the abrupt instant kill.

Then, this gramophone shouldn't be left for his use.

Because the item did not amplify his ability but merely a simplified version of its ability. Its purpose is to make others unable to resist the temptation of “second chance” and choose to use it.

Just like those players.

Once used, the person would be cursed.

Judging from the name, it seemingly absorbed luck. The cost of the second time usage wasn't clear. If it were used for the third time, all the remaining lifespan would be absorbed.

If Time Stopper Eye made many such a gramophone, then he should not lack lifespan at all.

There was another question — Elle.

How did she know all this?

Annan and the players knew it was because they could see the attribute panel.

But Annan had already tested it from Salvatore. The aboriginals of this world couldn't know all the properties of the curse vessel.

They could only know the approximate level of power and curse through some strange means. That was why curse vessels became hazardous items and were forbidden to be trafficked and used among civilians. Once discovered, the church or large organization would seal the curse vessel.

Elle wasn't a senior Transcended...

Worse still, she was just a sixteen-year-old civilian, not even a nobleman nor a priest. Her biological parents were indeed Transcended, but she was still very young when she left them.

It was impossible for her to know the properties of this curse vessel.

Based on Annan's judgment of Elle's character, she couldn't be so rude to Amos.

Rather than saying that it was Elle, it was better to say...

...It might be the Venerated Skeleton?

Thinking of this, Annan shuddered. His whole body stiffened, and his back was instantly soaked with cold sweat.

It was like something perilous eyeing on him...

It was like realizing a snake getting into your quilt for being half asleep and half awake.

If it weren't for Annan's loss of fear emotion, he would be so scared to the point of screaming out loud.

But soon, the feeling of being stared at gradually dissipated.

Annan didn't bother checking his body but immediately tuned back to the live broadcast as soon as possible. Fortunately, he didn't miss anything.

With Delicious Wind Goose stopped the "Time Stopper Eye's Gramophone" completely, the violin "background music" in the air finally disappeared.

But behind Delicious Wind Goose was still a sealed stone path.

The T-shaped corridor in front of him was divided into two ends, with two exits and two display cabinets that mirrored each other.

On the display cabinet on the left, there was a silver revolver with many runes engraved on it!

On the right side, there was a police rifle held by the "demon" just now.

Delicious Wind Goose chose the left without hesitation.

This was a man's instinct.

Because compared with a petty rifle, the revolver was much cooler.

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This time he encountered no obstacles. He took the revolver from the display cabinet. It was tightly fitted with his palm as if this was originally Amos' gun.

Delicious Wind Goose rubbed the gun on his hand and looked at it with a smile.

"...White Ivory Pistol? Or Casull [1]? Wow, this revolver is so cool."

Upon seeing the gun, Delicious Wind Goose immediately stopped panicking.

Although he had only 3% of Health, he was immediately overflowed with confidence.

"As long as I have a gun, no monsters will be a problem."

Delicious Wind Goose's words came to an abrupt end.

After he revealed the magazine, he found that there was one last bullet inside.

—Yes, it was the last shot.

"Is the last bullet left for me?"

Delicious Wind Goose's face went bitter for an instant, "I'm not lucky, my brothers. Can you send me back out from the dungeon?"

Despite Old Goose saying so, he didn't even think of putting the revolver back.

Delicious Wind Goose looked back again.

He saw that the man with the sledgehammer stood silently in the middle of the corridor.

“—Omg, he's here.”

“—The last bullet is dedicated to you.”

“—Brothers, I'm going to Jiu Er's stream.”

“—Waiting for this streamer to lose his memory.”

(TN: Dungeon challenger loses memory after death)

The sudden emergence of the monster after turning back shocked all the players and made them laugh.

No one thought that Old Goose could survive...

Delicious Wind Goose was about to shoot, but he entered the CG cutscene immediately,

“...Buckel.”

Amos murmured in a low volume, raising his pistol to Buckel. His tone was indifferent and no longer overwhelmed by fear like how it was in the third level encounter, “Do you have to pursue me to the end?”

“This gun is engraved with [Venerated Skeleton's Piercing Rifling]. You should have heard it. There are three turbid blood bullets in it. Whether you are Transcended or not, you will still die when I shoot.”

Hearing this, Buckel's pupils shrank slightly.

He was silent for a while and asked cautiously, “Where did you get it?”

“Don't ask.”

Amos sneered, “I sincerely ask you. Can you leave? I don't want us all to die at this place.”

Annan raised his eyebrows when he heard this.

That's not right.

Why is Amos's attitude so different from that in the basement?

How did he know Buckel at this timeline?

At this moment, Annan saw a bullet text that no one noticed:

“—Why does this Buckel look like our baker?”

Seeing this, Annan was suddenly startled.

He quickly recalled...

The baker claimed to have come from the capital and never left the Freezing Water Port. He seemed to be from the Freezing Water Port 45 years ago...

“We can negotiate first.” There was silence for a while. Buckel spread his right hand, “[We must tell the truth here]. I want to know what curse you have added to the turbid blood bullets.”

“This is made by a corpse I bought at a high price. The curse is “Can't travel far.” As long as you get hit once, you will stay in the Freezing Water Port for the rest of your life. Would you like that to happen?”

Amos spoke slowly, frowning, “You should be able to see that I'm telling the truth.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

Buckel was silent for a moment, then nodded.

Immediately, he did not hesitate and took a step forward.

There came the hammer!

Amos also fired the bullet immediately. The bullet came and penetrated Buckel's heart!

But Buckel's hammer managed to hit Amos's head.

The inertia alone was enough to knock Amos' head into the air.

At that moment, Amos's head flew out like a golf ball and hit the wall heavily.

The spectators vaguely saw the ridicule at the corner of Buckel's mouth and the deep hatred engraved deep within.

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As expected, Brother Sledgehammer defeated Delicious Wind Goose.

Although Jiu Er seemed to be about to clear the level, Annan didn't plan to continue watching it for the time being.

Because in the final part of the Old Goose's live broadcast, a big load of information was revealed.

Elle's biological father is the baker from Freezing Water Port.

He stayed in the Freezing Water Port for many years because Amos inflicted the curse “can't travel far.”

So, what is the final outcome for Amos?

The newspaper said he was arrested. Is that true?

Or did Buckel kill him?

Does Buckel know what happened to Elle and Angelo in the end? Since he survived, does he know what happened in the incident forty-five years ago?

Many questions lingered in Annan's mind.

—I have to meet Buckel.

A clear thought emerged in Annan's mind.

Annan didn't hesitate nor delay his plan.

I still have to think about it rationally. Would there be any danger on this trip?

Or, will Buckel trouble me because his identity is exposed?

To be more precise, the question was more about—

Would Annan need to call Salvatore out of the basement and accompany him?

“Forget that.” Annan finally gave up this inhumane idea.

After all, Salvatore was working hard to prepare for something more dangerous. Any emergency task might disrupt his tight schedule. This was why he got into the basement and locked himself inside in the first place.

Salvatore had told Annan in advance that Annan would be fully responsible if anything happened these days and if anyone wanted to look for him.

“You do as you see fit,” Salvatore said previously. “Remember to act according to the situation.”

Salvatore didn't even bother to have food delivered to him. Instead, he would settle everything on his own in the basement.

Annan sort of realized Salvatore was on a big project.

They said that among the wizards of the eight schools, Idol's wizard was mainly responsible for applying buffs [1], the Energy Falteration School's wizard was primarily responsible for controlling the enemy, and the Destruction school's wizard was mainly responsible for damage output. Finally, the Alteration School's wizard was mainly responsible for the logistics.

Indeed, they could temporarily serve as wide-area map artillery on the battlefield. It was the sideline job they had after being hired by any kingdom.

The Alteration School Wizard's status was equal to Doraemon's.

Still, it gave off the vibe of an unreliable alchemist. After all, the alteration wizard could pull out simply anything.

Since the alteration wizard had different curses and different spells, the alteration products made by them would also have their unique characteristics.

Just like the Black Fire made by Salvatore that was not easy to detonate. Their alteration products would inherit part of the characteristics of the owner. This results in the alteration products of each alteration wizard would tend to be distinct. The higher the alteration product's grade, the more pronounced the distinction.

Since Salvatore intended to seclude himself for a few days to make some kind of alteration product, this product was most likely incomparable to the mass-produced Black Fire.

Although the alteration wizard might not know the ins and outs of his alteration products entirely, Annan still adhered to the best principle of layman management — “no guidance, no urging, no trouble making.”

Based on the understanding of Salvatore, Annan knew Salvatore would put his work on hold and accompany Annan for the trip if Annan were to tell Salvatore that there was an urgent matter that needed his help and protection.

But now, Annan wasn't a harmless puppy who just came into this world.

He had a good understanding of several wizard schools.

Alteration School was not suitable for combat because of the two characteristics of “alteration inertia” and “alteration warm-up.”

Alteration inertia allowed the curse power to snowball and grow stronger. If one were to be careless of their limit, it might go out of control. The simplest result was an explosion.

On the other hand, the alteration warmup could alterate the spells. It would have relatively minimal power in the initial stage. It also took a period of uninterrupted chanting to show the actual effect gradually.

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Salvatore mentioned it when chatting with Annan. The Alteration School's wizard was once called “alchemist” in ancient times before the “Unification War.”

The reason for saying so was because they did learn alchemy.

The teacher would get every scholarly alteration wizard to learn their first chant spell when advancing to Bronze Rank.

The basic version of this spell required more than three alteration wizards to perform cooperative spell casting by “rotation chanting” or “joint chanting” spell casting method. Firstly in rotation chanting, each user alternated the chanting continuously for more than three hours. Not even a slight mistake was permitted, or everything else had to start over.

Its effect was formidable.

It could alter one kilogram of “lead” into “gold.”

—Yes, it would be pure gold.

The pure gold that could be sacrificed to and accepted by “Mr. Ray.”

This was also the reason why “Silver Sire” was not “Golden Sire.”

Part of the reason was to prevent competition with Mr. Ray for the gold medium.

Another part of the reason was that only silver reserves in this world were fixed and non-renewable. Although gold was scarcer than silver and had a stronger curse performance, it was not a non-renewable resource in nature. Hence, the cost to replenish it was too high.

The purpose of this alchemy in ancient times wasn't to sell or exchange for wealth.

It was to refine gold with high enough purity for Gold Rank advancement.

The reason was that in ancient times, Transcended lacked sufficient and effective means to extract gold in high purity. The method of refining silver was discovered a long time ago.

That was why the ancient alchemists created this spell. The original purpose was to facilitate advancement.

For Swamp's Black Tower's alteration wizard, one of the Silver Rank promotion assessment requirements was to independently and successfully release this spell.

They used this condition to determine the alteration wizard's capability.

If the wizard in assessment couldn't shorten this super long spell while allowing it to work normally, or if the wizard accidentally made mistakes when chanting for a long time, that would be judged as insufficient proficiency. They wouldn't be allowed to bear a higher curse.

In a sense, it was a kind of protection. However, once the Silver Rank spell failed, it was not as simple as starting from scratch.

After there was a stable and non-Transcended means of gold purification method, this spell could only be used to sell gold for profit. In this era, the wizards were no longer short of money.

Especially for the alteration wizard, they could easily do business that was more profitable than alchemy.

The main function of this spell nowadays had become a gauge to test the ability of an alteration wizard.

Unfortunately, most of the alteration wizards hit their limit in attaining Bronze Rank. Those advanced to the Silver Rank alteration wizard from a formal channel were typically wittier with their words.

Salvatore once mentioned to Annan that was why graduated Transcended was usually much stronger than the stray Transcended of the same rank.

Not because they received a more comprehensive and better education.

But because their advancement was strictly supervised and protected. Hence, the erosion rate was much lower than the ordinary Transcended. Therefore, the Transcended who could pass the exam smoothly and advance would be the elites among their peers after completing the advancement.

...Of course, although Mr. "Don Juan Geraint" was a stray type, his situation was unique.

All in all, the slightly advanced Alteration School spells require a long chanting time to activate.

But even if Salvatore wasn't performing alchemy in the basement, it was likely that he was also under the operation of a long-period Alteration spell that should not be interrupted.

If Annan bothered him, Salvatore would have to allocate his precious rest time to work.

Annan didn't want this to happen.

It was important to be considerate of each other...

This trip might be dangerous, but Annan still decided to meet this person by himself now even though this person was someone who might have advanced to Silver Rank Wizard forty-five years ago.

“For me, it doesn't matter.”

Annan took a deep breath, his eyes gleaming with calmness.

[1] Buff is a term used in some video games to describe the amplification effect on game character's stats.

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Annan found out the store claimed to have the “baker from the royal capital” for a long time.

During the chatter with Salvatore back then, Annan wrote down all the places and characters that might have related to background stories.

Otherwise, Annan would not be able to introduce these elements to the players.

Annan didn't realize that the story of this “baker” would be so crucial in the past.

His original plan was to arrange for the idle players to go to Freezing Water Port to search for more clues. After the players find out more about these secret characters in their investigation, Annan would release missions to exchange the information with rare rewards and ample affection rates.

He could entice it by labeling the task as a secret mission.

Annan was confident once the keywords “rare,” “hidden,” and “restricted” were mentioned, players would go for it even if the rewards were mundane and average, let alone if he boasted the reward by a couple of margins...

...But who would have thought that this baker was merely a monk who swept the floor?!

(TN: It's a metaphorical expression saying that the baker appears ordinary like a random cleaner NPC)

“This is weird...”

Annan bared his teeth, a little depressed.

He wore a somewhat thin coat, sprinting on the deserted streets against the cold December wind. Fortunately, the moonlight of the Freezing Water Port was fairly bright. So even if the path wasn't illuminated clearly, Annan could still distinguish his path and direction.

It was already 10:30 p.m. Freezing Water Port was unlike Roseburg. There was no night entertainment, and the fishermen had already fallen asleep.

Some shops that would open tomorrow morning were still working hard to prepare the things for the business tomorrow morning.

The fishermen watched Annan run by in surprise.

After being stunned, they saluted Annan with some trepidation.

Annan responded to them one by one politely too.

After half an hour, Annan finally arrived at the bakery not too far from the city lord's residence.

—Authentic Capital Bakery.

A concise and powerful signboard name.

They were authentic buns with meat in it... simple and unpretentious.

But the bread here was delicious.

Several players bought the bread here for Annan as breakfast and snacks. The taste was indeed magnificent.

The bakery door would be closed at 11 p.m. However, lights were illuminating from within.

“Is there anyone?”

Annan raised his voice and asked, knocking on the door, “Hello!”

After a while, a confused and impatient voice came from inside, “We have sold out our buns. Don't you see what time it is already!”

“I'm Don Juan Geraint.”

After the other party answered, Annan stated his identity clearly, “May I trouble you to open the door.”

Annan did all that just in case.

If Annan yelled out his name and knocked on the door, Buckel could pretend to be absent or already asleep to avoid him.

Annan felt it was a wiser choice to wait for Buckel to answer before stating his identity.

At least Buckel couldn't use his petty tricks to avoid Annan.

After about eight seconds, Annan heard the sound of the door lock unlocking.

The wooden door opened.

The “Buckel” that appeared in front of Annan looked quite similar to Brother Sledgehammer in the dungeon instance. The only difference was that forty-five years ago, Brother Sledgehammer looked like he was in his thirties. Forty-five years later, he looked like he was in his fifties and almost sixty.

Although he had some gray hair and many wrinkles appeared in the corners of his eyes, Buckle didn't lose his steady demeanor. On the contrary, he seemed in great vigor without any hint of drowsiness even at 11 p.m.

The most significant difference was that Buckel no longer bore the ferocious murderous intent and hostility of forty-five years ago. Instead, he seemed a lot more quiet and peaceful.

...It seems that there is probably no danger right now.

Annan breathed a sigh of relief.

But looking at Buckel's face, Annan had a question in his mind immediately.

How old is this person this year?

Buckel looked forward subconsciously. After a brief pause, he lowered his head to look at Annan.

His gaze shifted to the bronze bracelet on Annan's wrist at the first moment, then quickly moved away, looking at the ground.

“Is there anything wrong, feudal lord?”

His voice sounded respectful.

“I may have to trouble you for something. But, can I go in first?”

Annan nodded, making a tender and polite voice, “It's a bit cold outside...”

Hearing this, Buckel hesitated slightly.

Buckel responded quickly, “It's a bit messy. Please wait for me to clean up. It will be done in just a minute.”

With that, Buckel closed the door again.

Annan raised his brows slightly,

—This is impolite.

Generally speaking, shouldn't he bring guests to the living room first? At the very least, he shouldn't just let the guests suffer the cold wind outside...

Buckel is from the royal capital, not a countryman. Would he not understand this etiquette?

Or is there anything he can't show to me?

Are you destroying evidence?

But such thoughts quickly ceased.

It was because Buckel cleaned up too quickly.

He closed the door for about five seconds, then opened the door back. Annan didn't hear any sound, nor did he see any flickering of lights inside. It even felt a little quiet inside.

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“Please come in, feudal lord.”

Buckel respectfully welcomed Annan in.

He took Annan through the bakery shop and walked to the backyard. They walked through the yard to the back room.

After guiding Annan to sit down in the living room, he gave Annan a new pot of black tea.

Annan looked at the tea box curiously.

If Annan remembered correctly, the Noah Kingdom's people had a habit of drinking tea. The tea that Buckel drank was better than the tea Salvatore brought.

Is bakery such a profitable business?

After Buckel poured hot tea for Annan, Annan said gently, "I heard some stories. But, before that, let me put this out first. Please don't mind too much about our conversation later..."

"This... Well..."

"Joseph Buckel."

Before Annan could ask anything, Buckel said his full name directly, "You can just call me Joseph, lord."

"Great. So, Joseph."

Annan readily followed after Joseph's words.

He asked softly, "I want to know at which year you came to Freezing Water Port?"

"About... forty years ago," Joseph replied.

"Specifically?" Annan asked, "Is it forty-five years ago?"

Upon hearing this, Mr. Joseph Buckel was silent.

He paused, then sighed suddenly.

Then, he leaned back weakly.

"Do you want to ask me... Do I know Amos?"

Joseph's mouth twitched slightly, and he smiled bitterly, "If that's what you're looking for, then yes. I do know him."

As he said, he took another glance at Annan's bracelet.

Seeing that Annan didn't reply immediately, Joseph asked, "I guess you just came out of a nightmare? Did you enter the nightmare on your own accord?"

"I entered the nightmare under Priest Louis's protection." Annan nodded and said softly.

He chose a relatively low-profile narration.

"I see."

When Joseph heard this, he relaxed slightly. He said with a light smile, "Did I scare you in the nightmare?"

"It's fine."

“I had entered that nightmare back then. I was scared of myself at the time. But I took a trick and convinced myself directly.” Joseph replied as he took a sip of tea.

Annan noticed the choice of word keenly.

“Back then?” Annan asked probingly.

He also noticed that Joseph was not wearing a curse vessel.

There was no bronze nor silver accessory... Nothing at all.

Joseph wore a thin coat at home. The silver bracelet Annan had seen in the nightmare disappeared.

Joseph didn't avoid this topic.

He nodded, “I gave up. Being transcended isn't my thing.”

Hmph, what a light and easy excuse.

Annan's eyelids twitched.

Transcended. It isn't something you can leave behind so casually.

Isn't a path of no return after you enter the ranks of Transcended?

“If you are planning to recruit me... I can only say that I will help when I can.”

Joseph smiled bitterly, “But I am a useless person now. I don't retain much of the spellcasting ability. So what I can do is probably limited.”

As Joseph spoke, he extended his hand, pointing at the kitchen and commanding,

“[Continue Working].”

In the kitchen not far away, the dough suddenly came alive and began to knead itself. Those fermented doughs lined up one by one into the oven—the bread baked previously jumped out by themselves.

There was an order to it as if the bread was taking the subway.

“Simple 'temporary reanimation.' My curse vessel can't be used anymore. The spellcasting ability I retain is just enough to prevent me from starving to death. I can't go back to Silver Rank either.”

Joseph spread his hands, “I just didn't know your intentions, so I turned around and entered the house to stop them from working... to prevent them from frightening you at night.”

“What exactly happened forty-five years ago?”

Although Joseph had many spell slots, Annan ignored this argument and asked important questions first, “What is the final and true ending?”

Joseph paused.

He opened his shirt and turned his back to Annan.

There were dense scars like a spider web at Joseph's back.

But they weren't exactly scar either.

It was more like a spider-web-like trace left by bullets hitting a bulletproof glass. Those cobwebs were all his veins, leaving blemishes and bumps on his back that were still beating slightly along with the heartbeat.

At the center of the spider-web-like scar...

That position should be Joseph's heart.

“Amos killed me once. He launched a sneak attack from the future, and he has a powerful curse vessel in his hand. I can't dodge it and can't defend myself from it. That cult's curse vessel, 'turbid blood bullet,' hit the heart. A powerful curse is instilled within me. I fell into a near-death state—”

Joseph put down his clothes. He replied slowly and earnestly to Annan,

“But after that, he didn't kill me. The reason is that the curse I bear will leak if I die.

“—Yes, he stole my curse vessel.”

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Annan was slightly startled.

“Why did Amos steal your curse vessel?”

Annan was baffled.

Even if Amos acquired Joseph's curse vessel, Amos couldn't inherit his level and use his spells.

The greatest value in the curse vessel was to activate Transcended abilities above the Silver Rank.

If one were to steal someone's curse vessel, he could temporarily seal the target's active abilities above Silver Rank. Of course, it was impossible to seal passive abilities.

Generally speaking, this method was used to transport and detain Transcended prisoners.

Only the hunter profession could effectively assimilate curse vessels and turn the curses into their power.

But obviously, Amos could not be a hunter.

He wasn't even a Transcended.

In other words, Joseph's silver bracelet was worthless to Amos. If he wanted to subdue Joseph, the best way was to shoot another bullet.

“I'm not clear...”

Joseph just shook his head.

His expression was a bit tired, “But he did not kill me, which baffles me.

“Moreover, I was injured by his turbid blood bullets and afflicted by the curse of 'can't travel far.' But, this curse is nothing to me. I have a way to get rid of it.”

Joseph explained to Annan, "I'm not a Noah citizen. I'm from Treasure Diamond Island.

"Feudal lord, I think you should also know I'm an Edict Wizard. I used to be one of the tutors of the Edict school at the Azure Diamond Tower. There's a friendly relation between the Azure Diamond Tower and the Elegant Elder Church. If I can get into contact with the high-ranked priest at the Elegant Elder Church, I can completely lift the curse."

The information occurred to be an enlightenment to Annan.

Thinking about it, it seems that the Edict school isn't taught in Swamp's Black Tower.

Annan did know where Treasure Diamond Island was.

The full name of the United Kingdom was called Denizoya & Fildes Archipelago United Kingdom. The Treasure Diamond Island was a part of the Fildes Archipelago. The island group was famous for producing various gems.

Although the Noahs would call them "United Kingdom people", people who came from the United Kingdom tended to call themselves "from the Denizoya Kingdom" or "from XX Island."

In the Noah Kingdom, jewelers would claim that "100% of the supply came from Treasure Diamond Island" and "hand-polished by the gem masters of Treasure Diamond Island" to raise prices. Of course, that wasn't true all the time.

Those emeralds used to test names were unique products from the Azure Diamond Tower.

Annan was a little surprised that Joseph came from the Azure Diamond Tower. But, Annan was a little concerned about the other piece of information.

"Can the Elegant Elder's High Priest lift 'that' curse?"

Annan did not dare to call out the name – Venerated Skeleton.

He was also afraid that he would pass out just like that.

After all, he told the two players who acted as security guards that he needed to visit an acquaintance nearby. He would come back after acquiring the "stipulated items." If Annan accidentally entered a nightmare and the players realized that they lost Annan, they would go crazy.

"Yes."

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To Annan's question, Joseph gave a clear answer, "the Elegant Elder is the deity of nobility and art. Before that false deity became a deity, he was already a Grand Duke. Hence, he was under Elegant Elder's governance.

"He comes from the Elegy Dukedom. The Elegy Dukedom used to worship the deity of death and earth 'Bone Burying Grandma.' So, he is also under the Bone Burying Grandma's governance. These two upright deities can disperse his power."

Looking at Annan's confused gaze, Joseph added, "This is a matter of the past. At that time, the Undead War wasn't over. The Bone Burying Grandma Church was the twelve upright deities' vanguard in the war against the undead. The Elegy Dukedom was also the front-line among many countries at the time. After all, the dead came from the south. The Elegy Dukedom was the most southern country at that time.

"Later... The Great Barrier shattered, and the gray mist spread. At that time, to snatch the limited spare 'Order Tinder,' a cruel war was triggered, which is the 'Blood War' in the history books.

"Actually, it was entirely possible for the Elegy Dukedom to survive the Blood War... if their position is more inward. But they happen to be in the most marginal location. So the gray mist engulfed the Elegy Dukedom within a day.

"They have no time to escape and even less time to prepare for war and seize territory. But, the Elegy Dukedom citizens have the most open-minded view of life and death. So they decided in the end..."

Joseph said slowly, "All Transcended who believe in Bone Burying Grandma, immediately use the last power to kill the Transcended of other faiths in the dukedom, and absorb all the curses on them. Then, they immediately take the lethal poison. With that, they seal themselves within their bones with Bone Burying Grandma's unique divine art.

"Transcended is different from ordinary people. Ever since we step on the path of transcendence, our soul has been altered, capable of carrying curse power. So if we die in the gray mist, our soul will be cursed endlessly till we become undead spirits imprisoned in the body. We will roam the gray mist unconsciously... Only when we roam to the border and are killed in the boundary can we be purified."

Joseph looked at Annan with a wry smile, "I think, feudal lord, you don't know this."

"...Indeed."

Annan said honestly, "I always thought that the undead only exists in fairy tales."

After all, the Venerated Skeleton's "ability was to bring the dead to life" seemed rather tongue-twisting, unlike a professional term.

If the undead existed, it would be more fit to say "turning into an undead."

"That's because the Elegy Dukedom eliminated the undead from the south," Joseph nodded and explained, "They are called the Elegy Dukedom as the funeral song sounded throughout the country for a month.

"The undead generated after the collapse of the Great Barrier have become the consumables for the war. They were all depleted before the end of the Blood War, except for the border areas where there is still a couple of undead."

Speaking of this, Joseph added, "Except... that one."

"Is that deity an undead too?" Annan was a little surprised.

"The clergy of the Grand Duke is the deity of bones and betrayal."

Joseph said slowly, "Grand Duke failed to acquire the Truth. The reason he can still become a deity is that he carries all the power of a country.

"All Transcended murdered and committed suicide so as not to give birth to the undead. This was his suggestion... or rather, the final order.

"People thought he had committed suicide and purified his corpse. But that was just a stand-in. Instead, he has been hiding underground, commanding an army of undead to dig underground passages.

"Gray mist is poison to ordinary people. It's just that death is not so quick. Therefore, except for some people in the north, who fled to the Denizoya Kingdom, the others who can't escape have already taken the poison. All of them went into the designated coffins later on.

"Until there was no more living person in the gray mist, that person launched a large-scale ritual underground. He is the Edict Wizard and Alteration Wizard at Gold Rank. He used all the corpses of Transcended and ordinary people, whose volume is almost half of the country, as the material to conduct a national level alteration ritual. First, he reversed and confused the cause of their death, attributed all their death to themselves. Then, he dragged the corpses and curses into his body. Finally, using the concept of 'the Sole Leader of the Undead Country,' he forcefully becomes a deity."

—So he is the Venerated Skeleton.

He is still a duke until now. Only when he is the "Duke of the Dead" can his deity hood be established.

Because his citizens have become bones just like him.

He is a walking Dukedom.

Annan blinked.

The Venerated Skeleton...

Why does it sound so trash?

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"That false deity mainly can change different corpses into various Transcendence materials."

Joseph Buckel said slowly, "For example, the paint Amos used needs to be ground out from the skin of [loved one]; his curse vessel 'Piercing Rifling' requires the heart's blood of [enemy]. 'Bone blood trigger' uses [the same person's bone and blood]. 'Turbid blood bullets' is a consumable made of the Transcended's liver."

From the sound of it, it doesn't seem particularly powerful.

It feels like a better Alteration Wizard.

Annan muttered silently in his heart.

But he did not say this out loud.

It wasn't Annan concerned with how Joseph Buckel perceived him.

He cared more about the Venerated Skeleton hearing his comment.

Annan didn't directly say the three words "the Venerated Skeleton," hence he would not be dragged into a nightmare.

But who knows if the Venerated Skeleton had already set up a field that generates response autonomously at this place, and he could hear it.

If he could hear it personally, then Annan might as well refrain from expressing strong opinions for the time being.

But Annan had some doubts.

"But I heard that that person seems to have existed since the Third Age..."

Annan asked with some doubts, "In my understanding, several countries are currently under the rule of an empire hundreds of years ago."

Annan learned this knowledge through the book written by the suspected Annan ancestor "Grinzuha Austere-Winter."

Then, he learned more information from the books that Salvatore brought. In the book he read, the five existing countries were split due to a brutal civil war after the sinking of the capital of an empire.

—That civil war was called the "Blood War."

Upon hearing this, Joseph Buckel frowned slightly.

"...Feudal lord, have you read the books in Amos's study?"

"En?"

Annan was startled.

He suddenly remembered.

The books in Amos's study seemed to be from Joseph Buckel.

Joseph sighed helplessly, "I didn't take those books away because they were useless..."

"Grinzuha Austere-Winter is the believer of the false deity. Many books he wrote recorded that ritual, and he will encourage people to use it."

"Is he a fraud?!"

Annan raised his voice subconsciously.

That person was the Austere-Winter family's member—

What does he want?

"He isn't a member of the Austere-Winter family."

It was like Joseph knew what Annan was thinking.

The tall wizard chuckled, "To be more accurate, he used to be. But he was expelled, deprived of Austere-Winter's surname. But he still uses this name without shame. So you can treat the book he wrote as a leisure novel. At least his writing skill is excellent, and it's interesting to read.

"As for the empire you just mentioned..."

His expression became slightly serious, "I think you are talking about the Yaselan Empire.

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"The Yaselan Empire is considered ancient. But he isn't the only ruler in this world. It used to be called the Osser Empire. It came from the desert region by the east and was an empire ruled by centaurs and elves. Until two Epochs, the empire has always been in the eastern desert.

"Later, there was the Epoch Disaster. Some of the Osserians fled westward and launched a war of aggression. They easily seized Yaselan's territory and established the Yaselan Empire. At that time, we were not called humans, but called 'Yaselan.'"

"Epoch Disaster?"

Annan tilted his head and asked softly.

"En, this is our Transcended way to distinguish the times."

Joseph seemed to have noticed Annan was a new Transcended. He started from the beginning, "Upright deities can't keep dealing with the suppressed curses. The accumulated curses will give birth to some 'accidents.' Disaster-like accidents strong enough to change every civilization.

"For example, the desert went alive and turned into a huge sentient creature. Another example will be one-third of the Yaselan Empire suddenly sank, forming the current Yaselan Sea.

"But in fact, mortals are still not clear about something. That is the beginning of the Fifth Age, not symbolized by the sinking of the Yaselan Empire. Although the old empire is great, it is not worthy of changing the entire civilization.

"The real symbol is the destruction of the Great Barrier."

"Wasn't the Great Barrier shattered because of the sinking of the Yaselan Empire?"

"Of course not."

Joseph laughed, "Order Fire has always been under the upright deities' church' control. It has nothing to do with the Yaselan Empire. After the capital sunk, all the elves living in the empire's capital and most of the centaurs went extinct. Besides changing the true deity's appearance to Yaselan, does it affect the church?"

"They are still the twelve true deities unique to this world, whether at the world in the west of the desert or the east of the desert. The gray mist can't isolate the deities' power."

Ya.

Indeed so...

Annan remembered.

In the history books he read, the Great Barrier was broken “because the twelve deities' church fell apart.”

But that reminds me...

Why did the church suddenly fall apart?

Joseph explained, “At the end of the fourth epoch, the real symbol is that the barrier is no longer permanent.

“For the previous barrier, the true deities will extract the power of the gray mist to sustain it. But now, the true deity must consume their own power to maintain it. For example, Silver Sire and Old Grandmother are more powerful and can maintain the barrier independently. But, for Red Knight and Mysterious Lady, they must be united together to maintain the barrier.

“This will not be announced publicly for fear of its consequence, most likely to avoid causing panic in public. There are other epochs that are not written in the history books. Our five countries today are based on the foundation of the Yaseland Empire in the Fourth Age.

“The knowledge before the Third Age is utterly unnecessary for ordinary people to learn about it. The population of elves and centaurs is small. They can only occupy a small territory area, and the other parts must be sealed back again. For example, the former Elegy Dukedom has been ruled by them since the Third Age. It's just that they were still a kingdom at that time.

“In other words, or at least in our research, we believe that the collapse of the Great Barrier may be the result of the discussions between the true deities. Anyway, the Yaseland Empire has sunk. Maintaining the barrier in the area that encompasses the Yaselan Sea consumes too much power. It is better to divide the barrier with a deity to shelter a piece of land separately so that the barrier can last for a longer time.”

After hearing this, Annan came to a realization.

Why did Grenznuha's book say that the Venerated Skeleton had a good relationship with the Bone Burying Grandma in the last era but was relegated to evil deity in this era...

The Venerated Skeleton was an evil deity from the beginning.

He was a believer in Bone Burying Grandma in the last century. Of course, he had a good relationship with Bone Burying Grandma.

The earliest could be traced back to the Third Age. What constituted the Venerated Skeleton was the history and corpses of the entire Elegy Dukedom, and these existed since the Third Age.

What Grinznuha said was his truth. Therefore, even if a lie detector were utilized, the display would show “this was the truth.”

But the content inside the book was all bullshit.

It was all deliberate effort to whitewash the Venerated Skeleton.

However, learning that the true deity's power fumed the barrier gave Annan an uncomfortable Déjà vu feeling.

How does it feel so similar to a game filled with suffering?