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“...Ritualist?” Annan frowned slightly, his expression turning serious.

He didn't doubt Citalopram with questions like “did you really hear that name” or “are you sure”. If a veteran ritualist was actually there, she had already done a fantastic job of coming back alive.

The path of ritual... That's another way to attain extraordinary power in this world.

There was no doubt that ritualists could be far more dangerous than Transcendeds.

There was only one end goal to the transcendent path—that was, mastering the Truth and attaining ascendancy into immortality.

Instead of seeking immortality, Truth, and authority, some Transcendeds overindulge with the mortal elements in this world. They were addicted to the extravagant life of the mortal world and the benefits that were visible to the naked eye and within reach.

For them, transcended power was just a handy tool for getting rich and prosperous.

Since it was a tool, they would naturally think of the efficacy and efficiency.

The foundational rule of this world was that if one desired power, they had to bear the corresponding curse.

However, since the power was only rented briefly, that would reduce the cost significantly.

Indeed, the ritualist was unlike the Transcended's approach of sublimating one's own soul and improving one's lifeform level. They wouldn't even embark on the path to transcendence at all so the Gray Mists couldn't hinder their movement.

They just applied occult knowledge to satisfy their endless desires.

In this case, the ritualists borrowed Transcended power using taboos, the real names of the deities, the rituals, and the relationship with the deities.

During the whole process, the curse wouldn't flow into their bodies. The residues of the ritual could be used as the raw material for other rituals.

Therefore, their lifespan was unaffected. They wouldn't fall into nightmares and they wouldn't mutate. They might even know how to use the Deities' Influence to eradicate the corruption on their soul... and even corrupt others' minds to drive targets into insanity while being unnoticed.

They were still mortals, but they had great power in their hands — a power that was beyond their control.

Transcended was well aware of the price that must be paid to obtain power. In their perception, those unworthy couldn't get their hands on the taboo knowledge or a more potent curse.

For the soul ascendancy process, the Transcended often had a probability of failing in their respective ritual. But, that wasn't the case for ritualists.

As they held powers beyond their levels, they became fearless.

To them, the difference between different levels of rituals was like “an explosion that could destroy a building” versus “an explosion that could destroy a city.”

If there were a mishap, they would be dead anyway. It wouldn't make any difference.

The only difference was how much trouble it would bring to others after their death.

Those who had taken the path of ritual would never have cared about this in the first place.

If one desired to be a ritualist, they must first have the awareness to pay any price and take advantage of anyone. There was often the possibility of offending the upright deities.

The ritualist had no reverence for power at all.

Therefore, all ritualists were wanted criminals.

Even if they did not commit any crime previously, they were constantly monitored, arrested, and even assassinated. Everyone knew that once the ritualist had a mishap, they couldn't stop nor suppress the ritual, unlike the ranked Transcended.

No one knew how profound the occult knowledge stored in ritualists' minds was. Similarly, no one knew how the ritualists became who they were and when they collected those occult knowledge.

Perhaps when they were young, they read the forbidden books collected by their parents;

Perhaps when they were young, they obtained a secret book that recorded a certain ritual from the belongings of the deceased teacher;

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Perhaps even in middle age and old age, they were lucky enough to be involved with the occult circle.

Those with no attachments had nothing to hold them back. In the case of a false deity's church, they didn't have a fixed base and wouldn't be afraid of the danger coming from the ritualist, contrary to the officials' attitude.

Hence, they would often hire ritualists to help them hold the ritual.

Unlike the transcendent and ritual paths, the path of faith was the fairest path.

There wasn't any special requirement on talent, capability, and morality. Of course, their nature wasn't as dangerous. As long as they contributed, they would attain gains. Those who worked would be rewarded.

However, it came at a price — loyalty.

It wasn't like the loyalty to the lords in the mortal world. They weren't as easy as mere promises, but the condition to be aligned with the deity.

For example, the Silver Sire's priests made the oath when joining the church.

“I swear to do my best to continue the Silver Sire's symbol — silver coins;”

“I swear to do my best to follow the way of trade, the way the Silver Sire has walked;”

“I swear never to betray and not to come close to other Eternals.”

The first two oaths required the priests to put in their “best efforts”, only the third condition was mandatory. They could utilize their own created ritual and the rituals which the upright deity and subordinate deities they put their faith in, but they shan't utilize rituals of other deities.

As for the reason, Annan hadn't figured it out yet.

It wasn't a harsh condition. Also, it wasn't a condition set for “believers”, but an oath that the “priests” had to follow.

It felt like a “Non-Disclosure and Non-Competition Agreement”.

Annan's previous plans would need to drastically change if there was a ritualist in Roseburg.

This meant that there might be no Rotten Man's believers in Roseburg. The summoner of the “Ritual: Roaring Heart” and the creatures could be the same person.

He was just employed by the Rotten Man.

Then, the Rotten Man forces in Roseburg weren't as robust as Annan imagined — they might have evacuated already.

“Things are starting to get complicated...”

It isn't just a beginner test for Suuankou and Citalopram anymore.

We might have gotten involved with the safety of the entire Roseburg, the Geraint family's continuation in the capital, and even the throne of the Noah Kingdom.

“I'll have to trouble you to run an errand... Quickly summon Jiu Er over, and get Suuankou to install the traps. After the installation is completed, retreat directly and use the trap to delay their departure time.”

Annan narrowed his eyes slightly, “I'm going back to get some items. You all shall wait for me here... I will try to be back within 40 minutes. You and Suuankou will tail the ritualist and ignore the rest if they leave.

“Your test has come to an end for the time being. I will assess it another time. But, to give you the bravery to tail the ritualist and tail him effectively, I will first grant you the ability to communicate with each other and respawn.”

Following Annan's words, two hints floated before Citalopram: Respawn and forum are unlocked.

Annan planned to intervene personally—he wanted to seize them alive.

At the same time, he would gather the online players, issue a time-limited mission, and grant temporary unlimited respawn privileges.

At the very least, these players would thin out the enemies' assault.

These two new players capable of assassination were a pleasant surprise for Annan.

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“Note this down. 9 rat hearts dipped with daffodil pollen can be used to replace the required baby's heart in the ritual.”

The “Father” taught slowly, “9 symbolizes the number of blood and desire. The daffodil pollen put on each rat heart shall not exceed $\frac{1}{3}$ of the heart size. Otherwise, the Silent Lady will 'reject' the ritual.”

The five witnesses had their eyes wide open, watching the Father demonstrate the miracle.

As for the rest, they took the hearing inhibition reagent — inexpensive alteration products that would temporarily take away their hearing, and they would recover quickly after smelling poop.

Every time before the ritual, the “White Snake” executives who weren't qualified to learn the ritual, but had the hope of becoming a core member, would ingest the reagent.

They also understood that doing so was to protect their life.

They have encountered many examples of tragic deaths due to ritual failures in the past few years.

Without an orthodox heritage, they would never easily use the ritual that they heard.

...But that being said, it was worth watching the process.

Those who could attend this meeting were higher-ups and even core members. For example, the tall and thin lurker, Bobby, was eligible to participate in this meeting.

Ordinary members had no idea who they were serving at all. On the other hand, the core members wouldn't leak the “Father's” secret who used the “Rotten Man Church” as a facade.

The reason was also simple.

They were all confident that they could become the “Father's” apprentices.

Most of these core members weren't Roseburg's natives. Instead, they were all disciples who had followed the “Father” to several cities.

They came here because the Rotten Man Church offered them a great price. Also, Roseburg's viscount had long known of their existence and let them grow further. This was also the fundamental reason why the “White Snake” could control the entire underground forces of Roseburg while being unnoticed.

The “White Snake” was just their lair.

After all, a lot of rare materials were required for the ritual. If they bought all the materials at the same time, the Silver Sire Church, which possessed Transcended knowledge, would sense something was wrong.

So they secretly assassinated the “White Snake's” original leader and utilized the underground gang forces as a facade to secretly collect ritual material under the disguise of logistics.

The “Father” seemed to do all of this to make money and for treasures.

His followers were here for “learning” — learning the taboo knowledge.

“But in this ritual, we're using rat's heart instead of a baby's heart. That's because the rat's heart and the cat's heel make an easy combination, which substitutes the 'hunter's heel' and 'pieces of the prey caught by it'. Remember to cut it with a rusted ritual knife to reveal the element of the killing.”

The Father said slowly and cut the cat's heel into three pieces, forming a triangle.

“This represents the 'lurker's stride' and the 'death of the hunted'. Then, we will have a resurrected frog's heart. First, soak it in Elixir and let it resume beating after an electric shock. The moment the heart stops again is when the ritual starts. This represents the moment when life succumbs to death.”

The “Father” explained without any pause to his work.

His explanation was detailed, but the only thing he didn't mention was the “portion and ratio”.

This was the experience every ritualist relied on for their livelihood.

It was also the means to control their apprentice so that the apprentices wouldn't have any maligned thoughts to seek their life and knowledge.

This allowed the apprentices to work for him for many years as “assistants” as they grew up. Furthermore, once the apprentice learned enough rituals and accumulated enough experience, they would be driven away in time or even killed.

“Is that all you need, Father?” The brown-skinned tattooed woman asked with a smile, “Don't hide your secrets.”

“Of course not, Greenscale.” The Father glanced at her and replied nonchalantly.

Like the alias “Father”, the brown-skinned woman had a pseudonym — “Greenscale”.

The reason for not using their real names was because they understood the danger of cursing someone via names. At the same time, they didn't have the money or prestige to ask the idol wizard to create a stand-in for themselves in redirecting the curses that target them away. On the other hand, having an alias will safeguard their lives against their teacher, students, and colleagues.

The “Father” added casually with a hoarse voice, “What we will be summoning this time is the Skeleton Crow of the Funeral Deity Faceless Poet. It can detect and harm the dead. So when you are about to steal corpses, you can summon one of them to keep watch for you.

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“This ritual is a simplified version. If you want to summon the Skeleton Crow, you have to use the 'Remains of the Silent Funeral' as a guide. Otherwise, you may attract the 'Invisible Hunter' or the 'Mist Lady'. You may summon the two surprises successfully or fail because of insufficient power. The worst price can make your heart stop for 30 seconds if you fail.

“So, when you see a funeral with this atmosphere, you can go around and collect the influence. After all, the influence is easy to remove. Crying before the curse becomes active can purify the influence.”

Of course, the “Father” had hidden something from them.

After “Green Scale” pointed this out, he honestly and carefully explained the details to them.

As the frog's heart stops beating, the “Father” put on a solemn expression while the rest became quiet in an instant.

He quickly lifted a human leg bone and placed it horizontally above the ritual area.

After that, a gray hue instantly plunged into his pupils.

After a short delay, the “Father” dripped with cold sweat on his forehead.

In front of everyone, the 9 hearts burned simultaneously, releasing dim gray flames. After they were all burnt out, the flames still didn't disappear. Instead, three black flames clustered began to burn the cat's heels slowly.

At this moment, the sound of clattering sounded.

It was like putting a lot of Lego building blocks in a bag and shaking it hard.

But the apprentices soon realized that it was the sound of bones crashing against each other.

In front of the “Father”, the broken bones of birds emerged from thin air. They collided to form a crow about half a meter high.

It had only bones all over its body and gray flames burning in its skull. However, it could still fly.

The Skeleton Crow flew for a circle in the air. When its eyes glanced over somewhere, it shrieked and flew over immediately.

—If Citalopram witnessed this scene, she would immediately realize that this was the position where she had been staying for the longest time!

Then, a bloodstain appeared under the Skeleton Crow.

It lurched on the ground, avoiding everyone, and stopped in front of the shelves.

That was the trajectory of Citalopram's actions!

“Sure enough, a ghost visited us.”

The “Father” sneered and said in a hoarse voice, “It isn't necessarily someone from the Crow's Family. I suspect the Venerated Skeleton may be involved. Of course, there's the chance of being a stray undead.

“We need to summon something more to make sure that we can protect ourselves.

“Take a good look. Then, you can make consecutive summons while you are in 'fear'.

“I have taught you last time on the necessary elements to summon 'Bane'. The conditions include any strong emotions of fear, sadness, pain, or regret from the summoner, a burned old photo album, a kidney of a desperate male sharpshooter, and unused poison over ten years old. We have all of them in stock... So go and get it.”

The “Father” commanded slowly.

His narrow eyes were full of fear, but this fear didn't affect his words and thinking.

He learned the religions of many churches. Of course, he knew that it wasn't the Venerated Skeleton's doings.

This is the trace of a "Half-dead Enchantress".

The only possibility is that Don Juan Geraint has discovered our existence, so he hired a Half-dead Enchantress to scout on us.

Luckily, my apprentices couldn't decipher these traces.

On the one hand, the "Father" needed them to do the grunt work for him, getting all the items required for the ritual.

On the other hand...

"The Betrayed Apprentice" could also be used as the material of the Venerated Skeleton's ritual... and become a powerful Skeleton Guardian.

Unfortunately, the Skeleton Guardian couldn't do grunt work, and it would be the last time these apprentices would be helpful to him.

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Since this was a "time-limited event" without any prior notices, few players could participate in time.

Players were more inclined to reside in Roseburg than the rural Freezing Water Port. After all, the city was relatively more developed. It was much more convenient for food, clothing, housing, and transportation. In addition, there were opportunities for odd jobs to earn some money and upgrade their equipment.

After all, even their feudal lord already resided in Roseburg, so they didn't even have the task of bodyguarding their lord there.

However, some players would visit Freezing Water Port once every three days to farm the dungeon instances.

Fortunately, there were about 30 players in Roseburg, and the strongest 4 players were all in Roseburg right now.

Only Salvatore was still living in the Freezing Water Port.

His laboratory was just below the city lord's residence. It would be troublesome to move the place, and he would be leaving soon anyway.

In fact, after he had gotten the Venerated Skeleton's Bone Blood Trigger, he could already return to Swamp's Black Tower.

The reason why Salvatore didn't leave immediately was to not leave the mess to Annan.

Salvatore admitted that he owed Annan, involving Annan in a fight that had nothing to do with him. This guilt even deepened after learning of Annan's true identity.

However, Annan didn't think so. He never felt that Salvatore owed him anything, and he even thought that he had used Salvatore so many times that he felt uneasy for his conscience.

Somehow, Salvatore was quite firm in his view.

He had already made up his mind that when Annan went to the capital, he would follow along as well before he returned to Swamp's Black Tower.

Of course, Annan thought that Salvatore must be feeling lonely on his journey.

Although Annan couldn't get Salvatore's help in this operation, he had summoned another helper, Kafni Noah, on his way in getting his equipment.

Kafni, who was left alone in Roseburg by the Fourth Prince Albert, was now Annan's chief bodyguard.

She lived in the room next to Annan.

After advancing into Silver Rank, the most significant difference was the "Perception" and "Will" attributes.

A Dragon Monk's extraordinary perception allowed Kafni to detect every movement in Annan's room, even through walls. Whether there were thieves or assassins, she could directly sense their location as if she had seen them with her own eyes.

At this moment, Annan brought Kafni to the side of the warehouse. She was sensing the curses in the warehouse over a distance, with her eyes closed.

"I can feel it..." Kafni closed her eyes slightly and whispered, "There are remnants of rituals over there. It's fresh... and there are many varieties."

"Can you detect what types of ritual there are?" Annan asked eagerly.

Kafni shook her head, "I can't sense the ritual's outcome. It must be the doing of a veteran. He must have added the wall with a layer of lead. If I haven't advanced into Silver Rank, I can't sense any trace of ritual even if I'm a Dragon Monk."

"Can you give me a rough number of the rituals?"

Annan urged in a low volume, "If you aren't sure with the type, count what's in there. You don't need to be accurate with the numbers, but tell me what you sense."

Hearing Annan's instructions, Kafni closed her eyes again and poured her perceptions into the warehouse.

"I felt the essence of 'Bone', 'Dead', 'Fear', 'Betrayal', 'Shadow', and 'Blood'. I don't know how many summoned creatures are there or which of these smells are material, influences, or a summon. But to be on the safe side, we must be prepared to face up to 7 Transcended enemies."

Kafni said seriously, "If there are more than two Silver Rank enemies, I may not be able to protect you."

As she spoke, she glanced back at the players who were gathering up. Then, she whispered into Annan's ear, "If the battle situation is unfavorable, can we let them occupy the enemies as we retreat? In that case, I'm confident that I can buy you time."

...That should be fine. Annan thought.

In actual fact, Annan summoned the players with the same intention.

From this point of view, Kafni and Annan shared the same thoughts.

But in front of the players, Annan naturally couldn't admit it so readily.

"Annan" was an NPC on the player's side. Moreover, he was a future Grand Duke who was tough on the outside but soft on the inside like a prickly pear. Also, he had to display himself in being resolute, responsible, and wise. So how could he be timid before the fight?

"It doesn't matter."

Annan patted Kafni's head lightly, feeling the warmth of Kafni's head, and whispered comfortably in her ear, "I have another 'that' to use — it won't be dangerous.

"If the situation is unfavorable, I will activate it."

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Although Annan wasn't well-prepared equipment-wise compared to the battle with the Rotten Man, he still had the incomplete Sage's Stone with him.

In addition, Annan also brought along [Elven Skin Glove], [Barrier Destroyer's Right Arm], and [White Guillotine]. Then, he put the [Blood-stained Kitchen Knife] in a carry-on bag.

The main reason for not taking out the kitchen knife directly was because the curse [Painting Destroyer] might put Annan in a difficult situation.

[Painting Destroyer: If the holder sees a portrait of a middle-aged woman while wielding the [Blood-stained Kitchen Knife], he must throw the kitchen knife out within 3 seconds. Otherwise, the holder will be injured by the kitchen knife.]

They were about to assault a warehouse, with the owner of that warehouse being a ritualist.

Certainly, rituals often required something bizarre and less common. Annan dared not say that there were absolutely no "portraits of middle-aged women" in that warehouse.

If he saw the painting when he entered the warehouse with a kitchen knife, he would have to disarm his weapon immediately in front of the enemy.

It was better to hide it from sight and use it as a one-time throwing weapon at critical moments. After all, the kitchen knife had a handy curse [Extraordinary Throw].

[Extraordinary Throw: When this item was thrown, it would automatically search for enemies in a small area as if the Edict school spell of the same name was applied.]

In the previous battle with the Rotten Man, this skill didn't come in handy because it was just an ordinary kitchen knife, and it couldn't harm the Rotten Man.

Sending it over was like an act of giving a gift.

Worse still, the Rotten Man might catch the knife and throw it back.

After all, curse vessels wouldn't recognize their masters.

Annan was confident that a kitchen knife thrown by Rotten Man would be fatal.

At present, however, the current enemies were feeble mortals.

They weren't even Transcended yet.

Hence, the kitchen knife had a purpose in this battle.

At present, Annan wielded a hammer with his right hand and a guillotine blade in his left, giving off a ferocious air — if you ignore his body size and young face.

Even though Annan had a sullen face and made a look of “I'm super fierce now”, the players just whispered among themselves and pointed at him secretly.

“—To be honest, he's kind of cute.”

“—The cute style of being angry.”

“—Come on. Annan can break your head with a hammer.”

“—Even if he does, I wouldn't stop him. It's because of my love for him!”

“—Alright, stop now. You're making us embarrassed.”

Looking at the lively forum, Suuankou and Citalopram felt a touch of “What, I'm actually playing a game”.

After the players were all gathered, Annan commanded in a deep voice, “The only door on the front has a trap, which Suuankou had set up. Then, we'll take a different path. Let's go in from the place where there is no door! I'll break the wall first, and then you all shall charge in—everyone pairs up in twos for the first assault. After getting close to the enemy, Kafni, Yiyi, and I will enter from the side of the battlefield.

“Remember to attack the summons first while giving priority to your safety. You don't need to kill them, and your goal is to hold them back. The front exit of the warehouse is installed with traps, and you can also force the enemy there. Kafni and I will focus on defeating the ritualist first.

“Then, let's all get ready...” As Annan spoke, he raised the hammer in his hand.

If this hammer wasn't a hammer but only a staff, it resembled the infamous Shaolin weapon — Qi Mei Staff. After counting the hammer in, it would appear that Annan's height was relatively inadequate.

Annan waved the [Barrier Destroyer's Right Arm] at the next moment.

It gained an extra boost of 10 Strength when attacking a “wall”.

As Annan slammed the hammer with all his might, the earth trembled.

On the next hit, that side wall of the warehouse was full of cracks.

On the third hit, a hole about one person in height and five meters wide was broken into the wall. Many bricks and debris splashed inward with the dust flying up in the air.

As the warehouse wall collapsed inward, the players charged in with killing intent!

Indeed, the players had heard the instructions. There were many “summoned creatures” and killed anyone you see.

Since our goal is to hold them back, defeating them directly wouldn't be a problem, right?

The players had watched the live stream on summoned creatures before and learned that these creatures would give a lot of experience.

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The ritualist had already realized that an ambush was set up at the warehouse's entrance.

He likely learned this information through a ritual or a summoned creature.

Hence, none of the enemies had gotten out of the warehouse even when Annan and the rest had returned.

However, they didn't expect that Annan wouldn't need to go through the entrance at all.

He was able to break through the sidewall in just 5 seconds!

The players immediately swarmed into the warehouse when the wall collapsed.

To Annan's surprise, the situation in the warehouse was different from the intelligence he had gotten previously.

There were only two ordinary people inside.

Or... 1.5 humans instead.

The room was scattered with [Skeleton Soldiers], which looked like standard mobs in other games.

What stood out differently was the size of these skeletons. They were more than two meters tall, and their skulls were peculiarly more enormous, giving off an oppressive air.

Although they weren't equipped with armor, their outlook signified that they weren't just fodders that wielded “bone sabers”.

They either held a flail or a mace in their right hands, but each had a thick iron shield more than two meters high in their left hand that could be easily stationed on the ground.

Annan recognized the enemies immediately.

They are Skeleton Guardians!

The once-loyal guardians of the Venerated Skeleton... Each of the Skeleton Guardians was equivalent to a Level 10 Giant Guard proficient in Bodyguard Swordsmanship.

The Bodyguard Swordsmanship was dedicated to two combat scenarios: “fighting the enemies with a number advantage” or “fighting a group alone”!

The Skeleton Guardian, which had lost its vulnerable parts such as its heart, neck, and head, was invulnerable to conventional methods of killing. Since they were skeletons, they had excellent resistance to stabbing and arrows. The tall, heavy shields in their hands could be used to defend against any bludgeoning damage coming from heavy weapons. As the Skeleton Guardians grouped up, they could also form a shield wall as a temporary cover. The flails or maces in their hands could effectively damage those clad in heavy armor.

They were the fearless defenders, invulnerable to stabs, slashes, bleeding, poisons, and shield bashes. Moreover, they could form a shield wall to provide covers at any time, making them the perfect fit as defenders.

In small-scale battles, Skeleton Guardians could completely change the tide of a fight.

The only downside was that the ritual summoning them was pretty harsh.

As the guardians of the Betrayal Deity, they would only follow the leadership of the “betrayer”. Also, the betrayal must be committed by the one in charge towards their underlings. Only then could Skeleton Guardians be summoned from the flesh of the betrayed.

Under the protection of the Skeleton Guardians group, the players could barely notice the thin, hunched old man standing by the altar in the warehouse.

He looked so old as if he could die at any given moment. An incomparably dense death aura shrouded his deeply sunken ugly facial features, but his mobility remained unhindered despite so.

Beside him, a macho man was slowly melting, turning into a monster like a fat Candle Dog that burned brightly. The candle oil dripping out formed its lower body.

“—Fuck, Matou Zouken?” Lin Yiyi's eyes widened up, and she couldn't help but blurt.

As the Tank for the team and to protect Annan, she chose to charge directly at the “Matou Zouken” and the “Candle Dog”.

But at this moment, the Skeleton Crow in the air suddenly opened his mouth, and its jaws made clicking sounds.

When it chirped, all players didn't feel any discomfort. However, Citalopram, who rushed over after Yiyi, heard a shrieking noise in her ears.

It was a harsh, high-pitched chirping.

Her mind went blank at the moment she heard this voice. Soon, she lost the ability to control her body completely.

Other players saw that Citalopram's blurred body became clearer and manifested like a shimmer of light. In addition, there were lots of fluctuations in her ethereal body.

But, in the next moment, a sharp stone came flying at high speed, forcing the Skeleton Crow to stop chirping and dodge away.

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The player who threw the rock was the Wandering Child!

“Are you alright?” He asked urgently, without looking back at Citalopram.

Then, he drew an S-shape on the ground with a rapier.

A curved, rocky ravine suddenly emerged on the ground following the slash. Immediately, they swelled up from the ground and separated the battlefield diagonally into three areas.

Four Skeleton Guardians were at the outer area, whereas the middle area had six Skeleton Guardians, the “Candle Dog”, the Skeleton Crow, and the old man. Finally, the last area had 5 Skeleton Guardians caged in the triangular wall.

After achieving this feat, the Child's forehead was dripping with sweat, making it seem like it wasn't an easy task.

Immediately afterward, he pointed his rapier to the ground.

Three tile-sized, tooth-shaped sharp stones were summoned on the ground. Then, as the Wandering Child pointed his blade at the Skeleton Crow again, these sharp stones rose from the ground and flew towards the Skeleton Crow!

All of a sudden, the players heard a gunshot.

A person stood above the temporary earthen wall, which was previously empty. The man wore a strange helmet installed with thirteen lenses on his head that only covered his eyes. At the corner of his mouth, there was a hint of melancholy.

He wielded a sniper rifle about 1.5 meters long, and his first shot deflected two of the stone pieces. Unfortunately, the last stone piece couldn't hit the Skeleton Crow in its trajectory.

The Child profused with cold sweat after noticing the sniper with an exaggerated outfit.

I'm done for. This fucker has a hand cannon...

Why is the thickness of the barrel so large it can fit a quail egg!?

“Don't be afraid, that's [Bane]!”

Annan soothed them from the backline, “It can only be attacked by long-range weapons such as crossbow arrows and firearms, but it can't attack living creatures, only ballistic interception!”

Hearing this, the Child felt a little relieved.

But at this moment, a petite figure suddenly jumped out from over his head.

That was Jiu Er!

She wielded a refined battle axe — a new weapon she bought via Annan's affection ratings. It didn't have any particular advantages or strength boost, nor was it a curse vessel... but it had two features: sharp and heavy.

It was added with some adamantium, which made it heavier than a stainless steel battleaxe of the same weight. Since it was an alloy, it was also sharper. It even had a beautiful sheen of dark gold on its axe blade.

When Jiu Er asked Annan to give her a good and durable weapon previously, Annan thought of the axe at the first moment.

This was the axe in the hands of the decorative knight statue in the living room of the Viscount Mansion.

It was 1.8 meters in height. When Jiu Er held it in her hand, it was equally amusing, like Annan wielding the Qi Mei Staff (i.e: the sledgehammer without a hammer's head).

Annan knew that Jiu Er had robust strength, especially after changing her profession into a Berserker.

Moreover, she had promoted [All-out Blow] to Level 7. Ordinary long swords were simply unable to sustain her enormous strength.

But this axe would do just fine.

Since the axe was used as a display in the Viscount's house, it was without a doubt that it was a refined weapon of excellent quality. With great maintenance, the blade of the axe was shining. Giving it out would make the gifter quite prestigious since the weapon was seemingly brand new.

Of course, none had used this axe before. After it was forged, it was immediately sent to the auctions for the collectors to buy it.

After Jiu Er acquired it, a dim crimson light appeared on it. It was the special effect produced by the long-term contact of the adamantium with blood. "Gold" symbolized "dye" in Alteration School. As a result, the adamantium was quite susceptible to being dyed with the color of the objects that it was frequently in contact with.

However, it was noteworthy to mention that the blood-red hue on this axe wasn't from the enemy's blood.

Jiu Er lunged and landed behind the Skeleton Guardians in the middle area.

She raised the axe, turned it upside down, and screamed, "Don't come near me... Ah~"

Before the Skeleton Guardians' weapons struck her, Jiu Er slashed the axe into her own abdomen vertically first!

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Jiu Er's battle resolution stunned even the Skeleton Guardians for a moment.

Besides having wrappings covering her chest, she only put on an overcoat on top. After she cut her abdomen, blood spurted out of her body.

Her Health dropped to 50% instantly, and it continued to deplete.

When Jiu Er was injured, her abdomen lit up with mystical dark red runes.

It was a crimson curse mark that was as fiery hot as charcoal fire.

The runes that were split in half by the cut summoned upon a greater power. Heat waves that were visible to the naked eye were steaming out from her abdomen. One could see how the heat agitated the air around her.

“Ah...” Jiu Er took a deep breath.

A puff of white steam shot out from the depths of her throat like an arrow. She swung the axe in her hand, and the scorching blood was splashed onto the ground in an arc.

At the next moment, she leaped high into the air again.

Due to the intense movement, the spilt blood had depleted her Health to less than 40%.

While Jiu Er was still in the air, her sclera turned black and her pupils scarlet.

Massive strength surged from the runes on her abdomen as if she had acquired a second and much stronger heart, pumping limitless power into her limbs.

This was Berserker's skill, [Death's Embrace]!

[Death's Embrace LV1: The closer your state is to death, the more resilient you are from dying. For every 10% drop in Health, there will be a temporary +1 attribution bonus on either Strength, Agility, or Constitution. If Health increases, the temporary attribute bonus will be lost. When your Health is lower than 40%, this buff takes effect; when Health is higher than 40%, this buff is calculated normally, but it will not take effect.]

When Health dropped to 40%, Jiu Er acquired 6 temporary attributes.

The system had randomized 3 points in Strength, 2 points in Agility, and 1 point in Constitution!

A loyal Skeleton Guardian immediately intercepted when Jiu Er was about to leap towards the old man. The skeleton raised its heavy shield high and tried to bash at Jiu Er, who was up in the sky and getting ready to swing at her like a tennis smash.

Immediately after, Jiu Er's biceps bulged and the blood vessels under her skin ruptured, causing a dark web-like network to surface on her arms.

The blood-dyed axe came straight down, and it easily struck through the Skeleton Guardian's shield!

—Boom!

There was a loud crash, accompanied by dust spreading in all directions.

The giant shield in the hands of the Skeleton Guardian was dented with an opening splitting to the sides.

The enormous force struck the skeleton off balance, who staggered two steps back and fell to the ground.

The surrounding players had already retreated to both sides.

In fact, Jiu Er wasn't shouting the phrase "Don't come near me" to the monsters but the players.

Jiu Er knew she couldn't keep fighting for long, especially if the enemy wouldn't spare her time to recover her Health.

So at the moment when she just launched the attack, she had already activated all the buffs.

[All-out Blow LV7: Exerting all your strength to launch 1 devastating attack. The Strength for the next attack gains a 30% bonus and consumes triple the stamina.]

[Blood Sustenance: Weapons stained with the user's blood will cause greater damage to the enemy (the lower the user's health, the greater the increase in damage); when weapons stained with the enemy's blood attack the user, the user's health recovery speed will be significantly increased in a short period (the lower the health, the faster the recovery speed).]

When Jiu Er landed, she kicked her legs and darted forward!

The wound on her abdomen was still bleeding, which stained her clothes red.

A bright red shadow dashed forward and sent the Skeleton Guardian's head out with an axe's slash!

Despite losing its head, the skeleton still struggled to get up from the ground. “

“The head isn't its weakness—” Lin Yiyi, who had successfully inched closer to the enemy, shouted.

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With the iron pipe in her hand, she easily deflected the Skeleton Guardian's attack away to another Skeleton Guardian's knee. The attack coming from the skeleton with its knee struck was deflected to the neck of the first skeleton.

Afterward, she swung her iron pipe at the damaged spots on the two Skeleton Guardians.

Under a clear crisp sound, she punctured a crack on her opponents.

She could easily crack the bones by repeating the attacks on the same spots.

“Got it!” Jiu Er didn't pause for a second.

She first chopped off the Skeleton Guardian's left and right arms in two slashes. Immediately after, she stepped back and chopped the skeleton's knees open with consecutive axe slashes.

Then, she activated [All-out Blow] again, splitting the flying skull vertically into two pieces.

Her work was as skilled as the chefs chopping ribs when handling ingredients.

Just as she was processing the “ingredient”, another Skeleton Guardian had rushed up, trying to launch a sneak attack on her. But, it was still only an attempt.

They made loud noises as they moved, so staying stealthy in their objectives was impossible.

Jiu Er, who acquired a temporary bonus on attribute points, didn't bother to look back to parry the upcoming attack.

She wasn't even in a defensive stance at all.

She simply squatted down, held the axe in both hands, and performed a 360° spinning slash!

Since her slash was kind of low, the Skeleton Guardian behind her failed to block her attack with its shield.

Its shin was shattered in an instant. Only then did Jiu Er start dodging the attack.

The direction of her dodge wasn't just a retreat but a frontal assault to another enemy across a distance!

The red figure darted over.

All of a sudden, three scorching balls of wax oil were spat at her!

The amount of wax oil was enough to fill a bathtub.

Since Jiu Er activated [Charge], she couldn't stop anymore.

In the end, her scarlet eyes were gleaming with viscous air. She didn't evade but accelerated instead!

If you're going to take me down, I shall at least bring one down with me!

The Child had already noticed that the Candle-Dog-looking monster was unbound by the ritual.

He too had completed his summoning as well!

A rock wall rose from the ground, blocking the wax oil spraying at Jiu Er.

The viscous flames quickly spread onto the rock wall.

Meanwhile, Jiu Er had already rushed to a place enabling her to attack.

Unlike when she rescued Suuankou previously, whereby she utilized her elbow to launch the first attack to unbalance the enemy, she raised her axe as she came closer to the attack position.

Under the [Charge]'s momentum, she slashed her axe diagonally.

The Skeleton Guardian, with her back facing her, had its tibia shattered.

The rock wall spread, rising from the ground and surrounding Jiu Er. In the end, the wall became more than two meters high and a palm's length thick, successfully shielding her from the wax oil that was still spraying continuously!

The Child had his right arm trembling uncontrollably due to the rock summoning at this scale.

He couldn't help but ask for help, "Milord! We can't hold on!"

"I heard you." Annan replied calmly.

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As Annan spoke, the "Candle Dog" seemed to have suddenly realized something and stopped attacking the players. Instead, the dog retreated a few steps back and then began to devour himself frantically.

Its body looked like a fat Shar-Pei [1] about one meter tall, but it had no nose nor eyes. Its head looked more like a tube with several rings of sharp teeth.

There was no skin on its body, but only layers of white fat burning with flames. When it moved, these fats trembled slightly... After the flames had burned out, traces of wax were left on its path.

The previous attack came from this monster.

Its slender and soft neck had bent, nibbling on itself, and then spat out incendiary bombs.

The white wax oil it spat could burn continuously on the rock wall for more than ten seconds. Undoubtedly, once the players got hit by it, they would no longer be able to fight anymore.

"This is the apostle of the Deity of Lamps and Candles, the Light Chasing Beast. It will attack all creatures without a light source... If you leave it alone, it will wolf itself swiftly."

Kafni's voice sounded beside Annan, "But the wax oil on it is a precious material, called 'White Liquid Fire'. So please freeze it alive, Your Highness. I want that material to repair my lantern."

Kafni's voice was filled with resentment as her lantern was destroyed previously.

Annan nodded, "Sure, it's a piece of cake."

As soon as his sentence ended, a layer of frost appeared on the ground silently. Frigid cold air encircled the battlefield. The players even found it difficult to breathe, and their feet became freezing.

It was like stepping on ice with thin shoes.

Though, the spell was unlike before.

The players didn't see any signs at all... Previously, there used to be veil-like white curse ripples that spread out from Annan's feet like water waves.

But this time, the surrounding temperature suddenly dropped without warning.

Kafni opened her eyes slightly.

The ruby-clear pupils were full of curiosity and wonder.

...He actually became stronger again.

Should I say... as expected of Annan?

Kafni's perception was accurate.

After Annan cleared "Nightmare: Reflection", he found that the [Shared Experience Pool] in reserve was just enough to increase his wizard profession by 1 level.

As a result, his profession panel had grown into:

Wizard (Energy Falteration School) LV18: [Instant Spell LV4 (Chilling Touch, Slothful Eye, N/A, N/A)], [Guided Spell LV4 (Impeding Wall, Frost Field, Notion Rain, Denial of Life)], [Chant Spell LV2 (Frost Wheel, N/A)], [Ritual Spell LV1 (N/A)]

On the other hand, Annan's [Perception] attribute had just exceeded 40.

—When Annan met Kafni for the first time, his [Perception] attribute was only 31. However, it had only been less than a week, and Annan's main attribute had increased by one-third.

It could be Annan had respawned quite a bit, or possibly because he had an outstanding perception... But the most likely reason was that Annan had his frost element 100% awakened.

His most commonly used guided spell [Frost Nova] finally ushered in the first evolution.

[Frost Field (Guided): Render the temperature of the specified object (air/water/earth/living creature, etc.) drop rapidly in the spherical space within a radius of 40 meters (depending on the Perception attribute), and makes its surface brittle. In the Frost Field, every time the enemy runs/attacks/dodges/get attacked, there will be a mandatory Constitution check [2]. If the check fails, the enemy shall suffer a “Chilling Touch” spell. For every 3.6s (depending on the total level of wizard profession – 5), 5 Order Power will be consumed to sustain the effect.]

Annan's spell had become much more potent.

In the past, the [Frost Nova] consumed additional mana to activate “Chilling Touch” to freeze the targets. The attacks were like tides, rushing out wave after wave along with Annan's heartbeat. It was a rhythmic attack and was easy to be dodged and evade. Worse still, it could be hindered easily with a wall.

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But that has become different now.

After the spell evolved, Annan could freeze people through walls.

Moreover, the frozen enemies were more vulnerable now. Annan's spell had amplified the players' attack power in a sense.

Every time the enemy committed a slightly more significant movement, their movement would be interrupted by the cold air that suddenly penetrated their body. It had become a practical and supportive spell that controlled the enemies. At least at its first appearance, it quickly interrupted the enemy's momentum.

The first to notice the effect wasn't Jiu Er but Lin Yiyi.

She suddenly noticed that the movements of the two Skeleton Guardians beside her were sluggish for a moment.

After taking a careful look, she noticed that their joints were covered with thin ice at some point. The weight of these ices wasn't devastating, but they had hindered their movement greatly as if turning these skeletons into rusty machine dolls.

Lin Yiyi took advantage of the situation.

After slamming her iron pipe heavily twice, she broke two Skeleton Guardians' knees. The points of shatter had erupted frosty white mists.

Before the skeletons fell on the floor, Lin Yiyi swung the metal pipe in her hand horizontally, knocking their skeleton heads away like golf balls.

Oh, they have weakened... Lin Yiyi realized it firsthand.

As for Jiu Er, her Level 7 [All-out Blow] only forced her into a 6 seconds cooldown period before activating the next.

Her next [All-out Blow] directly shattered the Skeleton Guardian's spine in front of her. Although she felt that the enemy had weakened, it wasn't a big change for her.

Anyway, she could instantly kill the enemies no matter what. The difference was negligible.

The Light Chasing Beast had seemingly realized the situation. It cowered in fear and stopped devouring himself.

It didn't dare to spray those viscous white wax oil on Annan.

The Light Chasing Beast just kept retreating. At the same time, it spat out the pure white wax oil on the ground as if it was vomiting. It made a grunting sound like packet milk that was almost emptied, probably whimpering and begging for mercy.

However, just as the beast stepped back, Annan had already inserted the white guillotine in his left hand on the ground. He raised his left hand and chanted,

“The frost is the wheel—”

“—The bones are its path!”

Annan didn't launch his attack on the Light Chasing Beast immediately.

As the Light Chasing Beast continued to retreat, its body surface had started to be frozen.

As Annan's chant ended, five crystal-colored flames ignited at Annan's fingertips. A faint ice-blue magic circle emerged and then quickly dispersed.

After Annan flicked his left hand forward slightly, a hollowed-out and gorgeous frost wheel flew out of his palm with ice-blue light rays intertwined at its core!

The Frost Wheel rolled on the ground like a darting tire.

A layer of pale white frost marks instantly appeared on the warehouse floor.

The Frost Wheel rammed directly into one of the attacking Skeleton Guardians, closest to Annan!

The Skeleton Guardian held its iron shield to brace for the wheel attack.

Bang— just like the sound of glass breaking.

The shield in the Skeleton Guardian's hand was useless against the Frost Wheel. The wheel went straight through the protection, sucking the skeleton into it!

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Indeed, the skeleton was sucked into the [Frost Wheel]!

The Skeleton Guardian's body didn't immediately shatter from the first collision. Instead, the bones became pale and extremely brittle, and a thick layer of frost covered its body.

If the target was a living creature, the frigid cold air inside the [Frost Wheel] could instantly kill him even if there was only a little bit of elemental power.

But the situation was otherwise for this skeleton as it survived the first impact...

After the [Frost Wheel] broke apart and traveled a distance, it recovered its shape a little and locked the skeleton within it!

As the hollowed-out [Frost Wheel] continued to break apart due to the high-speed movement, the Skeleton Guardian's limbs also shattered along with it. The broken bones were thrown out from the wheel's gaps.

It seemed this was the best way to utilize the Frost Wheel!

The seemingly gorgeous, useless, and fragile attack was actually extremely torturous.

Any enemy that could survive the first impact wouldn't be able to move due to the frigid cold air. They would be wrapped in ice and sealed in the hollowed-out wheels. At this time, the hollowed-out wheels were like thin, sharp, constantly regenerating knives.

In the end, the [Frost Wheel] didn't stop.

It rolled forward in an arc, taking a path that could crush many Skeleton Guardians at once!

Seven out of the eleven remaining Skeleton Guardians were engulfed by the Frost Wheel that passed by quickly. The Skeleton Crow in the air was also sucked into the wheel.

It finally reached its limits and wholly broke apart when the wheel struck the eighth Skeleton Guardian. By then, it could no longer regenerate anymore.

At this time, many broken bones exploded outwards like rain as the Frost Wheel shattered.

[Abolished Bronze Rank summoned creature “the Skeleton Crow” in battle. You have acquired 120 Shared Experience points.]

[Abolished Bronze Rank summoned creature “the Skeleton Guardian” in battle. You have acquired 34 Shared Experience points.]

[Abolished Bronze Rank summoned creature “the Skeleton Guardian” in battle. You have acquired 30 Shared Experience points.]

Eight prompts appeared in a split second.

Annan's vision was overwhelmed with many experience gains.

That eighth Skeleton Guardian had lost all its strength when the Frost Wheel hit it. A vertical line of frost marks was left on it as it lay on the ground.

Delicious Wind Goose, who was closest to the skeleton, rushed over at the first moment.

He rushed over, activating [All-out Blow] to put an end to this enemy.

After having the wheel rampaging in the arena, Annan had cleared off many enemies in the warehouse.

Only then did the players realize how powerful their faction leader was.

To them, the Skeleton Guardians were undoubtedly "elite monsters", except for Jiu Er, who had adequate damage output. At best, the rest could only contain the enemies like Lin Yiyi and Delicious Wind Goose, unable to inflict lethal damage.

But to Annan, the Skeleton Guardians were nothing but mobs that could be wiped out with a single spell.

At this time, the Light Chasing Beast was utterly frozen.

When the flames on its body were extinguished, it seemed to have lost its life. The snow-white and smooth substances on its body were condensed into pastes.

It had utterly lost its previous appearance and appeared like a frozen lump of oil paste.

The flames that had splashed onto the rock wall had long since been extinguished. Layers of white paste congealed and softened on the wall. Some had fallen on the ground and became non condensable waste.

As for that Bane, Annan couldn't do anything with it. Since it couldn't attack his group anyway, he just pretended it wasn't there.

So far, all the enemies in the warehouse were eliminated except for the few Skeleton Guardians.

But the old ritualist didn't conduct any summon nor curse ritual again.

His trousers and the clothes on his shoulders were covered with a layer of hoarfrost. At this level of low temperature, his feet should have been frozen. But the ritualist called the "Father" didn't even utter a word.

He didn't attack Annan even once but just raised his hands in surrender and looked at Annan calmly without any resistance or provocations.

"Are you going to kill him, Your Highness?" Kafni whispered, "I can do it for you."

She lifted her skirt slightly as if to perform a curtsy, but Annan could sense that some shadowy tentacles were slowly invading out of it.

"Wait, not yet." Annan shook his head.

He's just a ritualist... not a Transcended. We can kill him whenever we want. There's no need to be in a hurry.

He bears no curse on his body. He is safe since his forces don't have any hidden ability for a comeback.

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"I think you're under arrest." Annan said politely, "But you don't seem to be panicking."

"My sin is too heavy. There's no use in panic... You might as well kill me."

The "Father" just smiled. He said respectfully and humbly, "Of course, if you think I'm worthy, you can keep me alive. I can provide you with a contract that can restrain people's souls. If you have a ready-made ritual like this, I can also sign any contract unconditionally."

Accepting a contract at any condition— Annan couldn't help but frown.

Basically, he intended to give up everything to stay alive.

He didn't intend to bargain with Annan, and he didn't ask for more. From this point of view, this old man was wise... He only left two choices for Annan.

Either kill him outright or leave him alive—and he was willing to give everything.

"You seem to have a lot of life experience." The corners of Annan's mouth rose slightly, "Tell me... since you have sacrificed them all, what are you trying to do?"

"That is to ensure that my loyalty to you is of value."

The old man said humbly and respectfully, "To tell you the truth, milord. My apprentices are too ambitious and don't know their limits. If they serve you along with me and obey you, sooner or later, they will betray you."

"But you have just betrayed them," said Annan slowly.

Having summoned the Skeleton Guardian, this showed that those people didn't realize that they had been betrayed until the end.

The Light Chasing Beast's summoning conditions were even harsher. After disregarding those bits and pieces, the rarest material needed was "the whole body fat of a good person who had killed at least ten people".

But the Light Chasing Beast just seemed too weak.

This old man must have seen or known about Annan and the players, including their previous fight with his summons before. That was why he summoned Bane to fight Kafni's lanterns, the Child's [Geo Strike], and the traps. Then, he summoned the undead Skeleton Guardian to fight Jiu Er, who had lifesteal capabilities. Their shield-holding characteristics would hinder the players. Last but not least, the Skeleton Crow forced Citalopram out of the warehouse.

All these summoned creatures had played their role in countering the enemies.

But what about the Light Chasing Beast?

Its only value in existence was to make Kafni's shadow grow more extensive, which allowed her to summon more shadowy tentacles.

But after Annan heard Kafni's words, he understood.

The Light Chasing Beast wasn't an "enemy", but his "gift" to Kafni.

These summons of him were to display his capability to Annan. On the other hand, it also prevented him from being assassinated before Annan talked.

Annan was curious.

When did this old ritualist start preparing to surrender?

"If you can't trust me, you can kill me."

Facing Annan's question, the old man just bowed humbly and replied, "The people from the Rotten Man Church didn't tell me the 'Don Juan Geraint' they asked me to deal with was a leader who could command Noah's family."

"Anything else you want to say?" Annan said calmly, "Your reason hasn't been convincing yet."

"Another reason is that the Skeleton Crow's eyes allow me to see your face. You are not from the Geraint family, so my previous arrangement is voided. I have prepared enough Black Fire here to blast me and you to oblivion. They're right inside the second row of boxes in the door. I have eight boxes of it. Also, there's a ring of rubble tied around each Black Fire barrel. If I want to harm you, I can just let these Skeleton Guardians hold the torches and..."

The old man said humbly, "Of course, if you really can't trust me, you can kill me."

"It's still not enough." Annan narrowed his eyes slightly, "You still have something hiding from me."

In fact, Annan couldn't see what else the old man would try to hide.

He felt that what the old man said was indeed the truth, but its logic confused Annan a little.

It was just Annan's habit of tricking the enemy. If his trick didn't dig any more clues, he might accept this rare talent under him. Of course, he still had to be vigilant and impose restraints.

After all, he who betrayed all his apprentices without hesitation could betray the master.

However, after hearing Annan's words, the "Father" suddenly raised his head and looked at Annan, seemingly pondering on something.

This surprised Annan a little.

Did I... did my trickeries get me more info?

But then, the "Father's" change of tone stunned Annan.

"Looks like you really want to know."

The "Father" sighed. His humble expression had gradually become calm and a little indifferent, "Since you have put it out so blatantly, then I shall spit it out. Well... for the sake of Her Royal Highness Kafni

having already addressed Your Highness directly to you, and for the sake of you seemingly want to spare my life...

"I was sent to Noah by 'the Daughter of the Storm'. I was in Noah a long time ago. I took the commission from the Rotten Man Church to observe the 'Time Stopper Eye's' matter of resurrection and ascendancy into a deity. This is the first mission given to me by the Daughter of the Storm. Now that the mission has been completed and I have sent the letter, my life has completed its worth. But my students don't know this matter.

"Do you understand what I mean when I say it like this, Your Highness?"

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The players quickly eliminated the rest of the Skeleton Guardians.

As for the materials left after the skeletons died, they had all dissipated in the air as there was no way of preserving it.

The only harvest would be the frozen Light Chasing Beast, which Kafni had taken.

The lamp oil in her lantern was made from the Light Chasing Beast's oil paste plus several alchemy stabilizers. Only this oil paste could maintain a stable and bright light in any environment. It also ensured that its light wouldn't be too glaring, nor would the lantern overheat and catch fire.

Since it was already a curse material, it didn't take much of an effort to produce a curse vessel with it.

"I can extract about five barrels of 'white liquid fire' with what we have."

Kafni said to Annan seriously at the time, "I brought the tools, so please leave the refinery work to me. After I'm done, I will keep a barrel for myself and give the rest to you."

I don't mind. Take it all if you need it. That was what Annan intended to say at first.

However, he learned from Kafni that a "barrel" of white liquid fire, which was the size of a jar of tea leaves, could sell for about 40 to 60 pounds.

...That would be 200 gold coins.

Hearing this price, Annan silently swallowed back his words.

His entire wealth didn't even amount to this number yet.

But then Annan thought through it again.

Since it was a valuable curse material, Salvatore might need it.

Anyway, since he wanted to sell it, he might as well sell it to the senior. It would be a win-win situation.

Speaking of which, how much did I owe him again?

Salvatore had never mentioned the money Annan owed, so he couldn't recall the number right now.

Before capturing the ritualist whose alias was "the Father", Annan didn't forget to give out the reward of the time-limited mission.

All the participated players were awarded 200 experience points and 200 affection ratings. This number was enough to entertain those players who came over to “challenge a special game event”.

Suankou and Citalopram's main missions were marked as completed. The total experience points earned from the two missions allowed them to reach Level 7 directly.

They likely had to stay in their teachers' place tonight.

As for their housing issues, they had to wait until the daytime. Only then could Annan go through the official procedure at the city hall and assign them houses from Crimson Water Street. Yup! Annan had distributed the players' houses in Roseburg for free without any costs on affection ratings.

All the players had a 200 m2 house with three bedrooms!

Of course, the internal decorations weren't provided.

This would probably be due to the rare conscience of the game designer. .

After all, he was a transmigrator too.

He knew well what these players wanted.

There were a lot of empty houses in Roseburg anyway.

After repelling the Rotten Man a few days ago, Annan finally had his time to deal with the garrisons in Roseburg, who stayed quiet as if they were deaf and blind.

He had risked his identity being exposed and went to the Green Water Street area in the south part of the city to speak with the commander of the local garrisons.

The commander was polite and didn't trouble Annan. That showed that he didn't know Don Juan Geraint at all.

He explained clearly that they weren't subordinates to Count Geraint but under General Edwin's direct command.

As the Head of the Intelligence Department, Count Geraint was the head of the national spy department, so they weren't allowed to have any form of military power... So, they had direct orders from General Edwin to refrain from following Annan's orders.

The general was only responsible for two matters. First, if the Austere-Winter Dukedom was being invaded, then they would defend Roseburg and ask for reinforcement from the capital as soon as possible.

At the same time, they would intercept any Austere-Winter Dukedom spies coming from the Freezing Water Port and stop the spies from going further south.

When Annan first heard it, he put on a baffled expression.

But you're not stopping me in any way...

I seem to be the spy.

But since then, Annan had learned at least one thing. The general didn't intend to trouble him, nor was he interested in being affiliated with the viscount. So, he wasn't harboring any ill thoughts towards him.

They were just intimidated by the Geraint family... or rather, they didn't want to have any unnecessary contact with the Geraint family to avoid suspicion.

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Thus, things were simple.

Roseburg, which was rebuilt after the war, was like an asymmetrical four-petaled flower.

The Rusty Water Street on the east side was a mix of slum and industrial areas. Crimson Water Street, the largest area on the north side, was a dense residential zone. The smallest zone with the best environment was on the west side, Clear Water Street. It was the municipal area. Green Water Street on the south side was a commercial and entertainment zone with the city square in the middle.

Roseburg used to be a frontier fortress.

Crimson Water Street, in the north of the city, was divided into a military zone for storing garrison supplies and accommodating the garrisoned units during the war. But after the war and the withdrawal of the garrisons, these places were empty. After all, Roseburg was a border city. If there were too many garrisons, it would cause tremendous pressure on the goods transportation and the neighboring country.

The Freezing Water Port was the outpost and a buffer zone for invasions. Basically, there wasn't a need to garrison military units there. In fact, the garrisons stationed in Roseburg only amounted to 2,000 elite soldiers.

After all, Roseburg had underground passages built.

The specific location was at No. 1 Clear Water Street. There was a steam machine similar to a subway in the underground passage, connecting Roseburg to the capital.

Noah Kingdom's most elite Transcended troops could reach any major city in Noah Kingdom within half a day once the order was delivered. In the face of infiltration by small enemy forces, well-trained Transcended were more helpful than soldiers.

Transcended could only be smuggled through underground passages. Therefore, those who had infiltrated must be ordinary people. Let's not forget that Transcended had an overwhelming advantage against ordinary people. Moreover, the Transcended units weren't mobilized in large numbers, but they entered the city through underground passages that ordinary people couldn't use. This made their arrival unnoticed.

Roseburg was much emptier after the garrisons were gradually withdrawn from Roseburg to the inland.

Roseburg's viscount, who was still young at the time, made a wise decision. After obtaining permission from Count Geraint, he recruited construction teams from the inland area with high salaries to convert the military base on the north side into residential houses. At the same time, they focused on constructing commercial districts and selling expensive and high-quality goods and services to these highly paid workers.

The viscount hardly lost anything in the transactions. Some construction teams even stayed in Roseburg for a long time. After all, there were long-term urban reconstruction projects here.

This attracted a large number of residents.

To make room for the soldiers, Roseburg's viscount also provided them with an area of villas in the center of the business district at a low price. His goal was simple — to turn the garrisons into their commercial zone's security guards for free.

Although neither the Barber family nor the Geraint family had direct order over these units, these soldiers were human beings after all. After living in that place for a long time, it would naturally foster a sense of belonging.

The viscount had a smart plan too, or rather a forceful approach. He disbanded the original city guards in the commercial zones and forced the garrisons to provide security. Later, Viscount Barber tried to please them with an extra salary from the municipality, but this request was rejected. Even though Viscount Barber was warned at the time, the matter ended with only a warning.

With the benefits provided already, they could hardly turn him down. After all, this luxury housing wasn't given away for nothing.

Hence, Roseburg had become the most prosperous city in the North Sea Territory with good public security and intensive commercial activities. Many small businesses from out of town would come to the Green Water Street area to purchase a house.

After all, it wasn't easy to find a place that upheld law and order in this era.

Although Roseburg had a steady stream of residents coming in from the inland, the construction speed went ahead of the population growth rate.

Annan immediately used his power to assign all the residential areas under Viscount Barber to the players. The assignment went through in the forms of title deed and house deed that was typically used to repay the feudal lord after a construction team went bankrupt. Although Viscount Barber wasn't the feudal lord, he lived in Roseburg like a feudal lord, so these documents were also handed over to him.

Also, these houses were treated as a batch of “foreclosures”.

This “community” had more than 40 well-maintained villas. Each villa was more than 200 m² and the three-story luxury specification wasn't affordable to ordinary people. It seemed highly probable that the construction team had an ill strategy. The houses weren't sold even though there were a couple of wealthy people who lived in Green Water Street in the south already.

So Annan dismantled the single-family villas into three sections. With that, he could house three players for each villa.

This distribution system could last for a while.

The players were grateful for it too.

Annan didn't pay them a salary last month, so much so that the players even forgot that they had salaries. However, they were pleased with the gifted properties.

Especially, after experiencing the narrow housing of 30 m2 at Freezing Water Port, they were in ecstasy with the new houses that Annan gifted them.

Annan also smiled in satisfaction.

It's so easy to be in good favor of the players...

After earning their place to live, I think they will identify themselves further as a part of this world and have a sense of belonging.

As for now...

After the players returned to their respective homes, Annan took the ritualist to the viscount house.

He got some unexpected information from "the Father".

Annan wondered if Kafni knew the name, but it wasn't appropriate to let the players know these secrets for sure.

"The Father" said to Annan earlier that he came to the Noah Kingdom on orders from the Daughter of the Storm. His objective was to take note of the resurrection of Michelangelo.

Annan once heard the alias "the Daughter of the Storm" from Old Bread.

It wasn't a deity's name, but a title like "Time Stopper Eye".

It was a title that only those with Gold Rank could have!

And, The owner of the title "the Daughter of the Storm" was Maria Austere-Winter — Annan Austere-Winter's sister.

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Annan still put iron gloves on "the Father" as a security measure.

This was a unique method of restraining a ritualist.

No one knew what bizarre rituals they had mastered... and they might launch a sudden attack with some odd items.

There was a solution to this problem.

The tool targeted specifically in restraining the ritualist was the "iron gloves".

It worked similarly to handcuffs but with an additional iron that fixed the joints in its place. The knuckles of the iron glove were slightly bent, neither touching nor completely facing each other. In the end, the prisoner couldn't stretch out his fingers.

This posture contradicted what a ritual required. Since the handcuffs locked their wrists, their fingers couldn't move freely.

Only a restraint like this could halt any plans a ritualist secretly harbored.

Of course, the easier and safer way was to chop off their hands and cut their tongues.

But Annan wasn't going to do that.

He had some use for the ritualist.

Annan sat opposite the ritualist.

"The Father" had his hands restrained, sitting at the dining table with Annan.

The chef had already prepared dinner for Annan.

Annan politely poured a glass of wine for the two of them, but the ritualist didn't seem to have the intention of enjoying the food and drinks.

The Father acted naturally and sat quietly opposite Annan in the face of a kind treatment.

"I think you probably know who I am." Annan took a bite of the roast and stared at the old ritualist, "You know what I mean."

"That's natural, Your Highness Annan." The Father lowered his head and replied softly, "I saw you a few times when you were young."

"How young was I?" Annan asked rhetorically. He narrowed his eyes slightly as if a little displeased. But in reality, he was probing the ritualist.

The old ritualist didn't look up at Annan but continued to answer, "I think it's about when you were 6 years old... and when you were 8 years old, we met again once. Not long after that, I came to Noah. After that, I'm only in correspondence with 'the Daughter of the Storm' by mail."

Annan was silent and made a quick calculation in his mind.

This body of Annan Austere-Winter was 14 years old this year. Maria participated in Michelangelo's ritual five years ago.

It's probably after that event...

Oh, that's great.

It's better that he doesn't know much about me.

"Maria..." Annan's expression was a little complicated, but he hesitated to speak.

He looked at the old ritualist and said slowly, "How do you view me?"

"You will be our future Grand Duke, the King of Wolves..." The Father paused for a while and then said gently, "The only heir to the Dragon Throne."

Sure enough, he knows a lot. Annan came into deep thought, but he didn't show it on his face.

He frowned slightly and looked at the old ritualist seriously, "That's not what I meant... You know what I'm trying to say."

As for what it is?

Oh, I don't know myself.

Annan muttered to himself silently.

But hearing Annan's words, the old ritualist was startled.

He raised his head as if it was his first time seeing the future Grand Duke and scrutinized Annan.

Annan looked straight into the old ritualist's eyes without fear.

After a while, the old ritualist gradually withdrew his gaze and lowered his gaze again.

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"I thought you had given up already." The old ritualist muttered softly.

But Annan didn't respond to it.

Seeing that there was no reply, the old ritualist sighed and continued, "It seems that you have succeeded.

"It is indeed Reverse Inscription. I can sense that you have resolved the curse of Winter Heart. Your Highness is on the right way."

"The right way..." Annan murmured and repeated, shaking his head slightly as if silently denying something.

His gazes seemed complex; he sighed slowly and heavily.

The old ritualist who just raised his head saw this scene.

He could only comfort, "You are indeed right. During the year you went to find the Silent Lady, didn't you avoid that catastrophe? It's all destined."

"...Tell me in detail." Annan was silent for a while before replying in a low volume.

The old ritualist also submitted and persuaded softly, "I think you should have heard more or less about it... In the past year, there have been many disasters in Austere-Winter. I don't know if you know... Two months ago, the Rotten Man came again. He came to seek you again.

"At that time, the Old Grandmother was still in her Wymrest. Her Highness Maria was still cultivating at Storm Cliff, and His Highness Dmitri was studying in the Howling White Tower. So the only one in the Throne Room was your father..."

"Father..." Annan's voice trembled slightly.

The old ritualist was silent for a while. He then replied, "Grand Duke's current state isn't quite optimistic. If you have a chance, I still hope you can go back and visit him... I apologize, Your Highness. I shouldn't have said that given my duty, but I just—"

"I can understand." Annan nodded slightly and replied softly.

According to the information he learned, Ivan Austere-Winter was a great monarch, although he was a strict father. He was known for his justice and frugality. Although he was the Grand Duke, he lived and ate with the people. In Austere-Winter Dukedom, where food was scarce, he never wasted food.

Among the people, Ivan's reputation was outstanding.

Hence, it became normal for the old ritualist to have such thoughts.

“And after that?” Annan pressed on.

The old man paused before continuing, “I don't know what happened after that. Soon after, Austere-Winter has wholly blocked off any news coming from it. But as far as I know, the Rotten Man took a 14 years old child away at the time and forced him to jump off into the Black Sea.

“I think that should be your stand-in... After all, you left Austere-Winter a year ago. Very few people know about this.”

What? Did I leave Austere-Winter a year ago?

Annan frowned slightly and soon relaxed.

It turned out that the Silent Lady engraved the Reverse Inscription on Annan in person.

Judging from these words, it should be that the Young Annan ran away from home and planned to find Silent Lady by himself, asking for Reverse Inscription to resolve the curse from Winter Heart.

But the position he was lying at when he woke up did seem to be floating from the other side of the Black Sea. A few days ago, when Rotten Man met Annan, he did admit that he pushed Annan into the Black Sea. But, he wouldn't have mistaken the wrong person.

Could it be that at that time when Annan quietly returned to the Austere-Winter Capital, the Rotten Man who trailed him noticed him and threw him into the sea?

Annan realized some details of the story.

If even “the Father” didn't know that he had returned to Austere-Winter Dukedom, it meant that most people probably didn't know about his return. Therefore, this matter should have been kept secret.

But Rotten Man knew about this very early.

What happened?

“I want to know more about Maria.” Annan asked in a low volume, “And, what should I call you? So do I just call you 'the Father'?”

“No, no... If Her Royal Highness Maria found out about it, she would have me skinned alive.”

The old ritualist smiled wryly and shook his head again and again, “You can just call me by my name. I'm Vasily Manning. You should just call me Vasily or Old Vasily.”

“...Manning?” Annan repeated slowly.

He had a vague memory of this surname.

Vasily nodded, “You must know my brother.

“He's Merlin Manning, who used to be the Index Finger of the Right Hand. He's my brother.”

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Austere-Winter Dukedom, Province of St. Alexis, Pillar of Poison Fern.

Bella landed on all fours and sprinted on the ground.

She wasn't a human but a werewolf.

Her spine wasn't in the shape of a human but in the form of a wolf. Her limbs were deformed into animal claws at the elbow and knee joints. She had gray-white fur on her four feet.

She also had short gray-white hair, making her hard to spot with her white leather armor due to the snow.

She sprinted like a thunderbolt even in the snow, reaching a whopping 80 kilometers per hour. The protruding stones on the ground, the steep cliffs, and the broken stone pillars covered with dark green ferns could not hinder her in any way.

However, her dark golden pupils were filled with fear.

“You're the only one left, defector.” An indifferent and hollow voice sounded in the air, with heavy echoes.

Bella's hairs stood up immediately.

She changed her direction without hesitation, and she jumped up to a steep rock pillar 9 meters high.

Her silver collar shone brightly at the same time.

Countless black runes flowed out from the silver collar, forming hideous battle paints on her face and collarbone.

As the curse marks emerged, her figure suddenly became lighter.

Bella leaped from the top of the rock pillar covered with poisonous ferns without hesitation. Her feet stepped on the air, and ripples appeared. Consequently, her speed had doubled.

The wind visible to the naked eye formed a cloak behind her—supporting her body, allowing her to move freely and silently in the air.

Only “Windrunners” could achieve such a feat.

But at this moment, the sky went dark quickly.

Black clouds appeared; its speed in obscuring the sun was much faster than Bella's speed in the air.

The howling wind came fanning on her face. Then, with the snow on the ground levitated due to the wind, a blizzard wall was formed, confining her in the core of the wind cyclone.

Bella looked up in horror.

Under the dark clouds, a short white-robed girl levitated in the air.

There was no emotion in her icy blue pupils. Instead, her half-open eyes were filled with deity-like indifference.

The long, supple, waist-length hair was no longer the harmless black color it had been when she was a child. Instead, there was a blue hue on her silvery-white hair because of her bloodline power.

She wore a white, tulle skirt-like robe with a hollowed-out silver crown on her head. On her slender and bare ankles, fine silver scales surfaced on her skin.

Of course, Bella knew who this formidable lady was — Princess Maria Austere-Winter. She was the Grand Duke of Austere-Winter's only daughter.

She was also the current supreme leader of the Transcended institution “Winter's Hand” of the Austere-Winter Dukedom.

A monster who had attained Gold Rank at the age of 17.

There was no escape.

In desperation, Bella let out a long wolf howl.

Her body enlarged rapidly and soon turned into a 2 meter tall, standing giant wolf.

She showed no signs of timidity and bared her fangs at “the Daughter of the Storm”.

But the next thing she did was to pull off her own tongue.

Facing a Gold Rank Edict Wizard, she didn't have the confidence to control her body.

In the face of Bella's futile resistance, Maria had no expression on her face.

She acted like she saw nothing happen at all..

It was not arrogance or contempt, but sheer indifference.

“You're not spilling it out... Fine.” Maria whispered, “Then, you shall [commit suicide].”

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There was magic in her cold voice.

Bella's right hand reached out at lightning speed without warning, plunging into her own heart, and took it out.

Maria raised her head slightly in silence, watching the vigor escaping from Bella's pupils. The victim gradually fell from the air.

At the next moment, Maria disintegrated in countless snowflakes, merging into the whistling snowstorm around her.

The snowstorm drowned Bella's corpse, making it plunge into the ground swiftly through the falling snow. Then, as the storm gradually subsided, she was deeply buried beneath the surface.

In the Austere-Winter Dukedom, there might be Transcended corpses buried in every patch of thick snow.

Another violent wind came, and Maria's body emerged from the pillar that Bella was standing on previously.

She pulled out a pure white jade card from her pocket — the initially empty card was suddenly filled with writing.

She looked at the letter from Vasily Manning carefully. Her long fluttering hair behind her gradually calmed down.

The Man in the Mirror?

As Maria silently recited the name of the new deity, there was no emotional fluctuation.

So, Michelangelo has succeeded.

That means... one can still ascend into a deity without the Book of Truth.

As long as I became a deity...

She threw her gaze into the distance.

At the end of where she was looking, it was the extreme north of the Austere-Winter Dukedom... That was a place termed to be the end of human civilization.

The materialized nightmare, the infinity of the Gray Mists, and the undead that lay within.

—As long as I become a deity, I can freely step into the Gray Mists.

“Annan...” She closed her eyes and murmured in a low volume.

A rare moment of tranquility occurred in her mind that pushed away the countless negative emotions that previously filled her heart.

“Good news.” After digesting the message, Maria replied indifferently, “Get ready to return home, Vasily.

“A ship with a blue canvas will arrive at Freezing Water Port in 10 days. You shall leave by that ship.”

Then, she sent the message out.

But soon, a new reply appeared on it.

It wasn't the usual “Understood” reply she was familiar with.

It was intelligence on her younger brother, who had been missing for more than a year.

“So, Annan is on the Noah continent?”

What great news.

Annan isn't missing, nor did the Rotten Man manage to take his life...

But soon, her heart was filled with intense restlessness, anxiety, and paranoia.

So, Annan has also become a Transcended.

But, how does he return home?

If the Noah Kingdom learned that Annan was trapped in their country, would he be forced to do something? Would he be imprisoned? Would he be tortured? Would Annan be detained in exchange for benefits from the Austere-Winter Dukedom? Would he be tortured in exchange for information? Would the Rotten Man go for his life? Could the Old Grandmother find Annan?

Her calm mood was instantly disrupted, and many possibilities that made her tremble and made her uneasy kept emerging in her heart.

“Annan...AnnanAnnanAnnanAnnanAnnanAnnan...” She repeated in murmurs.

Finally, Maria broke free from the restlessness that kept rising in her heart.

I shall tell my father about this no matter what.

...Do I need to return home?