

Sorcerer's Handbook

Chapter 161: Moonshadow

The living room was filled with the upbeat melodies of pop music. Emma had a peculiar taste, enjoying these boisterous tunes. Even worse was her singing along in her less-than-stellar voice, an act that felt like a double taboo.

"No one can share this with me, hiding in the quilt, playing~"

With a clatter, the door to the storeroom opened. Emma, who was just singing, immediately put on a straight face and silently placed two plates in front of Igor.

On the left plate was dog food, and on the right, clear water.

Igor looked up at Emma, timidly raised his right hand, to which Emma nodded, and he rushed off to the washroom.

When he returned, he obediently lay on the floor, eating just like a pet. Igor didn't feel any psychological pressure from this kind of humiliation that didn't touch his interests. It was unable to scratch the soul of the Trickster.

However, Emma was quite satisfied, crouching next to him and saying, "I found some information. Observation Point 53 has been confirmed as a complete virtual gateway."

Igor looked up sharply, "Then—"

SMACK!

Emma suddenly slapped Igor's head hard, creating a loud noise. Her pretty and cute face was covered in shadow, appearing fierce and violent.

Igor obediently raised his hand, and Emma immediately broke into a smile, "You can speak."

"When will the first exploration of Observation Point 53 take place?"

"Tonight, 0 o'clock on May 2nd, when the Blood Moon dims." Emma said, "The Lakeview War Zone has transferred a group of adventurers over there. I've prepared the Adventurer's Standard Outfit and a bicycle for you. There are still 5 hours before midnight. You have enough time to get there. As for whether you can blend into the team of adventurers, it's up to you."

Igor was taken aback. He felt that Emma would help him, but he didn't expect her to arrange everything so perfectly.

Whether it was living in the storeroom, eating dog food, or wearing a collar, Igor could resist. But he chose to appease Emma because she was his hope to escape from the Blood Moon. Offending her would only hasten his own doom.

Not to mention information about Observation Point 53. Although Emma had to tell Igor due to contractual limitations, the timing was at her discretion.

If Emma told Igor at 11 o'clock, he would miss the best opportunity to escape—the first wave of exploration of the virtual gateway. This would be the time with the most loopholes and the easiest to blend in!

Emma not only informed Igor in time but also helped him prepare to blend into the team of adventurers. Igor couldn't help but feel touched, "Thank you, thank you for helping me so much."

Emma was slightly surprised, then showed a sweet smile, her wolf tail wagging triumphantly, "You're welcome!"

Suddenly, she pulled Igor up, "Come on, let's eat."

"Ah?" Igor looked at the dog food in the plate, "Am I not supposed to eat this?"

"Good kids don't need to eat snacks." Emma let him sit down, "I'll make something delicious for you."

Although she said that, Emma's cooking skills only went as far as 'I know how to use this kitchen utensil'. She took out some semi-cooked food from the fridge, heated it up, and put it on the table. But for Igor, who had been eating dog food for several days, being able to sit and eat with a spoon felt like a high-class restaurant treatment.

Just as Igor was about to start eating, he saw Emma folding her hands in prayer, "Thank you for the sun and rain given by the Blood Moon, which brings us plentiful food from the earth."

Igor noticed Emma sneaking glances at him. After a moment's hesitation, he also followed her in prayer before the meal. Emma was very satisfied, and while eating, she asked, "We haven't gambled in a long time, do you want to bet on something?"

Igor: "But we're eating right now."

"Gambling with food, what an idea! Igor, you're so clever, come up with something fun!" Emma said excitedly.

Igor did not want to oppose her here. After pondering a moment, he said, "Alright, the game is this: we each take turns eating 1 to 3 bites of food. Whoever happens to eat the last bite wins."

"What an interesting bet!" Emma said, "What should we wager?"

"A question," Igor replied. "The loser must answer a question honestly."

"No problem! Haha, Igor, you're bound to lose this time. My record is one Lala Fatty per bite!"

Just like before, Emma never cared about the size of the bet. But the key to winning this game wasn't the size of one's appetite, but rather the order of who went first and their calculating abilities. Under Igor's simple operation, Emma ate most of the food, but the last bite was taken by Igor.

Emma patted her belly contentedly and sighed, "Ah, I lost again. That makes the score 185 losses to 12 wins..."

Igor, having changed into his Adventurer's Standard Outfit, pulled up his face mask and put on his hood. He looked at Emma with some surprise, "You actually kept track of our betting tally?"

"Of course, how could I forget such an important thing?" Emma casually wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, dug out a key from her pocket, and tossed it to Igor. "The bike is at spot no. 16 downstairs."

Igor caught the key, "I'm sorry to trouble you. If I'm caught, the Memory Master will find evidence of your help in my memory. I don't have time to find the Memory Master to erase my memory..."

"It's fine." Emma waved her hand dismissively. "Isn't it normal for friends to help each other?"

Friends...?

A smirk curled the corner of Igor's mouth. "But I'm a criminal, and you're a Blood Mad Hunter."

"So what?" Emma cocked her head at Igor, her feet curled up on the chair, her tail bending inward, a look of confusion on her face.

"You're a criminal, I'm a Blood Mad Hunter, but what does that have to do with us being friends? When we play together, we're just playing a gambling game, not a game of hunter and criminal..."

"I've never heard of someone locking their friend in a storeroom and feeding them dog food," Igor said coldly.

"You're a rude, bad kid. Isn't it normal to be punished?" Emma retorted righteously, "You still haven't admitted your mistake!"

What mistake should I admit? I was locked in a storeroom on the first day!

Unreasonable, incomprehensible.

Igor shook his head, went to the entrance to put on his boots, and Emma came over saying, "Are you leaving now? Be careful on the road."

"Right, I won the bet just now. As the winner, I have the right to ask you a question, and you have to answer me honestly."

"Go ahead."

"Was I arrested by the Heresy Court because you reported me?"

Emma blinked, her face showing confusion.

"You were arrested by the Heresy Court? I was wondering why you disappeared for over a year... Wait a minute, are you saying you're an escaped convict? So you really were a criminal?"

Igor was shocked, "Didn't you see my wanted poster?"

"The hunt for the escaped convict was the captain's responsibility. I've been in charge of deputy mayor's security work recently..." Emma shook her head, "As for your arrest by the Heresy Court, I didn't even know who you were, how could I report you... Wait a minute."

"Come to think of it, I was suddenly congratulated by everyone a year ago. They said that I volunteered to be the bait and lured a cunning Trickster into a trap. Even the captain praised me, treated me to a grand meal. I didn't know what had happened, and I just ate the meal in a daze, and even got promoted..."

Although it sounded unbelievable, Igor felt that Emma was not lying.

From the moment he met her, Emma seemed to be a very cute and naive type, which was why Igor had exploited her to accumulate a contract time of 9000 minutes. He had seen that she was easy to take advantage of.

In his heart, Igor didn't want to believe that Emma was the one who reported him, otherwise he wouldn't have asked the question, because it meant a serious flaw in his judgment of people.

If he couldn't even distinguish whether a client was a dog or a wolf, he would basically lose his qualifications as a trickster.

Luckily, Emma didn't disappoint him. She was indeed a natural fool, and the Heresy Court had just happened to catch him, not because he had actively walked into Emma's trap. The only person in the world who could deceive him was still that underdeveloped cult leader.

Thinking of this, Igor couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief and smile: "Thank you, Emma."

But Emma was not satisfied and asked: "Don't you have anything else to say to me? Like an apology or something..."

"I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble..."

"I've said it's okay, not that!"

So what was it then? Even as a Spirit Art Master, Igor still couldn't figure out what Emma was thinking, so he simply pushed the door and left: "Thank you for your care, I hope we have the chance to meet again in the future."

"I'll definitely win next time!" Emma shouted loudly.

On the way out of the apartment, Igor let out a long sigh, sweeping away the gloom of being locked up these past few days, and his steps became lighter.

Emma, besides having a big temper and a bad habit of treating people like dogs, was also a good client. Given enough time, Igor was even confident he could develop Emma into his own undercover agent in the Heresy Court.

After all, Emma surprisingly valued friendship. She wore her emotions on her sleeve, was straightforward in her thinking, didn't mind breaking rules, and acted just like a child...

Igor found the bike Emma had prepared. Just as he was about to leave, he suddenly heard Emma's voice from above.

"Next time you ask for help, say 'please' first!" Emma shouted from the balcony without any restraint: "Don't be so rude in the future!"

Igor was slightly taken aback, he could only nod quickly and ride away from the awkward scene of the incident.

He wondered why Emma had suddenly said such a thing, and it took him a while to realize that when he first found Emma, he indeed didn't say 'please'.

Igor found this both irritating and amusing. Could it be that Emma was angry because he didn't say 'please' when he initially told her "I command you to help me escape from the Blood Moon Realm"?

"You're a rude little brat, isn't it normal to be punished?"

Screech!

Igor abruptly braked and looked back at the apartment building where Emma lived.

He recalled some information about the Moonshadow Tribe.

The members of the Moonshadow Tribe came from two sources. Apart from adults who became priests through church exams, there was another way – when the Beloved Church evaluated the potential of babies, they would keep the children whose talents most suited the Moonshadow Tribe and send them directly to the church's foster home for cultivation.

Unlike most foster homes, the church's foster home was completely closed and did not accept social supervision.

Regular foster homes, good or bad, had to install cameras to allow the public to see the situation inside. They could have child fights, but they absolutely did not allow staff to physically punish the children.

You could educate through verbal warnings, resource bias, and even collective isolation, but you could not directly harm the children or deprive them of their freedom; the children had the right to refuse.

Because of the closed nature of the church's foster home, many people suspected that it was conducting militarized cultivation.

However, the Moonshadow priests who come out of the Beloved Church's Foster Home often dispel people's doubts. Compared to the vast majority of people in the Blood Moon Realm, the Moonshadow priests are so pure, adorable, passionate, innocent, diligent, and polite – they are like grown-up little angels.

In passing, the Heresy Court is only responsible for hunting down evil. If a Blood Moon citizen encounters issues like neighbor conflicts, lost pets, a light bulb stuck in the

mouth, tongue stuck to a rail, body stuck in a washing machine, the Heresy Court is of no use. The correct approach is to seek the Church.

As long as they receive a request for help, no matter what time it is, the nearest church will dispatch a Moonshadow priest to assist. Moonshadow priests are always cheerful and enthusiastic, never shy away from trouble, and face everything with patience. This has fostered the concept of 'seek the Church for trouble' among Blood Moon people.

Almost everyone has received help from a Moonshadow priest, and no one dislikes them. Currently, 60% of the Blood Moon citizens are timely worshippers of the Church, the majority of whom are influenced by the Moonshadow priests. Therefore, they firmly believe that the Blood Moon Supreme, whom the Moonshadow priests pray to, indeed exists with ultimate benevolence and kindness.

One of the main reasons Fernand Snow's speech didn't cause much commotion is the existence of the Moonshadow priests. If the benefits harvested from them were given to the sacred bloodline, everyone would undoubtedly be furious. But if it's between the sacred bloodline and the Moonshadow, people hesitate – sacrificing for the Moonshadow seems more acceptable.

There's a saying in Caimon City: The faux top-tier is the Jade Garden; the real top-tier is the Foster Home of the Church.

As for the likes of Langna, calling him a werewolf is quite accurate. His existence only tarnishes the name of Moonshadow.

At this moment, Igor suddenly recalled his conversation with Langna before his jailbreak.

"The Beloved Church actually raised a Moonshadow like you, it's really strange."

"What's strange to me is that the Church didn't raise any other werewolves."

So that's what it meant...

Actually, Igor should have guessed it earlier – how could an adult be afraid of being locked in a storeroom? Igor wasn't afraid even without a Chip. If Igor had a Chip, he could even carry out Canopy anonymous fraud in the storeroom.

Only naive children would fear such confinement punishment.

And moreover, Emma clearly didn't have a dog at home, so why did she have dog food? She even pointed at the dog food and said it was a snack.

Adding to that her unusual emphasis on politeness and her childlike character, the truth was becoming clear.

Igor looked up at the slowly rising Blood Moon, shook his head gently, and pedaled hard on his bike to escape.

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Chapter 162: Authentic! Fantasy! Adventurer!

“Adventurer Code Name?”

“Death Maniac Swordswoman.”

“Gender?”

“Male.”

The record keeper at the camp paused for a moment, his face unchanged. “Please read and confirm adherence to the ‘Adventurer Agreement No. 430’ and the ‘Secrecy Agreement’. Here is the printout...”

“Accepted.”

“Please show your adventurer’s badge.”

Ashe, wearing a mask, pulled out a round badge and slid it across the glass screen of the check-in device. The screen lit up green. The recorder nodded, “Registration completed, you may enter.”

Without any hindrance, Ashe easily stepped into the Observation Point No. 53 Camp. A crude earthen wall that was thirty meters high isolated the inside from the outside. At the very center of the camp was a tall tower, and atop it was a deep blue swirl, Ashe's target for this trip: the Level 2 Virtual Realm Turbulent Passage.

All vegetation in the camp had been cleared, replaced by rows of benches. Many adventurers gathered to chat, pulling out bottles of wine to discuss the wide world, then popping a piece of Moon Sugar into their mouths and convulsing — drinking and eating sugar was a heavenly joy.

From time to time, there were shouts:

"Flame Squad, come this way!"

"Wolves, gather here!"

"Falgar, Falgar, where is Falgar from the Coffin Bearer team?"

Apart from these noisy individuals, there were also many lone wolves like Ashe, wearing standard cloaks and masks, mysteriously observing with cold eyes.

Such chaos was the diverse representation of adventurers in the war zone.

When Ashe looked at the adventurer information on the Canopy, he couldn't help but applaud the Blood Moon Realm's superb level of exploitation and oppression — because under the social atmosphere of 'human rights and freedom' and 'racial equality', the military expenses required by conscription were just too high. So, the Blood Moon Realm decided to simply get rid of its army!

The Blood Moon Realm disbanded its army 300 years ago and entirely switched to the adventurer system.

The so-called adventurer system involves the war zone providing tasks, adventurers accepting and completing these tasks, and then receiving rewards from the war zone. The relationship between the war zone and the adventurers is only contractual, with the adventurers free to come and go. In theory, this could indeed share some of the army's duties.

The greatest benefit of the adventurer system is naturally not having to provide training costs, not having to deal with logistics, and not having to offer compensation.

It's not the war zone's concern if an adventurer dies. If an adventurer doesn't want to work, they can go. There are plenty of people behind them eager to accept tasks. The war zone doesn't have to worry about 'human rights', after all, the relationship is not even that of an employer-employee, but a temporary contractual one.

Simply put, because forming an army requires treating soldiers as people, it's too expensive; recruiting adventurers only requires treating adventurers as tools. There's no need to waste money on 'race', 'human rights', and other extraneous factors, thus significantly reducing costs.

In the first year of implementing the adventurer system, the Blood Moon Realm saved 80% of its military expenditure.

And the most wonderful part is, switching from conscription to the adventurer system had no negative impact on the Blood Moon Realm.

The reason is that the Blood Moon Realm has no hard military needs for suppressing rebellions, defending borders, or disaster relief.

There's no need to suppress rebellions, especially when considering the 'anti-love education' implemented by the Blood Moon Realm. The chip at the back of everyone's neck makes large-scale rebellions impossible.

There are no natural disasters, the meteorological bureau takes care of everything before a disaster could happen. As for the virtual realm disasters caused by sorcerers, naturally, sorcerers have to solve them, the army can't help with that.

As for the borders, in the words of the Canopy, 'the Blood Moon Supreme has already helped us resist the external enemies', so there's no need for an army stationed at the borders.

Maintaining public safety, capturing criminals, preventing cults, and other affairs are the responsibility of the Heresy Court.

Thus, the military was left with only two functions: emergency troops and suppression of the Abyss scattered across the landscape. These responsibilities could be entirely shouldered by adventurers. Therefore, even though efficiency hadn't improved after the military system transitioned to the adventurer system, it hadn't decreased either. Groups of adventurers subsequently took the stage in history.

As a violent organization, adventurers were a diverse group. Among them were combat sorcerers who devoted themselves to protect the Blood Moon and hone their skills. There were also opportunists seeking to gain resources from the war zones, and even wanted criminals who sought refuge and survival in the war zones.

Yes, war zones were willing to shelter wanted criminals, and the Heresy Court wouldn't go into war zones to arrest people. For villains who had committed heinous crimes in the city and had nowhere else to go, the war zones were essentially their only sanctuary.

For instance, the Woodpecker Gang controlled by Sylin had a branch in the Lakeview War Zone, which specialized in taking in members who had caused trouble. If 'Golden Mouth' Ronat hadn't been captured, he would likely have gone to Lakeview to become an adventurer.

When Ashe heard about the adventurer system while in prison from Igor, he asked if they could possibly make a living in the war zones after escaping. He dreamt of embarking on an exciting adventure, earning merit while clearing their names, and putting this strange cult leader back on the path of a fantastical journey.

However, Igor coldly dismissed this fantasy—while the war zone didn't care whether you were a heinous villain or an offender guilty of racial discrimination due to bad breath, you had to have a Chip.

Without a Chip, wanted criminals couldn't even enter the 'Safe Rest Area' provided by the war zones. As the name suggests, this area would activate the 'Attack Prohibition' in the adventurers' Chips, preventing any attacks within the safe zone.

Ignoring the fact that Ashe was unwilling to implant a Chip, even if he were willing, he couldn't find a way. Implantation of Chips was a monopoly of the Beloved Church; even the underground black market only provided purification services, not implantation.

Thus, the five major criminals who escaped from prison had no way back after their Chips were removed.

Furthermore, life as an adventurer wasn't as rosy as Ashe imagined. The war zones only accepted Merit as currency. Regardless of how much money you had, you couldn't live comfortably in the war zones—in fact, you might be fleeced. In the end, you'd have to take on tasks, like monster hunting in the sewer abyss for a living.

According to statistics, only 25% of new adventurers could survive in the war zones for a year. Although most people returned to the city to work due to an inability to persist, this survival rate was still horrifying.

To accommodate such a diverse group of adventurers, the war zones also introduced the 'Adventurer Merit' system. All mission rewards were Merits, and adventurers could exchange Merits for any rewards in the war zones, including but not limited to spirits, Miracle Techniques, Faction Knowledge, and so on.

The ingenious part was that Merits were not registered on the Chips, but on the adventurer badges that they carried with them.

Adventurer badges were anonymous.

As long as you could present an adventurer badge, the war zone would exchange your Merits for rewards, regardless of whether the badge was yours, found, or... taken by killing someone.

It was only when Ashe discovered this mechanism that he fully understood the Blood Moon Realm's intentions in implementing the adventurer system. With this method alone, large-scale violent groups were fundamentally dissolved in the war zones. As long as the war zone could provide Merit exchange rewards, suspicion would always linger among adventurers.

In the Blood Moon Realm, which even banned familial units, how could they allow the existence of a violent group like the military?

Although large groups didn't exist, small adventurer teams of five or six people were countless. In this camp alone, there were seven or eight such teams.

Seeing these 'Flame Adventurers', 'Hungry Wolf Team', 'Gale Brigade', Ashe couldn't help but tear up – he also had a bit of longing for this kind of fantasy adventuring life, to form an adventure group with a few like-minded buddies, embark on an unknown journey, experience epic stories, and then retire and get married before the age of 35, retiring to the countryside.

Ideally, he hoped to meet a beautiful, sexy lover, a virtuous and caring wife, a red-faced acquaintance, and a vibrant, cute girlfriend.

And it would be even better if they could avoid meeting each other.

That's what a real fantasy story is.

But now he was caught → escaped from prison → fled the country, this isn't a fantasy story, this is clearly a cops and robbers story!

There's no need to cross worlds; he could experience this process just by embezzling public funds from the company!

Just as Ashe was once again enveloped in the melancholy of adulthood, a friction seemed to arise among the adventurers.

A cloaked, masked adventurer claimed that he had lost his badge and suspected that the three people who had just passed by him had stolen it. Naturally, the three denied it and were even willing to be searched by the masked one.

As the masked one searched the first person, the first person raised his hands, holding the adventurer's badge in his right hand, and threw it to the second person in the masked one's blind spot.

Everyone around saw this scene, but no one spoke, all just watching the drama unfold. Those with malicious intentions need not mention, even those with a good heart would not lend a hand – even an important badge could be stolen, that's better to give up the adventurer's career, and obediently go back to the city to become a cog in the wheel.

The masked one went to search the second person, the second person also raised his hands, and threw the badge to the third person. When the masked one went to search the third person, the third person threw the badge to the first person.

The badge was equivalent to having circulated among the three, causing the onlookers to burst into laughter.

The three were purely trying to make fun of the masked one. In the end, the masked one got nothing and could only admit his bad luck and leave.

Just as Ashe thought this was just a usual social beatdown, the three suddenly screamed.

"Where's my badge? How did my badge disappear?"

"Mine is gone too! Damn, it must have been that Goblins bastard!"

"Where did he go?! Find him quick, my badge has the merit of buying a spirit!"

The three were so angry that they were looking everywhere for the masked one, but there were too many people wearing cloaks and masks here. The masked one blended into the crowd as soon as he dived into it, how could they find him? They even targeted Ashe, who stared back at them fearlessly.

"Hahaha, I'm dying of laughter, I just saw him take your badges when he was searching you, but I didn't say anything, hahaha!"

"What are you glaring at, you can't even steal better than others, are you still here to lose face? Are you looking for a fight?"

"We've had enough laughter, you can leave now."

The members of the surrounding adventurer groups loudly mocked them, laughter was heard everywhere, the three were so angry that their shoulders were shaking, they were so aggrieved they were about to cry. They could only whisper a few harsh words that no one could hear, and slinked away to the edge of the area.

At this point, the Goblins in a suit walked onto the stage. He was tall and handsome, with a pair of silver-framed glasses on his nose, and a top hat covering his hairless head, suddenly looking like a glowing green elf.

A mere goblins exuded an elegant aura (Ashe was completely unaware that he was being racially discriminatory), it was unknown whether it was plastic surgery or natural – anyway, the genetic optimization technology of the Blood Moon Realm was the best in the world.

“Good evening adventurers, I am the clerk for this mission, Gibot Mantelas.” The Goblins calmly said: “There are only 90 minutes left until midnight, the camp is now closed, we will now enter the combat preparation stage.”

“Being in charge of the foreign invasion operation, a risk-free endeavor that only serves to polish one’s political resume, it appears this Goblins is a candidate for the council.”

A sudden commentary on politics, quite familiar to Ashe, came from the side. He turned his head in puzzlement to glance at the cloaked adventurers beside him, but he couldn’t ascertain who was speaking.

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Chapter 163: What a Mess

The Goblins continued, “I won’t beat around the bush. The Virtual Gateway we found this time is a level 2 gateway. The highest single unit of arcane energy it can accommodate is the Two Wings Fully Spread. Therefore, this operation is not a kingdom war, but a low-intensity hunting festival.”

“The operation requires groups of five. You can form your groups freely, or be randomly assigned—don’t interrupt, let me finish—The reason why it is necessary to be in a group of five is because the Moonshadow Priest will perform the Blood Moon Blessing on you.”

“The blessing is cast on groups of five. It includes enhancements such as increased speed, ghost form, efficiency, self-healing, hardening, mental resistance, featherweight suspension, and more than a dozen others. Most importantly, it will establish a ‘Life Link’ amongst your squad members that lasts for 48 hours. If anyone doesn’t need the Blood Moon Blessing, raise your hand.”

The adventurers who initially had some doubts suddenly fell silent, even Ashe was tempted. The multi-fold enhancements were appealing, but the ‘Life Link’ was too enticing. In the ‘Event 422’, medics used this miracle to treat hundreds of people, so Ashe easily found information about this miracle in the Canopy.

As the name suggests, this miracle creates a life link among a group of people. For instance, if there were 50 healthy individuals and 50 injured ones, once the link is established, the life force of the healthy individuals would continuously flow into the injured ones, enabling them to heal at a rapid pace.

Moreover, as long as the link exists, the injured will never die from their injuries. It’s like locking onto their last drop of blood!

In times of medical staff shortage, this miracle can save a vast number of lives in a timely manner, buying time for emergency treatment.

When used in an adventuring squad, it serves as the best life-saving charm because it’s a passive effect. Even if other members are unwilling, they still have to supply life force. Even the most selfish adventurer would not refuse an extra layer of insurance for themselves.

Seeing no one raise their hands, the Goblins continued, “Once I finish speaking, you may start forming your groups. For those who do not wish to form groups freely, we will provide random assignment. But let me clarify one thing—if you join a random team, you will be among the first groups to enter the gateway. Free-form groups will enter after the random ones.”

Ashe’s eyes flickered, understanding that the random teams were expected to be the cannon fodder.

Although it has been confirmed that this is a complete Virtual Gateway, more than a day has passed since the ‘rabbit’ returned. It’s hard to say if there will be unexpected circumstances on the other side of the gateway. Compared to free-form teams with team cooperation capabilities, the random teams are naturally more suitable to act as scouts and break the ice.

No wonder they are given the 'Life Link'. It's hoped they can last longer to buy time for the adventurers that follow.

"Of course, the teams that enter first get extra rewards," the Goblins said calmly. "For now, we plan for the first three batches of random teams to enter, with five teams in each batch, and a 3-minute interval between each batch. The first batch of teams gets 300 Pioneer Merit points, the second batch 200, and the third batch 100. The first team of each batch gets an additional 80% Pioneer Merit points, the second team 50%, the third team 30%, the fourth team 10%, and the fifth team 0%."

In other words, the first team of the first batch can directly receive 540 merit points (300×1.8). This is an incentive for the vanguard—a prerequisite is to return alive to spend them.

Ashe doesn't have much knowledge about the prices in the war zone, but seeing the other adventurers gasp and the camp turn cold, he knew these 540 merit points were quite powerful in terms of purchasing power.

An adventurer raised his hand and asked, "What if an adventure group sneaks into the random teams?"

"We don't mind," the Goblins said indifferently, pointing towards the tents on the side of the platform. "As you can see, there are three rows of tents to my left. With the platform as the reference, the first row is the first batch, and the first tent on the left is the first team."

"The blessings commence at 11:15. I hope that before then, each tent will be filled with five people," the Goblins adjusted his glasses. "Now, let the team formation commence. So, the teaming session begins, and by the way, no dead people are allowed."

In the face of a group of fierce adventurers, The Goblins expression was calm, as if he were treating a flock of sheep, then stepped down from the platform. The adventurers didn't move until he had left, even making way for him under the platform.

Power can indeed be breathtaking, but authority can also make one hang one's head.

Once the Goblins entered the largest tent, a Sorcerer suddenly smashed a long table, took out a hand cannon from a box, thereby opening the prelude to the chaos!

The sound of guns was like thunder, and several adventure groups directly took out their guns and shot at them!

Before the battle even began, the adventurers were already squabbling over their positions!

Their goal was very clear — the first batch, the first team, worth 540 points of merit!

In essence, the danger level of the first three batches is roughly the same. If the third batch, fifth team's danger level is 10, then the first batch, first team's danger level would only be around 20.

If there truly were ambushes on the other end of the tunnel, all of the first three batches would have to fight for their lives. However, if there weren't, then the first batch, first team would reap the most benefits.

Every adventurer was a risk-taker, with an insatiable lust for danger. Faced with such high rewards, how could they resist going all in?

Therefore, they were willing to fight for the 'right to risk their lives'.

Compared to the first batch, first team, the rewards for other positions were much lower. The second and third batches had the same risks as the first, but the chances of survival greatly increased—after all, there were cannon fodders to distract attention.

While the adventure groups were fighting each other, the real lone wolves also began to enter the tents to form teams. After a brief thought, Ashe decisively walked towards the first row, fifth tent.

Unlike other adventurers, Ashe had no plans to return to the Blood Moon Realm. The sooner he left Blood Moon, the better, so the first batch was his best choice.

The first batch, fifth team was undoubtedly the riskiest and least cost-effective position. The danger level of the fifth team was almost the same as that of the first team—if there really were ambushes on the other side, it would only be a matter of who dies first. However, the rewards for the fifth team were significantly less. Only those who slipped through the basic education net would choose this position.

But for Ashe, the fifth team was the ideal position. He could leave Blood Moon as quickly as possible, and the first four teams could draw attention. Maybe he could slip through unnoticed.

However, when Ashe lifted the tent flap, he found that there were already four people inside.

There were three long benches in the tent. On the right bench sat two masked figures—one tall and large, sharpening his nails with a nail file; the other slender, hands in his pockets, the sound of steel beads colliding emanating from within.

On the middle bench sat another masked figure, barely discernible curly hair and dark skin, tearing open a Snow White package and shoving a piece of Moon Sugar into his mask.

On the left bench, a masked figure lounged lazily with a pair of enchanting, seductive fox eyes. When Ashe burst in, the corners of his eyes curled up, revealing a smirking smile.

Ashe promptly tried to back out, “I’m sorry, I think I’ve taken a wrong turn. Sorry to disturb you—”

A hand grabbed his wrist, and when Ashe tried to resist, that familiar voice instantly made his body stiffen.

“Don’t forget, you still owe me a wish, my dear Cult Leader.”

Igor pulled Ashe into the tent and immediately reached to lift his mask, his eyes brimming with barely contained joy.

“Lucky me, I was just in need of a bait, and here you come, walking right into my trap... this is really...”

“Such a misfortune.” Ashe sighed. Search* The NôveFire.net website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

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Chapter 164: The Gathering of Villains

Ashe never doubted his ability to escape the Blood Moon, ordained by the Virtual Realm. He had considered the worst-case scenario of his escape journey: blending in with a group of unfamiliar adventurers, stumbling into a foreign land possibly worse than the Blood Moon Realm, being treated as an enemy by the locals, and continuing his unlucky streak of taking the blame. From being labeled a “Cult Leader” to being branded as an “Intruder from the foreign lands,” he imagined living a precarious life of ‘happy’ freedom...

He thought it couldn’t get any worse than that.

Then reality slapped him hard—never underestimate me, society’s idler!

Ashe realized he had set his sights too low, fantasizing about ‘blending in with a group of unfamiliar adventurers’. But who else could be beside him, with sleazy eyes and brimming with tricks, even capable of stealing candy from a child, if not Igor, the notorious Bewitcher?

And that guy munching on Moon Sugar as if it were a snack? That’s Harvey, the Necromancer.

As for the duo sitting across him, unmistakably Langna and Ronat!

The five notorious villains of the breakout were gathering once again!

What was this feeling of old companions, who had shared hardships and challenges, coming together again? Ashe felt like he was about to ignite!

With rage, that is. Search the website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

“Did you also choose to escape the Blood Moon through the virtual gateway?” Ashe almost couldn’t contain his anger. “You’re the big fish around here. Do you really need to flee with me?”

While munching on his candy, Harvey shrugged, “You’re the leader of the Four Pillars Cult. Shouldn’t you continue spreading your teachings in Caimon City, promoting the traditional culture of the Four Pillars? And here you are, thinking of fleeing. That’s not very loyal of you!”

Langna put away his file and glanced at Harvey, “Once we leave the Blood Moon Realm and its Chip system, you’re no longer the mysterious and fearsome controller. You’ll be just a Necromancer, no different from a street rat. Is that really okay with you?”

When his profession came up, Harvey couldn’t stay silent. He snorted, “Maybe the other side of the gateway is a grand nation that venerates the Necromancy faction. A place where corpses litter the ground, the living are freed from tedious labor, focusing on the

Virtual Realm and research. Society is run by the dead, free of conflict, abundant in resources, where life is elevated through death..."

"That's as ridiculous as us eventually falling for Lala Fatty," Igor interjected bluntly. "Maybe you should head to the Foster Home's kindergarten class. You might find someone there who speaks your language."

"I'm getting hungry," Ronat muttered, waving at Ashe. "What kind of Lala Fatty do you like? I prefer the spicy ones."

"I like the ones with salted egg yolk flavor... Wait, no!" Ashe covered his head in frustration. "Can't you choose another time, another way? Do you have to pick the same time, the same method, even the same row of seats as me?"

"We're in more danger every minute we stay in the Blood Moon," Langna replied. "You also think this is a rare opportunity, don't you? Besides, finding you here, I couldn't miss it."

Ronat agreed, "Definitely."

Harvey chimed in, "Absolutely have to go with Ashe."

Ashe was taken aback. "Why?"

They fell silent, all turning to look at Igor. Igor had been smiling slyly at Ashe, his right hand firmly on Ashe's shoulder, as if afraid his prey would escape.

Ashe felt a chill, swallowed, and cleared his throat before speaking earnestly, "I'm not actually opposed to us working together. After all, we have a shared experience of escaping prison, know each other well, and have a foundation of trust and cooperation. Working together should make things more efficient. But since we're comrades with a common goal, we should cooperate sincerely and present a united front, without dragging each other down or betraying one another. What do you think?"

"Yeah, yeah!"

"Ashe is right!"

"Typical of the Cult Leader, always so eloquent."

Igor nodded repeatedly, looking very agreeable, and then held up three fingers, "So, dear Cult Leader, are you planning to distract attention, create an escape opportunity for me, or act as bait?"

“Don’t make me choose such a cruel option! And aren’t all those choices the same?” Ashe hissed in a low roar, “At least give me a way out, considering my major contribution in the prison escape!”

“Nonsense!” Harvey retorted, “I was the one with the greatest merit. Without me, how could you have controlled the guards?”

“I can’t ignore that, Necromancer,” Langna said calmly. “If I hadn’t cleared out the hunters and sailors on the transport ship, how could the plan have gone so smoothly?”

“I designed the escape route,” Ronat interjected. “If I hadn’t thoroughly investigated the area from Shattered Lake Prison to Caimon City, how could we have avoided all the surveillance cameras and arrived in Caimon City without any notice?”

“Hey, hey, hey, are you all misunderstanding your own roles?” Igor’s eyebrows twitched, “The escape plan was my creation. Without my brilliant mind, you all would have been rotting in Shattered Lake. You were just the limbs; I was the brain. Would you credit the achievements of the toes to the brain?”

Outside, bullets flew and flames and ice clashed, occasionally punctuated by explosions; inside the tent, a verbal battle raged. The idiots argued about who was the MVP of the escape, utterly lacking self-awareness. Ashe despaired over his journey of escape.

Worse still, Ashe couldn’t escape Igor’s clutches, as the latter still held one of his wishes.

Igor could even command Ashe to stand on his hands and attract attention in the most humiliating way. In fact, the Bewitcher was likely brewing even more vicious plans — such as ordering Ashe to intercept Langna, Ronat, and Harvey, causing a disturbance to buy the bad guys more time.

If they encountered any crisis, Igor would undoubtedly command Ashe to act as a “Taunting Minion” to draw attention, which is why Harvey, Langna, and Ronat insisted on working with Ashe. If Ashe was to be sacrificed, why not use him to cover for three old comrades?

“The Virtual Realm tells me that I can definitely escape the Blood Moon.”

The arguing in the tent suddenly ceased. Ashe shook off Igor’s hand on his shoulder, looked around, and said indifferently, “I’ve participated in a ‘Fate’s Inquiry’, and one of the questions was about how I would escape the Blood Moon Realm. This means the Virtual Realm believes I can successfully escape.”

“If you want to work with me, I don’t mind, but I advise you to drop the idea of using me as a shield and genuinely protect me.”

Ashe spoke firmly, “I can miss this chance and wait for a second or third opportunity, but you might not have that luxury.”

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Chapter 165: A Prison's First-Class Protected Animal

Turning the tables!

Since Ashe couldn't avoid the four relentless Bone Dragons, he decided not to hide anymore, even thinking of using them to his advantage.

As Ashe rightly said, although the recent foreign invasion was indeed the best chance to escape in a while, he wasn't overly anxious. After all, the Virtual Realm had already assured his safety.

It was like a professor guaranteeing you'll pass before an exam. You wouldn't hand in a blank paper, but you'd comfortably skip questions you don't know because, even if you do poorly, the professor would adjust your coursework grades to ensure you pass.

However, for Igor and others, Ashe's status had leaped from a 'one-time taunting minion' to a 'prison's first-class protected animal.' After all, sticking close to Ashe meant a smooth escape from the Blood Moon. They were too busy protecting him to consider using him as disposable bait.

Yet...

"You don't actually believe that everything mentioned in the Fate Quiz will happen, do you?" Lagna calmly stated, "The only absolute in the Fate Sect is that nothing is absolute."

Ronat shrugged, "Plus, you can't prove you've actually encountered the Fate Quiz. Even if you, Ashe, are willing to stake your reputation, the Cult Leader isn't exactly known for his integrity, is he?"

Harvey nodded along, "Even if the Fate Quiz is real and you do escape the Blood Moon, that doesn't necessarily mean you need to be alive. I could just as well take your dead body away from the Blood Moon."

Igor delivered the final blow, "Compared to taking a whole living person with us, wouldn't it be more efficient to kill you, pack you into four boxes, and carry you as a talisman?"

Damn, they make a good point!

Ashe, failing in his attempt to impress, hung his head low. Unseen by him, the four exchanged quick glances, silently reaching a consensus.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, the tent flap was lifted, and a tall beastman sniper walked in.

He was unmasked, with one mechanical eye. Both shoulders, hands, knees, and waist were fitted with sniper gear, a sorcerer's armament that abandoned real bullets, requiring a spirit to shoot.

Gun Sect – Eight Sniper Style!

Igor and the others instantly recognized the beastman's path of development. This was a fusion of the robust physiques of beastmen and ogres with sniper tactics. Equipped with multiple heavy sorcerer sniper rifles, he used spirits for aiming and shooting, dispersing the recoil throughout his body via spirits, making him incredibly formidable in direct combat. A true assailant and blade on the battlefield. Sorcerers below the rank of Three Wings had virtually no defensive miracle that could withstand the Eight Sniper's targeted shooting.

The beastman sniper was also surprised to find the tent full. He quickly assessed the strength of the occupants: the duo on the right bench, untouchable;

The middle bench emitted a gray, deathly aura under his "Tactical Eye Model 7," best not to provoke;

The left bench, though also seating two, featured one tall and confident, while the other seemed inconspicuous, head hung low as if constipated.

In an instant, the beastman sniper determined who was the easiest target in the tent and reached directly for Ashe, “You—“

Ah, which tea café to visit, really want to take a dump, shrimp-flavored Lala Fatty is quite good, when will I hit it big—

The beastman sniper suddenly came to his senses, realizing he had been bombarded with a slew of distracting thoughts for a full two seconds, forgetting his situation and purpose!

An attack from the Heart Sect!

He tried to move, but his legs were numb as if they didn’t belong to him. A decayed, deathly aura crept from his feet to his waist.

A sinister miracle from the Necromancy faction!

The beastman instinctively wanted to launch an indiscriminate attack at full firepower, but suddenly, two steel beads shot from the right, striking his eye and knee. Not only was he temporarily blinded, but he was also forced to kneel!

Gunmanship or archery?

Struggling to open a slit in his eye, the beastman saw a whip-like kick sharp as a blade!

Snap!

Everything happened as fast as lightning. By the time Ashe looked up, all he saw was a dark shadow flying backwards out of the tent, unable to even scream.

He tilted his head, puzzled: “What just happened?”

“Nothing much.” Igor clapped him on the shoulder amicably. “You know, I’ve had a change of heart. Even though you’re not that useful, we do have a friendship. So don’t worry, Ashe, I won’t use you as bait. Stick with me, and I’ll lead you to victory!”

Ashe glanced at Igor, his eyes gradually lighting up, his lips curving into a playful smile.

“So, you’re saying I’m important?”

Igor’s expression remained unchanged: “Ashe, you’re so ordinary and yet so confident...”

"If I were really useless, you'd flatter and praise me, inflate my ego, and then kick me out to face death. But if I'm useful, you'd try to crush my confidence, so I'd willingly be at your service." Ashe pointed at Harvey. "Don't forget, I watched the whole process of you trying to recruit Harvey. He just didn't fall for it."

Harvey raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

"Oh, so you're feeling cocky, Ashe. Would you prefer to do a sensual dance or stand on your head with diarrhea— Are you trying to get yourself killed?!"

Ashe flipped Igor's hood and ruffled his hair in anger, laughing mischievously: "Come on, make a wish. I'll fulfill it as best I can. Whoever doesn't make a wish is a puppy, come on!"

"Ha-ha-ha, I knew it, Igor, you believed me. You'd rather choose a certain future where you stay by my side and protect me than face the vastly dangerous unknown future!"

"Did you forget that as soon as we cross the passage, you're useless? I could order you to wait in place for 48 hours and then return to Blood Moon."

Ashe paused, sitting down obediently like a good child. "Sorry, I was too arrogant."

Igor, annoyed, adjusted his hair and put on his hood again. He looked at the Cult Leader, who was leisurely borrowing a nail clipper from Langna, so irritated he almost wished Ashe would hang himself with his own intestines.

And what's going on? Now even a foolish man with the social skills of a toddler from a Foster Home can easily see through his thoughts? Am I, Igor, not cunning enough, or is Ashe too absurd?

How many times had he been outsmarted by Ashe?

The fourth time, the fifth?

Igor felt Ashe was his nemesis, making a decision against his Trickster principles: "This guy must not be spared. The day we leave Blood Moon will be the day Ashe is buried!"

Several more people tried to enter the fifth tent during this time, but they were all driven away. Soon, the sound of Goblins could be heard outside: "Team formation time is over, random teams can come out now."

Ashe's group of five exited the tent and looked up to see three people standing on a high platform.

“Good, all random teams are full.” The Goblin nodded in satisfaction. “Now for the blessing ceremony. To my left is the assistant priest Kiera sent by the church. Her priest team will bestow the Blood Moon Blessing on everyone.”

The assistant priest Kiera, in a gold-trimmed white robe, was tall but had a cute appearance. Her chubby cheeks and baby fat made one want to pinch them. She shyly nodded to the adventurers, her large grey wolf’s tail wagging behind her.

“And standing to my right, this hunter, whom I’m sure everyone recognizes, is none other than the enforcement squad leader of the Heresy Court, Gerard Westminster—“

Ashe and his four companions instinctively retreated back into their tent.

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Chapter 166: Three Words to Willingly Surrender Ashe

“Everyone, don’t be afraid.”

Kibbott, the Goblins, gazed at the restless crowd, having anticipated this reaction. With a gentle clearing of his throat, the entire camp fell silent, leaving only his voice echoing clearly.

All sorcerers aspiring to politics master the art of sonic magic. Voice is power; even if not interested in silencing political foes, one must be able to defend their own voice.

“I understand your worries, so I’ll skip the pleasantries. If we were to use all adventurers here for target practice, innocents would suffer. But selectively executing every other one means missing some culprits,” Kibbott said, his contempt for the fearful adventurers below growing. They seemed like stray dogs to him.

The mayor was right — dogs can be used but not allied with, as they’re easily lured away by someone else’s bone. Only by collaborating with wolves, exploiting these dogs to the fullest, will they become strong enough to turn against their masters once satiated and sharpened.

The Blood Moon Realm has too many dogs and too few wolves.

Therefore, the combat competition must go on...

Recalling the mayor’s teachings, Kibbott’s expression grew colder as he continued, “But rest assured, this festival is of great importance. Compared to the offerings needed by the Blood Moon Supreme, your crimes are trivial. Even if the Death Maniac Swordswoman goes berserk, I won’t allow harm to come to our valuable forces here.”

“Relax, Secretary Kibbott,” Gerard said, arms crossed, eyeing the adventurers with interest. “I value this festival more than anyone here.”

The crowd sighed in relief — of course! The Heresy Court and the war zone never interfered with each other. Plus, with this being a festival against foreign invasion, why would Gerard come here to arrest people?

But many were still uneasy. What was Gerard doing here if the festival had nothing to do with the Heresy Court? Was he just out for a stroll because he couldn’t sleep?

“However, the Death Maniac Swordswoman is indeed here to pursue criminals,” Kibbott continued. “But it has nothing to do with the majority here, nor with the adventurers. She’s only looking for fugitives disguised among them.”

Ashe and his companions felt a sense of doom.

“The ‘Corpse Lover’ Archibald Harvey, ‘Carrion Crow’ Ronat Wade, ‘Trickster’ Igor Bukin, ‘Death Eater’ Langna Qios, ‘Demonic Saint’ Ashe Heath.”

Gerard announced loudly, “I’m here only to pursue these five. They’ve just escaped from Shattered Lake Prison and removed their Miracle Chips from their necks, so they are definitely not part of the war zone adventurers, and I’m not overstepping my jurisdiction.”

The adventurers relaxed.

Not only were the five escapees unrelated to them, but more importantly, they were not ‘adventurers.’ This meant Gerard hadn’t broken the unspoken agreement between the war zone and the Heresy Court to arbitrarily arrest criminals seeking refuge in the war zone. This was what truly reassured the adventurers.

If Gerard had arrested criminals among the adventurers, they would not resist, but they would soon flee the Lakeview War Zone for other zones. After all, if even the war zone couldn’t guarantee their safety, why stay and become political achievements for the Heresy Court?

Ashe and his companions exchanged silent glances, nodding subtly. Without needing words, they knew they had to cooperate sincerely; otherwise, they couldn’t escape the pursuit of the Tri-Wing Sanctuary Sorcerers.

Alright, it’s time to ignite the fire—

“By the way,” Gerard added, “While theoretically I’m after five escapees, I have a particular interest in Ashe. So, beyond the bounty posted by the Heresy Court, I’ve set a personal reward for information on Ashe Heath. Anyone providing concrete details about him will receive a reward of 100 Gold Coins. And if the other four escapees are willing to divulge information about Ashe, I’ll represent the Heresy Court and halt their pursuit, granting them three days to flee.”

Ashe turned to look at his companions, and they all turned to him.

“...You’re not seriously considering betraying a friend just to save your own skins, are you?”

Harvey scratched his head, “Are we friends...?”

Ronat shrugged, “What’s wrong with scrambling to survive?”

Igor spoke coldly, “If it wasn’t for your recording that enraged Gerard, would he be relentlessly chasing us? Whoever causes the mess, cleans it up. Any problem with that?”

With just three sentences, Gerard had managed to sow discord in this already shaky team, true to his reputation as a master manipulator and Blood Mad Hunter.

Just as Ashe was contemplating distancing himself from these untrustworthy individuals, Langna calmly said, “We don’t have the Chip, eventually, we need to find a way off Blood Moon. Unless Gerard is willing to let us pass, betraying Ashe offers us no benefit—even with three days to run, Blood Moon offers no sanctuary.”

Ashe couldn’t help but give a thumbs up, “See, Langna’s making sense. You guys are falling for the enemy’s tricks so easily. You should learn from him—“

“But if we can’t find any other leverage, we might have to trade Ashe for a chance to breathe,” Langna continued, “Better one of us than all five.”

Igor looped an arm around Ashe’s neck, “Thanks, Ashe. Didn’t expect you’d sacrifice yourself for us—you’ll grant my wish, won’t you?”

Ashe’s face fell, but it was hidden behind his mask. He had no choice but to play it by ear now. Despite Igor’s possible betrayal, Ashe had to admit that sticking with these four was currently the best strategy.

After all, they shared a common goal, and wrongdoing was right up their alley. If he were with strangers, his only option would be to hope for a Miracle.

Gerard waited a moment to see if anyone would step forward to snitch, but not surprisingly, no one did. He gestured to a Goblins to continue speaking.

Kibbott announced, “Next, the Cleric team will bestow the Blessing of the Miracle. Please line up by teams. The Blood Mad Hunter will guard the clerics and scan your Chip information. Information about the foreign realms across the portal has been sent to everyone at this camp. Please read it promptly.”

Ashe and his group pretended to summon a hologram—without the Chip, they couldn’t receive the mass-sent junk, but they had to maintain appearances.

The Cleric team approached the stage, each exhibiting some canine traits, nearly all of them sporting a fluffy tail. Ashe couldn’t help but glance at Langna, who silently pointed to the looming Blood Moon above.

Unlike the Moonshadow blessed by the Blood Moon’s grace, Langna could only transform in shadows, showing no Moonshadow traits otherwise. The difference between him and the others was as stark as living off bread versus off scraps. No wonder he was considered a heretic and left to die at the shattered lake.

As the adventurers began to line up for the blessing, Ashe witnessed the new age ceremony—the five clerics had each adventurer extend their right arm, located a vein, and then injected them with a steel syringe.

The acolyte Kira took out a radio and pressed a button, filling the camp with sacred prayer chants. Soon, the adventurers underwent a transformation as the wandering moonlight, like light smoke, materialized into layers of gossamer garments draping over them.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!”

“I can feel the strength surging!”

“Praise the Blood Moon!”

“Damn!” Ashe couldn’t help but comment, “Isn’t this just like getting an injection with some music hypnosis?”

“Blessings have always been like this,” Ronat explained nearby. “Priests prepare the blessing potions in advance. When needed, an injection accompanied by holy music activates the miraculous effects of the potion. Though not as potent as a priest’s direct spellcasting, it’s faster, convenient, and even portable. You can’t easily buy these priest-made potions outside the war zone.”

It was apparent that the adventurers had never experienced such luxury before. They were so exhilarated that they seemed ready to burst with energy, making Ashe wonder if the potion contained Moon Sugar... or perhaps it was the other way around, with Moon Sugar containing elements of the blessing potion?

But this blessing was practically a curse for Ashe and his four companions. The blessed adventurers all wore a thin, bright red gossamer garment, making them very conspicuous.

In other words, it was easy to tell who had received the blessing and who hadn’t. They couldn’t sneak by unnoticed. If everyone else was illuminated by the blessing and only they were not, the only difference from outright surrendering was that they would be resisting to the end, aggravating their situation.

They were at the back of the line, and the priests were blessing people quickly. It would be their turn in no more than ten minutes, so they had to make a decision fast.

“How about we just wrap things up?”

“Better to deal with it and then turn it in to show our sincerity.”

“Leave it to me. I’m a pro when it comes to handling bodies.”

Watching Igor discuss seriously with Ronat and Harvey, Ashe shivered: “I’m starting to regret why I broke you bunch of scum out of jail...”

“What are you talking about? We’re just discussing how to cook Lala Fatty...”

“Alright, stop scaring Ashe, our little cutie,” Langna said, looking at Harvey.

“Necromancer, can you pull off the same trick again?”

“I could.”

Harvey looked up at the night sky. “But the prison is a special structure, so it had strong constraints. Here, without even a ceiling, the only enchantments I can guarantee are ‘attack restraint’ and ‘movement restraint’.”

“As for Gerard, don’t get your hopes up,” the necromancer said, not daring to look directly at the hunter captain, only glancing quickly out of the corner of his eye. “Ignoring his power enough to counter the restraints, just his authority level probably exceeds that of the ‘Chip Processor.’ Any restraint command issued by the processor won’t work on an Enforcement Captain.”

Indeed, Harvey had come fully prepared for this life-or-death challenge, though it was pointless—the greatest threat to them here was Gerard. If they couldn’t use the chip processor to restrict Gerard, the examiner, their prison escape exam was doomed to fail.

Ashe asked, “Can’t we cause a chaos and then break through? Isn’t it said that the virtual gateway only allows entry to those with two wings or less arcane energy? Gerard shouldn’t be able to chase us there, right?”

“You might be underestimating Gerard’s combat power,” Igor said, spreading his hands. “Not even the most reckless gambler would bet on a Tri-Wing Sanctuary Sorcerer showing a weakness that we low-level sorcerers could exploit... Wait, Gerard’s main target is you, which means we could hand you over to distract him, then slip through the gateway. There’s a good chance we’d escape.”

Ashe glanced sideways at him. “What do you think I would do in that situation? Desperately run away to buy you guys time, or just surrender and let Gerard catch you all, so we die together?”

“Jeez, Ashe, you’re such a refreshingly awful person.”

“Thanks for the compliment, I’m flattered.”

Jokes aside, Igor’s concerns were unavoidable—Gerard was like a mountain, firmly blocking their path of escape. No matter how many fancy tricks they had, if they couldn’t deal with Gerard, it was all just empty talk.

“I agree with Igor’s plan,” Langna suddenly said.

Ashe looked at Langna in surprise, not expecting this burly, bald guy to give in to his survival instincts and betray them at the drop of a hat.

Damn it, give me back all the emotions I felt for you!

However, Igor's eyes lit up, and he slapped Ashe on the shoulder, realizing something. "Exactly, given our current situation, this is indeed the plan with the highest chance of success."

"Ashe Heath, we have to hand you over."

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Chapter 167: Gerard and the Four Pillars Cult

On the evening of his 24 years, 1609 months, and 16 days, Gerard sat on the steps of a high platform, looking down at the adventurers receiving their blessings, his mind drifting back to himself 134 years ago.

Back then, he had struggled through three times to prepare for the exam, finally getting admitted to a research institute just before the human age limit of 25. However, disinterested in academics, Gerard joined the Heresy Court as a common hunter.

His mentor was a former member of the sacred bloodline, a smoker with a lazy disposition, famously known as the 'Restroom Hunter' for his timely bathroom breaks during clerical work. This mentor taught young Gerard a valuable lesson.

Hunting wasn't a glamorous job. The daily grind was just as annoying as trivial matters, especially in an era still riddled with racial, gender, and class discrimination. Many people weren't outright evil, but like fishbones in rice, they caused an indescribable aversion.

Interacting with them felt like accumulating fishbones in one's throat, which eventually needed to be cleansed with blood.

However, the unreliable mentor could always precisely discern Gerard's low spirits and occasionally took him to Tea Cafés and Casinos to alleviate stress. Gerard was usually reluctant, but the mentor's scruffy, sleazy smile indeed cleared the clouds in his heart.

Until one day, Gerard and his mentor were assigned to a special task force to eradicate the Four Pillars Cult. Initially, Gerard didn't take the organization seriously. Under the benevolent Blood Moon, evil seemed like a puddle after rain, bound to evaporate under the fierce sun.

But the operation encountered unexpected setbacks. The main force got separated, cult members fought fearlessly, dying alongside the hunters. When they finally reached the cult leader's location, only Gerard, his mentor, and another veteran hunter were left.

His mentor asked Gerard to stand outside the door to prevent escapes and give a warning if needed.

This was a reasonable request, and Gerard couldn't refuse.

Sensing Gerard's eagerness to prove himself, the mentor chuckled, "When you lead a team in the future, you'll have plenty of chances. Now it's my turn to show off. You just wait here— but come in quickly if something goes wrong with me."

Even in grim times, the mentor could dispel the darkness in Gerard's heart. So Gerard watched as the two hunters pushed open the door, holding up Hunting Lamps and stepping into the dark room, searching for the hidden cult leader.

One minute, two minutes, three minutes passed without any sound from inside. Impatient, Gerard also raised his Hunting Lamp and stepped into the room.

The darkness in the room was thick, almost tangible, the light from the Hunting Lamp unable to penetrate it, and even the New-style Handgun seemed powerless against this unknown fear.

He stepped on a liquid — blood. Gerard looked down to see a strange corpse on the ground, and following the blood trail, he saw two figures entwined.

His mentor was biting the throat of the old hunter, who had thrust his sword through the mentor's heart.

"How beautiful, don't you think?" the strange corpse spoke.

Startled, Gerard fell to the ground, pointing his gun at the corpse.

"I'm not a Sorcerer, nor do I have a weapon. You don't need to be so tense," the corpse sat up, smiling. "If you pull the trigger, I'll die."

"You... they, they—"

"The Vampire feared the hunter's attack and bit him first, then the hunter retaliated, killing the Vampire. I was just here, sleeping."

Gerard said fiercely, "You're lying!"

"The rebuttal was decisive. If it doesn't align with your own truth, it's not the truth, right? I quite like this kind of straightforward thinking," the corpse tilted its head. "You must be wondering, why would a vampire fear an old hunter taking action against him? It's because of a longstanding grudge between them."

"But the senior was so kind, how could he—"

"Just because he was kind to you, does that mean he's been a good person all his life? Never offended anyone, never did anything bad?"

Gerard was momentarily stumped, but quickly retorted, "You're the leader of the Four Pillars Cult!"

"So, because I'm a bad person, everything I say is wrong, right?" The corpse flashed a sweet smile. "I really like your straightforward thinking."

"But, do you know why the Four Pillars exist?"

"Desire!" Gerard panted, gritting his teeth. "You're just a group of demons seducing people into corruption—"

"It's for peace of mind." The corpse placed a hand over its heart. "To become stronger, smarter, more popular, to find more happiness... People seek peace of mind, so the Four Pillars answered their wishes."

"They both sought peace of mind, that's why they fought each other to the death here. If they hadn't, they couldn't have vented the darkness in their hearts."

"You're lying!"

"In your heart, you're already agreeing with me, aren't you, Hunter Gerard. You're a child with great insight. During your investigation, you discovered that the senior and the old hunter were at odds. You've already guessed their untold story..."

"Shut up!"

“You also know, the senior’s smoking habits, his laziness, his unkempt appearance, all stem from his dark and massive past. From the bits and pieces, you’ve deduced that the senior was a tragic loser, harboring a madness under his smile capable of destroying sanity...”

“I said shut up!”

Gerard pressed the gun’s muzzle to the corpse’s forehead. But the corpse just smiled, raising a bloodstained finger, drawing two bloody tear tracks under Gerard’s eyes.

“Rain may evaporate in the sun, but some of it seeps into the soil, nourishing the earth. The evaporated water doesn’t disappear; it follows the natural cycle, waiting for the next downpour. The rain doesn’t stop; it keeps falling, because I exist, because you exist.”

“In a world where the law becomes a slaughter, crime isn’t shameful.”

“So Gerard, for whom are you crying?”

Bang!

The corpse finally fell silent. By then, the other hunters had belatedly arrived, concluding the hunt.

A century passed in a flash. Gerard became lazy, arrogant, rule-breaking, but also stronger. Just when he thought he could sleep in Caimon City’s paradise, a familiar name awakened memories buried under the dust.

So Gerard volunteered, devised a detailed plan, and in his strongest form, wiped out the reborn Four Pillars Cult, trying to make up for past regrets with his current achievements.

But Gerard felt no satisfaction—because this generation’s cult leader was the weakest he had ever seen.

Naive, clueless, speaking in a soft voice, almost like a recent college graduate. Catching him was hardly harder than catching a cat.

So when Ashe claimed amnesia during the interrogation, Gerard believed him on the spot, thinking he was just an unlucky scapegoat whose memory was erased by the mastermind.

Later, Professor Sylin approached Gerard to discuss Ashe’s danger, even at the cost of favors, asking him to ‘measure’ Ashe’s potential again. Although Gerard spared Ashe out of respect for a fellow citizen, his opinion remained unchanged—he still saw Ashe as a lamb unworthy of attention. Search* The novelFire.net website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

Then a series of events erupted like a storm: the escape, control of the prison, the Blood moon trial, Sylin's disappearance...

Just a moment ago, Gerard received a message that the president of the Elf Rights Association, Schilling Dorr, was missing, unable to confirm his life and death, and the news was temporarily blocked.

A hundred years later, when he was clearly sitting under the bright blood moon, Gerard felt that he had entered that dark room again.

Ashe-Heath, unquestionably the leader of the cult of the Four Pillars Cult, is the source of chaos, the secret head, whose mere existence causes disaster, who is himself a vortex of evil!

With his perfect disguise, he earned the trust of the Tri-wing Artisan, and the imprudence of the law enforcement captain!

"So just like last time..." Gerard murmured in a voice only he could hear: "Am I going to have to make it up after the fact again?"

Suddenly, there was a disturbance in the blessing group.

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Chapter 168: The Legacy of Sylin

“It’s him!”

“You’re doomed this time!”

Gerard looked over and saw an un-blessed man with a masked face breaking away from the group, desperately rushing towards the entrance.

An adventurer next to the masked man shouted, “Stop him, he’s the wanted criminal!”

Gerard watched the scene coldly and said, “Bass!”

Gerard didn’t come alone; he had several hunters assisting him. Hearing the captain’s order, Blood Saint Beastman Bass didn’t hesitate. He pulled out his handgun, switched off the safety, and his body blurred into a blood shadow, chasing after the escapee!

Gerard himself remained seated on the high platform, knowing well that as long as he guarded the virtual gateway, Ashe couldn’t escape the Blood Moon.

As for the man who had just fled in panic, Gerard didn’t believe it was Ashe himself. The white-haired hunter had been fooled by a substitute before; how could he fall for it a second time?

It was likely Ashe’s substitute, which Bass could destroy with a single strike.

When Bass passed through the crowd of adventurers, everyone’s chip screens popped up automatically, except for Gerard and the assistant priestess. They were bombarded with two blood-red messages alternating:

“Warning: You are currently in a no-attack state.”

“Warning: Your movement is restricted.”

Even Bass was forced to stop amidst the crowd, unable to resist the chip’s constraints. Before he could react, the surrounding adventurers suddenly screamed in agony, falling one by one with blood gushing from their bodies!

“The hunters want to trap and kill us here!”

“They’re even controlling our chips to make us sitting ducks!”

“Gerard is going to judge us across the war zone!”

“They’ll kill us all! Controlling chips like this is illegal, they won’t let us leave alive! They’re going to die!”

Blood, night, restrictions, screams, along with Gerard’s notorious reputation and the criminals’ self-awareness, panic spread like a plague bomb, instantly exploding among the adventurers.

Just then, the warnings on the adventurers’ screens blurred and distorted. They tentatively moved and to their surprise, found they could walk!

“Run!”

Without hesitation, the adventurers instinctively obeyed this unknown command. Running had no downside, it meant escaping the terrifying Gerard, and everyone else was doing it.

They were like a herd of panicked rabbits, scattering wildly at the slightest provocation!

“Break through!”

“Flame Squad, follow me, cut down any enemy in our way—“

“Ah, I’ve been shot, I’ve been shot!—“

“Don’t step on me, don’t! Ah~”

The hysterical chaos and screams pierced the night. The adventurers who had fallen were trampled by the panicked crowd, emitting painful wails, clearly about to be trampled to death!

In the face of this disaster, Gerard’s eyes shone brighter, burning like rubies.

Chaos, manipulating hearts, inciting darkness, controlling everyone like puppets.

This was the flavor, the feeling he sought!

Indeed, it was you, Four Pillars Cult Leader, Ashe Heath! Sëarch* The website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

Although the initial screams had arisen from various parts of the crowd, the first to lead the adventurers to escape and then hide among them to fan the flames was already locked in Gerard’s sights!

By now, the adventurers had stormed the camp entrance. The guards from the Government Affairs Hall in charge of the blockade dared not intercept them. Although there were priests for emergency aid, they were just doing their jobs; why risk their lives

against these madmen? They let the adventurers break out of the camp and scatter in all directions.

As the notorious fugitive was about to escape in the chaos, Gerard clasped his hands in prayer and activated a Miracle, transforming into the light of the Blood Moon to leap across the camp, vaulting over the confused adventurers like a white wolf hunting its prey in the night!

He swung his Chain Sword from a distance, which instantly disintegrated into a snake-like rope, coiling towards the fleeing figure in the forefront!

“I’m sorry, Ashe,” Gerard’s eyes filled with a crazed killing intent. “But you’re going to die anyway, let me vent a bit!”

Sword Blood Miracle – Blood Virgin Lament!

This was Gerard’s most cruel and violent Miracle, where the Chain Sword would turn into a meat grinder, binding the target and mashing them into a pulp, bones and flesh included, even manifesting the effect of harming the soul, bathing the target in the most severe and vicious pain in the moments before death!

It was more a punishment than an attack!

Now, it was Gerard’s time for judgment!

However, what responded to Gerard was not a splash of blood, but... nothing.

Nothing at all. The moment the Chain Sword touched the masked person, they just dissipated. Two familiar objects fell to the ground where they stood – recording pens.

It was like the worst joke, exploding into the most boring fireworks.

A Substitute?

This was the Substitute?

Then the one before—

Gerard landed and turned back, seeing the initially fleeing masked person lying on the ground screaming in agony, apparently shot in the leg by Bas, revealing a fish-man’s scaly face from under the cloak, clearly not the Ashe-Heath he had been longing for.

The first masked person was a decoy used by Ashe, a precursor to the ensuing chaos; the second was a substitute used to stir panic, also to divert Gerard’s attention.

So where was the real Ashe?

Gerard turned to look and saw that the hunters left on the high platform had been taken down, and several blood-stained adventurers were rushing towards the virtual gateway.

Right, although the adventurers were initially fleeing outwards, several had been 'shot' for unknown reasons and lay on the ground, unable to run, even trampled by the panicked crowd, so Gerard subconsciously ignored them...

I've been fooled again.

With the same trick.

Again using a substitute to shift attention.

Gerard suddenly felt very tired, the Chain Sword in his hand heavy, lacking the strength to lift his body. He knew he was too late; he had been lured too far, and only Two-Winged Monks could pass through the virtual gateway, making it impossible for him to chase after them.

Unless someone could stop them, otherwise—

Bang!

Clang!

A moment before the shot rang out, Ashe on the high platform thrust the Honeyed Words, Dagger in Heart into the ground!

The warm yellow Sword Aegis, formed almost instantaneously, was shattered by the sniper bullet!

The sniper was a beastman hiding at the entrance of the camp, his right hand fitted with a heavy sniper rifle specially made for beastmen, the barrel gleaming with a golden light, seemingly guided by a Miracle.

Gerard recognized him, and so did Ashe.

He was Beastman Gesas – Duff.

A Two-wing Sorcerer, the current leader of the Woodpecker Gang, and a loyal lapdog of Professor Sylin.

His last mission was to hide near observation point 53 and take the opportunity to kill Ashe-Heath.

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Chapter 169: The Endgame

The plan went incredibly smoothly.

Sometimes Ashe couldn't help but admit, the five of them were like a crime syndicate made in heaven. With some quick improvisation, they actually lured Gerard out, creating a gap to break into the Virtual Realm Passage.

The plan was actually quite simple: First, Igor randomly chose an audience member to intimidate. Out of ten adventurers, nine have something to hide and the last one is essentially the scapegoat. Igor didn't need to exert much effort to draw out their deepest fears, making them believe he was the enemy they had been running from. In a state of panic, the chosen one would flee outside.

As the Hunter pursued the Adventurer, Harvey connected a chip using Necromancy, adding a Restriction to everyone present, plunging the adventurers into a state of panic. Meanwhile, Ronald discreetly knocked down several adventurers with steel balls, grazing Ashe and others, so they all naturally fell to the ground.

A recording pen, hastily made by Ashe, would start playing on the Substitute, while Igor activated Mind Miracle to amplify everyone's suspicion and panic. The adventurers would quickly sink into a fear of the Hunter, and eventually, under the lead of Ashe's Substitute, they would rush out of the camp.

Once Gerard was lured out and the other adventurers had all left, those 'injured' lying on the ground would seize the gap to leap up, rush towards the Passage, and leave Blood Moon behind to start anew!

Ashe didn't hold much hope originally, but this flawed, impromptu plan was executed without a hitch. When Gerard became a shadow, flitting over his body, Ashe's heart nearly leapt out of his mouth.

A more ideal scene than Igor had imagined unfolded: Only one Hunter was left on the high platform, and the surrounding Moonshadow Priests seemed to be petrified with fear. After Langna knocked out the Hunter with a punch, the path ahead was clear.

Everything that should have gone wrong went right in the most critical part of the process.

Yet, in the ending, where there should have been no room for error, the unexpected happened.

On the stairs towards the Passage, Ashe suddenly felt a chill, as if someone was gripping his heart tightly. He could even sense a word forming above his head—

Danger!

He knew what this meant—"Primal Instincts" had been triggered.

During his Virtual Realm Adventure, this skill he had acquired from the Sorcerer Handbook had saved him from peril multiple times. This time, Ashe naturally chose to continue trusting it.

Miracle: Sword Barrier!

After his Promotion to Two Wings, Ashe could use Gold arcane energy to activate Earth Sword, and the defensive power of this Miracle had almost tripled.

Bang!

With a noisy blast from the Gun, the warm golden Barrier shattered like glass, and even the ground, tasked with dispersing the destructive force, cracked into a spiderweb!

Ashe didn't even need a direct hit to feel like a mere graze from such an attack could strip flesh and bone, reducing his weight by a good ten pounds or more!

Ashe turned his head slightly and saw the Orc sniper lurking in the shadows of the camp entrance.

Sylin's lackey.

He hadn't forgotten about Gersas, but he never imagined Gersas would snuff out his last hope so perfectly. This unexpected bad luck made Ashe feel as if he had exhausted all his fortune escaping from prison.

More importantly, while maintaining the Sword Barrier, he had to keep his sword planted in the ground, unable to move!

After all, the strength of the Swordsmanship Faction ultimately lies in destruction, not protection. That a Swordsmanship-derived Miracle could offer such strong defense, with its only drawback being limited mobility, was already more than one could ask for.

Before this, Ashe hadn't been troubled by this Restriction and naturally hadn't thought about improving the Miracle.

Now, Ashe had to make a cruel choice: give up the Sword Barrier and let Gersas blow away half his body with a single shot; maintain the Sword Barrier, and in a few seconds, Gerard would personally break through it!

But Ashe quickly gave up on choosing—because Gersas had opened up a third path for him.

Gersas swiftly raised his left hand, thrust out his waist, and positioned his heavy sniper in his left hand and the dual Guns at his waist. All four guns appeared at once, but he didn't lock onto Ashe. Instead, he aimed at the other four Prison Escapees!

He was too greedy, no longer satisfied with Ashe as his only prey. He wanted to take down everyone else as well. Because in just a few seconds, Gerard would arrive and suppress the entire scene with absolute power, and all Gersas would have to spend was a bit of arcane energy.

What was he after? The bounty for the Prison Escapees? Or a favor from a Tri-wings Sanctuary Sorcerer?

As an Orc Sorcerer who clawed his way up from the bottom, Gersas had plenty of greedy reasons. Perhaps without meticulous thought, he simply seized every opportunity, every prey, a practice that might have cost him at times, but more often yielded rich rewards. Thus, he instinctively followed these survival Rules.

But his prey this time were the most vicious criminals from Kaimon City.

Harvey, running at the front, suddenly tossed a bone glowing with an inky green light into the air, which exploded the next second, clearly diverting the Shot Bullets meant for Harvey onto the bone! However, Harvey grunted, his left arm going limp and lifeless as if it had lost all bone.

Igor, in an instant, let out a psychic shriek. The intense sonic waves formed a barrier with no dead angles, diverting the Shot Bullets to the right by sheer force. But they were too close, and a bullet grazed his shoulder, ripping a large chunk of flesh away. Igor stumbled to the ground in pain.

Ronald, who specialized in long-range assassination, had no means of defending against such sniper Shot Bullets, but he didn't need to—Langna immediately pulled him behind and, with a right hand glowing golden, turned and slashed!

Two Shot Bullets were forcefully deflected by Langna's strikes!

Such was the might of a top-tier Two Wings Physical Sorcerer! Barehandedly intercepting sniper Shot Bullets!

While Ronald was protected by Langna, he didn't idle either, throwing out a bunch of steel beads. The beads accelerated with a sonic boom in midair, like missiles heading straight for Gersas!

Although the process seems long in description, all of this happened in the blink of an eye—Ashe erected the Sword Barrier for defense, Gersas raised his four heavy snipers for a point shoot, and the Prison Escapees defended and counterattacked.

As the sole long-range damage dealer, Ronald did not disappoint Ashe. His steel bead storm forced Gersas to defend.

This was the opening Ashe needed!

But after this momentary delay, Ashe had fallen to the back of the group. The high platform was already difficult to climb, and he hadn't even pulled his sword from the ground yet.

It is well known that in an escape, running slowly might keep one alive, but being the last is certain death—the pursuer will always try their hardest to capture the easiest prey!

He needed a Miracle, something that could at least keep him in step with the team and not become the last one lagging behind!

Heart Sword, Substitute, and Circulation—these three were the spirit techniques he had mastered most proficiently. Sword Barrier was the only Miracle he truly excelled at.

When Ashe's mind stirred, the effects of these three spirit techniques swirled incessantly in his mind, and the structure of the Miracle Procedure unfolded before his eyes. His insights into the realms of Swordsmanship and Water Faction blazed like a fierce fire, consuming all his thoughts, leaving only the brightest crystallization of wisdom!

Suddenly, he remembered Valcas's final strike, the miraculous moment when the Swordswoman and he soared into the sky.

Then Ashe moved. His right hand still resting on the Honeyed Blade embedded in the ground, his left hand suddenly produced another Honeyed Blade, wrapped in a sharp golden radiance.

Using 'Substitute' on the Honeyed Blade, letting the 'Heart Sword' attach to the Substitute blade.

By now, Harvey had already stepped into the Virtual Realm Passage, and the rest of the team were only a few steps away from it. Ashe, however, remained unmoved, upturning the Substitute blade in a spear-throwing gesture and hurling it—it struck precisely at the topmost step of the platform!

Then he simultaneously launched 'Earth Sword' on both the Heart Sword-attached Substitute blade and the Honeyed Blade!

Two warm yellow pillars of light appeared on the platform at the same time. Igor glanced at the light pillar of the Substitute blade as he passed by, and Ashe's heart leaped—any casual flick from Igor could shatter the Substitute blade—but it seemed Igor didn't plan to waste another moment on Ashe and headed straight for the Virtual Realm Passage.

By this point, Ashe was far behind. He could even hear the sound of Gerard breaking through the moonlight behind him. Ashe had never felt so strongly that his Destiny was in his hands, that any slight mistake would turn his fragile fate into bubbles, to be extinguished by the palm of his hand.

Yet Ashe felt neither fear nor excitement, nor could he be considered calm.

He was just very quiet.

He quietly appreciated what kind of story 'Ashe' would unfold next.

With the Substitute blade as the target coordinate, the Honeyed Blade as the starting coordinate, 'Heart Sword' as the guide, 'Earth Sword' to pave the way, 'Circulation' to change the law!

Miracle!

Between the two warm yellow pillars of light, a faint yellow shadow flickered, and then nothing else stirred—it was as if nothing had changed. But in that brief moment of breath, Ashe had already reached the uppermost step of the platform. He pulled out the Honeyed Blade from the ground, and the Substitute blade below turned into a wisp of smoke and dissipated.

Success!

Earth Sword became the path, Circulation eliminated friction, and with Heart Sword as the guide, Ashe, clutching the Honeyed Blade, successfully switched places with the Substitute blade in an instant!

This Miracle is called... Bidirectional Rush!

Langna and Ronald saw Ashe suddenly appear before them, their expressions slightly astonished, but they didn't ponder over it much, assuming it was Ashe's hidden trump card—indeed, such a short-distance movement Miracle didn't seem to necessitate secrecy.

The three of them were only ten steps away from the Virtual Realm Passage, and Igor, who had half a foot in the passage, looked back at them, his pupils suddenly dilating.

Although Primal Instincts weren't triggered, Ashe didn't hesitate; he directly used the Slay Me Miracle on himself, cutting down the illusory Substitute, Purifying all Abnormal Statuses within his body! The blood that was about to stagnate inside him instantly returned to normal, and so Ashe only staggered slightly, without falling flat on his face.

It seemed Langna also had a Miracle to dispel Abnormal Statuses and was completely unaffected, but only Ronald screamed as he fell to the ground, his entire body convulsing and paralyzed.

And Igor himself took a nosedive into the Virtual Realm Passage, evidently afflicted at the last moment.

Behind them, Gerard's Chain Sword had extended to its longest state, tearing through the air with mournful screams, carrying a brutal trail of blood as it barreled forward!

Undoubtedly, the blood-related Abnormal Status they were experiencing was Gerard's doing.

As a member of the sacred bloodline with Tri-wings, Gerard might not favor the Blood Magic Faction, but that didn't mean he wasn't proficient in it!

When it comes to dealing with any flesh and blood creature, the Blood Magic Faction is the true specialist!

Langna reacted extremely fast, kicking Ronald away with one swift kick. Ronald's abdomen emitted a dull crack, clearly indicating several broken ribs.

The bald man turned around and headed back. Shadows on the ground swarmed over him like a horde of black cats, equipping him with a suit of shadow armor that made his

already towering and burly figure appear even more colossal, chilling, and fierce, as imposing as a pitch-black Abyss.

Boom!

Langna blocked Gerard's strike with his arms, the shadow armor almost completely shattered, and his left foot carved a dent in the stone-bricked ground. Despite the damage, he managed to hold his ground, even sending Gerard's Chain Sword flying upwards!

On the other side, Ashe took hold of Ronald and, with astonishing speed, cast the "Slay Me Miracle" on him, dragging him by the collar as he sprinted away. Ronald, also known as the 'Woodpecker with the Golden Beak,' quickly regained control of his body and stood up, the severe pain in his abdomen not affecting his movements.

But he didn't rush to flee with Ashe; instead, he glanced back.

Gerard had emerged from the moonlight, his Chain Sword morphing into a longsword, his anger and humiliation making his already unhandsome face even more contorted. Langna stood silently, ready to face Gerard's outburst.

Everyone could predict the scene that would follow—no one believed Langna could withstand Gerard's full-powered strike. The previous attack with the Chain Sword was weakened due to the distance, but now that Gerard had arrived at the scene, there was no need to bypass Langna; with one strike, he could tear Langna, Ronald, and Ashe to shreds!

There was no better opportunity than now.

This is my last chance.

"It's over."

After murmuring this to himself, determination flashed in Ronald's eyes. He suddenly stopped in his tracks, turned around with a flick of his right hand, and shot out a steel ball.

The steel ball accelerated furiously in mid-air, turning into a meteor that struck towards Langna!

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Chapter 170: So This Is What Hatred Feels Like

Before the prison break, Ashe had met with Ronald once in the cafeteria, alone.

Ronald, to him, was nothing more than a tool, but it wouldn't be true to say Ashe lacked all compassion. Thus, Ashe had probed Ronald's plans after the escape—whether he intended to part ways with Langna or assassinate him.

Should it be the latter, Ashe could reach an understanding with Ronald—regardless, after fulfilling Harvey's Contract, the Prison Escapees were bound to clash.

It had nothing to do with interests or grudges; it was purely a matter of trust.

You can never be sure if others will turn against you, so you must strike first.

When dealing with a group of Death row inmates who crawled out of a Manure pit, it's best to assume the worst because they too judge others by their own base standards.

If Ronald needed it, Ashe could covertly coordinate with Igor and Harvey to focus their attacks on Langna at the moment of rupture. After all, the bald Werewolf was indeed the strongest among them, and with him being a member of the ruling Race, Moonshadow, there were plenty of reasons to target Langna.

However, Ronald flatly rejected Ashe's kindness. He was grateful for Ashe's help and suggestions, but he firmly refused to let Ashe and the others interfere in his affairs.

It wasn't that Ashe underestimated Ronald, but a gang assassin having principles about murder was just absurd. Ronald didn't explain much, just shook his head, indicating that their intervention would only ruin his revenge.

"I must make Langna feel true pain."

Ahead was Gerard, wielding the destructive Blade, and behind was Ronald, calculating and full of resentment. Langna's face showed neither sorrow nor joy, only slightly tilting his head at the whistling sound of the steel beads.

Then, a shadow descended.

Thud!

Gerard's Chain Sword stopped mid-Slash as it hit a person. He felt as if his miracle-infused Blade had struck the hardest metal or the heaviest mire; all his strength absorbed by the frail body before him.

And this strange sensation of the Slash...

Blood splattered like scalding whips across Langna's face as he watched the figure who had shielded him, slightly lowering his eyelids.

Ronald's strength as a One Wing Sorcerer to become 'Golden Beak' was due to a hidden Faction in the Virtual Realm that allowed him to create disposable steel beads equivalent to a Device Spirit. With careful preparation, the destructive power of these beads could rival that of a Two Wings. It was only natural that he could assassinate a Two Wings Sorcerer with the element of surprise on his side.

One of these beads was known as the 'Flickering Steel Bead,' which enabled Ronald to teleport to the bead's location. After the prison escape, Langna had spent much effort to help Ronald gather the materials for the Flickering Steel Bead, aiding him in crafting one — Ronald's old safe houses for placing his items had long been destroyed and confiscated by the Sin Hunter's Hall.

There were too many situations where the Flickering Steel Bead could be used, such as three moments just before when it should have been used to escape danger, yet Ronald had not used it.

He chose to use it here.

As Gerard retracted his Chain Sword, Ronald collapsed backward like a lump of mud, and Langna caught him. The blood-escaping wound revealed the ghastly and cold steel bones within.

This was the secret behind Ronald's use of the steel beads; he did not rely on arcane energy to propel the beads but used his own steel bones as a base to generate a magnetic pull to guide them.

Apart from being a casting medium, Ronald's steel bones also provided him with formidable defense. His steel skeleton was a Miracle in itself; the seemingly frail Ronald could disperse any impact across his entire steel frame, so much so that even Langna had never managed to bite through any of Ronald's bones.

Therefore, when Gerard's strike hit Ronald, the Golden Beak was already dead. He successfully blocked Gerard's full-powered attack, but the cost was his entire skeleton, organs, and even muscles being crushed by the powerful impact.

Langna felt as though he wasn't holding a person but melting ice cream. Ronald seemed to have deliberately maintained the integrity of his face, allowing Langna to see his final expression clearly: a slight smile on his lips, eyes narrowed, as if he were laughing.

From that expression, Langna could see hatred, a sense of release, and even a trace of... pity.

Langna then hoisted Ronald's Corpse onto his shoulder and, with one hand, slapped the ground of the raised platform.

"Pray for the Dark Side of the Moon."

The raised platform burst forth with hundreds of peculiar runes, and the Blood Moon cast down its dark red light. In an instant, the platform became an absolute forbidden zone, repelling everyone on it, including Langna and Gerard!

Gerard unfolded his Tri-wings and hovered in midair, his gaze fixed on the Virtual Realm Passage being smeared by the dark light, his face extremely ugly: "How could you—"

"You should have seen my resume, knowing that I was once an elite Moonshadow Priest," Langna said, placing Ronald's Corpse down, and glancing at the group of priests nearby watching the platform: "During the Hunting Festival, the greatest use of a priest is not to bless, but to seal and destroy passages."

"After so many years, the Ritual Track of 'Dark Side of the Moon' has hardly changed, and I can still easily trigger the Procedure prepared in the platform, completing the last step, and invoking the power of the Moonshadow to completely forbid the Virtual Realm Passage."

At this moment, Gerard was no longer in a hurry, having watched Ashe step into the Virtual Realm Passage; he reverted back to his usual demeanor as the Captain of the Blood Mad Hunters, "But this also means you cannot escape."

"To me, Shattered Lake Prison, Kaimon City, or any other Kingdom makes no difference," Langna said, removing his cloak to reveal his fierce, hairless face: "It's just that Ronald longed to escape from prison, and I did everything in my power to fulfill his wish."

"Ashe just helped Ronald; I hope this return gift will satisfy Ashe."

"Ashe Heath, he truly is a devil more beguiling than a Bewitcher," Gerard sighed: "Even a Moonshadow traitor is willing to sacrifice himself for his escape."

"Who said I was going to sacrifice myself?"

Langna took off his shirt, revealing a physique as sculpted and robust as marble.

"Do you mean to say you want to escape right in front of me?" Gerard flicked his Chain Sword lightly, shaking off the fresh blood to form a mist of red: "I'm not a sole believer in

the power of arcane energy, but you just exhausted all your strength to barely fend off my Chain Sword. I don't think you have the capability."

"Moreover, I'm in a foul mood tonight and want to get home for some rest. After all, I'm now working overtime on a voluntary basis." The White-haired Hunter's red eyes swept through with a fierce light: "I won't adhere to the safety clauses in the 'Sin Hunter's Hall Enforcement Code' anymore, and I will show no mercy to anyone trying to stop me from clocking out."

Langna seemed impervious to Gerard's murderous intent, calmly asking: "As a favored child of the Blood Moon Sovereign, do you know the difference between the Moonshadow and the sacred bloodline?"

Gerard answered without hesitation: "Moonshadow gives life, sacred bloodline guards death."

"Yes, Moonshadow gives life, sacred bloodline guards death. This represents the social division of labor between the two races and also summarizes their character traits. The sacred bloodline possesses a death-like calmness, while the Moonshadow always maintains a newborn-like passion." Langna glanced at the curious Moonshadow Priests nearby: "But in my view, this phrase could also mean that the sacred bloodline are all dirty adults, and the Moonshadow are all mischievous children."

Recalling his subordinate Emma, the werewolf with the large tail, Gerard had to admit that Langna was right. At that moment, the White-haired Hunter realized something and stared intently at Langna: "Langna Chios, you seem..."

"Only the pure of heart, those who do not forget to pray at night, can transform into a Moonshadow on the night when the henbane blooms under the full moon." Langna said: "Since I was young, I realized I was different from the other Moonshadow electors. They are full of passion, emotionally impulsive, pure and naive, simply greedy, whereas I am the exact opposite—I was born without affection, without desire."

"Interestingly, I still became a Moonshadow, a werewolf who can only transform in the shadows. The Priests told me to hide myself, but most spirits in the Moonshadow faction need emotions as fuel, so I had to seek the help of the 'Affection' spirit."

"Perhaps it was luck, or perhaps misfortune, but in the Virtual Realm, I came across a set of Taboo Ritual Tracks from the Mind Faction. The effect of the Ritual Track is to harvest emotions from others, seemingly to complement those miracles that require the burning of vast amounts of emotion."

"But for me, emotions are exactly what I need. I need to harvest feelings; I need something to fill the emptiness inside."

“I modified the Ritual Track, but the process became more bloody. I was quickly caught, and my secret was exposed. However, the Church didn’t execute me—they never execute a fellow member. So, I was sent to Shattered Lake Prison, where I could continue my research.”

“I would plant ‘Affection’ in the target’s heart, letting it overflow throughout their body. I tried my best to act out the semblance of ‘love,’ but to no avail. Me, without emotions, even after harvesting so many emotions, fundamentally could not understand or experience them.”

“But watching Ronald die before me, the wasteland in my heart experienced its first sprout.” Langna clenched his blood-stained fist: “After nine years, I finally acquired emotion.”

Gerard asked with interest, “Is it love?”

“No, it’s hate.” Langna’s tone finally fluctuated: “Ronald wanted to die in front of me because he hated me!”

“He knew my emotions were a facade, knew that any form of revenge was meaningless to me. The only way to make me suffer was to make me feel emotion.”

“So he planned to escape from prison, to leave the Blood Moon, to accumulate hope, to gather joy, and then choose an appropriate time to die in front of me in the most tragic way, like a bubble bursting.”

“That way, the twisted tree that grew in his heart, watered with hope, fertilized with joy, basking in the sunlight of freedom, yet rooted in the soil of pain, would bear the most vibrant fruit and plant it deep within me.”

“He succeeded, and so did I.”

Langna raised his thumbs and with Ronald’s blood drew two streaks under his eyes.

“So this is what hate feels like.”

Seeing this, Gerard’s brows twitched violently, as unpleasant memories surged back into his mind.

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

Chapter 171: Captured Once More

“If I had killed him that day, perhaps everything would be different.”

Gerard shook his head, his tone filled with regret: “You are merely victims of the Four Pillars Cult... Without meeting him, you wouldn’t have been seduced, and the peaceful prison life would not have crumbled.”

“Ashe Heath, indeed a source of disaster.”

“I’m not in the habit of shirking responsibility, nor do I believe I was bewitched,” Langna said. “On the contrary, I’m grateful to him—if not for this series of events, my Ritual would not have been completed, nor would I have gained sentiment.”

“However, when it comes to defining him, we can reach a consensus: he truly is a charismatic being, capable of crafting an unpredictable stage of Destiny, one that allows us to break free from the mundane... Wings, if you will.”

“Wings?”

“Isn’t that what allows us, shackled and bound, to soar?”

Gerard had lost interest in the victim’s nonsensical ramblings. With his finger pointed at Langna, the Miracle he had silently readied during their conversation activated, and moonlight transformed into chains that tightly bound the only remaining Prison Escapee.

“Congratulations on gaining sentiment, it seems you can now repent and pray properly.”

Langna did not resist, speaking calmly: “The 15th of each month is the Night of Blazing Blood, marking the Blood Moon’s closest approach to the earth; the 1st of every month is the Night of Dim Blood, representing the Blood Moon’s furthest distance.”

“The Moonshadow have a trait: the more intense the Blood Moon’s night, the stronger the Moonshadow become, and vice versa. Thus, the Moonshadow are strongest on the night of the 15th, and weakest on the night of the 1st.”

“As a Church defector, the shame of the Moonshadow, even the Blood Moon spits on me, a beast rejected.” Langna’s voice grew more vehement: “Only on the Night of Dim Blood do I become whole.”

“Look, now even the clouds can obscure the Blood Moon.”

Gerard looked up to see a cloud drifting across the night sky, the already dim moonlight further obscured by the overcast, and in the chaos, the camp's lighting had been knocked down earlier, leaving the place shrouded in darkness.

Bang!

Langna's chains of Miracle were snapped, and a thick shadow engulfed him, transforming into a fierce and evil deep monster. The darkness of the entire space seemed to thicken, and for some reason, Gerard could feel an emotion named 'hatred' suffusing the pitch-black surroundings, as if hundreds of wolves were watching him from the shadows!

"Wow."

Acolyte Coir and the Priests gazed up at the spectacle with their mouths agape in surprise, clapping their hands: "That's amazing."

"Quick, make a wish, ask for my mercy, or I'll throw you right back."

Ashe, supporting Igor, moved through the Virtual Realm Passage: "I am Ashe Heath, Cult Leader of the Four Pillars Cult; I'm capable of anything. Saving your life without having you sign a Slave Contract is already quite generous of me. Now, if you don't make a wish, don't blame me for being ruthless."

"Fine, let's sign a Slave Contract," said Igor, his face pale but still managing a smile. "Need help drafting the Contract? I'll give you a 20% discount."

Damn, Ashe felt like dropping him right there and then.

After stepping into the Virtual Realm Turbulence, Ashe found Igor bleeding profusely inside. Igor was already wounded by a sniper shot from Gersas that had torn away a chunk of flesh, and now he had been bound by Gerard's Blood Magic and had fallen to the ground, bleeding copiously.

Igor wasn't a Battle Sorcerer and could have kept going if he gritted his teeth, but this delay overwhelmed him with intense pain that drowned his reasoning. Ashe used the "Slay Me Miracle" on him and found he couldn't even stand up, crawling on the ground like a baby. Unable to bear the sight, Ashe helped him leave.

Logically, whether Ashe ignored him or finished him off would have been reasonable, given their sand-level acquaintance, which wasn't worth fussing over and could be toppled by a mere breeze.

Furthermore, with Igor holding a wish over Ashe's head, Ashe had to worry about Igor possibly shouting for him to come out and stand on his head as a chance to kill this Bewitcher, which would be the rational thing to do.

But then Ashe considered: could this be the Bewitcher's test? If he dared to act or flee, the Bewitcher might immediately make a wish forcing Ashe to go back and kiss Gerard's toes.

Igor had a penchant for manipulating people's hearts, despicable and shameless by nature, with a fondness for harming others without benefiting himself; these were indeed the kinds of schemes and tricks he would carry out, and they had to be guarded against.

In fact, Ashe had to admit to himself that even though their relationship was one of mutual use, Igor had indeed provided him with a great deal of help.

Without Igor's plotting, neither the escape from prison nor the entry into the Virtual Realm Passage would have been possible.

Ashe would need to prepare himself mentally to burn bridges before crossing the river, as it was not something he could do lightly.

For Ashe, "doing bad things" was an active skill that required casting time, and given the short decision-making time now, Ashe could only choose to help him escape.

However, Ashe had his own little schemes. If Igor used his wish here, then he would no longer have any means to restrain Ashe. Yet, Igor was well-versed in game theory, understanding that a card not played held the greatest threat. No matter how much Ashe threatened or enticed, Igor would not loosen his lips, taking advantage without paying, but his body honestly leaned heavily on Ashe, taking full advantage of the Cult Leader.

The passage soon reached its end, and looking at the interweaving exit of the currents, Ashe exhaled: "Finally..."

"You're not leading us the wrong way, are you?" Igor gasped, "If we go out there, we might see Gerard's surprised face."

"I wouldn't get lost... I hope not," Ashe said, not entirely certain himself. After all, though the passage was supposed to be one-way, it was hard to say whether the directions had been reversed when he had helped Igor up.

It was all Igor's fault, making him doubt himself.

If they had really taken the wrong path, he would have to strongly request that Igor be transferred to another Blood Moon Prison, just to avoid being taunted to death by him for the rest of his life...

With a mind full of chaotic thoughts, Ashe mustered his courage, supporting Igor as they stepped into the unknown Kingdom.

What met their eyes was not a massive Blood Moon but a lonely night sky and... a bright highway stretching into the distance?

The subsequent sensation of stepping into the void, the intense feeling of weightlessness, made Ashe realize in an instant—another Virtual Realm Passage suspended in mid-air!

This is why Exploring the Virtual Realm Passage is so difficult: in addition to the incompleteness of the Virtual Realm Passage and the animosity that different Kingdoms harbor against Invaders, many explorers might just fall to their deaths as soon as they step out of the passage!

Speaking of which, Ashe remembered that one of the blessings that Priests give to Adventurers includes ‘Light as a Feather’, specifically to deal with this kind of situation!

Instinctively, he spread his Silver Wings and shouted, “Igor, spread your wings!”

“Huh?” It took Igor almost a second to catch up with Ashe’s thinking, and by the time he unfurled his Silver Wings, they had both already hit the ground.

Or more accurately, fallen into a cage.

Ashe pushed Igor, who was leaning on him, trying to prop himself up to survey the situation, only to see Harvey also sleeping in the cage. At the same time, he smelled a comforting scent, like blankets just warmed by the sun, and like the aroma of food that greets you before you even enter your home...

Ambush, trap... Ashe’s instinct was to cast ‘Slay Me Miracle’ on himself, but his thoughts were slowing down, and even his arcane energy was becoming sluggish. He struggled to turn his head, and through a blurry vision, he only saw a violet silhouette outside the cage.

“According to the Prophecy of the Gospel, tonight only three People from the Exotic Lands will transmigrate. Tie them up, put on the Arcane Lock Collars, and leave immediately.”

“Let’s hope this gift will please the Four Pillars Cult.”

(End of Volume One: Sea of Knowledge)

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

Chapter 172: Freya Extra

“Adra, why did you have to drag me here? I’m in a hurry to get home and catch up on my shows. I still haven’t seen the finale of ‘Sorcerer 100%’ from last night—”

“Because the Eastern Army won by a slight margin, it ended with a solo female lead, and the pair lived happily ever after.”

“Adra, I haven’t watched it yet!”

“Well, now you don’t have to, unless you’re part of the Eastern Army like me.”

“I’m with the Northeast Alliance...”

Adra raised an eyebrow. ‘Sorcerer 100%’ featured four main female characters, with the Audience divided into East, South, West, and North, each corresponding to a different character archetype: the caring confidante, the childhood sweetheart, the love at first sight, and the energetic playmate. In the finale voting, the Eastern Army’s solo victory, the Western Army’s solo victory, and a free-for-all among all four were the top contenders, with the vote counts closely contested. Thus, no one could predict the winner until the last day, right before the finale was broadcast.

But the choice of the Northeast Alliance was utterly absurd, an option so niche it couldn’t get more obscure. Typically, female Audience members would choose a solo victory ending, right?

Only male Audience members would opt for a finale with multiple female leads, but even then, if they chose multiples, they’d usually want all of them, not just two...

Noticing Adra’s gaze, Freya became defiant: “Though I know there’s little hope, I can’t help it. I’m just that kind of romantic!”

“A romantic Bewitcher? That’s a first... Romantic and yet you choose two?”

“I only like these two; I’m not against the others, but I won’t force myself to like them too!”

During their casual conversation, the taxi came to a smooth stop at the curb. The Human driver in the front seat pulled the universal hand from the console, its slender steel-chain fingers extracting a freshly printed receipt from the fare machine. Adra immediately took it, scanning the receipt with a Chip to complete the payment.

“Have a wonderful evening.”

As they stepped out, Adra noticed Freya looking thoughtfully at the departing taxi. Curious, she asked, "What's up? Don't tell me you're interested in that driver? If so, why didn't you ask for his Curtain account—"

"It's not that," Freya shook her head, "I'm just curious why he would buy a car that requires a universal hand to operate, instead of one with a steering wheel... Could it be that the former is a bit cheaper?"

"You don't understand because you never took classes in the Mechanical Faction." Adra laughed. "Driving with a universal hand can be more responsive, and it's easier to control the vehicle in case of emergencies. Now, basically all low-end cars have switched to universal control panels. Taxis, excavators, construction vehicles, and other Occupational vehicles have completely eliminated steering wheels. All operators must use the universal hand."

"Steering wheels are now basically exclusive to luxury cars, but the rich don't drive themselves; they hire drivers to handle the steering wheel..."

"So, does the driver need to have normal hands to reflect the luxury aspect?"

Adra looked at Freya with surprise. "To come up with such an insightful comment, you've entered the realm of upper-class thinking. I only learned these bits of knowledge while chatting at the casino... But cheer up, we've arrived at your favorite place!"

Freya turned around and saw a six-story building bathed in enchanting purple and red Lighting. The name of the establishment, "Mimosa," was crafted in Illusions that flickered in and out of the night sky. The entrance was bustling with people coming and going, and taxis were constantly dropping off and picking up customers, indicating the popularity of the venue.

"... The highest-end leisure center in Kaimon City? Spending once here is enough to cover four times the expense elsewhere..."

"That's right!" Adra said, hooking her arm with Freya's as they entered. "Don't worry about the money; I've won quite a bit recently. This treat is on me; you just need to enjoy yourself! Consider it a celebration for finally getting rid of that enchanting jerk!"

"Aren't you the one who doesn't like coming to places like this?"

"Once in a while is fine, especially if it's to keep you company. I can't stand to see you with that resentful look all the time."

Freya touched her own cheek. "Is it that obvious?"

"Anyway, the best way to forget a man is not to delete him, but to replace him with more men! Come on, this place definitely won't disappoint you!"

The first floor of the establishment featured a bathing hall with ten entrances, categorized by different genders and races to streamline the flow of guests. Upon entry, patrons would change clothes, receive an item in the form of a hand tag, and then they could bathe. For those interested, there were options like hot springs, saunas, scrubs, and massages. The second floor housed the Rest Hall, complete with a buffet, tabletop game rooms, card rooms, bamboo mat rooms, and even a casino. Thus, the first two floors were typically abuzz with noise and excitement, a place where even those without particular desires could relax and unwind.

After having their fill, Adra and Freya arrived at the elevator hall on the second floor. The attendant there to greet them was a beauty whose gender was indiscernible, dressed in a tight uniform which accentuated their curvaceous backside and flat chest, their skin was smooth, and their pupils were a surprising shade of pink with heart shapes. The attendant's voice was distinctly androgynous, "May I ask which floor you would like to visit?"

"Which floor is the Mud Café?" Adra inquired.

"Is this your first time here? In Crystal Fate, there's no distinction like Mud Café or Tea Cafe," the attendant replied with a slight smile, more seductive than Freya could ever imagine, "The third floor is Crystal Fate, offering custom service rooms suitable for individual guests or small groups of three or fewer. Guests are welcome to take their time selecting their preferences and enjoy services in the absolute soundproof privacy of these rooms. If there are any special requests, including but not limited to costumes, items, or even bio-modification, Crystal Fate will strive to accommodate."

"The fourth floor is the Encounter Hall, which naturally sets the stage for various common scenarios such as a Nursery, Classroom, City Hall, office, street, forest, library, elevator, Restroom, Treatment room, and so on. All staff members are dressed according to the respective scenes, each wearing a Bracelet on their left hand. Guests can either change into costumes to partake in role-playing or directly enjoy the services offered. The only downside is the lack of privacy and soundproofing, which requires guests to be a bit more open-minded."

"The fifth floor caters to those with particular tastes, which are quite unique. Since it seems you've just finished eating, I won't go into detail to avoid upsetting your digestion." The attendant then presented a piece of paper, covering most of it and only revealing the first line, "The mildest service offered here is this one."

Freya was relatively unfazed, as she often browsed through Curtains for entertainment and thus had a stronger psychological tolerance. Adra, on the other hand, turned pale and felt nauseous on the spot.

The attendant swiftly pocketed the paper and gently pressed on Adra's nape, tenderly kissing her lips. Adra relaxed almost immediately, and as the attendant drew back their hand, they smiled, "Feeling better now?"

“Much.” Adra, touching her lips, seemed slightly dazed. “So sweet...”

With a smile, the attendant continued, “The sixth floor is the Rest area for staff, off-limits to guests. Which floor would you like to go to?”

Adra looked at Freya, who after a moment’s thought said, “The third floor.”

“Alright,” the attendant pressed the button for them and noticing Adra’s glances, winked, “My badge number is 115, I’m currently available for requests. I’m quite popular though, so if you want to request me, you should do it quickly~”

Even the usually stoic Adra, known for her calm demeanor in the casino, blushed. Reaching the third floor with Freya, they were promptly led to an available room by a staff member and handed a palm-sized Knowledge Screen for selecting services based on their preferences.

“Any particular Race you’re interested in?”

“Um...”

“Any preferences in attire? Prison garb? Hunter outfit?”

“Um...”

Adra, noting Freya’s lack of enthusiasm, asked curiously, “Why do you seem so disinterested? You’re not living up to the Bewitcher name.”

“But I just don’t have any desires...”

The attendant offered helpfully, “If you can’t decide on a Mud Worker that suits your fancy, how about we let some of the ready Mud Workers come by for you to take a look? Maybe you’ll find one that catches your eye. Do you have any general requirements?”

Adra nudged Freya with her elbow, “What does that dog of a man you’re with look like?”

After a moment’s thought, Freya described, “Human male, a head taller than me, probably in his twenties. As for looks... not as attractive as me, always lounging around but with a charming smile, handsome in profile...”

“Go with that description, some variation is okay,” Adra suggested.

“Very well, Mimosa will strive to accommodate your needs.”

Soon, ten young and handsome Puppies

stood in line in the room. Some had rugged features with white hair, looking handsome in Hunter uniforms, almost like Gerard working a side job after his shift. Others had dazzling styles, with eyes sparkling like stars, reminiscent of celebrities who stepped right out of a Shadow Drama. There were also those with a mischievously charming smile, exuding a foxy allure, their every move embodying the essence of a 'lover'.

Even Adra, whose threshold for excitement had been heightened by the gambling, felt her heart flutter. She tugged at Freya's hand and said, "I think the second one from the left is quite nice, the third one too; the two in the middle look alike, they must be going for a twin style, and there's also... Freya, which one do you like? Wait, aren't you the Bewitcher, don't you want them all?"

"I think... none of them are really to my taste."

Adra was taken aback and waved her hand in resignation, "Bring in another group."

"Any you like?"

She shook her head.

"Another group."

"The third one on the right has to be better than that dog of a man you're with, right? I'm even tempted!"

She shook her head again.

"Another group."

Ten minutes later, Adra sighed, "Sister, my dear sister Freya, what do you really want?"

Freya thought for a moment, then looked up and said, "Adra, thank you for your concern, but I'm really not interested. How about..."

"How about what?"

"How about we just cash in instead?"

"Get lost." Adra kicked her playfully, "I rarely treat you, and you're making it so difficult."

Freya laughed, "Since it's rare that we come here, you should enjoy yourself, Adra. I think I'll head home to catch up on my dramas."

"Aren't you with the Northeast Alliance?"

“Even if it’s not the ending I like, I still want to see it through to the end.”

After saying goodbye to Adra, Freya returned to the first floor to change clothes and left the glitzy palace. Standing on the bustling street, she looked up at the crimson Blood Moon reigning over the earth. Neon lights painted the city with a rich palette of colors. The city, as always, was fixated on Entertainment to the brink of death. The damaged buildings from the 422 Incident had been completely repaired and rebuilt. It seemed as though Fernand Snow’s Blood Moon Tribunal hadn’t brought any change to the city; the Blood Moon had returned to its tranquil state.

The posters plastered on the lampposts advertising for the Combat League seemed to narrate that the wheels of history had already begun to turn.

Freya had intended to take a taxi back to her apartment since it was a bit far, but after thinking it over, she felt some aversion to the idea and instead chose to rent a nearby bicycle. After unlocking it with her Chip, she cycled home.

Passing by the Merle Family convenience store, Freya went in to buy some snacks and liquor. At checkout, the cashier said, “Our Moon Sugar from the Snow White Brand is currently on a buy-three-get-one-free promotion. If you have our membership card, you can get a 50% discount. Would you be interested in buying some to take home?”

Freya glanced at the prominently displayed Snow White Brand Moon Sugar on the counter and shook her head: “I don’t need it.”

After half an hour, Freya finally arrived at her apartment building. Just as she reached the third floor, she smelled the familiar scent of Lala Fatty, a surge of inexplicable excitement prompted her to quicken her pace, only to see a delivery person handing over a Lala Fatty takeout to her neighbor.

She made way for the delivery person to leave and then, with a quiet sigh, Bewitcher took out her keys and opened her door. As soon as she turned on the light, she was fiercely ‘attacked’ by a predatory bird of prey—

“Meow~ (=w=) ”

“Little String, I’m back.”

Freya quickly poured out some cat food and cleaned the litter box. Watching her Scottish Fold cat feast, she gently stroked its back and asked, “How are you feeling? Does it hurt anywhere?”

Little String looked at her puzzled: “Meow (Do you actually understand what I’m meowing)?”

Realizing she may have revealed too much of her intellect, Bewitcher absentmindedly ruffled the cat's head and went to take a shower. For some reason, these past few days she had the urge to dress after showering, which she had resisted until now, but today her mood seemed particularly off, so she just went with it.

When she emerged from the bathroom in her underwear, Freya had the feeling that her life was about to change dramatically.

She turned on the Knowledge Screen and went to a video site to watch the finale of "Sorcerer 100%." Naturally, a 30-second advertisement was the first thing to appear. However, after playing for 10 seconds, it was followed by a 20-second announcement from the Sin Hunter's Hall:

"The extremely vicious criminal 'Ghoul' Langna Chios is still at large. The offender possesses combat abilities ranging from Two Wings to Tri-wings. Citizens are urged to contact the headquarters of Sin Hunter's Hall immediately upon receiving any information. A reward of 50 Gold Coins for his capture dead or alive, and 5 Silver Coins for information leading to his capture."

"Con Artist Igor Bukin, Necrophiliac Archibald Harvey, and Demon Saint Ashe Heath have self-exiled from the Blood Moon Kingdom; the bounty has been revoked."

"He really left Blood Moon, huh..."

Freya lay sprawled on the table, watching "Sorcerer 100%" on the Knowledge Screen, suddenly feeling a bit listless and even beginning to tire of this happiness that existed only on the screen.

She turned off the page and just lay there, staring into space, until Little String came over to push her head and affectionately rubbed against her cheek, with a look of 'I'm really worried about you, master'.

After a moment, Freya rubbed her moist eyes, hugged Little String tightly, and felt rejuvenated!

Nearly suffocated, Little String struggled to escape from her embrace and hid in a corner, licking his paws as if he'd just survived a disaster. Freya didn't pay him any more attention and energetically opened "New Folder" – "Used Countless Times"!

Goodbye is goodbye, the next one will be better behaved!

Let's check out something nice to rejuvenate!

First part, second part, third part, fourth part...

Half an hour later, still unable to find the right Casting Materials in the entire folder, Freya pondered for a moment, then opened her Chip and chose "Gallery".

The Chip could take pictures directly; the camera equipment was naturally her own eyes, essentially capturing and saving what she saw directly onto the Chip. However, because such photos took up a lot of space, and the storage on the Chip was very limited, only the most precious photos were worth saving.

Freya had once thought about taking a picture of the Cult Leader, but the latter was surprisingly vigilant and did not match his appearance. Every time Freya tried to take a photo, Ashe would immediately turn his head, avoiding Bewitcher's gaze several times in a row, even while sleeping.

Until one night, on a whim, Freya pounced on Ashe in the middle of the night and pinned him down. Taking advantage of the fact that Ashe had no room to evade, she sneakily snapped a side profile of him. Although the night raid was ultimately unsuccessful, she had captured a precious close-up of 'Kaimon's most vicious criminal in a century'.

At that time, the room was dark except for the faint glow of Blood Moon light streaming through the window, casting a mix of panic and shyness on his face. Gazing at the photo, Bewitcher couldn't help but open the newly purchased alcoholic drink and started chugging it down.

Minutes later, the chair was soaked with the spilled drink.

Freya moved to another soft chair, and accidentally, the faux leather got wet with the drink.

Then, lying on the bed, another accident happened, and the sheets got wet with the drink.

But after three rounds of drinks, Freya was finally a bit drunk and tired. She grabbed a tissue, wiped the spill carelessly, and closed her eyes contentedly to sleep.

After a while, Little String jumped onto the bed and nudged Bewitcher, checking if she was dead. Freya opened her eyes and scratched Little String's chin. Looking at the photo on the Holographic Screen, she sighed helplessly and a faint smile appeared on her lips.

"I've used you up, but I still want to see you."

"I might really miss you."

Footnote:

1. Puppies(小奶狗):

Derived from a categorization used by Japanese girls for boys. It originally refers to unweaned puppies, but now it is a collective term for young, clingy, cute, and sunny boys.

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

Chapter 173: The Swordswomans Interlude (1)

Gales, the second floor of Swordflower College's Training Hall.

Compared to the first floor, the second floor is much more austere, with an open space nearly devoid of any equipment. However, the walls and floor are covered with Razer Meteorite flooring, which, with its deep blue serpentine patterns, can effectively disperse and resist any attack. Reinforced with magical arrays, it can even withstand Sanctuary-level destructive miracles, making it a durable location that can endure all kinds of abuse.

The only downside is the significant light pollution from the Razer flooring.

This stage is specifically provided for Sorcerers to battle. Since most miracles cause severe damage to the surroundings, Sorcerers looking to clash at full strength must do so on a designated dueling ground. Engaging in unauthorized duels in public is punishable by fines and a three-point deduction on one's Spellcasting license.

By now, it's past 11 p.m., and most Sorcerer Apprentices have either returned to their dorms to sleep or ventured into the Virtual Realm Adventure. On the vast second floor, only two Swordcerers are left sparring, their released Sword Qi scraping white streaks across the Razer flooring!

Hiss—

Hearing the sound like that of a thread being pulled taut, Felix quickly retracted his sword and retreated.

The 'Red-haired Swordswoman,' Sonya's unique miracle, Water Moon, had already made waves throughout the Gales magic colleges, and it was recently included in the "Stars Miracle Catalog," rated as a mid-tier Radiant Silver miracle. Countless

Swordcerers were awaiting Sonya to lift the Restriction and grant licensing, eager to witness the splendor of the Counterattack Miracle.

In the Stars, miracles are evaluated through a detailed system, divided into Silver, Gold, Spectrum, and Void, with each tier further subdivided into three levels: Dim, True, and Radiant. Each level is then split into Upper, Mid, and Lower Ranks, totaling 36 levels.

If Sonya can continue to optimize the mid-tier Radiant Silver ‘Water Moon,’ either by replacing its precious spirit with a common one or by further addressing the casting flaws, then Water Moon could be upgraded to upper-tier Radiant Silver, becoming one of the most elite miracles accessible to Silver Sorcerers!

Even the Family had, unprecedentedly, tasked Felix with securing a long-term licensing agreement for Water Moon from Sonya, at any cost. Built upon the foundation of the Vibration Sword, a technique for which Vlozrada is renowned, acquiring this miracle was crucial for the Family simply to diversify their array of miracles, let alone for the sake of a mid-tier Radiant Silver rarity.

In general, Radiant Level miracles are considered “trump cards for punching above one’s weight,” True Level miracles are “brag-worthy achievements,” and Dim Level miracles are “decent.”

Why, you ask, is there such a complex rating system for miracles? Naturally, it’s to better price the miracles, ensuring buyers feel the price is reasonable and sellers find the price fair.

After all, Star Extreme Hall, the body responsible for compiling the “Stars Miracle Catalog,” employs hundreds of magic practitioners and thousands of part-time consulting magicians. They all serve this miracle rating system, on which the livelihoods of thousands of magicians depend.

Water Moon is incredibly quick to activate, powerful, and it’s a Counterattack Miracle, fully deserving of its mid-tier Radiant Silver rating. However, after several days of sparring, Felix had learned how to counter it—by retreating immediately upon hearing the sound of the Moon Silk to launch a Long-range Attack, he could easily break the miracle!

But as Felix forcefully interrupted his attack to withdraw, he realized his opponent wasn’t wrapped in Moon Silk. Instead, she took the opportunity to attack, targeting his exposed flank!

A trap!

But Felix retreated too quickly; he couldn’t defend in time!

The Female Swordsman with red hair executed a Vibration Sword attack, an Uppercut Slash from below that catapulted Felix into the air!

Killing Intent Uppercut Slash!

Evil Light Slash!

Rupture Wave Slash!

Felix was sent flying, unable to touch the ground. The Vibration Sword has two main characteristics: 'dispersion' to enhance the strike area and 'vibration' to increase lethality. But if a Swordcerer fully masters these traits, they can develop a third characteristic—forcibly launching the opponent into the air!

Using the Uppercut Slash, a Vibration Sword practitioner can send their enemy flying, stripping them of any leverage, turning them into sitting ducks, ready to be sliced at will!

Felix had been careful to avoid Sonya's Uppercut Slashes, never giving her a chance. He didn't expect that beneath her seemingly average looks and beautiful exterior, she had such a dirty trick up her sleeve, feigning the use of Water Moon to make him retreat, then following up with an Uppercut Slash, creating a perfect opportunity for attack.

At this rate, he would be comboed to death!

However, being suspended in air is almost a death sentence for a Swordcerer, as most sword techniques require solid ground to generate force, so...

Just as Sonya was about to launch another Evil Light Slash, Felix suddenly spit at her. With the addition of a sinister and gentle breeze, it instantly transformed into a stench-filled, vile rain!

Miracle: Sorrow Wind Erosion Rain!

"Oh?"

Sonya let out a surprised and delighted sound, casually blocking all the rain with a Vibration Sword.

Felix, having landed smoothly, no longer concealed his strength. He blew three times in quick succession, creating three hovering Wind Blades!

Miracle: Tooth Wind!

Then, with a light touch of her lips and a cross stroke, she drew ten intertwined acidic water marks like a net!

Miracle: Poison Blade Web!

“How interesting, really interesting!” Sonya gradually tore through Felix’s miracles, her mouth curving slightly upward, her pale red eyes seemingly transforming into vertical pupils: “Felix, you—”

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This time, Sonya held nothing back, preempting Felix’s miracle cast with a Killing Intent Evil Light Slash. The crimson sword light slashed through Felix’s left arm, spilling deep red blood and exposing the bone!

At the sight of blood, Sonya’s eyes gleamed, and her grip on the wooden sword tightened. However, she quickly came back to her senses and, dropping the wooden sword, hurriedly said, “I’ll help you to the Treatment room—”

“No, no need.” Felix hid his left hand behind him, shaking his head repeatedly: “It’s just a minor injury. I have a Hydrotherapy spirit; I’ll heal myself and take the opportunity to improve my status in the Water Faction Realm.”

So this is what it’s like to be a Noble young master, huh? Even though he’s not pursuing the path of a Medic, he still carries a Hydrotherapy spirit with him.

The rustic girl expressed her amazement at the city dweller’s wealth and peeked at Felix’s left hand, only to realize that he had been wearing a glove, perhaps an Item that could enhance the effects of miracles.

As for the injury... Well, since the hand wasn’t severed, it was considered a minor injury, not worth mentioning. Sonya felt justified in letting Felix take care of it himself.

“But why didn’t you call a halt when your Star Robe got torn?”

“It probably got torn in mid-air; I didn’t notice it at the time.”

Both of them had a layer of film around them, like dreamy bubbles, which would absorb all damage when they were attacked, ensuring the duelists’ safety.

This is the privilege of being an Academy Sorcerer: the Star Robe. Before a duel, get it enchanted by a Professor, and you can revel in the thrill of full-fledged battle without worrying about accidentally blowing your classmate’s head off.

“Looks like that’s it for tonight,” Felix sighed with relief. “Although battling with you, Sonya, has been incredibly beneficial...”

“Then let’s continue,” Sonya said, still bursting with energy. “You’ve still got your other hand intact.”

“But! !! Am! Injured!” Felix said through clenched teeth. “Let’s take a break over there, and I’ll tend to my wounds.”

Sonya had been challenging him to Sorcerer duels every evening recently, and at first, Felix was happy to learn from a Genius. However, Sonya’s ferocity escalated night after night. On the first night, Felix could handle his injuries, but by the second night, he needed to seek a Medic, and from the third night on, he would barely bid farewell to Sonya before calling someone to send him to the Treatment room, all the while cursing her in his mind, wondering if the rustic girl ever got her period.

If it weren’t for the little pride left, and his unwillingness to lose to a peer, Felix would have long refused Sonya’s unilateral thrashing.

But he refused to believe it. He was a revenger who had been burdened from a young age; how could he be afraid of a vulgar rustic girl with nothing but Talent?

He could lose, but he couldn’t lack the courage to draw his Sword against a rustic girl!

However...

Felix sat down and looked at his bleeding left hand. If it hadn’t been for this accident, their fight probably would have lasted until midnight. And based on past experiences, the rustic girl tended to become more excited and wild as the battle progressed, especially during the last half hour, which was like a storm wreaking havoc. Felix’s wooden sword had been smashed to pieces several times.

Being injured in one hand and getting off an hour early... didn’t seem like such a bad deal?

“Your Wind Magic, Water Art, and Poison Magic are all at the Silver Realm, right?” Sonya suddenly asked. “Did you start learning them as a child, or did you pick them up recently?”

Felix hesitated for a moment, “Recently.”

“...You should have given up Swordsmanship a long time ago.”

“There’s no way,” Felix said as he treated his wounds with Hydrotherapy spirit. “Swordsmanship is the key to Vlozrada, and it’s the foundation of my survival. Sometimes compromises must be made for survival. Without life, there’s no chance for Talent to flourish. The importance of each is clear at a glance...”

“I’m not listening, I’m not listening, I’m not listening,” Sonya covered her ears. “I refuse to get dragged into the loves and hates, the conflicts of interest of the Noble circle.”

“It was you who brought up the topic,” Felix relaxed and snorted coldly. “Tomorrow, I won’t come to duel with you anymore.”

Sonya looked at him in astonishment, then grabbed the corner of her clothes, looking down, lost in thought.

Felix felt somewhat pleased with Sonya’s reaction; he hadn’t expected the rustic girl to show embarrassment. He had thought she would mock him for running away upon hearing those words.

“Um... what about a newspaper?”

“What?”

“I could use a rolled-up newspaper,” Sonya gestured as if rolling a paper. “How about I fight you with a newspaper?”

Felix was taken aback, his face turning red: “I’m not afraid to duel with you!”

“Not even with a newspaper? I could use a finger, I can even invoke Swordsmanship spirit with one finger!”

Felix felt that if the conversation continued, he would be infuriated to death by the rustic girl, so he cut it off decisively: “My Soul has recovered well, and tomorrow I can enter the Virtual Realm. I won’t have time to duel with you!”

A few days ago, after Felix passed through the Whirlpool portal in the Virtual Realm, he was taken for First Blood by a Slaying Fish-Dragon that was blocking the way. However, Sonya immediately took advantage of the situation, so Felix’s Killing Intent Sword ended up in her hands, leading to their first official encounter over interests.

Felix, having experienced death, did not seek help from his Family to hide his level of arcane energy, but after so many days, his Soul had naturally recovered.

That’s why Felix was so bold tonight to reveal his trump card in the battle against Sonya—if he lost, so be it, but if he won, there would be a reason to leave victoriously, denying the rustic girl a chance to turn the tables!

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

Chapter 174: The Swordswomans Interlude (2)

“Hey, congratulations.” Sonya sounded somewhat downhearted. “I still haven’t fully recovered...”

Sonya did not hide the fact that she had died in the Virtual Realm; instead, she spread the news widely. With the help of Professor Trozan, the entire school learned that the Genius known as the ‘Red-haired Swordswoman’ had finally met her match in the Virtual Realm.

After some strategic public relations, the students’ perception of Sonya softened. Even Professor Trozan, who had been envious of her talents, took greater care of her. Whenever Sonya went to the cafeteria, the auntie would even give her an extra couple of scoops.

Her failure did not tarnish Sonya’s talents; instead, it made her more approachable and personable.

Like the ‘impoverished but beautiful college student’, the ‘Genius who occasionally fails’ was also a rather effective label. Sonya decided to seize this rare opportunity to deepen this persona. This way, she wouldn’t have to carry the weight of everyone’s expectations, yet she could still access the resources reserved for a Genius, effectively Winning.

“Looks like I’ll just have to go back to the dorm and sleep like everyone else tomorrow night...”

Most people choose to sleep, right? Who else would be as excited as you in the middle of the night, itching for a fight? Felix thought to himself, grumbling inwardly, while coldly huffing, “Just remember to tell Sylvia not to wait down there and ‘accidentally’ run into me again.”

“Huh?”

Sonya opened her innocent wide eyes, looking at him with a puzzled face: “Sylvia? Do you mean Senior Sister Sylvia? What about her?”

“You’re acting as if you really don’t know.” Felix looked at her with disdain. “I won’t be going to the Meditation Tower tomorrow night. I’ll be entering the Virtual Realm from home instead. Just make sure she stops bothering me.”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about—”

“Sonya, try thinking of others for once,” Felix sighed. “You know how dangerous it is to be close to me. Why don’t you advise Sylvia to stay away?”

The rustic girl countered, “Do you dislike her?”

“Is the opposite of dislike liking? Sonya, I hate the way you deliberately set traps with your words—”

“So answer me directly, do you like Sylvia?”

“...I like her, but not in the way you’re expecting.”

“Feelings can be developed over time, don’t you believe in love at first sight?”

“Why do you care so much?” Felix was getting impatient. “What has she promised you? Whatever she’s offering, I can match it.”

Sonya replied instantly, “She promised to make me the lead in a 9 Moon Shadow Drama!”

Felix was livid, “That’s nonsense! Sylvia doesn’t have that kind of influence!”

9 Moon specifically refers to 9 PM on Saturdays, the prime time slot for dramas. Only the highest quality dramas with the most funding are qualified to air during this time, often guaranteeing a hit show before the season even starts.

Becoming the lead in a 9 Moon Shadow Drama is like stepping halfway into the realm of top-tier performers!

A rustic girl like you has no right to be the lead in a hit drama!

After a moment of staring at each other, Sonya turned her head and covered her mouth, trying to hide her laughter. Felix could only smile helplessly and sigh.

Why does such a shameless rustic girl possess Swordsmanship Talent favored by the Stars, and why did he become friends with such a shameless rustic girl...

“It’s not just for the reward,” Sonya said as she tucked her hair behind her ear and propped her wooden sword in front of her, studying the patterns on the blade. “Senior Sister Sylvia says that Noble marriages often involve loveless unions for alliances, right?”

“Indeed,” Felix nodded. “Noble marriages are mostly about exchanging benefits.”

Sonya spoke softly, “If those without affection can be together, why not those with affection?”

Felix blinked, surprised, and looked at the Red-haired Swordswoman.

Suddenly, an idea struck him, and he said, “Do you have someone you like?”

“You—”

Sonya instinctively wanted to deny it but stopped herself, looking around before whispering, “What are you talking about?”

“You weren’t this sentimental before,” Felix raised an eyebrow. “Don’t forget, although it’s nothing to be proud of, I’ve had my share of romances. If there was a Faction for love, I’d at least be Gold Tier. Judging by your reaction, could it be your first love? Who is so unlucky—or rather, so fortunate—to have caught the eye of the Red-haired Swordswoman?”

“You just wanted to curse at me, didn’t you!” Sonya said through gritted teeth. “And I didn’t... think whatever you want!”

“If you really hadn’t, your response would be ‘Guess who I like’ instead of a weak ‘think whatever you want’,” Felix laughed. “Hanging around with all you mundane Female Sorcerers, I’ve started to follow your train of thought. You seem a bit flustered yourself, Sonya.”

Watching Sonya, who was both embarrassed and angry, Felix was also filled with questions—he knew her social circle, which barely included any males; who could she possibly have feelings for?

Arsenault, who co-anchored with her? But it was rumored that Arsenault would actively run away whenever he saw Sonya on campus...

Senior Lorein? Unlikely...

Me? Not to mention how badly she beat me up, but she also helped Sylvia ambush me, and I’m a bona fide Gold Tier in the love Faction, highly attuned; it’s impossible not to feel when someone has feelings for me...

After much thought, Felix suddenly remembered something: during the night of hosting, Sonya seemed to reconcile with her roommate Lois, and since then, they’ve grown increasingly close. Just the day before yesterday, Sonya got drunk with Senior Sister Leoni, and it was Lois who helped her change and bathe...

Could it be...

As Sonya, who had finally calmed down, turned around, she realized Felix was several meters away from her and asked in confusion, “Why are you so far away?”

“Nothing.” Felix stood up and said, “My left hand is almost healed. I think I’ll go home for a bath and then get some treatment. It was great spending a pleasant evening with you. Let’s never see each other again, goodbye—”

“Since it’s the last night,” Sonya also stood up, “then you should give me a ride back to the dormitory... You don’t want to?”

“Does the opposite of not wanting to mean wanting to? Sonya, I hate the way you deliberately set traps with your words—”

“If you’re going to practice Hydrotherapy spirit, might as well add a few more wounds—”

“I still have to drive, can’t afford to injure both hands and feet.” Felix surrendered.

The two left the deserted Training Hall and stepped onto the campus boulevard under the watchful gaze of the Stars.

Sonya suddenly remembered something and exclaimed, “Ah, I almost forgot, there’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you for a long time. After all, Felix, you’re a Noble young master, so you might know some secrets that the poor don’t.”

“What is it?”

“Do you know about the Four Pillars Cult?”

Felix blinked and subconsciously raised his left hand but then lowered it again.

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

Chapter 175: The Swordswomans Interlude (3)

“Why are you interested in this organization? Wouldn’t the drama club be more suitable for you if you’re looking to join a club for fun?”

Sonya watched as Felix settled into the driver’s seat. After a moment of thought, she decided to sit in the back, comfortably stretching out on the leather sofa and casually replied, “I was in the drama club last semester. It was nothing but a playground for a bunch of middle-tier women to scheme against each other, with the service staff being a group of low-tier men pandering to them. The prize was one or two high-tier men... However, last year’s prize didn’t quite appeal to me. I found it boring and quit the drama club.”

“So you quit the drama club because it was no longer fun...”

“You know about the Four Pillars Cult, so you must realize it’s not some trivial club where boys and girls look for excuses to mingle.” Sonya took out a wet wipe and dabbed the sweat off her neck, continuing, “Or rather, it’s much more dangerous than those boring clubs.”

Felix lightly tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “In theory, there shouldn’t be any information about the Four Pillars Cult in the Stars Kingdom... Would you mind telling me where you heard that name?”

“The Sorcerer Handbook in the Virtual Realm.”

“If you mind, you can just say so,” Felix stated indifferently. “There’s no need to provide evidence that can’t be disproven. Intelligence from the Sorcerer Handbook has no legal standing and its credibility is highly questionable. You’ve seen ‘Legendary Treasure,’ right?”

“Of course, I’ve watched the version starring Delarose five times!” Sonya perked up at the mention. “But I really did see it in the Sorcerer Handbook.”

‘Legendary Treasure’ is a well-known parable in the Stars Kingdom, repeatedly adapted onto the Holographic Screen. Its story is straightforward: there is a legendary treasure in the Virtual Realm that no one knows the location of. The protagonist, a novice sorcerer on an adventure in the Virtual Realm, comes across a glittering Sorcerer Handbook. It describes the proper Ritual Track to obtain the legendary treasure. To perform the Ritual Track, the protagonist needs to delve into the Magical Factions and summon the necessary spirit.

When the protagonist set up the Ritual Track and initiated the Miracle, the gate to the Legendary Treasure appeared. However, behind the gate wasn’t treasure, but countless tentacles and an endless abyss of darkness. The protagonist wanted to resist, but unexpectedly, their spirit willingly surrendered and rushed towards the embrace of the gate to the Legendary Treasure.

It turned out that the Magical Factions and spirits needed to complete the Ritual Track were just to make the summoner more ‘appetizing.’ The gate to the Legendary Treasure wasn’t particularly powerful, but for every summoner who delved into the Ritual Track, it was the perfect natural predator, turning the summoner into food to be taken at will!

The story ends with a young sorcerer, fresh to the Virtual Realm, who finally defeats the Sorcerer Projection and is rewarded with a glittering Sorcerer Handbook...

This parable naturally teaches people to work hard and not to expect windfalls. But for sorcerers, there’s an additional warning – the intelligence from the Sorcerer Handbook is very dangerous.

"If you only know about this organization from the Sorcerer Handbook, there's no need for such a detailed investigation, right? Since you found me, it means you have already done some research in the library, haven't you? I wasn't aware of your strong curiosity, or is it that the Swordsmanship Training assigned by Professor Trozan isn't keeping you busy enough?"

"Tch, if you don't want to talk about it, then don't. Just drive me back to the dormitory."

"Doubt is not the same as refusal. I hate your presumptuous way of thinking." Felix stepped on the gas pedal and backed the car out: "But I don't know much about the Four Pillars Cult either. After all, as I said, you can't get any information about this organization from any written materials, the Empire has thoroughly destroyed all information."

"I also heard about this Religion occasionally when mingling in Noble circles, but it's mostly mentioned with a sense of morbid curiosity. From what I understand, the four pillars of the Four Pillars Cult represent four codes of conduct: the Tyrant who rules with violence, the Conspirator who manipulates through schemes, the Compassionate Father who tortures with despair, and the Debauched Prince who indulges in pleasure... As you might guess, the only one favored by Nobles is naturally the Debauched Prince, symbolic of hedonism."

Sonya placed her hands on the front seat and leaned forward to ask, "So... does the Four Pillars Cult exist within the Stars Kingdom?"

"There is no such thing," Felix shook his head. "The existence of any Religion is predicated on a need for people to have spiritual sustenance, or the dissatisfaction with reality that leads them to Pray for Redemption from a higher power. The Stars Kingdom is a great nation, devoid of the fertile ground necessary for heretical sects to take root."

"But didn't you just mention that some Nobles pursue excitement by following the Four Pillars Cult?"

"Everyone holds beliefs they think are correct at different times in their lives. Naivety is a stage everyone must go through, Nobles included," Felix replied. "But what makes Nobles what they are is the glory brought by their titles, shielding them from the follies of youth and the taint of evil."

"'Without a title, one cannot become a minister, and without being Noble, one cannot govern a county'... You must have memorized the 'Noble Act' and know why Nobles possess a status and power above the common people, right?"

"Blessing of Stars," Sonya said. "It is said that every Noble who is officially ennobled receives a Blessing from the Empress herself, becoming wise, valiant, fair, and strict... and indeed, this seems to be the case."

The class barriers in the Stars Kingdom are very strict. Even if you are a genius Sorcerer, you cannot hold any real power in the empire if you're not a Noble.

However, the Restriction applies only to 'Noble' status. If you can inherit a Noble title through marriage or perform great deeds that lead the Empress to bestow a title upon you, no matter how you become a member of the Nobility, you've got your ticket to the ruling class. Whether you can become a key official in the nation is then a matter of personal ability.

In this era of highly advanced information exchange, even a slightly arrogant remark from Sonya would get her blasted over a dozen pages on the Curtain forum by her classmates. Yet, such blatant class discrimination has not caused any ripples in the Stars Kingdom.

Even Sonya, who has felt since childhood that society owed her an imperial throne, thinks the Nobility system is very good.

Because being Noble is truly advantageous.

Impartial and just, fearless in the face of difficulty, diligent in learning, and exhaustively devoted—this is the public's impression of a Noble. Whether it's a flirtatious socialite or a sheltered "greenhouse flower" who's never seen a mosquito, the moment they inherit a title and become Noble, they transform into mature and steady pillars of society for the Stars Kingdom. They dedicate themselves to the welfare of the masses with integrity and without seeking personal gain or engaging in corruption or laziness.

The reason for all this is the 'Blessing of Stars'.

The textbook describes the Blessing of Stars in one sentence: "It awakens the Noble's sense of duty." Sonya used to think this was just an empty phrase. However, after arriving in Gales and learning about the perfect integration of the Noble system with the bureaucratic system, she realized that the statement was actually true.

"All those details you mentioned are peripheral, the core impact of the Blessing of Stars is singular," Felix glanced at the night sky filled with stars and said, "It instills in Nobles an absolute loyalty to the Stars."

"Absolute loyalty?" Sonya blinked, "Brainwashing control?"

"It's not exactly brainwashing," Felix pondered and explained. "Let's say, Sonya, you value your mother highly, you like making money, and you are willing to contribute to the Stars Kingdom. But if we were to prioritize, your mother would be more important than making money, and making money would be more important than benefiting the Stars Kingdom, right?"

“Of course,” Sonya paused, “Actually, making money isn’t much more important than benefiting the Stars Kingdom... unless it’s a lot of money.”

“So, in your heart, the highest priority is your mother, followed by making money, and then the Stars Kingdom. The so-called absolute loyalty is just making the concept of ‘benefiting the Stars Kingdom’ the top priority, nothing more,” Felix elaborated. “If it were complete brainwashing control, the Nobles would have rebelled by now. No one wants to become a puppet, devoid of self.”

“The power of the Blessing of Stars lies in the fact that it only elevates the Stars Kingdom as the most important entity to protect, without taking away other emotional commitments of the Nobles, such as family, lovers, children, or hobbies. If it’s a legally mandated holiday, those Nobles are almost indistinguishable from ordinary people, and they can enjoy entertainment and social status that are beyond the reach of commoners.”

Felix glanced in the rearview mirror at the rustic girl: “Even knowing this secret, if you had the opportunity, would you want to become part of the Nobility?”

After a moment of thought, Sonya replied, “I suppose I would.”

Although the Blessing of Stars involves a form of brainwashing, Sonya felt she could accept it if it simply elevated the priority of ‘benefiting the Stars’ to the highest level. After all, it’s the nation where she was born and raised, and if possible, Sonya certainly hoped the Stars Kingdom would continue to prosper.

It’s likely that most people would agree, since contributing to the prosperity of the Stars Kingdom is an admirable life goal. The question is akin to ‘If you wish to be a good person, the cost is becoming very wealthy’—who wouldn’t want that?

“That’s why there’s no presence of the Four Pillars Cult in the Stars Kingdom,” Felix continued. “Under the just and fair rule of the Nobility, the people live in peace and prosperity, with living standards rising year by year, leaving no foothold for the Four Pillars Cult to influence any social class.”

“You won’t find any information on the Four Pillars Cult partly because the Empire destroyed it, and partly because nobody needs the Four Pillars Cult.”

“A Religion not needed by the people naturally ends up in the trash heap.”

The sedan stopped on the main road in front of the Dormitory Area, and Felix pressed a button to open the rear car door, saying, “That’s about all I know about the Four Pillars Cult. Anything else you want to ask?”

“No,” Sonya shook her head, “I was just curious, that’s all.”

"I don't care where you heard that name, but as a friend, I advise you—don't pursue the Four Pillars Cult any further."

"Why?"

Felix turned around to look Sonya in the eyes.

"Because it's a waste of time," he said. "You're a Genius Swordcerer, with no spare time to waste on such trivial matters. It looks like you're not training hard enough; perhaps I need to report to Professor Trozan tomorrow that you're not focusing on your Training..."

"You seem very arrogant today," Sonya retorted, unphased. "Is it because you don't have to duel with me tomorrow? How about I ask the professor to check your progress in the morning? I can fight you with a newspaper..."

"You're so annoying! I can't stand you!"

Laughing, Sonya hopped out of the car and approached the window, saying, "Thanks, see you tomorrow."

Watching Sonya bounce into the girls' dormitory building, Felix let out a long sigh of relief, feeling that another moment chatting with the rustic girl would have made his brain boil.

"Hmm?"

The steering wheel was stained with blood. On closer inspection, she noticed fresh blood seeping through the glove on her left hand.

Felix had been cut on the palm by Sonya, but had refrained from removing the glove to treat it until the rustic girl was gone. Now that she had left, Felix finally could take the glove off. But instead of immediately attending to the wound, she held her left hand up to her eyes.

In the palm of her left hand was a perfectly round hole, just large enough to fit an eye.

Her already-striking pale purple eyes gained a kaleidoscopic luster when viewed through the circular hole.

Through this round aperture, Felix gazed at Sonya entering the dormitory building in the distance.

"Who has been talking to her about the Four Pillars Cult?" he murmured quietly. "I hate these kinds of unpredictable factors."

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

Chapter 176: Has the World Been Destroyed?

The sky had turned into a sea of fire, the earth brimmed with murky darkness. Massive fragments tore through the burning clouds one after another, plummeting toward the tainted land. Every minute, every second, the world twisted and crumbled.

In this apocalyptic scene, a mysterious figure in a dark red gradient overcoat stood on a cliff, gazing at a meteor shower in the distance. Right hand holding a wine glass, it seemed as if this spectacle was worth celebrating with a drink.

Who was he?

What had happened?

Why had it come to this?

Suddenly, a red-haired woman emerged from the fiery sky. Dressed in a black miniskirt, her eyes appeared to encapsulate a sea of blood, and in her hand, she wielded an exquisitely carved longsword. As she stepped forward, the sky split in two from the sharpness of her sword's aura. Merely gazing upon her figure was enough to make one's eyes sting!

At that moment, the mysterious person seemed to sense the gaze from behind. He slightly turned his head, almost revealing his true face.

Igor strained to open his non-existent eyes, trying to capture any detail of this enigmatic figure—

“Cough, cough, cough!”

Igor abruptly pushed away Ashe's hand, wiping his moist lips and cursed, “What are you doing?!”

Ashe looked confused, holding up a water bottle, “I was giving you water. What, did you think I was trying to drown you by stuffing your head in the toilet? I'd like to, but alas, the toilet doesn't have a single drop of water. If you don't want it, fine. Harvey, do you?”

“I don’t want to use the restroom here.” Harvey’s voice was faint. He sat against the wall, his dark complexion unable to hide his feebleness.

Ashe thought for a moment, then screwed the cap back on the bottle and set it aside, “Better save it then, who knows, maybe they’ll bring food later...”

It was then that Igor finally had the chance to assess their situation: the three of them were in a small room, about ten square meters, with padded floors and walls. Lighting seeped through gaps in the walls, and in the corner was an all-in-one toilet with a sink.

The room had no windows. Only in the corner of the ceiling was there a vent from which warm white mist was slowly being expelled, quickly blending into the room’s atmosphere.

He checked his equipment: the small knife, defensive gun, and multi-tool keychain were all gone. However, his metal headgear was still intact—it could be straightened into a metal spike, offering some protection. But its effectiveness was highly situational: it required the enemy to have their guard down and be stripped of any protective gear.

In essence, it could only be lethal if the enemy was caught off guard while in bed or using the bathroom.

Igor attempted to stand up to block the vent, but found himself completely drained of strength. He couldn’t even stand, collapsing right in front of Ashe.

“It’s an anesthetic healing spray,” Ashe said languidly. “Haven’t you noticed our speech is weak?”

“Your voice always sounds like you’re constipated. How could I tell the difference?” Igor retorted, lifting his sleeve to discover that the wound from a sniper bullet had begun to scab over. He was mildly surprised—while it wasn’t as effective as a healer’s touch, the treatment was significantly better than standard first aid.

“Do you guys know the date and time?” he abruptly asked.

Ashe replied, “It’s 1 AM on May 2nd—we’ve probably slept for less than an hour. But time zones might differ between kingdoms, so it might not actually be 1 AM outside.”

Igor didn’t ask how Ashe knew the time without a chip or a watch. Instead, he pressed his hand against the floor, feeling a slight vibration: “We’re on a moving vehicle, likely a car, though I’ve never seen one with such impressive soundproofing and shock absorption...”

He tapped the collar around his neck, “Have you guys tested this thing?”

“Any attempt to use arcane energy triggers a strong electric shock,” Harvey responded indifferently. “If you want to test it, I suggest you take off your pants and sit on the toilet. But feel free to test it directly; the padding absorbs well, so any... accidents you have will clean up quickly.”

Igor gave Harvey and Ashe a quizzical look, “Considering you’ve volunteered this information, I won’t ask how you discovered it... Got any other intel?”

After a moment of silence, Ashe said, “Before losing consciousness, I heard someone say ‘I could only pick up three People from the Exotic Lands’... This ambush was not meant for Adventurers—it was meant for us, and they even knew Ronald and Langna wouldn’t come.”

“A Miracle of the Prophecy Faction or the Destiny Faction,” Igor said, unsurprised. “What happened to the Werewolf and his prey?”

“Ronald died trying to save Langna,” Ashe said succinctly. “I didn’t see what happened after that.”

However, Igor raised his eyebrows slightly and gave a soft “Oh,” his expression lacking any surprise.

Suddenly, Ashe had a strong intuition and asked, “Did you know beforehand that Ronald would do this?”

“To be precise, I’m the one who taught him to do it,” Igor said with a smile. “After all, I did feel some sympathy for him, so I planned to secretly collude with him, thinking we’d gang up on Langna after our escape from prison. But he wasn’t interested in that; he wanted ‘true revenge,’ and I just happened to have some information on Langna, so I shared with him the real method of revenge.”

“You deceived him?”

“I never lie,” Igor said. “I just fulfill others’ wishes.”

“How funny, is another name for a Con Artist ‘God’?”

The Cult Leader and the Con Artist exchanged cold glances, and then the Necromancer suddenly said, “Even if Ronald and Langna didn’t come, why didn’t the other Adventurers show up? The Hunting Festival wouldn’t stop because of us, on the contrary, the Adventurers should have had an added bounty task to capture us.”

Ashe spread his hands and said, “You didn’t see what we did to scare the other Adventurers... Maybe they’re all huddled in the Warzone now, waiting for Gerard to give them a written guarantee not to capture them before they dare to continue participating

in the Hunting Festival. With this delay, if they can work normally by tomorrow night, that would be efficient.”

“Or perhaps the Virtual Realm Passage has been blocked,” Igor guessed. “Since they could predict our arrival with such precision, maybe they were also prepared to block the Virtual Realm Passage.”

Harvey sighed softly and said, “Does that mean we can’t count on the Adventurers to save us...”

At that moment, the three of them were simultaneously struck by a whirlwind of complex emotions—they had gone through great lengths to escape the Blood Moon Kingdom, successfully scaring away Adventurers, deceiving Gerard, and finally crossing the Virtual Realm Passage to arrive in a new world. Yet before they could take a breath of freedom, they were bafflingly captured.

Ironically, their greatest hope for getting out of this bind was the very pursuers from the Blood Moon Kingdom.

Igor shook his head, casting aside any budding regrets and resentments, and turned to Ashe, “What about your Slay Me Miracle?”

“I’ve tried it,” Ashe said. “But it’s an external object, akin to a Sorcerer continuously casting spells. The Slay Me Miracle can clear my negative status at the moment, but as long as I’m wearing the Collar, the binding status will be reapplied the next second... The Collar must be physically removed.”

“I feel like a tool that could electrocute us at any moment might not take too kindly to being forcibly cracked open,” Harvey said, tugging slightly at the Collar, which immediately emitted a dangerous red glow.

“Restraining Collars, anti-suicide padded wagons, anesthetic treatment sprays...” Igor muttered, “It’s not surprising that we were ambushed and captured, what’s surprising is that they have such a professional set of transport equipment—if they didn’t prepare this gear especially for us, it means their usual clients also need to stay in such places.”

“Who would need to be transported with this kind of equipment?”

“Death row inmates, lunatics, slaves?” Ashe guessed.

“Corpses could be a possibility too,” Harvey said.

“Don’t scare me, isn’t the standard transport for corpses a Body Bag?”

“Ashe, as a Cult Leader, don’t you understand? A fresh corpse has its unique value, especially the residual warmth, which is like the last echo of life. Watching a body with

warmth gradually turn into a meaningless lump of flesh, that profound sense of witnessing—I'm sure you can appreciate that, right?"

"Who would understand such a thing!"

Listening to the two of them engage in endless banter, Igor, in a poor mental state, subconsciously wanted to interrupt them, but he quickly realized that something was off—their complexions were as bad as a made-up Orc dancer's, neither fully awake nor able to sleep.

The anesthetic treatment spray, in addition to causing them to be weak and anesthetized, seemed to also have an anti-sleep effect, suppressing their physiological state as much as possible while keeping them in a state of insomnia.

Compared to direct hypnosis, this state of tired wakefulness is more suitable for dealing with Sorcerer prisoners. It can exhaust the Sorcerer's Mental Power, and over time, even prevent them from maintaining normal cognitive abilities. If an Interrogation is needed, prisoners in this state are more likely to divulge information. Igor had learned this from reading Mind Faction literature on Interrogation.

Ashe and Harvey might not understand this principle, but upon realizing they could not sleep, they subconsciously engaged in intense conversation to keep their minds active and maintain their condition as much as possible.

Igor quickly gathered his thoughts and carefully considered their current situation.

Actually, their circumstances were not too bad. After all, if they had been ambushed by an army from another Kingdom, they would now either be forced to have their memories extracted or become the kind of warm Corpse that Harvey favored—the point was not that Igor judged other Kingdoms by the standards of the Blood Moon, but rather that the principle 'the heart of a stranger is different from ours' was a common understanding.

Although they did not know who had used a Prophecy Miracle to accurately predict their appearance, it at least proved they were of value, perhaps as research material or as Slaves. In any case, there was hope for survival.

If this Kingdom also favored civilization over barbarism, where societal rules could bind the powerful, then Igor even had confidence that he could achieve something here. For a Mind Sorcerer, rules and human nature are the strongest weapons.

Thinking of the Prophecy Faction, Igor involuntarily recalled his recent dream. It was the result of a Revelation spirit acting in his dreams, a rare phenomenon that Igor could not fathom.

He had also triggered dreams of Revelation before, but most were meaningless images.

The only time it proved effective was after first encountering Emma in the “Revelation of Gamble”, when Igor suddenly dreamed of Shattered Lake Prison. He didn’t pay much attention to this Revelation at the time, but looking back, it might have been a harbinger of his imprisonment.

But the images in the dream were too exaggerated... Had the world come to an end?

Igor wasn’t questioning the ‘end of the world’ scenario itself; he was questioning his own credibility—a ‘blind man’ from the Prophecy Faction who hadn’t even reached the Silver Realm, how could he be privy to such a distant and grand future?

Even the legendary Prophet with quadruple wings might not be able to predict the fate of the world, right?

And who was that mysterious person observing the world’s end?

Perhaps the Revelation spirit had also inhaled the anesthetic spray and was showing him scenes from the past...

Meanwhile, Ashe and Harvey’s idle chatter came to a halt. Although they wanted to combat their gloomy mental state, it seemed like the secretion of dopamine had been suppressed. The more they talked, the more exhausted they felt, and they just wanted to stop talking.

No, they needed to find something stimulating to do.

As Ashe thought this to himself, the familiar game interface appeared before his eyes, with the current time displayed in the top right corner.

Time for a card draw.

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

Chapter 177: Bride Swordswoman

Ashe had actually acquired ample funds for a card draw last night during his Robin Hood act at Sylin’s, but the situation was too perilous, and he had to prepare for a quick escape at any moment, which left no room for card draws.

Now, Ashe no longer had to worry about his safety because he was already in danger.

It was the perfect time for a card draw.

First, he checked in to receive the day's Source Crystal bonus, then he accessed "Material Procurement." Ashe had 232 points, enough to buy a "Bag of Source Crystals" worth 198 points.

Purchase successful!

He gained 40 Source Crystals!

Then, the first-time purchase bonus triggered, and he got another 40 Source Crystals!

With an accumulated 15 Source Crystals, Ashe now had a total of 95 Source Crystals, enough for 31 consecutive draws!

When Ashe opened "Operator Search," he noticed a new change on the interface.

"Swords and Dragons Dance Limited Search (Please launch this event as soon as possible after three weeks if the expected monthly revenue target is not met)"

"Increased probability↑↑ to obtain Limited Operators 'Black-and-White Witch' and 'Enchanting Maiden'"

"Increased probability↑↑ to obtain Limited Costumes 'Bride Swordswoman,' 'Blood-Sea Return Swordswoman,' 'Doomsday Afternoon Observer,' 'Swimsuit Observer'"

"Ends at 00:00 on May 15th"

Ashe was stunned by the numerous issues. He knew his company was ruthless, but he hadn't anticipated this level of shamelessness—launching a Limited Search to lure players into pay-to-win schemes because the monthly revenue might not meet the target was downright disgraceful!

And that comment in the parentheses was clearly meant for the company's leadership; someone had forgotten to delete it.

The so-called Limited Search meant that the mentioned costumes and operators could only be drawn from this event's card pool. Once the event was over, players would have no chance to draw the above rewards from the public card pool unless the event was rerun in the future.

Therefore, players with even a hint of a collector's instinct will spend as much as possible in the Card Pool to acquire key rewards. If a Limited Operator is particularly powerful, even those who usually don't spend money might painfully delve into Pay-to-Win; and for those who aim for 'complete collection', the Pay-to-Win can become relentless until they've drawn every item from the Card Pool.

Limited Events are typically launched during anniversary celebrations or New Year festivities, when people are more likely to have disposable income and might get carried away with Pay-to-Win. Additionally, the festive atmosphere means players are less concerned about the distasteful nature of Limited Events.

But overall, Limited Events can almost be equated with ‘forcing you to spend money’ and are far from being considered benefits. To launch a Limited Event less than a month after the game’s release and describe it as ‘unsightly’ would be an understatement.

However...

Ashe tapped on the “Bride Swordswoman” in the event description and nothing popped up. Although there was an event description in the interface, there wasn’t even a thumbnail image—no new Operator information, let alone a new Costume Portrait, just a text-based lure to spend money on Pay-to-Win.

It was clear that the game system was functioning but not fully normal—everything seemed secondary to Pay-to-Win.

Despite grumbling internally, Ashe didn’t hesitate to spend all his Source Crystal reserves in this Limited Card Pool.

It had nothing to do with the Bride Swordswoman; he simply wanted to draw new Operators.

Wait, there was a Ritual to perform before drawing cards...

Ashe went to wash his hands, then crawled over to Igor: “Rock-paper-scissors.”

Interrupted from his thoughts, Igor’s face went from blank to unsightly to resigned, his expressions managing to be quite the spectacle.

Eventually, Igor extended his hand in defeat and quickly won two out of three rounds against Ashe, promptly telling Ashe to get lost with disdain.

Ashe crawled back and lay down, ready to draw cards!

“Confirm the use of 93 Source Crystals for 31 Searches?”

“Confirm!”

Out of 18 beams of white light, all were Energy Potions, Experience Potions, Primary Combat Cards, and other such common items that polluted the Card Pool. He would refine these potions later with the Refining Bottle. Search* The website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

Nine beams of purple light contained three Joy Potions, three bottles of Pure Radiance Special Drink, one Intermediate Trial Card, a new Item 'Aurora Autonomous Car (Deluxe Edition)', and a new Item 'Training Gloves'.

And then, four beams of golden light!

"Black-and-White Witch"!

"Swimsuit Observer"!

"Doomsday Afternoon Observer"!

"Debauched Prince's D20"!

Snap!

Suddenly, a noise echoed through the room, Harvey and Igor looked over to find Ashe relentlessly banging the back of his head against the padded wall.

Harvey, seemingly thoughtful, nodded and began to imitate Ashe by also banging his head against the padding.

It felt surprisingly effective and indeed seemed to invigorate them.

Igor, however, suddenly felt that compared to the drowsiness that plagued him, being in the company of these two with intelligence on par with that of adult Orcs seemed more detrimental to his well-being.

After venting his frustration on the padding, Ashe's gaze returned to the game interface. People can be strange sometimes; even when it's not their fault, they might instinctively punish themselves—almost as if they want to use a purer form of pain to fight against the onslaught of Destiny, just like...

But when Ashe saw the "Swimsuit Observer", he felt like banging his head all over again.

What's going wrong here? Not a single Costume for the Swordswoman, yet all the Observer's Costumes come out?! If I wanted to see the Observer's Costumes, I could just buy them myself. And it's not just Costumes; I could even go for drag, plus I get to see the Observer's bathing CG for free every day—but who wants to watch that?!

They must have secretly tweaked the drop rates, making it impossible to get the "Bride Swordswoman"!

It's just like my company to have such an unseemly approach!

No wonder they pay us so well; it's all from these shady practices. Disgusting!

When Ashe shifted from employee to player, he felt an overwhelming urge to write a lengthy post condemning his own company's 'Seven Deadly Sins', but alas, it would be futile. After grumbling for a while, Ashe finally calmed down and inspected the newly acquired Operator Items:

"Training Gloves": When equipped by an Operator, the experience gained from fist and claw training is increased by 15%.

"Intermediate Trial Card": Provides an Operator with a trial to gain a moderate amount of experience and a slight increase in Bond. Each Operator can use this only once per week.

"Aurora Autonomous Car (Deluxe Edition)": A vehicle for use on the lands of the Virtual Realm, capable of being outfitted with various functional accessories. Current accessories installed: none.

"Pure Radiance Special Drink": Every wise Soul, upon dissolution, releases a bit of pure arcane energy. Consuming Pure Radiance can greatly accelerate the recovery speed of the Soul and increase the absorption rate of arcane energy by 5% in the Virtual Realm for seven days. What kind of person, what kind of place, could so easily collect a bottle of Pure Radiance Special Drink?

As for the gloves, needless to say, Ashe hasn't drawn a Trial Card in a long time and didn't expect to pull an Intermediate one this time.

The Pure Radiance Special Drink brought joy to Ashe's heart; if the Swordswoman's calculations were correct, their Soul injuries might need two more weeks for complete recovery, but with this drink, recovery could possibly be shortened to just a couple of days.

It's the last sentence in the effect description that gives Ashe an odd feeling, as if this bottle of drink is some villain's ill-gotten gains. But since it's not explicitly stated, Ashe decides to turn a blind eye; now's not the time to be squeamish.

As for the Aurora Autonomous Car, it's undoubtedly meant for traversing the Time Continent.

After all, the Boat is only for the Sea of Knowledge, and Ashe was worried they'd have to travel on foot after their stealthy arrival on the Time Continent. Now with this mode of transportation, escaping can be one step ahead.

And as for the 'Deluxe Edition' that currently only offers mobility without any functional accessories, it's really more of a 'Beggar's Edition'!

Unlike the Boat, the car itself is a large steel apparatus with potential lethality. Ashe speculates that in the future, he might be able to draw armaments for the car, such as machine guns, rocket launchers, bulletproof glass, vehicle-mounted chainsaws, and even skill cards for the car that enable the use of flashy abilities like 'Whirlwind Charge Tornado'...

And then there's the new Operator, "Black-and-White Witch"!

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

Chapter 178: The Worthless Ashe

"Black-and-White Witch"

"Human Female, 19 years old"

"Bond Level: 0 (30% Experience Sharing)"

"Occupation: Daughter of the Tower"

"Occupational Traits: In the Tower, learning efficiency +15%"

"Inherent Talent: Witch (Intermediate): Gain an additional 150% time experience, with a low chance of gaining 10,000% time experience, and more likely to gain favor with the Bronze Dragon (unlock higher talent levels with increased strength)."

"Personal Skill: Personality Fission: The Black-and-White Witch can actively adjust her personality to adapt to different environments, and can even switch to specific combat personalities when facing different enemies. Insight +10, Vital Point Judgment +10, critical hit rate increases with the duration of battle."

"Silver Blessing: Witch's Taboo: Secrecy empowers you, concealment is your weapon. The less people know your true inner self in reality, the stronger you become in the Virtual Realm. Currently, the Black-and-White Witch's concealment is at 93% (unknown to all), granting a 93% bonus to arcane energy recovery rate. (Observer's observation is not included)"

"Items: None"

"Controlling Spirits: Mask, Hydrotherapy, Claws..."

"Mind Faction: Silver Rank"

“Fist and Claw Faction: Gold Tier”

“Time Faction: Silver Rank”

“Water Faction: Silver Rank”

“Cultivation Strategy: Not set”

A Gold Tier in Faction Realm, and with a Silver Blessing, she’s a Two Wings Operator!

Ashe fell into deep thought: Is it because he himself is a Two Wings Operator that the new Operator he drew is also Two Wings? Or is the card draw random, and with good luck, one could even draw a Quadruple Wings Operator?

The Black-and-White Witch has Hydrotherapy spirits and a Silver Rank Water Faction, making her almost a half-healer. However, she majors in the Fist and Claw Faction and also cultivates in the Time Faction. Despite appearing quite impressive, Ashe couldn’t determine her precise role; it would still be best to assign tactical positions in team battles within the Virtual Realm.

Of course, if the Black-and-White Witch could stop time, then Ashe’s tactical position would be as her Thigh Accessory

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Speaking of thighs, Ashe glanced at the Portrait of the Black-and-White Witch. Her Costume featured a black and white chessboard-patterned skirt with one leg in white stockings and the other in black. Ashe couldn’t help but hiss...

Perhaps the Death Maniac Swordswoman could take a lesson or two.

Despite his reluctance, Ashe checked out the new Costume he had acquired, and to his surprise, there was an unexpected joy:

“Swimsuit – Observer: Gain +10% enhanced effects from the Water Faction (limited to the Virtual Realm, but wearing the same garments in reality also grants the enhancement).”

“Doomsday Afternoon – Observer: Gain +3% attack power when unharmed.”

Costumes can actually boost attributes!

Although the boost was small, it was better than nothing. If possible, Ashe would have loved to give the Swimsuit to the Swordswoman, but it was not exchangeable.

Even though the Swimsuit offered more of a boost and the new Operator also had affinity with the Water Faction, Ashe equipped himself with “Doomsday Afternoon” instead. After all, the Swimsuit was too embarrassing, and Ashe’s self-esteem, which the company had whittled away sustainably over the years, was just barely intact; he couldn’t waste it on something like this.

Moreover, as long as he customized identical garments in reality, he could trigger the enhancements. No matter how he thought about it, the Swimsuit simply couldn’t become regular attire. Ashe didn’t want to bear the negative buff of “very likely to be considered a pervert by others” just for a slight boost.

Compared to the Swimsuit, “Doomsday Afternoon” was much more normal, appearing as a dark red gradient overcoat that should be easy to obtain.

After getting a bottle of Pure Radiance Special Drink for himself and the Death Maniac Swordswoman, Ashe noticed that the apocalypse observer in the Portrait immediately drank it, while the Portrait of the Death Maniac Swordswoman showed a “zzz” sleep icon, indicating that the action of consuming the Potion had to be delayed for five hours.

Lastly, there was the special golden Item never seen before.

“Debauched Prince’s D20: A die for Entertainment, hand-carved by the Debauched Prince himself. When used during Entertainment, it allows the Operator to receive a gift from the Debauched Prince.

When ‘Entertainment’ is arranged in the Operator’s Cultivation Strategy, the D20 can be rolled at the end of each Entertainment session. Depending on factors like the type of Entertainment, the number rolled on the die, the Operator’s mood, etc., Operators can gain anywhere from 0% to 200% Magic Debauched Experience (100% experience = 1 professional Training session).”

Magic Debauched Experience is not subject to any reductions, only additional bonuses.”

Ashe understood immediately—this Item made the previously impractical ‘Entertainment’ option in the Cultivation Strategy more useful. Before, Entertainment only increased trivial stats like an Operator’s mood, but now there was a chance to earn significant Magic experience through Entertainment, effectively allowing Operators to grow stronger while playing games and reducing the experience loss that came with Entertainment.

In simple terms, it was a useless Item.

After all, Ashe wouldn’t schedule Entertainment for his Operators, even with this new Item.

A quick calculation revealed that Entertainment cost two Action Points and could yield a maximum of 200% experience; however, Training cost one Action Point and guaranteed 100% experience. Mathematically, the return on two Training sessions was definitely better than one Entertainment session!

As for the mood boost from Entertainment... Although the Swordswoman often complained, under Ashe's era-leading motivational speeches, she had gradually adapted to the high-intensity Training, which showed that human adaptability is quite strong, and there's still potential to be tapped into her initiative.

Ashe judged based on his own experience; when he first started his job, he went straight into a 997

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schedule, where touching fish was synonymous with Resting, and yet he survived, even managing to get ahead with promotions and salary increases, proving that Entertainment was unnecessary.

The harder the struggle, the more luxurious Ashe's lifestyle became—driving a Land Rover!

The harder the Operators work, the more luxurious the players' lifestyle—driving a Ferrari!

The harder you haul bricks, the more the Observer looks for affairs!

To the Swordswoman and the Witch, keep it up!

However, the name of the Item surprisingly included Debauched Prince, and if Ashe remembered correctly, wasn't the Debauched Prince one of the incarnations of the Four Pillars?

This thought circled in his mind and then dissipated into thin air—no matter if you're the king of heaven or the Debauched Prince, once it's in my hands, it's mine, and whatever I eat is nourishment!

Then, regarding the Black-and-White Witch's Cultivation Strategy... Ashe paused here, remembering that the Swordswoman's weekly Cultivation would also end tomorrow.

He thought about it and decided to formulate the Black-and-White Witch's Cultivation Strategy tomorrow, syncing both Operators' Cultivation cycles so that the weekly reports could be delivered together.

It's not exactly OCD, but synchronizing the cultivation cycles of all Operators does feel much more comfortable—okay, it's a mild case of OCD.

Then there's the "Intermediate Trial Card"...

Actually, the moderate amount of experience provided by the Trial Card is barely significant for both Two Wings Operators. What Ashe values more is the 'slight increase in Operator Bond'.

The Swordsman already has a Level 3 Bond with him, while the Black-and-White Witch is at Level 0.

For the Swordsman, the Bond provided by the Trial Card is equivalent to Ashe taking her out for a meal and a stroll down the street, at most maintaining their current relationship, far from enough to upgrade their Bond. But for the Black-and-White Witch, the Trial Card is like Ashe introducing himself, breaking the ice, sharing a bit about family backgrounds—it might not upgrade the Bond right away, but after a few more encounters, they will become more familiar with each other, making it a very cost-effective choice.

So Ashe decides to use the "Intermediate Trial Card" on the Black-and-White Witch.

Just as he closes the game interface, Ashe feels as if a membrane in his mind has burst, and the drowsiness that had been teasing him without advancing suddenly takes him by force. Ashe quickly collapses into a pile of mush and falls asleep.

After about thirty seconds, the car door slides open.

A young man dressed in a dark blue Butler's uniform enters the car. With his light blue hair and a blue gradient cloak, bright eyes, white teeth, and tender white cheeks, he looks no older than thirteen or fourteen.

He turns the sleeping Igor over, touches Igor's forehead with his left hand, and a book materializes in his right. Flipping through it, he says, "Second place in the 'Two Wings Mind Ranking – Azura Sub-Ranking,' fifth in the 'Azura Beauty Ranking,' the name is Igor Bukin."

"Ah~ so that means Mildred, the social butterfly, has been squeezed out of the Beauty Ranking?" someone outside chuckles lightly. "Great, finally one less person to bring down my style. Since he's in the top ranks of both minor rankings... let's tentatively classify him as a three-star character."

The young man nods, moves over to touch Harvey's forehead, and says, "First place in the 'Two Wings Necromancy Ranking – Azura Sub-Ranking,' the name is Archibald Harvey."

"First in a minor ranking like the Necromancy Ranking? But still, it's first place... also tentatively a three-star then."

The young man goes over to Ashe, touches his forehead for quite a while.

The person outside asked curiously, “What’s the matter?”

“It seems... he’s not on any Ranking List.”

“Not on any list? He seems to be a Two Wings Sorcerer, right? Not on the Comprehensive Sorcerer Ranking, Murder Ranking, Creation Ranking, Faction Ranking—none of the minor lists?”

“No, none.”

“Hmm... then let’s just classify him as a zero-star waste.”

Footnote:

1. Thigh Accessory(大腿挂件):

A “thigh accessory” refers to a person who clings to someone with powerful abilities or influence. Derived from the phrase “to hug the thigh,” a thigh accessory is like an ornament that clings to the leg, symbolizing someone who latches onto a powerful ally and is unwilling to let go. Here, “thigh” metaphorically represents a strong and capable teammate or partner.

1. 997:

“997” refers to the work schedule practiced by some companies in China, especially in the internet industry, where the work pace is extremely fast. The working hours are from 9 am to 9 pm, 7 days a week.

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

Chapter 179: Lise Deya

While Ashe was being written off as irredeemable kitchen waste, far away in the bustling imperial capital of Nabistin, there lay a series of grand and solemn palaces. Among them, the most eye-catching was the towering Tower built on a small island in the middle of Yalan Lake. With its white walls and blue roofs, accompanied by the singing of orioles and the circling of doves, the structure seemed to belong not to this world but to a fairy tale.

“...And so, the brave knight defeated the fire-breathing Evil Dragon and found the beautiful princess in its lair. Together, they returned to the capital and were celebrated by all. The king officiated their wedding, and the knight and princess lived happily ever after, a joyous and congratulatory occasion.”

Granny, with a smile radiating across her face, closed the picture book as the room's clock chimed, and a charming cuckoo bird popped out to announce the time.

“Princess, the clock has struck twelve; it is time for you to sleep,” Granny said gently as she tugged at the covers, careful as if the mere act of covering the princess could cause harm.

The princess blinked her lovely pale green eyes, which twinkled like stars with dazzling brilliance. Her skin was as pure white as snow, her lips as red as blood, and she had long, black hair that cascaded down like a waterfall, fanning out on the pillow.

“Granny Marsha, when will the Evil Dragon come to capture me?” she asked.

Granny patted the princess's head with a smile, “The brave knights are all outside protecting you, so the Evil Dragon can't come and take you away, my dear princess.”

“Ah? Won't the Evil Dragon be very disappointed then?” the princess said, somewhat forlornly. “It wants to capture me so badly, just as I long to see Nina... Granny Marsha, when will Nina come to visit me?”

“Princess Nina is very busy, but as soon as she has some free time, she will surely come to visit you.”

Granny turned off the bedside lamp and quietly left the room.

The princess lay in bed, her thoughts wandering. She pictured the Evil Dragon in her mind: it would have four beautiful sharp horns, scales that glimmered, and a mouth full of fierce but neatly arranged sharp teeth. Its eyes would be as large as half-moon mirrors, and I could see my reflection in its pupils...

When the Princess turned over in bed, she was stunned: a Bronze Dragon, exactly as she had imagined, appeared outside the window, gently flapping its wings in the air and gazing at her with vertical pupils.

The Princess threw back the covers and got out of bed, dressed in a pure white cotton nightgown, her bare feet touching the cold marble floor. She walked over to the window and met the gaze of the Bronze Dragon.

“Have you come to take me away?”

The Bronze Dragon remained silent, just quietly watching her.

But the Princess, as if hearing something, smiled brightly: “Alright, I’ll go with you.”

Compared to the knights who had always guarded her at the base of the Tower, the Princess felt that the Evil Dragon in front of her was more like the hero who would save her—she would ride on the back of the Evil Dragon, soaring through the skies, looking down upon the magnificent earth and experiencing the thrilling adventures she had longed for.

She carefully climbed over the window sill, and the barriers that had previously stopped her seemed to vanish in that moment. Sitting on the edge of the window, her two adorable, shiny little feet gently swayed as she opened her arms toward the Bronze Dragon: “Thank you, Evil Dragon.”

However, the knights below the Tower were, in fact, watchers.

The Bronze Dragon did not exist in reality.

But the Princess really did jump.

With a piercing whistle cutting through the night, the entire Palace was alerted. The Palace Sorcerers were urgently summoned, and the Tri-wings Sanctuary Sorcerers flew directly to the room at the top of the Tower for a thorough search, but still found nothing.

“Where’s the Princess?”

“The Princess is missing!”

“Go look for her! Get the Prophet over here! ...No, use the Gospel to ask for the Princess’s location! No matter the cost in Points, use all the Gospels necessary!”

“It’s no use, the Gospel won’t respond!”

“How is that possible...”

The frustrated trackers soon left the Princess’s room, which they had disrupted, extending their search throughout the entire imperial city.

No one noticed that an uninvited guest had already appeared in the room and had been watching the whole drama unfold from the sidelines.

He walked to the window, hands resting on the sill, and stretched his head out to survey the magnificent royal city that was lit up below. Layer upon layer of aurora-like Curtains gradually unfolded above the city. Thousands of ‘Hawkeye’ drones took off from various locations, laser-like Pattern Lines emerged on the ground, and all surveillance systems were activated at full capacity. In minutes, every corner of the city had been checked, and all spatial Miracles Purified, all in search of the missing princess.

"It saves me the trouble," he said with a chuckle, resting his chin on his hand.
"Educating the Swordswoman has cost me quite a bit of 'time'."

"Who are you?"

A petulant voice suddenly came from behind him. The observer turned his head to look at the young girl in a black dress standing by the bed. She had stunningly beautiful features, skin white as snow, lips red as blood, and long, shiny black hair.

Unlike the tranquil and lovely princess who had just jumped, she appeared furious, hands on her hips, puffing up her face as she glared at the observer, almost as if she was about to rush up and take a big bite.

"Although I would like to say it's nice to meet you for the first time, we have already made eye contact just now," the observer said, spreading his hands. "Pleased to meet you, Witch. I am the apocalypse observer, but you can call me observer."

"I am not a Witch!" She walked straight up to him, poking his chest with her finger. "I am Princess Lise Deya; you can call me Princess Lise or Princess Deya. I've never had such a strange title as 'Witch'!"

The observer tactically leaned back and asked, "So, should I call you Lise or Deya?"

She blinked, "...Deya."

"But I think 'Witch' sounds nicer," the observer turned back to look at the increasingly bustling imperial capital. "So, Witch, how does freedom feel?"

"Are you mocking me?" Deya grabbed the observer's collar and twisted him back around, almost lifting him off his feet. "Who exactly are you? How did you manage to break through the barriers to enter the royal city, and even my Tower? Without the help of the Bronze Dragon, I couldn't have possibly left this prison!"

"If a legendary Sorcerer could possibly infiltrate this place, then your ability to see me truly surpasses the realm of mortals," Deya said earnestly. "I am not a Soul, not a spirit, nor arcane energy; I am an illusion, a thought, a sentiment... Other than Lise, no one should be able to notice my existence, no one in this world should be able to see me."

"How can you see a thought?"

Deya scrutinized the Observer's face, shrouded in mist. "Are you the Divine Master?"

"I'm sorry to disappoint you."

Lifted up by Deya, the Observer showed no irritation, calmly stating, "I am not a god, at least... not yet. On the contrary, I am here to seek your help."

Deya cocked her head, "What help?"

"Become my companion, accept my arrangements."

"Should I take that as your declaration of slavery?"

"I vow to defend your right to free thought to the death."

"Absurd."

Deya forcefully pushed the Observer out of the window, and pure white radiance began to emanate from her as the center. In an instant, the entire world turned into a vast expanse of whiteness, leaving only Deya standing and the Observer falling.

The Observer's dark red cloak gradually turned gray, and his entire being came to a halt, as if time had frozen around him.

"Though I do not know who you are, nor how you can see me, the fact that you can communicate with me means you are within my thought," Deya articulated each word. "Intruding into someone else's Kingdom of thought is a very dangerous thing."

She clasped her hands together: "Be shattered into countless pieces by time, Observer!"

As soon as Deya finished speaking, the Observer's body shattered like a mirror, breaking smaller and smaller until it turned into a pile of sparkling sand.

Hmph, is that all there is to it?... Just as this thought surfaced in Deya's mind, suddenly, cracking sounds came from all directions!

Crack!

Deya looked up, only to find the pure white still world she created cracked like a mirror, fissures spreading everywhere! In each fragment of the world, the Observer's blurred figure appeared!

Everywhere under the heavens, in all directions, endless, omnipresent!

"Not an illusion, not a facade; each one is the real me."

The voices of the Observers resonated like rolling thunder, the resonance nearly shaking Deya's form: "We come from a second ago, a nanosecond ago, a millionth of a nanosecond ago... Instead of using time to kill, you should learn how to use time to not die."

"It seems I can't save the effort after all."

By the time Deya collected her thoughts, she found herself sitting on the edge of the bed with the Observer still beside the windowsill, as if nothing had happened.

But Deya knew that in the mental confrontation that had just occurred, even within her own Kingdom of thought, she had lost, and utterly so. She couldn't describe the feeling—her free thought had been defeated!

She rolled on the bed and hid behind it to avoid the Observer's gaze, asking cautiously like a startled rabbit: "Do you, being such an entity, truly need my help?"

"You seem to overestimate me a bit," the Observer said with a smile: "I am also just a distant longing. Without some special methods, I couldn't even see you. My actual presence has just set foot on the Time Continent, without a single Gold feather, weaker than you. With your help, exploring the Virtual Realm will be much easier."

How could that be... Deya didn't believe for a second that the Observer only had Two Wings, but she quickly caught on to the key phrase he mentioned: "Exploring the Virtual Realm?"

"Yes, you will join my team for Exploring the Virtual Realm, and together we will make a splash across the Time Continent." The Observer nodded: "But don't expect me to provide any information. As for the Virtual Realm and the Time Continent, you have a deeper understanding than I."

Exploring the Virtual Realm together? Deya instinctively wanted to dismiss such a fanciful idea, but on second thought, it seemed more ordinary compared to the Observer's ability to see her.

The main point was, the Observer had no reason to deceive her, a mere Two Wings Sorcerer, even if she was favored by the Bronze Dragon.

However, if the Observer's strength really was less than hers, that meant...

"That's right," the Observer suddenly recalled something and said: "I also have a companion who is a Swordcerer. Together, we have traversed the Sea of Knowledge, defeating many enemies." [search the N0veFire.net website](http://search.th3.N0veFire.net) to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

Deya pushed aside the bold thoughts that sprang to mind. "Do I have the right to refuse?"

"I also have a companion who is a Swordcerer. Together we've sailed the Sea of Knowledge, slaying many enemies," the Observer repeated with a smile.

Frustrated, she pointed at the Observer and exclaimed, "You're threatening me!"

"I prefer to think of it as temptation," the Observer tilted his head slightly: "But I swear to defend your right to free imagination to the death."

Deya seemed about to say more when suddenly her expression changed, and she vanished in a blur.

"Not even a goodbye, such an impolite Princess," the Observer lounged in the chair at the vanity: "So what if the Cultists have captured her? Why the panic? She should have known that the favor of the Bronze Dragon isn't so easily borne."

"Compared to you, she's really quite mischievous."

The Swordsman sat at the edge of the windowsill, her long legs in black stockings swinging gently in the air, her expression tinged with worry: "But she's too mischievous, I'm more concerned about whether Ashe can handle her."

"Don't worry."

The Observer said with a playful smile, "Isn't there Sonya?"

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

- Chapter 180: The Four Pillars Cult!

Chapter 180: The Four Pillars Cult!

As Ashe woke up, he saw Harvey and Igor eating sandwiches.

"Aren't you afraid they're poisoned?"

"Then I'll just take—"

"What I mean is, you should have woken me up to test them for poison." Ashe quickly grabbed the last sandwich and licked it to claim ownership, eliciting a look of disgust from Igor.

"How long did we sleep?"

Ashe checked the game interface, "It's 2 a.m. now; we slept for less than an hour."

Igor murmured, "That means we'll have to stay here the whole day..."

“Why?”

“If there were only a 6-hour drive left, there would be no need to provide food. We’re injured and sleep-deprived. If we stopped eating for another day, there’s a risk of sudden death, so they made sure to provide us with food.”

The sandwiches were far from filling and only made Ashe hungrier. He knocked on the padded wall, morosely saying, “Does this mean we’re going back to Prison? I’m starting to doubt if the title of the Sorcerer Handbook will be ‘The Masses’ Prison Review’ after I die...”

“Going to Prison would be a good outcome,” Igor said solemnly. “What I’m really afraid of is if they have a Slave society, where Sorcerers are the Slave masters, and all common people are slaves to Sorcerers. Coupled with the technological system of Sorcerers, they could force a Slave society into a modern developed Kingdom...”

Harvey inquired, “Isn’t being a Slave better than being a Prisoner?”

“Not at all. The biggest problem with a Slave society is that it’s ruled by men, not laws. When a Conflict arises, the first thought of Slave owners isn’t to solve the problem but to eliminate the person causing it. They have a penchant for violence, place extreme importance on blood relations, are very exclusionary and discriminatory against outsiders, and everyone’s social status is assigned from the day they are born with absolutely no class mobility.” Igor spoke with aversion, “Even some feudal superstitions are better than a Slave system.”

Harvey chuckled, “Then it seems we’ve fled from the Blood Moon Kingdom to an even worse Kingdom. Sigh, when I think about it, the Blood Moon Kingdom wasn’t that bad. If the Church had allowed commoners to study Necromancy, I probably wouldn’t have bothered to run away. Sadly, I didn’t have the chance to go to school initially, and later couldn’t get into graduate school to become part of the sacred bloodline, which meant I had no right to learn Necromancy...”

“It’s not necessarily a Slave society,” Ashe suggested, his tongue flicking out to lick the water inside the bottle. “Maybe this is a Civilized Kingdom that’s even more advanced than the Blood Moon Kingdom and doesn’t view refugees from other countries as enemies—”

“What Civilized Kingdom produces professional prison wagons like this?” Igor patted the padded rear wall. “Harvey, if you were to transport someone you’ve captured, how would you do it?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Don’t you know?”

“Well, I do know...” Harvey mumbled. “I have a friend, really just a friend. If it were me, I’d turn the person into a Corpse and have them run back on their own... But that friend usually uses drugs and an Auxiliary Spirit to hypnotize the target into unconsciousness, ties them up, and throws them into a van to transport them.”

“Would there be a company in the Blood Moon that makes these kinds of carriages?”

“Impossible. The closest thing might be a camper, but the business of binding people is considered a lower-value sector in our society; there’s no way they would custom-build carriages for such a minor business.”

Igor looked at Ashe. “So, Cult Leader, do you understand? Anyone who has these kinds of carriages is likely a special Occupation, mainly involved in capturing people—probably a Slave Catcher Squad. If there’s a Slave Catcher Squad, then it naturally follows that there’s a system of Slavery...”

“Wait a minute,” Ashe raised his hand to ask. “Couldn’t it be human traffickers?”

“A sex Slave is still a type of Slave—”

“It could also be traffickers who abduct children.”

“Child trafficking?” Both Igor and Harvey looked puzzled. “Why would someone kidnap children? Who would buy them? And what for?”

Ashe suddenly remembered that even families had dissolved in the Blood Moon Kingdom—without buyers, there naturally wouldn’t be any traffickers. He took some effort to describe this vile industry to Igor and Harvey, but they still couldn’t grasp the concept—much like trying to explain the exhilaration of fitness to someone who never exercises.

Even though they had escaped the Blood Moon Kingdom, its culture was deeply ingrained in their souls. They struggled to understand why some people would go to such lengths to have descendants, even if it meant taking someone else’s, to the point of fostering a sinister industry. In their worldview, descendants might be closer than strangers, but they were still ‘others,’ not ‘self.’

In a sense, the Blood Moon didn’t deliberately erase their emotions; it just perfected one of their correct thought patterns to the extreme—when selfishness became their highest principle, the emotional effort required became incomprehensible.

This was also why Ashe remained wary of them. It wasn’t just because they were death row inmates, but also because the education of the Blood Moon had lowered their moral standards so significantly that they could be compared to a project manager who’d call Ashe at three in the morning to rush a PowerPoint presentation.

Humans are creatures with great limitations, unable to comprehend things they've never seen. Only by witnessing enough of everything can one grasp all the truths of the world. Without sufficient experience, even a gemstone in front of someone might be mistaken for a mere rock. Thus, to obtain the gemstone, one must first witness the rise and fall of all things...

A strange idea popped into Ashe's mind. He shook his head to suppress the sudden flight of fancy and said, "Even if it really is a Slave Catcher Squad, at least our lives would be safe. Plus, being Slaves could help us quickly understand this world. If it comes down to it, we could always become Prison Escapees. We are, after all, professionals at escaping."

Igor looked at Ashe with a hint of surprise and was silent for a while. Ashe felt uneasy under his gaze, "What's up?"

"I've had this vague feeling since I was in prison," said Igor, "I'm not sure if it's ignorance that breeds fearlessness, or the blind confidence you cultivated as a Cult Leader, but you seem to have never feared the malice of Destiny."

"After all, we barely escaped the Blood Moon, only to be captured again. Even I can't help but want to curse at the world, yet you, like a fish with only a seven-second memory, immediately start thinking about how to utilize being a Slave."

"Do you have some kind of ace up your sleeve?"

An ace? Does the Black-and-White Witch I just drew count?

Ashe scratched his head: "Isn't this just normal mental resilience? Like when your boss suddenly gives you a new task on your way home from work, demanding it be done by the next morning, you curse inwardly for a bit, then order takeout and work overtime obediently, right?"

Harvey said, "I think most people wouldn't equate working overtime with being caught by a Slave Catcher Squad... Go on."

Ashe and Igor caught the item Harvey threw to them—a Snow White Brand Moon Sugar.

"When we get off the bus, that's when we are most vulnerable and they are most lax," Harvey said calmly. "This stuff can force your spirit into a state of high alert, overcoming the fatigue of sleeplessness, and even speed up the recovery of arcane energy."

"After leaving the Blood Moon, you won't find Moon Sugar anywhere," Igor mentioned. "Physical addiction to sugar can be broken with spirits, but I've never heard of anyone overcoming the psychological craving. In Shattered Lake Prison, many a Death row inmate spent all their contributions just to buy Moon Sugar."

“There should be similar drugs in this Kingdom,” Harvey said, patting the padded wall. “The more advanced the Kingdom, the more popular the drugs to fill the void. Every Race has a self-destructive tendency; when survival is no longer a pressure, they seek out activities that are more dangerous but also more pleasurable.”

“Necromancer’s peculiar theories,” Igor put away the item. “I’ll take it, I won’t use it, but I’ll cooperate with you.”

“Same here,” Ashe was not interested in testing his own resistance to toxins, but after some thought, he still put it in his bag—it could be considered for the Substitute, to see the Substitute’s reaction.

Thinking of the Substitute first when there’s good food, that’s so me.

After a long journey, at 6 p.m. during the Blood Moon, Igor finally felt the carriage come to a stop. The three exhausted individuals exchanged glances, knowing that the first major challenge was about to begin. Harvey silently consumed a piece of Moon Sugar, instantly revitalizing his spirit and energy.

The carriage door slid open. “Come out, the three of you.”

At that moment, Ashe suddenly realized that he could understand the language of this kingdom, although with a strange accent, probably somewhere between Cantonese and Mandarin. With careful listening, it was still intelligible.

Even within the same language, different cities can lead to different accents, so it was normal for them to have one. But they had transmigrated to another kingdom, and yet the basic language was still the same?

Stepping out of the carriage, they were greeted by a sky half-filled with a setting sun and half with stars, and what looked like an abandoned industrial park—a rare sight in the Blood Moon Kingdom, where the Blood Moon always hurried to announce its presence before the sun had set.

As they had expected, the vehicle that transported them seemed quite advanced, entirely silver-white. Although it still had four wheels, the tires surprisingly lacked the Pattern Lines that increase friction for anti-slip purposes; it seemed as if a single brake could lead to a drift of several meters, completely beyond their understanding of driving, looking more like a concept car from a fantasy.

This was a kingdom where Sorcerer technology was highly advanced, at least more so than in the Blood Moon Kingdom.

This was the conclusion all three came to upon seeing the vehicle that represented the pinnacle of industrial production.

“These three are the People from the Exotic Lands you requested. You can check them with the Gospel,” said the voice.

Standing in front of Ashe were two unremarkable individuals: a youthful-looking Butler and a beautiful girl with purple hair and green eyes.

The latter was holding a luxurious orange velvet folding fan and dressed in a purple coat. Ashe’s immediate thought upon seeing her was of a phrase often seen in tabloid news: “She outshone everyone!”

Ashe instinctively glanced at Igor—the girl’s beauty was a match for Igor’s!

Moreover, because Ashe was more familiar with Igor, there’s a saying that the grass is always greener on the other side, so the unfamiliar girl’s attractiveness gained extra points in Ashe’s mind, thoroughly surpassing Igor.

From Ashe’s account, these two hardly seemed ordinary. However, in comparison to another group, they indeed appeared quite common—six sinister figures in black robes were glaring ominously at Ashe and his companions.

“The People from the Exotic Lands are confirmed,” the leader of the Black Robe Men nodded. “No time to delay; let’s proceed with the trade.”

The young Butler stepped forward, presenting three controller-like keys, while the Black Robe Man produced a box. Harvey lowered his eyelids, as if readying for action.

But they all refrained from any sudden moves until the transaction was complete.

This was because the Purple-clad Girl was smiling at them the entire time.

Ashe’s Beast Intuition was triggered, indicating that the Purple-clad Girl was even more of a beast than he was, to the extent that his subconscious began to fear her.

The Butler handed the box to the Purple-clad Girl, who opened it to reveal an octahedral amethyst. The amethyst seemed to have an inner light source, emitting a warm and inviting glow that made the Purple-clad Girl look even more dazzling. Her beauty skyrocketed, overwhelming Igor by a large margin.

“The trade is complete,” said the Purple-clad Girl and the Butler, making way. “Now, these three are in the hands of the Four Pillars Cult.”

The Four Pillars Cult?

Harvey and Igor instantly turned their heads to stare at Ashe, who was equally stunned—he had indeed heard the term “Four Pillars Cult” in his half-asleep state

before, but the speaker had a heavy accent, and he was groggy, so he thought he had misheard.

Before Ashe could gather his wits, the Black Robe Man's sleeves unleashed dozens of chains that tightly bound the trio and stuffed them into prepared Body Bags, tossing them into their vehicle.

He then turned to the Purple-clad Girl and said, "We'll head back to commence the Ritual. Let's hope for future collaborations, Funeral Firm."

The Purple-clad Girl gave a slight nod: "Ranked number nine on Azura's Quest Ranking, the Funeral Firm is always ready for your commission."

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