

Righteous Ps 261

### **The Righteous Player(s) Chapter 261**

Annan watched Vasily, whose hands had regained freedom as he wrote letters to Maria. He emphasized, "Remember to show it to me once you're done writing."

"Yes, Your Highness." Old Vasily answered obediently without raising his head.

Annan nodded, signaling that he heard it.

He leaned back slightly against his seat to think.

Annan had just learned of Maria Austere-Winter's order to Vasily, "Get ready to return home, Vasily. A ship with a blue canvas will arrive at Freezing Water Port in 10 days. You shall leave by that ship."

After that, Vasily immediately asked Annan if he could reveal the information he had learned to Maria.

Annan agreed to it with the condition of knowing what was written.

Vasily Manning readily agreed to this request.

Annan pondered in deep thoughts silently as he waited for Vasily to complete the reply.

...Hmm, Vasily Manning. Annan had indeed heard of this name.

He had also met his older brother, Merlin Manning.

But that was because Annan had met him in [Nightmare: White Tower].

Merlin had participated in the first half of Michelangelo's ritual. Thus, even if he was not the best Energy Falteration School wizard, getting an invitation from Michelangelo was already an adequate recognition of his abilities.

Before he retired, Merlin was a core member of Winter's Hand — Maria even trusted him.

Annan remembered him... He was skinny and tall, a taciturn old man.

Merlin's curse vessel was a silver tongue ring, and the curse mark was located in his mouth. When the wizards got into a conflict during the nightmare, his first reaction was to stand in front of Maria.

...But Annan also knew.

Among the people who survived the White Tower Ritual... Merlin wasn't one of them.

In other words, the Old Merlin should have been dead five years ago.

Let me make some more inferences...The time Maria dispatched Vasily into the Noah Kingdom was basically when the White Tower Ritual ended. His primary duty was to observe the resurrection of Michelangelo...

Yes. Indeed, Vasily's mission at the very beginning was to "observe".

Although the Rotten Man's church hired him, he was also the person who released many summoned creatures to ruin the ritual. This level of intervention had gone far beyond “observation”.

It was fair to say that his actions were somewhat contrary to Maria's orders.

Maria only sent him alone without any aid. Her goal must then be only for observation and not “to ruin the ritual”.

The purpose of sending Vasily was because he had sufficient occult knowledge to understand the ritual.

At first, Annan didn't quite understand the inconsistency.

But after learning that Merlin was Vasily's biological brother, Annan understood everything.

...I see.

Did he put the blame of his brother's death on Michelangelo's shoulders?

Although Vasily received Maria's mission and knew that it was a deity's ascendancy ritual, he still wanted to give it a shot to see if he could ruin this ritual.

Hence, Vasily had planned to die with “Don Juan Geraint” at the very beginning. If the direct descendants of the Geraint family were to die here, it would cause havoc within the Noah Kingdom.

That would have been his final piece of influence imposed on the entire ordeal.

It seemed that he had immediately realized something after meeting Annan and Kafni. Only then did he give up the idea of “using Big Explosion”.

No wonder... Annan felt that something was off from the very beginning.

You must know that the Transcended power of the ritualists came entirely from occult knowledge.

What determined the strength of a ritualist was their skills in logical analysis, adaptability, memory, experience, rationality, courage... and most importantly, wealth.

This was the crux of the matter.

The price of occult knowledge wasn't cheap.

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Some ritual knowledge could directly give birth to a ritualist; hence, it was forbidden in most countries. As for the knowledge about deities, those were taboos that could not be shared— mortals were unable to retain any of this information in their brains..

Even if you had heard it or seen it, you could only use it once at most.

Those secret books recording occult knowledge were even less likely to be easily obtained by people who weren't wealthy.

Initially, Annan thought that the knowledge was from the Rotten Man's Church because many summoned creatures were involved. Moreover, it was unlikely for an ordinary human to master so much knowledge.

However, that actually was the case.

This could only mean one thing.

Those foolish apprentices of Vasily didn't even realize that their teacher was not some unemployed and penniless ritualist but a government official of a country.

The "secret book" that had recorded forbidden knowledge about deities wouldn't disappear upon reading; it only required the user to reread the book after usage of the knowledge. As for any information about rituals, they were confiscated and stored in the library of forbidden books.

Whether it was King Noah or Austere-Winter's Grand Duke, one would try to produce ritualists as long as he was not stupid.

Why was Vasily able to learn so many kinds of forbidden knowledge?

Why could Maria trust him to sneak into another country alone for as long as five years to carry out a mission related to the deities?

The answer was simple.

He and his brother were of the same profession!

His brother Merlin was a senior executive of Winter's Hand, mainly responsible for the domestic eradication of dissident spy affairs; Vasily was under Maria's command to execute a cross-border mission that lasted for several years... So it could only mean that Vasily was also an elite in espionage.

After all, Transcendeds were required to have their custom clearance documents, and their identity strictly verified whenever they go through the underground passage. This made it impossible for them to carry out espionage missions... but the ordinary people were too weak to fight against Transcendeds. On the other hand, priests with stable Transcended power couldn't be mobilized directly by various royal families.

Therefore, the only ones who could get through the Gray Mists were ritualists.

Hence, Annan finally figured it out.

Why must ritualists be seized whenever they're discovered?

Because every ritualist, no matter their capability, could be a spy from another country.

"It's done," said Vasily softly.

Then, he put the pen on the table and handed the letter over to Annan.

It was written as follow:

"Honor to the Storm and Wolves:

"New intelligence: I have met His Highness Annan, who was thought to be long-lost. He is currently in the Noah Kingdom, living under the pseudonym of Don Juan Geraint. He has realized his conjecture from the past, obtained the Reverse Inscription, and regained his emotions. However, His Highness has become a Transcended and thus cannot return to Austere-Winter by ship through the Gray Mists.

“Additionally: His Royal Highness Annan is now on good terms with Her Highness 'the Shadow Demon' Kafni and has advanced to the rank of Silver Knight. His identity may have also been exposed;

“May I ask, do I still follow the original plan to return to the Austere-Winter Dukedom in 10 days?”

Watching Annan read the reply carefully, Vasily took the initiative and asked Annan in a soft voice, “Your Highness, should I remove the second paragraph?”

“...No need.” Annan decisively objected, “Just send it like this.”

He believed that Maria needed more accurate intelligence to prevent deviation from her original plan. The information must be conveyed accurately enough.

Plus, there was nothing worth hiding.

Soon enough, Annan watched Vasily conduct a simple sacrifice ritual and “burned” the information over to Maria.

Not long after, Vasily raised his head.

“I have received a reply, Your Highness.” Vasily said respectfully, “The return plan has been canceled.

“The 'Daughter of the Storm' has ordered me to stay in Noah to assist you. She will find a way to bring you back and has told me to send you a message. She urges you not to try crossing the underground border yourself and wait quietly at Noah. Don't wander around, and don't make any more contact with strangers.”

...But I have my reasons. Annan sighed deeply.

I have to visit the capital in three months. The Silver Sire had issued this mission to me personally.

Annan reiterated his mission reluctantly for Vasily to pass it on to Maria.

It occurred to him that Maria was treating him like a child, asking him to stay put, stop wandering, and stop talking to strangers... It felt like she was talking to a lost child through the phone.

Wait a minute. Judging from Annan's biological age, he was indeed a child...

### **The Righteous Player(s) Chapter 262**

When Suuankou and Citalopram went offline last night, it was already 2 a.m.

It was time to go to bed, but they felt refreshed instead.

It was as if they had taken a nap already.

They hadn't been online in the game for that long — except for Suuankou. The rest only came online at dinner time.

Eight hours had passed since they logged onto the game.

“You don't have to sleep anymore because your body is well-rested. If you attempt to sleep again, you will have a headache.”

Lin Yiyi replied lazily, "The [Mist Continent] can completely replace sleep."

She stretched, then slumped back on the bed without caring about her image.

She opened her arms and legs, looked at the ceiling, and muttered, "Ah, I'm a little hungry...I want to have some meat..."

"Eat as much as you want. Is two pounds enough?" Jiu Er replied, "I can get you more if you want!"

"Then, I'll be chubby!" Lin Yiyi jumped up from the bed in annoyance, ran over, and hugged Jiu Er, who failed to escape. She reached her hands beneath Jiu Er's clothes and tickled Jiu Er, "Hahaha, I'm going to torture you with my tickles..."

Seeing his sister and the rich loli laughing while playing together, Suuankou calmly adjusted his glasses and turned his eyes away politely.

Citalopram walked over to him and said with a chuckle, "You didn't change much with the character customization."

Citalopram, whose real name was Wen Xue, had a distinctly different outfit from Jiu Er. Jiu Er was well-dressed even at home. She was the youngest among the three girls, but she only applied light makeup.

She had a beige slim-fit turtleneck sweater with sleeves that reached her palms, leaving only her bare fingers exposed. The white-toned clothes were supposed to make her skin look a little yellowish, but they made her glow instead.

Citalopram, on the other hand, was only wearing a simple white blouse. It appeared that her clothes were a little tight by the chest. She had an ordinary pair of black slacks for her lower body, and her feet on the plush carpet were warm even without wearing socks.

Citalopram's model-level figure was absolutely overwhelming amongst the three ladies in the house.

Suuankou even felt that she wasn't much shorter than him...

She should be about 1.7 meters tall, right?

Citalopram habitually picked up a pack of cigarettes from the table, tapped one out from the pack with her finger, and put it in her mouth.

She took the cigarette pack and gave it to Suuankou, "The Kimling Twelve Hairpins, mint-flavored... Want one?"

"No no, it's fine. I don't smoke..." Suuankou quickly declined.

Citalopram nodded approvingly, "You're right, smoking is a bad habit."

She was about to light the cigarette, but she thought of something.

So she put down the lighter, took the cigarette off from her lips, and kept it between her fingers.

"Are you Lin Yiyi's biological younger brother?" She asked curiously, "Both of you are streamers?"

Citalopram's voice was slightly hoarse but had a unique charm to it.

Suuankou hurriedly explained, "No, my sister makes videos. She doesn't do live broadcasts, so she technically isn't a streamer."

"But, it's almost the same." Citalopram nodded, "Anyway, you two are the professionals. I'm not very proficient at games, so I shall follow your guidance most of the time."

She said with a slight smile and extended her right hand that was without a cigarette towards Suuankou, "I'm counting on you."

Unlike her feministic, attractive aura, Citalopram's hands were unexpectedly strong and steady. There were even calluses on her hands. Suuankou was a little suspicious if she was actually a physician rather than a psychiatrist.

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"No problem..." Suuankou smiled happily.

After learning that the game could replace sleep, Suuankou's first reaction was there was no need to worry about insomnia from now on.

I just press the Enter key, and I fall asleep immediately.

Hmm, the quality of my sleep is superb as well.

The problem is that maybe merely 8 hours of sleep isn't enough...

"Since this game can replace sleep... Then basically, we can't even quit. Then, I suggest that we should unify our game log-in schedule."

Suuankou calculated carefully, "I currently end the livestream every day at about 10:30 p.m. Also, I have lectures in the morning, so I have to get up at 7:00 a.m. Hmm, I can move forward my streaming schedule by half an hour. Then, when I end my stream, I can log straight into the game and not play with my phone.

"That's almost 9 hours in the game for weekdays and an additional daytime on weekends."

"In my case, my schedule is a bit busier. However, if I try to adjust it, I should be able to get 9 hours of log-in time a day too." Citalopram smiled, "I might be able to stay in the game a little longer than you. I don't have night shifts, but you have the streaming job at night."

"It's only a few hours difference," Suuankou's eyes lit up, "Also, whether it's a lurker or a Half-dead Enchantress, our professions are more advantageous at night as compared to the daytime."

Citalopram was interested, "So, we're teammates, right?"

As if sensing something, Lin Yiyi put down Jiu Er, who had been tickled for a long time. She then approached with interest, "Are you two going to form a regular team? Are you sure that's enough people?"

"Well, we both have things to do during the day. We're not as free as you, and our timing isn't as flexible either." Suuankou said helplessly, "Even if we want to have more people in our regular team, we need

to match our schedules. Otherwise, what's the point of having a team if we can't go online at the same time together?"

"Anyways, you can still stream for today. It isn't too late since it's only 2a.m."

Lin Yiyi said casually, "It just so happens that you haven't streamed tonight yet. Have something to eat. When you're done, you can stream all you want while I have to catch up on my video production? Then, let's play the [Mist Continent] 8 hours later. By the way, I forgot to mention that your 'game character' also has to sleep for 8 hours every day. This limitation is seemingly imposed to prevent addiction. During these 8 hours, you can do your work or fulfill your daily needs."

"What if I want to get some time during the day to play for 1 hour or two?" Suuankou asked, "For example, when I take a nap at noon in real life, can I take that time to enter the game and earn some money?"

"Theoretically, it is possible. At first, we thought that as long as we were offline, we would have to wait for 8 hours before the next log-in. But, that's not necessarily the case."

Lin Yiyi explained to her brother thoroughly, "However, if you log out at 7 a.m., then the 8 hours gap isn't fulfilled by noon. Of course, if that 8 hours limitation was already fulfilled, you can log off once your in-game time has spanned 12 hours from your last waking time.

"For example, if you leave the game at 7 a.m., you can be online again at 3 p.m. If you exit the game before 3 a.m., you can launch the game at any time."

In fact, Annan realized that the "8 hours offline" rule wasn't quite flexible. Therefore, an additional "reconnection mechanism" was added.

As for why it was 12 hours instead of 16, Annan thought everyone would wake up at different times; some could be late, and some could be early.

"Speaking of which," Lin Yiyi said casually, "Do you have anything to work on tomorrow? If you're not busy, go online earlier.

"I shall bring you both to the city hall. You can get a free house there, each with three bedrooms."

"What?" Suuankou was shocked, "The house that my character slept in today is distributed for each player? Wow, the benefits provided are great."

When he noticed the house had three bedrooms, he thought it was for three people.

It appeared that he had underestimated the conscience of the game planner.

"Our game planner is awesome!" Suuankou exclaimed loudly.

"You should praise Annan instead." Lin Yiyi corrected, "It's Annan who gave you the house!"

Hearing this, Suuankou was baffled. Citalopram seemed to realize something, "Sister, you're not trying to be a cradle robber, are you?"

"Fuck off!" Lin Yiyi was instantly infuriated and kicked the silent Suuankou to the floor.

That's not robbing the cradle.

I just have a young girl's heart!

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Suuankou and Citalopram didn't let Annan wait too long.

By 10 a.m., the two of them had arrived at the City Hall.

To their surprise, Annan arrived even earlier than them.

Although Annan slept late, he still got up at 6 a.m.

After washing up and having breakfast, he walked to the City Hall, which only took five minutes for the journey.

It was also unclear if it was because his Constitution attribute was much higher than Salvatore... or his bloodline was more complicated.

All in all, even though Annan only slept less than four hours, he was much more energetic than Salvatore sleeping six hours a day.

Of course, it might also be because Annan could make up for sleep at other times.

"Sign this for me." Annan pointed to another set of contracts and said habitually, "Sign it here... Just sign Suuankou and Citalopram with any language you preferred. As long as it is written in your name, the contract is valid."

The significance of these contracts was that after they were signed, even if Annan's identity was exposed and he was no longer the feudal lord of the North Sea Territory and Roseburg's city lord, the players would still own these houses.

Even those who came later in the office couldn't determine the seller of the players bought the house through the procedures. Annan utilized the private seal of Roseburg Viscount, and the date on the contract was extrapolated eight or nine years ago.

I'm such a nice guy and think about the legality of housing for the players... Annan couldn't help but sigh in his heart.

"After signing, take your keys." Annan handed the two sets of keys to Suuankou and Citalopram, respectively.

He showed them each key. "Suuankou, you shall live upstairs of Yiyi. Citalopram, you'll live upstairs of Jiu Er. Both of you're living with your guarantor. Is that fine?"

"The biggest key is the main entrance's key." Annan pointed to a key about the size of an adult man's palm and patiently explained, "After going in through the main gate, it's your yard. There is nothing planted in the yard as of now, and the pond isn't dug out yet. After you leave Roseburg, you may bring back any rare plants you see here, as long as it doesn't disturb your neighbors."



“After going in from the yard, you need this key to unlock the inner door. The first floor is your guarantor's residence. After going up the stairs from the entrance hall is your residence. There is a small cubicle in the yard with weeding equipment and so forth. Also, feel free to convert it into a pet kennel if you wish. This key and the gate key are shared between the three of you.”

Annan added, “I won't give you the room on the third floor to anyone until you all agree. But if you perform well in your mission, I can offer you the key to that floor. You may treat it as a room extension, storeroom, or whatnot. It's up to you to decide.

“As for the furniture for the two of you, I already bought it for you last night. Someone will deliver it to you tonight, so remember to get someone available at home. As for the daily necessities, it involves privacy and security issues, so you have to buy them yourself.”

Annan instructed seriously.

Although he was sitting on a chair with his height not even reaching Suuankou's chest, he had a convincing image that seemed mature.

...As expected of the son of the Grand Duke. Citalopram complimented secretly.

Suuankou was flattered.

You can't do that! Lord Annan... No, Your Highness Annan!

You gave me a mansion as soon as we met and even furniture for free. How... how... how... can I accept it!?

Despite so, Suuankou had another thought surfaced in his mind.

He was worried that because of cultural differences, if he lamented “that's overpolite”, then Annan might not understand that it was pleasantries and replied, “Oh, that's fine, I'm sorry,” and took the house back.

Then, he would regret it seriously.

After the two of them thanked Annan earnestly again, he sent them back.

He didn't stay long at City Hall.

Before lunch, Annan packed up and went home.

At Annan's request, Vasily explained Annan's situation to Maria.

She learned that Annan had received a direct mission from the Silver Sire, and he had to go to the capital. But, with the protection of the Silver Sire and the Paper Princess, Maria reluctantly agreed.

But she still stressed to Annan repeatedly to not stir up trouble, not wander around, and stay on a low profile. She also asked Vasily to stay with him, write a report every week, record where he went and what he did, and report his safety every three days.

After confirming that Vasily was trustworthy, Annan made a request to Vasily.

Vasily frowned slightly, “I'm proficient at removing “influences”... But the process of eliminating the influences is nothing more than 'cancellation' and 'consumption'. Unfortunately, I have never heard of [the Remains of the Wheel of Divine Transporter], or nightmares about [Brilliance].”

The old ritualist had never heard of this influence, so he had no way to eliminate it.

As for [Brilliance]...

Vasily had seen nightmares with “darkness” as the keyword in books. “Brilliance” was unheard of. The name just didn't seem related to “nightmare”.

So, Annan could only mention to Vasily about the torn Truth pages.

However, Annan was a little surprised that Old Vasily wasn't surprised by this.

Although he didn't know Annan's identity and he didn't know how Annan and Rotten Man fought, he could tell that Annan had used Sage's Stone before.

If Annan didn't grasp the Truth, he couldn't defeat the Rotten Man even after using the Sage's Stone.

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“I did hear some news, and it seems that a new Book of Truth has been born recently.”

Old Vasily replied, “About half a month ago, someone from the Papal Kingdom has gotten the title page of the Book of Truth — 'Machine'. Your footprints have already crossed several countries, and you have the bloodline of a true deity. I never doubted whether you and Her Royal Highness Maria could get a new Truth Fragment.

“In 60 years of life, Your Highness — you are the best young talent I have ever met. If anyone in this world may be recognized by the Book of Truth, there your name must be in it.”

Even though Vasily had been praising and bootlicking, he really had no clue about the Book of Divine Transporter.

But, this also answered another puzzle for Annan. Vasily knew very well that Annan Austere-Winter didn't have those guards with weird names, strange ways of doing things, and constantly respawning.

However, it all made logical sense to say that they came from the influence of Truth Fragment.

Vasily simply found it reasonable that the Truth Fragment could summon and control immortal and strange humanoids, even more, so that he thought these summonses were underwhelming. He suggested to Annan that the Truth Fragment might not be utilized to its limits yet.

Of course, that was the truth. Annan didn't recruit players to the limits at all.

After all, he was still in an enemy country to recruit elite units—the lesser the number, the stronger the emphasis on individual strength.

However, Vasily couldn't help Annan eliminate “the Remains of the Wheel of Divine Transporter”.

But he could do something else...

Tonight was the day Annan would fall into a new nightmare.

Even Priest Louis could tweak the ritual so that Annan's death in a nightmare wouldn't affect him in reality.

In comparison, Vasily was a professional ritualist.

The knowledge he possessed could give Annan various buffs according to the nightmare. For example, if Nightmare had the keyword "Frost", he could add frost resistance on Annan; if Nightmare had the keyword "Desert", he would provide Annan with wind-resistant and the ability to create water.

However, the keyword "Brilliance" was unheard of.

But no matter what, it shouldn't be a big problem after strengthening Annan in all aspects.

The only distorted nightmare Annan had ever challenged was the Gallery.

Seeing that it would be another distorted nightmare, Annan's primary goal was to survive... If he lived till he woke up, he would consider that a win already.

But, Annan had the intention to clear the distorted nightmare in one go after having Vasily's buffs.

Annan stayed at home quietly for most of the day, waiting for the ritual to be set. Vasily used cinnabar to paint Annan's body with weird red runes all over his body. This purpose was to make the ritual held in reality have its effect applied in the nightmare.

At sunset, Vasily activated the prepared ritual.

He lit eight candles of varying lengths one after another. August was the month of Mr. Ray, the deity of light and purification. In nightmares, He offered the strongest protection.

Soon, Annan, lying in the middle of the ritual, fell asleep.

Unlike the icy drowning experience of entering [Nightmare: Reflection], this time, Annan found it warm and soothing. It was like lying on a bed with a heater underneath and covered with a quilt that was freshly retrieved from a sunbath. At the same time, there was still a small sun in the house.

...Fuck, it's kinda hot.

This was Annan's only thought before he went fully asleep.

Words began to appear in front of his eyes.

[“Advanced Influence: Remains of the Wheel of Divine Transporter” has reverberated.]

[You are now entering the dream world.]

[Detected the dream key: Kafni Noah.]

[Searching for the nightmare with the keyword “Brilliance”...]

[The system has found the nightmare.]

[Falling into a nightmare. The dungeon instance is being generated.]

[Detected that the current dungeon instance has a special property: Reminiscence]

[This dungeon instance wouldn't mutate.]

[The dungeon instance difficulty is set to [Distorted].]

[This dungeon instance has no save point. Your erosion rate is increased by 25% for each death. You will be forced out from the dungeon instance after 1 death.]

[This dungeon instance contains a plot and possibly provides decryption rewards.]

[Dungeon instance clearance reward: Any profession will be promoted by 3 levels.]

[Dungeon instance decryption rewards: Element (Brilliance) awakening level increases by 10%]

[Loading completed.]

### **The Righteous Player(s) C264– Nightmare– The Great Hunt**

#### Chapter 264: Nightmare: The Great Hunt

Watching the countless streams of data flowing through quickly, Annan felt the familiar sense of weightless falling gradually returning.

It was as if the stagnant air around him was gradually melting.

Annan, who was suspended in the void, also began to gradually fall.

“...Honey, I want you to know that some cursed people don't deserve this, but some people deserve it.” Annan heard a somewhat familiar voice ringing in his ear.

He was a little surprised because of that voice...

It seems to be the fourth prince, Albert's voice?

At the next moment, Annan's consciousness completely plunged into darkness.

“...Your Highness? Your Highness Annan?” He heard a cautious voice ringing in his ear.

At that moment, Annan even thought that he hadn't entered the nightmare smoothly.

But soon he reacted.

He noticed that he seemed to be sitting on a chair, and the world in front of him had become much larger.

Wait, not really so.

He's getting smaller.

“Sorry, I just fell asleep.” Annan subconsciously showed a tired expression and spoke in a childish voice.

He noticed that he seemed to be staying in a luxurious palace.

He wore a coat akin to the mink's fur; the exotic fur was pure white with intricate silver embroidery.

But what baffled him was that even though it was heavy, Annan didn't feel hot wearing it.

Annan could clearly feel that the room temperature was about 28°. Seeing the thin clothes of the maids walking around in the palace, Annan could immediately tell that it should be summer now.

The maids who were chatting look over as though they had noticed Annan's movement.

One of them was a woman with long black hair and dark red pupils. Annan couldn't tell the exact age, but it was fair that she was already in her adulthood. She wore a dark yellow gauze with black spots reminiscent of the wings of a moth. She had a calm expression, bright eyes, and a natural demeanor.

The one chatting with her was a young man who appeared to be in his twenties.

He was approaching 180 meters tall with deep blue pupils, a thin and well-proportioned figure, and a straight back. His pure black long hair draped to the waist. They were well-taken care of, smooth and supple.

The youth's skin was as cold and bloodless as jade. He wore the same clothes as Annan's. However, unlike Annan, he didn't even have the typical wolf fur on his neckline. His body was clean, and there wasn't even a single bit of dirt between his fingernails.

But what didn't fit with his flawless appearance was that he kept frowning and looked serious. Perhaps because of the frequent frowning, there were faint wrinkles on the forehead.

"What's the matter, Annan?" He frowned, walked over, and asked plainly, "Are you tired?"

Those comforting words in a concerning tone didn't carry any emotions. Instead, it was calm to the level of indifference.

"Your Royal Highness Dmitri." The servant behind Annan leaned forward slightly, put his hand on his chest, and respectfully saluted the young man in front of Annan.

Is it Dmitri Austere-Winter?

So what he is using now is the body of Annan Austere-Winter when he was a child?

Annan immediately realized the backstory of this dungeon instance.

Taking my height as an estimate, this body is currently about 9 or 10 years old.

Then, the timeline should be 4 or 5 years ago.

Could it be this nightmare is about what happened when Prince Albert and Kafni met Annan back then?

Then, this person...

Annan's eyes moved to the lady who gave the impression of calm and dependable.

She should be the Princess Royal of Noah Kingdom, Elizabeth Noah.

It's really hard to notice that she is in her fifties.

"Yes, I'm a little tired." But when Annan's thoughts were racing, he just stood up and lowered his head apologetically, "Sorry..."

“Just go to rest if you are tired,” replied Dmitri calmly.

There was no emotion in his pupils and words as if he was made of ice.

He turned his head and asked Elizabeth plainly, “Your Highness, Princess Royal, is there anywhere I can give Annan to have a rest? There are too many people here, and Annan's health has never been well.”

“We do have a place.” Princess Royal chuckled and nodded gently to Annan.

Her voice was calm and generous, giving a strong sense of comfort in sharp contrast to Dmitri's, “Let's have Annan to the garden located at the side hall to have a rest. There is a flower field that was blessed by the Silver Sire's pope. It nourishes the body and mind quite effectively.”

After she finished speaking, she turned to look at a young maid in a white short-sleeved maid uniform with her hands clasped in front of her chest.

“Marie, lead the way,” she said softly.

The maid bowed solemnly and replied, “Yes, Your Highness.”

At this moment, an old man not far away stood up silently.

He had a thin, skinny build with sunken cheeks and deep eye sockets. He had little hair, wore a pure black outfit like mourning clothes, without the slightest color.

He stood silently behind Annan, bowed respectfully and politely to Princess Royal.

Annan recognized him immediately.

He's Merlin Manning I'm talking about last night.

The maid glanced at the silent old man with some fear, walked to Annan, and couldn't help smiling at his tender face.

She bowed and reached out her hand to Annan, coaxing softly, “Please come with me, okay? Your Highness Annan...”

Annan didn't hesitate and passed his hand to the maid. He followed her to the side hall where the crowd was sparse, and the old man followed quietly.

At this moment, Annan finally saw the introduction mission of this dungeon instance.

“1498, August 8th.

“As Annan Austere-Winter — the youngest son of Austere-Winter's Grand Duke, you follow your brother, Dmitri to attend the 80th birthday of the Noah Kingdom's old king in the place of Austere-Winter's Grand Duke, Ivan-Austere-Winter.

“This is the first friendly diplomatic interaction between the two countries since the Austere-Winter Dukedom and the Noah Kingdom were at peace. It marks the rejuvenation of business and trade between Austere-Winter and the Noah Kingdom...”

“—if everything goes well.

“Very unfortunate, and rightfully so — someone wants to ruin the hard-won peace.

“And it's very simple.

“Whether it's Annan, Dmitri, Elizabeth...or anyone else, as long as one person dies, this birthday party will turn into a grand funeral.

“And, the fuse for the next war.

“What's more? They didn't want to kill just one person.

“It's going to be the Great Hunt ritual—

“Perhaps it's too hard for you, who is only 9 years old, to stop this. But only you can do it because only you can act freely at this birthday party since you are young.

“Stay alive. Interrupt the conspiracy. Keep more people alive—”

[In this nightmare, you are blessed by “Mr. Ray”. You will continue to recover health and mana after leaving the battle.]

[In this nightmare, you are blessed by the “Silver Sire”, and all “Silver Sire's” [Divine Art] ability checks + 1.]

[In this nightmare, you are blessed by the “Mysterious Lady”, which nullifies all the effects of ritual on you.]

[In this nightmare, you are blessed by the “Old Grandmother” and acquire your body's original Falteration Wizard level.]

[Main Mission: The Man of Brilliance]

Immediately after, three side missions appeared.

[Guarantee the survival of “Annan·Austere-Winter”, “Dmitri·Austere-Winter”, “Elizabeth·Noah”, “Kafni Noah”.]

[Find and interrupt the key ritual.]

[Do not reveal your identity.]

### **The Righteous Player(s) Chapter 265**

Annan's first reaction was... Luckily, I have Vasily on my side.

There were four buffs imposed on Annan, all of which were from decisions concluded during the previous discussion with Vasily; they were confident these buffs would work in the nightmare.

Mr. Ray was the nemesis of all nightmares. As long as there was power to fuel the battle against nightmares, He could interfere with almost all rituals.

In fact, the morning light that forced all nightmares to end at 6 a.m. every day came from Mr. Ray's power. He would interrupt the nightmares for everyone at the same time every day, no matter if the person was His believer or not.

The only exception would be when the target was the priest of other deities. The reason was to avoid interfering with the priests from their work in purifying nightmares.

Silver Sire and Old Grandmother were both upright deities to whom Annan was confident that he could borrow their power from. As for Mysterious Lady, She should be willing to accept the ritual as long as it was a complex and grand ritual with the details appropriately met.

Mysterious Lady cared for all those proficient in rituals, just like how teachers loved their intelligent students.

Without these four buffs, the difficulty of this nightmare would undoubtedly be even more demanding.

In actual history, Annan, Dmitri, Princess Royal Elizabeth, and Kafni all survived. Even the Old Merlin, who was by Annan's side, lived on for a few more months. Aside from the fact that the trade agreement was still not reached, there was no war between the two countries.

Annan remembered clearly that the exact time of the death of Master Michelangelo was November 30, 1498.

The date on which the nightmare existed was August 8, 1498.

That means that this nightmare was three months before the “Nightmare: White Tower” timeline. Even the attendant next to Annan wasn't dead because Merlin Manning died three months later in the White Tower Ritual.

What the hell?

In the original history, who resolved this incident?

It can't be the nine-year-old Annan, can it?

This is not right because I'm just a kid.jpg

While Annan was distracted with his thoughts, a maid led him through the side hall and brought him to the palace's garden. As the Winter Heart's 'Right Index Finger' predecessor, Merlin Manning was like a ghost, silently following behind Annan and protecting his safety.

Under the protection of Old Merlin, the watchful eye of the best Silver Rank Falteration Wizard in the world, Annan didn't even know when he was “free to move around”.

Do I have to fool Merlin away first?

But that doesn't work either.

Because Annan remembers it well...

Prince Albert's wife and her cousin Denton were the Rotten Man believers, and her cousin was a powerful “Dream Stealer”.

A Gold Rank Soul Snatch Wizard who could directly modify other people's memories, feelings, and preferences in dreams!

He was now disguised as Silver Rank, lurking beside Prince Albert.



If Annan left Merlin's sight, he could be abducted.

Although Merlin was only at Silver Rank, he was a "Winter's Hand". After experiencing the personal blessing administered by the Austere-Winter's Grand Duke, his feelings and speech functions were sealed by the ritual. This might be another use from the [Winter Heart] talent.

The Winter's Hand, whose feelings were sealed, could perfectly restrain the Soul Snatch wizards. Even if the opponent were at Gold Rank, he would never dare to appear in front of Merlin.

Thinking of this, Annan noticed another thing.

Annan, in this period, shouldn't have reversed the [Winter Heart] yet. In other words, he should now be in a state of "not being able to feel positive emotions".

Annan needed to adjust his acting skills a bit.

I have to appear a little sad in front of acquaintances, so at least I won't reveal any flaws.

Annan's side mission required him to "not reveal his identity".

Unfortunately, this condition seemed quite vague. Annan wasn't sure whether it was about "avoiding being discovered to be the person ruining the ritual" or "he can't reveal that what's happening is just someone's nightmare".

In short, as long as he was cautious, things shouldn't go wrong.

The top priority was the "Great Hunt Ritual".

Annan didn't even know what this ritual was, where it was located, let alone how to interrupt it. This was the primary issue he needed to tackle.

Even though the main mission didn't mention any details, Annan instinctively knew that there was a time limit in his heart.

After all, Annan and Dmitri couldn't stay here forever. They had to return to Austere-Winter. It was just that Annan didn't know anything about this ritual at the moment and didn't even know how much time was left for him.

Based on the typicality of the previous nightmare, Annan guessed that this ritual might be on the verge of starting.

There was not much time left for Annan!

After the maid led Annan through the side hall, he was stunned for a moment by the miracle in front of him.

It was a gorgeous sea of silver and purple flowers.

The flowers were unique. They had the appearance of roses, but their petals were translucent pure white. Their branches and leaves were in the color of violet. The sea of white and purple swayed under the wind, reflecting the splendor of summer noon.

In the garden, there were cobblestone paths. The paths in the garden extended in all directions, leading to three pavilions of varying sizes.

“This is the place, Your Highness Annan. This is the garden blessed by the Silver Sire, where your spirit will slowly recover at this place.”

The maid spoke softly, “Please head further in. I have prepared iced juice for you in the pavilion. If you need anything else, please let me know. I will prepare it for you.”

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Annan would have paid attention to the ice-cold juice — his first reaction should be trying it out first after seeing something delicious.

But his attention was captured by something else.

Amidst the sea of flowers, a girl wearing a black dress made of the same material as Princess Royal Elizabeth's was sitting quietly in the flower field. Her black curly hair draped to her shoulders, and her features were delicate and lovely.

She took off her black high-heeled shoes and placed them neatly beside the path; she was stepping on the ground with her bare feet.

There was a small drawing board on her knees and crayons in her hands. She looked up at the sky, seemingly preoccupied with her thoughts.

Her crimson pupils shone with a colored glaze in the summer sun.

Her appearance resembled a lifeless puppet.

Isn't that Kafni? Annan quickly recognized the girl who was quite close to her.

A thought suddenly popped into his mind.

Could it be that Annan and Kafni got acquainted at this time?

The maid noticed that Annan halted his footsteps, and she followed Annan's gaze.

She was immediately surprised.

Why is Her Royal Highness Kafni here?

“Who is she?” Annan asked in a cold voice.

Noticing that Annan was curious, Old Merlin, who followed Annan, raised his head and looked at the maid silently.

What he meant was simple: Speak up.

The maid's smile froze slightly, and then she explained to Annan with a soft expression, “This is Her Royal Highness Kafni... the daughter of His Highness Albert.”

“Can I play with her?” Annan asked politely.

The maid gave a bitter smile, "Of course, you can, Your Highness Annan. It's just Her Highness Kafni is a little shy."

Out of courtesy, she swallowed "eccentric" down her throat.

Annan gently broke free from the maid's hand. Apparently, the maid allowed him to do so. Then, he walked over to Kafni, who was sitting in the flower field while looking up at the sun.

"Looking directly at the sun is bad for your eyesight." Annan walked over and adjusted his tone slightly.

In the end, he said sternly like how a mature child would speak, "It will hurt the eyes."

"It won't." Kafni's tone was dreamy. She spoke softly, "Mr. Ray has a good temper..."

At this moment, Annan noticed the drawing board in her hand.

It seemed to be the sea of silver-purple flowers in front of them.

But unlike what Annan saw...

The crayon Kafni used was in red.

The painting was like blood and fire, a color like the setting sun.

Could the clue lie here in Kafni?

It suddenly occurred to Annan that Kafni seemed to have some kind of gift in supernatural vision... a glimpse into fate.

He asked softly, "Are you painting?"

At this time, Kafni turned her attention to Annan. She was silent for a while, then asked coldly, "Who are you?"

"You have winter colors on you, but it's summer right now."

"My heart is like the ice," said Annan seriously. It was the maxim of the Austere-Winter family, and it wasn't surprising that Annan knew that.

He reached out to Kafni and said in a friendly manner, "My name is Annan Austere-Winter. My last name emphasizes the winter. What about you? What's your name?"

Kafni looked suspiciously at Annan, who had a calm face.

She always suspected that Annan would suddenly pull her hand back and slap her with a giggle after putting her hand on his. Her siblings would play this kind of boring game.

But, she looked at Annan's outstretched hand. Then, she looked at the smiling maid in front of the pavilion and the somewhat terrifying thin old man staring at her from a distance, vaguely aware of something.

It didn't take long before she tentatively reached out her hand and put it suspiciously in Annan's palm.

It wasn't the "warm palms" mentioned in the story. Annan didn't have any "warm smiles" either. Instead, his fingertips gave off a shivering low temperature.

She didn't know why, but she vaguely felt some inexplicable peace of mind.

"Kafni." She whispered, "Kafni Noah... Kafni means running fingers through hair.

"May I call you Anna?"

"It's Annan." Annan corrected Kafni and took her hand.

He said solemnly, "Then we've become friends, Kafni."

### **The Righteous Player(s) Chapter 266**

Kafni was stunned when Annan held her hand. After that, her body became a little stiff.

Kafni's eyes widened slightly. Her pupils were clear as red gems, filled with confusion and dismay.

Have Kafni's hands always been this soft? This was the first thought that popped into Annan's mind.

Kafni held his hand many times. The only thought he had was that her grips were firm, contrasting her appearance.

Although she didn't have any calluses and her skin was unusually fair, Annan couldn't break free whenever she held his hand.

Yet today, Kafni's palms were so soft and tender.

Is Kafni not a Transcended yet? Annan was dumbfounded.

This would mean that...

Kafni advanced from an ordinary person to Transcended at Silver Rank in just four or five years?

She didn't even have a basic profession right now...

Isn't her leveling speed a little too scary?

But Annan suddenly noticed something.

There were apparent calluses on young Annan's palm— these must be the traces of sword practices.

That's right.

The young Annan who was using the Frost Sword for the first time appeared in his mind; he was indeed about this age.

Has Annan already started practicing Frost Sword now?

"Now that we have held hands, we are friends." Then, Annan said in a childish but serious voice, "If someone bullies you, I will help you beat him up."

Annan had reconsidered his tone several times before speaking. It wasn't easy to decide how he should say it.

This should be what a nine-year-old boy should say... right?

Annan suddenly felt that he should change his name.

He should not be called Annan in his current situation, but Edogawa Conan [1] instead.

Annan was clear about it in his heart.

The clue was with Kafni... To save time, he needed to conquer Kafni with the highest efficiency. Of course, he could not expect Kafni to “join his team” right away, but he had to persuade Kafni willing to “provide information” at least.

He suddenly grabbed Kafni's hand even tighter.

But he adjusted his grip well so it wasn't hurting her—This way, it wouldn't raise her attention.

At this time, if Kafni threw away Annan's hand or pushed Annan away because of nervousness or whatever, the atmosphere between them would immediately become cold and distant.

If Annan tried to grab Kafni's hand again, she would firmly reject him.

This was because the Young Kafni could not decide if she wanted to keep her distance or maintain the current state now that she also felt some positive emotions from Annan.

If she tried to push Annan away or escape his hand but failed, she would subconsciously think that she indeed longed for a friend like him... But if she succeeded in rejecting Annan just once, she would immediately regain clarity and remain calm and vigilant.

But Annan didn't want to grab Kafni with brute force—

After all, Kafni's identity was a noble like him. As a guest, he shouldn't be too crude... The maids were watching.

However, in Annan's experience, he didn't need to apply brute force at all.

He just squatted down while still holding her hand, changing the subject naturally, “What are you painting?”

“Is it a flower field?” Again, Annan intentionally took the lead in the conversation.

The Kafni at this age was much easier to fool than the Kafni five years later.

Annan quickly diverted her attention.

It could also be because she had not been able to find anyone who could appreciate her paintings lately. Kafni replied softly with some nervousness and uneasiness, “Yes... these are the flowers.”

She was worried if this slightly shorter boy would tease her paintings for being “weird and scary”.

It was rare for her to encounter someone willing to chat with her instead of being afraid of her.

Kafni was born with the ability to read people's intentions and discern the truth and lies.

She knew... This adorable blue-eyed boy wanted to be friends with her from the bottom of his heart!

Kafni didn't want to lose such a rare true friend.

Fortunately, Annan indeed didn't laugh at her. Instead, he just nodded seriously, "It's well-drawn.

"You might become a great painter in the future, Kafni."

—This was not Annan's flattery.

Annan indeed knew that Kafni's painting skills would be superb in the future. She could already replicate Amos's paintings at the tender age of 14. She could also create bizarre "inspirational paintings" with a mystical sense of beauty.

As for the blood-red sea of flowers at the tip of her pen now... Although this crayon drawing was still rough to the touch, it already had some of that vibe.

Kafni also looked back at Annan in amazement.

She saw that Annan was sincere with his compliment!

But even Kafni felt that her paintings were not that great.

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"What's wrong?" Annan backtracked in confusion.

Did I say something wrong?

Why does she suddenly seem so shocked and confused?

Annan didn't realize yet that Kafni's supernatural vision could see through lies and people's intentions.

This was 14 years old Kafni, and she had not opened up about her abilities to Annan.

"...No, nothing." Kafni suddenly felt her cheeks getting hot.

She turned her gaze away to look at the painting.

She initiated an explanation with her signature, soft, drawling voice, "Because I saw... the sky turned red. It was a color like fire... there were red vines that crawled from the ground to the sky, turning the entire sky red."

Kafni gasped for a breath after making such a lengthy statement in one breath.

Annan frowned slightly and thought about this.

...Red vines... crawled to the sky...?

What's this...

Kafni was too young to provide a clear description. But she had a supernatural vision... she must have seen something we could not.

While Annan was staring at the painting in deep thought, Kafni was spying on him.

Anna... seems to like my paintings? Kafni felt a little touched.

She still had not realized that her left hand and Annan's right hand had been held together all this while, but her dad witnessed it.

His Royal Highness Albert had just come out of the side hall hurriedly and was looking in this direction. He was probably looking for Kafni.

But he saw the maid that followed alongside his royal sister pressing a finger on her lips as she smiled, signaling for him to be quiet.

It was only then that Albert understood.

Looking from a distance, he did not see Annan at first glance. After all, Annan was wearing an elegant pure white robe that was almost camouflaged within this silvery purple sea of flowers.

But after he located Annan and Kafni, his gaze became a little conflicted.

As far as he knew, Annan went to the garden just a few minutes ago.

He realized that his daughter, Kafni, was still in the garden. She was notoriously eccentric, cold, distant, and inarticulate. There was a possibility she might bump into Annan.

That was why Albert rushed over hurriedly, intending to resolve any conflict.

Annan had only departed 5 minutes ahead of Albert. Plus, he definitely couldn't walk as fast as Albert because of his young age. So, Annan had probably been here for less than 3 minutes.

But how were they able to get so intimate with one another in such a short period?

They were even holding hands...

It has not even been 3 minutes!

Looking at the rare excitement on Kafni's face and her eyes that seemed to be shining brightly, Albert even felt a little jealous. But, on the other hand, he also couldn't bear to interrupt Kafni's rare happiness.

On the contrary, Annan didn't notice that Kafni was staring at him.

He was simply thinking deeply about Kafni's words.

Red vines...

Red sky...

Suddenly, Annan vaguely grasped some clues.

He leaned his head over and whispered into Kafni's ear— It didn't seem like something Annan could ask, hence he had to be as quiet as possible, “How many vines did you see, and where? Did they form some sort of pattern?”

Kafni blushed a little when Annan leaned in so closely.

She leaned back slightly to create some distance in a panic.

She quickly calmed down afterward and also leaned over to whisper in Annan's ear, "There were six... One here, and the other five... Do you want to see it? I'll take you there."

As expected. Annan squinted slightly.

Is it... a hexagram?

The number six symbolized the "War" number, and the month under the protection of the war deity Red Knight was the month of June. Therefore, if the purpose of this ritual was to cause war, it made sense that "six" was used as the core structure of the ritual.

From the ground to the sky...

Does this mean that the entire palace is a ritual ground?

Is it underground?

Annan put aside his inner speculations temporarily and nodded thoughtfully to Kafni, "Okay, take me there."

Kafni had zero hesitation.

She simply put on her boots, brought along her drawing board, and was about to leave with Annan. Only then did she realize that they had been holding hands for so long.

She pursed her lips and actively reached her hand out to Annan.

"Come on, Anna." She said seriously, "I'll take you there."

"...It's Annan." Annan corrected exasperatedly.

### **The Righteous Player(s) Chapter 267**

"...Yes, Your Royal Highness. But about the Freezing Water Port's trading of goods..." Dmitri stopped abruptly halfway through speaking.

The young man with a straight back and a stern expression frowned slightly, looking towards the forlorn old man with a thin body.

"Where's Annan?" Dmitri asked nonchalantly as he saw Old Merlin returning alone.

His deep ice-blue pupils were like the frozen sea, seemingly without emotion.

Elizabeth knew that this was the Austere-Winter lineage's talent... the Winter Heart.

This was proof that the Cold-Blooded Lady's blood was flowing within them.

The Austere-Winter Dukedom was a country in which the climate alternated between winter and harvest years. Just like the Underground Federation, its surrounding ecology would transform automatically on a large scale with just the existence of the Old Grandmother.

Old Grandmother was an upright deity with two forms.



When She was awake, She was a three-meter-tall beauty with frosty skin and blue eyes. The Old Grandmother in this form was the deity of tradition—Regardless if it was giving birth to Austere-Winter blood, establishing the Austere-Winter Dukedom, educating her young grandchildren, helping the current Grand Duke handle government affairs, hosting domestic ceremonies, events, or even rituals for descendants' marriage, birth, funeral, and burial, it would all be done when She was in this form.

She was just like an immortal grandmother... She had an absolute voice in the family and was active in many affairs. When the Old Grandmother was awake, everyone would have great respect for the Austere-Winter family because they had an upright deity ancestor who was protective, strong, and capable behind them.

This was why She was affectionately called “Old Grandmother”. The habit of loving and caring for children and grandchildren was not limited to Her own bloodline... She also often gave gifts to obedient and lovely children, and enjoyed mediating other people's familial conflicts. The Austerians called this period the “harvest year”.

However, because of Old Grandmother's characteristics before becoming a deity, She had a habit of randomly falling into a “Wymrest” for an unknown period of time.

At that time, She would turn into a giant dragon with a height of 100 meters when She was lying down.

That was more than thirty stories high.

At this time, She was the deity of frost.

The breath She exhaled would stir up a never-ending blizzard. This blizzard could act as a barrier to protect Austere-Winter Dukedom from the Gray Mists and a shield against foreign invaders when Old Grandmother had fallen into Wymrest.

But this blizzard would also make the Austere-Winter Dukedom's already cold temperatures plummet even lower. Some newborns and old people would freeze to death in this period, wild crops and weak ordinary beasts would not survive. Even trees would fall into “hibernation” that could last for more than ten years.

Even those Transcended who died in this blizzard would not create nightmares— because even the curse would be frozen and become part of the blizzard. Austerians called this part of the cycle the “winter year.”

Inside large cities, there could be temperature-regulating barriers arranged by wizards, greenhouse crops facilities, and also crops imported from other countries through underground passages. In the villages, only the powerful hunters and warriors could go out against the blizzard. Similarly, only the Frost Beasts could survive within the blizzard and go hunting along with villagers in forests, snowfields, and the sea.

These Frost Beasts were monsters that had experienced physical transformations after extended periods of being immersed in a blizzard full of curses. They relied on curses to eat, so when humans were trapped in their towns during the blizzard, they could instead multiply—once the numbers reached a certain level, they would attack human settlements.

But those of the Austere-Winter blood could tame and train these Frost Beasts during winter. This was also the fundamental reason why the Austere-Winter family could not be replaced.

Sure enough, they were also believers of Old Grandmother, and also Her descendants.

After all, the beasts were created when Old Grandmother was in dragon form during Wymrest.

This was also why the Austere-Winter family, known as the “Wolf King”, used the white wolf as the family emblem. The Frost Beast type greatest in number was the gregarious species that had the appearance of a wolf.

The point to be made was that Frost Beasts did not attack humans because they craved food... They were a special species similar to elementals and did not need to eat meat.

They simply craved “love”.

But it wasn't just love.

Hope, sympathy, loyalty, joy... Frost Beasts had the ability to devour positive emotions, as they themselves did not possess any emotion, nor much wisdom.

So they would follow their instincts, track humans' scents, attack humans, and devour their emotions— they would not show mercy to humans that provided them food.

Yet, after encountering an attack, the humans often did not have many positive emotions... This would further irritate the frost beast, and they would search for the next human settlement.

Only other Frost Beasts, the “Winter's Hand” who did not possess any positive emotions, and humans with the talent of Winter Heart would not be attacked by the frost beasts. Based on the Frost Beasts' understanding, humans of the Austere-Winter family were the human form of a similar species and were ranked above them. Therefore, they would instead devote loyalty to these “similars” they see.

They would then be caught and taken into the army. The domesticated Frost Beasts could form a symbiotic comrade-in-arms relationship with the warriors— they were taught to reserve their bite and would not directly chew their partners to death.

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The Winter Heart was not just a talent used to tame frost beasts.

It allowed the possessor to have a sense of immortality.

Once the damage they received exceeded a certain limit, the damage would be transmitted to the Old Grandmother to bear it on their behalf; if She was awake, She could come over immediately. As for when She was sleeping, She would be able to gradually wake up once She had borne enough.

Only the frost element could be used to kill the Austere-Winter family. This was the “family law” that Old Grandmother reserved for Herself— after all, She was the deity of tradition.

As everyone knew, all Gold Rank Transcended that had awakened frost elements were born from Austere-Winter Dukedom.

Therefore, it was almost impossible to kill the people of the Austere-Winter family.

The only way was to tie up their limbs and throw them into the sea or into the basement, and wait for them to kill themselves when they could no longer bear it.

Besides that, the Winter Heart could also enable the possessor to have a cold and indifferent heart.

From birth, the Austere-Winter family had to endure the “eternal training” to never be happy. This was to keep them from indulging in the desire for power, to always remain clear-headed, and to always act for the people.

Regardless of what they did, they would not obtain happiness. So for them, only the “rules” and “traditions” that they learned from childhood were worth noting... They were the king of cold-blooded who had only acted for others since birth.

This was unquestionably cruel.

But for the Austere-Winter Dukedom that would randomly fall into winter year, only a king who was strict, self-disciplined, impartial, and able to endure people's resentment, cursing, and misunderstandings could stably maintain the crumbling public order.

Old Grandmother's thought process was simple.

If people needed such sacrifices— then the sacrifices should be made by Her own children.

This might be unfair to Her own children... but this was a “tradition”.

While the Old Grandmother was extremely protective, She also had extremely high expectations towards Her own children. Each generation of the Austere-Winter's Grand Duke... even the heirs of Austere-Winter's Grand Duke, were the best rulers of all nations under such training.

They would not get lazy from the pursuit of lighthearted pleasure, nor would they get arrogant because of the pleasure of superiority. They would not be swayed by the compliments of their ministers or envoys, and they would not suffer the temptation of beauty. For them, reproduction was just “duty” rather than “happiness”.

Such rulers... Why would anyone go to war with such a terrifying and desolate country?

Elizabeth's thought process was simple and pure.

The reason she tried her best to defuse the aftermath of the war brought by her father was that she was afraid.

She didn't want to go head-to-head with such an enemy.

This was also the main reason why Princess Royal was willing to humble herself and initiated to welcome Grand Duke Ivan's eldest son in person.

She didn't want her stupid siblings to screw things up.

They simply didn't understand the horrors of the Austere-Winter family.

“...What?” Dmitri was stunned for a while after exchanging whispers with Old Merlin.

He shook his head and murmured in a low voice, "Annan actually..."

"What's the matter, Your Highness?" Elizabeth asked casually as her heart tightened.

Dmitri turned around.

She seemed to have vaguely seen a little confusion in Dmitri's emotionless ice-blue pupils.

"Annan seems to be having a good time with a young lady named Kafni." Dmitri shook his head and replied calmly, "Your Royal Highness, I apologize for my brother. He has overstepped."

Hearing this, Elizabeth had a wild idea. "...No, it's fine, Your Highness Dmitri."

She let out a sweet smile and said gently, "How about, let's talk about... His Highness Annan. What do you think?"

### **The Righteous Player(s) Chapter 268**

On the other side, Annan and Kafni had already circled the palace once.

Only Elizabeth's personal maid was following behind them. Old Merlin had already rushed back when they were near the main hall to notify Dmitri of the big news quickly.

That's right. For them, this was indeed big news.

Annan's character was considered the most shy and timid among this generation's Austere-Winter clan... He could also be described as the most reclusive.

Old Merlin had never seen Annan take the initiative to strike up a conversation with others, let alone whisking the royalty's daughter away right under their eyes at the first meeting.

Old Merlin could also see that Kafni was not an ordinary person — she had the talent to be a wizard or a priest.

That sharp perception of a Transcended could perceive the essence of deities within mortal beings. For Transcendeds, it was indeed a great gift. She could always be at the forefront of the path of Transcended.

This was because of her ability to easily identify the key and essence within rituals and even curses.

But, for a child who had yet to set foot on the path of Transcended... That sort of endless hallucination would only bring trouble to her life.

Could it be that such an odd child could ironically find common ground with His Highness Annan?

Old Merlin knew very well.

Whatever the cause or ultimate response, they were not within his power to deal with.

He had to tell His Royal Highness Dmitri to have him decide.

Luckily, Her Royal Highness Maria was studying abroad and did not come along... Old Merlin sighed silently.

He glanced at the door.

Annan and Kafni were there, whispering to one another in an empty corner.

But both of them were highly conspicuous.

They would become the center of attention even while staying there.

However, those qualified to attend the king's birthday party in person were not simple-minded individuals.

Even if they saw Annan and Kafni together, they would pretend not to see it.

Although they had never met Annan, his clothes were iconic. It was made from the finest Frost Beast fur that could remain dry and cool even in the hot summer. However, if an ordinary person were to wear it, they would fall sick from hypothermia.

That temperature was like having ice cubes stuffed in the interlayer of a down jacket. Only members of the Austere-Winter family could withstand it.

On the other hand, Kafni's eccentric reputation had long circulated within the Noah Kingdom's upper-class society.

This crazy little girl was deemed to walk the path of Transcended sooner or later. Hence, parents had warned children of her age to stay away from her and maintain sufficient distance and respect.

The reason was also straightforward.

If Kafni were to die later, all of what she had been through would possibly manifest into a nightmare. If someone were to enter that nightmare with ill intentions, they could learn the secrets of those close to her from it.

Those who had greater secrets would want to keep their distance further away from whoever might embark on the path to Transcended.

Nobles and officials expressed their delight in seeing the good relationship between Kafni and Annan.

Austere-Winter's Grand Duke was too strict in their operations.

If Kafni could marry into the Austere-Winters and befriend them... That would be the best case. Austerians were known for their loyalty, competence, and unity. Many well-known mercenaries and guilds were formed or organized by Austerians.

For them, Austere-Winter's young workforce was even more so an excellent one.

Some young people would head to neighboring countries to escape the winter years, but they would still return when it was the harvest years.

In other words, they were strong and hard-working. Long-term consumption of the flesh of Frost Beasts made the strength and constitution of Austerian young adults much greater than those of other countries. An Austere-Winter boatman could carry three times as many goods in a day compared to a Noah boatman of the same age. Such a level of labor could not even make them fall sick from fatigue.

After all, they didn't have to withstand the never-ending blizzard while working. They were, in fact, overzealous in their work. This could also make them highly active, excited, even aggressive.

The flesh, blood, and fur of the Frost Beasts were also Austere-Winter specialties. The blood of the Frost Beasts was even a highly demanded material for Alteration Wizards, primarily as one of the main components to create a reliable adhesive.

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This powerful adhesive was necessary for building tall stone buildings, bridges, and city walls. However, it could also be altered into a weak glue that could be used to build roads after it was diluted.

Plus, it was not limited to the Noah Kingdom's own needs in building bridges, roads, and houses. There was an even greater demand for these two adhesives in the Papal Kingdom. These adhesives were also one of Noah Kingdom's main exports.

A trade partnership with Austere-Winter Dukedom represented a lot of profits to be made.

In fact, not many people were willing to go to war at all.

This was also why the war between the two countries has never completely subsided, but constantly waged in continuous cycles instead.

The current king wanted to unify the five kingdoms and rebuild the Great Barrier. This was the slogan he had propagated since a young age. Many nobles supported him as they urgently needed a protracted war to get more benefits.

But when people realized that His Majesty the King was serious — he genuinely wanted to unify the five countries. He was not making empty promises, and people became reluctant to continue supporting him.

The five countries were originally one. Aside from the Underground Federation's relative independence, no other country was separable from one another. All countries were also inseparable from the Underground Federation, mainly from the subways they built and managed.

It was the resistance from the Noah Kingdom internally that had been preventing the war from developing.

After the Noah Kingdom's upper nobility realized that Kafni had managed to land His Highness Annan, they began to figure out ways to sell Kafni over to Austere-Winter reasonably.

—Kafni had no friends anyway.

Her mother was also similarly “traded” to her father, Albert.

Kafni's father, His Royal Highness Prince Albert, would probably be the only one who would express concern for this matter.

But everyone knew that Albert was least likely to inherit the throne.

He doesn't fight for the throne, he doesn't offend anyone, nor does he want any power— he was simply passing through his days.

While it ensured his safety, it also didn't give him much authority.

But what they didn't know was that Annan and Kafni were discussing some terrifying topics.

"It is indeed a hexagram..." Annan drew the route in his mind.

To prevent alerting the enemy, he only walked around the palace with Kafni following the position she described and determined the position by simply looking around. This was to prevent them from being watched.

Kafni also confirmed this possibility with Annan, "Anna, someone was staring at us when we were near the kitchen earlier... The red-haired man, right at the door."

She leaned into Annan's ear and whispered in her signature fluttering, dreamy voice, "They want to kill us.

"They want to kill both of us... I can read their minds."

Annan didn't bother to correct Kafni's increasingly eccentric way of addressing himself.

His heart simply wavered. He also leaned in and whispered into Kafni's ear, "How many of them are there? How can they see us?"

The situation seemed to be getting serious.

Annan could no longer bother to continue with his child act.

Fortunately, Kafni was also not an ordinary person— she didn't mind Annan's somewhat strange inquiry.

She said indistinctly, "We all have a flesh scent that wolves can smell. Everyone has it... but you don't.

"So, they can't see you." Kafni stared at Annan with her clear, almost transparent pupils.

She let out a childish voice and asked intently, "Can you... can you save me?"

...It is a blessing from the Mysterious Lady. Annan realized quickly.

It seemed that a strange ritual had unknowingly locked onto the people in this building, but the function was not accurate. Otherwise, they would have noticed something was off with Annan when they saw Annan and Kafni together.

Does that mean I would have to act alone after this?

But how could I get away from the maid and Merlin's watch?

"Of course, I can. You may not believe it, but I'm very strong... I can protect everyone." Annan paused abruptly. The corners of his mouth pursed slightly as he quickly suppressed his habitual confident smile.

Annan stared at Kafni. He gradually got rid of his disguise and replied without much thought, "Plus, this is what I'm here for."

### **The Righteous Player(s) Chapter 269**

Old Merlin appeared out of nowhere as Annan and Kafni were whispering in the corner of the main hall.

“Your Highness Annan.” Old Merlin whispered to Annan without looking at Kafni, “Your Royal Highness Dmitri is looking for you.”

His scraggy face showed no emotion.

His silent and indifferent aura were very similar to Dmitri's.

Although they were similarly expressionless, there was a massive difference in their appearance and dressing. Dmitri gave off a formidable and majestic aura, whereas Merlin's deeply sunken cheeks only made him seem like a horrifying beast.

In the Noah Kingdom, only a “soft warrant” would generally be imposed against Transcendeds who had broken the law.

It was to put the Transcendeds' name on the wanted list and notify the officials but never to pursue them in brute force. However, the wanted person would be just like any other wanted criminal. They were not allowed to cross borders, borrow money, form their own families, nor enjoy the protection of the law.

They restricted these Transcendeds' scope of activities by depriving those who had broken the law of their legal rights, providing a better-than-nothing form of punishment. Transcended troops would be dispatched for the hunt only when they had committed a serious crime.

In fact, this was a kind of compromise and tacit understanding— as long as you had the self-awareness of an undesirable, kept a low profile, and didn't mess around, the kingdom would take it as if you and your crimes did not exist.

After all, the threat that would come from having a Transcended fight out of desperation was too significant. Plus, killing them would only leave a new Nightmare.

But it was different at Austere-Winter, especially during the winter years and the turbulent political environment — when the Austere-Winter's Grand Duke was most anxious.

Also, the blizzard would have kept the detrimental effects of Transcendeds' deaths to its minimum. Moreover, the population density of Austere-Winter Dukedom during the winter years was much smaller than that of Noah Kingdom.

So they wouldn't make any compromises.

The special operations unit responsible for chasing down Transcendeds was the Winter's Hand.

Even if the Transcendeds kidnapped ordinary people as hostages, the Winter's Hand would never compromise in any way. Even if the Transcendeds kidnapped nobles or even people of the Austere-Winter family, they would completely ignore the safety of the hostages and kill the Transcendeds mercilessly.

The organization had relied on this ruthless and stringent mode of conduct of absolutely no exceptions nor negotiations to preserve the stability of the Austere-Winter Dukedom.

According to Annan's knowledge, the current Austere-Winter's Grand Duke... Annan's father, Ivan Austere-Winter, had been kidnapped once when he was only a teenager.



It was a Transcended group of seven. There were four Silver, one Gold, one Bronze, and even a ritualist.

They kidnapped Ivan and his younger brother— of course, they couldn't be asking for money.

Their purpose was to force Urie Austere-Winter, then Austere-Winter's Grand Duke, to release a political prisoner.

The information delivered by Salvatore was vague; hence Annan was unable to find out the specific history and name of that political prisoner. It was only known that he was also an Austerian, even a nobleman who was later locked up as a political prisoner.

But even with his two sons kidnapped... Grand Duke Urie didn't compromise with the kidnappers.

Grand Duke Urie sent troops to surround the target and negotiated for two days and three nights. When the kidnapper's patience was finally about to run out... The Winter's Hand troop broke in and attacked at lightning speed, killing six and taking one prisoner.

In this not-quite-successful rescue, Ivan's younger brother unfortunately died.

—And the person in charge of this operation was Merlin.

But not only was he not held accountable for his failure to rescue the hostage, but he was instead credited for his decisive actions, successfully capturing one of the kidnappers and uncovering their conspiracy through interrogation.

According to Annan's understanding in the Nightmare: White Tower, Merlin should have retired with a leg injury five years ago. In the beginning, Annan thought that Merlin was mute. Only until the end of White Tower did Annan see that Merlin had a tongue.

A regular Winter's Hand would have their tongues cut off when they retire. The intelligence they knew was similar to occult knowledge, encrypted, and couldn't be written down. They could only be passed on verbally for a limited number of times.

The best way to deal with it was by cutting tongues off.

But by the looks of it, Merlin must have gotten some special privilege and retained his ability to speak.

He had even gained the trust of Grand Duke Ivan to protect Annan and Dmitri on their trip to the Noah Kingdom.

Did Grand Duke Ivan have no feelings for his brother?

Regarding Dmitri's case, this was unlikely.

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Annan speculated that this was because Grand Duke Ivan trusted Merlin greatly.

Why exactly would a Silver Rank Falteration Wizard be so trusted by the Grand Duke?

It wasn't that the Austere-Winter Dukedom did not have any Gold Rank talent, they had several.

But Merlin was the highest-ranking Transcended in this escort team that followed Dmitri's group to Noah by train.

It was a pity that Annan didn't see Merlin's full strength in the White Tower.

He decrypted the dungeon too quickly.

Annan still didn't even know what Merlin's curses were.

Presumably, Dmitri and the original Annan should know something.

Annan vaguely realized that if he could not successfully conquer this nightmare with his power alone, he would have to find some way to borrow Merlin's strength.

But how could he get Merlin's assistance without having to reveal his identity? And how much strength did Merlin roughly have?

Many thoughts flashed through Annan's mind.

He quickly figured out a solution.

He stood up and nodded silently.

Annan gave Kafni a look, signaling her to stay here.

Kafni looked at Annan seriously and signaled that she understood.

She knew what Annan was going to do this time—

Three minutes ago, Annan said to Kafni, "I need to go to those six places. But I can't escape Merlin's tailgating... I need your help."

"...?" Kafni tilted her head silently.

She didn't know exactly what kind of help Annan needed.

Thus, Annan explained his plan to Kafni.

He needed Kafni to take him into a private room with a secret passage. Annan would then leave from the other side through the secret passage. During this time, Kafni had to pretend that Annan was still in the room until Annan came back.

It was easy to find a private room like that.

Kafni was ultimately a princess.

Her own room met all of the above requirements.

Annan was a little worried if Kafni, as a child, would understand his plans.

Another concern was... as a stranger of the opposite sex she had just met— would Kafni be willing to bring Annan into her room?

But Kafni finally agreed after hesitating for a while.

Then the rest of the question was left for Annan.

Annan got up, tidied his clothes, and followed Old Merlin to Dmitri.

He wanted to request a leave of absence from his brother, Dmitri.

To let him know... he was going to a more private place with Kafni; and to convince him that he did not need Merlin's accompaniment.

...Things are getting complicated.

### **The Righteous Player(s) C270– Information Obtained From the Nightmare**

Chapter 270: Information Obtained From the Nightmare

“...you want to go play with Kafni?” Dmitri stared at Annan and repeated slowly.

He frowned his eyebrows even more.

He subconsciously pressed his right index and middle finger against his chin as he was in deep thought.

But there were still no hints of emotion in those pupils that had always been calm and indifferent.

Although Annan only had shoulder-length hair, he could easily be mistaken for an elegant maiden; Dmitri had long hair up till his waistline, yet he would never be mistaken for a woman.

It wasn't just because of his deep voice.

It was more so his aura that seemed to carry a heavy weight.

“...Yes.” Annan grimaced in embarrassment and replied softly.

For some reason, the Dmitri before him seemed to overlap with the Ivan Austere-Winter in Annan's memory, who trained him in the Frost Sword techniques.

...Is it because the eldest brothers are like fathers?

To be stared at by Dmitri's domineering gaze, even Annan himself worried that he would not be granted his leave at that moment.

Even so, Dmitri calmly replied after a few seconds, “Okay.”

For some reason, he readily agreed to Annan's request.

Dmitri then turned to Princess Elizabeth beside him and said politely in a soft voice, “My brother has caused you trouble.”

“No such thing... Little Kafni is usually a withdrawn child. She rarely has a friend, and I am very happy for her.” Princess Elizabeth smiled beautifully.

Her face seemed to be shining. It was hard to tell her specific age. But in her slightly squinted eyes, there was a sense of cunning that wasn't displeasing.

She smiled at Annan and said, “You have a good brother, Your Highness Annan.”

“...Thank you, Your Highness.” Annan's reaction was a little awkward. Finally, he bowed at Princess Elizabeth and let out a soft, polite voice.

The aura of his voice was a little weak, but it was as clear as a flame in the cold wind.

Seeing his demeanor, Dmitri suddenly said something out of the blue, “Annan, remember why you're here.”

...I, why am I here? This made Annan a little confused.

But luckily, he quickly understood it.

At this time, Dmitri had already lost his fertility. In other words, the reason it was Annan instead of Maria who followed Dmitri to Noah was probably that Annan was the actual envoy that posed as the “Heir of the Dukedom”.

In other words, it was not “Annan who followed Dmitri”, but “Dimitri who followed Annan” here instead.

However, Annan was too young.

That was why Dmitri was asked to assist Annan in conducting a series of negotiations.

If so, what was Annan's primary purpose for coming here?

—The answer was clear as the skies.

He was here to get more experience.

It could also be that Annan was here to build confidence.

As the eldest brother, Dmitri acted solidly and appropriately. This was probably the main reason why Annan's character was relatively weak. Hence, although Annan made a somewhat outrageous request, Dmitri decided not to disapprove Annan.

Because what he had to do was to build confidence in Annan— not destroy it.

Annan's thoughts dashed, and he organized them in the blink of an eye.

A firm expression quickly appeared on his tender and delicate face, “Of course, I remember, my eldest brother.

“Thank you for your care, Your Royal Highness.” There was still a slight trembling in Annan's voice, but his voice had gotten louder and clearer — just like his voice outside of the nightmare.

At this time, Annan noticed that Dmitri's constant frown had relaxed a little.

Does this mean he is pleased? That's the right call.

Annan let out a sigh of relief secretly.

There was still no expression on Dmitri's face, but he said indifferently, “Remember to come back before dinner.”

“You can also ask your new friend to show you around.” Princess Elizabeth added.

It seemed that she had noticed something — this woman who was known to be iron-fisted in the army seemed to become soft and gentle after changing into a dress.

She let out a gentle smile towards Annan and took his hand gently, “Not many people are willing to play with Kafni, but I know she's a good girl... Keep her company, okay?”

Are you setting us up for marriage?

Having the intelligence of an adult, Annan immediately caught on to Elizabeth's intentions.

This woman was brilliant. She was not “allowing” Annan to bond with Kafni but “requesting” for him to look after Kafni — A clever gesture, no doubt.

Why?

Did she realize that I'm the actual dukedom heir?

No, it's not possible. Dmitri's loss of fertility was a secret at this time. Otherwise, she would probably be more explicit in her gestures.

Plus, it was impossible that she would let Kafni and Annan get together right away if she did know of this matter.

After all, Kafni's father was the fourth prince. If the “future Austere-Winter's Grand Duke” could become the husband of his only daughter, Annan would then become his powerful political bargaining chip.

If Elizabeth realized that Annan was the actual future Grand Duke... she would have formed a de facto alliance with Albert before letting Albert freely expand his power.

—Because she was a smart person.

So, there was only one possibility.

Has the nobles' political situation in the Noah Kingdom gotten to the point of needing a marriage partnership to relieve its tension? To the point of needing an “outsider” to disrupt the situation and reshuffle the forces of all parties...

Princess Elizabeth, who wasn't wary of Annan, had inadvertently revealed major political information to Annan.

Annan, on the other hand, acted completely normal.

He replied softly, “Alright, Your Royal Highness.”

Annan's voice had steadied, vaguely carrying Maria's shadows.

This made Dmitri somewhat satisfied.

Annan then excused himself from the two.

Kafni took Annan to her bedroom.

She didn't ask Annan how he got permission from the two supposed "heirs to the kingdom".

It seemed as if she expected this already.

It could also be that Kafni didn't care about these things.

"...This is the secret passage." Kafni took Annan's hand and walked him to her wardrobe, "After you exit, you will arrive straight to a corner of the garden. I often sneak out from here..."

Her voice was soft, and her face was a little flustered.

There was a stark difference from the Kafni a few years later who could hold Annan's hand at ease even in the first meeting— the Kafni now would still get shy.

She seemed to be very concerned about the somewhat intimate relationship between the two of them at this time.

Annan instead thought exasperatedly. Hey, you're only nine years old.

Although I know that girls may mature a little earlier, is it normal for you to know so much at such a young age?

"What are you going to do?"

Annan opened the cleat at the back of the closet and whispered to Kafni before going in, "Without my voice, they might realize that something is wrong."

Kafni replied without hesitation, "I'll draw you a picture."

"...But I'm not here."

"You were here."

Kafni replied softly, "I can remember."

Her seemingly non-human vitreous red eyes seemed to project another world which Annan couldn't understand.

She replied in a low voice, "I can see... your phantom."