

Witch 1031

Chapter 1031: The King of Graycastle (I)

Meanwhile...

In the City of Glow

Hearing the noon bell ring, Horford Quinn put down his quill and looked toward the southwestern.

The news of the coronation of Prince Roland had not only spread throughout the whole of Graycastle, but also to the Kingdom of Dawn. According to the flyers distributed on the streets, this should be the very moment the young man was crowned.

Everything was happening so fast.

Horford found it hard to believe that the new king was several years younger than his daughter Andrea. Roland had now secured his throne and even extended his influence to the neighboring country.

After the war against the Moya Family, the name of Roland Wimbledon was known by every noble in the king's city of the Kingdom of Dawn. In the beginning, the rumors about this extraordinary prince were just circulated among some underground Chambers of Commerce, but news of him soon spread throughout his country like wildfire.

Three years ago, Prince Roland had just been the insignificant lord of a remote town. Nobody in the Wimbledon Family had thought he would become the sovereign of the state in the end.

His sudden rise was shrouded in mystery. A lot of his behavior was as unpredictable and bizarre as his unpresided ascendancy. The coronation ceremony, for example, perfectly illustrated the eccentricity in King Roland's character. He was probably the only king in history who chose to hold the ceremony in the Months of Demons.

Kings with such unique characters typically emerged when the country was in a state of chaos or experiencing a civil strife. With the looming Battle of Divine Will, Horford felt that the world would soon undergo drastic changes.

"Your Majesty," The guard said, breaking his train of thought. "A letter from Sir Hill Fawkes."

"Really?" His eyes were back on his desk again. "Open it and read it to me."

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

The word "Your Majesty" was indeed hypnotic. For the past 20 years, he had been the Hand of the King and had spoken those words countless times. Horford had thought he would be immune to the pleasant intoxication brought on by the sudden surge of power and prestige, but the truth was his heart swelled with pride every time somebody addressed him in this way.

Regardless, he should congratulate the new King of Graycastle.

Horford knew very well that his ascendancy to the throne was due to Roland's support. It was not Sir Quinn's swords those big nobles feared, but the deafening thunder that could raze the whole city that Roland commanded. That was why his authority had yet to be challenged. Horford knew the best way to secure his grip on power was to form an alliance with Graycastle, particularly at this moment when everything was about to change.

"The letter says that Graycastle has sent a mining expedition to the border of our country. They're expecting your assistance and support."

"Inform Earl Luoxi of this matter and tell him to greet the expedition with the knightage," Horford instructed immediately. "Also, inform all the local lords in that region and make sure the expedition gets what they need."

"As you command, Your Majesty!"

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Archduke Island, off the coast of the Kingdom of Wolfheart.

Although the town was far outside the range of influence of the Months of Demons, the wet, cold sea breeze made the whole town look desolate and grim. Few people could be found on the muddy streets, except in the dock area.

Despite the weather, an open air bar next to a warehouse drew a lot of attention. The bar offered cheap wines to sailors and travelers who want to warm up a little. Most of the customers simply came and left, but now there were around 100 people gathered about the bar.

A woman wearing clothes made of coarse fabrics also approached the crowd.

"Farrina?" Someone whispered. "What are you dwelling on? We should go."

"Demons," she replied.

"What?" The latter's expression changed.

"I heard somebody talking about the demons." The woman called Farrina said. "Just a moment, Joe."

The man hesitated. At length, he lowered his head and said in a hushed voice, "Yes... Your Holiness."

"This isn't an order." Farrina waved her hand and inched closer, hoping to hear more of the conversation.

"I've never seen such gruesome monsters. They had wings wider than a man and tusks bigger than our arms. City walls are nothing to them!" A merchant boasted. Now the center of attention for the surrounding people, he spoke even louder, "But that isn't the worst of it. There's another type of demon who looks like a man, but much stronger. Their spears are faster and deadlier than a balista. Armor is useless against them! I don't mind if you laugh at me, but I almost peed my pants when I saw them."

People in the crowd gasped.

"Is it true? Are they invulnerable?"

"We couldn't lay a finger on them if they are flying in the sky."

Still, some people looked incredulous.

"Get over with yourself! What demons — Do you even know the difference between demonic beasts and demons?"

"Go to Hermes Plateau and take a look! There are all kinds of monsters there. You seem to wet your pants easily. Don't freeze your dick off.

"What do you know about it?!" The merchant cried indignantly. "That's how Prince Roland Wimbledon described them! He's been living in the Western Region for many years, and he doesn't know the difference between demonic beasts and demons? Rubbish! Demonic beasts are just dumb, roving mobs, but demons have well-trained armies. Have you ever seen animals coordinate attacks on a city, one after another?"

"If what you said is true, how did Graycastle drive them off?"

"You wouldn't be able to understand. The situation was precarious, but suddenly thunder roared up from the city wall and pierced the sky." The merchant bragged, spraying his audience with spit. "The demons were instantly blasted to smithereens. Their blood splattered all over the ground. One of them fell right in front of the hotel I was staying at. There was a hole as big as a bowl in its chest. God knows how they did this!"

"Even ballista couldn't do that. Based on what you said, isn't the prince a God?"

"Haha. If he's not, how do you think he wiped out the church?"

Hearing these words, Farrina's hands curled into fists.

"..." Joe put his hand on Farrina's shoulder and shook his head in silence.

"I know." Farrina took a deep breath and unclenched her fists. "What do you think?"

"The Bloody Moon has not appeared yet. The demons shouldn't have arrived at the Barbarian Lands. But his story fits the descriptions of the demons in the Holy Book. It doesn't sound like a lie. I don't... really know." Joe paused for a while and said, "But we have nothing..."

"Nothing to do with them." Farrina cut in. "You're right, Joe. We have to take care of ourselves first."

After the death of the acting Pope, Tucker Thor, Farrina had followed his orders, retreating from New Holy City along with the rest of the Judgement Army. She had planned to re-establish the church on Archduke Island in the Kingdom of Wolfheart where the witch organization, the Bloodfang Association, used to be. To prevent the resurgence of the witches, they had selected this fertile land as their new stronghold.

Yet to their great surprise, the news of the fall of Hermes had spread throughout the whole region. After learning the fall of Hermes, the bishop on Archduke Island had turned against the church and colluded with the nobles. Now, he was known as the Earl of Archduke Island. To secure his new title, he had even hanged the messengers from the church outside the city gate.

The unexpected betrayal was a heavy blow to the Judgement Army. Because of this, many of them had left the Judgement Army. Farrina had been living a clandestine life on Archduke Island for half a year and achieved nothing yet. If she could not re-establish the church and attract new believers, this would probably be the end of the church.

Without a doubt, the only way to save the church from this precarious situation was to execute the traitor as a deterrent.

The only problem was that the enemy also had a group of God's Punishment Warriors.

It was going to be a bitter fight.

"Let's get out of here." Farrina pulled up her hood and cast a last glance at the bar.

The merchant rambled on. "There are a lot of interesting things there! For example, black iron ships as huge as hills, and a giant building taller than Tower of Babel. Once you see them, you'll never forget!"

"C'mon, tell us everything. I'll buy you another drink!"

"Were they all built by that Prince Roland?"

"Of course! But you can't call him His Highness anymore. By the time I left Neverwinter, he had decided to ascend the throne! The date... let me see, right... it's today!"

"Wow. So now he's the King of Graycastle?"

"Haha, that's right!" The merchant raised his wineglass and said, "Since it's his coronation day, let's make a toast. To the King of Graycastle!"

"To the King of Graycastle!" The crowd raised their glasses.

"The King of... Graycastle?" Farrina sneered. "Be whatever king you like. The Battle of Divine Will would eventually reduce the whole world to ashes. We'll sooner or later meet again in the Hell. The only problem is who'll go there first. If I fail to defeat the traitor, I'll be there before you; If I win, then I'll wait for the news of your fall right here."

"King Roland Wimbledon," thought Farrina savagely.

Chapter 1032: The King of Graycastle (II)

At the headstream of Silver Stream located in the Southernmost Region of the Sand Sea.

Brian sat in a tent, waiting for news from the front to arrive. Sitting opposite to him was the chief of the Wildflame clan, Guelz Burnflame, and the elder of the Osha Clan, Thuram.

The two men had become the representatives of the Mojin Clan.

Together with the commander of the Gun Battalion who represented the chief, all the leaders who participated in the decision-making process with respect to the Sand Nations were here.

The cold desert wind whistled outside the tent, but the interior of the tent was quite warm as if it were sitting on the top of a giant brazier. No matter how cold the ground seemed to be, every time Brian buried his feet into the sand, he could feel heat escape from underneath. It was even warmer than the brick beds and the heating system used in Neverwinter.

The locals invented this so-called "sand bed", which was a shallow hole as wide as a man in the ground. Native people would first replace the coarse sand with sifted fine sand, and then bury themselves in it to keep their body temperatures. The fine sand had a soft touch and was even softer than burlap mattresses. With just a tent and a sand bed, the Sand Nations could spend their winter very comfortably.

Sadly, it was also the same terrestrial heat that destroyed the life here. As seawater gradually evaporated, the desert within 100 miles was wiped out by seasalts. Hardly any sandworms or scorpions lurked around, let alone trees and flowers.

Without an oasis, there would be no food. The entire plain was thus a bleak emptiness. Perhaps, nowhere in the whole Southernmost Region could be more dismal and dead than here except Blackwater Swamp.

For the past hundred years, Mojins had erected several wooden houses here and there in this saline-alkali land to provide accommodations for traveling salt merchants. However, things had now changed.

"You don't seem to be worried at all, young man." Guelz ended the silence. "The Wildwave Clan and the Cut Bone Clan were two biggest clans in Iron Sand City. The chief can easily crush them, but this doesn't mean those small tribes can do that too. Do you really put so much faith in them?"

As Guelz spoke out, Thuram also said, "In the past one year, not a single tribe in Iron Sand City has been promoted to be one of the six big clans. Apparently, Wildwave and Cut Bone have kept all the resources to themselves. With sufficient food, a clan in the Southernmost Region can easily recover from a previous loss. They're now probably stronger than prior to you coming here."

"Faith? No..." Brian slowly shook his head. "I don't put faith in them."

"Then... why didn't you request troops from the chief?" Thuram asked in surprise. "100 soldiers and the warriors from the Wildflame Clan and the Osha Clan would be more than enough to deter those brutes from setting foot on the small oasis again."

"Then what? The First Army would be permanently stationed in Silver Stream Oasis protecting those small tribes?" Brian stared at him. "Do you think His Majesty wants a future like this?"

"Um, well..." Thuram was at a loss for words.

Shortly after the relocation, they had started exploiting the resources in the Southernmost Region. Apart from building the Festive Harbor at Endless Cape, another key project was the development of the saline-alkali land at the headstream of Silver Stream. Since there was no river, they had to rely on manpower and animal power to transfer those salts out of the desert, to the closest branch of Redwater River by cart.

For this reason, Fallen Dragon Ridge and Port of Clearwater had provided competitive wages and benefits to the laborers, in hopes of attracting more Sand Nations to help with the transfer.

Within a year, various tents had been pitched in the saline-alkali land, and the place was soon alive with busy workers.

The laborers dug wells and drew consumable water from the underground stream of Silver Stream. They not only drank the water but also used it to filter salt.

Shortly afterwards, plants were built. Without steam engines or other machinery, they did all the work manually. The whole working process was similar to gold mining. People separated the scattered salt from the sand and gravel, collected and crystalized them before shipping them to the inner land of the Western Region where they would be further processed. The repetitive and tedious work gradually became a new mundane routine of everyday life in the saline-alkali land.

Although there was no oasis, sandworms or scorpions around this area, the place started to get teeming with life.

Many relocaters, as well as some small tribes who had been hesitating to come simply could not resist the good compensation. They came to the border in groups and offered to work for the project in exchange for wheat, dried meat and fabrics. Some of them returned to the oasis with the food while others stayed, becoming one of the earliest settlers.

The big clans in Iron City were not happy about this. The more tribes that chose to move out of the oasis, the fewer resources they would obtain. The increasing tension between the big clans and the small tribes had finally turned into an open conflict two months ago, where the Wildwave and Cut Bone Clans had dispatched infantry and killed some tribesmen departing the oasis. They had left their heads on the road leading to the north, apparently to deter people from the Sand Nations from leaving.

The big clans did not have the courage to openly provoke King of Graycastle, so they had attacked the small tribes who had yet to submit to his rule. They had thought the chief would dismiss the matter, for no northern king would actually care about the lives of hundreds of Sand Nations. They had not expected, however, that this would be the very thing that Roland detested.

Brian knew very well that King Roland dreaded any loss of the population for no reason.

Before Guelz had sent his letter to Neverwinter, Brian had already prepared himself for a probable war.

"What if they lose?" said Guelz Burnflame as he massaged his forehead apprehensively. "If I remember correctly, those people received training on how to use a flintlock just three months ago, right?"

"Then we'll be slaughtered, and your clansmen would be reduced to slaves in Iron Sand City," said Brian as he closed his eyes. "Prior to the war, I told you that it's going to be your battle, not mine. I've provided you with weapons. If you still can't save your clansmen from their swords, you don't deserve the honor of being one of the soldiers of Graycastle. I can always train new people if I want."

"..." Guelz's manner tightened abruptly into a grave expression for the first time as if he was re-evaluating the young officer in front of him.

"Plus, you forgot that the training three months ago was only for flintlocks." Brian went on, "Apart from flintlocks, they also use swords, daggers, their fists and teeth. These are weapons Sand Nations have been using from the moment they were born, aren't they?"

The members of the Sand Nation troop selected by Brian were all from the small tribes that had relocated to Port of Clearwater. Unlike the big clans such as Wildflame, those tribes were still concerned about the tribes left behind at the oasis, even though they had chosen to live at Graycastle. As these people were not politically involved but still maintained a relationship with the desert, they were perfect for forming a local military power. They used old, outdated flintlocks as their weapons.

Suddenly, outside the camp came the little pattering of feet.

"Stop there!" The guard hollered.

"I'm Jodel from the ambush unit. I have something important to report to Mr. Commander."

"Let him in." Brian opened his eyes abruptly.

The tent flap was pulled open, and a man stumbled in, his face smeared with blood, all shaky and breathless. He sank to his knee, panting, but his eyes were glinting with excitement.

"Sir, we won!"

Chapter 1033: The King of Graycastle (III)

Brian walked out of the tent and saw the victorious soldiers return one after another.

Compared to how they had looked when they had marched for war, they now looked no better than a bunch of refugees. They were all ragged and covered in blood. It was obvious that they had just returned from a fierce battle.

The number of casualties was astonishing. Out of the 2,000 soldiers that left, less than half were walking. All the horses and camels had been used to carry the wounded. Together with a few captured enemy soldiers, the group looked so beaten-up that it did not look like a well-trained army at all.

Nevertheless, their spirits were high. Everybody was excited about the victory.

This was literally the first time that the small tribes were able to defeat the big clans of Iron Sand City!

Brian knew this past battle had made those hunters true soldiers.

He was more pleased to see that the ambush team, although battered and dishevelled, had followed his instructions that no soldier should abandon his weapons under any circumstances.

Most of their water sacks and ration bags were gone, and some had even lost one of their shoes, but all of them still had their guns and swords.

The First Army could not be stationed in the Southern Territory to protect Sand Nations forever. They must be able to carry out Graycastle's policies among their tribesmen by themselves. Brian knew the King of Graycastle wanted more than a simple implementation.

He wanted more soldiers, more Mojins to participate in the Battle of Divine Will.

Now, these people were qualified to move on to the next step.

Brian turned around in satisfaction and nodded at Jodel, "Tell me the details of the battle."

It was a pretty straightforward battle, although it was full of errors and accidents. The initial plan was that the 2,000 strong army should be divided into two groups. One would sneak into Silver Stream Oasis and advance to the north during the night to make an impression that they were planning to attack the saline land, while the other would wait for the enemy in an uninhabited oasis at the end of the Silver Stream so that they could launch an ambush.

Provoked by the smaller tribes, the Wildwave and Cut Bone Clans had soon dispatched an infantry of more than 800 people to pursue the "traitors". Although there were many "traitors", the two clans had not taken them seriously. In their opinion, this group were even weaker than the watchdogs.

As the battle had progressed, the enemy had soon been lured into the ambush. Everything had gone well up to this point.

The "baits" were supposed to dismount and yield. They should have found an opportunity to disperse the horses once the enemy had dismounted as well. Then the ambush squad would have launched their attack. However, the group responsible for blocking the retreating path had set the fire too early. As the road had been ablaze, the enemy had realized something had gone wrong and started to retreat. Had they not prepared a large amount of blackwater beforehand, the enemy would have probably escaped.

The battle then turned to chaos. The "baits" had drawn out their swords and flung themselves at the enemy, and so had the ambush team. Many people had used the flintlock just once, completely forgetting the loading and firing skills they had learned during training. In the end, they had resorted to their traditional combat method: a hand-to-hand fight.

Like Brian had said, the people of the Sand Nation had weapons other than flintlocks. With the horses neighing and fires sizzling in the air, the withering, small oasis had become the location where the two parties had started an intense, life-and-death struggle. One moment a soldier had lunged at a horserider, and the next a horse had trampled a man. When two people tussled, teeth could also be a lethal weapon.

The small tribes also had warriors. Since the people of the Sand Nation had started to learn how to cope with the harsh living conditions from the moment they had been born, almost everyone that had survived the venom of sandworms or scorpions possessed excellent combat skills. Indeed, there was no large difference between a member from a big clan and one from a small tribe in terms of individual physical strength.

What those small tribes lacked was resources. Inadequate resources limited their ability to reproduce and expand. No warrior could defeat ten people at a time, no matter how strong he was. As long as the tribes remained small in size, it would be impossible for them to compete with the big clans.

But now, they had what they needed.

All the soldiers were from the ten Silver River Clans. Since everyone shared the same food, wore the same clothes, slept on the same bed, and received the same training, they did not have to fight for resources. Now what they needed was simply the courage and determination to challenge the big clans in Iron Sand City.

The massacre of the small tribes committed by the Wildwave and Cut Bone Clans had encouraged them to stand up for themselves.

The battle had lasted all night.

The Sand Nation army had gained a tough victory.

By the time the fires were quenched, the oasis was covered with blackened wood. Since all the trees were gone, the sand would soon drain the little water around this area, and Silver Stream would shrink further, exposing more oases to wind deflation.

But the people of the Sand Nation would survive.

The battle precluded the eventual disappearance of the oases, but it also pointed out the direction in which the people of the Sand Nation should head.

After hearing Jodel's report, Brian walked up slowly to the returning soldiers.

"Good job! You should be proud of yourselves because you protected your people! This is a victory belonging to you, so you have the right to decide on how to deal with these captives."

Brian pointed toward the captured warriors from the big clans.

"Kill! Kill them!"

"Sir, they killed my family!"

"They should pay for that!"

Brian's eyes met with the anxious ones of the people of the Sand Nation. He gave them a casual wave and they immediately understood what to do.

With clanks and clatters, numerous swords were drawn out from their scabbards.

Blood blossomed and soaked the coarse sand beneath their feet. The soldiers' morale had reached its peak!

"But Iron Sand City still poses a threat to us. The Wildwave and Cut Bone Clans will still dispatch their troops to the interior of Silver Stream, so your tribesmen are still exposed to danger," Brian proclaimed.

"The chief has granted you the right to permanently live in the oasis, but the traitors attempt to ruin everything! Tell me, what should you do?"

"Take Iron Sand City and drive them out of Blackwater Swamp!"

"Let them know the consequence of betraying the chief!"

"Commander, some of my friends are still in the oasis. Please allow them to join us!"

"And also my... my sisters!"

Guelz and Thuram stepped a few paces back involuntarily, shocked at the soldiers' reactions.

Brian looked in the direction of Neverwinter.

"Your Majesty, we've shed the traitors' blood, and I hope this will be a nice present for your coronation. The Mojins who used to only care about themselves have started to work together. I believe that sooner or later, you will be able to take over Iron Sand City."

But this was just the beginning.

"The entire Southernmost Region will eventually become a part of your territory. There will be nobody on this desert to challenge your authority."

I hope you like my gift.

Chapter 1034: Subtle Hints at the Ceremony

The coronation celebration lasted all day, from noon all the way through to the evening.

The central square was saturated with the warm aroma of savory soup as it simmered in pots above the fire. Within the pots, a thick layer of spicy oils glazed the surface displaying the richness of the soup. It was made so that anyone could add the food they wanted and eat as they pleased. As spices were still considered as luxuries in this era, the party attracted many civilians. Some people even brought jars and barrels, hoping that to bring some soup home to savor every drop of it later.

City Hall was in charge of continuously adding water and broth into the pots. With each addition of chopped beef bones and sausages, the crowd would burst into loud cheers.

This would have been an incredible scene during the Months of Demons in the past.

People used to breathe gingerly during a long winter season, for cold represented death. But now, they could appreciate the snow drifting down from the sky and express their love for life without such fear.

Because they knew there would be enough food to keep them warm.

Everybody raised their cups in celebration of the new king while sending him their blessings.

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Sylvie turned around and watched the bustling castle hall.

People here were also having a good time.

There was plenty of delicious food, wine, music and laughter.

The party became even more boisterous when Roland and Anna presented themselves in their wedding gowns.

It was Sylvie's first time to see such a unique wedding gown. Completely different from the white dress the bride had worn on the Chief Knight's wedding, the new one designed by Roland was actually nothing like a nightgown. The dress was mainly in red and gold, with long sleeves and a full skirt. Its shoulder parts were ornamented with two patterned ribbons of intricate and elegant designs.

Not many people could pull off such a bright color, but the dress was perfect for Anna. She was a genius fire controller and one of the most outstanding witches of this era. The bright red outfit made her look even more stunning whilst also making her display a gracious and queenly aura.

Everybody raised their glasses, to which Roland and Anna returned a smile. It was a perfect party.

But Sylvie was all tensed up.

She had noticed something strange at the ceremony.

As she had the Eye of Magic, she was obligated to detect anything out of character before anyone else and promptly notify the other guards. For things like a coronation ceremony, she had to make sure Roland was absolutely safe, not only because he was Princess Tilly's brother but also because it was her responsibility as a guard. Therefore, Sylvie had been extremely cautious, making sure that she did not miss anything.

Each incident seemed insignificant if she looked at them separately. However, once she pieced them together, she found something suggestive.

This reminded Sylvie of a song Roland often hummed.

The lyrics were quite interesting, which read "a walking stick blackened, a strong floral scent softened ... many jigsaw puzzles that might not make sense to you, would eventually lead you to the discovery of a truth well hidden."

It was worth noting that after Mystery Moon heard the tune, she made it the song of the Detective Group.

The situation this time had been exactly as the lyrics described.

Sylvie did not know what the problem was. Normally, she would have warned Nightingale and Ashes by now.

But this time, she kept silent.

Because she suddenly remembered what Anna had told her two days ago.

"The person who keeps the secret is always the one that knows it. I need your help, Sylvie."

At that time, she had not understood the meaning behind it, so she had not given it much thought.

But now, as if struck by a sudden enlightenment, Sylvie saw the full picture. Anna's words were the last piece of the puzzle that had just been slotted into place.

She discovered a secret.

Sylvie did not take delight in it. Instead, she felt a huge burden being laid upon her shoulders.

Because now she had to not only keep the secret but also stop others from noticing it.

Someone else had probably also noticed those subtle signs!

Sylvie surveyed the entire hall. Her eyes rested on three people.

"Achoo!"

Lorgar rubbed her nose, glancing about suspiciously.

"What's the matter?" Andrea asked. "Wolves can also catch a cold?"

"I'm not sure if it's my nose. I've been feeling something wrong since this morning." Lorgar made a sniff. "The odors I smell seemed inconsistent with the number of people here..."

"Inconsistent?" Ashes cut in. "Can you actually tell people apart by their smells?"

"I can as long as they aren't too far apart and there's no interference of a strong scent," said Lorgar with a nod.

"There are nearly 100 people in the hall," said Andrea with an incredulous look. "Even if you do have an acute sense of smell, you can't remember all the odors people are giving off. Besides, many of them are wearing perfumes. They also tend to touch others, like this." With these words, Andrea touched the back of Ashes' hand with the hand she had just used to eat a chicken drumstick. "I'll also have her odor on me now. Can you still tell us apart?"

"It's difficult... but still, I can tell whether a certain individual is present or not." Lorgar dropped her ears in confusion. "Nobody is moving about, but I notice some scents are on and off. Why is that?"

"Ahem." Sylvie appeared behind the three witches and said, "You're probably sick."

"Sylvie?" Andrea raised her brow. "How come you're here?"

"I'm just walking around and overheard your conversation." She shrugged and looked at the wolf girl. "The weather on the desert in the south is quite different from that in the Western Region. It's easy to catch a cold. Plus, this is your first winter here, so it's normal that you are feeling under the weather. If you feel there's something wrong with your nose, you might as well drink some Lily's Cleansing Water. I was like that too when I first came here."

"Really?" Lorgar seemed to suddenly understand the reason. "I see."

Sylvie walked off, feeling a bit relieved.

Because of her ability, Lorgar Burnflame possessed far better hearing and a much more acute sense of smell than ordinary people. As she had an animal intuition, Sylvie needed to watch out for her all the time.

Fortunately, she had successfully prevented her from discovering the secret.

Now, her next target was —

"Coo, coo, coo, coo coo coo coo... coo!" Perched on Lightning's head, Maggie was talking to Joan in excitement.

"Ya, ya ya, yaa — ya!" Joan returned as if the two people were discussing a very interesting topic.

"Oh well, whatever..." Sylvie clapped her hand over her forehead. Even if they did find out something, they would not understand it.

Likewise, nobody would be able to read something out of their conversation either.

At this thought, Sylvie locked her Eye of Magic on her third target.

This was probably the person who was most likely to discover the secret and also the most difficult one to deal with out of the three.

It was Honey.

Chapter 1035: An Obscure and Wonderful Night

As a key figure of the Graycastle Weekly, Honey basically had informants everywhere. This combined with the advantages offered by Lorgar and Maggie. The olive forest in the castle backyard was like her headquarters and to escape from her detection was not easy.

Yet that was not the whole story.

Having the earliest access to interesting anecdotes in the city, she could always attract a large number of witches during gatherings. For instance, at the moment, the batch of witches that gathered around her was the biggest one in the hall.

Besides Mystery Moon and the other members of her Detective Group, Nightingale, Wendy, and Scroll were not easily fooled. Even Leaf, who had not shown herself for quite some time, also seemed to be talking about something with Honey.

"Conceal the secrets you know, and keep others from knowing them."

Sylvie took a look at Anna at the other end of the Hall. Thinking of the words Anna had given her, she walked toward Anna unwillingly.

"What do you think of these birds?" Leaf's voice went into Sylvie's ears. "They're the new species I found in the Misty Forest, not big, but fly very fast. They're so bold that they even dare to steal from a gray eagle nest. I figured that they might be helpful to you one day, so I took a nest of them back."

Sylvie saw two big Kingfisher and one small one standing on Leaf's shoulders and rubbing her face intimately, which gave her a completely different impression as the brave birds Honey just described.

"Sure, thank you." Honey took over the birds delightfully. "I haven't seen you for quite a while. I feel like you've become a qualified bird trainer."

"They probably think of me as a part of the forest," Leaf said smilingly. "Then again, the changes that happened in the town really surprised me... not only are there more houses, there are also such novel things like magic film and newspaper. If it wasn't for the fact that exploring the deep forest is equally enjoyable, I would have envied you."

"You should come back more often," Wendy said softly. "Everybody misses you."

"I missed you too..." Leaf's eyelids lowered. "But nowadays only the southeast edges of the Misty Forest are under the control of the Heart of Jungle, I must stay integrated with the forest as long as possible so

as to adapt to its ever-enlarging consciousness. To control the entire forest before the arrival of the war, I could do nothing but seize all the time I could..."

"You've worked hard." Scroll stroked her hair tenderly. "I'll ask Lightning to send the newly published newspapers to you every week so that you'll know what's going on in Neverwinter at any time."

"That is a wonderful idea," Mystery Moon shouted, "but what's written in the newspaper are things known to all. Compared to that, I prefer to know the secrets that are only known to a few." She then looked at Honey and said, "If you ever find something suspicious, please do tell the Detective Group. We have the most skillful detectives who'll ensure all your puzzles will be solved."

Hearing the word 'secret', Sylvie's heart began to extremely tense up.

Such a fool. She asked too directly! How can I divert the topic? No... It's too hard a task for me to avoid Nightingale and Wendy's attention and divert Mistry Moon at the same time!

"Em, there are quite a few..." Honey said, tilting her head.

"Oh?" Mistry Moon's eyes sparkled. She said hurriedly, "Such as?"

"This is a big problem!" Sylvie felt a deep desperation. "Will it work if I pretend to faint or be drunk? But I'm not able to act that well... sorry Anna, I've tried my best."

"Oh, although I'm also curious, I'm not going to tell it." Honey stuck out her tongue. "I especially can't tell His Majesty Roland—this is out of sister Wendy's request. She also said that no matter what anomaly I find, I need to report to her first."

"Oh?" Mistry Moon looked at Wendy in surprise. "This isn't fair!"

Wendy coughed twice. "I think this is for the good of the Witch Union—you'll be safer not knowing something."

Sylvie let out a long sigh.

Thus the latest crisis was averted.

I've successfully kept the secret... haven't I?

An anxious Sylvie had the toughest dinner party in her life.

After the banquet, Roland returned to the bedroom with Anna.

At the moment, this place had been as decorated as their wedding room. Under the flickering candlelight, Anna's figure in the wedding dress appeared dimmer, yet it exuded a particular sense of grace.

Roland walked up, gently took down her bridal veil, lifted up her bang, and stared into her eyes.

In the pair of eyes that were as clear as a lake, he saw rippling affection.

"Say my name, ok?"

"Anna?"

"No." Her eyes blinked. "My full name."

"Anna Wimbledon."

"Once more."

"Anna Wimbledon."

"Can you call me that ten more times?"

Roland gently smiled. "As many times as you want."

After hearing Roland whispering in her ear, Anna lowered her head shyly. "My request... is it a little weird?"

"A little." Roland poked at her nose. "You'll get tired of hearing this name in the future. You're my wife, with or without my family name."

In the world he came from, marriage did not require one party of the couple to change family names, so he did not care much about the name change after marriage.

"Even so, I feel I'm complete this way..." Anna pressed one hand on her chest. "I feel I'm no longer alone. That's probably the point of any ceremony... either wearing a crown or changing a title, people are just acquiring a self-identification through the attached external changes. Although emotions between two people need no verification through a ceremony, without this link, a couple might feel pitiful and regretful afterward."

"..." Roland could not help but hold her in his arms.

At this moment, any answer would have appeared redundant.

After a little intimacy, Anna said, "Roland, can I ask for something?"

If Roland remembered correctly, this was the first time that Anna ever asked something of him.

"Sure, go ahead."

"I want to take the post of the minister of the Department of Industry."

Roland was a little surprised. "This isn't a problem, but why do you suddenly..."

"Because I'm only a common girl born in a remote small town," Anna said smilingly. "Now I am suddenly the queen of Graycastle. I guess there must be many people feeling discontent."

"Don't worry. Nobody dares to gossip about it," Roland consoled her.

"If everything has to be quieted down by you, it would only add to people's suspicion." She shook her head. "I can't keep on hiding behind you and only indulge in things that I'm interested in. I want to do more, offering people no excuses to accuse me."

"You've gone from being an unknown witch to becoming a figure taking charge of a whole department by yourself?" Roland smiled subconsciously. "I've never intended to keep you in that narrow backyard..."

"As you wish, my dear."

"Thank you for indulging my willfulness." Anna stood on her tiptoe and gently kissed Roland on his forehead. "Right, haven't you always been curious about what I talked with Nightingale that one night?"

"Um..." Roland slightly paused. "I'll be lying if I say I wasn't, but..."

"It's alright," she said smilingly. "It was an agreement, and I've fulfilled it. Now... carry me to bed."

The candle was put out by a string of Blackfire. The curtain of the night covered their silhouettes like a thin veil.

What an obscure and wonderful night.

...

Chapter 1036: Regime of the New Kingdom

On the second day after Roland's inauguration, he called for the third plenary session in the castle's reception hall.

The main content of the session was the distribution of power, which concerned the officers the most.

As the advocators of choosing the right side, this session was undoubtedly the moment that these officers had long hoped for. To serve the local lords and to serve the king were two totally different concepts. Especially since most of them had worked in the City Hall, so they had a rough mastery of the new king's idea of "weakening the local, strengthening the center" to concentrate power. They understood their promotion had special significance, which meant they had gone from being nobodies to the top officers of the Kingdom of Graycastle. What they would govern was no longer be a small piece of land in Western Region, and their influence would be stronger than the former great nobles.

Roland would not allow his officers' ambitions of ascending to the skies with a single leap to keep on growing, so he laid down the general principle right at the beginning of the session. "First of all, I'd like to congratulate each of and every one of you. Anyone who is invited to this session will join the elite class of Graycastle. In the next few decades, you will be joining me in the endeavor of governing this kingdom."

"That's flattery, Your Majesty." Barov took the lead to stand up and bow. "It's our honor to serve you! Just tell me whatever you want me to do. I'm at your disposal!"

Although what he said meant to be humble, Barov's face wrinkled with the smile he put on. Obviously, he had many expectations for his path ahead.

Roland nodded smilingly. He gestured for the rest to sit down, then said slowly, "I have to mention one thing first. The reason I took back the nobles' feudal power is to replace them with capable personnel. A kingdom's prosperity depends on the number of talents who are working for it. I don't hope to see you turning into another kind of noble."

"Of course..." Barov said hurriedly. "Nobody can be sure that his descendants will be as equally capable, so all the positions should be dispatched to the most capable."

The others instantly agreed with Barov.

Roland wasn't so sure. He felt these City Hall officers had changed a lot and their flattery sounded a lot more smooth, and the expressions in their eyes were filled with an unexplainable awe. The changes brought him a vague sense of satisfaction.

This was probably also the effect of the ceremony.

No wonder Timothy and Garcia did not hesitate to drag more than half of the kingdom into the fires of war.

Yet Roland did not indulge himself in this kind of satisfaction for long. Even as a supreme king, what he governed was no more than a corner of the extensive continent. "If I'm content with what I've accomplished, what difference would I have with a sheik from an isolated island?"

The world is so big. I want to see it.

"What you said is only the most basic point." Roland looked around the hall. "As a matter of fact, even the most capable could not be guaranteed to always be qualified for their positions! There are many ways to ruin one's prospect, such as external temptation, the solidification of ideas, and the desire to expand one's influence. You are not exceptions."

With the rising of Roland's voice, the officers lowered their heads, not even daring to breathe heavily.

"Therefore, entering them as the starting officers is only the start for your career. Your abilities and performances will be assessed annually. Whether you're to be promoted or stay where you are will be decided by the assessment." Roland paused. "Of course, there could be a worse consequence. For example, those who insist to knowingly causing damage to the kingdom will be removed from their positions and sent to trial!"

"Your Majesty..." Barov asked carefully, "May I know who will write this assessment report?"

"Myself." Roland looked at him. "Are there any more questions?"

Although it was Nightingale from the Security Bureau who would do the investigation, Roland felt it was more fitting to tell people that he would be the one executing the assessment.

"No, I... have none."

"I know what's on your mind," Roland proceeded. "You must be thinking that you've gone such a long way to achieving this, it's supposed to a time for your reward, and if you have to keep on giving great effort, but behave like you are walking on thin ice, what's the point of becoming the starting officers. Yet what I'm about to say is your reward doesn't contradict with what I've said just now. Instead, they're supplements to each other. As long as you finish the tasks I give you, I don't mind that you seek profit for yourselves. It's like dividing a piece of bread. When the bread gets big enough, everyone can eat well even with a very small portion of it; on the contrary, if the bread is too small, one can't eat enough even if he eats it all by himself. As for the fact that those who stand in the front of others will get his slice of bread sooner, I think all of you can understand that."

The resources an officer of upper rank got was far greater than his listed salary, and the connections and power he had access to were far more effective capital than money. If one even failed to see that, Roland would not want him to continue to have a say in the City Hall.

The driving effect of the combination of stick and carrot had been repeatedly tested in the rivers of history. Although it was still a little rough, Roland had begun to master the use of it.

"Before I announce the new appointments, you can still choose to give up your career in the government. Those who choose to give up will get a large number of gold royals as compensation, which is enough for you to squander for the rest of your life, but if you decide to stay, you'll have to take on the responsibilities and obligations of an officer. Now, make your decisions!"

Nobody dared to leave. Even the minister of Chemical Industry who had complained constantly in the beginning and wished to retire as soon as possible remained silent at this moment. Obviously, through the two years' of experience of holding a political position, he understood the significance of the post of a minister in requesting for appropriation from Barov.

"Alright," Roland smiled and said, "here are your appointments."

Compared with the old City Hall, the biggest change in the new power system was that the towns in all the regions were also put under the management framework.

Roland adapted a modern method and set the big cities as provinces whose prefecture included their surrounding residential areas such as towns and villages. The manager of a province was called a governor, the same rank as a minister. Every province needed to set its own city hall, which was under the control of the City Hall in Neverwinter.

As this was building on the foundations on the previously established secondary City Halls, such a transformation was not difficult. Although the workload of the ministers would greatly increase, their power would correspondingly rise up to a new level.

Barov, as he had always wished, was promoted to the Hand of the King. He was responsible for coordinating all the departments, and concurrently in charge of the Treasury. As an old chief who was among the first batch of Border Town's managers and who cultivated numerous talents for the City Hall, his appointment could not be any more suitable. He didn't expect that a joking promise Roland made four years ago could be realized today.

Apart from some similar institutions like the king's city City Hall, the army, Security Bureau, Witch Union, etc, Roland also established a whole new department: Headquarters of the General Staff.

This was different from the staff organization that served in a combat capacity. The Headquarter of the General Staff took charge in making foreign policies, and any specific schemes about strategic plans. With the expansion of the strength of Graycastle and the increasing threat of the Battle of Divine Will, the future connections among the other three kingdoms and the Fjords were bound to grow tighter. That was why Roland needed a visionary department to assist him in controlling the overall situation.

As for its minister, it was none other than Edith Kant, the Pearl of the Northern Region.

Chapter 1037: Massacre On the Snow-covered Plains

After appointing roles to everyone, they spoke their oaths out loud as per Roland's request.

This was the first time the officials had to go through such a process. However, as surprised as they were, they still followed their King's orders without delay, with their chest held high.

The oath itself was nothing special: "Loyal to the King, dedicated to your duty." These were the words that all the officials would say, but speaking them out loud on a formal occasion in front of a crowd had a dramatically different effect. These words seemed to have come to life and reverberated in everyone's minds.

Roland knew then that they were slowly uniting as one.

"Now that you have passed the ceremony, let's get started." Roland rose from his throne and slapped the map behind him, "We shall eliminate all threat of the demons in the Fertile Plains and ensure that the northwestern side of Neverwinter is safe for us to build the foundation for humanity's mass migration back to the plains."

The two defeats humanity had suffered previously had pushed humanity up against a wall with the ocean at their back and nowhere to escape. Marching West was now their only way forward, both for the acquisition of more resources and as a strategic move against the demons.

The First Army must gain control of the Taquila ruins if the people of Greycastle were to settle in the plains properly. Without a source of God's stones, the demons would not be able to build their obelisks, and Greycastle could then safely expand its borders. This would give them the chance to either continue on with Greycastle's development or prepare a counterattack on the demons.

After all, humans were not restricted by the red mist.

With technology development, the First Army's weapons' effective range would also improve.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Everyone shouted.

After the meeting, Roland went back to his office, and Nightingale served him red tea that she had prepared beforehand.

"Good work."

She had a carefree expression on and the dried fish that was dangling from her mouth meant that she was in a good mood.

"Ah... Thank you," Roland picked up the fragrant tea. He suddenly recalled the words that Anna had said last night and gazed at Nightingale.

What was the promise that Anna talked about? She did not explain in detail last night, but Nightingale was present at both the inauguration ceremony in the morning and the wedding in the evening. It did not seem like she had time to fulfill any sort of a "promise".

This issue still puzzled him.

Also, Roland felt that if he asked them directly, no one would give him an answer.

"What's wrong?" At that moment, Roland heard Nightingale's voice next to his ear, "Do you think I look good today?"

"No ... Ermm," He quickly sipped his tea to cover up his bewildered expression, "I mean, not bad..."

"So do I look good or not?" Nightingale leaned down and looked Roland deep in the eyes. Roland could smell the sweet smell of her hair. "Your heart is in turmoil," Nightingale observed.

Before he could reply, she went away and leaned on a chair, chewing her dried fish, seemingly pleased with herself.

Realizing that she was only teasing him, Roland shook his head, yet at the same felt glad that she didn't pursue the matter.

However, one thing was certain.

She was still the Nightingale he had always known.

...

Western Region, in the sky above the snow-covered Barbarian Lands.

"What is our current speed?"

No reply.

Lightning could only hear the sound of wind gushing past her ear and she could hardly even open her mouth. If she tried to speak right now, her tongue would probably be torn apart by the headwind. She had no choice but to synchronize with her magic power.

The freezing sensation disappeared in an instant and the sound of wind became somewhat bearable.

"Maggie, what is our speed now?" She asked again.

"Let me check, Coo!" Maggie stuck her head out from Lightning shirt, "It's about two times faster than a gray eagle, coo."

This was most likely related to a beast's sharp instincts, but Maggie had a great sense of speed. So bringing her along was much more convenient than using magic power to measure their speed.

"Three hundred kilometer per hour?" Lightning sighed. When a gray eagle dived to catch a prey from the sky, its speed can reach up to hundred fifty kilometers per hour and almost no prey could dodge the attack. Now that Lightning had far surpassed the top speed of the eagle, she did not seem to feel glad wholeheartedly.

Three hundred kilometers.... This was the limit without synchronization.

After her magic powers had evolved, she spent a lot of time to get used to her new ability and learn the technique to control the level of magic power. In other words, if she can handle the discomfort under high-speed flight, then she would be able to minimize the use of her magic power.

To deal with this problem, Roland had provided her with a new set of equipment, including a pair of wind goggles, clothes with a double-layer thermal insulator, smaller backpack, and decreased the weight of the gears to the minimum.

All these adjustments helped her break her record, yet there still seemed to be limitations due to her body. It seemed like three hundred kilometer per hour was a bar that could not be passed.

Moreover, there was a drastic increase in the use of magic power after synchronizing.

Lightning couldn't help but admire the robust body of that Extraordinary, Ashes.

Of course, every witch's ability is determined at birth, and the only thing she could do now was to work hard to get stronger.

Perhaps she could ask Lorgar about training a tougher body after they returned to Neverwinter.

"Heads up, Coo!" Maggie shouted while in her arms, "We are already a hundred kilometers away from the Taquila ruins!"

"Ah okay..." Lightning closed her eyes, felt the magic reserves in her body and then smiled, "Then let's give the demons a nice surprise."

After she had finally gotten used to her new ability, His Majesty finally agreed to let her satisfy her explorer's cravings... Wait no, her request to scout. Even if she only flew at her slowest speed, those stupid demons would only be able to bite the dust. She would not encounter any danger as long as she planned her magic expenditures well.

However, Lightning was not satisfied. She still remembered that time three years ago in the Barbarian Lands where she was scared stiff upon seeing an ice sculpture of a demon under the Taquila ruins. This is something she must redeem herself in as an explorer.

Fear stems from the unknown, and demons were no longer some terrifying creatures of the myths.

"Lightning, going full throttle!"

After she heard that, the pigeon quickly ducked her head and hid under the young girl's clothes.

Lightning kept on accelerating, and despite the protection from synchronizing, she could still hear the sound of wind tearing past her getting louder and louder, from an initially high-pitched screech to a deep rumble. Their views blurred as Lightning sped up even more, and eventually, the white plains under them looked like melting cheese, flowing past as they flew.

Then that moment came.

With a boom, there came utter silence.

It was as if she shook off the restraints the world had on her, as wind and snow was left flying past her, and the whole sky became her playground.

Like what the King had said earlier, she was now the one who left sound trailing behind.

No matter how many times she repeated this, Lightning would not get bored of it.

Sometimes she had thought that she was born just for this moment.

After a few minutes, the Taquila ruins rose above the horizon.

What surprised her was that the land around the ruins had suddenly changed color. It looked like the muddy ground after the snow had melted. Yet, as she looked harder, she realized that the muddled background was a mixture of flesh and blood! Coal-black demonic beasts were swarming towards the ruins and smashed into the defense lines of the demons like waves splashing onto a shore.

Before their bodies broke into pieces.

Chapter 1038: Enemies from the Abyss

"That's..." said Lightning as she slowed down. Her eyes widened open.

Thousands of demonic beasts were swarming on the snowfield. It looked as if a black carpet was laid over the white snow. The moving "carpet" somehow reminded her of ants gnawing at corpses.

This time, however, it was not corpses they were facing, but demons who were equally brutal.

The skyscraper-like skeleton monsters moved slowly among the demonic beasts as they jostled enemies aside. With every step they took, a few demonic beasts would fail to escape and be crushed below. Their four crooked limbs looked as slim as tree branches compared to their huge size, but Lightning believed that they were thicker than Lady Agatha's Spellcaster Tower if she viewed them close-up.

There were numerous Mad Demons clinging to the monster's abdomen, towering over the beasts as they hurled their spears down. The beasts, however, had no choice but to keep pushing forward, even though their counter-attacks took little effect.

"Magic Power Parasite."

These words crossed Lightning's mind.

It was a kind of deformed demon that was between the living and the dead. It had no fixed form and was parasitic on the skeletons and black stone-like blobs. It relied on the magic power to move and launch strikes. The Spider Demons discovered in the battle on the Northbound Slope and the leviathan she was watching now were both very likely to belong to the same species.

Though the demonic beasts' tusks were sharp, they barely did any harm to the stone-like monsters. They had no choice but to bypass the skeleton monsters and attack the main body of the enemies behind these monsters.

Without a wall for the demons to take cover, the battle would be very tough.

Frenzied beasts may have the advantage when facing unarmed humans, but the odds did not favor them this time as Mad Demons were extremely strong and fast. Although they had sent out many demonic hybrid species, the demons had Lords of Hell, Siege Beasts, and Spider Demons at the front line to counter, allowing them to slaughter the demonic hybrid beasts almost as fast as the First Army did. As a

result, demonic beasts could not gain an edge over the demons, even though they largely outnumbered their enemies.

Perhaps sensing the speed had slowed down, Maggie poked her head out. She gasped upon seeing such a horrendous scene.

"The demonic beasts and demons... They're fighting?"

"So that's the reason why Neverwinter has such peaceful Months of Demons," said Lightning while pretending to analyze the problem professionally. "But it's a bit weird, didn't the Taquila ancient witches say that the demonic beasts always come after the relics of gods? I'm certain that the demons' king wouldn't bring their relics to this piece of the wastelands... This means the demonic beasts must have gathered here for other reasons. It's too bad that Sylvie didn't come with us, or we could collect more information."

Maggie cocked her head to the side and asked, "Are you still going to surprise them?"

"Of course!" said Lightning decisively. "We're so close to the ruins of Taquila, yet the Devilbeasts haven't come to stop us, so they must be distracted by the battle. What a good chance this is for us."

There was no doubt that both the demons and the demonic beasts are His Majesty's enemies. The more fierce the battle between them became, the more relaxed the army would be during the expedition that was going to start early next spring.

Lightning estimated the magic power in her body was enough for her to maintain flight at supersonic speeds for three to four minutes. In case of any dangers, she would save half of that magic power. This was more than sufficient for escaping. Overall, she was left with only two minutes to shake the demons' defense line. Thus, she had to be very cautious when choosing her flight path.

Her eyes stopped at the giant skeleton monster.

Its deformed body structure looked like an askew bench from far away. The skeleton features were composed of flat long black stones. It looked slightly similar to the glider runway built on the east coast. They seemed to be an ideal place for her to fly over.

According to her ability test results, the lower she flew, the greater the damage she would cause. Therefore if she could fly closely by the monster, the Mad Demons in its abdomen would surely suffer greatly from the impact.

His Majesty had instilled the principles of high-speed flying into her since she had awakened to this higher level. She knew that body size also decided how much energy could be detonated when her speed passed the sound barrier. If it was Maggie flying at supersonic speed over Neverwinter during that night, the whole city might have been ruined.

Hence, Lightning did not plan to crush the demons in one fell swoop.

She just wanted to make the demons suspend their attacks.

The areas under the skeleton monsters were like death zones. The demonic beasts had to avoid this. As a result, their moving speed was significantly slowed. If those brazen skeleton monsters could be pinned down, the demons' back line of defense would become more pressured.

Even if the plan did not work out, she would not be affected anyway.

As soon as she made her decision, Lightning pressed Maggie's head onto her chest and swooped toward the nearest skeleton monster!

At that moment, she had completely forgotten what Roland had warned her about.

No one could grasp sound by the tail. It was time to show them authentic flying skills!

The kilometers between her and battlefield had shrunk in a split second. When she appeared above the battlefield, it was dead silent.

But that was only in her opinion.

In the demons' eyes, it was as if thunder from the sky had all of a sudden crashed down and swooped them over. The result of the collision between the front and rear impact waves were overwhelming. While Lightning leveled off and flew five meters over the monster, the blast of the impact waves had turned the snow into clouds of white mist which almost enveloped the whole monster. The demons were howling in pain from the ear-splitting explosion.

But she had no time to enjoy how big the damage she had made, for she had five similar targets to handle.

Just as she was about to fly over the third skeleton monster, something unexpected happened!

Out of nowhere, a figure suddenly appeared on the bare platform she flying over to. The moment it stood there, it drew all her attention. There were still miles between them, but Lightning felt a sudden chill come over her. Her fingers could not stop shaking.

It was a demon, yet it looked human-like, except for its blue skin. It looked handsome and its golden eyes were deeper than the abyss of hell. They just stared at each other, but Lightning felt as though she was a frog being targeted by a viper. An instinctive dread rose from the bottom of her heart.

"What kind of monster is that?" thought Lightning.

She could feel the strong magic power in the demon's body as it distorted the surrounding air. Even though she was flying at a high speed, the power had oppressed her tangibly. It was as if she was stuck in a viscous mire and was being helplessly dragged towards the demon.

Run!

Now!

A voice was warning she to stop flying and run away immediately.

But she could not move her body at all. She had lost the control of her own body.

She saw the demon slowly raising its right arm towards her.

At this moment, something sharp pricked her chest.

It felt like someone had driven a nail straight into her body.

It was Maggie!

As the pain spread throughout the body, she instantly regained control of her limbs and time had returned to normal.

Lightning suddenly raised her body, flew upwards, and fled to Neverwinter as fast as she could without glancing back.

Chapter 1039: Decisions On Incoming Letters

"Your Majesty, this is the finance for this week," said Barov in exhilaration as he presented the report. "In short, the figures show a better uptrend than we've expected. As a matter of fact, they've spiked. In the past, this would have been a miracle!"

"Yes. Well done," said Roland as he leaned back in his chair. His expression was a lot calmer than Barov because he knew how the miracle had occurred. Both the population and economy had increased during the Months of Demons this year compared to summer and autumn, the busy seasons. This meant that the Months of Demons now had very little impact on Neverwinter. The turn of events was so dramatic, it was as if the snow outside the window was not real. For the people in this era, this report would completely reshape their common sense.

After all, when the cold winter came, people tended to consume more energy than being productive. It was as if they started to hibernate. Thus, an economic slump was commonly seen in winter. In the past, the entire border town was abandoned in winter. Hence, how could the production and trade continue without people?

However, Roland was aware that the people's choice of "hibernation" was nothing but a temporary compromise to deal with the harsh environment. Human beings had the ability to change their environment. This allowed them to top thousands of creatures on earth throughout history. The concrete boat was immune to the wind direction and could work tirelessly, making heavy snow no longer a barrier; the heating system helped people keep warm; the hospital provided medical insurance; the plants were able to run even in bad weather. As human beings became more adaptive to the environment, the "miracle" would sooner or later come.

In addition, the enthronement and the establishment of the new capital also played a role in surging these figures as people were always apt to gather in bustling places. This was a custom that has not changed for thousands of years.

Nowadays, the wide Redwater River seemed to be a bit crowded with so many concrete boats coming and going. At the end of the last year, the total number of the concrete boats manufactured in Neverwinter had exceeded 500. They had been designed for multiple purposes. Some of them had holes for quick loading and unloading; some had two stories where the lower story was for cargo while the upper story was for passengers. Its versatile design had been favored by many in the Chamber of Commerce. Since large scale of population migration could be a rare niche, the cement boats they had purchased now could be seen in many cities' docks.

Since news of the enthronement had spread, there were 500 or 600 people arriving at Neverwinter each day. One year ago, Barov had thought it was impossible to reach the population of 100,000, but the Western Region now had a total population of near 200,000, and 90% of them lived in Neverwinter.

Furthermore, it was a fact that the new capital was completely different to the traditional cities. It had neither grand walls nor division of the inner and the outer city. Instead, it was divided by circles of streets, which enlarged towards the suburbs. The city looked as if the city was a forest of houses.

Many people had criticized Neverwinter for its similar structures and lack of ornate architecture.

But to Roland, those criticisms were another kind of compliment.

How could Neverwinter bear the rapidly increasing population if there were not so many houses to accommodate them? 200,000 people were almost equal to the combined total residents in the rest of Graycastle's cities. If Neverwinter had to be walled and embellished with exquisite buildings such as the grand cathedrals, bell towers, and a palace, it would take him decades to complete.

Population was the basis of industrialization, they guaranteed the expansion of plants and provided the prerequisite for economic prosperity. The beauty of the city was the last thing he would care about.

Perhaps in his eyes, rows of chimneys discharging hot smokes were more beautiful than a magnificent palace.

Considering the time lag in spreading news, next year would see a more shocking growth.

"Stick to it, you'll get the reward you deserve," said Roland.

"Being the Hand of the King is the best reward I could ever have. It's your wise decision that makes such a difference. What I did is nothing but to follow your order," said Barov as he stroked his beard proudly.

Roland shook his head with amusement. "Do you have anything else to report?"

"Ah...Yes, Your Majesty," The old chief pulled out two letters. "These two letters were sent to the Administrative Office, but I think it requires your final decision."

"Oh?" Roland took the letter. The sender's name on the first letter looked familiar to Roland. "Kajen Fels?"

"Mr. Kajen is a great dramatist in the old king's city. He brought his troupe to Neverwinter and asked for a chance to perform a new play for you in the enthronement, but you didn't agree at the time," Barov reminded Roland.

Roland recalled it immediately. The first time he heard of this name was from the businesswoman Margaret. Back then, when he was asked about who he knew best in the capital, he blurted out the Magic Hand Yorke, which was really awkward. The City Hall officials had reported their application for a performance before the enthronement and also handed in the scripts, but he rejected the application after he quickly ran through the script. He had planned the magic movie starring Lorgar for a long time, and there was no way to cancel it for a drowsy play of a bland imperial love story.

"Mr. Kajen sent this letter before he left Neverwinter. I don't think you should be bothered with this trivia... but he was very prestigious. Are you..." The old chief's voice lowered as he said these words while looking hesitant.

Roland comprehended the implications of his statement.

According to the date on the letter, it had been a week since Barov received the letter. Barov seemed to have given much thought to this thing. He had known that his king was not good at appreciating the traditional dramas. As he saw Roland rashly deny Mr. Kajen application, the impression became deeper. Barov might be afraid of annoying Roland so he did not present the letter right after he received it. He had now hoped that Roland would spend some time reading the dramatist's letter.

As of far, he could see that Barov placed high praise on Kajen Fels.

Not only him, but also Margaret and the Chief Knight. Anyone from the old capital seemed to have a good impression of this dramatist.

If so, he may as well take a look at the letter.

Roland shrugged, unfolded the letter, and scanned through it quickly.

It was actually an inquiry about how to make the magic movie.

As Kajen had said in the letter, at first, he had asked the Star Flower Troupe about it, but May told him that the troupe was only responsible for the performance and the Witch Union was the one who turned it into a mirage. As it may be confidential, she could not give him a detailed answer. Following this, he wrote an enquiry letter to the Witch Union, but the letter was returned soon after it was sent. It was explained that the Castle District does not accept any directly-sent letters. So he had no choice but to ask the City Hall again, in the hopes that they could ask the question for him.

Generally, the leader of an industry was most hurt when something overthrew their original thought. However, in this letter, Roland read none of the frustration but the man's eagerness for the magic movie.

"I see." Roland paused thoughtfully for a moment and said, "I'll write back personally."

He had treated both the drama and the magic movie as a way to propagate for Neverwinter. He had neither time nor the energy to shoot an old imperial love story, so he might as well explain it to Kajen directly and make him desist once and for all.

"Yes, Your Majesty," said Barov as he let out a sigh of relief.

"What about the other letter?" Roland asked as he unfolded the letter. Since it was sent to the Administrative Office, Barov must have screened the letter beforehand.

"It was from a merchant called Victor Lothar."

"Did he finally stop asking for a trade in package and popcorn?" Roland laughed.

"Yes, he wants to buy cotton." Barov nodded.

"Cotton?" Roland's hands paused. "Neverwinter doesn't grow it."

"He wants a customization of it," Barov replied. "He wants Miss Leaf of the Witch Union to customize it for him."

Chapter 1040: Victor's Plan

Leaf, who had contributed the most to the growth of grain production, had been mentioned in the picture-story book, *The Witch Diaries*, long ago, and the book had been available for sale in the Convenience Market since then, so it was not strange for a foreign merchant to know about her.

However, he was the first one to ask for a specific witch for a task. The people of the four kingdoms, unlike those adventurous folks in the Fjords, were deeply influenced by the church, so they had a significant amount of prejudice against the witches. Now that there was one of them who was willing to voluntarily work with a witch, Roland could not help being a little interested.

After reading the letter, he touched his chin and said, "Coming from the Kingdom of Dawn... Do you know where he's living in Neverwinter?"

"Yes," Barov said, "The Administrative Office has kept track of him. I also asked Lady Scroll to check the taxes he has paid and found that he started to pay taxes six years ago. But at that time he mainly purchased gemstones, occasionally some furs, all of which have nothing to do with cotton."

"Interesting." Roland was well aware of how simple the tax collection system was in this era. The tax collectors had to record every tax each person had paid, and as time went by, the collectors were liable to lose track of how much the taxes were really paid, let alone check the data. The permanent residents had no choice but to pay tax as their property was clear to see, while the merchants who frequently traveled between cities should have had many tricks to avoiding paying the tax collected by the local lords. The fact that Victor's tax record could be traced back to six years ago suggested that he must be a very honest and trustworthy man, which was really uncommon for merchants.

"Send for Victor," Roland said, putting down the letter. "I need to talk to him alone."

"As you command, Your Majesty."

...

Roland soon met the merchant in the meeting room.

He really did look like a citizen of the Kingdom of Dawn. Like Andrea, he had pale golden hair. He also had a pretty face and well-maintained skin. Overall, he looked like a well-bred nobleman with the right etiquette from a wealthy family.

It was hard to imagine such a man would travel between kingdoms for his livelihood. Instead of running the business himself, he could always order some reliable men to handle the general affairs. After all, in this era, long-distance travel was tough for anyone, whether they were rich or not.

Victor gave a proper explanation for Roland's confusion—family conflicts.

In order to eschew his elder brother's oppression and prove his ability, he had to leave his home and run a business in Graycastle.

Victor's story wasn't very convincing, but Roland didn't want to be too inquisitive. In any case, Roland wasn't interested in other people's affairs. Besides, since Nightingale had not given any response, the merchant was telling the truth.

After the introduction, Roland came to the point directly. "You want Leaf to culture productive cotton seeds and aim to set up a brand new clothes shop, which would be promoted to the entire kingdom with cheap and fine clothes made of the cotton?"

What Roland had asked was not his own imaginative idea but was actually written at the end of the letter. That was one of the reasons why Roland decided to see Victor personally. It was like someone had submitted a business plan aimed at raising 100 million yuan and all he lacked was Roland's investment worth 500 yuan.

"Not just the Kingdom of Graycastle." The merchant nodded. "I've calculated the price. The finished products will still be competitive in the Kingdom of Dawn even after including the price of shipping."

Selling at a low price could help the product muscle into the market, but... that was not easy. "How do you intend to guarantee that your products can be both cheap and fine?"

"First I'll need special cotton, Your Majesty," Victor said with enthusiasm. "Since Miss Leaf was able to produce the golden wheat that had a yield three times higher than the ordinary species, I think she should also be able to triple the cotton yield. If the price of raw materials can be reduced to one-third of the current price, then clothes will be much cheaper."

Roland could not help laughing. The logic behind Victor's words seemed right at first, but you would realize how ridiculous it was if you thought it over. It would be easy for Leaf to culture the productive cotton. In fact, with the help of the vast pool of magic power given by the Heart of the Forest, she was able to culture new seed variants much faster than before. However, the price of grains in Neverwinter was set low to stabilize the price, not because they could not be sold at a high price.

It would be a great problem if people could not afford food, so the price of grains had to be controlled and kept low. However, this was not the case for cotton, as people always had alternatives to choose from, such as linen, hemp, and furs.

"Okay... Let's assume Leaf is able to make the yield of cotton three times higher. Why should I sell this cotton to you at a discounted price when I can sell it to others at the market price?"

"Because I can save you a lot of investment and provide more than 2,000 jobs, providing employment for your city," Victor said without hesitation. "Aside from that, you can get a lot of tax revenue, and your people can also benefit from it. In fact, you don't have to do anything, as I can handle all the management affairs and the production line."

Roland was surprised by Victor's answer that was full of modern terms. He considered it for a long while before he asked, "Did you learn those words... from the newspapers?"

"That, and every one of Neverwinter's announcements. I've studied them all. Some of the words may be quite awkward when I first read them, but they have helped me understand business from another angle," Victor said with his hand on his chest. "The other lords would throw me out if I had proposed a reduction in the price in front of them, but I believe you can see the value in this."

"This is quite a sneaky compliment... If I throw him out now, I'll be no different from 'the other lords'?" Roland smiled slightly. "Tell me your plan."

Victor spoke eloquently about his plan for nearly an hour. Apparently, he was well-prepared in advance.

His idea was not complicated. In brief, he wanted to build a business system that integrated the farming, textile production, and sales. House Lothar had quite a long history of making garments, so he already had much relevant experience and technique. Once the project started, it would not be long before they saw the fruits of their labor.

Of course, anyone could paint an attractive blueprint with their rhetoric, but Roland kept listening because he saw that Victor had taken many details into account and planned well in advance. Neverwinter was not a suitable place for growing cotton, so the plantation and the textile factory had to be located in the Southern Territory, where there was ample sunshine and high temperatures all throughout the year. Meanwhile, as the Sand Nation people were still moving in, there would be a great deal of labor available. Everything seemed to fit in with the plan. The final sewing and garment production would be set up in Neverwinter, where it could be directly sold to the people here, who could afford the clothes.

Victor would be responsible for the initial investment and preparations, such as purchasing farmland, recruiting farmers, building manufacturing plants, and buying equipment. Neverwinter did not need to risk anything, for it spent neither time nor any money on the venture. As a matter of fact, apart from providing the productive strains cotton seeds, Neverwinter could just step back and reap the profits.

In addition, due to the simple usage of cotton, the output of the final products could be easily assessed from the amount of the materials that went in, so it was easy for Roland to calculate the tax, which was a relief to both him and Victor.

Among the advantages Victor had mentioned, Roland preferred two of them in particular: the first was that House Lothar already had efficient spinning tools that were capable of processing three times the yield of the cotton; the other was that they had trained a number of skilled tailors who often designed garments for the nobles in the City of Glow, so the clothes they made would be popular with many people. Victor also admitted that this business idea was inspired by when he watched 'The Wolf Princess'. He found that the citizens of Neverwinter were still plainly dressed, which was improper for a new capital.

These two points were the key to the entire plan, for, with them, this huge and ambitious business proposal was no longer a castle in the air, but actually quite feasible.