

## Witch 1081

### Chapter 1081: A Quiet Night

The whole encampment lapsed into a dead silence after nightfall.

Everybody sank into deep slumber after working for a whole day, including the witches.

Yet Lightning was wide awake.

Her insomnia had started around half a month ago — or rather, she had been feeling restless ever since her departure from the Misty Forest. The marks of Maggie's beak began to throb again, reminding her of the experience on that day.

Lightning did not know whether the pain was real or not. She had tried many different methods to distract herself but none of them worked. The wound was still there. It neither aggravated nor disappeared but remained on her chest like a permanent scarlet stain that refused to come off.

Lightning was distraught. Every day, she stayed awake until three or four in the morning before falling into a short, restless sleep. Haunted by constant nightmares, she would wake up with a flinch at the slightest sound made around her.

Lightning let out an almost inaudible sigh. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Maggie lying sprawled across her bed in a deep slumber.

She tucked her wrinkled blanket under Maggie's armpits, slid off the bed and walked out of the room quietly.

The witches' encampment was laid at the center of the campsite, guarded by the God's Punishment Witches. As Lightning did not want to disturb them, she flew out of the campsite and landed on the half-completed railway quietly.

The moonlight slanted along the road and silvered the edge of the railway tracks. A night breeze sighed through the field, ruffling bushes and trees. Dimly, she could hear birds chirping and insects sing. She would have liked a night like this before, but now she was just not in the mood to appreciate the beauty of nature.

Lightning did not even have the courage to look in Taquila's direction. She knew that the monster hiding in the dark was still watching her. Every time she sensed its gaze, her hand would automatically reach for her wound in the chest.

Looking at the crossties stretching across the field, Lightning felt bitter.

It had actually taken her a month to finally overcome her fear and fly over the low city wall of Neverwinter. Lightning knew she might never be able to directly confront the Senior Demons in Taquila, but she believed that as long as she continued with her rehabilitation program, she would, at least one day, be able to return to her original condition prior to the incident.

Yet the reality was ruthless. She not only lost the ability to summon her power at will but also had difficulties flying. What was worse, she even started to become scared of regular demons.

In the past, she and Maggie could beat four Mad Demons effortlessly.

But now, she could only tail the enemy at a distance, waiting for them to retreat.

In other words, she was a hindrance to the operation.

The thought almost brought Lightning to tears.

No matter how hard she tried to conceal her secret, people would eventually discover it.

Even Maggie, who was usually slow at understanding things, had noticed something different about her.

Perhaps one day, Maggie would go her own way, leaving her timid-self behind.

By then, what should she do?

"I'm so useless," Lightning mumbled as she crouched down and buried her head between her knees.

"How can a person, so afraid of demons, be the captain of the Exploration Group? They'll definitely laugh at me if they know what a craven I am... I always regarded myself as the greatest explorer, but the truth is, I'm just a coward."

"Yes, you are," a voice in her head said reprimandingly. "They'll sooner or later know who you are and laugh at you."

"But I don't want this..." Lightning said and broke into a sob.

"Now you see the consequence of bragging. If you don't want anybody to mock you, you'd better leave for somewhere nobody knows. Otherwise, you'll be a laughing stock for sure."

"Is this the only way? To leave?"

"No, you can't leave," a voice said suddenly.

"Who's there?" Aghast, Lightning yelled and jerked her head upward. She saw a familiar figure not far away from her, with a pair of long ears and a tail wagging in the ghostly opaline white moonlight. "... Lorgar?" Lightning cried.

"Ahem..." The wolf girl answered on a cough. "As a disclaimer, it wasn't my intention to eavesdrop on you."

Lightning now noticed that Lorgar was drenched in sweat. Her olive skin, a typical feature of Mojins, was sparkling like dewy gemstones.

"Are you... on training?"

"Yes. I'm not as strong as an Extraordinary. Although I can transform into a wolf, I still need to strengthen my body. Otherwise, I'll become weak, let alone combatting," said Lorgar as she spread out her hands. "We haven't encountered any demons lately, and I've promised the chief not to leave the campsite. To make sure that I receive adequate physical training every day, I have to work out at night."

"I see..." Lightning mumbled, now completely back to the present. She took a deep breath, buried her face in her hands and asked, "Did you, hear everything?"

She did not even need an answer. Wolves normally had an acute sense of hearing.

Lightning felt the heat rise in her face and neck.

"Well..." Lorgar paused for a second and said, "I've never comforted anyone before, so I can't offer you solace. However, I want to tell you my father's story."

"He was born in the Wildflame clan and is a member of the Burnflame Family, but nobody expected him to be the chief of the clan at that time, because he has a big weakness compared to his eight brothers. My father doesn't like social events. He's afraid of hunting by himself, and hunting is a big social event by which the Mojins choose their chief. After all, a chief not only needs to manage affairs within his clan but also exert his influence on other tribes. Every clan would choose the best of their younger generations to showcase their power."

Lightning was at a loss for words. She could not believe what she had heard. The unsociable person whom Lorgar talked about had not only overshadowed everyone during the Neverwinter Sport Meeting but had also caught King Roland's attention. Was that man really Lorgar's father?

"To be honest, I didn't believe it when my father told me, so I went to check with my grandfather," Lorgar went on smilingly as she approached Lightning slowly and crouched down next to her. "But it was true. I asked my grandfather why he selected my father as the chief of our clan, and he said Guelz probably couldn't achieve anything by himself, but he is the strongest warrior in the clan with the support of his clansmen. So why not pick him? It's because clansmen should always support each other, and this is how a clan survives. A hunting event doesn't prove anything."

Lightning's heart missed a beat.

"I actually feel happy about... what my father and my elder brother did for me in Neverwinter," Lorgar said while dropping her ears. "My father did something he would have never done if it wasn't for me... He did something quite embarrassing."

"Hmm, r-really? You stormed off and went back to the Witch Building, leaving them in the castle hall alone. You said you didn't want to see them again, although I do admit that their outfits were a little inappropriate in that situation." thought Lightning.

"My grandfather probably wanted me to understand that courage not only comes from within but also from outside," said Lorgar slowly. "So why do you have to care so much about how other people look at you? If your team members in the Exploration Group come across a crisis, will you leave them alone?"

After a moment of silence, Lightning replied quietly, "... thank you."

"I've told you I'm not comforting you. I'm just telling you a story," said the wolf girl who jerked her head away. "So, you don't need to thank me for anything. Plus, I find the Exploration Group sort of interesting... As a group member, I'm obligated to cheer you up."

Lightning was on the verge of tears. She rubbed her eyes hastily, pretending it was a trick of winds. When she finally calmed herself down and was ready to speak, Lorgar suddenly turned around and clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Shh..."

"What's the matter?" After Lorgar lifted her hand, Lightning asked in hushed voice.

"Do you hear anything?"

Huh? Lightning raised her head and listened carefully. Other than the whistling wind, she heard nothing.

"Hang on... it seems the owls and the insects have stopped singing."

"Something is coming this way from there," Lorgar said while pricking up her ears, her eyes resting on the night sky in the east. "This whistle is... watch out!"

She grabbed Lightning by her waist, and the two girls rolled down a slope to the curb!

Just at that moment, they heard a deafening roar crack through the air above!

Chapter 1082: A Battle in the Darkness

"What just happened?"

Lightning felt her head swimming. By the time she returned to the present, she found herself surrounded by numerous long black needles as thick as a man's finger. These lusterless crystals landed in the vicinity of the railway, point down, quivering like black swords.

Then, a few more blasts from the encampment shattered the silence of the night.

"This is... an attack!"

The enemy had sent the Spider Demons to attack the Expedition Corp!

By the time Lightning realized what had happened, the enemy had started their second round. This time, however, the noise did not come from the sky but traveled through the trembling ground underneath, thudding as if a heavy object were smashed into the earth.

"Oh, no..." Lorgar muttered under her breath. "That's where the Longsong Cannons are."

It appeared that the demons first located the encampment before they attacked the cannons. Could they really do that in such a pitch-black night?

"Why hasn't the alarm gone off yet?"

"I've got to wake everybody up!" Lightning yelled. Since she did not take her flight suit or sigil with her when she sneaked out, she had to fly back to the campsite against the heavy fire above the encampment. At this thought, Lightning grabbed Lorgar by her arm, trying to hoist her up to her feet.

"You..." Lightning turned around. To her great surprise, she saw a long needle half buried in Lorgar's leg, nailing the wolf girl into the ground. Blood oozed profusely from her wound and soaked her pants.

Lightning suddenly felt suffocating.

It was her fault that Lorgar got hurt...

"Don't be stupid," Lorgar said, grinning. "The needle would get me regardless. Probably my condition would have been even worse if I didn't meet you. Fortunately, there's no demons' blood on these stone needles, so I just got a scratch."

"What scratch! Your bone is broken," Lightning said within herself. From the volume of the blood, the needle might have reached Lorgar's main blood vessel. If that was the case, it should be handled very carefully. However, where could she find Nana now? If the Mad Demons came back, Lorgar would literally become a sitting duck, completely vulnerable and defenseless!

Lightning revolved a multitude of thoughts in her head rapidly but could not find a solution.

"Look," Lorgar said feebly as she put her hand on Lightning's shoulder. "You need to get to that big machine on the railway..."

"Do you mean the 'Blackriver'?" Lightning asked in surprise. "But..."

"Everybody should have heard the bombing by now," the wolf girl said painfully. "The problem is how we're going to deal with it. If my assumption is right, at least half of the enemy are coming for the Longsong Cannons. It seems to me that they're also using weapons other than stone needles. I don't know what's happening there, but if... if the demons get what they want, we would lose the only weapon that has a chance to repulse them. You know its possible consequence, don't you?"

If that happened, the Spider Demons would be able to pour down black needles at the encampment unscrupulously and break through the entire defensive line.

Lightning nodded.

"Aargh... then hurry up..." Lorgar urged, pushing Lightning on the back. "Although this is the first place being attacked, it's actually the safest. I'm not their target anyway... Look over there..."

Lightning looked in the direction Lorgar pointed at and saw the wooden watchtower at the end of the railway had been chopped off by half as if it were engulfed by the darkness.

"So, run! To the 'Blackriver'—" the wolf girl shouted at the top of her lungs through her teeth. "Only you can do that now!"

She was right. Flying would be the fastest way to deliver a message to the armored train traveling between the front and Station No. 0.

Lightning clenched her fist. She cast one last glance at Lorgar before turning around reluctantly. Within a second, she soared into the air and zoomed toward the encampment.

A few gunshots reached her ears.

As Lorgar had predicted, the whole campsite was awakened. Although the soldiers did not know where their enemy came from, they all scrambled to their feet and armed themselves for the upcoming battle.

So did the witches.

God's Punishment Witches were always the first ones to get themselves ready. They were light sleepers who kept their armors on even in their sleep. When Lightning dashed back into her room, she found an anxious Maggie pacing up and down in agitation.

"Where have you been, coo?" Maggie asked, throwing herself onto Lightning in a hug that nearly knocked her flat. "Why didn't you tell me you were out for a walk, coo?"

"I'm sorry, but I have to head to the 'Blackriver' now. I'll fill you in later," said Lightning with a surge of guilt. She had thought that tactless as Maggie was, she would never understand what fear meant. However, she had been wrong. Maggie might not necessarily feel scared, but she did care for her friend.

"I'll come with you, coo."

"No, they need you here," Lightning said, although deep down inside, she really wanted to have Maggie in her company. "Sylvie needs you to help her monitor the encampment. The more people keep an eye on the demons, the better!"

"Cheer up! I can't drag everyone's feet anymore," Lightning reminded herself.

"Also, I need you to do one thing for me first," Lightning added as she put on her flight suit as fast as she could. She brushed Maggie's long hair from her forehead, held her face with both her hands and said, "Please promise me that you'll succeed in this mission. It's the most important task of the Exploration Group."

"Coo?" Maggie asked while blinking.

"Please find Nana and take her to the end of the railway. Lorgar is seriously injured and is currently lying there. Please make sure you bring her back, ok?"

Maggie bent her head firmly and said, "Coo!"

"Then I'll entrust the matter to you," said Lightning as she gently pressed her forehead to Maggie's. She then flew straight out of the room.

As she climbed, she noticed the reason why the alarm had not gone off in the first place.

The five watchtowers in the outer ring of the defensive line were now all gone. Apparently, they had been destroyed during the enemy's first attack. Those watchtowers should have been fortified strongholds equipped with concrete blockhouses. However, since they had just started the construction of Tower Station No. 0, they had yet to erect web wires on the outer side of the trenches, let alone a complete set of fortifications.

What further unnerved Lightning was that the gunshots appeared to have come from the inner circle of the encampment, which meant that the soldiers were currently fighting against someone. Nevertheless, she had seen no sign that indicated the defensive line had been broken through so far. Although the enemy was still attacking the campsite, they seemed to be quite far away. So, who were the soldiers fighting against?

She started to understand how important her role was.

"Yes, I'm a coward."

"Yes, I lost to the Senior Demon."

"But there's still something I'm capable of..."

"Which is flying!"

"I admit I'm scared."

"As long as I don't look toward the north, I should be fine."

"I don't even need to face regular demons."

"I just need to fly straight to the railway. There's no excuse for me to be so timid anymore!"

Lightning sped up as she zoomed toward the forest along the "Black River".

"Faster, just a little faster!"

As she kept pushing herself, gradually, she felt her power come back. When she overcame her fear, the whole world around her became silent.

For the first time in such a long time, Lightning entered the Realm of Silence again after her awakening!

Chapter 1083: A Black Apparition

Danny leaped out of the bed when he heard the first blast.

In the next moment, something splattered against the roof before crumbs and chipped stones started to rain down from the ceiling. The whole house began to wobble violently.

"W-what happened?"

"Is it an earthquake?"

His companions were all startled. The pitch-black room soon sank into chaos.

"No, it's a raid!" The soldier closest to the door yelled as he snatched up his rifle. He was about to rush out when Danny pinned him down to the floor. "What are you doing?" the soldier barked.

"Don't move. They're still attacking us!" Danny growled.

As Danny had expected, soon a few more blasts reached their ears, and something hailed down at the roof again.

"D-Damn it, that is..."

In a cloud of dust, someone lit a candle. After the dark was dispersed by the dim candlelight, everybody sucked in their breath in horror.

Thousands of sharp black needles had pierced the ceiling. In the flickering light, they looked like human hairs hanging upside down.

"That was a Spider Demon..." The soldier on the ground swallowed hard. Most members of the sniper unit had participated in the first expedition, so they knew the Spider Demons pretty well. The soldier on the floor immediately realized what would have happened to him had he rushed out of the house.

"If I survive this battle, I'll buy two lamb legs and thank Miss Lotus in person," another soldier promised as he patted his chest.

The soldiers normally lived in a tent during a battle; but this time, the witches built a few concrete houses for them. Although they were not sure whether it was a decision made by the management team or not, the concrete dwellings had definitely saved them on this particular occasion. If they had lived in a tent, they would have been long dead by now.

"Don't be so pessimistic. I'm still looking forward to my wedding."

"You just want to fawn over Miss Lotus, don't you?"

"Nonsense. If he intends to fawn over someone, it has to be Miss Angel, Nana."

It was a narrow escape, but none of them looked very concerned about this raid. They quickly armed themselves with weapons and ammunition while jabbering.

Because they all knew one thing.

Death was unavoidable and inevitable. Rather than worrying about their unforeseeable future, it would be more practical to kill the enemy.

As the campsite became gradually alive with noises, Danny pushed open the door and dashed out of the room while ducking his head.

The few sentinels outside the barrack were long dead. The whole encampment was raucous: people were yelling; demons were howling; there were also gunshots and explosions everywhere. Nobody knew the number and whereabouts of the enemy. The watchtower was enveloped in an impenetrable darkness with no lights on to point them direction, as though these demons all had come out of nowhere.

Danny clambered straight up to the roof and sprinted in the direction where he heard the least gunshots, totally ignoring his desperate companions shouting behind him.

"I thought you would look for the place where most people are."

He heard Malt chuckle in his head.

This was the reason he liked fighting.

His partner would only appear when he threw himself into a battle.

"If there are many people, it means our guys are in an advantageous position. My presence would just help them finish off their enemy faster," Danny replied. "However, on-and-off gunshots indicate someone is having a bitter fight. They tell me that my bullet is in need."

"I'd told you before that it wasn't your fault— you can't save everyone on a battlefield."



"But at least I can save the ones I see," Danny said with a smile. "Don't worry. I feel good. I can see you better now."

Danny looked around. As he had expected, he saw his old partner float out of the darkness, running next to him.

Danny soon found a high point of the battleground as he proceeded. After he climbed up a tottering pile of iron cases, he immediately spied some Longsong Cannons standing in an open field in his vicinity. A few demons were using bunkers to have physical altercations with some artilleries. Apparently, the artilleries, not equipped with heavy weapons, were having a difficult time subduing the demons. They could not easily recover their encampment while the latter was spearing.

Many people were lying sprawled in pools of blood, penetrated by bone spears on the road leading to the artillery field.

"How did they get here?"

"I have no idea, but I'm now going to finish them," Danny said as he raised his long gun and aimed it at a demon who sneaked up behind a barrack. If this demon succeeded in his attempt, the artillerymen would suffer an onslaught. However, the demon was now too focused on its own undertaking to realize that a sniper was right behind it.

Danny pulled the trigger without the slightest hesitation. As a cloud of Red Mist erupted from the back of its head, the demon fell off the roof and plummeted to the ground.

Danny could literally hit anyone within 100 meters in the moonlight.

"Good job. Watch out for your left-hand side. Someone's coming."

Danny then saw five or six soldiers crouch at a corner, inching toward the edge of the wall, planning to have a desperate struggle with the demons despite the raining spears.

"Very brave fellows but pretty silly as well. Without a shield, you can't possibly survive the spearing attack," Danny muttered under his breath, his lips curling up into a smile. "How about hanging in there for a bit longer?"

He quickly fired three shots, and the bullets landed right beside the soldiers' feet just when they were about to make their move. Frightened by the whistle of the bullets and resultant dust, they shrank back.

"They would bite your head off if they knew it was you," Malt said apprehensively.

"Hahaha." Danny broke into a laughter. "Let them be." He re-aimed his gun at the Mad Demons and shot in rapid succession. Deterred by the gunshots, the demons stopped attacking the barrack and hid themselves.

Just then, a loud noise cracked through the air above.

"Watch out! Look over there!"

No sooner had Malt finished his warning than several shadows descended from the sky and dived to the encampment.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

The earth quavered when the shadows hit the ground.

In the moonlight, Danny found out in his great dismay that they were actually three giant black stone pillars! The stone pillars started to billow clouds of Red Mist after they landed. They sizzled just like the steam engine invented by His Majesty.

But he soon realized they were not machines.

Three thick slabs peeled off the big pillars, producing a ton of "blood". The pillars were then divided into three parts, each of which contained a demon! These demons were enveloped in a fluid-filled sac, just as a baby floated in its mother's womb. After the sac was drained of blood, the demons awoke, revealing their gruesome tusks.

A bullet landed precisely on one of the Mad Demons' head when it walked out of a black stone pillar.

"Crack!"

The demon staggered and then slumped against the stone pillar with a thud.

"So this is how you came here," Danny snorted as he reloaded his gun. "Why didn't you just stay in there since you weren't fully awake anyway? Come as you like, but I'll kill every single one of you. Watch me, Malt!"

Chapter 1084: In Battle Fumes

The battle became fiercer as the enemy continued to attack.

With a whoosh, a dozen stone pillars plunged from above. Thick ashes and smoke, mixed with the Red Mist, permeated the air and overspread the pale moon. Chipped stones splattered against the ground, forcing people to bow their heads. The whole situation turned into a sort of doomsday disaster. One stone pillar landed right on one of the iron cases. The shockwaves sent Danny flying across the battlefield. By the time he realized what had happened, he had laid in a heap on the ground.

"Aargh... damn it," Danny muttered between his coughs, feeling a pain lance through his chest. Meanwhile, he also tasted blood in his mouth. "Malt, are... are you OK?"

"I'm fine," Malt replied next to him anxiously, "but you are hurt!"

"I've probably got a broken rib," said Danny through his teeth, wincing. "It's not a big deal though. As long as I can still pull the trigger, I can continue to fight..."

He fumbled in the darkness for his gun frantically, a little panic until he finally found it.

"No, you should run, as fast as you can!" Malt implored.

Danny struggled to draw himself up and leaned against a dented iron case behind him.

It almost cost him all his strength.

He saw a towering black stone pillar loom against the cloud of Red Mist, about to open.

Danny raised his gun slowly and placed it on his shoulder while using his knee to stabilize the weapon. Since the target was just ten meters away, he did not think he would miss it.

"Stop! That's enough! Why don't you leave?"

Danny could hear Malt scream. He also wanted to ask himself the same question.

"Because I don't want to leave the battlefield and I don't want to lose you..."

The moment he fired, the slab collapsed.

He hit it.

Before the demon tore the sac open, the bullet had penetrated his forehead.

This time, however, the demon did not fall flat on its face.

It walked out of the pillar while shaking what remained of the sac off his body and stopped before Danny.

It was an armored demon much larger than a Mad Demon. As it drew itself to its full, magnificent height, it cast Danny into a long shadow that spread across the sky. In the utter darkness, Danny could only see its red eyes glinting maliciously.

Danny reloaded the gun and pulled the trigger again.

With a clink, sparks flew off the demon's chest and pale blue waves rippled across its body.

The demon fixed Danny with a cool stare and slouched toward him.

It did not draw out its weapon but continue to shuffle toward him with a supercilious look on its face.

Danny repeated the same action mechanically. He reloaded the gun and fired, but his bullets seemed to have lost their magic touch.

"No..." Malt broke into a sob in despair.

Upon the fourth shot, dazzling flames suddenly erupted from the demon's chest.

"Bang!"

With an earsplitting crash, the demon was sent flying across the field and straight into an iron case.

Danny stood transfixed on the ground, watching a tendril of smoke escape from the muzzle in amazement.

Then he saw a man in front of him.

"Run, mortal," said the man as he turned around. "This is not something you can handle. We'll take over from here."

The man was carrying a rifle with a huge caliber, the bullets around his waist as thick as his wrist. Apparently, they were not something a normal man could carry. Further, the man was plastered with the same armor the demon was wearing.

"Special Unit of Strategies and Tactics".

Those were the words that came to Danny's mind at that moment.

This unit had become the most mysterious unit of the First Army since their debut during the first expedition. They never attended their training sessions, so nobody knew exactly how many of them there were and where they were stationed. The only thing he knew about them was that they were all picked by His Majesty himself and were considered as the most powerful troops in Neverwinter.

"Grrrrrr—"

The demon crawled out of the overturned iron case and hollered angrily. It finally changed its haughty attitude and reached for the giant double-edged sword on its back.

"Hmm, a Senior Demon promoted from Lord of Hell? No wonder you have such a strong magic reaction," the man said to the demon as much as he said to himself as he dashed toward his enemy fearlessly. "We've been waiting for this moment for a long time!"

Several soldiers armored in the same fashion followed at his heels. As the group joined the battle, the situation gradually changed. Despite their heavy load, they moved and walked much faster than a regular soldier. As they slowly cornered the enemy, their attack turned more brutal and even savage. After they exhausted their ammunition, instead of using bunkers, they switched to bayonets and started to stab the enemy ferociously.

The demon was actually swifter than it appeared. However, surrounded by the four raging warriors who were apparently out of their minds, it finally yielded to its fate. Its blue ripples started to fade.

No wonder they were picked by the king.

Yet this was also Danny's battlefield.

Danny would never back off unless he died.

He forced himself to sit up, supported his gun with his own body and aimed it at the battlefield.

When he shot down a Mad Demon that attempted to launch a surprise attack at the Special Unit of Strategies and Tactics from behind, the warrior turned around and cast him a glance from a distance.

Danny pulled open the bolt and took a sharp intake of the air saturated with the smell of gunpowder in a way an addict inhaled heroin. It was a mixed feeling of pain and satisfaction.

"Doesn't it feel good, Malt?"

...

"Darn! What the hell is the Artillery Battalion doing?"

"Can't they stop those raining stone needles?"

"I hope they didn't send newbies to the front."

Down the trenches in the outer ring of the encampment, some soldiers were complaining behind shields, and Fishball was one of them. Although he was a member of the anti-aircraft machine gun squad, he did not think it a good idea to operate the machine guns when their enemy happened to be something more grisly than flying Devilbeasts.

After they had been wakened up, they had immediately manned the defensive line according to the predetermined procedure. They soon bombarded a few demons with crossfire and mortars on their way, so the defensive line remained intact. The soldiers on duty were confused as to who they were killing next. When everybody thought their mission would be exterminating loose invaders, they received a new order from their superior, who instructed them not to leave the trenches under any circumstances whilst preparing themselves for a fight against their real enemy.

A group of demons was coming to attack the campsite from both the east and the south. They were the main force of the enemy.

Fish Ball thought of the expedition that had taken place a few months ago, where swarms of demons had sprinted toward them at a tremendous speed. It was a chilling scene to behold. Fortunately, the First Army had got themselves well prepared. Their gunfire had stopped the demons somewhere 200 meters away from the encampment.

Yet now, there were no fortified blockhouses around the defensive line, and artillery reinforcements had yet to show up. Every now and then, a blast cracked like a whip through the air above them. As they could practically see nothing through the inky darkness, Fish Ball was not sure whether they would be as lucky as the last time.

"They're coming!" Suddenly, someone yelled. "They are 1,500 meters away from us. Everybody, stay alert!"

"1,500 meters? We can barely see anything within 200 meters!" Fish Ball complained within himself. He knew the order was given by the witch who possessed the Eye of Magic. However, as a soldier, he must obey orders. Under no circumstances could he desert his post. Fish Ball clenched his teeth, ready to fire.

Just at that moment, the train let out a long shrill whistle in the distance!

Chapter 1085: Attack and Defense

"Could you make it a little faster?" Lightning hovered beside the conductor, so tempted to push the train forward herself. However, she knew that even Maggie could not move such a colossal machine barehanded. "Could you shove more coals into the boiler?"

"Haha, the boiler would burst under high air pressure, little girl!" said the conductor, a silver-haired old man who looked more like a kind-hearted next-door neighbor than a soldier. He yelled back over the clunk of the train, "Don't worry. It isn't that easy to beat the First Army, even for the demons from Hell."

Lightning pursed her lips and fell silent.

Although the train was running at an enormous speed, Lightning was still quite anxious. It had not taken her a very long time to find the "Blackriver", for the train was, after all, too large to miss. She had actually startled everybody on the train when she had burst in. Other than that, everything went as planned. As a member of the Witch Union, she had soon convinced the conductor, who had then ordered his crew to turn the train about.

Yet this did not ease her mind at all.

After the train turned around and headed in the direction of Tower Station No. 1, Lightning finally got hold of Sylvie. The message from Sylvie gave her a leaden feeling in her stomach: the demons had caught the First Army off-guard, and their main force was now hurrying to the encampment from two different directions. If the First Army did not get the support of the artillery anytime sooner, the situation was going to be quite precarious.

After receiving the news, Lightning could not feel as optimistic as the old conductor anymore.

The only good thing was that Maggie had successfully located injured Lorgar. The latter was now out of danger after receiving Nana's treatment.

"It's noisy and windy out there. Don't you want to come in? I don't like yelling all the time," the conductor said as he took a deep pull on his pipe. He leaned against the window and said, "It's wobbly but at least it's warm in here. The boiler works much better than a fireplace!"

"No... thanks," Lightning declined the offer while casting a glance at the rickety dashboard. She shook her head and said, "I'm fine."

The conductor was right. It was indeed the fastest the "Blackriver" could get.

If the train ran a little faster than this, it would definitely fall apart even if the boiler could manage such a crazy speed.

"I know you're still worried about the encampment. Do you have any family members or friends there?"

"Yes," Lightning answered with an apprehensive look.

"So do I," the conductor said as he stroked his beard. "I have two actually!"

"Oh?" Lightning was a bit surprised. She had thought otherwise, for the conductor did not seem to be very worried at all.

"I used to be a miner and I had four children before. My first one died of a chill, and the other three survive the arrival of King Wimbledon," the old man explained smilingly. "My two sons used to be as frail and weak as mice. However, after they joined the army, they've changed a lot. That's why I'm confident in the First Army. An army with people like that would not be so easily defeated."

Lightning doubted the credibility of his words, but she asked, "What about the other one?"

"He's right on this train," said the conductor as he tapped his pipe. "He's the lookout who found you approach the train in the first place."

The old man paused for a second and then went on, looking quite proud of himself, "His Majesty brought so many changes to this town, and I wanted to do something for him in return. It was quite boring to stay at the mine all day, to be honest. I reckoned it would be much more fun to travel around. When his Majesty came to hire machine engine operators to operate the train, I applied for the conductor position. With a stroke of luck, I got the job."

Lightning twitched her lips and was about to say something when the telephone on the control panel suddenly rang.

"Father, I just saw Tower Station No. 1! There's a fight going on there and I can see flames and flickers of light!" The voice on the other end of the line was so loud that even Lightning could hear it clearly outside the window.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to call me father in the army?" the old man bellowed over the phone. "Keep an eye on the front. I'm going to sound the alarm and tell them that the reinforcements are coming!"

He then tugged on his whiskers at Lightning and said, "See? They can't be defeated that fast, right?" Then, the old conductor turned around, pulled the string behind him and hollered, "Let's go, lads!"

"Woooooo—"

About seven minutes later, with a deep groan, the "Blackriver" slowed down and joined the battle after a long, low-pitched whistle.

Stones needles were smashed to pieces as they hit the railway. When the black stone and the steel clashed, a jet of sparks flew off the inky locomotive.

Several demons approached the railway, attempting to stop the giant steel beast from advancing, believing that they could stop the trundling train barehanded. They all, as a result, got sucked under the train and were crushed into a pulp.

No living creature could possibly stop a train, no matter how slow the train appeared.

In the meantime, the machine guns at the front and the rear of the armored train started to rake through the area. Caught in the crossfire, the demons had no time to take refuge. Their bone spears were virtually ineffective on the "Blackriver".

Lightning, on the other hand, had flown into the turret.

"Sylvie, where's our target?"

"Right in front of you around 3,300 meters away," Sylvie answered, apparently having noticed the train as well. She blurted out the firing parameters at once. "We have a clear field. Ready to go!"

The artillerymen started working as soon as the train came to a complete halt.

...

Sylvie could now see that the enemy's main force enter their shooting range.

There were just around 5,000 demons this time, much less than when they had fought at the Northbound Slope. Like some random bandits, the demons were in quite a loose formation. The First Army thus pretty much prevailed the entire battlefield, making the whole situation a little odd and bloodcurdling.

A short way farther on, the vision of the Eye of Magic distorted.

An impenetrable blackness rose above the ground, blocking the view of the Magic Eye. However, this was different from an interference of a God's Stone of Retaliation. An anti-magic area generated by a God's stone was a clean-cut block, whereas the black vision ahead was more like something else... like a living being.

It came so suddenly, for there had been nothing just a second ago.

The long needles pelting down at the campsite and the stone pillars had all come from that black mantle.

This was the toughest and the most intense battle Sylvie had ever experienced. The whole battle, from the ambush to the attack, gave her a sinister feeling. She could not see clearly, and it appeared that everything the demons had done so far was targetting her.

She had no time to think about how the enemy had got so close to the encampment unnoticed. Her sole focus was on the "Blackriver".

Since she did not know the exact location of the demons, she had to make adjustments according to the landing spots of the bullets.

After she waited for a long time in anxiety, the "Blackriver" finally produced its first thunderous roar. Scorching flames lit the encampment, and firelight reflected off the gleaming train!

The cannonball traveled even faster than the sound.

It penetrated the thick air, weaving through the darkness as the air rippled behind it.

Chapter 1086: A Sharp Confrontation

At the same time, the demons started to charge both flanks of First Army.

Within two minutes, they were 500 meters closer, darting from somewhere 1,500 meters away to somewhere less than 1,000 meters from the encampment. If this had happened in broad daylight, the First Army would have been able to see the enemy clearly at this distance. However, the poor visibility at night significantly impacted their vision. Although Sylvie had notified the liaison officer about the demons' movement immediately, the First Army had failed to react fast enough.

What was more astonishing was that the demons actually dropped prone on their stomachs when artillery shells landed near them. With their strong limbs, they crawled pretty fast. As the demons were spread out, the machine guns were much less effective.



Sylvie remembered that the machine gun squad used to be invincible. They could block attacks in any forms and annihilate every single enemy within their shooting range as fast as farmers reaped their crops. Within a second, they could cause considerable damage to their enemy. The unification war of Graycastle and the defeat of the church had provided perfect examples.

However, this time, bullets kept missing the demons. With them crawling forward in the dark, it was hard to kill the demons.

Sylvie warned the front at once. However, since the soldiers could not see where the bullets were hitting, they weren't able to correct their aim.

Fortunately, the attack on the other side was effective. As the black mantle could only block the Magic Eye but not artillery shells, the shells streaked across the battlefield from 3,000 meters away. Firelight lit up the inky sky. Broken limbs and chipped black stones were thrown out from the black shroud as the shells exploded.

Based on the area she was blind to and the rate at which the demons' projectiles were fired, Sylvie believed that the Spider Demons had formed columns. It was the only way could they fill such a small space with as many Spider Demons as possible.

"Keep firing! March forward in 20 meters increments!" Sylvie shouted over the Sigil of Listening.

"Got it!"

The most important thing at the moment was to stop the enemy from launching any more long-distance strikes. As long as the defensive line was still there, the demons could not easily break through. The closer they were from the encampment, the easier it would be for the soldiers to see them. Additionally, First Army had other weapons besides machine guns.

If the defensive line was broken, the whole army could face annihilation.

Fish Ball was praying at the front that no stone needles would land on his head. He came to a shooting position while clenching his teeth.

In fact, he was quite surprised that he had the courage to dash out of the trench. If this had happened in the past, he would have probably wetted himself already while imploring the commander to spare his life.

Perhaps the comment "you aren't a craven" or the roar of the artillery behind him made him bold. In the end, he managed to remain at his post, thus avoiding the fate of being the first military officer executed for desertion. Although he was just a unit leader, he still needed to set a good example for his team. Yet Fish Ball knew that he would normally never agree to take such a risky assignment, as he treasured his life more than money.

Fish Ball had to admit that the army was an incredible place. Once the first soldier darted out of the trench against hailing gunfires, the rest would automatically follow. When the intense atmosphere reached a certain point, his brain simply stopped functioning properly and all he could do was to follow the procedure mechanically.

"Captain, the cartridge has been loaded!" his men yelled.

Fish Ball took a deep breath and lowered the muzzle of the Mark I. Although he was a member of the anti-aircraft machine gun squad, the gun he was using was still equipped with a rear sight and an optical sight, which let him aim at the demons on the ground. The two baffle plates on either side of his machine gun were mainly to protect him from the spears pelting down from the sky. Once he lowered the plates, his back would be unprotected. Therefore, apart from praying, he could only draw himself as close to the plates as possible to avoid being hit.

As long as he did not die on the spot, Miss Nana would be able to heal him.

In order for Miss Nana to do so, the field medics needed to rescue the wounded as fast as possible.

Trying to overcome his fear, Fish Ball growled as he pulled the trigger. The thick night air was soon filled with bullets.

As the battlefield was permeated with loud blasts, Fish Ball could hardly tell the attack of the Longsong Cannons from that of the Spider Demons.

Occasionally, black stone needles brushed past his ear or hit the baffle plates. Being so close to death, Fish Ball was numbed to everything and could only think of continuing to shoot.

"Ammo out! Reload!"

"C-coming!"

...

"Where's the cartridge?"

"Here!"

...

When he finally saw the silhouette of the demons, Fish Ball heard the bolt click. He had just exhausted the third cartridge of bullets.

"Reload!"

"Didn't anyone hear me?"

"Hey, what are you guys doing?"

Fish Ball wheeled around abruptly and found the other two soldiers lying on the ground with crimson-stained stone needles piercing their bodies.

Fish Ball stiffened for a second before he realized what had happened. He yelled at the top of his lungs, "Field medics, somebody needs help here!"

Nothing but thunderous roars answered him.

At that moment, the mortars finally started firing. Hundreds of shells rose into the air and rained down, carpeting the area between 400 and 800 meters away from the defensive perimeter.

For a split second, flames blossomed above the ground, lighting up on both the demons and the blood stains on the baffle plates of his machine gun.

...

This was the moment Sylvie had been waiting for.

The 'Blackriver' had weakened the Spider Demons' attack, but didn't fully stop them. Every now and then, they threw another stone pillar at the soldiers, causing more and more injuries to the First Army. Even though Agatha, Shavi and Molly were now fully supporting the army, it was impossible for them to monitor the entire 200-meter defensive line.

The only thing Sylvie could do was to let the front know who needed help when she was not giving firing instructions.

Then she heard Maggie's voice coming from the Sigil of Listening.

"This is the artillery, coo! The Taquila Witches have killed all the demons that invaded the encampment, coo. Commander Van'er says he's ready to fire and hopes that you could give him instructions, coo!"

Sylvie balled her hand into a fist.

"Stay there. It will be faster for me to communicate via the sigil than by phone!"

"Noted, coo."

Just when the artillery was about to use the four Longsong Cannons to strike back, the demons' attack suddenly dropped off. It seemed that they knew that this would happen.

A loud, piercing whistle cracked through the air, and the Army of the Demons immediately ebbed away, leaving behind those at the front line.

Chapter 1087: Loss and Victory

...

When Anna descended to the underground headquarters, she immediately sensed the oppressive atmosphere in the room.

Everybody rose to their feet and bowed their heads as they saw her. "Your Royal Highness, ma'am!" they said in a chorus.

Iron Axe went down to his knee and said, "I'm sorry for having you come down here. I should have anticipated that the enemy would raid the encampment at night and take extra precautions accordingly. I sincerely apologize for my negligence."

"Please don't blame yourselves," said Anna as she waved her hand. "I'm just concerned about the situation at the front like everybody else. I want to know what's going on. Is everybody... OK?"

Anna was still not accustomed to the fact that she was now the queen. She felt particularly embarrassed when Wendy, Agatha, and the other witches bowed to her. She actually preferred to treat all the other witches as her sisters, although she had never specifically said that aloud.

When the campsite had been attacked, she had immediately been escorted by both the God's Punishment Witches and her guards to the underground shelter. However, Anna would have rather fought with the others like she had done during the Months of Demons than being strictly protected.

Yet she knew as the queen, she had to accept some inevitable changes.

She just hoped that her presence could put everyone's mind at ease.

Iron Axe, surprisingly, looked hesitant. After a moment of silence, he answered, "Your Highness, the battle didn't go well."

"Can you tell me more about it?"

"Certainly. We were actually just discussing it," said Iron Axe, who cast a glance at Ferlin Eltek. The latter gave a nod of comprehension and opened his notebook.

"Based on the reports from the field medics, 200 killed and 700 wounded in First Army," Morning Light replied heavily.

"However, these are just the initial rough estimates. We got those numbers in quite a hurry. The actual casualties will likely be higher, since Miss Nana... can't treat so many people at once."

200 deaths. This number almost equaled the number of casualties the decisive battle against the Church. However, that massive battle was the final battle of the war with the Church. This was the very first battle with the demons after they started advancing north. There was still a long way to go before First Army reached the Taquila ruins.

No wonder Iron Axe was disconcerted by the outcome of this battle.

Anna had seen the wounded soldiers who were covered in blood, lying on the ground in a line. The air in the hospital was saturated with the smell of blood and the sound of inarticulate groans. Nana definitely could not cure all of the wounded at once. For the maimed soldiers and those who suffered severe internal organ damage, she could only cure five to six people at most in one day. Therefore, in order to save more people, she had to apply her magic power to the ones most in need.

For example, Nana would only heal fatal wounds for the soldiers who were wounded in the chest or abdomen. For those who sustained minor injuries, she would instruct the field medics to stitch up their wounds after the soldiers drank Cleansing Water. As for those who had relatively severe injuries, she had to leave their wounds open before she treated them the next day. The soldiers would thus rely on the medicine made from sleeping ferns and coltsfoot to reduce pain. As to whether they would survive the night or whether the liquid medicine would cause addiction, the field medics did not have time or effort to thoroughly think about these problems.

It was not easy to accurately apply magic power to a specific body part in such an intense environment. Anna was surprised at how much Nana had improved. Compared to the little school girl who used to faint at the sight of blood, Nana was now an experienced and professional military doctor.

"I'll advise His Majesty to persuade Countess Spear from Fallen Dragon Ridge to send us reinforcements," said Anna slowly. "She can help the field medics to save more people. By the way, how did the demons sneak in?"

"I guess... the enemy took advantage of the limits of my Magic Eye," said Sylvie, who apparently looked very frustrated. "The Devilbeast scouts they sent earlier were probably trying to learn how far my Magic Eye can see, and I was completely unaware they were watching me..."

"We should have thought about that," Agatha put in self-reprovingly. "After the battle at North Slope, the demons apparently noticed Sylvie's presence. They used Devilbeasts to first test out how far her Eye of Magic can see based on our reactions to them. Then, their army gathered outside that range and raided us after night fell. They started attacking us the very moment we retreated from Tower Station No.1, when our encampment was the most unguarded."

"That being said, this wasn't anybody's fault," Morning Light comforted. "If we really wanted to deceive the enemy, we'd have had to ignore the Devilbeasts when they approached us. This would be against the protocols we received during our training. Even if we knew the enemy's plan beforehand, it would be impossible maintain a charade with thousands of soldiers and regular workers. In other words, the enemy would have learned the limits of the Magic Eye at somepoint anyways. Even if they didn't ambush us at Tower Station No. 1, they would have done so at No. 2 or No. 3."

"If I remember correctly, the shooting range of the Spider Demons is around two to three kilometers. Since they are fairly slow, it normally takes them quite a while to enter our firing range and be spotted by Sylvie. Is it just pure luck that they weren't spotted in the first place?" Anna asked in confusion. "I'm not really familiar with the operation. Correct me if I'm wrong. The First Army should have their own scouting team, shouldn't they? For example, they can use hydrogen ballons at the encampment."

"You're always so attentive to details, Your Highness," Iron Axe replied while placing his hand on his chest. "Generally speaking, the First Army gathers information in three ways: through Sylvie, through Maggie and Lightning, and by themselves. However, the army scouts are just supplementary and only for contingencies."

After hearing the explanation from the commander-in-chief, Anna finally had a basic understanding of the intelligence system of the First Army. During the Graycastle unification war, this system had worked pretty well. Yet when they fought against the demons, they soon noticed some big flaws in this system.

Nothing running on the ground could compete against the Devilbeasts flying in the sky.

This meant there was a limit in how much information the army scouts could obtain. Once they went beyond that limit, their mission could be highly risky and even life-threatening, and dead people can't bring back information. The Devilbeasts were able to hide in clouds, giving them an absolute advantage over scouts on the ground. As the Fertile Plains was flatter than a pancake, they could dive down anytime like a hawk snatching up a rabbit.

This disadvantage significantly restricted the amount of information the First Army could collect. In this situation, they could barely assist Sylvie. Meanwhile, the flying demons could prey on any soldiers sent out to scout while escaping the scrutiny of the Magic Eye. There was basically nothing the First Army could do about it.

A phrase suddenly flashed across Anna's mind.

A phrase that Roland had a mixed feeling about every time he mentioned it.

That was "air supremacy".

The party who had the command of the sky dominated the war.

Apart from "air supremacy", there were also some other phrases beyond her understanding which Roland said from time to time, such as the Black Ribbon and Akiyama...

Anna shook her head, trying to put these thoughts behind her. She asked, "Based on your description, the Spider Demons should have reached the third layer of the defensive line by the time we saw them. Was it because of the poor lighting at night that we failed to notice them?"

"That's one of the reasons, Your Highness," Ferlin Eltek replied. "The General Staff believes... that those monsters were probably waiting for us there from the beginning."

Anna blinked in mild surprise and asked, "Are you saying... that they were hiding right underneath us?"

"That's right. This is the only explanation that makes sense as to why these giant creatures suddenly emerged within shooting range," Ferlin confirmed in a grave tone. "I asked Miss Sylvie. She told me it costs her a lot of magic power to see through solid matter. When she does that, she can't see very far. It seems the Devilbeasts were also diverting Miss Sylvie's attention while testing out how far she can see. Once she focused solely on the sky, she would not have excess magic power to also monitor things underground."

"So this is why the demons successfully raided the encampment?" Anna questioned herself in silence.

If both Sylvie and the demons were stationary, it would be a lot easier for Sylvie to notice the movement below. The blackness Sylvie had seen was probably not to cover the demons, but rather to distract Sylvie from the Spider Demons when they came out of hiding.

Now they knew they were dealing with a very difficult enemy. The demons had not only come up with a strategy that countered First Army's operation methods, but they were also extremely proficient in their use of magic power.

It was no wonder that a suffocating atmosphere had settled over First Army's headquarters.

This was definitely not a good sign.

What would Roland do if he were here?

While Anna was trying to come up with some encouraging words, Edith suddenly burst into a fit of laughter.

"Why all the long faces like you just lost a battle? We just gained a major victory!" She said while chuckling. "Am I in the wrong meeting?"

Chapter 1088: Just a Beginning

"Lady Edith..." Ferlin reminded her in a hushed voice. "We just lost over 200 people. What major victory are you talking about?"

"Only... a little over 200," the Pearl of the Northern Region interjected. "What about the demons? 50 of them sneaked in the campsite, including a Senior Demon. They should be responsible for all the casualties of the First Army. It appears that we suffered a great loss at the first glance, but there are at least 2,000 casualties among the enemy on the defensive line, not to mention that this is just a very rough estimate. There were also numerous demons blasted to pieces when they attempted to flee. It may take a few days for us to obtain the exact number. Am I right, Miss Sylvie?"

"Well..." Sylvie said hesitantly, "That's what the Eye of Magic saw."

"Ms. Agatha, I guess you've never been a commander in a war over the past 400 years, have you?" asked Edith as she turned to the Ice Witch.

Agatha's brows were furrowed. She said, "During the Battle of Divine Will, it was mandatory for the witches in the Union to learn how to fight against demons. I used to be a researcher at the Quest Society and fought them once when exploring the ruins..."

"I'm talking about a war," Edith snapped, leaning forward while gazing at Agatha compellingly.

"Edith— " Iron Axe said, trying to put a pause on this awkward conversation.

"Why?" At that moment, Anna blurted out, jerking everyone back to the present. "Why do you ask her that? As far as I know, you were only a commander back in the Northern Region and shouldn't have experienced a major war either."

This was a particularly tricky question that would have easily fanned Edith's fury had it been put by somebody else. However, Anna communicated it in such a gentle and dignified manner that no one felt the question threatening.

Perhaps, the innocent and serious look in the azure of her eyes naturally calmed everybody down.

The glint in Edith's eyes faded away. The next moment she placed her hand on her chest and replied quietly, "You're right. I didn't have war experience, but someone else here did..." She broke off and then continued, "From her look, I instantly know we won this battle."

Her?

The people in the room looked in the direction Edith pointed out and saw at the end of the long table, the representative of Taquila, Phyllis, sitting there in a daze, with a cup of tea in her hand, her lips curling up into a smile. Every now and then, she took a little sip of the tea as if savoring some tasty drink. This was not normal for the Taquila witches. As they had lost all the sensations, the pleasure of eating and drinking were denied them. Food was simply a basic life necessity to help them self-perpetuate.

Despite the fierce discussion, Phyllis was completely not paying attention to the meeting. Even though everyone was now staring at her, her mind seemed to still be somewhere else.

It was after Wendy pushed her in the back that she finally jerked herself out of the trance.

"Oh, so where were we?" The God's Punishment Witch asked blankly on a cough. "I was thinking about something very important and wasn't paying attention to your discussion. Well, does Your Highness have some questions for me?"

"..." There was an awkward silence.

It was surprising to see that an ancient witch, who had been living for 400 years, lie in the same fashion as mortals. Phyllis was clearly daydreaming, but she unblushingly turned her lack of attention into a very poor lie that she was dwelling on some serious undertakings.

"Haha."

Somebody sniggered, and then everybody laughed. The tension in the room was immediately relieved.

"Looks like I don't need reiterate my question now," Anna said while shaking her head in amusement.

Edith rose, surveyed the room, and said, "The demons suffered a greater loss. They fled but we stayed. There's no damage whatsoever to Tower Station No. 1, so where does the talk of defeat come from? His Majesty once said to me that a loss means a failure to accomplish a predetermined goal. Apparently, the demons didn't get what they wanted. I would even like to say that the commander of the demons made a very serious mistake."

"A mistake?" The people on the floor were all astounded at Edith's conclusion. It did not seem to them that the ambush last night was a failure. It had been well planned out and successfully executed. The demons' accurate control of their magic power might not necessarily look very impressive. After all, they had been constantly upgrading their magic skills over the past thousands of years through numerous wars. However, their quick and effective reaction to firearms definitely said something about their learning ability, for there had been completely no communication between human beings and demons until the outbreak of the war at the Northbound Slope.

Everyone started to realize that the demons were nothing like any of the enemy they had encountered before. Although the demons had once almost eradicated the human race from Fertile Plains and destroyed the witch empire, nobody had personally witnessed that dust-laden history. The past thus gradually faded into oblivion, leaving only a thin thread of memory that would easily snap and float off with time.

It was until the outbreak of this war that people finally caught a glimpse of the mysterious history and started to feel a little scared. Nevertheless, nobody had shared their fear.

They realized that the demons were far stronger than the demonic beasts on the Barbarian Land.

Apart from their magic power and enormous physical strength, the demons had developed a high level of civilization.

They even possessed knowledge unknown to human beings.

When mankind could no longer use excuses such as "the demons relied on the power and magic granted by Gods", and when the notion that man was the smartest creature on the continent was challenged for the first time, the shock was absolutely ineffable.



Immediately, men started to question themselves and overlooked the potential problems among the demons. That was why everybody was curious when Edith said the demons had lost the battle.

"What's their mistake then?" Anna asked instantly.

"They're too arrogant, Your Highness," Edith answered firmly. "They first stirred the encampment, then seized the artillery, and finally drove the army straight in. If they were facing a knightage or an old-school army, they would have won. However, the First Army isn't any common army. The demons only saw the change in our weapons but overlooked our soldiers. This is their biggest mistake!"

Everybody straightened up to listen to her speech.

"They only dispatched around 50 demons throughout the whole operation. This indicates that it wasn't easy for them to carry out their plan. They should have made the best use out of this plan, but what did they actually do? They sent the 50 demons to various places, including the barracks, the trenches and the artillery," the Pearl of the Northern Region spoke eloquently. "The commander of the demons is definitely not a fool. It's obvious that it believes ten demons would be more than sufficient to crush us. Isn't it too presumptuous?"

Anna somewhat understood the implication behind Edith's words. She clenched her fist and said slowly, "If they didn't make this mistake... if they treated us as equal..."

"Then they would have never thought that only 50 demons would defeat us. Instead, they would kill as many soldiers as possible," Edith cut in with a nod. "Suppose all the demons rushed to the barracks, including the Senior Demon, while their army waited at the rear, what would happen after the Spider Demons sneaked in?"

Anna felt a chill running down her spine.

The reason they had only lost 200 people was that the 50 demons had been scattered around the encampment. It had thus earned the reinforcements some time to fight back. If the demons had planned to massacre the entire barracks while sacrificing the Senior Demon at the very beginning, the First Army would have probably sustained a much greater loss.

"A loss of 500?, 1,000... or 2,000? Of course, we'll eventually annihilate them and preserve Tower Station No. 1. However, it'll be hard to say which party would win the battle then," said Edith as she splayed her fingers. "Unfortunately, the demons are too arrogant to seize this opportunity. The first army, on the other hand, learned a lot from this operation. For example, they should now know that the barracks should be built underneath the ground; the roof should not only be able to block stone needles but also the strikes of the machine guns and mortars. If our enemy didn't make such a mistake, it would have probably cost us a lot more to learn our lesson." Edith paused for a second and then went on, "Anyway, fellows, it's just a beginning."

Chapter 1089: The Deity of Gods

It took a lot of energy and strength to connect minds.

He could only find two words to describe such a kind of feeling: burning and chaotic.

The burning sensation resulted from the Origin of Magic. Although the Origin of Magic was where all kinds of power stemmed from, what everything returned to, and also what created the Realm of Minds, it would destroy everything coming near it before its upgrade.

As for the chaotic feeling, it came from minds themselves.

Once magic power reached a certain point, it would leave marks on a person's mind.

Numerous minds converged as streams merged with the ocean. Some of them sank to the bottom, leaving the slightest trace behind them while others floated off with the tidal waves.

The difference between the two lay whether minds had consciousness.

That was what parted higher minds from lower ones.

The ones sinking to the bottom were useless, whereas the floating ones indicated that they had entered the Realm of Mind before. Even if they had just been there once, they differentiated themselves from others.

Hackzord was one of those who was good at controlling minds.

He was not only acknowledged by the Origin of Magic but also obtained the ability to connect with minds at will.

This enabled him to search for some valuable information.

But he did not do such things quite often.

Minds intertwined and influenced each other. If he stayed there for too long, his mind would be contaminated. Besides, it was easy to get lost in the midst of wild streams of minds. Many people had indeed lost the sense of direction after they entered the Realm of Minds, leaving their soulless bodies behind in the real world. Hackzord did not want to be one of them.

The main reason, however, was that Hackzord did not like it here.

Even though he was one of the top mind controllers, he could not linger too long.

Without the support of a body, the mind would eventually sink to the Origin of Magic. Newly awakened individuals would soon replace him, as everything was subject to changes. He would eventually vanish into a puff of smoke if he did not upgrade himself. Watching his own mind dancing up and down was like watching his own life slowly draw close to its end. It was not a pleasant experience.

Suddenly, Hackzord sensed something familiar.

"Is this... Kabradhabi?"

He was surprised.

"Why is he so weak like he's dying?" he wondered.

Kabradhabi should not have been that weak even if those low lives had destroyed his body. Although his mind was now at the bottom, it was, after all, the mind of an upgraded one. As the commander of the Western Front Army, he would not lose his consciousness upon dying.

Nonetheless, the Kabradhabi in front him was way weaker than the upgraded one he knew. He was even weaker than a female insect. With such feeble magic power, Kabradhabi should have had no way to enter the Realm of Mind.

Hackzord stretched out his non-existing hands and slowly grabbed that thread of mind.

"Sky Lord, " a voice said, waking him up from the Realm of Mind, "the king is summoning you."

He turned around, cast the guard a glance and said, "Noted. You may leave."

"Yes."

Hackzord let go of the legacy shard gleaming in red and zoomed toward the top of the Birth Tower.

After they inherited a part of the civilization, they made great progress in their magic power research. The invention of symbiosis had freed them from magic stones. Even the Birth Tower had developed some new abilities, such as amplifying the effect of magic power and resonating with other Birth Towers.

The resonance between different Birth Towers enabled local lords to communicate with the king directly.

The thick, wet mists surrounding the top of the tower made Hackzord feel better. He put his hand on the tower and started to concentrate his mind.

"Sky Lord is at your service, my king."

"How did the plan go?" the king's voice rang off the tower. "We don't have much time left."

"Did something happen at the Sky-sea Realm again?" Hackzord asked instantly.

"Yes, something quite wild happened there. Most people suggested ignoring it, given that the Deity of Gods is close to its completion. They maintain that once the Deity of Gods comes into use, we would be able to reverse the situation, starting to attack the enemy rather than just defending against them."

"Deity of Gods!"

Hackzord was thunderstruck.

"So, finally, they're having... the ultimate legendary weapon?"

For years, they had been striving to go beyond the restriction of mineral Magic Stones to travel around in the world at will. Now, their dream was finally coming true.

Like the name suggested, this was a God's gift. It meant that they were another step closer to the Origin of Magic.

Sky Lord expressed his admiration for the king through his mind.

"What's your thought on this?"

"Something unexpected happened at the Western Front," said Hackzord. He had wanted to tell the king that everything was fine, considering that the king had already the Sky-sea Realm to worry about. He did

not want to place more burden on his shoulder. However, he should also be absolutely loyal to the king by not making any decisions for him. At this thought, he changed his mind. "My commander's report shows..." Hackzord broke off and then decided to address formally, as this was also how he used to call himself. "Those human beings changed a lot in the past 400 years, particularly in their combat methods. Our vanguards suffered a minor loss, but it won't impact our plan in general."

The king slipped into silence after hearing the report. He then asked, "Is it a result of evolution?"

"It has nothing to do with evolution but more with the usage of devices and natural elements, for example, fire that we aren't quite familiar with."

"Not even magic power?"

"I'm afraid so. My commander planned to capture some men and some of their weapons like we used to. Unfortunately, our attempt was unsuccessful," Hackzord said. "My commander suggests me sending some reinforcements to the Western Front or looking for the reason via the Realm of Mind."

"Did any upgraded ones fall in men's hands?" asked the king, who was seemingly unimpressed. "I did expect that this would happen one day, since we've lowered the upgrading requirement, but it seems too soon to me. I remember the commander of the Western Front is the one you highly speak of, a what you called a genius. Are you sure he fulfilled his due diligence?"

Hackzord bent his head immediately.

"So, did you find anything?"

"Nothing. He barely has any magic power left, so I couldn't get many details out of him." He hesitated for a moment and then said, "But..."

"But what...?"

"When my mind touched his, I somehow saw extremely bright flames... It might just be an illusion."

"If they're really fires, then never mind," the king snapped. "Although we rarely use them, we know enough about them. Plus, we stopped learning from human beings a long time ago. As for your first request, I'll decline it for you. We should focus more on the attack at the Sky-sea Realm. I can't give you more troops and I certainly won't send you the troops who are supposed to guard our headquarters. Don't forget though, the legacy shard that determines the upgrading of our kinds is now in your custody!"

"I understand."

"Very well then. Make sure our plan goes smoothly. Once we have the Deity of Gods, we'll gain the eventual victory." The king's voice trailed off and gradually faded out of his mind.

Chapter 1090: An Unexpected Visitor

In Thorn Town at the foot of the Cage Mountain in the Kingdom of Dawn.

A wagon train passed through the town and staggered to a halt in front of the lord's mansion.

"Here we are. Get off, all of you! Hurry up!" A man who seemed to be the steward of the fleet brandished a horsewhip and bellowed, "Govern yourselves if you want to stay alive. Answer whatever the lord asks you. You got it?"

Most of the passengers getting off the carriage were pale and ragged. They were tied to each other by the wrist with a rope. Beyond a doubt, they were all slaves, slaves of the lowest rank.

Slaves were trafficked to Thorn Town quite often recently. The arrival of the Graycastle exploration team, as well as numerous caravans and emissary delegations sent by various lords gradually filled this quiet town with exuberance and vivacity. These new visitors either took up their abodes at a hotel or pitched a tent or a barrack outside the town. Within merely a month or so, this remote town had expanded a great deal.

"Sir Marl, what do you think of these people?" Forint Sheffield, one of the recent visitors from the City of Maplesong, asked Marl Tokat, a great noble in the City of Glow, greasily. His eyes were fixed on Marl, one hand massaging the other restlessly. "These people are in a good health condition, with no visible disabilities. They're the best picks from the prison. Although they look fragile, they all have ferocious characters. Once they are fed, they can do anything for you, sir."

"Enough," Marl dismissed him with a wave impatiently. From the look of Forint, Marl instantly knew this man, who shared the same family name with the lord of Maplesong, was not worth his time. "I'm not interested in purchasing prisoners, but this gentleman here is. This is Mr. Sean, the Captain of the Imperial Guards of the King of Graycastle."

"I, I see," Forint stumbled while bowing again. "My lord immediately answered the summon of the King of Dawn. He asked me to commence my journey as soon as possible. Pray forgive me for my ignorance. I wasn't aware that Mr. Sean is the real purchaser."

"That's fine," said Sean as he walked up to the prisoners whilst darting his eyes from one another. These prisoners were apparently not as good as those sent by the King of Dawn. However, considering that they currently needed as many people as possible to excavate the Temple of the Cursed, he was not too fussy about this matter.

When Sean was carefully surveying the prisoners, one of them suddenly dashed out of the queue, knelt down in front of him and said exasperatedly, "Sir, I'm wrongfully accused. Please let me go!"

Restricted by the rope, he could only implore in a half-kneeling position

"You idiot!" The steward yelled while gritting his teeth. He would have lashed his whip at him if the two lords had not been present.

"Why did you say so?" Sean asked curiously as he stopped in front of him.

"I didn't kill or rob. I only stole some chickens from my neighbor!" the prisoner explained breathlessly. "Prisoners with such minor offenses in the City of Maplesong will be only sentenced to flogging or banishment. It isn't a capital offence, sir!"

"Is that so?" Sean asked as he turned to Forint.

Forint replied at once, "Yes and no, sir. On the day before Earl Sheffield received the summon of the King of Dawn, he made a little adjustment to the local laws. To quash the rampant Rats and reduce underground crimes, he increased the maximum penalties for all crimes, including theft."

"Wh-what?" said the prisoner in astonishment. "A death penalty for stealing some chickens?"

"Is it very hard for you to understand?" Forint shot him a disdainful look and said, "The internal war and the constant rebellions bleed off strength from the City of Maplesong. With the increase in refugees, how to make scums like you behave if not with more severe punishment? Today you steal chickens from your neighbor, tomorrow your neighbor would probably starve to death. So, what's the difference between a thief and a murderer? In my opinion, you deserve a death penalty."

"Sir, I..."

The prisoner wanted to argue, but Sean interrupted him. "Since you're guilty, what about doing some work to atone for your sin?" He paused for a second and then raised his voice. "You probably have all known that you'll get your freedom after ten years of heavy labor, no matter what crime you committed. This is a promise made by the King of Graycastle and the King of Dawn! Don't try to escape, for this is your last chance!"

With these words, he signaled his men to take away the prisoners. Forint immediately approached him with the same oily smile. "I knew you would take all of them. According to our contract, one prisoner is..."

"One gold royal each, and it's 106 in total, right?" Sean asked.

"That's right!" Forint replied, his eyes glistening with excitement.

"Someone in the lord's mansion will receive you."

"Yes, sir!" Forint said, returning Sean a broad grin.

"Also," Sean spoke abruptly as Forint turned around, "I don't want to see the same thing happen again."

"You mean..." Forint said, a little surprised.

"I don't care whether the lord of Maplesong amended the laws the day before or not, but according to our contract, the prisoners must be told the purpose of this trip and the punishment they will receive. If there's one more prisoner who appears not aware of his death sentence and claims that he's innocent, I'll have to deduct a portion of my payment," Sean warned sternly.

He neither intended to be some sort of judge, nor did he really have empathy for these people. For him, the most important thing was to complete Roland's task and prevent those avarious noble merchants from disgracing his Majesty.

"I... I see." Forint said while bowing his head. "I'll be more careful next time."

After Forint took his leave, Marl commented with a shrug, "You're very cautious."

"I'm just doing my due diligence."

"Really?" said Marl as he looked at the crowded town. "Your king even takes extra caution when purchasing death row prisoners. I wonder if King Wimbledon did it on purpose or he's simply a born philanthropist. My elder brother told me that he's around the same age as me, but he's already a marvelous king. A man can't be a philanthropist and king at the same time. Now I really want to meet him in person, since his guard has already impressed me."

"It isn't hard to meet the King of Graycastle since you're from one of the three big noble families," said Sean coldly. "If I were you, I would not be so imprudent as to say such things to that guard."

"Who cares? You tend to shut yourself in instead of sharing your thoughts with others, don't you?" Marl said while spreading out his hands.

Sean now had a better understanding of Marl's character. Like his cordial, loyal brother Otto Tokat, as the second son of the Tokat Family, Marl was also very easygoing.

The best way to deal with this kind of person was to ignore him.

He turned around, planning to take a look at the dump site guarded by the First Army when a soldier sprinted up to him.

"Sir, a stranger wants to see you. He says he knows where the 'treasure' is."

Sean drew his brows together. Ever since the message of searching for the cursed treasure went out, every now and then they had people coming forward who claimed that they knew the whereabouts of the treasure, most of whom were scammers who provided false information just for the purpose of getting a reward. Sean said, "Didn't I tell you that you only report to me when there's a solid clue?"

"That guy insists on meeting you in person," the soldier replied. "He claims to be one of the last survivors from Hermes. Apart from the treasure, he also knows where the remaining members of the church are hiding. We've already detained him."

"Hermes... church?"

Sean squinted his eyes and then said, "Got it. I'll go meet him."