

Witch 1091

Chapter 1091: Hopeless Love

Sean was studying the man tied to a chair in a tent. The latter did not avert his eyes. He was also gazing at Sean in silence.

It was unusual for a traitor to be so quiet. Back in the old king's city, Sean had witnessed numerous betrayals. Although traitors tipped him useful information, Sean despised the worst of human nature portrayed by a traitor: avarice, obsequiousness and power-hunger.

The reaction of this man, however, raised Sean's interest.

After the two men stared at each other for quite a while, Sean broke the silence. "Name?"

"Joe," the man answered. "Are you the commander here? I mean the commander of the Graycastle troop rather than the lord of Thorn Town or some other random lord."

"Is that important to you?"

"If you aren't, I won't spit a word, because... there's no point of doing that."

"This sounds quite interesting," thought Sean.

Sean leaned forward a little a bit and said, "I'm the Chief Guard of the King of Graycastle, King Roland Wimbleton, and also the captain of the Graycastle exploration team. You can call me Sean. I'm the person whom you can put confidence in. Now, can you tell me the whereabouts of the treasure?"

"You must be looking for the Magic Ceremony Cube in the Temple of the Cursed at the Cage Mountain," Joe replied flatly. "The Earl of Archduke Island Lorenzo has it!"

Sean was a little surprised at his bluntness. He had thought the man would negotiate with him before providing some vague clues that required him to verify their validity, but the man immediately told him everything. Sean asked, "Have you... seen it before?"

"No, but it isn't a secret in the church." Joe then briefly related the war between the church and the Kingdom of Wolfheart. He said, "Lorenzo bragged about his discovery and exaggerated the Cube a lot in his report. Many church executives knew about it, but the Holy City of Hermes didn't pay it much attention."

"I see. So the treasure was in the Kingdom of Wolfheart before being captured by the church. Fair enough," Sean muttered as he stroked his chin. "But why did you tell me this? You can also sell the information to some other lords, can't you?"

Joe took a deep breath and said, "Sir, have you heard of... the God's Punishment Army?"

"Naturally. It's the secret army the church took pride in," said Sean derisively. "Unfortunately, however, it was flattened by His Majesty's First Army during the battle at Coldwind Ridge."

"Very well then," said Joe, who did not seem to be remotely upset about his response. "It would be easier for me to make it clear outright. As Lorenzo has a group of God's Punishment Army, nobody dares challenge his authority over the Archduke Island except the King of Graycastle."

"So?" The guard said while raising his brows. "I thought those man slaughter machines were all killed in action at Coldwind Ridge. How many of them are left?"

"Ten... no, probably around five," said Joe hesitantly. "Anyway, it's not a lot."

"Five would be enough to guard a castle," said Sean with a smile. "What do you want from me then? Or how much would you like me to pay you for this piece of information?"

"No, my only hope is to stay alive," Joe said in a hushed voice. "The church has nothing to compete against Graycastle now, but Lorenzo is still planning to revenge the church. His men have already entered Thorn Town, and I don't want to meddle in this matter. If..." He broke off and then continued, "If this information is helpful to you, I hope the King of Graycastle could acquit me."

Sean doubted whether this was his real motive.

Sean rested his chin on his hand, a gesture King Roland often made when he interrogated prisoners. Although Sean did not possess a special ability to distinguish lies from truths like Ms. Nightingale did, sometimes he did not necessarily need magic power to do so.

To be honest, he did not perceive any signs that indicated this man named Joe had a strong desire to live. When he stared into his eyes, he could see a hint of stone cold self-determination in them.

Perhaps Joe did not realize that he was wearing a look of a desperate man.

"Just this one request?"

"Y-yes."

"Then I'll ask someone to escort you to Neverwinter."

"Huh?" Joe said, noticing something wrong. "Why do I have to go to Neverwinter?"

Sean rose to his feet and said, "I don't have the power to acquit you, but I can't abandon a person who retracts from a wrong path. Don't worry, everybody in Graycastle knows His Majesty is a benelovent and honorable man. The Witch Union can also double check the reliability of your testimony. If you didn't lie, you would be treated fairly and certainly be exonerated from your wrongdoings. If with luck, you'll probably even receive a large sum of rewards for coming forward."

"S-sir... that treasure..." Joe stammered, attempting to stand up but the rope restricted his movement.

"If Earl Lorenzo does have the treasure, His Majesty will get it from him sooner or later. Besides, you have nothing to do with the treasure, right?" Sean said while spreading out his hands. "No need to worry. Although Neverwinter is far and we can't set you free for the time being before confirming the validity of your information, we'll pay you for sure. The church will no longer pose a threat to you." With these words, Sean turned to a soldier and instructed, "Send him back to his cell."

"No, sir, hang on..." Joe said. His expression changed. The previous indifference yielded to a panic and defenseless look. He struggled to stand up, threw himself abruptly to the floor and said, "Please, don't send me to Neverwinter!"

His feign nonchalance dissolved into a look of forlorn despair as his voice rose. Sean stopped. He did not understand why this man would suddenly sink into such a state of despondency when he was already prepared to die.

"Why?" Sean asked as he wheeled around. "Or rather, you actually wanted something else?"

"Please, please save her — save Farrina, please!" Joe implored, banging his head to the floor as he kept yelling hysterically. "She doesn't have much time. She... she doesn't have much time left..."

His voice, in the end, trailed off into a sob.

"That's probably his real intention," thought Sean.

He walked up to Joe who trembled uncontrollably, patted him on the shoulder and asked, "Who's Farrina? Why doesn't she have much time? Now I really need to have a good chat with you."

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After Joe restored his composure, he related everything to Sean. At this point, Sean understood what had happened.

It was actually a story about love.

Joe was indeed the last remaining church member, whereas the former bishop had become his enemy. With no other alternatives, Joe thus turned to the former opponent of the church, the First Army from Graycastle, for help. Compared with external rivals, traitors were always more despicable. Meanwhile, Sean also learned why Joe was ready to die: he knew from the beginning that the First Army would eventually see through his plan and believed it would be better to be hanged and die together with Farrina together than being tortured by Lorenzo.

Joe could have taken things slow. However, considering Farrina might not survive Lorenzo's endless torture, he decided to risk his life to come to seek First Army instead of waiting for another few months. He knew Lorenzo would not kill Farrina immediately, as he still needed her for getting the Holy Book. Yet Farrina definitely could not wait for that long. After all, human bodies had a limit. By the time Graycastle took action half a year later, it might be too late.

At first, Sean did not want to meddle in the internal conflict of the church. He was also suspicious of the validity of Joe's information. However, after learning that this was all about love, Sean believed Joe.

The next thing Sean needed to do was to find the men sent by Earl Lorenzo to further confirm the news.

"I see. Once I catch those people, I'll let His Majesty know at once," Sean promised slowly. "I'll send him a message via carrier pigeon."

Chapter 1092: An Arrest Warrant

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"So, you're going to help him?" said Marl Tokat as he knitted his brows. "To help a remnant church member?"

After Sean sent Joe away, he immediately sent for the emissary of the City of Glow and told him the whole story. He did not believe the three noble families would try to keep the treasure for themselves, because none of them knew what it was used for. If the treasure was really something extremely powerful, they should not have had it smuggled out of the Kingdom of Dawn in the first place.

"I don't make the call as to whether I should help him or not," said Sean indifferently. "My instruction is to find the treasure as soon as possible. Now, I've finally obtained a clue that sounds reliable, so naturally I should further confirm its credibility. As for what comes next, I'll leave it to His Majesty." He paused for a moment, rested his eyes on Marl and asked, "So, do you have any good plans, Mr. Emissary?"

The First Army was invincible, but their unparalleled power would be of no use if there was not an enemy to compete with. Since the First Army did not have expertise in searching for cunning spies, it would be better to place the matter in the three noble families' hands.

"To be completely honest, I wish I had never listened to this story," Marl said, shrugging. "Lady Quinn was expelled from the Kingdom of Dawn because of the church. If there were no church, she would probably have married my brother now... Ahem, but since you've asked, I'll try my best to assist you. Although there have been many visitors to the town recently, it shouldn't be that hard to find a particular group of people."

"A particular group of people?"

"Yes, as the passage to the Cage Mountain is blocked, the fastest way to get here from the Kingdom of Wolfheart is via sea. People have to go through Coral Bay, a port city in the northeast of Thorn Town," Marl replied as he counted on his fingers. "We are going to look for fleets coming from the east, with around 10 to 15 crew members, probably with a little Wolfheart accent, and dressed up like Wolfheart citizens. Based on these criteria, we'll be able to narrow our target down to only several fleets. I reckon there are less than five that meet all these criteria."

"Is this because Coral Bay... is the only big city in the east? Once we circle out these people, are we going to detain and interrogate them all?" Sean asked thoughtfully. The situation was pretty similar to that in Neverwinter. Many people came to Neverwinter from the east but none the west, except the demons. "

"That's right," Marl answered with a nod. "The spy you're looking for is very likely among them."

"But who should do all this work?"

"Is there anyone else who knows better than the town than the local Rats? A problem that can be solved with money isn't really a problem," Marl replied smilingly as he placed his hand on his chest. "To show the sincerity of the three families, the Tokats is willing to bear all the expenses incurred."

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In a residential house in the suburb of Thorn Town, the butler of the Earl of the Archduke Island, Hagrid, was fanning impatiently, trying to keep the buzzing mosquitos away from him.

"What an awful place this is! There's not even a mosquito net here," thought Hagrid irritably. How was he supposed to live here two months later when summer started?

Hagrid still had no clue as to why the Magic Ceremony Cube illuminated.

He was not even sure whether the King of Graycastle was really coming for the treasure in the Temple of the Cursed.

"Maybe I should go and see what he is doing at the moment?" Hagrid thought.

Based on the information collected by his men, the Graycastle Exploration Team had arrived at Thorn Town two months ago. It appeared that they were planning something extraordinary. First, they had built a road in the mountain. Then, they had started to recruit death row prisoners. They had also turned the temple on the mountainside inside out. Every day, they shipped bricks and stones from the mountain and piled them up in an open field constantly guarded by the soldiers.

It made perfect sense if they excavated the ground to search for the hidden treasure. However, Graycastle seemed to be more enthusiastic for stones than the treasure itself. Hagrid had once watched them work from a distance. He had seen the soldiers air slabs and bricks in the sun before shipping them to Coral Bay in the east via carriage.

Hagrid did not understand what the King of Graycastle used these black stones for.

He had also managed to obtain some of the stones from the port and asked his men to send them to Earl Lorenzo. As he had expected, the stones did not help the Magic Ceremony Cube recover its legendary power.

The key to activating this ancient treasure must be something else.

"Sir, the person you're looking for is here," reported a man who lifted the curtain and came in.

"Send him in," Hagrid said as he straightened up and turned up the collar of his coat.

"Yes, sir!"

A villager-looking man was pushed in. He knelt down on the floor, looked up at Hagrid gingerly and said, "Sir, my name is Knaff. Do you want to climb up the mountain? As long as you don't intend to cross the mountain, I can take you anywhere you want..."

"You were the guide for the Graycastle men when they arrived at the Cage Mountain?" Hagrid talked over him.

"Y-yes... sir."

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Hagrid tossed him a small pouch and said, "Here's 20 gold royals. If you can give me information that would interest me, they'll be yours."

"Of, of course, sir. I'll tell you everything I know!" Knaff said hotly.

"Tell me what happened in detail. I want to know everything," said Hagrid as he swept the villager with a disdainful look and reclined against his armchair.

When Hagrid heard the exploration team climb up the Cage Mountain, his eyes snapped open. He asked, "Hang on, what did you just say?"

"The witch called Azima —"

"No, after that!"

"Um, she said, 'this way', with a coin in her hand."

"A coin?" Hagrid pursued. "What does it look like?"

"It looks pretty plain, neither like a silver royal nor a bronze royal," Knaff replied after a moment of contemplation. "Right, the coin isn't patterned. It seems to be a thin slice of polished metal."

"Was the witch holding it all the time?" Hagrid asked, having a vague feeling that this was probably the key.

"Most of the time she was," The guide answered with a look of dawning comprehension. "Now I remember that this group of people followed the witch. Every time they took a turn, the witch would place the coin in front of her and gaze at it for a while."

"Damn it! So it does have something to do with witches!"

Hagrid clenched his fist and asked, "Where's that witch... called Azima?"

"I, I don't know," Knaff said while shaking his head vigorously. "She left Thorn Town immediately. Perhaps... she returned to Graycastle?"

If the witch had stayed at Thorn Town for only a few days, then she must have departed the Cage Mountain before he had left the Archduke Island. However, The Magic Ceremony Cube had been illuminating since his departure, which meant... she had left the coin here. Hagrid resolved a multitude of thoughts in his mind. He came to realize that this particular coin was probably a "key" discovered by the King of Graycastle from the ruins. Since it was so important, he speculated that it must be in the custody of the leader of the Exploration Team.

Hagrid had learned who the leaders of the Exploration Team were a long time ago. The personnels of the highest rank of the exploration team were the commander-in-chief, Sean, and the emissary of the three families, Marl.

He thought the king's guard might be easier to deal with compared to the second son of the Tokat family. Like the old saying went, fortresses always crumbled from within.

How many gold royals did he have to prepare in order to pry open the guard's mouth?

500... or 1,000?

Hagrid knew Earl Lorenzo would pay whatever it required to know the secret of the Magic Cube.

Once he managed to touch base with that commander, he would soon be able to learn the answer.

Hagrid was thrilled by his plan.

If he could get the "key" to the treasure, Earl Lorenzo would definitely rely on his counsels more. Perhaps one day, he would even become a lord. After all, anyone could use the Magic Cube. It did not have to be a lord necessarily.

While he was fantasizing about his bright future, there was a pattering of running feet outside the door.

"Wait a minute, who are you —"

"Aargh!"

With clinks and clanks, the door was forced open. Before Hagrid realized it, a group of patroller-like men rushed into his room and prostrated him to the floor.

Hagrid yelled, struggling, "I, I'm a law-abiding merchant. You can't do this to me! I can offer you as much money as you want —"

"The lord of Thorn Town suspects that some church dregs are hiding among your crews. We request your full cooperation with our investigation at once!" The men said firmly. "Save all the talk for his lordship!"

Chapter 1093: To the New World

"Twin Dragon Island hasn't been so bustling for a while."

Thunder said as he stood at the top of the bridge of the "Snow Wind", watching the boisterous dock down below.

Thousands of people were congregated here, busy loading their ships. From above, they looked like ants moving in a line. The dock area was filled with the yellings of vendors, the shoutings of sailors, as well as the sound of tidal waves foaming on the beach. All these sounds preluded their upcoming journey.

The other side of the dock was packed with sailing ships, their masts soaring into the air, forming a sea that stretched away endlessly.

Thousands of banners and flags streamed in the air, including those of Crescent Moon Bay, Sunset Island and Shallow Water Town. All the influential Chambers of Commerce at the Fjords had gathered here, ready to commence their voyages.

The last time Thunder had attended a big event of this scale was when he had reached 22 years old, when all the Chambers of Commerce had assembled to explore Shadow Waters.

Margaret said smilingly, "Not only Twin Dragon Island but also the entire Fjords are exhilarated by your news. A route that used to be the least profitable has now become the most popular one. The newborn generation is really lucky. They don't have to risk their lives to become real explorers."

Thunder curled up his lips into a smile.

He knew Margaret was talking about the route leading to the Festive Harbor.

When the news that "as long as you find something interesting at the Endless Cape, you can claim rewards from the King of Graycastle" spread to the Fjords, the explorer community was stirred.

Fjords people had a crazy obsession with the title "explorer", for the title represented fame and wealth. However, it was not easy to discover a new sailing route, a new island or a big secret without a large amount of money, and more often than not an attempt would end up being fruitless and might even cost their lives.

Yet the recruitment campaign held by the King of Graycastle had altered everything. He had opened a very well-developed and relatively safe route between the Fjords and the Endless Cape. The brand new port city, the City of Festive, brought huge business opportunities. Even if one did not make any new discoveries, he would at least be able to profit something from this trip.

If one, with a stroke of luck, did find something invaluable, it would be even better.

Plus, the King of Graycastle made it very clear that those ancient ruins might bear a significant relationship to a secret with respect to Three Gods. Anyone who contributed to the revelation of the secret would have a chance to be titled "Honorary Lifetime Explorer" by the king. Although Graycastle, as a kingdom on the continent, employed a different system from the Fjord Islands, this condition for a lifetime explorer was fairly reasonable. As a matter of fact, Fjords people took this requirement more seriously than Graycastle citizens.

After all, the exploration had something to do with their faith in Three Gods.

As the new route was so lucrative, it inevitably raised some suspicions among a few explorers. These skeptical voices, however, were soon drowned out by enthusiastic merchants. The name of the King of Graycastle had spread throughout the whole Fjords market when Chaos Drinks and perfumes had been introduced to the islands. With the democratization of Graycastle commodities at the Fjords and a wide use of paddle steamers, more and more Fjords people started to include Roland Wimbledon in their daily conversations. A stereotype gradually formed among Fjords residents that Neverwinter citizens were all ultra-rich people.

Meanwhile, the foundation of the Joint Chamber of Commerce further strengthened people's faith in Roland Wimbledon.

Since their employer was a powerful king, it made sense that he set up a relatively high threshold for people to receive that honorable title.

Hearing the news, almost everyone at the Fjords started to take action. There were generally two groups of people. The more experienced and adventurous ones joined Thunder, whereas the others who preferred a safe journey while hoping to make a good fortune out of the trip headed to the Endless Cape, attempting to find themselves a good spot at the Festive Harbor.

Thunder would have never believed a country across the channel could exert such a huge impact on the Fjords if he had not witnessed it himself.

This drastic change had only taken place in the past one or two years.

Thunder said to Margaret as he squinted at the distant horizon that looked like a thin thread of silver, "Thanks to your help. I couldn't have been dedicated to the exploration if you didn't take care of the Chamber of Commerce for me. If truth be told, I'm good at nothing but taking adventures. I'm not even a good father. You have helped me so much over the past few years..."

"You should know that I'm most willing to do these things for you," Margaret answered as she put her hand on the back of Thunder's. "Doesn't it hurt one's feelings to appreciate a person who doesn't want anything in return? We're going on a long trip soon. It's better not to talk about things like this."

"Margaret..." Thunder said. He turned around and their eyes met.

"Having said that, it isn't exactly accurate to say that I ask for nothing. There's something... that I do want," said Margaret as she winked. "So just bear in mind that I am up to something, and please don't feel that you owe me."

Thunder knew what Margaret wanted.

He was glad to see Lightning and her get along well back in Neverwinter.

Now he suddenly realized that he had been accustomed to Margaret's company.

It was weird that a man like him, who could steer his ship against whirling hurricanes and waves, would feel a little hesitant to confess his feelings.

Thunder was debating whether he should hold Margaret's hand when his first mate interrupted their conversation.

"Captain — " The first mate craned his neck, yelling on the terrace of the bridge. "All the caravans are waiting for your instruction!"

Thunder coughed and said, "Got it! I'm coming!"

"Alrighty!"

He then took a deep breath, turned to Margaret and said, "Time to go."

"Off you go." Margaret smiled at him while nodding. "Do what you're best at, as His Majesty said..."

"Right," Thunder said, "... to the new world."

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He walked down the tower, passed the bridge, crossed the deck and reached the bow, facing the spectators gathering about at the dock.

The crowd below immediately burst into loud cheers.

Thunder waved his hand and said, "I think everybody has known that the farthest we have been to is Shadow Waters. However, this was just a tiny step we made in the past. There's a huge Swirling Sea out there for us to explore. This time, we're going beyond Shadow Waters, crossing the incredible Sealine and visiting the distant land in the east — a bleak emptiness not yet imprinted with human feet!"

"I've seen a vast continent in the Shadow Ruins. It's a land as splendid as the Four Kingdoms. But where is it? Is it to the east of the Sealine? We're now going to find the answers to these exciting questions. If it does exist, Fjords people would no longer need to struggle on this overcrowded land and live in fear! Also, this new land will probably bring us much more wealth than all the fortunes we have made over the past years altogether. This is also one of the reasons I encourage every capable man to join us: It's so lucrative a business that everybody would have a chance to benefit from it!"

His speech was interrupted by a rush of cheers from the crowd. Thunder waited for the crowd to fall silent again and then continued, "Yet I want something else other than gold royals and fame, that is, I want the Fjords to constitute a part of our history! Up to now, Fjords people are seldom mentioned in the history of the Four Kingdoms. There are neither prominent families dwelling on the Fjords for generations nor a king governing the land. We're far apart from the continent, living on an isolated island with no influences whatsoever on people across the channel, except for traveling caravans."

"But this will all change soon. When we discover a brand new land for mankind, history will remember us. We'll be remembered as the most adventurous explorers in the world! I hope you understand that this upcoming trip will not only alter the present but also determine our future!"

"Hoist the sails, lads!" Thunder threw his arm in the air and shouted, "To the new world!"

The crowd below also raised their arms and shouted together. Their tumultuous cheers whipped through the air.

"To the new world — full speed ahead!"

Chapter 1094: A Power of Attorney

In Neverwinter, Graycastle.

Roland was sitting behind his desk answering a phone call from the front at Fertile Plains.

The word "front" was not actually accurate. Based on the decreasing rate of the reception, it was more a phone call between Neverwinter and the Longsong Stronghold than one between Neverwinter and the front. Without an extender, this was the farthest a wind-up telephone could reach.

Yet they could still go beyond this limit.

The simplest way was to ask Leaf to "forward" calls. When she turned into the Heart of Forest, she could control the entire Misty Forest with her mind and transfer information even faster than Lightning when she was flying at the speed of sound. The front personnel simply needed to call Leaf, who would then transfer the call to Roland. In that case, they could pretty much receive messages instantly.

"Everything looks fine for now," Leaf replied in an unnecessarily low tone to mimic Iron Axe. "As you anticipated, the demons made several attempts to destroy the railway tracks afterwards, but their action didn't really impact our logistics. Without the spider demons, they could only move the tracks manually. Moreover, they had to hurry off to avoid a direct clash with the 'Blackriver'. Since there was no need to replace the entire railway, it didn't take our engineer team long to mend the damaged section."

"It seems that the armored trains worked."

"Yes, Your Majesty. The armored trains actually function as a small stronghold. They play an important role in sending reinforcements and repairing the railway. I just wish there were more of them. If we could put a "Blackriver" at every station, that would be great."

"You make it sound like an easy job." Roland could not resist grinning over the phone. "Apart from armored trains, we also need witches to continue to produce freight trains. The two we have now is the best we can do at present. Keep expanding our defensive line. Hopefully we can get prepared for the general offensive by midsummer."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Leaf said in a muffled voice.

"Leaf, you can actually... skip the nasal sound," Roland thought in amusement.

Roland continued on a cough, "By the way, is there still no sign of a massive attack from the demons yet?"

He had been quite restless since Nightingale had woken him up in the middle of that night, telling him that the First Army had encountered a night raid. His heart had been in his throat until Anna told him that the loss was moderate and that Edith had reassured everything was fine.

In fact, poor lighting had always been a big problem for the First Army. In a dark surrounding, their firing rate would be significantly compromised, and Roland had still not figured out how to manufacture tracers. The soldiers essentially had to rely on the witches' instructions to fire. Roland had not expected the demons would launch their first voluntary attack at night. He was surprised to learn that they had not only developed a thorough understanding of the ability of Sylvie's Magic Eye but also grasped the nature of firearms. He was also quite taken aback at the fact that they adopted a loose formation and sneaked in. Fortunately, the enemy did not possess a weapon as powerful as a cannon, and the First Army had carried out their contingency plan perfectly. Otherwise, the outcome of the battle could have been different.

"I haven't noticed any signs that indicate the demons will attack us at night like last time so far," Leaf said. "Ms. Sylvie is now putting one or two hours every day on patrolling the railway area which the demons must pass if they plan to attack us. She sometimes also spies on the enemy on the Magic Ark or the 'Seagull'. At least, it's safe for now."

"What does the General Staff say about it?"

"They think there are two possible reasons. One is that the demons have noticed our change and can't play their old trick anymore. The other is that the demons can't assemble enough troops to have a second round of attack in such a short time."

"Really?" said Roland thoughtfully. Apart from the demons' remarkable learning ability, he was also very concerned about that Senior Demon acting as the skirmisher.

Indeed, this was not their first time meeting a Senior Demon.

Now he remembered after they had met the first Senior Demon at the snow mountain, they had encountered this particular type of Senior Demon four times. However, several hundreds of years ago, Senior Demons used to be commanders only. The Union would only have had a chance to kill them after the Blessed Army had slain all other regular demons. They had apparently lost their superior status over the past hundreds of years and started to participate in a battle more often than they used to. This was definitely not good news for them.

For the soulless God's Punishment Army, Roland could still develop some specific tactics to tackle them. For a group of Senior Demons with various powers, he could literally do nothing about them but to cross his fingers.

Since there were no particular methods to fight the Senior Demons off, the only way Roland could think of now was a universal strategy, which was to catch the enemy unprepared and eradicate them with more powerful gunfire.

"The demons would definitely not allow us to prowl around the Fertile Plains. We should stay alert, making sure we leave them no chance."

"Noted!" Leaf said while raising her voice. After the communication was over, she said with an abrupt return to her usual manner, "Your Majesty, Iron Axe has hung up."

"Alright..." Roland heaved a sigh and asked, "Who's next?"

"The Minister of Construction, Karl Van Bate."

Roland was a bit surprised to hear the Ministry of Construction have problems, as they had already sufficient materials and manpower to carry out their projects. He thus said, "Transfer the call."

"Your Majesty," Leaf said whilst mimicking Carl's voice this time. Although Roland could still somehow distinguish the difference, the rustling of the twigs and leaves made Leaf's performance quite impressive. "The construction team has encountered some problems recently. I hope the other departments of the Administrative Office could help us."

"It seems... Leaf has got addicted to this voice over job," Roland thought.

The report from the Minister of Construction was fairly straightforward. The night raid had shocked many workers and resulted in a low morale among the workers. As many foremen had noticed their workers were slacking off, they wished to change the workers' shifts or allow their families to visit them so as to raise their spirits.

Roland thought it was practically impossible to change everybody's shifts since not all the workers were willing to trade their lives for a higher pay. As such, he steered the conversation to the second method. "Family visits? I remember more than 70% of the railway workers are immigrants who don't have a family. If we allow family visits, those who don't have relatives would feel bitter against those who do, which would then exacerbate the current situation," Roland replied.

"I've thought about that, Your Majesty," Leaf answered for the Minister. "The railway construction team once asked all the workers to submit a Power of Attorney, in which they named the person who will have the full authority to take care of their personal matters in case they're killed in action. This person must be very important to that worker and thus, in a sense, can be regarded as his family member."

"That sounds like a plan," Roland said after a moment of reflection. "Alright then. I'll ask Barov to arrange it."

Chapter 1095: An Account of the Past

After Roland hung up, Nightingale placed a silver white ring on his desk.

It was a ring made of two shards of aluminum that could hold a roll of paper as small as a person's palm specifically designed for carrier pigeons. The combination of the ring and Soraya's "ultra-thin paper" enabled them to deliver more messages at a time. Instead of tying notes to the messengers' claws, they could now simply attach them to this ring.

To prevent accidents en route, each local Administrative Office set up a post station for messengers who flew over 500 kilometers to take a rest before taking off for the next station. To more efficiently sort encrypted mail, the ring was embossed with an identification code similar to train tickets in modern society. The identification code would instantly tell mailmen where this encrypted letter came from and where it should go.

The letter C on this ring represented the Kingdom of Dawn. Out of security and confidentiality concerns, Roland had decided to use the first letter of each country's Pinyin spelling instead of the standard characters commonly used in the Four Kingdoms.

"Is it from Thorn Town in the Kingdom of Dawn?" Roland said while raising his eyebrows. "When did you receive it?"

"Just ten minutes ago when Honey came," Nightingale replied. "But you were on the phone at that time, so I didn't give it to you straight away."

"Did they find something new in the ruins at the Cage Mountain?" Roland wondered as he unclipped the ring and unfolded the letter.

The letter was a bit long. It took him around seven minutes to figure out what the guard was trying to convey.

"I didn't expect the church would ask for Graycastle's help," Roland remarked impressively after he put down the letter. He knew it was now impossible for the church to stage a comeback after they had abandoned Hermes, but it did not hurt to help them weed out a local noble. It was very ironic to see the very person who gave these fugitives a fatal blow was nobody but a former bishop of the church.

"Do you know where those church dregs are? Those who fled Holy City, leaving the orphans in the monastery behind?" Nightingale asked, her voice alive with curiosity.

"If what the letter says is correct, the church is now completely over," Roland said as he handed the letter to Nightingale. "Their last hope turns out to be their last straw."

Nightingale cast Roland a glance after she read the letter and asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Since the butler of the Earl of Archduke Island has confessed everything and we've also known where the treasure is, we'll sooner or later send our men to the Kingdom of Wolfheart," Roland said while

tapping the desk gently. "The reaction of the Magic Ceremony Cube to the enriched uranium sample indicates the drawings on the mural are probably depictions of true stories. Regardless of what it is used for, we'd better bring the Cube back to Neverwinter. As for the acting pope Farrina..." Roland paused for a second and then went on, "Bring Joe and her back here for further questioning."

"That's what I thought you would say," Nightingale commented with a faint smile.

"I thought you wouldn't like my answer," Roland said carefully. "The church persecuted you before."

"I did hate the church very much, and I even hated men at one point," Nightingale admitted. "However, after I learned that it was actually Alice's plan and that what she did was all for the continuity of the human race, I changed my mind. I don't hate her anymore but just feel she's pathetic. Plus, the church established by Starfall City is long gone. Even if I want to avenge myself, there's nobody for me to take revenge on now."

"Um... you hated men before?" Roland asked in surprise.

"Why do you sound so flustered?" Nightingale said as she shot him a stare. "I couldn't control my awakening. I didn't do anything wrong. Why did everybody hate me so much like I'm a horrible disease? You alienate me, so why do I have to befriend you. That's how I viewed things back then, and I can assure you that most of the witches had the same feeling before."

"Is that the reason you showed up in my bedroom with a dagger at that time?"

"You were lucky you know?" Nightingale said with a laugh. "I didn't necessarily hate people, but I did despise nobles. I sat down and negotiated with you purely because of Anna. Did you forget what people called me before?"

"No, I didn't. You were the Shadow Killer, a ghost assassin who made all the nobles in the old king's city shudder." Roland left his words unsaid.

"So you flirted with me..."

"To reveal your true nature," Nightingale said, muffling her snigger. "I was acting. I wanted to let Anna understand what disgusting creatures nobles were. Unfortunately..."

"What are you regretting about? Are you regretting that you failed to persuade Anna to leave Border Town or about your unsuccessful flirting strategy?" Roland grumbled within himself. He said glumly, "So I was indeed lucky."

"It's easy to go extreme when holding a grudge against someone," Nightingale said, justifying her behavior as she patted Roland on the shoulder. "Soon I found you're as different from the other nobles as me, so I decided to trust you."

"Shall I say thank you?"

"You're welcome," Nightingale replied matter-of-factly. "After I learned about the Pure Witches and someone like Zero, I soon put those childish ideas behind."

"Really... you did come a long way," Roland commented with a sigh.

"Why do I have the impression that you aren't very happy?" Nightingale asked as she leaned forward and peered down at Roland, her hair touching his cheek. "You weren't very sad a while ago, but you are... now."

With these words, she quickly slid into the Mist. By the time Roland saw Nightingale again, she was lying on a recliner with a piece of dried fish between her lips, winking at him triumphantly.

Grinding his teeth, Roland got to his feet. He was about to give her a lesson, making her understand who the real King of Graycastle was, when the telephone rang.

It was from the Director of the Administrative Office.

Roland shot Nightingale a "wait-for-me" look and picked up the phone.

"Your Majesty," Barov's voice sounded over the phone, "there's a special guest from the old king's city who insists on speaking to you."

Barov, as the Hand of the King, normally did not introduce visitors himself. Intrigued, Roland asked, "Who's that?"

"The great dramatist, Sir Kajen Fels," Barov boomed, a hint of excitement in his voice.

Roland's brows were furrowed. "Why is he here again? Didn't I make it very clear in my last letter?" thought Roland a bit irritably. He replied, "I have a lot on my plate. If he doesn't have anything really important..."

"Yes, he does, Your Majesty!" said Barov, who immediately related the purpose of Kajen's visit to Roland.

"Are you sure?" Roland said, slightly surprised.

"Yes, he truly said so!" The governor answered positively.

Hearing these words, Roland suddenly had an idea. After a moment of silence, he changed his mind and said, "Take him to the castle parlor. I'll meet him there."

Chapter 1096: His Expertise

It was Roland's first time meeting this preeminent actor and screenwriter, his hair half gray, his face half hidden in his bushy and tangled beards, his black tuxedo crisp, and his tie neatly around his neck. Like a man from a portrait, he looked old-fashioned and antiquated.

Roland pictured his portrait hung on a wall, with a caption underneath.

Although Kajen was an elderly man, his eyes had not yet aged. After a bow, the screenwriter directly rested his eyes on Roland. Apparently, it was not his first time having an encounter with a royal family member.

"Your Majesty, this is Sir Kajen Fels," Barov introduced the man while massaging his hands in exuberance. "He's the best actor and screenwriter in Graycastle and is also very well known across the

Four Kingdoms. Back in the old king's city, I was a frequent visitor to the Central Theater and I liked Mr. Kajen's work very much."

"You act like a child... You're the Hand of the King. Can't you behave more like an adult?" thought Roland while twitching his lips

"Good morning, Your Majesty," said Kajen as he clapped his hand over his chest. "Now I know why you don't watch new plays."

"Really?" Roland seated himself in the host chair and said, "Why?"

"You're... too young," Kajen replied slowly. "You're much younger than I thought."

"Are you saying that a person who doesn't have a great deal of experience of life doesn't have the capability to understand your plays?" Roland would have been a little affronted at such imprudent comments if he had still been the lord of Border Town. However, as he grew older, he became more unflappable in such a situation.

But his tone, which dropped dramatically at Kajen's words, clearly indicated that he was not very pleased.

Barov shot Kajen a warning look.

"No, Your Majesty. I'm not referring to your age but your spirit," Kajen explained while shaking his head. "Youth has nothing to do with a person's age. I've seen many nobles who live like old men in their prime. Likewise, a man who has crept in his decrepitude doesn't necessarily mean he's old." His smile became a little self-mocking at this point. "I thought I was very young, but now I realize life doesn't have a limit."

"Can I take your words as a compliment?" Roland said as he raised his brows.

"We can't say a young spirit is good and an old spirit bad, Your Majesty." To Roland's surprise, Kajen did not answer his question directly but went on, "A person with a young spirit can be motivated, audacious, curious, and the list goes on. However, he may also lose himself or even bring upon himself swift destruction while pursuing his goal, so..."

"Ahem, Mr. Kajen —" Barov interrupted him in a low voice.

"Ah, sorry, please don't take my words too seriously," said the dramatist, who had just realized he had spoken more than he was allowed to. "I'm an old man who has seen a lot of things, so I often have some crazy ideas. Please forgive my impertinence."

"That's fine," said Roland, who waved his hand and started to take a liking to Kajen. "Let's get down to the business. Barov told me that you want to work on my plays or join the Star Flower Troupe. Why's that?"

Kajen replied straight away, "I want to know more about the Magic Movie."

"So he's trying to achieve his goal in a roundabout way after I turned him down," thought Roland.

"You don't mind working on plays you disdain?"

"I'm not saying those plays aren't good..." Kajen explained. "I just feel that each show should be well planned beforehand so that actors can learn from it. Otherwise, they not only waste their time and talent but also fail their audience."

"But your audience isn't nobles, and I don't have much time for rehearsals. If you join the Star Flower Troupe, very likely you'll be forced to act in a play that doesn't meet your standards, and your name would potentially be ruined. Did you still want to join us?"

"Your Majesty, I..."

"I don't think it's a good idea for you to join the Star Flower Troupe," Roland talked over him. "The plays I plan to put on show are all meant to entertain the masses. Most of the actors will be from the Star Flower Troupe. I'm afraid I don't have any plays at the moment that will suit your taste or reflect your talent."

This time, Barov started to eye Roland.

"However..." Roland ignored Barov's meaningful blink and said, "I have something else for you."

"Yes, please," Kajen said eagerly as he leaned forward.

"In fact, I'm planning to write a play about a romance in a dark time, which actually happened during the rebellion of the Church of Hermes." Roland then briefly introduced the basic structure of the story. "I've heard that you're expert in plays about love and redemption, so let's make it a pilot project. If your play turns out to be a great success, I'll consider about your request next time I film the Magic Movie. How does that sound?"

After Roland seized the new and old Holy Cities, he told the public that the culprit of all the atrocious crimes was the false pope. The real pope had been killed a long time ago. Now, a new church agent had been appointed and he would fully support Graycastle to fight the Battle of Divine Will.

After more than one year of advertisement, the public gradually accepted the "new history". Now it was time to further uncover the origin of the Battle of Faiths and the church. Once the masses learned the truth, they would view the new church as a completely separate organization from the usurper's and the church that had persecuted the witches. The new church, therefore, would become a part of Neverwinter's political body.

"Is the play you're talking about based on a true story?" Kajen asked. "Can I meet the two main characters in the play?"

"They're currently in the Kingdom of Wolfheart, waiting for rescue." Roland said, shrugging. "But I think you should know what 'based on' means..."

"Of course," Kajen confirmed with a nod. "The plays I wrote in the past are also based on royal legends and myths, and I had to avoid using any identifiable family names and family history, but..."

"But what...?"

Kajen hesitated for a moment and replied determinedly, "Your Majesty, although it's definitely a new experience for me, I would like to join your rescue team if you allow me to. I want to watch this operation. It'll be very helpful for me to understand their story."

"Even though this requires you to pay a visit to the Kingdom of Wolfheart?"

"I don't think I can picture those details in my head, and I don't want to miss the opportunity you've given me," Kajen said cordially. "I can assure you that I won't cause any trouble to your team. My health has not failed me yet, and I have my student to take care of me."

Chapter 1097: Friend and Old Acquaintance

After Kajen withdrew, Barov immediately rounded on Roland and said anxiously, "Your Majesty, why did you decline his request? He's an iconic figure of the play industry in Graycastle, and every troupe is eager to have him! I'm not saying the Star Flower Troupe isn't good, but Ms. May is, after all, not as influential as Kajen Fels. If Kajen joins our troupe, Star Flower would veritably become the most eminent troupe throughout the whole kingdom. With Kajen in the troupe, a great number of actors and actresses would come and join us. Then we wouldn't need to worry about being short staffed."

Roland cast him a sideways glance and said, "Haven't you heard of the saying that people usually don't care much about things they obtained very easily?"

"Um..." The governor was taken aback for a fraction of a second before he replied, "Forgive my ignorance, but who said that, or rather, in which book did you see it?"

"I said it," Roland said unblushingly. "This is common sense. He has been attracted to the Magic Movie, so he would definitely stay in Neverwinter for a while. Compared to a straight 'yes', a challenging task would motivate him to work harder. Perhaps, he would even thank me for giving him this opportunity. If I let him in right away, he would take it for granted, and that's the difference between a yes and no."

Roland stopped for a second and then continued, "Plus, May is Kajen's student. If Kajen joins the Star Flower Troupe, what would Star Flower Troupe become of? I don't mind him participating in filming, but I don't want him to act in a play. His presence, however, would pressure young actors to further improve their skills."

"Well... you're right," Barov said hesitantly. "But you allowed him to go to the Kingdom of Wolfheart..."

"That's nothing," Roland cut in, "It's his own choice. I'm also curious about what play Kajen is going to make at this stage. As far as I know, he's already reached the pinnacle of his career. By the way, how's your statistic report going? If you have time to pry into other people's business, why not get your own work done?"

"Yes, Your Majesty... Please excuse me!" said Barov quickly, who bowed at once and retired from the parlor.

"You're acting more and more like a king, Your Majesty," Nightingale said as she revealed herself from behind and squinted at him.

"Haha... I'm flattered." It had been a while since Nightingale had addressed him in such a formal manner, and somehow Roland did not really like it. He said, "You don't need to talk to me with such formality, you know?"

"But I feel it isn't a very good idea to be too intimate," Nightingale instantly shot back while folding her arms. "'People usually don't care much about things they obtained very easily'. I didn't know you thought this way. I should be more careful in the future and set a boundary between us. Also, I'll certainly remind Anna to prevent someone from getting too full of himself. "

Roland could feel his forehead dampened with cold sweat. He said vaguely, "Well... um... um... anyway, people and the Magic Movie are two different things! Plus, I'm not the first person saying that..."

"But you agree with it," Nightingale grunted. "My magic power in my chest tells me that you accept at least 55% of the theory."

Roland mopped his forehead, wondering if Nightingale could now detect lies with such accuracy, and then he suddenly remembered the word "chest" she had mentioned. Agatha told him that witches' magic power was in a shape of a cyclone, but it was not a physical entity. In reality, magic power spread all over one's body rather than clustering around a certain area.

"Did you really use your ability?" Roland questioned.

"Haha." Nightingale could not resist laughing. "You found out, but you did say that. If the other witches know what you're really thinking, what will they think of you? Will they start to think that you 'take them for granted'?"

"Five Chaos Drinks," Roland blurted out, starting to bribe Nightingale.

"Ten, with different flavors," Nightingale negotiated as she licked her lips.

"It would raise suspicions if I give you too many..."

"Suspicious of what?"

"Well... someone will think it's unfair."

"Don't worry. I'll hide them well. Nobody will find them."

"How about eight? If you get them too easily, you'll..."

"Will what?"

"No, nothing. I have to think about it..."

...

In the end, Roland signed an "unequal treaty" at the cost of ten Chaos Drinks.

Watching Nightingale snacking on dried fish triumphantly, Roland shook his head in amusement.

By nightfall, Barov handed in the list of family visitors. He reported over the phone, "Ms. Scroll and I reviewed the family records and the copies of Power of Attorney. We've selected around 1,600 people for the first round of family visits to the Fertile Plains. Priority is given to family members. We're currently in the process of drafting a detailed proposal. If everything goes well, they'll be taking off in two days."

"Very well. Go ahead with your plan," Roland said approvingly, feeling very pleased with the high work efficiency of the Administrative Office. He was proud of how well his prime minister was trained.

"As you command! But Your Majesty, one worker's family member is a witch."

"A witch?" Roland echoed, his brows going up.

"Yes, this worker is called Snaketooth, from the Longsong District. He used to be a Rat at Black Street, and the witch is Miss Paper."

"Paper?" Roland suddenly remembered that Paper had involved herself in a small dispute when Petrov had brought her here. Was that Snaketooth her friend?

"Do you want me to cross him out?" Barov pursued as Roland lapsed into a long silence. "After all, Miss Paper has completely cut off from her past now."

"Of course not," said Roland, coming out of his reverie, "She severed her relationship with her past job as a Rat, but not with her friend. Don't forget that the key to eliminating Rats is to educate and transform them. They shouldn't be treated any differently just because of their previous occupation."

"A worker who used to be a Rat at Black Street..." Roland's lips curled up into a smile as he sank into his thought. If he remembered correctly, Paper and that worker had not seen each other for nearly two years. Perhaps they had forgotten what the other looked like. Yet Snaketooth still put her name on the Power of Attorney. It sounded like a fascinating story.

"I'll let Paper know," Roland said in the end. "You take care of the rest."

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

At a clearing to the southwest of Tower Station No. 1, the First Army was holding a memorial service.

Nearly 300 serried snow-white tombstones stood solemnly on a meadow. Although nobody was buried underneath, everyone rose to pay their respects, a sober and stern expression on their faces, as if their companions had been standing right in front of them, alive and well.

"Here lie the valiant soldiers who sacrificed themselves to defend Tower Station No.1."

"They did not retreat but fought fiercely against the ferocious enemies."

"Because they knew that Graycastle had got their back."

"They were the swords of His Majesty, the towering wall protecting the civilians."

"Their names will be engraved in our memories."

"Their dreams will be fulfilled by us."

"To the King of Graycastle, to the Kingdom of Graycastle."

"Salute!"

Iron Axe performed a military salute, and all the others followed.

Lightning landed quietly on a barrack.

She spied a familiar figure at the front.

That was the conductor of the "Blackriver".

Chapter 1098: The Guardian

After the group of soldiers dispersed, the old man returned to the train. Lightning flew into the cab from the rear window and landed silently on the floor of the compartment.

The old man stood in front of the dashboard, transfixed like a silent statue, gazing at what lay in his hand.

Watching his lonely back, Lightning wanted to console him, but words somehow abandoned her.

The old man did not see Lightning until she touched the half-open blind.

"Ah, you were the little girl the other day..." said the old man who blinked in surprise.

"My name is Lightning," Lightning said as she took a step back. "Sorry, I..."

"I see. You came to comfort me, right?" The old man said, grinning. "That's OK. I'm not that old yet. I don't need a little girl to comfort me. To be honest, it's a little embarrassing. That's a convenient ability you have. You can go wherever you want."

Lightning was a little relieved after she noticed that the old man was not as disconsolate as she had thought. She said, "I, I'll knock before I come in next time."

"I'm not blaming you, child," said the old man as he took down a foldable desk off the wall and wiped it with his sleeve. "Come, sit here. I'll make you a cup of tea. This is the only thing I have here to entertain guests."

"Thank... you," said Lightning, as she slouched toward the table and sat down. On the dashboard lay a Neverwinter identification card.

"I'm Broocher, or you can call me my nickname, Mr. Howler. The lads on the train all call me by that name." The old man placed a cup of hot tea on the table and asked, "Did you attend the memorial?"

Lightning nodded and then shook her head. "I just stopped by and watched for a few minutes..."

"That means you didn't lose any of your friends, which is good."

Lightning clutched the cup and asked, "Your son..."

"Oh, that was Robert, my third son. He died when they tried to seize the artillery," Broocher said placidly. "The commander says he was very brave."

"He was," Lightning muttered. She had heard everything about the battle from Sylvie. It took a great deal of courage to charge at the spearing demons with no firearms or the support of the God's Punishment Witches.

"My third son used to be the timidest among my four sons. When he was a miner, he never stood up for himself no matter how harsh his foreman treated him. He would only complain about him to me in tears," Broocher said with a sigh. "You must be wondering why I don't look very sad, aren't you?"

At a loss for words, the little girl stammered, "No, I..."

"That's OK," the old man consoled her. "I know this will come one day... but my three sons told me one thing once."

"What... did they say?"

"They said they wanted to defend Neverwinter and everything in their native town that they earned through their hard work." The old man sipped the tea and continued, "To be completely honest, I didn't understand at first and asked them why it had to be them instead of others."

Lightning was asking the same question within herself.

Broocher seemed to know what she was thinking. He answered, "They said that others had made their sacrifices."

"Many people were killed during the battle against the demonic beasts when they were just members of the Militia. People died all the time when they fought against Duke Ryan and the church. If everybody relied on others, we would have been still working at the mine, living like animals," the old man said.

"There's no battle without blood spilled. Everybody has his own turn. If nobody wanted to come forward, we would have been at the mercy of our enemy — that was what they told me."

"I'm not sure if my three sons are right, but I'm sure that this is their own choice." He took a deep breath and went on, "They were adults, and they knew what they were doing. That's enough for me. Compared to my eldest son who died of a chill, my third son would be remembered by the army forever. What do I have to be sad for?"

Lightning remembered what the conductor had said the other night. "They used to be as frail and weak as mice. However, after they joined the army, they changed a great deal. That's where my confidence in the First Army comes from. An army with people like that would not be so easily defeated."

"So that's the reason..." Lightning thought.

"By the way, I should thank you."

"Thank... me?" Lightning echoed in confusion.

"Yes," said the old man smilingly. "Without your prompt notification, we would have suffered a greater loss. You protected the First Army and the other son of mine in another way. I was wondering when I could meet you again and thought I probably would never see you in the future, but you appeared right behind me. It's nice to express my gratitude in person."

After the tea, Lightning waved goodbye to Broocher.

As she flew out of the train, through the window she saw the old man return to the dashboard, grab that identification card and bury his face in his hands.

...

Maggie was hovering in midair when Lightning returned to the residential area. She pulled Lightning into a rib-cracking hug as soon as she saw her and said accusingly, "Where have you been, coo? Why did you come back so late, coo? Did you forget what day it is today, coo?"

"Um, what day is it?"

"It's the day Lorgar is discharged from the hospital!" Maggie exclaimed as she descended on Lightning's head. "Let's go to the hospital, coo!"

"Ah... alright, alright. I see. Be quiet," Lightning said as she steadied the wobbly pigeon before zooming toward the center of the encampment. The Tower Station No. 1 underwent significant changes after the night attack. All the facilities, including the barracks and the hospital, had been relocated to the underground, except the platform, the yard and the watchtower. In this way, they were able to extend the defensive line to the outer ring of the encampment while at the same time monitoring the interior. Even if the demons launched a similar attack again, they would be able to minimize its impact.

Lightning and Maggie soon caught sight of the wolf girl.

"Hey," Lorgar said as she shook her ears. "Long time no see."

"It has been just a week," Lightning said, relieved to see the wolf girl in high spirits again. Lightning had been very concerned about Lorgar, because based on Maggie's description, Lorgar had been barely alive when she had been sent to the hospital.

"I feel time go so slow, probably because I've been sleeping all day," Lorgar said while stretching her body. "Nana insists that I should stay at the hospital for a week. If I stayed here for another week, I probably wouldn't need her treatment."

According to the Taquila witches, witches generally had a higher tolerance to the side effect of sleeping ferns than ordinary people. As such, to save Nana's magic power, they usually put themselves to sleep when receiving Nana's treatment.

"You really have monstrous self-repair ability, just like Lady Ashes, coo!" Maggie remarked while flapping her wings.

"Um... After I talked to Miss Andrea, I feel this is nothing to brag about," Lorgar mumbled in a hushed voice.

"Coo?"

"No, nothing," The wolf girl muttered as she walked up to Lightning and suddenly picked her up under her arms.

"Oi, Oi... what are you doing? Put me down," Abashed, Lightning yelled. "Somebody's watching us!"

"Sylvie told me everything, everything you did."

"I..."

"See? You can do it as long as you try hard," Lorgar said as she pressed Lightning into her bosom. "This is the captain we love."

Lightning stopped struggling, feeling warmth wash over her body. After a moment of silence, she murmured, "But I'm still a coward."

"You admitting this to me indicates you've already made progress." Lorgar put down Lightning and said, "You aren't going to leave us again, are you?"

Lightning's eyes darted from the wolf girl to Maggie, then nodded gently and said, "No."

The moment she made her promise, she felt a heavy burden press onto her shoulders.

However, she did not feel intimidated.

Instead, she somehow felt a sense of security.

"Coo?" Maggie asked in bewilderment, her head lopsided. "What are you talking about, coo?"

"We're discussing the upcoming celebration," Lorgar said as she straightened up. "Since we're all safe and sound, shouldn't we have a drink?"

"Celebrate, coo!! Celebrate, coo!" Maggie rejoined in excitement.

"Hey, hang on..." Lightning said hesitantly. "I have to patrol the campsite tonight."

"That's OK. You just provide drinks and we'll drink them for you," Lorgar said, her tail high up in the air. "This is what a captain should offer to her team, isn't it?"

Chapter 1099: I Like You and Everybody

The following day, a message from Neverwinter stirred the entire construction team at the front.

King Roland had granted family visits to all the laborers who had been working for more than three months. They would have a day off to spend this special day with their families whom they had been longing to see. Their family members would travel from Neverwinter to the terminus station located at the Misty Forest to meet them.

Everyone was grateful for King Roland's kindness and compassion. The workers chanted "Long live the king" after they heard the news and worked even harder during the remainder of the day.

Snaketooth was one of them.

In fact, when the foreman had told him the news, he had literally goggled at the list in disbelief for a few minutes.

He gazed at the bottom of the list where the name "Paper" lay, his head completely blank.

"Hey, are you OK with the arrangement or not?" Snaketooth still clearly remembered that the foreman had pressed him for an answer impatiently. Indeed, he had stared at the list for quite a while before signing the paper. Snaketooth grinned every time he thought of that moment. "Just a heads up. If you

disagree, you can put down another person's name, and the Administrative Office would make an inquiry to him or her. However, if your application is rejected, you'll lose your vacation."

The foreman obviously wanted him to approve the list right away to save his work, but Snaketooth knew he did not understand his feeling.

Why would he want to reject it. On the very contrary, he wanted to give the official at the Administrative Office drafting this list a big kiss.

"I agree. I totally agree!"

"You should have said that earlier rather than gaping like an idiot," the foreman grumbled scathingly while casting him a sideways glance. He went to look for the next person on the list after Snaketooth signed.

Snaketooth stood rooted there, staring at the hand with which he had put his signature in a daze.

He still felt that everything was like a dream, a dream he hoped that would last forever.

He did not have the courage to say hello to Paper in Neverwinter because he was afraid of being rejected. Paper was now a member of the Witch Union and had become much more beautiful than the frail girl he had known. If Paper did not want to associate herself with a former Rat like him anymore, his intrusion would only disturb her peaceful life.

When he saw Paper's name appear on the list, he knew the Administrative Office had confirmed that she agreed to come and visit him.

Nothing could be more exciting than spending time alone with Paper. He was happy that Paper did not reject him.

Snaketooth waited for the family visiting day in great anxiety and excitement.

Since the train could only carry around 100 people at a time due to its limited transportation capacity, Snaketooth had to wait for a week for his turn, although Paper was on the list of the first round of the visitors.

"Hey man, it's your turn today?"

"Look at you! It's a girl, isn't it?"

"Don't stay up too late!"

Snaketooth went all red as his fellow workers jested. He dashed out of the room in embarrassment.

He heaved a deep sigh of relief after finally boarding the train. Anyway, he would be meeting Paper in two hours.

The train conductor reminded them of the rules pertaining to family visits every now and then. For example, visitors were not allowed to go beyond the guarding zone and had to leave before 8:00 PM. They also should follow the First Army's instructions in the event of an emergency. Snaketooth had learned all the rules by heart, as some returned visitors had already told him.

With a long, shrill whistle, the train staggered to a stop at the terminus station at the Misty Forest.

"Get off the train. Line up and don't push!" The train staff hollered. "It isn't grocery shopping. There's no need to fear that the food would be sold out."

The crowd erupted into a laughter.

Snaketooth felt his heart thumping in his throat.

He could barely contain himself.

He had pictured his meeting with Paper numerous times in his head and had also rehearsed his speech over and over again. However, he was now groping for words like a dunce.

When that pretty girl appeared in front of him, Snaketooth forgot all about his prepared speech. No words came out of his mouth. He simply grinned at her, feeling very stupid.

"You're living at Neverwinter. That's awesome!" The girl trotted to him and held his hands. She neither hesitated nor showed any reluctance to touch him. Everything was just like what it had been like two years ago. Her bright smile instantly eased his mind.

At that moment, Snaketooth believed that he had made the right choice to come to Neverwinter.

...

"So, you came here after the Longsong District was merged?"

The pair of the two walked abreast along a path leading to the depth of the forest far away from the boisterous encampment so that they could have some privacy. Paper appeared to have a lot to say as if she wanted to fill in the gap between them. Snaketooth, on the other hand, answered every question Paper asked. They were now more like friends than a superior and a subordinate.

"The entire Rat organization has been uprooted. There were many job postings on the square, so I applied for one. If I continued to be a Rat, I would have got in trouble," Snaketooth said while nodding. "Tigerclaw and I decided to work in Neverwinter, as the pay is higher here. Plus..."

"It's closer to you," he left the remaining words unsaid.

"No wonder I didn't find you guys. I didn't know you already left there," Paper remarked with a mixed feeling.

"You went back to... the Longsong District later?"

"I asked someone to look for you," the girl said slowly. "After I learned that the entire Dark Corner Alley was torn down, I thought you left the Western Region."

"Oh... I see."

"But why didn't you come to see me after you came to Neverwinter?" Paper questioned.

"Well... it's a long story." Snaketooth said on a cough. "Tigerclaw and I had nothing at that time. We didn't have a permanent residence and we worked all day, so we kind of forgot."

It was such a poor excuse. Nobody could ever completely forget a person for two years. That simply meant he did not care about her. However, Snaketooth would never tell Paper that he was trying to dodge her.

Fortunately, Paper did not probe into the matter. She said, " Same here. I was so busy at the beginning after I moved to Neverwinter. I have to help the construction team to make cement settle faster. I have to assist Ms. Agatha, and I also have to help the chemical plant to manufacture various strange stuff," Paper said as she counted things off on her fingers. " His Majesty says my ability can accelerate reaction processes and increase bond energies. I wonder how he knew it. According to the book, those particles are even smaller than sesame. Can you imagine that? If an atom is as big as the Longsong Theater, its nucleus is smaller than a walnut..."

Snaketooth did not understand a single word Paper was saying but he kept nodding, pretending to be interested in the topic. For a split second, he noticed Paper's change and the difference between them. He looked at her with utmost attentiveness, his eyes flitting from her glistening eyes and long eyelashes to the delicate tip of her nose and moving lips, fascinated by everything about her.

Snaketooth was almost about to confess to her.

"By the way," After talking about her own experience, Paper switched the subject, "after I learned that you were in Neverwinter, I asked Ms. Scroll to look up the files and found that Sunflower and the others also came here. That's so nice. We can hang out together in the future..."

Snaketooth was not paying attention to the latter half her sentence. He was too occupied by his own thought.

So he confessed his love.

"I like you, Paper!" he blurted out.

Immediately, he realized what he had done.

His heart was beating suffocatingly in his chest. An indescribable nervousness prevailed him.

For a moment, Snaketooth regretted being so impulsive.

However, to his surprise, Paper replied to him at once.

She answered brightly with a smile, "I like you too, and also everybody."

Chapter 1100: Afternoon Tea in the Forest

...

"Did she... really say that at that time?" Wendy burst into a laugh after Leaf recounted Paper's story. She asked, "What about the young man called Snaketooth? Didn't he say anything?"

"Just laughed like a child with her together," Leaf said as she shook her head. "He probably used up all the courage he could muster to communicate his feelings. It wasn't an easy task after all."

"I thought so too," Wendy said, smiling even more broadly. "It's so good... to be young."

"Is it OK to eavesdrop on our fellow witch though?" Leaf questioned as she transformed from a green shadow into her original appearance.

"We weren't eavesdropping. We were simply doing what His Majesty told us to," Wendy protested, swelling up dignifiedly. "He asked us to have an eye on both of them, so obviously we should know about their topic of discussion, shouldn't we?"

That sounded quite reasonable.

"Besides, would you choose not to listen to their conversation if His Majesty didn't ask you to?" Wendy asked, staring at Leaf smilingly.

"Um..." Leaf said while clearing her throat. She curled up her lips and gave an affirmative answer, "Yes, I still would."

Both of them broke into laughter after exchanging a look with each other.

Leaf waved her hand. Soon, a giant vine rose from the ground and sent Wendy and her slowly to the treetops. Shortly afterwards, the dense branches and twigs below spread out, intertwined and converged again. A moment later, a balcony built with green leaves appeared.

An endless sea of trees and a vast meadow leading to the Dragonspine Mountains suddenly came into their views.

Leaf used to build similar tree cabins back in the Witch Cooperation Association to shelter the witches from pouring rain and muddy roads, but it used to take her a lot of time to create one. To save her magic power, the cabins were always the shabbiest, smallest of the kind, with the shape of a chrysalis, and they could not always accommodate everyone.

But now, she could not only build a balcony effortlessly but could also conjure recliners and a coffee table. She also conjured two cups of light golden flower tea, which sparkled in the sunlight on the coffee table.

"Did you make it?" Wendy asked as she sniffed the cups. The tea smelled good.

"Yes. I used morning dews, honey and sugarcane to make it, with some fresh jasmine flower buds as well," Leaf answered while nodding. "It isn't as tasty as Chaos Drinks, but you can have as much tea as you want."

"You've become stronger and stronger," Wendy remarked impressively. "People say Anna is a true genius of our century, but I think you're just as powerful as her. Probably one day, you can control all the forests in the world and spread your mind throughout the whole continent, provided that you live long enough..."

"Based on my current status, I can't do that," Leaf said with a wave, smiling. "It would take nearly ten years for me to merge with the entire Misty Forest. By the time I'm able to leave here, I'm probably an old witch."

"Nobody knows," Wendy said as she sipped the tea. "Agatha told me that witches and their magic power are interdependent on each other. The more powerful a witch is, the longer lifespan she'll have. The Transcendents might have still been alive if they weren't killed in the war." Wendy gazed up at the sky and said, "You're probably stronger than them. Perhaps, you can survive all of us."

Leaf fell silent. There was a hint of melancholy in her eyes, which Wendy did not notice.

"Also, our appearances have something to do with our magic power too." Wendy paused for a second and then continued, "Pasha has confirmed that the legendary Queen of Starfall City, Alice, was divinely beautiful." At these words, Wendy turned around and rested her eyes on Leaf. "Right... you do look a bit different now. I mean... when you descended from the treetops, you looked like a goddess of forests for a moment. I'm envious."

Leaf rolled her eyes and said, "This doesn't sound like something the kind, caring Wendy I know would say."

"That's because I didn't really think about these problems before," Wendy replied with a smile. "I was too focused on our survival to reflect upon other trifles, such as what our magic power can achieve, what our future would become of, and how magic power would affect our physical appearances."

"Makes sense," Leaf agreed while twitching her lips. "So now you've started to study the impact of magic power on your appearance. Let me guess... do you have a crush on someone?"

"That's different. You're just a little younger than me, aren't you? Are you not worried that you'll end up being all alone like me?"

"Forget about the age. I already have a forest. What else do I need? But I have my own way to know what you want. I supply all Honey's animal messengers."

"Unfortunately, as the superintendent of the Witch Union, I review every single article she writes."

Time passed by quickly as the pair teased each other over the afternoon tea.

Leaf finally steered the subject to the business when the sun started to sink behind the mountain in the west. She asked, "So, are you leaving soon?"

"Yes." Wendy got to her feet and said, "I have to escort Anna back. As the 'Seagull' doesn't work at night, we have to take off before four o'clock."

"You'll miss Paper and her beau's bonfire party then."

Unlike other family members, Paper took a flight to the front instead of traveling by train. As the departure time of the glider was fixed and they certainly could not leave Paper at the front alone either, she had to get there right on time.

"I don't have a choice," Wendy said resignedly while spreading out her hands. "We can't afford to waste too much time on the commute. It isn't safe and Neverwinter needs the glider."

"I'll let her know it's time to go," Leaf said as she transformed into the spirit form again.

"Thank you."

Leaf submerged in the sea of trees and reappeared in front of Wendy a few seconds later.

"OK, done. She'll meet you at the airport. I think she should be bidding farewell to her friend now. Let me transport you there."

Wendy nodded and turned around to wait for the balcony to descend.

"By the way..."

Leaf suddenly spoke in a quiet voice.

"Yes?"

"Ah, no," Leaf said hesitantly, "nothing."

Wendy took a breath, wheeled around and said gently, "Speak out. I'm here to listen."

"I'm just..."

"Just what?"

"Just a bit..." Leaf mumbled while clenching her fists. She suddenly, however, stood transfixed to the spot, looking over Wendy's head and locked her eyes on the northern side of the forest.

Perceiving the shock and surprise on her face, Wendy also wheeled around to see what had happened.

Several tendrils of dark smoke curled up from the forest and spread out like a veil.

"Is the forest... on fire?"