

Witch 1131

Chapter 1131: The Third Academy

Roland immediately set off for the ammunition plant at the Third Border City.

He knew Anna was not at Neverwinter at the moment, but he believed they could manufacture tracers with the current available technologies.

If he intended to mass produce tracers, he had to rely on factory workers rather than Anna.

Escorted by his guards, Roland entered the plant where all the workers went down to their knees, both excited and overwhelmed. Looking at the ecstatic look on their faces, Roland realized he had just made a rash decision. However, since he was already here, he had no choice but to hastily turn this unexpected visit into a tour of inspection.

After the exhilarated workers returned to their workstations, Roland immediately came up to the superintendent and said, "Bring the most skillful foreman here. I want him to test out something for me."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

The mechanism of a tracer was simple. It was basically a bullet head filled with luminescent activators, accelerants and slow burning gunpowder, sealed with a tailpipe and a shard of aluminium foil. When the bullet escaped from the muzzle, the resultant gas would unseal the foil and ignite the slow burning gunpowder and the accelerants, leaving a bright, dazzling trajectory behind.

In the technologically advanced modern society, manufacturing tracers was not a big issue. All they needed to do was to add another assembly line. However, in Neverwinter where the development of industrialization was still in its infancy, it would be a lot more difficult to produce tracers. First of all, luminescent activators were usually a mixture of strontium nitrate, powdered aluminium and magnesium, and barium peroxide, which meant they had to first create these chemicals before mass producing tracers. Roland knew very well the industry level of Neverwinter. Up to this date, the Ministry of Chemical Industry was still not able to guarantee a constant supply of machine guns and ammunition to the First Army, let alone other additional weapons.

The superintendent soon brought a worker to Roland. To Roland's surprise, he was not a withered, gray-haired elder but a young man in his mid twenties. The foreman went down to his knee in the same manner as a knight and asked, "Your Majesty, what can I do for you?"

Roland understood that Neverwinter was currently industrialized. Unlike traditional handicraftsmanship, the younger generation who learned faster than the elders became the main workforce. The development of technologies closed the gap between the young and the old. Experience was no longer an asset when it came to new production tools.

Roland noticed that most workers in key positions were merely around 20 to 30 years old, which indicated that Graycastle was facing a bright future.

Roland nodded in satisfaction and said, "I want to add something new to the bullets. Now, listen carefully."

Since the "tablets" would produce dazzling light upon deformation, all he needed to do was to ignite gunpowder to provide a thrusting force that would create a flare.

The mechanism was pretty similar to that of a punching machine. He would first need to carve out a gourd-shaped hole at the bottom of the bullet head and fill the hole with thin-sliced tablets. When the bullet left the muzzle, the expanded gas would push the slices into the hole. As those slices were stuck in the bullet, they could not restore its original shape but remain in a reduced state. The tablets would thus keep illuminating until the electricity within was exhausted.

After hearing Roland's explanation, the worker agreed to work on the project.

The next day, Roland found a report on his desk.

The result indicated that the experiment was successful. After several attempts, they had managed to produce more than 20 tracers that left a clear, flashy trajectory on the screen.

Roland felt very encouraged!

Poor visibility at night had been bothering the First Army for years. Even with flares, it would still be hard for them to fire as accurately as in daylight. This problem would become even more serious when soldiers fired from above in the plane. Pilots would have no idea where their bullets landed from the sky even on a clear day. With a tracer to point out directions, they would then have a bigger chance to win the Battle of Divine Will.

Traditional tracers would actually deviate from their courses as the luminescent activators reduced. As they became lighter in the air, their centers of gravity shifted. As such, there was an old saying before tracers were widely used in wars, which was, if the target was hit by a tracer, then it meant you had just missed it. Nevertheless, the tablets were a better option in a sense that their weights would not change during the process. Roland only needed to slightly lengthen the bodies of the bullets so that they would work just as the same as normal ones.

The only problem left now was how many "tablets" there were in the Southernmost Region.

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A week later, the two explorers who had discovered the ruin in the desert arrived at the Shallow Beach.

Roland further inquired them about what they had discovered down in the cave at the parlor.

The replies from the pair were consistent with the report. Before the Giant Armored Scorpion had appeared, they had walked a few hundred meters until they had reached the "tablet wall". They had no idea as to what was behind it.

In other words, they might have only found a very small portion of the "tablets".

According to the murals, there should have been tons of bodies.

Roland was also very concerned about the natural environment in the cave and the legendary Flowers of Providence that should have been extinctive a long time ago. According to Simbady, the natural environment in the cave was very similar to that of Silver Stream Oasis.

If the vast meadows had indeed gone through a desertization after the departure of the Three Gods Emissary, so should have the underground cave underneath the Endless Cape.

Perhaps, the legend was not exactly accurate. There might be some other hidden secrets.

Roland could not wait to explore the desert.

After the meeting, Roland had a private talk with Rex.

"Your diving suit is very interesting. The discovery of the ruin would definitely be a part of our history," Roland said while sipping his tea. "To be honest, I'm surprised that you actually applied the steam engine to your invention. Most people have no idea how to use it unless provided with instructions from our tech guys, let alone transforming it. I believe you're already halfway to the honor of being titled a lifetime honorary explorer."

"Th-thank you," Rex stammered in excitement. "It took me half a year to figure out how this machine works. I can offer you a discounted rate for my diving suits, if that pleases you — "

"No, you misunderstood me. I don't need your diving suits," Roland interrupted him with a smile. "I can certainly make a better one if I want."

Rex blinked in confusion, apparently astounded at Roland's reply. He summoned a really forcible grin and said, "Your Majesty..."

Roland talked over him, "I don't really care about whether you think I'm boasting or not. What I really want is — the Society of Wondrous Crafts."

Momentarily stunned, Rex said hesitantly, "I... don't quite follow you..."

"I know what you're trying to prove, and I can help you get what you want," Roland said flatly. "There are only two academic schools at present: alchemy and astrology. I believe what you're doing is very similar to alchemy. Both you and alchemists are creating new things for the mankind. So, why don't we set up another academic school for wondrous crafts and establish a society for this industry?"

Rex suddenly felt breathless. He instantly took the implication behind these words. If this was an offer from someone else, Rex would definitely think he was talking sheer nonsense or making fun of him. Compared to the prominent Society of Alchemists and Astrology Association, the Society of Wondrous Crafts was frivolous. Nonetheless, powerful and distinguished as the King of Graycastle was, he might be able to achieve what he had just promised.

He swallowed hard and asked in a coarse voice, "And what do you need from me?"

The king must want something from him if he planned to improve the reputation of the Society of Wondrous Crafts.

"Everything."

"What?"

"Ahem, no, I mean that you work for me," Roland corrected himself while clearing his throat. "Move to Neverwinter and become a resident of Graycastle. I take all credit for your work and will have the right to sell and use your inventions. You'll, on the other hand, gain fame and wealth, as well as an optimal research environment in return."

"I..." Rex did not know what to say. Although his work had been constantly criticized by the public and treated with utmost contempt, he viewed his every invention as his own baby. Most members of the Society of Wondrous Crafts would probably feel reluctant to abandon their research to someone else.

"I understand you need more time to think about it. Take a rest and think it over," Roland said as he rose to his feet and passed a book across the table. "Let me know your final decision three days later."

"Your Majesty, this is..." Rex asked in confusion as he took the book.

"Your reward for the discovery of the ruin," Roland answered with a faint smile.

Chapter 1132: The Effect of the Reward

Simbady was waiting for Rex in the yard.

"How did that go? Is the chief interested in your diving suit?" Simbady asked brightly, who had now pretty much viewed Rex as one of his friends. "What's your reward for the discovery? Did you get the title of the honorary explorer?"

Rex shook his head, crestfallen, and replied, "He isn't going to purchase my diving suit..."

"Oh..." Simbady said, a little downhearted, but he soon encouraged Rex, "Graycastle might not need your diving suit, but the Chambers of Commerce at the Fjords will definitely notice your invention. You said the ocean is a huge treasury, didn't you?"

He did say that. In fact, he had anticipated a huge amount of reward from Roland. Apparently, the King of Graycastle took the diving suit very seriously, and that was why he had requested a meeting. Rex's original plan was to become an honorary explorer and thereby further advertise his diving suit at the Fjords Islands.

Yet the reality was...

He managed a bitter smile and answered, "His Majesty just gave me a book."

Simbady was frozen for a second and then asked, "What?" He peered down at what Rex was holding and said, "So this is..."

"That's it," Rex said, nodding resignedly. The book was not thick. It only contained dozens of pages, without a single word on its cover. The cover was neither gilded, and nor did it have a floral printing. Even a regular noble would grant him a better prize than this shabby, battered book.

He would definitely not gain exposure from this reward but instead become a laughingstock.

"The chief shouldn't be that kind of person..." Simbady said as he stomped indignantly. "Even I received 20 gold royals from him. You, as the organizer of this exploration, deserve more remuneration than me!"

Rex appreciated Simbady's heartiness. However, he knew there was no point of questioning the king's decision, because the king had offered to help him realize his dream. He was just being hesitant to take this offer.

Just at that moment, a guard came over to him and said, "Your Majesty has arranged accommodation for you. Please follow me."

"Thanks a lot," Rex said as he bowed and signaled Simbady to follow him. At any rate, he needed to read the book first.

Then he heard a strange buzz when he stepped out of the Castle District.

The buzz sounded like roars of distant thunders except it was little crispier.

Rex looked in the direction of that sound in curiosity.

He spied a barely visible black dot flicker in the distant sky.

"Is that a bird?" Rex wondered but soon denied this thought. How could a bird a few miles away produce such a loud noise?

Simbady also noticed this unusual phenomenon. His manner tightened like a soldier on heightened alert.

"It's... coming toward us!"

"Is that an enemy?" Rex said in surprise. "An enemy in the king's city of Graycastle?"

"I don't know... but it's definitely not a bird!"

"Relax," the guard leading them the way answered placidly. "That's just Her Highness playing with her new toy. I couldn't believe it at first either, but you'll get used to it."

"Her Highness'... toy?" The two men echoed, aghasted.

"His Majesty advised Princess Tilly to confine her activities to the testing site, but she thinks the field isn't large enough for a complete flight test. She can't fly to the residential area, industrial district or the Swirling Sea, so that leaves her with no choice but to fly in the Castle District," the guard explained nonchalantly. "But I have the impression that the princess is just showing off her skills to His Majesty."

They still did not understand at all.

However, Rex noticed that the guard took pride in what the princess did.

In a few seconds, that black dot drew closer to them with an earsplitting roar, and then Rex saw the most incredible scene in his life.

A winged metal artifact whistled past him, casting a vast shadow much bigger than a seagull's on the ground. From its enormous size, Rex judged it must be very heavy. However, this heavy iron beast was

now soaring the sky. Meanwhile, he also saw a woman sitting on it, though not very clearly, and was positive that the machine was manned.

Fan..."

A name suddenly flashed across Rex's mind.

The Society of Wondrous Crafts was not an organization that emphasized distinctive properties of hierarchy. Rex had not been particularly close to Fan. He had only seen him fly during that open flight test. If truth be told, he was a little resentful of Fan. Because of Fan's unrealistic daydream, the reputation of the Society of Wondrous Crafts suffered even more scathing criticism after his test had miserably failed.

However now, another person achieved what Fan had failed, in a more flamboyant way.

Watching the winged iron beast hovering around the castle, Rex felt a molten wave of astonishment rise inside him.

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The guard took them to a hotel called "Foreign Affairs Building" and said, "I'm Sean. You can come to see me at the Castle District once you've made your decision." With these words, he turned around and strode off.

Simbady had still not recovered from the shock as he muttered prayers to Three Gods under his breath and peered through windows every now and then, positively terrified, but still half expected to see that incredible flying object once more.

Rex, on the other hand, locked himself up in his bedroom.

He gazed at the book for a good 15 minutes as if hoping to see through Roland's mind before he opened the book.

During that 15-minute contemplation, he had revolved numerous presumptions in his head, expecting to see some articles introducing Neverwinter's customs and traditions, a generous job offer in the disguise of a book, or even a blatant threat ordering the members of the Society of Wondrous Crafts to move to Neverwinter.

But he saw none of them.

There was only one line on the first page of the book: physical law of buoyancy.

"Any body completely or partially submerged in a fluid at rest is acted upon by a buoyant force, the magnitude of which is equal to the weight of the fluid displaced by the body."

Rex did not grasp the sentence at first. However, after he read it a few times, his eyes gradually widened with comprehension.

Rex quickly flipped to the second page where he saw a full page of arithmetic formulas. Each formula was explained in great detail to help him better understand the concept. Soon, his eyes were glued to the book.

All these concepts, such as volume, density and buoyancy, were quite familiar but also strangely foreign to him at the same time.

They were no longer mere vague descriptions but concrete units and numbers, with which one could easily know via simple calculation whether an object would float or sink in water and how far this object would go.

Almost instantly Rex thought of the steel ships and hydrogen ballons sold to the Fjords, and everything seemed to dawn on him.

The book also introduced a submersible craft capable of independent operation underwater. Although it was just hypothetical at present, according to those formulas, Rex believed he could make it happen.

At the end of the book, Rex saw a huge, very strange-looking ship that could not only float on water like an ordinary ship but could also dive into water like a fish. It could accommodate at least several hundred people. Once it was submerged in water, it would be impervious to even the most furious storm.

Rex was utterly shocked.

He was also, at the same time, discouraged and frustrated.

Like a person who had just caught a glimpse of an unknown realm after an arduous journey and was about to celebrate his recent success, somebody pointed him the entire winding path to the unexplored world lying before him.

Rex was certain there was more than one flying iron beast in Neverwinter.

He now understood what the "reward" meant.

If he refused the King of Graycastle's offer, he could further his diving career and take it to the next level with the help of this book. However, in that case, the best he could possibly achieve was the submersible craft, and he would probably never be able to build that submarine described at the end of the book.

If he accepted the offer, this book would then become a powerful marketing tool to bring new wonders to the Society of Wondrous Crafts.

Chapter 1133: Shadow Tides

Meanwhile in the east of the Swirling Sea.

A huge fleet comprised of five columns were floating around the Shadow Islands.

The most distinctive ship among them was the "Snow Wind", its colossal black iron body and the dark smoke billowing from the chimney standing out from all the other ships.

The deck of the "Snow Wind" was now teeming with busy sailors.

They were all running back and forth to make final preparation for the journey to the islands.

Thunder was instructing his team at the bridge, "You're all great explorers at the Fjords. Many of you have been to the Shadow Waters, so I'll make it short. These islands are not stationary. It will be really foggy there when the water rises. So, you have to be extremely careful, understand?"

"Captain, don't worry," a first mate promised as he patted his chest. "I've been working with you for years. When did you see me make a mistake? I'm more worried about the four Chambers of Commerce. They have a higher chance to make errors."

"That's right. It wouldn't be that easy to maneuver three-masted ships through those underwater reefs. It would be much safer if they ride on small boats."

"They probably think their giant ships are as nimble as the 'Snow Wind'. We aren't going to help them if they hit a rock!"

Everybody guffawed with laughter.

"If they're worried that we're going to keep treasures to ourselves, just ask their captains to hop on our ship!"

"Those Chambers of Commerce apparently want to butt in on us!"

"I told you they're all old cunning farts."

"But if we want to go further in the east, we have to have a huge fleet. There's nothing we can do about it."

Watching the roving mob, Camilla Dary heaved an almost inaudible sigh. Over the past one month, she had gained a basic understanding of the Shadow Waters. It appeared that this area was the center of the Swirling Sea where tides originated. The water level changed drastically when tides rose and receded. When water went down, thousands of reefs floated up above the surface of the water and formed numerous individual islands. The tides at the Sleeping Island were nothing compared to the ones here.

What was more incredible was that there had not been a single map of Shadow Islands up to this date despite that it had been discovered more than a decade ago. The reason for that was that the hidden rocks around here were constantly moving, including that enormous ruin. They had to wait for all the rocks to come out of the surface before crossing the ocean. Because of that, it was extremely hard to sail through this area.

However, these sailors looked more like a group of ferocious bandits than professional explorers. Explorers were highly respected among Fjords people, but among explorers themselves, they rarely respected each other. Most explorers preferred to act alone, who rarely took orders from others unless the other party was seemingly influential like Thunder.

As a former noble, Camila felt slightly disgusted about the jeers and boos. She would never have joined these people with Joan had this not been an order from Princess Tilly.

She was surprised that she started to miss the First Army in Neverwinter. At least, the soldiers of the First Army maintained absolute silence when they carried out a mission. They always stood erect, with a brisk and crisp air that afforded a pleasant vista to contemplate.

Camila thus quietly left the command room at the bridge for the deck.

She immediately spotted Joan who was playing at the stern of the ship, accompanied by Ms. Margaret.

At the sight of Camila, Joan immediately sought refuge from Margaret, only poking half of her head out.

Camila felt a little dispirited. Joan got along fairly well with the witches back in Neverwinter and had even made friends with Maggie and Lightning. She did not understand why Joan would not accept her like she accepted everybody else. She had known Joan for a very long time, longer than anyone except Margaret.

Margaret asked smilingly, "What's the matter? Not in a good mood?" She pointed at her own lips and said, "Your face gave you away."

"No," Camila said distractedly. "I'm just..."

"You don't like the atmosphere in the command room, right?" Margaret said as if having seen through her mind. "I told you not to worry about the exploration. Leave it to the guys. You just relax and enjoy this trip."

"How can I?" Camila replied, her brows furrowed. "I can't place my life in their hands."

"You don't trust Thunder?"

"I..."

Margaret held her hand and paced to the railing. "I admire your sense of responsibility, otherwise Lady Tilly would not entrust the Sleeping Island to you. However, sometimes, you need to learn to trust people, not only Thunder but also Lady Tilly..."

"How can I not trust Princess Tilly?" Camila thought but remained silent all the same. She had been opposed to their relocation to Neverwinter from the beginning.

"You would go crazy if you're always so strained on the sea," Margaret went on. "They can be boisterous, but I can assure you they're all excellent sailors."

Camila finally got a chance to cut in, "Just a disclaimer, I didn't say anything..."

"But you're thinking that way, right?" Margaret talked over her. "Haha, that's OK. The nobles in the Four Kingdoms view us as barbarians, and we view Mojins just as the nobles view us. To be honest, I only see one noble who never discriminates people based on background."

That was Roland Wimbledon.

As much as Camila hated to admit it, this was the name that came to her mind.

Roland had openly claimed to support witches four years ago.

Camila now had no reason whatsoever to believe that Roland was plotting something, because the very witch he had rescued back then had now become the Queen of Graycastle.

Did she just need to put more faith in him?

While Camila was lost in thought, the ocean started to roar at a distance, as though molten waves were foaming and thousands of fishes swarming toward them. Camila was not sure whether this was her hallucination, for from what she could see, the sea was still perfectly tranquil.

"The water is going down," Margaret murmured.

"Ya... Ya..." Joan squeaked, tugging Margaret's sleeves nervously.

Around 15 minutes later, Camila saw changes.

A pointy stone started to rise from the surface of the water, and then more stones appeared. Rather than islands, what she saw was a sea of rocks and boulders. After the water dropped five meters, Camila saw reefs gradually reveal themselves underneath those stone pillars.

She held her breath.

This was her first time to see such an amazing scene. As the water level plummeted, the horizon seemed to be floating above the islands. Camila knew this was just a trick of the eye. Now the entire Shadow Waters transformed into a slope, with the horizon being the crest of the hill.

In spite of all of these changes, the sea was still surprisingly serene and motionless.

After around two hours, mists started to rise around the islands, and the Shadow Waters finally unveiled its mask, showing its true nature.

Chapter 1134: Plunge into the Sea

"Woo—woo—"

The "Snow Wind" produced a low, deep whistle.

That was the sailing signal.

The first four ships at the front set their sails and left the fleet.

The ships of the four Chambers of Commerce, including Crescent Moon Bay, Sunset Island, Shallow Water Town and Twin Dragon Island, followed the "Snow Wind" into the Shadow Waters.

Their vision blurred and sunlight became dismal. They had entered an entirely different world after sailing 1,000 meters.

The deck was now shrouded in thick mist. Camilla noticed that the ship had stopped wobbling.

"What happened?"

"Don't worry. The engine is off," Margaret answered. "The trick to safely pass through this area is to be low. Maybe it doesn't apply to small boats, but for a large ship like this, we just need to glide over the slope. Look around."

Camila looked in the direction Margaret pointed at and saw all the ships from the Chambers of Commerce had lowered their sails to half-mast, some of which were facing each other, which was definitely not a scene normally seen during a regular voyage.

Also, a brazer had been set up at both the bow and stern of each ship to mark the ship's location. Even so, Camila could only see two ships looming against the fog, the third one completely out of sight in the depths of the mist. The faint firelights flickered ominously, and the fourth ship seemed to have totally disappeared in the mist.

"Are we going downhill?" Camila asked suspiciously. After living in the Sleeping Island for a while, she had learned something about the ocean. When the seawater rose in submerged caves and cracks, whirlpools would emerge on the surface of the water. The smaller ones were one-finger wide, whereas the larger ones could be a few meters. However, at any rate, the water would be directed to the center of the whirlpools and spinned faster as it drew close to the vortex.

Camilla had thought it was the vast vista of the ocean that made the movement of water currents indiscernible. However, now the fleet had reached the depth of the Shadow Waters, so she should see something happen.

Much to her dismay, some algae was drifting off on the surface of the water!

This indicated that the water currents did not alter their directions at all, at least not here!

"It looks incredible, but that's the fact," Margaret said, nodding. "If there was a huge whirlpool here when tides receded, we wouldn't have come here, because that would be the largest and deepest whirlpool in the ocean. There would be no chance of survival. Since the ocean remains surprisingly tranquil, Thunder wants to look into this matter." Margaret broke off and looked at Joan who was now gazing at the sea. "Normally, it was impossible for human beings to dive to the bottom of the sea, but your ability gives us a ray of hope."

Camilla looked around, her eyes darting from the surrounding wet stone pillars and reefs, feeling a jolt of panic rise from her stomach. She could see the stones around her clearly. However, for the rocks farther away, she could only catch a glimpse of their silhouettes in various shades. They somehow reminded her of many grisly, outstretched clawed hands that usually appeared in a nightmare.

"Ya! Fish! Red fish!" Joan squeaked suddenly.

Camila turned around and saw a bright red "river" emerge abruptly on the right side of the "Snow Wind". Although Thunder had told her about it earlier, the sudden appearance of the river still shocked her.

"The Ghost Shadow Red River."

A special river comprised of fishes.

"Oh, stop clicking your tongue. red scaly fish isn't tasty," Margaret said as she patted Joan on the head. "As long as we marshal along the Ghost Shadow Red River, we'll reach the triangular tower ruin. Princess Tilly should have told you already. There's a weird telescope-like instrument in the tower, through which you'll be able to see a vast land you've never laid your eyes on. That's the purpose of this trip."

"That's what she told me."

"Unfortunately, we're not going to the ancient ruin this time, otherwise you'll be able to see that magnificent ruin," Margaret said in a sorrowful tone.

"No... I'm fine with that," Camila replied briskly. She would rather not visit this area ever again.

"Your reaction is exactly the opposite of Her Highness'," Margaret said, giggling.

After another two hours, the "Snow Wind" staggered to a halt before a large reef island, followed by the three-masted ships of the four Chambers of Commerce. After all the ships anchored, all the captains gathered around on the deck of the "Snow Wind".

"Wow, everyone's here. Very impressive," the first mate of the "Snow Wind" remarked scathingly while twitching his lips. "I thought you would run into a rock and ask us for help in tears."

"You're not the only good sailor and captain here," the members of the four Chambers of Commerce shot back. "The steel ship is great, but I'm not sure about the crews on it."

"Enough!" Thunder interjected. "I'm glad everybody has made it. Did you come across any problems on the way here?"

"No," the superintendents of the Chambers of Commerce replied. "Nothing happened, not even a Sea Ghost. It was extraordinarily quiet this time."

"I'm surprised too. Normally there'll be a few poor lads dragged down into the water by Sea Ghosts."

"Is it because we chose a different route and avoided the ancient ruin? Does that mean those monsters prefer the ruin to be their lair?"

"It looks like so."

Thunder thought for a while and waved everybody into silence. He then said, "In that case, let's get going. The water will rise up again in the evening, so we'd better reach the bottom of the sea by then. If there's nothing down there, we must leave before tides come, otherwise we'll get stuck here on the islands." With these words, he looked at the two witches and said, "Joan, Ms. Camilla, we'll place the matter in your hands."

"Ya," Joan said, nodding with a serious look.

"As long as you can ask those guys to shut up," Camilla grumbled as she swept over the explorer with a cold glance. "Just a disclaimer. I need to be highly concentrated when I channel Joan. If anyone interrupt my work, I'll have to start all over again!"

After Thunder promised her there would be no interruption, Camilla put her hand on Joan's shoulder and closed her eyes. She felt a surge of dizziness, and then she saw what Joan was seeing.

"Off you go," Camilla said within herself. "If we're disconnected or you are in danger, come back as soon as possible, OK? Don't force yourself. Your friends are waiting for you."

Hearing the word "friends", Joan shuddered imperceptibly, and her eyes became determined. "Got it, ya!" she said resolutely.

Joan then jumped backwards into the sea.

Camilla instantly felt a cooling sensation.

All her fatigue was gone.

But she knew this was just an illusion. That was what Joan felt, and she was simply channeling Joan's feeling.

"How does that go?" Thunder asked.

"Everything is going well. Joan's now 50 meters down the water," Camilla replied. "The stone pillars aren't getting any thicker, and nor are the reefs... I haven't seen any seabeds or mountains yet."

This was her task. Although Joan could see everything underwater, she could not put them into words. The only way to know what she saw was through channeling."

"She's now more than 100 meters down there. The surroundings are significantly darker, but she can still see everything clearly. There are still stone pillars and reefs. We haven't reached the bottom yet," Camilla muttered. "Damn, that's so deep. Perhaps those islands and rocks aren't real islands but are..."

"Are what?" somebody questioned.

Camilla swallowed hard and answered, "Are just larger stone pillars."

Chapter 1135: A Drastic Change

"The Swirling Sea is huge. It's perfectly normal that it has some strange geographical features," Thunder said after a moment of silence. "I've seen weathered rocky mountains in the Kingdom of Wolfheart. They're pretty similar to those stone pillars although they're not that long."

"But unlike the land, there's no wind underwater..." Camilla left her words unsaid.

"Wind?" Joan's voice suddenly popped up in Camilla's head. "There's wind here."

"What did you say?" Camilla asked quickly.

"Um, didn't I make that clear?" Thunder replied with a cough. "Then I'll repeat... Back in the Kingdom of Wolfheart, I saw —"

"Not you. I was asking Joan!" Camilla snapped. She knew she was being rude, but she had no choice and had to interrupt Thunder. "Joan just said something... There's wind at the bottom of the sea!"

The spectators on the deck were all mildly taken aback.

"I can't feel it, but I can hear it... Listen, did you hear that?"

Camilla immediately concentrated. She knew as the channeling witch, she could hear whatever Joan heard. Instantly, she heard wind howl down the water just as air whistled out from a crack.

"I'll dive further," Joan said. "But I have to change my position."

With these words, she untied her dress and her legs made contact with the water. Blue scales started to emerge from her ankles and crept up her legs. She now had a mermaid tail.

Suddenly, Camilla felt all the pressure weighing upon her vanish. She marveled at how far and fast the tail propelled her through water. She swam even faster than a fish.

This was what Joan really looked like!

Joan dived even faster.

"200 meters deep, and the wind seems to be louder... Still nothing has changed undersea."

"400 meters. It's completely dark. Luckily, Joan doesn't need light to see things. The stone pillars... are still deeper down there, and there are now new pillars."

"Could you stretch the rope a little farther?"

"Damn it, how deep is the water now? 600 or 800? Joan isn't sure. However, the stone pillars — " Camilla broke off. "No, that's... impossible..."

"What's the matter?" Thunder asked.

Camilla felt an ineffable chill run down her spine. "The pillars, the pillars... disappeared!"

"Disappeared? As in it vanished?" Thunder pursued, his brows furrowed as he turned around to look at the sea. The reefs were still there.

Camilla held her own trembling hands and said, "There's no seabed... nothing... They're suspended in the water!"

Everybody gasped.

Through Joan's eyes, Camilla only saw the upper part of those stone pillars floating in the water. Their lower parts looked completely chopped off by some invisible force. Large reefs were simply suspended in the middle of the ocean in a creepy sort of way.

This was beyond the scope of her understanding.

"Suspended? Are you saying these islands are floating on the water?"

"By the name of the Three Gods, they're all solid rock!"

"Woman, are you sure about what you see?"

"That's impossible. Even if they're floating, they can't remain in the same position all the time. Without an anchor, the water currents would flush the Shadow Islands toward the Fjords!"

The deck exploded with discussion.

"Silence!" Thunder hollered at the crowd and they immediately became quiet. "Are all the reefs floating like that?"

"I don't know... They're in different lengths," Camilla mumbled. "We haven't reached the very bottom of those pillars yet."

Meanwhile, Joan slowed down.

Even as a mermaid, Joan had a limit.

Just then, Camilla noticed a weird phenomenon.

Some pillars near Joan seemed to be stretched.

Those pillars were like tree trunks as they went straight down to the bottom of the ocean. Their ends were out of sight due to the darkness, and it was hard for Camilla to tell how long they actually were. What caught her attention was the patterns on the pillars and some barnacles attached to them. The pillars started to elongate at some point in the middle, whereas the barnacles, which supposed to be in a round shape, turned oval. They looked particularly strange compared to the normal pillars and barnacles a few meters away.

"Do you want to take a closer look?" asked Joan, who sensed Camilla's bewilderment. "They do look weird."

"OK," Camilla said while clearing her throat. "Be careful."

Joan started to slowly draw close to a pillar and stretched out her hand to touch the strange barnacles. Suddenly, something horrible happened.

Camilla saw Joan's scaly fingers elongate.

"What's going on?" Joan stretched out her hands in confusion. "Is this an illusion?"

Camilla suddenly had a sense of foreboding.

Just when Camilla was about to inform Thunder, Joan stopped moving and stared at a fish that streaked past her nose.

It was just a silvery eel that was about an arm's length long. However, when it passed the mermaid girl, it instantly stretched to around five meters and turned into something like a "sea snake" that instantly plummeted to the bottom of the sea. Within a few seconds, the silvery eel was stretched to its maximum and its tail was still in Joan's sight, but its head was already lost in the darkness. By that point, the eel was more than 100 meters in length! Within a blink of an eye, it disappeared in the sea with a flash of silver. It was as if it was sucked into something!

All the little hairs on the back of Camilla's neck stood up!

She yelled, "Get out of there! The exploration is over. Come back!"

But it was too late.

Joan struggled and her upper body still in the same position, but her tail was being horribly stretched to more than ten meters. It was as if something was dragging her down.

With panic creeping into her voice, Joan asked, "What... what should I do? Camilla, what should I do?"

"Move faster... don't stop. Kick harder! You can do it!" Camilla shouted hysterically.

However, Joan was sinking even faster. No matter how hard Joan moved her tail, she was sinking rapidly as though she was being sucked into a swamp. Now not only her tail was effected but her torso and hands started to elongate.

Upon realizing what was happening, Joan stretched out her hands in despair and cried, "Help me..."

"No!"

Before Camilla could finish, she passed out.

Camilla opened her eyes. Sweat started to drip from the tip of her nose and fell onto the back of her hand as she braced herself on the floor. Only then did she notice that she was covered with a fine sheen of cold sweat.

"What happened? Is Joan in danger?" Thunder asked as he helped her to her feet.

It took Camilla a long time to come out of her trance. She muttered blankly, "I don't know. The channeling... was disrupted."

Chapter 1136: Sea and Sky

It was a split second that contained an eternity.

Joan saw her body lengthen in the pitch-black ocean indefinitely until a white speck of light slid into her view. Then the white fleck burst into a haze of blazing white light that blinded her. The next moment, the memory that her body had been stretched beyond the human limit gradually came back, and she heard a deafening roar of water. The sound shattered the tranquility of the deep sea.

She felt she was spinning in a whirl, but soon denied this thought. A whirl only spinned around its center, but the water torrents here constantly crashed into each other, which was why they produced such earsplitting sounds.

Even Joan, as a mermaid girl, found it hard to keep her balance. Everything was out of control. She was flushed down by the thunderous water torrents like a feather on a stormy sea.

"Where am I?" she thought.

Although she had no idea what this place was, she was positive that this was not the depth of the ocean, as she could not feel huge water pressure weigh upon her scales. She gathered that the water was no more than 100 meters deep, which meant she could soon reach the surface of the water. Nevertheless, no matter how hard she tried to reconnect Camilla, there was no response from the other end.

This urged upon her to swim up and get herself out of danger.

Fortunately, swimming was much easier than changing directions.

She strained to raise her head and rose slowly against the rush of water. When she rose out of the water, her eyes huge in bewilderment.

The Shadow Islands seemed to have vanished in the thin air.

She could only spy rocks around and above her.

The vast sea had transformed into a narrow "stream" that stretched a few hundred meters. The tumultuous seawater ran wildly, her eyes screwing up against the equally wild wind. The wuthering wind and the wind she had heard earlier down the bottom of the sea vied with each other.

Joan turned around, blinded by the light behind. The water currents were now rushing to that light source.

"Am I... going to be flushed down again?"

Before she could stop it, she had been pushed into the haze by the resounding currents.

Then the surrounding became quiet instantly. Everything seemed to be far away from her. For a moment, Joan felt she was flying, her body so light she could not feel it. The next moment, it suddenly dawned on her that she was indeed floating in midair!

There was the blue sea underneath, 1,000 meters apart! She was no longer surrounded by those rocks but actually in the sky. The light she had seen was the sunlight peeping through clouds. The seawater gushing from the cave had now become a large waterfall.

"But... I'm not Maggie or Lightning. I can't fly!" Joan thought.

The next moment, she started to plummet.

"Ya — Ya — Ya — "

SPLASH!

After a frightening long drop, Joan plunged into the water.

She would have probably been scared to death had she not watched a similar scene in the magic movie. When she came out of the water again, she heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"Why did I end up floating in the sky? I had been deep down the ocean a moment ago!" Joan wondered.

At this thought, Joan stared up and was frozen on the spot.

"God almighty, what is it?"

She could not believe her eyes.

A huge rock was suspending in the air, so large that she could only see the side facing her. It cast an enormous shadow on the sea as dark clouds overcast the sky. A few white puffs of clouds scudded across the rock, giving her the impression that she was looking at the crest of a towering mountain rather than a gigantic rock.

Nevertheless, this "mountain" seemed to be more magnificent than the Impassable Mountain Range. Joan judged that the rock must be 100 meters thick.

On the humongous rock were many cracks, the shortest stretching a few hundred meters and the longest a few kilometers. Seawater gushed out of those cracks, forming a huge waterfall connecting the sea and the sky. As the water converged, the ocean waves foamed and splattered.

Joan believed even Thunder had never seen such amazing scenery.

Although she did not know where she was, she was sure that this place was very far away from the Fjords and the Graycastle. Otherwise, people would have noticed such a huge rock in the sky.

"Can I... still go back?"

Joan returned to the water, a few bubbles coming out of her mouth.

SPLASH!

Just then, she heard another splash, as though something else had fallen into the sea.

"Is there someone else like me?"

After doing a quick calculation of the distance between that fallen object and herself, Joan dived into the water and swam in the direction of that splashing sound.

She swam for around seven minutes until she saw what had fallen into the water. It was a strange boat, as large as the three-masted ship she had seen, its lower part a combination of a fish and a squid. The upper part of the boat was a ribcage, which housed a pulp of inner organs. The entire boat looked like a dead body of a half-eaten animal that made Joan felt a jolt of nausea.

However, the monster was not dead. After it fell into the water, it started to swim in the direction of the ocean waves with its four fins. Joan's eyes followed it, and then she was astonished at what she saw!

A little way farther on, a fleet of similar monsters lined up in the ocean, sliding in and out of her sight as the water rose and fell.

After the monster that had just fallen into the water joined them, the fleet marched slowly toward the east and disappeared from her view. Joan was relieved.

She wondered what she should do next. Since the boat-shaped monster had fallen from the sky, there might be some other grisly enemy.

Although she had never seen such monsters before, Joan did not think a good idea to approach them. Ever since she had become a witch, her instinct had never lied to her.

"Don't force yourself. Your friends are waiting for you."

Camilla's words came floating out of her memories.

Then she thought of the smiling faces of Lightning, Maggie and Lorgar.

She wanted to go back.

She had never had such a strong desire in her entire life. She yearned to return to Neverwinter, the place where she had only lived for a winter but had made many friends.

She was longing to meet everybody again!

"Ya!" Joan shouted self-encouragingly and swam to the west after she figured out where she should go.

No matter how vast the ocean was, it had a boundary.

Also, Lightning had told her once that the earth was a sphere. As long as she swam on, she would see her friends from the Exploration Group again!

She was certain about it!

...

"We have to go," Thunder said as he looked at Camilla Dary who was stooping over the railing. "Our destination isn't the Shadow Islands. We're wasting our supplies. It has been three days. I don't think I can force the fleet to continue to stay here any longer."

"But..." Camilla said apprehensively, "Joan's not back yet."

"This isn't your fault," Thunder said as he patted Camilla on the shoulder. "Waiting for her here won't make things any better. Do you remember what you said earlier? There are two reasons for the disconnection. One is that the connected individual is dead, and the other is that you guys are two far apart. If you insist it was the second scenario, we have a greater reason not to linger on."

"Are you saying... that we should look for her to the east of the Sealine?"

"To be completely honest, the chance that we find her there is slim, but it's better than waiting here doing nothing," Thunder said good-naturedly. "Remember that Joan is special. A sailor will definitely die if he's drowned in water, but Joan won't. She has lived undersea for more than a decade, so she could survive without us."

"I... I see," Camilla said while biting her lip. "Then I'll come with you, to the 'Sealine'."

"No," Thunder interrupted her. "I can't let you continue with our adventure under this condition. I promised to King Roland. No matter what happens, I'm obligated to bring you back to Neverwinter after the exploration of the Shadow Islands. They need you to fight the demons. Plus, only His Majesty knows what had possibly happened to Joan at the bottom of the sea. Your information is crucial," he paused for a few seconds and then said solemnly, "We all have our own responsibilities, and all of us need to fulfill our duties. That's what we should do."

Camilla closed her eyes, sad and agonized.

Two hours later, the "Snow Wind" whistled. The fleet set their sails and headed toward the far east. One of the ships left the fleet and headed in the direction it was coming.

The two parties parted and soon, neither of them could see each other as the other gradually disappeared in their views.

Chapter 1137: The Banished Senior Demon

At the front near Tower Station No. 9 at the Fertile Plains.

"The target is 6' 4" in the northeast, at 6,500 miles. We request for artillery fire."

Sylvie lied on her stomach on Maggie's back, looking down at the vast land below. The ground had been excavated around two or three days ago. The air was saturated with the fresh smell of soil.

"Copy," Shavy answered curtly over the Sigil of Listening. "Fire in five minutes." She then added, "Please be careful."

Sylvie looked in the direction of Taquila. From where she stood, she could spy the ruin of the Holy City. Although it was more than 50 kilometers away from her and was no bigger than a finger nail from this distance, she somehow felt it was within her reach. Silhouetting against the forest, the ruined city looked like a miniscule sculpture long forgotten.

While the ruin was beyond the vision of the Eye of Magic, Sylvie could still sense the glimmers of that bright red fleck. As long as the red speck remained stationary, they were safe.

"Alright, got it."

Sylvie slid the Sigil carefully into her pocket, patted Maggie's broad back and said, "Climb a little bit higher."

"Awh!"

Maggie, who had now transformed into a Devilbeast, produced a long howl, her giant wings sprouting from her shoulder blades and flapping against the wind. She was now even larger than two normal Devilbeasts put together, even larger than the mutated Devilbeast ridden by Kabradhabi. Nevertheless, Maggie was overall colossal even when she was in the form of a pigeon.

After they rose around 100 meters, they heard distant roars crack through the air.

Then several earth pillars rose from the ground at the front, which immediately rippled and sent grass flying in the sky. Shockwaves rocked the ground. Such a powerful explosion was always delightful to behold.

It was not long before a second and a third rounds of explosion took place.

The Artillery Battalion was now able to direct their shells accurately to their designated spots. Since it was difficult to calculate the exact targetted area, Sylvie simply did a rough estimate. The area was around 16,400 square meters, almost as large as the Castle District in Neverwinter, which was the district she was most familiar with.

As the Artillery Battalion continued to fire, Sylvie soon saw broken limbs exhaled from the cloud of dust.

A 152-caliber grenade would create a one-meter deep hole in the ground, whereas the demons could go no deeper than 50 centimeters underground even when the earth was permeated with the Red Mist. For the land uncorrupted by the Red Mist, the demons could hide underneath the ground but just barely. If a shell landed right on their heads, they would literally be blasted into smithereens.

Further, not only the grenade itself could kill a demon but the aftermath shockwaves could do so as well. As the demons were edging closely to the surface of the ground, any shockwaves within a radius of 20 meters would be fatal to the demons.

His Majesty called this type of random attack "sweep".

After five rounds of fierce bombardment, around 100 demons crept out from underground and started to retreat.

"The enemy has come out. They're all Mad Demons. Please fire at the same shooting angle," Sylvie instructed.

"Got it."

Suddenly, as if sensing something, Sylvie looked toward Taquila and saw the red fleck flash and streak toward their encampment.

Sylvie immediately took out another Sigil of Listening and said, "Lightning, come back, now! The Magic Slayer is coming!"

Maggie instantly turned about and retreated.

About seven minutes later, Maggie, Lightning and Sylvie all returned to the air defense zone. In the meantime, the Magic Slayer had also slid into their views. Sylvie saw the blue-skinned, human-like demon hover above the artillery encampment while staring at the three of them, his eyes gleaming maliciously.

The Artillery Battalion below was still firing.

The Magic Slayer was apparently furious but he could not do anything to protect his kind from the rain of shells.

At last, he headed back where he was coming, leaving the fleeing Mad Demons behind.

Sylvie was instantly relieved.

"He's gone. Let's fly around!" Maggie exclaimed in excitement.

However, at the sight of a nervous Lightning who balled her hand into a fist, Maggie quickly changed her mind. "Let's call it a day. I have to save some magic power for the night patrol. I've inspected the area within a radius of five to six miles and I'm pretty sure that the construction team is safe for now."

...

After returning to the underground headquarters, Sylvie marked the bombarded area green.

There were many green areas like that along the railway.

"Good job," Morning Light said as he held a cup of black tea. "It seems that Lady Edith's banishment plan has worked."

Sylvie took the tea and said smilingly, "Yes, it looks like so."

This was actually not the first time they had repulsed the demons.

The scouting had indeed become increasingly dangerous when they were 100 miles away from Taquila, because from that point, Sylvie had to pay more attention to the movements on the ground instead of the sky. However, the demons, with the help of their gas tanks, could suspend in midair as long as they preferred within this range.

Given such circumstances, the General Staff developed a "banishment plan", which divided the scouting area into several sections. The area within two kilometers were marked as the safety zone. In this zone,

the Magic Eye could see through and keep an eye on everything, so chances of them suffering a raid were pretty slim. The air force could leave the trenches in this area and provide broader protection.

The area within ten miles was called the recognition zone, which was the farthest the Longsong Cannons could reach and was also where Sylvie and Maggie mainly conducted their activities. This area would be marked green and considered as safe once a "sweep" was completed.

The area beyond 10 miles but within 50 miles was the dangerous zone monitored solely by Lightning. The purpose of setting up this zone was to warn the soldiers of the enemy hidden in clouds and earn more time for Maggie and Sylvie to retreat. Only Lightning had the capability to shake off her pursuers. Not even the Magic Slayer could possibly keep up with Lightning who flew at the speed of sound.

It appeared that the "banishment plan" worked pretty well. They had, at the moment, totally controlled the pace of the battle, leaving the demons no opportunities to fight back. Without the support of Mad Demons from the ground, the Devilbeasts in the sky found it hard to effectively stop the armored trains.

The main purpose of this "banishment plan" was to transform the recognition zone gradually into a safety zone by slowly removing the demons' outposts while keeping the Magic Slayer away from the battlement, so that he could do nothing about the scouting team. If they could successfully provoke him into breaking through the defensive line, that would be even better.

Nonetheless, the Magic Slayer had still not lost himself yet.

"By the way," Sylvie said as she surveyed the room, "where's Miss Pearl of the Northern Region?"

"She went back to Neverwinter by the 'Seagull' with Iron Axe after receiving His Majesty's order," Ferlin replied with a smile. "I think that's pretty much the time."

To discuss the strategies and tactics for the final battle!

Chapter 1138: Interception

In Neverwinter, Graycastle.

Roland received Iron Axe, the Commander-in-Chief of the First Army, and Edith Kant, the Chief of General Staff.

"How did it go? Do you like riding on the 'Seagull'?" Roland asked as he looked at the pair with some interest.

"Your, your Majesty, it's fast, but it's... a little too fast for me," Iron Axe answered with a look of terror. "I didn't feel that way before. However, when I actually sat in there, I noticed that it wobbled pretty badly. I was very scared when the craft went up and down and thought I was going to fall." He then administered a military salute and exclaimed through his teeth, "Of course, I promise that I'll do my best to overcome my fear, Your Majesty!"

It appeared that this seasoned Mojin warrior feared heights. Roland asked, his brows raised, "So, how are you going to overcome the fear?"

"I'll watch more magic movies once this war is over until I'm no longer afraid of it!"

"That's really like what a Sand National would say," Roland thought in amusement, a muscle flinching in his face. He turned to Edith and asked, "What about you?"

The Pearl of the Northern Region moistened her lips and answered quietly after a moment of silence, "Fantastic."

"That's it?"

Roland waited for Edith to elaborate but the latter did not say anything further. Then he noticed a rosy flush fluttered over her cheeks, her eyes glistening.

Roland heaved a sigh. He had to admit that his subordinates all had some unusual personalities. He expected to see them heap praises on his new invention, impressed and shocked. Now it appeared he had overestimated the psychological impact of the aircraft.

Roland rose to his feet and said, "Since you're already here, let's start the meeting. We have to get prepared for the final battle."

...

After six months of construction work, the first main railway was only 60 kilometers away from the Taquila ruin. Once the construction of Tower Station No. 10 was completed, the First Army would be able to directly attack the demons at Taquila. The "Torch" plan had cost much greater manpower and supplies than any of the military operations they had carried out in the past four years. 80% of the iron produced by the Furnace Area were used to build the railway. The sole purpose for this plan was to stop the demons from erecting the Obelisk before the arrival of the Bloody Moon.

Once the Fertile Plains was enveloped by the Red Mist, the demons would be able to invade the interior from the Impassable Mountain Range anytime. By then, not only would the First Army face a bitter battle but the demons would no longer be bounded by distance. Roland definitely did not want to see the battle unfold in this way, considering that human beings were already outnumbered by the demons.

However, if they managed to seize Taquila before the final battle, the demons would have to erect their Obelisk in the other two Holy Cities, the Starfall City and Arrieta. Both two cities were more on the northern end of the plain. Even if the demons built their outposts there, they could not directly threaten the Four Kingdoms. In that case, they would not only have a bigger chance to win the Battle of Divine Will but would also earn another 400 years for human beings to convalesce.

As Graycastle had already entered an Age of Industrialization, Roland was positive that human beings would have much greater achievement in the next 400 years when the survival of the mankind no longer depended on food and basic life necessities. Therefore, the vast plain, in a sense, became their strategic buffing zone as well as their prospective territory for further development.

Men would eventually defeat demons.

Though perhaps this generation might not witness their eventual victory.

This was also why Roland did not explain the reason for this plan in detail.

Unfortunately, the plan did not go as well as he had anticipated. They had planned to exterminate all the demons at Taquila and convert the ruin into their own stronghold. However, the First Army was now only one step away from success.

The appearance of the Magic Slayer had forced them to adjust their initial plan. The power of the curse inflicted by the Magic Slayer appeared to be incurable. Even very minor wounds could lead to mortality. Lightning could more or less cure herself, but Leaf's condition was much worse.

Based on Ashes' report, Leaf's health was deteriorating.

Although Leaf did not say anything about her injuries, Ashes could still tell that her health was declining. This indicated that the deterioration of her wound was beyond her self-repairing ability. Like a lesion, the infected area gradually expanded and would finally kill the patient. No matter how long this process might take, Roland could not let Leaf die. He could not accept any loss of the population.

It was time to make a final settlement with the Magic Slayer and Taquila.

The representatives of the witches and the army all gathered in the meeting room to discuss the upcoming battle. A screen spread across the wall and presented the image of the Third Border City. Their sole topic of discussion was how to kill the Magic Slayer that could inflict fatal curses on people.

Edith broke the silence as usual. "First of all, from what the General Staff can tell, when the Magic Slayer see a defeat is inevitable, he would very likely retreat. This is just an assumption. We haven't had much solid evidence to support this theory yet. Judging from the fact that he's still keeping a distance from the encampment, we believe he's exactly the opposite of Kabradhabi."

"I agree," Alethea, who had fought the demons more than anyone else, said. "Gallantry doesn't necessarily mean you have to be a suicidal moron. We agree with the demons on this term. A senior commander plays a far more important role than a Mad Demon. It isn't likely that he would die meaninglessly like his subordinates."

"So, we must be proactive and intercept them when they retreat," Edith continued while nodding. "Fortunately, we know everything about our enemy and have experience in dealing with them." She then cast a look at Andrea Quinn and said, "If the Magic Slayer doesn't notice our plan, a long-distance shot would definitely be the safest and most effective way to kill him."

Andrea brushed her hair away from her face gracefully.

"I have a question," Tilly spoke.

"Please go ahead, Your Highness," the Pearl of the Northern Region said while placing her hand on her chest.

"First of all, we can't guarantee that one bullet would be enough to kill the Magic Slayer. What if he's still alive after the bullet hits him? We won't have a second chance. Second, what if the Magic Slayer has noticed the presence of this weapon with a long shooting range and attempts to avoid a direct confrontation? From our past experience, it's very likely that he'll do so. It seems to me that the enemy learns firearms faster than we desire him to."

"I've thought about these two possibilities," Edith replied. "For the first one, the General Staff has decided to use a God's Stone of Retaliation as the bullet."

"A God's Stone bullet?"

"Correct. Even if we can't kill the Magic Slayer at one shot, we can immobilize him. Of course, the smaller a God's stone is, the softer it will be. A God's stone as small as a bullet can be easily crushed by a hammer, so it'll break before we fire. However, we can probably try Miss Andrea's weapon, as her weapon has a much larger caliber," Edith paused for a second and then went on, "Regarding this point, I've confirmed with Ms. Agatha. A God's Stone made from magic blood will be a lot harder. We can first test that out using the two bottles of magic blood she collected from the demons."

"To use the demons' blood to kill them? I like it," Alethea said smilingly. "You're the second mortal I'm impressed with."

The Pearl of the Northern Region returned her a smile indifferently and said, "As for your second question, I'll need a preserve unit."

"Only Lightning is faster than the Magic Slayer," Wendy answered apprehensively. "However, she can't... stop him."

"No," Edith said while shaking her head. "There's something faster than the Magic Slayer — "

"Something?" Tilly echoed with a look of comprehension.

"Right. That is — a diving 'Seagull'," Edith said slowly.

Chapter 1139: Celine's Request

"To have a God's Punishment Witch sit on the plane?"

"Exactly. The anti-magic area works the same way as a God's Stone. A dozen God's Punishment Witches should be able to kill the Magic Slayer. Even if they couldn't, our sniper team will give him one last blow," the Pearl of the Northern Region stated flatly. "Of course, this isn't going to be easy. Our plan really depends on how the other party will react. Nevertheless, we do have some ways to tackle him. Personally, I think this plan will work. Our enemy has seen bullets and guns but not the 'Seagull'. They won't believe a man can actually fly in the sky."

Roland instantly understood the General Staff's intention.

They could never rely on the sniper team entirely. If the Magic Slayer noticed that the patrolling Devilbeasts mysteriously disappeared and thereby found out this long-range weapon, he would naturally develop corresponding countermeasures. The Magic Slayer would probably swerve in the air or hurtle really low above the ground. In that case, even Andrea could not do anything about him.

Andrea's ability was to find out the enemy. However, the enemy might not necessarily show up on the battlefield.

Under such circumstances, someone else must entice the enemy out of hiding.

The one who provoked the Magic Slayer must be equally fast and powerful, but there was no such person among the witches.

Therefore, the General Staff thought of combining the glider and the God's Punishment Witches, which Roland had to admit was a really clever strategy.

The "Seagull" could bid her time in clouds before diving to the ground. After she accumulated a certain amount of kinetic energies, the 'Seagull' could travel over 500 miles an hour and catch up with the Magic Slayer sprinting on the ground.

Yet...

"This is the best plan we can think of at the moment, but I don't think Ashes will agree. This is too dangerous. You may run directly into the Magic Slayer," Roland broke off and stared at Tilly. "So..."

"I'll let her recede," Tilly said resolutely after a moment of silence. "I want to do this."

"Your Highness!" Wendy yelled exasperatedly.

Roland dimly knew what the superintendent of the Witch Union was thinking. The very two figures that tied all the witches together are Anna and Tilly. The former was the queen and the latter the legal royal heir to the throne. Wendy did not want to see either of them put themselves in a dangerous position.

"This mission isn't any different from the transportation of witches that we normally do. By the time the Magic Slayer notices the 'Seagull', the other Taquila witches would have rounded on him. Therefore, everything will be under control," Tilly said with a smile. "Don't worry, Ashes and I know what we're doing. We won't do anything beyond our capabilities."

Knowing that Tilly was determined, Roland did not want to further discuss the matter. He turned to Edith and said, "Go on."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Edith replied as she walked to the map. "The last step of this plan is to launch an ambush. The Senior Demons could not hold up for very long without the Red Mist, so they would have to retreat to recharge. This means that the best location for an ambush is somewhere close to their Red Mist supply line."

"Regarding that, I have a suggestion," Alethea cut in suddenly. "I'm not sure if you still remember the infiltration mission carried out by that Extraordinary the other day."

"Oh... that silly girl," Tilly said as she mopped her forehead. "She wasted one precious Five-Colored Stone because of that operation."

"But now, we'll have an excellent view at that location at the rear of the Taquila ruin," Alethea said, her main tentacle high up in the air. "Once we turn on the phantom instrument, we'll be able to see everything about their Red Mist supply line!"

Roland remembered that after the wolf girl, Lorgar, had discovered the demons in the vicinity of the ruin, the Witch Union had gone to scout around that area at once. As they had deviated from their original course, the mission had failed. If they had broken the Five-Colored Stone right in front of Taquila, they would have known every single movement of the demons and thus avoided the subsequent raid at Tower Station No. 1.

However, this failure could now, quite contrarily, help them.

Somehow he thought of one old saying.

"You never know whether this is a premonition or a blessing in disguise."

"Well, in that case, Iron Axe and Edith will stay at the Third Border City to draft a detailed ambush operation plan," Roland said. "As for the God's Stone bullet, Agatha, please work with the Ministry of Engineering."

"As you wish, Your Majesty!" everyone replied together.

When the meeting was over, Alethea suddenly whispered to Roland.

"Celine hopes that you could come to the underground lab. We've got a breakthrough in the research on the Magic Ceremony Cube."

...

Half an hour later, Roland showed up in the underground lab.

Celine turned on the Magic Cube and instantly, a familiar red light appeared in front of him.

"The breakthrough you talked about..."

"Please look at this," Celine said as she handed two small stones the size of a thumb nail with her auxiliary tentacles. "They're both the cube parts and are pretty old."

"They do look old," Roland said as he stroked his chin thoughtfully. There were noticeable signs of abrasion at one end closer to the outer surface of the cube. "Have you successfully disassembled the Magic Cube already? No, hold on, you have the parts. Then how come it can still illuminate? Is it because..."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Celine said smilingly. "I installed my replicates on the Magic Cube. The cube works perfectly fine, which indicates that those replicates work as well. What do you think of it?"

"Ingenious..." Roland remarked as he held Celine's tentacles excitedly as if he was appreciating some delicate instruments. "It only took you three months. I thought that would take you at least a year!"

"Slimwrist from the Sleeping Spell helped me a lot, and the structure of the Magic Cube is much simpler than that of the magic core," Celine answered, a little embarrassed under Roland's feverish gaze, and disengaged herself. "I withdraw my words that we need thousands of stones. I believe we only need 500 to make a cube replicate."

"The garrison at the Festive Harbor is now taking actions under my order. I believe we'll soon hear something from them," Roland said cheerfully. If the replicates work, this new device might, like the steam engine, bring about drastic changes to Neverwinter.

"Well, if that's the case, can I ask you for something in return?" Celine suddenly changed the subject hopefully. "Of course, this is all for our future research."

"What do you want then?" Roland asked curiously.

"An assistant, an assistant who could help me better understand the knowledge in the Dream World," Celine answered as she swayed her main tentacle. "My fellow witches would be most suitable for this position. However, they feel it hard to learn on their own. They told me there are institutions where an instructor can help students and answer their questions. I think that would be much easier for them. So, Your Majesty, could you send them to school?"

Chapter 1140: Dream World's "Illegal Immigrants"

After nightfall, Roland told Anna about what had happened in the meeting.

"... We still need to adjust the stability and strength of the God's Stone bullet so that we could suit its power to practical applications. I think you would be the only person who could do this. Make this project your top priority for now. I'll ask Andrea and Agatha to assist you."

"I feel like my work never ends," Anna said as she rested her beautiful head on Roland's shoulder. "I have to make the machine tool that is used to process plane parts, improve the internal combustion engine, and work on the railway at the front, as well as many projects on the book... I envy Pasha and Celine. Although Blackfire helps me a lot, it isn't as flexible as tentacles. I can't work on so many things simultaneously."

"Oh, I don't think it's a good idea. I don't want to cuddle a giant blob. You're not only the Minister of Engineering but also the queen of Graycastle. You're a public figure," Roland said smilingly. He knew Anna was simply sharing her happiness rather than complaining. Ever since she had assumed the office of the Minister of Engineering, she no longer looked sulky and expressionless. The more she worked, the more cheerful she became. Roland said, "Of course, I'm also looking for someone to help you. If everything goes well, there will soon be more people in the Ministry of Engineering."

Roland gathered that Rex from the Society of Wondrous Crafts should now be at the Fjords, though he was not sure if the latter had noticed the significance of his reward, A Comprehensive Study of the Law of Buoyancy. The marine craft he had drawn at the end of the book was based on the description in Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. For a quasi-inventer like Rex, who had never read any science fiction, such a magnificent envisage of a future submarine would definitely fascinate him.

"Really?" Anna said as she stretched herself and wrapped her arms around Roland's waist. "I'll wait for that day to come then, but now... I want something else as a reward."

Roland smiled. It appeared more than one person needed a reward today. He then unconsciously raised his hand to Anna's back.

...

Roland closed his eyes after Anna fell asleep.

When he woke up the next morning, the ceiling his apartment in the Dreamworld slid into his sight. A beam of sunlight slanted across the floor through the curtain.

Roland brushed his teeth, had breakfast, and then saw Zero off as usual. He leaned over the banister and peered down at the sea of heads down in the alley below. Students were hurrying to school with

their backpacks; young professionals were scurrying to work; some old men were working out in the chill of the morning. Everything seemed to be chaotic but energetic.

Nothing had changed in this city, but Roland knew this world was gradually transforming in a subtle and imperceptible way, as though this Dreamland had its own consciousness.

The evidence of such a transformation was the memories that had never previously existed, the battered and frayed red book, and the note in it.

After he read the book *Raison d'être*, Roland started to look for the Rose Café. However, nothing came up on the internet, and the witches could not find such a place either. There were 46 coffee shops in the city, but none of them was called Rose Café.

There was a possibility that this was just one of the author's bad jokes. However, as Roland learned more about this world, he was more convinced that the note was suggesting something to him.

The foreign race that had completely disappeared without leaving a trace.

The constant wars.

The inexorable awakenings and erosions.

All of these signs seemed to be mirroring the real world. This especially holds true with the discovery of the radiation people and tablet men on the battlefield, which made the narratives in the book even more compelling.

The question that puzzled him the most was why the book in the Dream World would, in a way, reflect the real world and also use the word "Battle of Divine Will". Garcia told him that, unfortunately, the author of the book had not left any hints. The only clue available was the note.

Roland had to put these questions aside as he searched for the Rose Café.

At around 8:00, he heard three rhythmic knocks on the living room door. They were one loud and two gentle knocks that indicated that nobody was in the hallway.

Roland immediately opened the door and let the visitors in.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," three petite witches saluted. One of them was Dawnen, the first witch who had entered the "Veil of Invisibility" in the Dream World.

"They do look like... high school students," thought Roland as he clapped his hand to his forehead. Dawnen's ability was erasing the traces of her companions. She had joined the Blessed Army the second year after her awakening and transferred her soul at the age of 28. She had extensive war experience. Her favorite weapons were a short sword and dagger. As witches usually aged much more slowly than common people, Dawnen looked extremely young in her dainty frame. To Roland, she looked no older than a teen.

So did the other two witches.

Roland now remembered his conversation with Celine.

"Go to school? I remember the God's Punishment Witches were all in their 20s on average. They should have been college students, but they only have an education level of middle or high school. If they look significantly older than other students, people will be suspicious."

"That won't be a problem. Many of us look younger than they actually are."

Celine was not exaggerating. The other two witches looked even younger than Dawnen.

Roland had to admit that after he asked Phyllis and Faldi to take care of the God's Punishment Witches, he spent most of his time collecting and memorizing information. After all, it would be too much for him to show 300 witches around in the Dream World while studying and investigating at the same time.

Roland was very impressed and pleased with his self-discipline.

"My name is Saint Miran. My ability is imitation. I can impersonate anyone who is connected to me. This is my second time visiting the Dream World. Nice to meet you."

"My name is Dido. My ability is the invisible pocket. In short, I can put objects into a magic, invisible bag. Well... it's not a very useful ability, but I'll do my best for Ms. Celine, on the honor of the Quest Society!"

The two witches introduced themselves.

Judging from their abilities, neither of them were combat witches. Since they could not join the Blessed Army, they had developed expertises in some other areas. Abilities shaped personalities. This theory had been well verified by the notorious poker trio.

Roland gathered that Dawnen was here to protect Saint Miran and Dido. The Dream World was not always safe after all. Particularly when there was an increasing number of Fallen Evils at the moment.

Roland nodded and looked at the three witches. He said, "Celine has told you the mission. Watch for my signals before answering questions. Don't talk too much."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The next problem was how to successfully send these "illegal immigrants" to school.

In fact, Roland had been thinking about how to hide the Taquila witches. So as to not expose them to the public, Roland had always chosen to fight Fallen Evils at night.

The warehouse which they paid frequent visits to would have raised suspicions among the residents a long time ago had the witches not used their abilities to erase their trace.

After thinking for a while, Roland could think of no one who could help him except Garcia.

He thus picked up the telephone and dialed her number.