

## **Witch 1161**

### Chapter 1161: A Slim Hope

"Don't move," said Elena.

With another two whooshes, one stone needle was slashed in half. The numbness gradually dissolved into an excruciating pain that seared through her legs.

Andrea clenched her teeth, managing to suppress her groan. As she looked up, she saw thousands of needles rain down where everybody had stood a moment ago. Had the God's Punishment Witches not come to their rescue, they would have probably been dead by now.

Nevertheless, even for the God's Punishment Witches, it was hard to avoid all the showering needles. One stone needle had forced its way into Andrea's legs and knees and penetrated them obliquely. Through furled flesh, Andrea could vaguely see her bones. Her pants were soaked in blood.

Elena was no better than her. One needle reached her stomach. Fortunately, the God's Punishment Witches could not feel pain, which enabled Elena to still concentrate on the fray.

Within a few seconds, perspiration ran down Andrea's forehead. She forced herself to gulp down one of the painkillers produced by Leaf, struggling to pull herself together.

Ashes was now fighting the Magic Slayer strenuously.

Everyone looked a little unkempt and windswept after this narrow escape. Many sustained injuries. They definitely could not dodge a second round of stone needles.

Just then, there was a clattering of footsteps coming from the depth of the forest.

Andrea realized that there must be some other demons other than the two Spider Demons awaiting them.

However, bounded by the wounded witches, the God's Punishment Witches could not commit themselves totally to the battle.

The situation was precarious.

Andrea grasped Elena's hand and croaked, "Head to the west, before it's too late!"

"West?" Elena echoed, momentarily stunned. "But the First Army is in the south..."

"I don't think we can go that way anymore. The demons must be waiting for us there. The only place in which we could take refuge is the Misty Forest in the west — " There were probably numerous well-prepared, fully-recharged demons down in the underground passages. If they rashly ran into their ambush, they would be doomed. Although the Misty Forest was far away from the First Army, at least the demons would have to travel a long way to pursue them.

It suddenly dawned on Andrea that the Magic Slayer was probably not waiting for his reinforcements but was waiting for his army to assemble. Their underground passages must have covered every inch of the land so that the witches would not have a single chance to escape.

The demon army probably had taken action when the decoy had flown out of Taquila.

"I see," Elena said while nodding and informed her fellow companions.

Meanwhile, Ursrook successfully dodged all the grapeshots whizzing toward him whilst gliding along the outer ring of the defense effortlessly. He conjured gusts of wind that consumed the witches' energies. A shield of blue light protected him from harms in any form. Apparently, singular shots could not cause him serious injuries.

When all the witches were congregated, the Mad Demons arrived at the forest.

"Look out for the spears!" Ashes yelled as she slashed a bone spear flying toward her in half.

The God's Punishment Witches, on the other hand, threw more grenades to defend against the hailing spears. For a moment, there was quite a commotion at the clearing.

Andrea knew that their greatest crisis had yet to be resolved.

She snatched the Sigil of Listening from Ashes and shouted at Lightning, "Find and kill the two Spider Demons!"

"But — "

"Only you and Maggie can do it. Go! You'll help us a lot if you succeed!"

The Spider Demons typically projected stone needles every seven or eight minutes. It had been three minutes since their last attack. If they failed to eliminate the Spider Demons before their second shot, they would all be killed on the battlefield.

"And ask Tilly to run!" Ashes added, without looking back.

"I..." Lightning hesitated but finally chose to obey. She said through gritted teeth, "Got it. Please hold on, you guys!"

"Of course we will," Andrea said as she summoned a bitter smile. "We haven't given up yet..." With these words, she turned to Elena and said, "Give me a weapon!"

"Are you sure?" Elena asked, her brows drawing together. "You'll slip off my back if you don't hold tight."

"Don't worry. I'll be perfectly fine with just one hand."

She then took the bolt rifle from Elena, pulled the bolt between her teeth and loaded the gun, after which, she propped her hand on Elena's shoulder, ready to fire. Even though she lost her legs, blinding with pain, with scarcely any magic power left, she was still a formidable sniper.

Savage Ashes was still fighting fiercely.

How could she surrender?

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"Lightning... what should we do, coo?" Maggie asked anxiously.

"Stay calm," Lightning said as she watched dozens of Mad Demons sprint in the forest and thick smoke coil in the distant sky. She forced herself to concentrate. Andrea was right. Her only strength was her tremendous flying speed. She could not let the Magic Slayer block her power again.

A great explorer should learn to maintain his composure and carefully analyze the situation. Since she could not provide much assistance in helping the witches retreat, killing the Spider Demons seemed to be more practical. To kill these monsters housed in stones, she had to utilize the grenade propellers newly developed by His Majesty.

"You go find the Spider Demons, and I'll contact the 'Seagull'. Princess Tilly has the weapons we need!" Lightning instructed curtly after making up her mind.

"Got it, aw!" Maggie yelled as she turned into a gray goshawk and shot high up in the air.

Lightning raised her speed to the maximum. Within a blink, she had reached the glider far away from the ambush field.

"Where are they? How's the plan going?" Wendy asked apprehensively as she pulled back the cabin door.

"There's no time to explain. I need the spare weapons!"

Lightning crept into the cabin and fastened the propeller and the grenades to her back when Tilly asked, "Things aren't going well, right?"

Lightning nodded and said hesitantly, "Yes, Ashes asked you to leave as soon as possible."

"I see. I'm leaving right away."

Lightning and Wendy were both frozen for a second.

"Because my stay won't help her with anything but only give her more pressure..." Tilly said, a tinge of tremor in her voice as though she was fighting back her words that were threatening to come out. "My instinct is telling me that it's best to return to the campsite."

"Your Highness..."

"But tell her that I'll come back! The 'Seagull' will soon bring new reinforcements. Tell them to hang in there just a little longer!"

Just then, a goshawk wailed in the distance.

"I'll let Ashes know," Lightning promised as she leapt out of the cabin while casting Tilly one last glance.

The weapons on her back weighed her down. Lightning dropped around ten meters before she was able to steady herself. If the Magic Slayer came after her again, there would be no chance for her to escape this time.

She needed to trust her friends and be brave!

Lightning took a deep breath of the cold air and zoomed in the direction Maggie had pointed out.

30 seconds later, she caught sight of her target — a Spider Demon that lay flat on the ground, slowly spewing out obsidian. The ground underneath it had sunk a few inches, forming a large dent, at the bottom of which she could vaguely see a few small holes that appeared to lead somewhere else.

Two Mad Demons were guarding the Spider Demon. Lightning hurtled low over the treetops, aimed at the crooked monster, whose armor was flung open, totally unaware of the danger above, and pulled the trigger without the slightest hesitation.

With a moderate clang, the grenade sank into the Spider Demon diagonally. The heat generated by the high-explosive shell instantly penetrated its stomach, crushing its veins and muscles underneath the obsidian!

With a horrible, bloodcurdling wail, the Spider Demon collapsed.

Chapter 1162: The Last Struggle

The Mad Demon guards howled with rage, snatched up their bone spears, and their arms began rapidly expanding.

Lightning would have dropped the weapons and fled immediately if this had occurred in the past. However, she was now well aware that there was one more Spider Demon to kill. The only way for her to avoid the infuriated Mad Demons would be to distract them.

She thus flew straight upward and flitted past the treetops. The moment she fluttered out of the sight of the demons, she turned around abruptly and streaked across the forest. At almost the same time, two bone spears darted up toward her through the dense branches and twigs and whistled by.

Lightning heaved a deep sigh of relief, wheeled around, and headed straight to her next target as Maggie instructed.

Her heart, however, plummeted to the bottom of her chest as she felt a surge of ominous feeling when she saw the second Spider Demon.

The Spider Demon was about to shoot, its stone pillar aloft in the air and its intertwined veins emanating a venomous blue glow!

Yet Lightning had yet to load her gun.

It was too late.

"Maggie, distract it. Stop it from shooting the stone pillar!"

"Owh!"

The goshawk, which had been hovering above the forest, plunged and soon transformed into a giant Devilbeast as it dropped.

The Mad Demons guarding the Spider Demon were confused as they were pressed to the ground.

Maggie's enormous body crashed into the Spider Demon with a loud bang similar to a gunshot. Obscured by the dust in the air, the Spider Demon stumbled, swung sideways, and almost slumped to the ground on his back.

Just at that moment, the stone pillar left the Spider Demon and hit the Mad Demons who had lost their balance. The pillar swept over the ground, hurtled straight into the forest at a horrific speed, and rolled upon the ground before it came to a complete halt a few yards away. It snapped into pieces as it struck the ground and created a fan-shaped clearing in the dense forest.

"Nicely done!" Lightning exclaimed as she loaded the gun and took aim at the Spider Demon, which was now struggling to straighten up in the earnest with its legs flying in all directions. Nevertheless, Lightning would not let it do so.

The grenade landed precisely on the Spider Demon's stomach. The flames and heated air resulting from the explosion created a large hole on the other side of the demon's body.

After confirming that the Spider Demon was immobilized, Lightning hoisted up Maggie, who had returned to her normal appearance, and asked, "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine! I used the biggest muscle on my shoulder to strike it!" Maggie said with confidence as she rolled up her sleeve and swung her arm casually. Her face, however, instantly screwed up in pain as she shot her hand upwards.

"It appears that your muscle isn't strong enough..." Lightning said softly while stroking Maggie's head. "I'll feed you a lot of barbecued meat in the future so that next time, you won't get hurt. But now, I need you to hold up a little longer. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes!" Maggie said while nodding vigorously.

"Then come on," Lightning said as she crouched down and placed the pigeon on her head. "Let's go help the others in the name of the Neverwinter Exploration Group!"

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"Bang!"

Andrea pulled the trigger and shot down a demon who had just poked its head out.

How many had she shot?

Her jaw was numb with pain. She could taste the blood between her teeth and felt chipped metal scrubbing her tongue. She was not sure whether it was rusty iron or her own broken teeth.

"Perhaps dozens?"

Andrea believed she had shot down at least ten demons. However, the demons did not retreat but, on the contrary, retaliated even more fiercely.

The Mad Demons, whom she had never taken very seriously before, suddenly became very difficult enemies. Since there were so many of them, they attacked the witches from various directions. Andrea

was glad that she had this advanced weapon, otherwise It would have been almost impossible to stop them.

Technically, the forest was not an ideal place to have a gunfight since the Mad Demons could easily dodge bullets while throwing spears at them between the trees. The God's Punishment Witches equipped with firearms but no shields, on the other hand, could only rely on their physical combat skills to avoid the demons' attacks.

To make things worse, there was also a high level Senior Demon, probably transformed from the Lord of Hell, that was apparently a lot weaker than Ursrook in terms of magic power but with a more sturdy, muscular physique. It had developed the nasty habit of using trees as its weapons. Every time it unrooted a tree, the God's Punishment Witches needed to work together to block the attack. Meanwhile, it also constantly built mounds of earth to protect the other demons. As a result, the joint attack of both the Senior Demon and the Magic Slayer significantly slowed the witches down.

Andrea repeated her movement mechanically. She loaded the gun, took the aim, and then shot. She was slowly losing track of what she was doing as pain and fatigue washed over her.

"Andrea, watch your right-hand side!" After two rounds of spearing, Sylvie yelled.

A group of Mad Demons distracted the God's Punishment Witches. The Magic Slayer wrenched himself free from Ashes' giant sword and streaked at Elena and Andrea like a ghost.

Andrea raised her gun, but Ursrook sliced her weapon in half with a knifehand strike.

Then there came the second blow.

Everything seemed to freeze in that split second. Andrea saw a ghostly blue light erupt from the Magic Slayer's clawed hand as it was about to swing down at her.

It was over.

She braced herself for death as she was paralyzed by fear.

Nevertheless, death did not visit her this day.

At the last moment, Elena whipped around and took the full blow.

The cut reached Elena's ribs and inner organs. Even though she was a God's Punishment Witch, it was impossible for her to continue to fight.

Elena fell to the ground.

"No — " Zoe shouted, who turned around and fired at Ursrook furiously. The Magic Slayer failed to dodge such a close-range shot. His shield finally shattered and his body was covered in bullet holes from which blood spurted out.

To Zoe's surprise, the Magic Slayer leered. He flew through the air backwards and planted his hand into his body, as though he did not feel any pain. His wounds immediately healed by themselves as his magic power welled up.

"Monster..." Sylvie, who saw everything, mumbled involuntarily in despair.

"I kill to improve and upgrade. It's very impertinent to call me a monster," Ursrook said with an air of irony as he returned to the other Senior Demon and took a gas tank from the latter. "Your every single wound and all the energy you've lost will nourish me! You should have foreseen your failure. Stop struggling, for it'll only increase your pain. If you yield now, I will grant you a painless death as a reward for your valiance!"

"Go to hell!" Zoe snarled. "I'll never yield to a demon, even if I have to die over and over again. I'll tear you into pieces!"

Andrea, however, did not hear the conversation. Everything, including the gunshots, the growls, the screams, and the warnings, seemed so far away from her. She slowly crawled to Elena and held the latter in her arms, muttering, "Why did you... save me?"

"Aargh..." Elena coughed out blood and murmured with a faint smile, "I should have been killed years ago. I lived longer than I should simply because I want something in return. We've reached our limits, but you still have great potential. Doesn't that give me a good reason to save you?"

While looking at grief-stricken Andrea, Elena gently stroked her cheeks and said, "Don't be sad. I don't feel pain at all. Really, it's nothing. I'm just... a bit... tired."

Her voice gradually trailed away and her breath became deep and steady as if she had fallen asleep.

Andrea held Elena's hand reassuringly. Her vision blurred.

Presently, the witches had completely stopped. Two more God's Punishment Witches were down, and the demons slowly closed in.

"Are we going to end up dying here?"

Andrea felt her strength start to escape her. A surge of giddiness flooded over her, and she lost her balance and fell to the ground.

Dark clouds scudded across the sky, a premonition of an upcoming storm.

In the overcast, leaden sky, she dimly spied a fleck of gold glimmer through the thick clouds.

This was the last thing Andrea saw before she lost her consciousness.

Chapter 1163: Transcendent

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Ashes noticed that her movement became faster.

She could have stopped the bone spear that had severely injured Margie had she swung the sword a little faster.

She could have stopped the Magic Slayer from attacking Elena had she moved a bit faster.

She could have blocked all the attacks from the Mad Demon had she been a little faster.

Her magic power currently running wild in her body strengthened every inch of her muscles and bones, creating a burning sensation on her skin. The pain somehow made her even more concentrated.

If only she could be a little faster!

Ashes had, once again, stepped into the same realm she had entered during her first encounter with the Magic Slayer. Indeed, she was even faster. Time seemed to move at a much slower pace. She could see every single detail of the battlefield, such as the tiny cracks on bone spears, the puddle underneath the demons, Margie's heaving chest, Zoe's trickling blood and so on. She could kill and rescue almost at the same time.

Ashes felt the surrounding magic power swarming into her and spreading all over her body. She reckoned this might be what Agatha referred to as an upgrade. Perhaps, it was about her time. The converging magic power not only strengthened her physically but also sharpened her senses, enabling her to fight two Senior Demons concurrently.

But she could not beat them.

"Clang!"

The giant sword clashed with the Magic Slayer's arm, sparks flying off the blade.

"What's the matter? Is this the fastest you could get?" Ursrook jeered as he streaked back before Ashes could give him another blow. "Your friends will die if this is all you can do. Perhaps, you're planning to abandon them?"

Ashes ignored his sarcastic comment and swung her sword at a spear zooming toward her.

"Don't listen to his nonsense. That freaking monster is trying to provoke you into madness!" Zoe advised, panting, as she loaded the gun with the rest of the few bullets. "If you fall for his trick, we'll lose."

"I understand," Ashes said, nodding calmly.

It was clear that the Magic Slayer attempted to break through her defense in collaboration with the scattered Mad Demons, who came up to her at a gallop against the gunfire. Their seamless cooperation forced Ashes to remain extremely focused throughout the whole battle.

The 100 Mad Demons at the Magic Slayer's command were perhaps the best soldiers in Taquila. They had yet to completely defeat the witches simply because the eight Taquila witches were also skillful and experienced combatants.

But the Magic Slayer was right about one thing.

This was the fastest she could reach.

Every inch of her skin was on fire at the moment, which was the exact sign of a power rebound. Ashes, who had been training herself on a regular basis, had never experienced such a backfire before. She could have escaped from the battlefield and recuperated until her body adjusted itself to the new power intensity. By that time, her skills would have definitely improved by leaps and bounds.



Yet time did not permit her to do so.

She could not save everyone but only herself.

She needed to do something more than this to pull them all out of the dilemma.

Perhaps, Alice, the Queen of Witches, would also feel lost if she were in her current position.

"You're an Extraordinary. You were born to have great potential. However, it requires a heart of steel to overcome and upgrade yourself." Phyllis' words suddenly came floating out of her memories. "As far as I know, all the Transcendents in the Union upgraded in battles, and those who couldn't successfully become Transcendents were all eventually killed by the demons. I hope you won't be one of them."

It wasn't until then that Ashes realized it was totally a different story to suit the action to the words.

She was now facing two options. One was to stay alive and reunite with Tilly, whereas the other was to upgrade herself and enter a new realm never achieved by human beings.

To enter this new realm, she had to burn herself.

"If we plan to use our magic power to achieve something, it would guide us in the direction we desire." Phyllis' voice was misty and distant as though coming from Heaven. It was like a long echo of murmur, a muted thunder rolling over the sky.

"What are you aiming to achieve exactly?"

"Look here. Fire!"

BOOM!

The silent battlefield suddenly erupted into another roar, followed by a shrill scream of the demons.

Ashes looked around and found Lightning just join the battle!

The grenade caught the Mad Demons offguard and sent them flying straight through the air. The two closer demons were instantly penetrated by the flying shells and lost their fighting capacity.

"Awh — " A gigantic Devilbeast emerged from the woods and bit the demons that charged at Lightning whilst pushing through the dense trees.

Under the joint effort of Lightning and Maggie, the number of the Mad Demons was soon reduced to five or six.

"Hold on. We are coming to help you, awh!"

"Annoying buzzing flies," the Magic Slayer mumbled, frowning, who turned away from Ashes to Lightning and Maggie.

The other Senior Demon thus took its superior's place, holding a large tree.

In the meantime, two bone spears cleaved the air, one aiming at staggering Zoe and the other Andrea on the ground.

It happened again.

If she ignored the Magic Slayer, Lightning would be in danger. If she went after him, then she would not be able to save the others.

Since a fast speed could no longer solve the problem, she had to resort to power that transcended the speed.

At that moment, Ashes made her decision.

Perhaps, she had already made her decision on the numerous nights she had spent at Neverwinter with the other witches, on the very evening she had conversed with Phyllis, and when Tilly had said "compared to the avenger you, I prefer the current you".

"Sorry, Tilly."

Ashes muttered as she stepped forward.

"What are you aiming to achieve exactly?"

"I want to protect them."

In an instant, she "saw" a roaming sea of magic power beyond any languages. Thousands of eyes were watching, murmuring, through the rushing currents.

Ashes lifted her limit and accepted all of them.

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Ursrook was suddenly alarmed halfway.

He whipped around and saw Ashes point her sword at the sky, its blade basking in a haze of golden light.

The moment that golden light hit his eyes, Ursrook felt his move suddenly become incredibly slow as if a swamp underneath were dragging him down.

He was not the only person who became slower.

The air seemed to grow thick and heavy as well.

Ursrook had had similar experiences before, but he did not expect it to happen at this moment.

How could that be possible?

This was not the power of a Magic Stone but of the witch herself!

He strained to stare up, half hoping that he was wrong, but the dazzling golden light above him clearly showed that this strike was going to be even more powerful than the one from that red-haired witch.

There was no chance for him to dodge it.

If the sword struck him, he would die.

Realizing what was going to happen, Ursrook mustered all his strength and generated the anti-magic area.

Precisely at that moment, Ashes' sword thrashed down.

A jet of blinding flash cracked through the air and lit up the entire continent.

...

Lan's eyes snapped open.

She rose to her feet, passed the people in complete stillness and walked slowly to the window.

This world she was living in had not awakened yet. Everything had lapsed into a trance, including the outpouring rain outside the window and the champagne ready to fill the glass. They were all suspending in the air, forming a part of the background behind her.

There should not have been any sounds in this world when even time was frozen.

However, in this impenetrable, velvety blackness, she heard thunders roar in the distance.

Lan pushed open the window and gazed upon the distant sky in silence.

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By the time Lightning's eyes acclimatized, she discovered, to her dismay, that the trees around the clearing had been burned to the ground. Wisps of smoke spiraled up horribly, and the air was heavy with a pungent smell.

"What just happened?"

All she could remember was that a Mad Demon lurking behind a tree had lunged at her when her focus had been solely on the Magic Slayer. She had thus no choice but to throw the propeller at it, in an attempt to stop the demon. The next moment, she was enveloped by a beautiful haze of golden rays.

But now, all the Mad Demons were gone, leaving the two Senior Demons alone on the battlefield.

The one transformed from the Lord of Hell slumped in a heap on the ground, its thick skin burned and cracked, almost dying.

The Magic Slayer was no better than his fellow companion, half of his body completely gone, black lights etching into his wounds. He was rooted to the ground, but for some reason, Lightning was utterly petrified by what she saw.

"Right... Ashes!"

She quickly looked around and breathed out a sigh of relief.

Ashes was still standing there, her sword in her hand, guarding the other witches.

"Are you OK — " Lightning asked as she flew to Ashes but the latter immediately cut across her.

"Get everybody out of here. Stay as far away from here as possible!"

"Huh?"

"Do it! Leave them to me, before I lose control!"

Ashes' voice cut through the air with a hint of starchiness, forcing Lightning to swallow down what she was about to say. It thus suddenly occurred to Lightning that Ashes simply did not want anybody to interfere with the battle between her and the demons. As Lightning gazed into Ashes' golden eyes, she somehow understood what heavenly thunder stood for.

Lightning thus asked Maggie to transform back into the Devilbeast and helped everyone onto Maggie's back. Although it was now impossible for Maggie to fly in the sky, she could still run at a fairly decent speed on the ground.

A moment later, both Lightning and Maggie disappeared into the forest.

After running about 100 meters, Maggie asked, "How did Ashes receive divine revelation? She's not having a Sigil of God's Will with her."

"I don't know either, but I'm sure about one thing," Lightning broke off, her hands clenching into fists in excitement. "She's now a Transcendent!"

Chapter 1164: A Destiny without a Choice

Dark clouds continued to converge and overspread the sky. A jet of flash cracked through the air every now and then, followed by muffled thunderbolts.

Ashes could no longer hold back the blood in her mouth after Lightning and Maggie left with the other witches. Her legs started to give away, and she leaned on her sword to maintain her stance.

Her magic power was almost exhausted after that deadly blow. Although more magic power swarmed into her body, she could not control it. Every single vein in her body was screaming protests. The pain resulting from the power rebound was unbearable.

She did not know how long she could hold up, but she knew she could not back away.

Otherwise, all her efforts would be wasted.

The thunderbolts had indeed severely injured the Magic Slayer.

Half of his body where the Stone of Flight was embedded vaporized. His movement should have largely restricted and his power ebbed away.

However, Ashes did not feel such a change.

She could still sense the lurking danger around her, and she knew perfectly well that the Magic Slayer was still able to fight.

That was why she had asked Lightning to get everybody out of here.

The stormy magic power was actually a combination of both Ashes' and the Magic Slayer's.

"Rise. You must finish the enemy before he finishes you!"

Ashes slowly got to her feet, her teeth clenched, and very painfully, took a step forward.

Just then, the burned Senior Demon also gradually straightened up.

"Damn it! Is it still alive?"

Ashes had directed her blow mainly to the Magic Slayer. She did not, however, expect that the other Senior Demon would survive such a magnificent strike that would normally be fatal to regular Mad Demons. Had she foreseen such a result, she would have aimed at that Senior Demon as well.

She was mildly surprised that the Senior Demon neither fled nor launched itself at her. Instead, it waddled toward Ursrook and stopped.

"What is it doing? Does it want to protect the Magic Slayer?"

Ashes' hand rested on the hilt of her sword.

"Very well. Then I'll send both of you to hell!"

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As the light penetrated the anti-magic area, Ursrook heard someone call upon him deep down inside.

In that split second, he sensed a queer connection.

Through the blinding golden light, Ursrook saw something more profound, something that he had been yearning to obtain, a realm that had denied him.

He glided through, and his feet thus imprinted on the unknown land. This was a crucial step that marked the difference between him and the lord.

However, they were now equal!

He had made so many sacrifices to defend Taquila and ambush the witches. He had even disobeyed the Sky Lord's order.

But everything was worth it!

As he embraced the power from the Realm of Mind, Ursrook connected his thoughts with his junior guard's immediately.

"Sir, you... you upgraded!" the guard said ecstatically but its voice quickly tailed away. "But I'll soon return to the Origin of Magic and can't... stay with you anymore."

"No, not yet. Actually, I'm very close to the upgrade, but the divine power hit me, so I can't complete my upgrade by myself."

"What... what can I do for you?"

"Abandon yourself to me."

The guard's face lighted up. "Is that all? Leave it to me, sir!"

Ursrook knew that he could have made an attempt to go beyond the limit of the Magic Stone and merge with the Origin of Magic, just as the Extraordinary had done. However, he was not sure about the possible consequence and would rather go in a more conservative way.

Their minds quickly disconnected. When the junior guard struggled to stand up, the Extraordinary also slowly drew up to her full height.

No... he should not call her an Extraordinary anymore.

After over 400 years, there was finally a new Transcendent.

It was obvious that the new Transcendent was trying to recover her strength, which provided him a great opportunity to complete the upgrade.

The junior guard finally stopped in front of Ursrook, its breath feeble like guttered candlelight, but its mind became clearer than ever.

"Sir... will we really be relieved from the fate, win the Battle of Divine Will and reach the inhabited Heaven one day?"

"We will. I promise," Ursrook said, and then he announced the guard's name, "Tartarus."

Tartarus' eyes glistened before the light in its pupils extinguished. "Please, take me with you — " it murmured.

Then the guard got to its feet abruptly and dived its finger into its skull!

...

Aghast, Ashes smelled a great crisis.

The Senior Demon pulled out the magic stone from its head as it howled, along with a large chunk of flesh, and inserted it into the Magic Slayer!

The black light around the Magic Slayer's wound instantly expanded!

She suddenly remembered Roland's words: demons upgraded through Magic Stones. Did Ursrook plan to upgrade himself by taking his guard's Magic Stone?

Anyway, she had to stop them.

Ashes, once again, directed her magic power to the sword, despite the excruciating pain she was suffering.

Another thunder erupted from the sky. When her power reached its peak, Ashes swung her sword a second time.

It was a relatively moderate strike, but golden thunder once again cracked through the clouds and lashed out to the demons.

Ursrook shrieked, a new arm growing out of the black light around him and stretching out to the thunderbolts.

The explosion generated by the clash of the two powers exhaled a cloud of dust that obscured the vision of both parties.

Ashes' heart sank when the sky gradually cleared up.

The Magic Slayer appeared to be unscathed, and he seemed to have recovered from his previous injuries. His new arm was a lot thicker than his old one, two long thorns sprouting from his shoulders and elbows, which were very similar to the limbs of the dead Senior Demon.

But he looked far more menacing than before.

"I have to admit that you're a real genius out of all the witches I've met. You not only exceeded the greatest witch in the human history but also opened the gate of the Realm of Mind. For a race which only has a lifespan of less than 100 years, it's very impressive," Ursrook drawled as he stretched out his clawed hand, ripped the Senior Demon's body apart and planted the blood-stained gas tank into him. "Unfortunately, you aren't the only genius here. We live much longer than you and have survived several Battles of Divine Will. I understand it's unfair, but that's your destiny."

"I'm afraid that your game is over." With these words, he lunged at Ashes.

Chapter 1165: The Eye of A Storm

The earth shook under the two's violent clash.

Swords met, as they sent off flashes of light to the surrounding forest. The black light covered the surface of the Magic Slayer and shielded the strikes of the golden thunderbolts. The turbulent magic power brought about a sudden downpour, and the two battling individuals became the eye of this unexpected hurricane.

Both Ashes and Ursrook had exceeded their limits. Their movements became a blurry swirl of light and shadow that slashed through the thick veil of rain, leaving a long mark in the air. Raindrops spluttered and flew off under the impact of the shockwaves. The battle was so intense it was as if two giants were wrestling with each other.

Ashes knew that she had completely lost control over her magic power. It was dissolving her flesh bit by bit, and now she was numb with pain all over that gnawed her skin as a result of the power rebound.

This was definitely not a good sign. Numbness were usually followed by a mental breakdown as well as a decrease in her ability to control her body.

In fact, she was now unable to direct the thunders to a specific spot. The avalanche of her raging magic power was breaking her body and gradually led her to the brink of collapse.

"I see. So this is the consequence of a direct merge with the Origin of Magic." The Magic Slayer looked weary. He wiped the blood off his face after fending Ashes off and said, "You've attained extraordinary power, but such power also consumes you. I'm very curious about what you will become if things go on like that. Will you be reduced to ashes? Or will you lose your humanity and become a mindless monster?"

"Whatever I will become, I'll first kill you." Ashes said darkly as she shook the water off the blade.

"With what? Faith and persistence?" Ursrook sneered. "That does sound like something humans would say. Unfortunately, the past hundreds of years have taught me that they are worthless as petals in the wind."

Ashes did not answer but charged at the Magic Slayer with the giant sword in her hand.

After a short but fierce battle, Ashes had a better understanding of the Magic Slayer's power. The chance of her beating the demon was slim. As the Magic Slayer slowly adapted to his new body, his movements became swifter while his strikes became more powerful and skillful. It appeared that he had regained the control of the pace of the battle, for Ashes felt it increasingly hard to hit her target. Such a consistent yet terrifying change made her truly realize how far a true genius could possibly go.

The only way to kill him was to generate divine power. Ashes did not know how she could have received divine revelation even without a Sigil of God's Will. She only knew her magic power had responded to her and transformed into a golden thunderbolt at her command.

Nonetheless, one thunderbolt was not powerful enough to cause fatal injuries to the Magic Slayer. It could only blast away half of his black light and add a few new cuts on him. She would have to repeat the thunder strikes to kill the demon, but she did not have enough time.

More importantly, the key to generating divine power was time, and the Magic Slayer would definitely not sit around waiting for her attack to charge.

Therefore, Ashes must create an opportunity to focus and summon enough power.

She knew what she should do next.

Ashes dashed to Ursrook in an instant. After a few more slashes with her sword, she missed once on purpose, thus enticing the Magic Slayer to draw close. Seeing the Magic Slayer stretch out his clawed hands, she charged and ran right into him while blocking the vital parts of her body.

The claws passed through her right chest and came out from her elbow.

At that moment, Ursrook's expression changed.

Ashes splattered blood, but at the same time, both of her hands locked the Magic Slayer in an embrace, and she said in a low voice, "I got you."

Just at that moment, the dark clouds above them started to spin and soon formed a giant storm!

...

"What did you say? Ashes... became a Transcendent?" Agatha exclaimed over the Sigil of Listening.

After flying west for a few miles, Lightning had finally gotten hold of the headquarters and made an urgent request for reinforcements to the Ice Witch. She felt a little better after Agatha confirmed that the First Army would soon come, then she recounted the incident concerning the Magic Slayer.

"I couldn't think of anyone else other than a Transcendent who has such phenomenal power," Lightning said as she slowly rose into the air and gazed upon the jungles behind her. Golden lightning and thunderbolts continued to roar about. Even the Sigil of God's Will could not sustain such a phenomenon that long.



"Extraordinaires typically evolve through battles. If she did become a Transcendent, she should be able to cope with the Magic Slayer. She made the right decision asking you to leave. Anyway... I'm glad that everyone is safe."

Lightning fell silent dolefully. Not everyone in the ambush team was fine, but she decided not to disclose the truth at this moment. She then steered the subject to the demons and asked, "What about the demons? Do they also evolve through battles?"

For some reason, the fear she had felt when she confronted the Magic Slayer lingered on. The wriggling black light around Ursrook's wounds and his terrifying back gave her an ominous feeling.

"There's no record of that in the Union, but according to His Majesty's memory fragments, the demons require high-quality Magic Stones to upgrade their powers," Agatha replied. "Of course, battles are also crucial to them. If my deduction is correct, merging with a Magic Stone is quite similar to the witches entering their adulthood. It is a test – a trial concerning magic power. If the attempt is unsuccessful, the demons would suffer a power rebound. Why do you ask?"

"No, nothing..." Lightning said, biting her lip. "I'm just a bit worried..."

There was a possibility that the Magic Slayer carried a few high-quality Magic Stones with him. However, could he really evolve through battles? When a witch had reached adulthood, she usually spent her entire day in bed, staying focused while awaiting that critical moment.

"Don't worry. Transcendents don't particularly rely on their abilities to fight. If the Magic Slayer has no way to subdue Ashes, I believe we'll soon know who wins the battle," Agatha comforted.

"Yea, I guess...."

Lightning nodded and was about to return to Maggie when suddenly, a muffled roar of thunder in the distance startled her.

A tidal wave of dark clouds converged, and they formed a spinning gray tower that connected the heaven and earth. She had only seen such a scene in the sea, which typically only appeared when a great storm was about to hit the ocean. By that time, there would be a huge swirl in midair, and any ships that failed to avoid the whirlpool would be torn to pieces by furious waves.

But they were on land.

"What happened?" Agatha asked over the Sigil of Listening, who apparently also heard the noise.

"What's that sound?"

Lightning said apprehensively with her nails sank into her flesh, "I wonder when Princess Tilly would send us reinforcements."

"The God's Punishment Witches are loading the 'Seagull'. It'll probably take them 10 to 15 minutes to get there."

"Fifteen minutes... I see." Lightning hung up after a short silence.

After she flew back to Maggie, Lightning started to attend to the wounded.

"That thunderbolt scared me, awh. Will Ashes be okay?" Maggie asked.

"She should be fine. She's now a Transcendent. You just need to take everyone to somewhere safe. You know where you should go, right?"

"Of course, awh. I just need to go around the Taquila ruin and turn to the southwest — Hang on, why me? Are you not coming, awh?"

But as Maggie waited for a reply, all she could hear was silence.

Chapter 1166: The Victor

BOOM!

Tendrils of lightning pierced through the whirlwind, and they slowly began to gather at the center as heavy rain poured on the ground, obscuring the forest. The evolved Magic Slayer and the new Transcendent stood transfixed like two austere statues. Their faces were within an inch from each other.

The wild magic power had completely covered Ashes, whose body was now emanating a dazzling golden glow.

She was the concentration point of all the divine power.

She transformed herself into a weapon of destruction.

"Is this your last resort?" Ursrook bellowed. "You want to kill me by sacrificing yourself. That's beyond stupidity!"

"I won't... let you walk away," Ashes said, panting. Every breath was painful. Blood flooded into her windpipe, and she could taste the nasty tang of blood in her mouth.

Five minutes... Ashes kept telling herself... She only needed another five minutes.

They were basically equal in power right now. As long as she did not let him go, it was impossible for the Magic Slayer to break away from her.

"Do you think I'll fight only with brute force?" Usrook snarled, his water-streaked face contorted in a rage. "It seems that I'm now rooted, but you are forging a cage for yourself!"

Several flashes of black light wriggled out of the Magic Slayer's chest and dived into Ashes' body like some sinister tentacles.

Ashes could not help but groan in agony.

She had thought nothing could be worse than a power rebound, but the black light tortured her in an even more callous and cruel way. She felt as though numerous tiny needles were attacking her veins in the brain, and she had to force herself to not pass out.

To her horror, in addition to the excruciating pain, those black tentacles started to creep up her body and spread out. The place that the black light had passed bulged as though some squirmy bugs were moving underneath her skin.

Blood spurted out from Ashes mouth. Ashes asked, "What... what did you do?"

"A little present for you that will make you understand the difference between our understanding and control of magic power," Ursrook whispered into Ashes' ear. "To tell you the truth, I should thank you. Thanks to this battle, I've finally evolved. Now, you are even offering yourself to me. I'm looking forward to how far I could grow after I destroy you."

Ashes suddenly realized that this was another form of corruption. The part covered in black light felt oddly disconnected as if it had been detached from her body. Ashes bit her lip, exercising all her efforts to summon her power to fend off the corruption.

"Don't. You. Dare. Possess me!"

As the two powers clashed, Ursrook's face twisted, and his new body suddenly expanded into a distorted and grotesque blob that grew larger than his original size. He was misshapen, with half of the Senior Demon's body and half of his own.

The corruption, however, continued to expand after a momentary pause, and black lines continued to creep up to Ashes' neck.

"Great perseverance," Ursrook commented with a callous and indecent pleasure in his voice. "But that won't work." His appearance had now completely changed after the horrific transformation, and he looked like a genuine monster of lore.

"I... won't..."

"Won't give up? Diligence, faith, perseverance, and relentlessness are merely excuses of the weak. Nobody wants to die. However, those slogans won't change anything, nor will they help your race to live on!"

Searing pain exploded in Ashes's head. Her mouth opened wide like a dumb person, but there was no voice coming out.

Golden flecks shined through the swirl above, but Ashes found her power slowly abandon her.

"We have a much greater power capacity and a longer lifespan than you human beings. You're fighting against overwhelming odds. That's the difference that determines our fates! Both the past two Battles of Divine Will have shown that you'll never beat us!" Ursrook lifted Ashes slowly off the ground and claimed his final judgment, "So, rest in peace. Blame your fate for being human — "

"Don't you — look down upon — humankind!"

Suddenly, a familiar silvery voice came through the pouring rain, which jerked Ashes out of the unconsciousness for a moment.

She turned around with great difficulty and saw a shadow dart out from the woods.

"Is that... Lightning?"

Lightning cleaved the milky curtain of rain, passed the blackened trees and dashed towards Ursrook.

It appeared that she was also carrying something.

Ashes blinked.

"Are those... grenades?"

"Get lost, you low-life!" Ursrook immediately generated the anti-magic area.

When the black light brushed past Lightning, Lightning released the grenades and changed her course abruptly.

The grenades fell.

They sped on under the momentum toward Ursrook and sprouted their empennages.

"You — " the demon growled, his eyes strained, and with all his remaining strength, he created the blue shield.

The next moment, explosions bloomed outside the shield, yet it was only a prelude to even more destruction. The cone-shaped bullets seething with energies created a dazzling trajectory in the air and shattered the shield with a loud crash. They slashed Ursrook's disfigured body as if hot knives through butter, thus reducing the blob attached to him to a pulp.

The Magic Stone Ursrook had obtained from the Senior Demon crumbled under the fierce onslaught of the shrapnel.

Ursrook let out a bone-chilling shriek!

The black tentacles immediately shrank; the burning pain Ashes was feeling ceased, and she regained her consciousness.

Without slightest of hesitation, Ashes released the accumulated divine power.

The Magic Slayer realized the danger and tried to wrench the witch away, but Ashes refused to slacken her grip.

"You're right. Human beings are weak, but nothing could stop us from moving forward. We'll never back off," she broke off with a tenuous smile on her face. "Because someone is already standing ahead, pointing to us the way forward."

Then golden thunderbolts overspread the black light and filled the entire sky.

Struck by the blinding, white-hot rays, Ursrook was evaporated without even the slightest trace of his existence left behind.

The roar of thunder spread through the Fertile Plains, leaving a long murmur of echoes.

Soon, the divine power diminished, and Ashes was alone on the vast land.

Lightning slowly rose from the ground and clenched her teeth. When she had collided into the anti-magic area, she had swayed sideways and had been thrown out before crashing into the ground. Luckily, the Magic Slayer had directed the majority of his power to the shield, which had afforded her time to synchronize her power after a narrow escape from the anti-magic area.

As a consequence, she broke one arm and scraped one side of her body.

Lightning limped to Ashes and managed a smile. "We finally... won."

"Yes, thank you. To be honest, I didn't expect that you would come back."

"That's an explorer's instinct. A great explorer always comes for those in need — " Lightning stopped dead, realizing something was wrong. "Hey, what... is happening to you?"

Ashes looked down at her hands. They were turning snow-white and became more and more transparent. She replied, "Perhaps, this is the price I have to pay for burning myself."

"Burning yourself... What do you mean?" Lightning pursued, stunned. Ashes gradually disintegrated into nothingness, and her long hair splintered into numerous tiny white flecks, as though she ceased to exist as a solid entity and became a misty image comprised of fireflies.

"If we want to use magic power to achieve something, it'll lead us to what we desire, but I asked for something more than I could bear..." Ashes said softly. "So that's what I will turn into after merging with magic power... It's better than becoming a monster."

"What, what are you talking about?" Lightning asked, panic-stricken, attempting to grab Ashes' hand, which immediately pulverized. "Ashes, tell me. What should I do?"

"Tell Tilly that I like her."

The dark clouds were eventually dispersed by the lazy sunbeams that spilled across the earthy land. In the slanting sun rays, Ashes closed her eyes and dissolved into the wind.

Lightning attempted to hold her back but to no avail. With her one good hand still trying to hug the air in front of her, the little girl broke into tears.

...

Lan heaved a deep sigh as she gazed at the dark sky, her eyes downcast.

After a long, melancholic silence, she closed the window and muttered as if she was asking an imaginary figure, or just talking to herself.

"What are you waiting for?"

"There's nothing to hesitate about anymore."

"We need to act faster. Time... is running out."

Her last comment gave way to an inaudible sigh that dispersed into the stillness of time.

Chapter 1167: Woe

...

"Is that so? I got it." Roland's heart sank when he received the news from the frontline. It took him a while to reply. "How are you feeling now? How is your injury?"

But what followed was only a suffocating silence.

Few more minutes passed before Roland spoke again. "This wasn't your fault. You couldn't foresee that the things would unfold in this way. Now, since the Magic Slayer has perished, take a long break and have a good rest."

Roland slumped into a chair after he hung up the telephone and let out a deep sigh.

As if she sensed something, Nightingale strolled slowly to Roland's desk and asked, "Was that Leaf?"

"Yes," Roland answered while closing his eyes. "The war is over. The First Army successfully seized Taquila with minimal loss and also discovered a half-completed tower base in the God's Stone mine. The ambush operation failed, but it has been confirmed that the Magic Slayer was killed. The curse was lifted, which is the fortunate part of all the misfortunes. However..." he paused for a second and said, "Ashes and Elena didn't make it."

"That... fool?" Nightingale said, aghast, and then turned away.

"Lightning told me that Ashes became Transcendent near the end of the fight and sacrificed herself to kill the demon. Nothing was left behind from the battle except for the melted remains of Ashes' sword," Roland continued slowly.

Roland had predicted the failure of the ambush when he had seen the siege through the phantom instrument. Judging from the formation of the demons, it appeared they had been purposely waiting for the witches to take action. Unfortunately, he could only have a glimpse of the battlefield through the screen. After the Special Unit had retreated to the west, he had lost track of the witches and thus been pacing up and down in his room with burning anxiety.

Roland had anticipated the worst scenario at that moment.

The actual outcome of the battle was much better than he had thought.

Nevertheless, the casualties still gave him a leaden feeling in his stomach.

After all, he was the one who had approved this plan.

"Ashes was arrogant and very full of herself, but she never made any reckless decisions..." Nightingale remarked as she placed her hand gently on Roland's back. "The same goes for Elena. I believe that they knew this would eventually happen, so, you don't have to pin all the blame on yourself. I'm throwing the words you said to Leaf right back to you."

Roland nodded slowly a few times. He still did not understand how the demons had predicted their plan and why they had taken eliminating the witches precedence of over control of the Holy City of Taquila. Yet it had happened. As the leader of Graycastle and the united front, he should never show any signs of despondency to the public no matter how disheartening and painful the situation was.

How was he supposed to support someone more downcast than him if he were to let his emotions consume him?

For example, Tilly.

He did not know how to face her.

From what Leaf had told him, Tilly and Ashes had been much closer than he thought. Although Tilly was not completely devastated by the news and immediately came to help the wounded, the sparkles in her eyes had faded instantly when she had heard about Ashes' death. According to Lightning's words, the radiance around Tilly had disappeared. Lightning had also forwarded Roland Ashes' last words, probably hoping that Roland could assuage Tilly's grief.

But comforting people was never one of his expertise.

He decided to take things slow.

On the same afternoon, the Seagull arrived at Neverwinter.

All the witches who sustained minor injuries returned from the battle, whereas those in critical condition were still remaining at the front, awaiting Nana's treatment.

Roland and the other Witch Union members greeted them at the airport.

Anna, Agatha, Molly, and Phyllis climbed down the jet bridge and hugged Scroll, Nightingale and Sharon, as well as the clerks of the Witch Union, including Ring, Grayrabbit and Pearl. At this moment, the war made everyone equal. There was no difference between combat and non-combat witches, new and Taquila witches, or witches and the common people.

Tilly was the last to get off the plane.

Roland walked up to her and stammered, "That..."

"Can I have a word with you in private, brother?" Tilly asked as she looked up at him.

...

He thus led Tilly to his office and closed the door behind them after Nightingale left the room on his orders.

"Alright, if you want to say something..." Roland broke off. As he turned around, he felt his chest suddenly constrict, and Tilly threw herself at him.

"Please, just stay there," Tilly choked while holding Roland tight, her voice quavered. "Let me hold you like this for a while, just a while..."

Her voice trailed off into a sob, her fingers sinking into Roland's back deeply.

So that was why.

Like him, she was a leader; a leader of Sleeping Spell. Tilly did not have the liberty to show her emotions. It was indeed not an easy task to hold back her tears while inside, she was tormented by misery and agony of her loss.

Roland patted Tilly on the back and said, "You don't need to hold back anymore. Cry if you want. Nobody will hear..."

Tilly's tears then came flooding out her eyes.

The sobbing soon grew louder and louder and turned into a heartbreaking wail that Roland had never heard before. He had never seen Tilly so sad, not even when she had been bullied by her own brother when she had been little. It was an outpour of forlorn and despair from a person who had just lost that which was what the dearest to them.

Roland didn't know what to say, because no words could comfort her at the moment.

So he just stood there and waited.

...

Meanwhile at the frontline.

The tent flap was pulled back, and Shavi came in with a bowl of medicine in her hand.

"Do I have to drink that again?" Andrea mumbled. Her legs were completely bandaged and her face covered with medicinal cream. Although neither of these really helped heal her wounds, Andrea liked the soothing sensation on her skin. "I won't drink it without candies."

"How about... I ask for some from the field medics?" Shavi said tentatively.

"Since when did the field medics have candies? This isn't Neverwinter. Whatever, help me up."

Andrea sat up, took the bowl, and emptied it down her throat.

"Aargh, is Nana still busy? How long do I have to wait before receiving treatment?"

"I asked her. She told me you need to wait for another three or four days. She said that some God's Punishment Witches were in worse conditions than you, and..."

"And what?"

Shavi muttered, "She said that your legs looked pretty bad but the injuries weren't fatal, so medication should help."

Andrea rolled her eyes and said, "I'm not that muscular monster. How can I heal myself up?"

Those words almost brought Shavi to tears.

"Sorry," Andrea mumbled, quickly turning her tactless comment into a cough. "Forget about it."

"No..." Shavi said while shaking her head. "You just reminded me of Ashes, so I couldn't help..."

"I look like her? What the — " Andrea broke off, frowning, as she realized that she had almost forgotten about her status as a noble. "Well... I feel a bit tired now. You go take a rest. Please tell Lightning and Maggie to bring some honey back next time they go on a patrol. At least that will make my life a lot easier."

"Okay, got it."

"Thanks."

Andrea, however, was still not able to restore her composure after Shavi departed.



"You wanted to save everyone? You even ended up becoming a Transcendent. Did you think that you were a Queen of Starfall City of old?"

"Now you killed the Magic Slayer and met a heroic end, but..."

Andrea laid back down and buried her face in her hands.

"... Damn it, have you never thought about..."

"How I'm supposed to surpass you when you're now gone forever?"

Chapter 1168: Recovery

Tilly cried for nearly an hour before she finally fell asleep. Roland put her on a couch, his cheeks and clothes smeared with Tilly's tears and snot. The latter was still shaking with sobs uncontrollably when Roland disengaged himself.

Tilly obviously did not wish the witches from Sleeping Spell to see her cry like this, so Roland asked Anna to bring Tilly to the master bedroom on the third floor of the castle.

Anna wiped Tilly's tear-streaked face as her breath gradually steadied as sleep broke over her. Apparently, she had burned out after working non-stop for weeks since Ashes' death. Anna gathered this was probably how Tilly coped with pain — by immersing herself in work and thereby temporarily detaching herself from the cruelty of reality.

"Please stay with her tonight," Roland said with a sigh. "She needs someone, and I trust that you're the best person to take care of her."

"Don't worry. I know how she feels and what to do," Anna answered while nodding. "What about you?"

"I could sleep in the Third Border City. I've been staying there for the past few days, so it doesn't matter to me," Roland replied. "Also, the witches there should be informed of the success of the 'Torch' project as well. Those ancient witches probably have been waiting for this news for a long time."

"OK," Anna said as she walked up to Roland and pressed a kiss to his cheek. "Although I don't want you to leave, it's important to let them know..."

"Sorry, you just came back from the front."

"Don't be silly, my king. We'll have plenty of time together in the future."

Just when Roland was about to leave, Anna stopped him again.

"By the way, bring Nightingale with you," she said in a serious tone. "You should never put yourself in danger."

While still being a little absorbed in Anna's clear blue eyes, Roland closed the door behind him.

...

Pasha greeted Roland and his guards at Third Border City immediately.

"Your Majesty, how did the war go? Any news from the front?"

She swayed her tentacles, looking unsettled.

With no intention of holding anything back from her, Roland said flatly, "We won. The demons on the plain were eradicated, and so was the Magic Slayer. The First Army seized Taquila."

Pasha instantly stopped swaying.

After a moment of silence, she asked, apparently thrilled, "Is this true? I apologize for my insolence, Your Majesty... I'm not questioning the credibility of your words, but I just don't know what to say. Could you tell me more about it?"

As a Senior Witch who had been living for more than 400 years, Pasha had developed the ability to remain unperturbed under any circumstances. It was Roland's first time seeing Pasha lose her composure. He replied, "Naturally, but..."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I'll soon tell everyone the good news!" Pasha said and vanished from into the cave and from Roland's sight.

Momentarily stunned, Roland shook his head resignedly.

When Roland entered the underground hall, however, he not only saw Pasha, Alethea, and Celine but also all the other God's Punishment Witches gather about at the center of the hall. They were spread out in a line and were looking hopefully at him.

This made Roland feel it hard to tell them the whole story.

"Do what you can," Nightingale whispered to him. "Or tell Pasha mentally."

Roland nodded, took a step forward, and briefly talked about the war and its outcome. As he had not received a statistic report yet and Leaf had missed quite a few details when she had related the incident to him, Roland could not fully recount the story. Nevertheless, the God's Punishment Witches did not really care about the specifics anyway.

For those survivors who had been waiting for four centuries, all they needed to know was the final result.

The crowd erupted into a loud cheer after Roland finished his speech.

Many witches burst into tears and some whooped with laughter. All of them were thrilled by the news.

It was a day of euphoria for those witches as they had finally, for the first time in the past several hundred years, been freed of the oppression of the demons.

"Please forgive our insolence and rudeness in the past," Alethea said as she came up to Roland and bowed her main tentacle. "From today onwards, there's no need to keep a united front. We acknowledge you as the leader of Taquila and we trust you'll lead us to achieve our final goal."

Neither Pasha nor Celine spoke. Apparently, they also agreed.

This meant that Taquila had officially become an integral part of the Kingdom of Graycastle.

Roland gave a curt nod of agreement, and Alethea straightened up.

"Also, I need to tell you one more thing," Roland said and then told them about Elena's death.

"I see... So it was her," Pasha spoke slowly.

Roland was mildly surprised that the witches were not too upset about the news.

"You... already knew?" Roland asked, unable to help himself.

"No, we just anticipated that it would happen," Alethea said truthfully. "The demons saw through our ambush plan, which, back in the Union age, would normally leave us with no chance of survival. It's very fortunate that we only lost one member."

"You probably find it hard to understand, but we're used to death," Celine supplied the answer. "Every one of us volunteered to transfer our soul to the carrier and was on the brink of death once, not to mention numerous defeats during the past Battle of Divine Will. We're not afraid of death but a meaningless one."

"And Elena simply made a choice that every Taquila witch would make under that circumstance," Alethea said. "So, you don't have to be too sad about it."

Instead of providing solace to the witches, Roland became the one being comforted.

While being a little touched, he was at a loss for words.

"Of course, this doesn't mean we aren't sad for the loss. We simply learned how to control our emotions," Pasha said as she looked at the celebrating witches. "I'll tell them later. Right now, let them enjoy the celebration."

...

Five days later.

As the army gradually returned to Neverwinter, the news of the victory slowly infiltrated the city.

Although the civilians did not witness the actual war themselves like they had done during the battles against the demonic beasts and Duke Ryan, nor did they celebrate the victory at the time, they gradually formulated a mental image of the enemy based on the various rumors circulated in the neighborhood. This particular enemy, unlike any demonic hybrids or knights, was ferocious, powerful, and dauntless. As many people had seen the attack of the Devilbeasts, it was further believed that this enemy was a demon from Hell.

Some details had even gone awry in the retelling, as the public was now quite positive that the demon was actually a 100-foot legendary monster that brought disasters and ejected fire. This imaginary demon thus soon became the most heated topic of discussion throughout the entire city.

The defeat of such an invincible monster significantly raised the morale of the masses. If the demon from Hell had failed to stop the First Army, then who could?

Meanwhile, the Graycastle Weekly further advertised the war by interviewing a large number of soldiers who had participated in the battle.

In a few days, Neverwinter witnessed a rapid increase in the number of people who applied to join the First Army, and the public set up a chant of "expand the territory of Graycastle for the king" throughout the city.

Nonetheless, the officers in Neverwinter knew very well what their real challenge was.

At the cemetery in the west of the city.

Since the first tombstone had been set up here five years ago during the Months of Demons, this old wasteland, which used to be overgrown with bushes and hedges, had now become a public cemetery carpeted with green grass.

426 new tombstones were added today.

Most of the tombs were empty, as they could not locate all the bodies of the killed. However, nobody felt that those soldiers were abandoned. On each of the tombstones, there was the deceased soldier's name, rank, and feats.

Elena's and Ashes' tombs were among them.

They looked identical to all the other tombstones except that there was a half-melted sword in front of Ashes' tomb.

"Salute!" Iron Axe shouted while raising his hand.

Then all the officers administered a military salute, most of whom had a much higher rank than ordinary soldiers.

It was not only a memorial but also a reminder.

It reminded them that there was still a long way to go before the Battle of Divine Will ended.

After the funeral, Roland summoned Barov and said, "Ask all the ministers to come here. I have new tasks for them."

The new battle had just begun.

Chapter 1169: A Parliament of Holy See

The rush of the waves from the Realm of Mind gradually faded, and Hackzord opened its eyes.

It saw a round hall, below which lay the tranquil sea of fog, and the ceiling of the hall was out of its sight. Nine seats of different sizes were suspended in the air and were along the steep stone wall. In the middle of the circle stood a giant Birth Tower. However, unlike a real High Tower, this Birth Tower was plastered with eyes the size of a junior demon.

This was the realm created by the king.

The "Presiding Holy See".

Although it was not its first time visiting here, it still felt somewhat restless and uncomfortable. Unlike a dream or ordinary mental communication, the communication that occurred in this hall, which was located in the middle of the Realm of Mind, was real. If it fell in the sea of fog or was under an attack, it would truly get injured.

In contrast to the chaos outside, the hall was strictly in order.

The king ruled the Holy See.

Once someone entered the Presiding Holy See, it would be at the mercy of the king.

Nevertheless, Hackzord was confident in its absolute loyalty to the king. It could easily suppress its instinctive revolt. Only savage beasts would find it difficult to control their instincts.

"The Sky Lord is at your service," Hackzord swept a bow at the High Tower in the center.

One of the eyes on the tower opened but immediately closed again. It said, "Please wait."

"Yes."

Presently, the seats were gradually filled.

The shadows occupying the seats were blurry, but Hackzord managed to make out who they were. The one whose armor was ornamented with various weapons, as giant as a small mountain, was the "Bloody Conqueror", the one wearing distorted clothes and masks was the "Resentful Heart". Very few could distinguish these prominent figures, because it depended on how well one understood the Origin of Magic.

When the last seat was occupied, the conference began.

The king materialized in front of all the lords, and half of the eyes on the Birth Tower slowly opened as well.

"You all probably know why I summoned you here. I believe everyone has the same question as me. Several days ago, one person upgraded and reached the Realm of Mind. The upgrade created a commotion there but soon, this particular individual became unresponsive," the king broke off and turned to the Sky Lord. "The one who created this commotion was Ursrook, the commander of the advanced troops of the Western Front. Hackzord, what in the world happened in the west?"

Hackzord felt nervous. It had expected the king to ask it this question. Disturbance of the Realm of Mind indicated that this individual must have achieved a relatively high realm, and all the lords would be able to sense such a remarkable improvement. As the battle in the Sky-sea Realm became increasingly fierce, one more lord meant a bigger chance to win. However, things suddenly took a turn for the worse. To everybody's consternation, this new lord simply left its mark in the realm and vanished into thin air. It was their first time over the past several hundred years seeing a lord die right after its upgrade.

In fact, Hackzord had received the news of their defeat in the west not long after Ursrook's upgrade, along with a letter written by Ursrook itself. Hackzord was so outraged by the content of the letter that it wanted to drill a hole in Ursrook's skull to see what had made it act so recklessly!

When the king raised the question, Hackzord hesitated for a moment but finally decided to disclose the truth concerning the battle.

As Hackzord had expected, the hall erupted into a loud murmur of jeers, gasps, and exclamations.

"Huh? Did I just hear that right?" the "Bloody Conqueror" sneered predictably. "Your subordinate knowingly made a bad decision and sent all the troops to the Fertile Plains for slaughter? What did you call that guy earlier? A genius commander?"

Hackzord knew that the Blood Conqueror, as the commander at the Sky-sea Realm, always held a grudge against Ursrook. Fearing that Ursrook's upgrade would threaten its status, the Blood Conqueror would naturally seek every opportunity to attack Ursrook.

"I don't really care about junior demons and Spider Demons, but the Sky Lord should have known how precious those symbiotic demons are," the "Mask", who was responsible for developing symbiotic demons commented enigmatically. "If we successfully seized Taquila, the City of Falling Star and Arrieta, that would have been a different story because the God's Stone mines there could provide us with supplies. However, we now not only lost those mines but also the symbiotic."

"I'm shocked that we lost to those low lives, and I believe your lordship should, more or less, take some responsibility."

"I think we overestimated this so-called genius. He's just barely above average."

"Not all the upgraded could open the gate, otherwise there would have been more than nine lords sitting here. Plus, its enemy was a Transcendent."

"So what? This isn't 400 years ago anymore. Do you think dying together with a Transcendent is something that we should boast about?"

Hackzord's face clouded over as it listened to all the sniding comments. Although it did not really understand Ursrook, Ursrook had been one of its favorites. As a lord, it could not tolerate any attacks toward its old commander.

Just at that moment, the king interrupted the discussion and silenced everyone. "Enough, I just want to know if this would affect our plan!"

Hackzord immediately concentrated its mind and replied, "No, of course not. We have many other plans. Taquila isn't our priority. I assure you that we'll tread on men's territory as planned."

"Then keep your word," the king said, his voice lower.

"But..." the Sky Lord said hesitantly. "But I need to request for more troops. According to Ursrook, we need ten times the troops we have now to win this battle." After an internal struggle, Hackzord decided to disclose the content of Ursrook's letter. It did not know why it reached such a conclusion, probably because of the trust it had put in Ursrook or because of the horrific prediction Ursrook had made. Constantly, a voice in its head pressed Hackzord to tell the truth.

"Ten times?" the "Blood Conqueror" bellowed. "What are you joking about? We can barely cope with the battle at the Sky-sea Realm, and you still request for more? I won't give you anything!"

"What did Ursrook say?" the king asked heavily.

"When he wrote this letter, the advanced troops had not fought human beings yet. Ursrook insisted in staying at Taquila under the pretext that it wanted to find out men's weakness. If the plan worked, we would have been able to significantly weaken humans. Then, we should send more troops and exterminate the entire human race."

"Was that a prophecy?" someone jeered. "I wonder if Ursrook predicted its own death."

"..." Hackzord nodded after a moment of silence. "Yes, it did."

A strained silence suddenly fell on the hall.

The lords exchanged looks, and the atmosphere became heavy.

The king spoke, "What did Ursrook say?"

The Sky Lord heaved a deep sigh and replied, "If it fails to survive, we should treat human beings as equals and exercise all our strength to annihilate them!"

Chapter 1170: A Shocking Statement

The hall was stirred.

"All our strength?" the Blood Conqueror echoed coldly. "What do you mean by 'all our strength'?"

"Literal meaning," Hackzord replied lazily. "Abandon the cities where we've exploited all the God Stone mines and half of the continent to the Sky-sea Realm. Direct all our forces to the Land of Dawn. I mean all, including old and new troops, until the human race is wiped off the face of this planet."

"Stop, you insolent brute!"

"Are you crazy?"

"Then where should the millions of residents in those cities go?"

"Although Ursrook didn't explicitly say that in its letter, I believe they should be relocated to the Fertile Plains. It's a vast land that'll be large enough to accommodate these migrants," the Sky Lord answered.

"We aren't going to have a mass relocation," the Mask snorted while bursting into a furious laugh.

"That'll be suicidal if we don't move the Birth Tower along with them. Plus, we only have one chance to erect the new tower after the arrival of the Bloody Moon. We could have built the tower in Taquila, but your genius commander lost the entire Fertile Plains. Isn't it too late now to talk about relocation?"

Hackzord fought down its urge to retort. As Ursrook had had limited forces at its command, and the king had refused to send more reinforcements, it had thus left Ursrook no choice but to abandon Taquila. However, Hackzord managed to suppress its resentment toward the king and remained expressionless.

It had to discipline its mind.

"We have alternatives," Hackzord said. "For example, we could use the Deity of Gods — "

"Absolutely not!" the Bloody Conqueror cut across Hackzord rather fiercely. "That's our only hope to repel the enemy at the Sky-sea Realm. How could we waste it on those low lives? Stop talking nonsense!"

"The Deity of Gods is our ultimate weapon," the king said. "It's an essential part of our operation plan, and nobody could ever change that, not even a new lord. That's settled."

The king made the final verdict.

Hackzord was profoundly relieved. In fact, it also felt that Ursrook's statement was a little too audacious. If Hackzord had had a choice, it would have rather kept the contents of the letter to itself.

Anyway, it had fulfilled its duty to the king.

"Also, I find it absurd to increase the force by ten times..."

Just when the Bloody Conqueror was about to pursue the argument, someone interrupted it.

"I actually think we should take Ursrook's warning a little more seriously," the voice said mildly, which startled everyone. It was the guardian of the king's city, the "Silent Disaster". As a lord, it rarely spoke on a meeting. Like its name suggested, the Silent Disaster had a taciturn character.

As the most powerful lord among the nine, the Silent Disaster despised the Mask and the Resentful Heart who had to rely on clothes to disguise their weaknesses. As for the Silent Disaster itself, it wore a gleamy black armor every day, its face completely masked by the visor, as though it did not care about its personal image, nor did it feel that the armor was uncomfortable to wear.

"And your reasoning?" the king asked curtly.

"Possibly... there are some other legacy shards unknown to us in this world."

There was another murmur that swept over the hall. It was louder than the one after they had heard Ursrook's final words.

"How is that possible? There are only four shards in total. Don't we find shards based on their shapes?"

"Do you think that human beings upgraded by some unknown means so we'll have to put all our strength into the battle against them?"

"Where did you get that information?"

The people on the floor raised various questions.

"No, I don't have evidence. It's simply my own speculation," the Silent Disaster drawled. "I saw something... incomprehensible in the Divine Land once."

"Can you tell us what you saw?" the king asked, half of his eyes resting upon it.

The Silent Disaster shook its head and said, "It's indescribable. Please take a look at my memory." With these words, it bowed its head.

"So..." All of the king's eyes snapped open! In an instant, a chill stole through Hackzord that made it shudder uncontrollably. Its instinctive revolt reached its peak.



The injection of another individual's thoughts made Hackzord shift in its seat uncomfortably.

But it had to be absolutely loyal to the king.

The Sky Lord thus suppressed its feeling and offered to connect.

Then, eerie images streamed into it and filled its heart with fears that chilled it to the bone. Among those images, Hackzord, dimly, spied a man, standing with an air of detachment not far away. This man seemed to be enjoying watching it struggle. Hackzord knew that this was not an illusion. Black tentacles that represented corruption were now rushing to attack it in a frenzy. If Hackzord did not leave now, it would soon drown in the Realm of Mind!

So Hackzord fled. During the escape, it broke one of the armrests of its chair.

The next moment, Hackzord woke up with a start and felt a chill running down its spine. The other lords also gasped and panted, obviously sharing the same feeling as Hackzord.

Now, everyone understood what the Silent Disaster had meant.

It was a well-known fact that legacy shards were connected with each other. When they communicated through the shards, there was a price they had to pay. Generally speaking, the price for the party who knew less about the Realm of Mind would be higher. They would not have been that surprised had this person in the Divine Land been a witch, as witches rarely visited the Realm of Mind voluntarily. They merely trespassed into the Realm of Mind every now and then, which did not really mean anything.

However, this person was a male.

According to the history of humans in the past thousand years, males had never displayed signs of magic.

There was no plausible explanation to this phenomenon except that human beings had upgraded.

It wasn't until then that Hackzord understood why the Silent Disaster had not shared this incident earlier. Nobody would like to admit that a low life had made it jump off the chair.

Hackzord wondered whether the Silent Disaster flushed underneath its helmet.

It appeared that its armor was not completely useless.

Was that the real reason it requested to resign from its guardian position?

Presently, one lord turned to Hackzord and asked, "Your lordship, did you also — "

"No, I only went to the Divine Land a few times, and I didn't see anything strange there," Hackzord cut that lord off while holding its chest a little higher. "If I did, I would have reported to the king immediately. I believe things would have been very different if it were me, based on my understanding of the Realm of Mind."

With these words, Hackzord darted a cold glance at the Silent Disaster.

"Interesting." Just then, a bright, silvery voice joined the conversation.

The "Nightmare" sitting at the end of the table, wearing a white robe, finally opened its third eye and broke the silence it had managed to keep since the beginning of the meeting.