

## Witch 1201

### Chapter 1201: Proof

Jean Bate absolutely did not want to become the King of Graycastle's enemy.

Although he had never met the King of Graycastle, he had heard a lot about him. The God's Punishment Army of the Kingdom of Everwinter and the Kingdom of Wolfheart had experienced an utter defeat in the battle against Graycastle; the alliance army of the nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn had been flattened within one day; Roland Wimbledon had united his kingdom within half a year; it was rumored that Graycastle had even interfered with the coup on the Archduke Island.

However, these rumors were incomparable to the news that the First Army had been fighting the demons over the past one year. He would have been skeptical had he heard the news from other lords, but he found it hard to refute the commander of the First Army.

Nonetheless, whether Jean believed it or not, he had no way to confirm its validity.

The plan of the King of Graycastle was actually a little too unrealistic and even preposterous in Jean's opinion. Jean Bate would pledge his alliance to Roland immediately if the latter took the throne of the Kingdom of Wolfheart, but the fact was that his true intention was to relocate the people in the two kingdoms! According to Iron Axe, King Roland was planning to ship civilians of the two countries by sea and by land until every single civilian left their native land. Most nobles did not really care about their subjects as long as the movement would bring them profits. However, it would be a different story to evacuate the whole city. A vacated city meant a huge drop in food, taxes and industrial growth. The nobles would not agree to this plan so easily unless it was absolutely necessary.

Even though the First Army was invulnerable, it could not possibly declare war against all the nobles in the Kingdom of Wolfheart. Without the support of the locals, their military logistics support would be in limbo. Furthermore, it appeared that Graycastle also intended to disperse their forces to attack the two countries at the same time, which was a surpassingly conceited and vainglorious act, as far as Jean could see.

After what seemed to be a long silence, Jean Bate said in a hushed voice, "I don't quite understand the rationale behind all this. If the demons are not coming from the Impassable Mountain Range, and we still continue to support the King of Graycastle, we would lose men, farmlands, cities and mines. I'm afraid we can't bear such a huge loss."

"I can't explain the reason to you. As the commander of the First Army, my duty here is to carry out the mission His Majesty entrusted to me. Yet..." Iron Axe broke off and then went on, "If you come visit Neverwinter, you'll know the answer."

"Fine then. Now, one last question..." the baron said as he moisted his lips. "You said nobles can make their own choices. What if I decide to come with you?"

Iron Axe nodded comprehensively, pointed at a clerk next to him and said, "This is Remy, the immigration officer of the Administrative Office of Neverwinter. He'll explain to you the next step."

"Hello, Mr. Baron, in that case, you'll become a member of the Kingdom of Graycastle," the immigration officer said as he leafed through the a stack of documents. "The first thing that I can tell you is that King Roland Wimbledon is a benevolent king. He'll never ill-treat anyone who has made a contribution to the kingdom. As Graycastle is governed by a series of laws, nobles in the kingdom are stripped of feudal power. Lands cannot be inherited. The same will also apply to you. As you have rich experience in city management, you could join the Administrative Office and assume the post of local governor or help His Majesty to expand his territory, for instance, the Fertile Plains. Of course, if the demons don't invade the Four Kingdoms, you're free to continue to rule the Sedimentation Bay if you want." "If you're lucky, you could rule a land much bigger than this city, considering not every noble would come with us."

It took almost a quarter of an hour for Remy to read all the documents, which indeed detailed all the prospective aspect of the policy that seemed to be the offspring of a long deliberation. Jean Bate believed the person who had drafted these documents must be an extraordinary minister. for he himself did not have the capability to produce such marvelous work.

In short, the main content of this proposal was an interchange between short-term and long-term interests. He could possibly become more than a lord of a bay depending on his performance. Whether it was a good deal solely depended on himself.

Jean should have settled down to the contemplation of this proposal thoroughly. However, the current condition forced him to make a quick decision.

This was at least better than being killed by one of the two families.

Jean was indebted to a belief that it would take more than one or two years to evacuate two countries. During the relocation, he could still rule the Sedimentation Bay without worrying about the threat of the two families.

He thus took a sharp intake of breath and answered, "I would like to pledge alliance to the King of Graycastle."

"A wise choice," Iron Axe commented with the same stony look as though he had foreseen the result. "Now, you could issue an administrative order to start the evacuation. We have a team of professionals to assist you in this matter."

"That fast?" the baron asked in surprise.

"Yes, we won't be here long. The First Army will leave the Kingdom of Wolfheart for the interior within three days."

"But — " Jean Bate pursued after a moment of hesitation. "The knights from the Tusk and the Redstone Gate won't let you do so. They probably won't openly resist Graycastle, but they could interfere with your operation by attacking the patrol team of the Sedimentation Bay."

He felt a little embarrassed to reveal this truth, for just an hour ago, he had told Iron Axe that he was the only ruler of the Sedimentation Bay. However, he must raise this problem now to prevent the two families from stirring up trouble in the event they knew that he had colluded with Graycastle and offered the land. It was also a test to see whether Iron Axe really intended to fulfill his promise.

But Iron Axe's answer again surprised him.

"The Sedimentation Bay is the key to this immigration plan, and I don't allow anyone to thwart it. There will be around 100 people stationed here after the First Army departs," Iron Axe said as he nodded to one of his assistants, who immediately left the parlor. "I've done some research on the Kingdom of Wolfheart before I headed here. Like I said, I won't allow any interference. Nobody could blatantly resist us or play stealthy games behind us. To this end, we'll take some measures to remove these potential obstacles."

"You mean..."

"Seeing is believing," Iron Axe said as he rose. "Don't worry. Those threats they you're worried about will soon be gone."

"It's still raining so heavily," Smarty remarked as he stretched out his hand, feeling the rain drops.

"So?" White asked while hammering his sore leg with his hands. "Why are you still here?"

"I don't want to get soaked. Plus, this shed is for everyone. I can stay here as long as I like," he retorted, grimacing.

"You — " White said, looking utterly affronted. He was about to give Smarty a lesson, teaching him to have some respect toward the elder when suddenly, a group of Graycastle men who left their tents caught his attention.

Water splattered over the pavement as these people trooped out in two columns.

He was very curious about the reflective metal tubes they carried on their backs, They were as ominous as those black facilities they had set up in the sentry boxes.

As the group of soldiers disappeared in the rain, White suddenly understood why he felt so fidgeted. These metal tubes did not look like being made by humans. Regular blacksmiths could by no means forge them.

Some other people who took shelter from the rain also noticed that and started to murmur.

Yet Smarty was surprisingly quiet.

White thus turned around. However, to his dismay, Smarty was gone.

Chapter 1202: A Thunderous War

The campsite of the Redstone Gate and the Tusk Families were located near the driveway leading to the city, a place originally designed for caravans and mercenaries for temporary use. Now it served as an abode for delegations.

Since the campsite, which was boarded with low wooden fences, was on the opposite side of the Sedimentation Bay and was relatively safe, no particular security measures were taken. Neither of the delegations had put out sentries. They simply drew a line at the center of the campsite with spears and shields to mark out their territories.

Most people understood that the line did not represent anything. As long as the lord of the Sedimentation Bay did not make his decision, the two delegations would keep a civil tongue, and certainly they would not bother putting out sentries on such a wet day.

Therefore, when the 100 soldiers of the First Army stopped at around 200 meters from the campsite, neither of the two families noticed that they had visitors.

The knights did not realize the change in the situation until they heard the First Army demand their surrender.

"This is the First Army of Graycastle, who is now officially taking over the Sedimentation Bay. Under Neverwinter law, your conduct constitutes an illegal intrusion and illegal use of firearms. I demand your immediate surrender, otherwise we'll resort to force and you'll bear all the consequences of your action!"

This was preposterous!

The commander of the delegation of the Tusk Family pulled back the curtains and saw a man stand outside the campsite, speaking to him with a peculiar cylinder. A flag was rippling not far away, on which was an unfamiliar coat of arms. However, he had a hard time associating these uninvited soldiers with Graycastle. For him, Graycastle was a distant and foreign country only existing in various rumors circulated in the neighborhood.

These people were all cloaked and soaked in the rain, looking amusingly pathetic and ridiculous. The fact that they demanded them to be disarmed further accorded him an unrealistic feeling.

The commander went downstairs and found that the floor had been packed with mercenaries, who were now speaking foul language and making obscene gestures. They would have probably spat on that man's face had it not been raining outside.

That was what low people typically did. As a noble, the commander had to come up with some useful strategies.

What should he do if these people were really Graycastle men?

Perhaps, he should wait for the Redstone Gate Family to take action.

He could not really ask his knights to disarm as those people had commanded, nor could he send an ambassador to negotiate with them, as he did not want to give them an impression of weakness.

The commander did not think the "alleged" Graycastle soldiers would suddenly attack them. They were, after all, so far away from the campsite, and the mercenaries had already reached their weapons, whereas the cloaked soldiers did not even possess a single horse.

At this moment, he had completely forgotten the warning previously given by the First Army.

For the nobles in the Kingdom of Wolfheart, wars were always time-consuming. They needed to first observe their enemy, issue commands, and then fight. These rules also applied to the battle with the Church of Hermes.

However, the First Army who had fought the demons viewed battles as a completely different matter.

Therefore, nobody realized what had happened when the battle broke out.

15 minutes later, four mortars fired. Although not as powerful as the Longsong Cannons, the mortars were more than enough to destroy wooden watchtowers. Since these mortars were much more portable than the field artilleries, soldiers liked to use them to start a war.

The campsite was instantly razed to the ground. The furious execration of the delegation members was drowned out by the roaring shells. The wooden houses soon collapsed under the impact of the shockwaves, fragments of pillars, doors and windows flying in all directions.

The unit commander of the First Army immediately ordered the soldiers to charge.

They soon besieged the campsite.

Neither of the two families managed to launch an effective counterattack. Some fearless mercenaries dashed out against the dust but were soon shot down. To avoid incidental casualties, the First Army did not advance until the dust was washed away by the rain.

They did this not out of kindness but because His Majesty needed more mine laborers.

Meanwhile, the First Army asked the knights to yield again.

This time, most of them obeyed.

Within 30 minutes, the threat of the two families that vexed the baron was eliminated.

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Jean Bate was still in a shock after he returned to his mansion.

He knew Graycastle was powerful but had never expected them to be so invincible. The battle that had just taken place a moment ago did not look like a typical war to him.

Jean finally understood why Iron Axe said "Seeing is believing". As a witness of the battle, he had to admit what he had seen was effable. He enjoyed the unfolding of the event with almost an air of contentment. He liked the reticence and steeliness of those Graycastle soldiers. The glaring contrast between their silence and the deafening explosion impressed him even more than the queer weapons themselves.

What had those people experienced?

"Now, do you believe that we could manage the Sedimentation Bay?" Iron Axe's voice interrupted his thought.

Jean Bate was rendered speechless for a moment. He simply nodded submissively.

"Relax," Iron Axe said with a faint smile. "Don't be afraid of the First Army. You've decided to serve King Roland. We won't allow anything to happen to the Sedimentation Bay or anyone to challenge His Majesty's authority. You're now one of us."

"One of them? That sounds so strange..." the baron thought to himself. Over the past few years in the Kingdom of Wolfheart, he had never expected to be associated with a country. However, the commander of the First Army seemed to think this was natural.

Jean found, surprisingly, that he did not repel this idea.

After a moment of silence, he heaved a deep sigh and said, "I'll take care of the relocation campaign."

Chapter 1203: A Black Present

Jean Bate was indeed fast. He not only offered half of the rooms in the mansion to the army but also sent some maids to serve the soldiers, although Iron Axe refused the service out of confidentiality concerns.

In watching the reluctant look of the several young officers from the General Staff, Iron Axe replied in a stony tone, "Time to work. Don't forget that your performance in this campaign is subject to Edith Kant's review. You should know the consequences if you make errors."

Everyone shuddered at the Pearl of the Northern Region's name and set to work.

"Map, I'll put up the map!"

"What about the schedule? I'll double check it."

"Anyone help me check the food?"

The room instantly became noisy.

"Look at these young fellows, always full of energy..." Remy commented while shaking his head. "The baron seems to have seen through them."

"A common trick nobles like to play," Iron Axe said, frowning. "He'd better employ his cunning little schemes on the immigration campaign."

"Don't worry. The Administrative Office will keep an eye on him," Remy promised while patting his chest. "Now, we've removed our first obstacle. It's better than I thought. The Tusk and the Redstone Gate Families indeed helped us, but it won't be that easy afterwards."

"No, it'll be just the same," Iron Axe corrected him.

"R-really?" Remy said in surprise.

"Because they've fallen behind," Iron Axe said and looked through the window. The overspread sky had cleared up a little bit.

"Because they've fallen behind." This was what Edith had told him before he had set off a week ago. He met Edith at the office of the General Staff, where they held a meeting to discuss how to efficiently carry out the immigration plan, with a secretary writing meeting minutes next to them. Edith said, "Most nobles haven't noticed the changes taking place in this world but are still dwelling exclusively on their

personal interests while gloating over their wealth. They saw hardly anything else. I bet you plan to fight those nobles one by one, right?"

"If they impede His Majesty's plan, yes."

"That'll be too slow," Edith disapproved flatly. "This is different from the Graycastle unification war. We need to garrison troops in various foreign cities, so as time progresses, we'll have fewer soldiers at our command, which will thus significantly prolong the campaign. Those nobles won't openly resist the army but they'll definitely play stealthy behind your back. By the time you notice the damage and rush to rescue, it'll look bad on His Majesty."

"Then what should I do?"

"Set your goals beforehand, build alliance and fight enemies together," Edith said while handing him a table.

There was a list of items on the table, next to each of which was a point scale.

"What's this?" Iron Axe asked in bewilderment. It was his first time seeing such a strange form.

"A threat evaluation form? Or a manual of resistance level? Anyway, what it is called doesn't matter. I made this table based on nobles' mentality and other factors, including gender, heir, the size of their domains, the number of their troops, their behavior, etc. You would have a rough understanding of each noble after filling out the form. The more information you obtain, the more accurate the evaluation will be. Since the situation in the Kingdom of Wolfheart and the Kingdom of Everwinter has changed a lot, the General Staff can't complete the form for you. If there's a city that's not on the form, just punch in the information and do the calculation yourself."

"And what next?" Iron Axe asked as he skimmed through the form.

"If the total point is lower than 50, it means the city has limited power and is not so ambitious. You could build alliance with them. These nobles could actually provide many things for you, such as local maps, the city structure, the demographics, and so on. More importantly, with the support of local lords, we'll be able to implement the plan more efficiently," Edith explained.

"As for those that are higher than 50..." Edith paused for a second and said, "Don't waste time on them. Whether they show any inclination to yield or not, you should crush them immediately."

Iron Axe was a little shocked at the method Edith proposed. A simple table would pretty much determine each noble's fate, even though Edith had never met or talked to any of them.

Iron Axe asked after a moment of silence, "Is the form... accurate?"

As the commander-in-chief of the First Army, he understood the importance of work efficiency and knew very well how much time this form could save them. Most of the ships were borrowed from the Chambers of Commerce at the Fjords, so he should wind up the campaign at his earliest, even if the demons were not planning to erect the Obelisk around the Impassable Mountain Range.

"There could be some errors here and there, and I'm not sure if 50 is a correct cut-off grade. However, considering we have limited time, I'll leave the details to your discretion," Edith said as she sipped her tea leisurely. "The General Staff is only providing counsels here."

Iron Axe turned to the last page of the form and found a list of cities that Edith had already graded. All the information was obtained from the Kingdom of Dawn, and the top city below the cut-off grade was precisely the Sedimentation Bay, the first stop of their journey.

Before Iron Axe took his leave, he asked one last question.

"Aren't there any nobles who haven't fallen behind?"

"Of course there's such a possibility," Edith replied smilingly as she played with her hair. "However, in that case, you'll soon find him out even without this form because this person must be like me."

Iron Axe breathed out a sigh as he came out of his reveries and walked toward the campsite of the First Army. As Edith had said, nobles did not pose problems. The problem was how to mobilize civilians in an orderly and efficient manner.

Nevertheless, within two days, the dock of the Sedimentation Bay had been packed with thousands of people waiting to board the ships. Not only Iron Axe and Remy but also Jean Bate was taken aback by such a huge number.

The First Army, therefore, had to postpone their departure to manage these civilians.

"What's going on?" Iron Axe inquired Remy. "Did you exaggerate His Majesty's promise?"

"No, I know I don't have the authority to do that," Remy said while shaking his head. "I strictly follow the procedure set out by the Administrative Office. It really depends on how many people the local lord could persuade. The baron is apparently not so highly respected among his people compared to His Majesty, so I assume there would only be around 300-500 civilians."

"Now it's 20 times that number," Iron Axe remarked. Obviously it was good news to have so many immigrants all of a sudden, but he was also a little disturbed by such an unexpected high volume. Graycastle was, after all, a distant, unknown country for citizens of the Kingdom of Wolfheart. Naturally, Iron Axe suspected that someone was behind all this, who persuaded these people to abandon their native towns and venture into a journey to a completely foreign country.

"There could be only one explanation," Remy said meditatively, "that they're all refugees."

Refugees had nothing to lose. As long as they saw a ray of hope, they would rush for it.

"But these people are all freemen living in villages and towns near the Sedimentation Bay."

"Yes, they are, but my men heard some interesting rumors when they visited those towns. For example, the Redstone Gate Family, who holds an ancient grudge against the baron, plans to reduce subjects to slaves after they take over the Sedimentation Bay. Another rumor I heard is about a monster that takes humans for food in the mountainous area in the north. Some towns were ravaged and human remains littered the roads. Now, this monster is coming to the southeast. There are many other similar, convincing rumors that perturb the community. I guess this is why so many people choose to leave. If they don't go now, they'll become refugees, too."

Astounded, Iron Axe asked, "When did this happen?"



"At least a month and a half ago, not long after we set out from Neverwinter," Remy replied while stroking his chin. "Aren't we lucky?"

"Not at all," Iron Axe thought darkly. Someone was apparently inducing panic to the public, and this person also knew the purpose of the First Army pretty well.

Who was disseminating the news? Why did he help Graycastle? Was he a friend or a foe? A multitude of questions overwhelmed Iron Axe.

Until a soldier came in.

"Sir, someone asked me to hand this letter to you."

"Who?" Iron Axe asked as he took the envelope.

"He didn't leave his name. He's tiny though," the soldier replied. "But he told me the letter was given to him by someone else as well. Perhaps, the writer of this letter doesn't want to be known. I checked it already. There's nothing but the letter in there."

It was an ordinary burlap envelope much cheaper than one made of parchment or leather. Many shops sold this type of envelope. It was not sealed with wax but was laid open very casually. Iron Axe took the letter out of the envelope, and to his dismay, the letter was written on a piece of black, refined paper normally inaccessible to civilians.

He turned over the letter and found a line printed in gold.

"This is a present from your most loyal servant. I hope you like it."

Chapter 1204: The Ridge of the Continent

The temperature in the mountain range soon dropped after the sunset.

"Time to find a place to spend the night," Lightning thought. The temperature here varied dramatically between day and night. It was scorching during the day, and she would get burned easily if not covered with anything. When night fell, the wuthering wind would take away all the heat, and she would have probably been frozen to death if she had continued to sleep in trees like she had done in the Misty Forest.

Therefore, Lightning must find a shelter before the darkness pressed in.

"Let's call it a day," Lightning spoke over the Sigil of Listening. "I'll find a shelter and you go bring some food."

Maggie could not respond when she was flying, but Lightning knew she heard her.

She then dropped and flew very low above the ground. Agatha had reminded her several times before she had left Neverwinter that when she was looking for the demons, she had to either fly very high or very low to avoid trespassing God's Stone mines. It was also not advisable to change routes very often. Otherwise, once entering the God's Stone mines, nobody would be able to save her.

Lightning strictly followed Agatha's instruction. In this undulating mountain range, she could rely on nobody, so she must take good care of both herself and Maggie.

Since they had paid particular attention to possible shelters while she had been conducting the search, Lightning soon found a cave halfway up the mountain. A forest of stones stretched away below her, each stone the size of Neverwinter. Lightning suddenly had a strange feeling that these stones and mountains were sculpted by a giant visible hand.

Streams were interspersed between the mountains, which torrented down upon a heavy rain or flood. The weather varied significantly in this mountainous area. More often than not it was clear and sunny on one side and stormy and gloomy on the other. Inexperienced explorers would be very likely flushed away by an unexpected flood at night if they pitched their tents on the mountainside. Therefore, it was very important to pick a highpoint of the land to spend the night.

Lightning had witnessed several floods since her entry to the ridge of the continent.

Further, unlike other mountains that were usually comprised of sharp and steep precipices, the mountains here were mostly composed of boulders with many holes in them, as though these rocks were some solidified fluids.

Fortunately, round as they were, the stones were still robust enough to form a shelter.

The cave she discovered this time was pretty big, around 100 square meters, littered with twigs and weeds, which Lightning inferred were the remains of bird nests. After confirming there was no potential danger in the cave, Lightning informed Maggie of her location and started to tidy up the cave.

When the darkness became impenetrable, Maggie, in the form of a snowy owl, fluttered into the cave and restored its human shape. She held up a package aloft like offering a present and said, "Look what I've got, coo!"

Lightning took the package and found a chicken and four giant bird eggs in it, a very rare finding in the Impassable Mountain Range. Even Maggie, an experienced hunter, would not always return with such fruitful results.

"Good job!"

Lightning stroked Maggie's head who returned a triumphant smile, "Haha."

A bonfire soon sprang into life. Lightning built a stove with the mound of earth collected from the foot of mountain to shade the firelight, covered the chicken with mud and then tossed the whole creature into the fire along with the bird eggs.

Dinner was ready 30 minutes later.

They had cooked like this numerous times in the Misty Forest and were now quite good at it.

The rich flavor of the chicken immediately escaped as they broke the hardened mud.

A sheen of oil glazed off the chicken, and the aroma of the spices filled the entire cave. After removing the skin, they saw the tender chicken meat beneath. The chicken was not overcooked at all, its meat white and juicy.

The pair devoured the bird eggs and the chicken ravenously and even ate the chicken bones.

Maggie belched in satisfaction and said, "Nothing could be better than eating our own food, coo."

Lightning cast Maggie a glance. She still remembered Maggie's indignant protest against her "eating a bird" in the beginning.

Lightning shook her head in amusement and asked, "Any luck today? Except for food though."

"Well, no, coo... the landscapes are quite the same here. If there were demons, I would spot them immediately, coo."

It would be really hard to spot God's Stone mines buried deep down underneath the ground from above. Lightning wondered where the supporting God's Punishment Witches currently were. If they could point out a rough direction for her, it would make her life a lot easier.

She pointed at the cave and said, "Well, since you had no discovery, make me a bed then."

"OK, coo," Maggie replied as she paced to the designated location with her long white hair streaming behind her and then turned into a Devilbeast.

Lightning then extinguished the fire and lay down on Maggie's stomach. Compared to a sleeping bag, Maggie was a better shelter. Her stomach, as warm as a furnace, could shield her from cold winds and keep her warm during the night.

The only drawback of this method was that the skin of the Devilbeast was a little scruffy compared to Lorgar's soft fur.

"Are you not sleeping?" Maggie asked as she saw Lightning take out the Stone of Lighting.

"I need to make a journal entry to record our journey today. It won't be long. You sleep first."

"Alright," Maggie answered gruffly. After a long silence, she suddenly mumbled, "You're going to take me with you for the future exploration, right?"

Momentarily stunned, Lightning said in a gentle voice, "Yes, of course."

"I'll take care of you since Ashes is already gone," said Lightning within herself.

Maggie finally fell asleep after receiving an affirmative answer.

Lightning sat there for a long time before she took out her journal out of her bag.

It had been ten days since they had entered the mountainous area in the north of the Kingdom of Everwinter. They had covered a distance of 120 kilometers. The deeper they probed into the Impassable Mountain Range, the smaller she felt. This was an area never intruded by human beings, and it was in here she had seen a breathtaking view. The forest of stones as vast as the Fertile Plains, the icefall, which was a sheer drop from Heaven to the ocean in the northeast, the sea of clouds that spiraled up, as well as the great rapture in the center of the ridge of the continent... Lightning now came to the realization that the Impassable Mountain Range that separated the four kingdoms was simply a branch of this mountain range. Those incredible scenes, all hidden behind the crests of the mountains, were inaccessible unless she flew over the steep cliffs.

Lightning now understood why her father was addicted to exploration.

Human beings were too little and insignificant compared to this world. She could only become stronger by getting to know more about it.

To become an explorer was the best decision she had ever made in her life.

Of course, she could explore the whole world later. Lightning knew she was now on a mission. If she flew too far away from the Kingdom of Everwinter, she would not only hinder the exploration but also cause unnecessary trouble to the supporting team. The "Roland" should have now almost reached the port of the Kingdom of Everwinter.

Lightning cast a glance at her hand drawn map and rested her eyes on the great rapture.

It seemed to be a protruding plain in the middle of the stone forest, but it was hollow inside, so Lightning was not sure how deep it was.

She could discern the fault underneath the crust.

If she still could not find traces of God's Stone mines or the demons, she would probably return to the Kingdom of Everwinter and meet with the supporting team to discuss the next step.

Chapter 1205: A Dangerous Signal

The next morning, Lightning disclosed her plan to Maggie. After a brief discussion, they decided to conduct another search in the stone forest and then head to the rapture as fast as they could.

They would have to return to the Snow Ridge in the Kingdom of Everwinter and complete the topographic map of this area before meeting the Taquila witches.

The sun broke over the horizon, the mountains were wrapped in rags of mist, and the rivers crisscrossed in the frost. There were traces left by the flood last night. As the roads began its winding ascent to the crests of the mountains, they saw a vast land of whiteness lay stretched before them. The distant rapture, completely covered by snow, resembled a giant porcelain bowl laid upside down.

It was estimated that the Kingdom of Everwinter was around 300 kilometers away, about the same size of the entire Southernmost Region. According to the map of the Land of Dawn drafted by the Union, the rapture was the offspring of various extinct volcanos.

Lightning had seen eruptions of active volcanos on the Searing Flame Islands, but they were nothing compared to the volcanos here.

Two hours later, the Exploration Group reached the rapture area.

They finally saw the whole landscape that lay out magnificently before them.

"It's so... so massive," Maggie exclaimed while flapping her wings. "I feel this hole could house an entire kingdom."

Lightning nodded in approval. The rapture was actually not a fault as she had thought but a huge scar that ripped the earth part. An immense invisible force underneath the ground had pushed the earth plates away from each other and formed cliffs on either side of the rapture.

If this "scar" was indeed the result of volcanic activities, what a huge eruption it would have been?

Lightning and Maggie dropped and landed at two to three kilometers from the rapture. As usual, Maggie approached the rapture first, for she could merge herself perfectly into the surrounding environment without raising any suspicions of lurking enemies.

"Listen," Lightning warned Maggie, "don't go too deep into the rapture. Just take a peep at the entrance and come back. If you find anything out of character, report to me. Never go in there on your own — "

"Got it. I'll report to the captain first before making the next move," Maggie cut across her. "I know. I know, coo. You told me a lot of times... You sound like His Majesty, coo!"

"Er, really? Ahem, anyway, it doesn't hurt to reiterate! I'll stay here and conduct a preliminary search in this area. I'll go no farther than one kilometer. Remember this particular spot, and we'll meet here in 30 minutes. Understood?" Lightning said while scratching the back of her head, a little embarrassed. She remembered that Roland used to always remind her not to act alone. Because of this, Lightning had complained to her group members a lot, and boasted that an excellent explorer was born to know how to make correct judgements, and that such warnings were completely unnecessary. Now, she realized how childish she had been.

"No problem, coo!"

"Good. Off you go," Lightning said while patting Maggie on the shoulder.

"Maggie, go!" Maggie yelled excitedly and flew toward the center of the rapture.

Lightning's eyes followed Maggie until the latter disappeared from her sight. She then started to survey the surroundings.

Snowy owls were a type of birds commonly seen in this area. They belonged to the owl family. They had an excellent eye sight and were thus active during the day and at night. As long as Maggie proceeded with caution, it was not likely that she would expose herself. This district was a bleak emptiness of icebergs, without the slightest trace of wild animals. Maggie would be able to spot a demon immediately, if there was one.

In consideration of these factors, the first place Maggie ought to look for should be hiding places. She had to think critically and solve problems herself.

However, within five minutes, Lightning heard something flutter above her head.

Lightning looked up with a start and saw Maggie plunge frantically and throw herself onto her.

"D-demons, coo!" Maggie shouted.

The words sent a faint shiver through Lightning's heart. Were there God's stone mines here? She thus asked, "What did you find?"

"A giant Eye Demon that is now lying on its stomach beneath the cliff, coo!" Maggie demonstrated with both her hands and feet. "I just passed the rapture and looked into its eyes!"

That meant the Eye Demon had also seen her.

Lightning was glad that she was not the one who had discovered the Eye Demon. A snowy owl would not catch the attention of the Eye Demon.

"Then? Did you cry out?" Lightning pursued.

"Of course not. I'm a seasoned bird, no, a seasoned explorer, coo!" Maggie swelled up. "I didn't even blink. I just pretended to be looking around. Then I averted my eyes, coo! I bet it had already put me out of its mind, coo!"

Then Lightning saw what had happened in her mind's eye.

A snowy owl stared at an Eye Demon and turned away...

"Oh, no!" Lightning snatched up Maggie and streaked toward one of the shelters they had previously found.

"Coo?" Maggie asked in bewilderment.

The shelter was an ice cave a few hundred meters away hidden behind rocks. The cave had not yet been filled with snow, so it was large enough to accommodate one person. Lightning rushed into the cave, poked half of her head out of the cave and looked up.

A moment later, a queer, shiny "door" suddenly appeared in midair.

Then a demon walked out from behind the door and stood suspended right above the rapture. Lightning felt her chest constrict involuntarily, as though she were facing Ursrook again.

The demon looked around cautiously before it dived. For a split second, Lightning felt all the blood within her freeze. It took her a great deal of efforts to suppress the urge to escape. However, she managed to stay put, as the demon was not aiming in her direction.

The demon plummeted to the ground covered in snow, exhaling clouds of white flurries. When it straightened up again, Lightning saw a snowy owl in its clawed hand.

Lightning swallowed hard, her hands involuntarily reaching for her own chest.

Fortunately, that snowy owl was not Maggie.

The demon gazed at the petrified snowy owl for a while and shook its head in disappointment before it released the bird. The owl screeched, soared into the sky, and disappeared from their sight.

The demon did not linger. It stretched out its hand and ripped open the strange "door" and vanished in front of the two witches.

Lightning heaved a deep sigh.

They were safe for now.

"Coo... what do we do next?" Maggie asked, a little crestfallen, for she had realized her mistake.

Lightning would have taken another route to sneak into the rapture in the past. The rapture was so massive that it was impossible for the Eye Demon to cover every inch of the area. As an explorer, Lightning would like to be the first person who made the discovery.

Nevertheless, she was now not only an explorer but also the captain of the Neverwinter Exploration Group, as well as the scout for the First Army.

Whatever was hidden underneath the rapture, the presence of the Eye Demon and the Senior Demon indicated potential danger!

She must return to Neverwinter as soon as possible to inform King Roland Wimbleton.

"Let's go to the Snow Ridge and meet up with the Taquila witches," Lightning said through clenched teeth. "This mountain range is no longer safe. Someone has clearly set foot in this area."

Chapter 1206: Just A Breath Away

"Have you found anything?"

An upgraded subordinate came up to Hackzord as it revealed from the Distortion Door.

"No..." Hackzord said while studying its hands attentively. "Probably the Eye Demon guard made a mistake."

"That does happen occasionally. You could take a rest at the Red Mist Pond, sir. I'll alert you if anything comes up." The subordinate paused for a second before it went on, "Sir Valkries always bathes in this pond. I think... you could also relax your muscles in there every now and then."

This was a pretty good idea. Hackzord did want to indulge in such a mundane pleasure and explore the beauty of the Realm of Mind. However, the king would not put blames on the Nightmare if anything went wrong with the plan for the Western Front. Instead, Hackzord was the one who would bear all the consequences.

After a moment of silence, Hackzord answered, "It would be too much for you to connect four Eye Demon guards at the same time. We've entered the most crucial stage of our plan, so I'd better monitor the situation myself. This is the last stronghold on the Western Front, and we mustn't fail the king."

The subordinate's manner instantly tightened into formality as it heard the king's name. It replied fervently, "You're right, sir! I shall not let the king down!"

Valkries was the one that let its guard down.

Hackzord thought to himself expressionlessly.

After Ursrook's tragic death at Taquila, this mountainous area became the focus of the Western Front plan. Hackzord exercised all its efforts to monitor this district. It had persuaded the front to spare four precious Eye Demon guards to monitor this area so that Hackzord could remain constant vigilance about lurking enemies.

Eye Demons, whose vision would not be restricted by distance, lighting conditions, or the size of objects, were the most astute observers. They could immediately sense enemies and inform the demons connected to them.

As the connection required a great deal of magic power, only upgraded ones were qualified to connect with Eye Demons. The world that Eye Demons saw were extremely complicated. They would not be able to mobilize themselves if they accepted all the information they received. Therefore, Eye Demons would normally conduct a preliminary screening and evaluate each creature they beheld in advance. Only those who posed a real threat or act strangely would be informed to the connected demons.

Hackzord had sensed unusual movements just a moment ago.

Like the subordinate had said, Eye Demons did make errors from time to time. This was because creatures tended to have their own unique ways to respond to nature, and not all of their behaviors were comprehensible. There was, for example, someone as inscrutable as the king, and also eccentrics like the Mask. Eye Demons, which lacked independent and critical thinking skills, sacrificed a lot for the thousands of eyes that encrusted their heads. As such, even though they possessed enormous magic power, not a single Eye Demon had upgraded to a Senior Lord over the past thousands of years.

Nevertheless, Eye Demons were still deemed as a rare species by the clan, whose birth rate was only a little higher than those of the Hatcher and the Mother of Soul.

Hackzord changed the subject. "How's the revival of the Birth Tower going?"

"It's almost done. Everything's going well."

"Very good. Take me there."

"Yes, my lord!"

Due to the impact of God's Stones, Hackzord could not go straight to the bottom of the valley and had to slowly make its descent through a flight of stairs.

As they went down, the surroundings gradually turned into a whirl of crimson. The air was impregnated with the Red Mist, and the towering precipices formed a giant vessel, a natural container chiseled out of rocks, where the Red Mist could easily accumulate. After more than half a year of accumulation, the lower part of the rapture was now permeated with the thick, dense Red Mist that could support thousands of lives.

However, Hackzord needed more than that.

Only when they erected the Birth Tower from the God's Stone mine could their kind truly survive on this land, without fearing a sudden disruption of the Red Mist supply.

The sunlight was completely replaced by a ghostly blue-purple light at the very bottom of the rapture. A stone tower stood magnificently before Hackzord among the God's Stone of Punishment Pillars.

A faint tremor of excitement smote upon Hackzord.

"No matter how many times I view it, it always awes me," the guard commented. "Before, we were only able to erect the tower when the Origin of Magic appeared."



"Yes, but it isn't the second Battle of Divine Will anymore," Hackzord said with a nod.

This particular Birth Tower was actually not supposed to be here because it did not grow out of the God's Stone mine but was an old one that had been set up a while ago. Although it currently relied on a huge base to support its weight, and its blotchy gray color signified a state of inactiveness, Hackzord knew this was just temporary. Soon, the tower would be reconnected to the God's Stone mine via the Mother of Soul.

This was the upgrade they had obtained from the legacy shards. Over the past 400 years, their understanding of magic power and magic stones had experienced various drastic changes. The most important change was that they slowly became less independent of the Red Mist.

Nonetheless, human beings also made remarkable progress.

Hackzord approached the tower base and gazed at the dormant Mother of Soul.

The Mother of Soul was the origin of everything, the most important individual out of the whole clan. It would only reach its maturity when magic power reached its peak and when the Divine Will emerged. By that time, the Mother of Soul would be fused with the raw God's Punishment Stone. Within a few years, the God's Stone mine would transform into a high tower that would further produce more Red Mist via magic power.

Yet their new technology had considerably shortened this lengthy process. A fast-growing Birth Tower meant much less time to prepare for the war. As they would soon have ample Red Mist, they could even use the Red Mist as a weapon and quickly convert the enemy's territory into their own.

There were nearly 100 Inferior Demons taking care of the Mother of Soul. They cleaned and fed her. In fact, the bottom of the great rapture was filled with thousands of such Inferior Demons. Through the window of the tower base, Hackzord saw those demons busy excavating the ground and transporting supplies. Some upgraded demons, on the other hand, were issuing commands on their Bogle Beasts. In the center of the rapture stood the symbiotic demon newly created by the Mask. These powerful war machines would swarm toward their enemies upon an order. For a moment, Hackzord had an illusion that this place was the real front.

In fact, this rapture was, in a sense, a frontline. If they failed to stop human beings on this continent, their future would become dimly uncertain. They had to defeat the mankind here to save their civilization.

Therefore, they must win this battle for the king!

Chapter 1207: A New Idea

In Neverwinter, Graycastle.

Since the Longsong Cannons were not portable, the Artillery Battalion had become exceptionally unoccupied these days compared to the Gun Battalion that had set out for the Kingdom of Wolfheart and the Kingdom of Everwinter to execute Roland's immigration plan. Apart from the daily training and the harvest, off-duty soldiers all went back home to spend time with their families.

Van'er also chose to go home. As the battalion commander, he rarely had free time these days, so Van'er treasured this rare opportunity to unite with his families. He also took the advantage of this break calling on neighbors and old friends. Since alcohol was expressively forbidden in the army, the only time Van'er could indulge in relvry was when he was off duty.

After years of development, businesses in Neverwinter were currently far more dynamic and diverse than those in the old king's city. Under the influence of Roland's commercial district plan, the premises on either side of the street had now been in extremely high demand. Two-story premises were soon let out to shop owners and foreign merchants and were subsequently transformed into hotels, restaurants and taverns. Commodies from various parts of world were being constantly shipped to Neverwinter for sale. These shops supplemented the Convenience Market that mainly provided citizens with life necessities and staples.

Van'er was impressed with the king's foresight as he wandered about on the street while surveying peddling vendors. The city was busy but not congested. Everything was in a strict order: peddlers set up their booths in a designated area; pedestrians walked on the walkway paved with slabs; carriages ran in the middle of the road.

Van'er remembered that someone had raised questions as to why they needed to broaden up the road in the beginning the construction work. Many people questioned about the necessity to create two respective lanes for pedestrians and wagons. Now, it appeared that it was quite a wise decision. Van'er suspected that Roland might have foreseen the future beforehand.

After passing two main driveways, Van'er reached his destination, the tavern "Lucky Shell".

As soon as he entered the store, a person limped up to him from behind the bar and greeted him. "Sir, there you are!"

"Just Van'er. This isn't the army," Van'er said smilingly while pulling the bartender into a crushing hug. "How's your business going? It looks good, eh?"

This person was known as "Iron Crutch". Half a year ago during that fierce night battle against the demons at Tower Station No. 1, a spear had penetrated Iron Crutch's abdomen and leg when he had been charging at the demons to retrieve the artillery field. He lost his consciousness on the spot. Although Nana later saved him, he still lost his right leg and had to replace it with an iron stick. That was how he got his nickname.

Iron Crutch thus retired from the military service. He opened this "Lucky Shell" in the eastern city with the benefits received from the government and his salaries, and this tavern became where the First Army often met each other during their break.

"Since I'm a retired veteran, the rent is relatively low for me. I can manage," Iron Crutch said while messaging his hands in excitement. "If only you could come here a little more often."

Van'er replied, "Then you'll have to wait for my retirement or when I'm like you. By the way, Are Rhone brothers here?"

"They're both upstairs. Let me take you up there."

"No, that's fine. Don't worry about me. Come drink with us when you aren't so busy."

"Sounds good," Iron Crutch agreed pleasantly.

Van'er went up stairs and immediately saw his old friends sitting at a round table. Jop. Cat's Claw, Rodney and Nelson were all there. These people used to shudder at charging knights when the Artillery Battalion had first been founded. Now, they had all elevated themselves to military officers that the whole Artillery Battalion relied on. Because each of them had their own duties, they had not drunk together in the tavern for a while.

Van'er joined them. They exchanged opinions on various matters ardently. The most frequent topic of discussion was naturally the army and the upcoming Battle of Divine Will.

According to the king, this would be an unprecedentedly massive war that would involve the entire continent. They were not certain whether they could see each other again after the war ended.

"We're actually quite lucky. At least, we don't need to fight those monsters directly," Rodney drained his glass and sighed. "If the artillery is defeated, then we pretty much lose the battle."

"The problem is that we don't know what new tricks demons will play... Remember that unexpected night attack at Tower Station No.1?" Cat's Claw commented while shrugging. "I hope our soldiers could learn to cope with the demons themselves. They shouldn't wait for the Gun Battalion or the Special Unit of Strategies and Tactics to rescue them."

Everyone assented in earnest. "Exactly. If only we have powerful weapons as well. Revolving rifles could kill knights but not the demons."

"Drop it. I've heard that the army is going to use bolt rifles in the future. There'll be no revolvers anymore soon."

"Really? Commander, are you positive?"

Van'er confirmed with a nod in response to the others' inquiring look, "The First Unit and the Sixth Unit have already switched to the new weapons. It may take a while for all of us to have one due to limited production."

Jop said, frowning, "I tried the new gun once. It's powerful and accurate, but it's too slow for a close-range attack. Can't the Artillery Battalion keep using the old weapons?"

"I'm afraid not. The management team has made the decision," Van'er replied while pointing at the ceiling. "We use traditional black powder to operate revolvers. The bullet will be pretty much the same, so those who used to produce black powder could now help with the bullet production."

"Then... maybe we should ask Sir Iron Axe to persuade His Majesty to design a new weapon for us?"

"Forget it," Nelson snorted. "Brian will definitely butt in!"

"Yes, the Artillery Battalion only needs cannons," Cat's Claw said with a perfect imitation of Brian's tone. "Don't you often say that the barrels should be as large as possible? Leave those tiny ones to us Gun Battalion. Lads, drink on!"

The group of officers roared with laughter. Only Van'er remained silent. He gazed at his glass, apparently lost in thought.

"Commander?"

Van'er stroked his chin and said slowly, "What if we create a weapon on our own?"

"What weapon? A new flintlock?" Cat's Claw asked, his brows raised. "Commander, you're drunk, aren't you?"

"Shut up! I'm not sure if you have noticed it. Both the grapeshot guns used by the Special Unit of Strategies and Tactics and the Mark I type HMGs operated by the Gun Battalion are equipped with an air duct for steady firing," Van'er said meditatively. "I've seen many disposed weapons. Although their structures are not always the same, they have pretty much the same mechanism."

"Er... Really? How come I don't know?"

"That's why you aren't the commander," Rodney said sagely while twitching his lips. "Having said that, we would need manpower and supplies to create weapons. Sir Iron Axe doesn't charge the plant that manufactures weapons."

"No, we aren't making weapons from scratch but are simply upgrading the ones we currently have," Van'er said, feeling more confident about what he was saying. "It won't involve the plant or the Administrative Office. We just need a skillful worker."

Cat's Claw, Rodney and Nelson all rested their eyes on Jop.

Jop sighed deeply and raised his hands. "Fine. My brother is working in the industrial zone. His job is to process and assemble steam engines. I'll take you there tomorrow."

Chapter 1208: Van'er's Gun

The next day at noon, they went to the Second Mechanic Plant in the industrial zone with Jop.

After hearing the purpose of their trip, Jop's brother, Lafite, showed great interest in Van'er's proposal. He took Van'er's rifle and fiddled the weapon affectionately before he asked, "Are we really allowed to do this? I was a miner, and what I'm now doing is simply some manual labor like sharpening and slicing. If I screw it up..."

"Brother!" Jop stopped him indignantly.

"One or two shouldn't be a problem. Guns break easily after all since we use them a lot during the training," Van'er said. "However, if you break a lot, then it means that my method doesn't work. I won't blame you."

"I see," Lafite said while nodding in excitement. "Then leave it to me! I'll do my best, as machine tools in the plant aren't always available."

"Your brother seems to like flintlocks very much," Cat's Claw whispered to Jop.

"That's nothing unusual," Rodney rejoined. "Who doesn't like powerful weapons? We used to flail swords and spears. Now we fire cannons and guns."

Van'er also thought the same way. After witnessing the true power of the 12-pound field artillery, he gradually fell in love with weapons. Van'er opened the leather bag his friends brought with them, took out a disabled HMG and then handed a metal tube to Lafite. Van'er said, "Let's begin."

...

The barrel of the rifle was soon fixed to a drilling machine.

Lafite turned on the machine, aligned the drill with the mark on the barrel, and slowly moved the drill downwards. When the drill touched the barrel, the metal tube splintered into numerous tiny chips.

It was a new experience for Van'er. Although he knew that both the steam engine and the Longsong Cannons were made of metal ingots, it was his first time witnessing the actual production. He was amazed when seeing the robust iron gradually melt and dissolve into various shapes.

According to Lafite, the machine tools in the Second Mechanic Plant were all in their third generation powered by Dawn I. Compared to the old machine tools driven by steam engines, the new ones were much more steady and quiet. In addition, they could start working anytime. Some skillful workers could even carve intricate patterns on a tiny iron rod the size of a fingernail.

Yet Van'er did not require such exquisite skills. After reflecting upon his proposal for a night, he redrafted his plan. The principle was to use the least resources to attain his goal. The transformation of the gun should be simple and must not interfere with the daily operation of the plant. As such, he brought the air duct of Mark I, in a hope of simplifying the procedure and saving time.

With a sample air duct, they could then easily ignite gunpowder. The problem, nonetheless, was how to keep up a steady fire.

Van'er had developed a great interest in the HMGs used by the Gun Battalion a long time ago. During the war of the North Slope, he had played with those machine guns many times. One thing that Van'er was certain was that Mark I was much larger than rifles because it had a much more complicated recoil system. Further, the loading systems of the two weapons were also quite different. Machine guns required a cartridge, whereas rifles were only equipped with a clip. Therefore, it was impossible to copy the whole model.

Even if his method worked, Iron Axe and Brian would not allow the artillery to use heavy machine gun parts.

The best way to upgrade rifles was to just upgrade the barrel.

"That's pretty much it..." Lafite said as he cleansed the drill and compared the air duct and the rifle against the sunlight. "These two barrels should be about the same length once we cut off the excessive part."

"Don't connect them as yet," Van'er stopped Lafite as he produced a piece of paper from his pocket and spread it out. "I want you to help me to make this spare part as well."

There was a crude diagram on the paper. The part was in the shape of an arc, about one finger long and two fingers wide, with a groove in the middle.

"What's that?" the other officers asked curiously. "It doesn't look like a gun part."

Van'er was not sure if this part would really work. It was simply one of his wild ideas that had yet been verified. However, he must not retract, so he said, "Ahem... if everything goes well, I believe this new part will replace our hands."

...

Five days later, many soldiers from the Artillery Battalion gathered at the First Army's shooting range.

They had learned from their superiors that a new flintlock that would enable the artillery to keep up a steady fire was currently under test. Unlike all the other weapons widely used by the army, this weapon was invented by Commander Van'er instead of His Majesty. Many soldiers were intrigued by the news and came to see what this new weapon looked like during their break.

To their dismay, the weapon under test could indeed fire steadily, although it did, from time to time, get jammed. As long as the user continuously pulled the trigger, the gun could eject multiple bullets at a time.

Unlike the revolving rifles that could only fire five bullets, this upgraded one could fire 20, which would almost rival an HMG if multiple such upgraded guns fired at the same time.

"I can't believe that you really made it," Cat's Claw remarked impressively. "Now I know why Sir Iron Axe chose you to be the commander."

"His Majesty taught me all this. Doesn't he always say that we need to apply what we learn from books to actual work? I simply did what His Majesty told us to," Van'er said triumphantly. He had not expected that his plan would work so well. Within just five days, he had created a new weapon. Next, they would only need to make a few adjustments and the Artillery Battalion would be able to increase the power of their guns significantly at a minimal cost.

"Are you Commander Van'er?" someone asked suddenly.

"Yes, you are..." Van'er said as he turned around.

"I'm Danny, a member of the sniper team," the man said with a smile. "I saw a lot of people here, so I came to see what's going on. I'm on duty today... Can I try out your new weapon?"

"The sniper team?" Jop echoed, a little surprised, and then cast a glance at Van'er, "Chief — "

Van'er knew that every single member of the sniper team was an elite picked by Brian from the Gun Battalion. The sniper team made its fame through the battle against the church at the Coldwind Ridge. They received a medal from His Majesty for their outstanding performance. They were the best among the best and were also highly respected among the soldiers. If this new weapon caught the attention of the sniper team, wouldn't there be a possibility that the Artillery Battalion could finally overpower the Gun Battalion?

In response to Jop and Cat's Claw's eager look, Van'er replied with a faint smile, "Of course. Please go ahead."

Chapter 1209: Testing Result

Danny took the gun and instantly noticed that the center of the gravity had changed. The gun was, overall, heavier than a regular rifle. Apart from the second tube installed to the barrel, this new gun looked no different than an ordinary bolt rifle used by most of the soldiers in the Gun Battalion, although it was not as well-made as his own high-precision rifle. The biggest change was that this additional metal tube ran all the way to the bottom of the barrel and was connected to the bolt.

This must be the reason that the gun could keep up a steady fire.

Danny took the aim and pulled the trigger. However, instead of locking his eyes on the muzzle, he gazed at the iron tube on one side of the barrel.

As the gun trembled when the bullet escaped from the muzzle, something extraordinary happened. It was just a split second, but Danny noticed the change in the bolt. The rod in the iron tube was pushed forward and then retracted along with the metal shard attached to its end.

This metal shard was normally fixed to the bolt. If someone tried to forcibly pull it, it would get jammed and break the rod. However, the groove in the middle of the shard enabled the bolt to retract and thereby unlock it.

Then, the whole process reversed. The rod retracted to the tube and the bolt returned to its original spot. The metal shard slid back to the bottom and locked the bore again.

This was such an ingenious design!

This additional part was quite self-explanatory. Even a lay man like Danny could immediately understand the mechanism behind it. Basically, the rod in the second iron tube replaced manual labor. What was clever about this design was that the rod completed four steps at a time, namely, pushing, pulling, lifting and pressing. Without any external force, the gun was automatically restored.

Danny fired all the bullets, mesmerized by the pungent smell of gunpowder and that familiar voice that always visited him on the battlefield.

"You missed one shot out of 20," Malt said. "Not used to the new weapon?"

"I haven't got used to it yet. See if I miss any in the next round."

"See what?" a surprised voice said to him.

Danny pulled himself back to the present. He suddenly realized that this was not a battlefield, and a group of onlookers were watching him in the shooting range. Danny looked toward the confused Artillery Battalion commander as he rose and said while shaking his head, "No... I'm just mumbling."

"You're really an excellent sniper. 19 out of 20. That's really something, and you're still not satisfied," Van'er said while patting Danny on the shoulder. He then asked hopefully, "So... what do you think of this gun?"

Danny knew about the competition between the Artillery Battalion and the Gun Battalion. Nevertheless, both of the two battalions served the king. He thus said honestly, "It's perfect, except it's a little unstable and heavy. I wish the sniper team could also have an upgraded weapon like this, if possible."

If truth be told, the gun was as accurate as regular rifles when shooting targets were at 50 and 100 meters. Although it was a lot heavier than a rifle, the sniper team and the Artillery Battalion were not required to fire on standby or carry the weapon on the go."

The greatest strength of this upgraded gun was that it enabled soldiers to keep up a steady fire. Since the current gun could not fire steadily, soldiers had to readjust their position and took the aim again after they missed their target. The repositioning normally took a few seconds, and more often than not, they lost track of the target. Therefore, they fired less frequently than ordinary soldiers. However, the upgraded gun minimized the readjustment and enabled soldiers to fire again immediately. This weapon would thus be very helpful for a massive warfare.

Van'er was pleased to hear that his work received some kind of acknowledgment. He grinned, "It's just a preliminary design. If you could help us further improve the weapon, I would feel more comfortable when I talk to Sir Iron Axe."

Van'er believed if the sniper team used the gun designed by the Artillery Battalion, then surely he outperformed Brian.

Danny, on the other hand, agreed to help Van'er purely out of his person affection toward firearms that could efficiently kill demons, the smell of gunpowder, and the voice of his ghost friend, Malt. Danny thus said, "I'm happy to be of service, Mr. Commander."

The two of them smiled at each other and reached an agreement.

...

Roland learned about this new weapon a few days later.

As an increasing number of soldiers from the Artillery Battalion visited the Second Mechanic Plant, the superintendent of the plant reported the incident to the Administrative Office, who later forwarded the news to the Minister of Engineering, Anna.

Roland was greatly amused by the duplicate sample created by Anna. The design was crude. Although the gun could fire steadily, it would easily break down since the additional metal tube was exposed in the air. The gun thus required extensive maintenance.

Having said that, the artillery, after all, did not need to fire very frequently.

"What do you think?" Anna asked smilingly.

"Well... there's a lot that can be done, but it's a good sign," Roland said casually. "At least, it shows that soldiers start to think independently and know what kind of weapon they really need. The strengths of this gun are also very obvious, which are minimal costs and simple alteration."

There would certainly be a huge increase in the consumption of bullets if the whole army started to use this new weapon. Fortunately, frontline soldiers who mainly relied on HMGs did not necessarily need to fire successively.

Well, in that case, let's help them," Anna said, nodding.



The design of the weapon was soon finalized with Anna's assistance. The bolt and piston were replaced by a more flexible latch structure. Its joint was encased in a shell to stabilize the weapon, so the gun would not get easily jammed. After a part of the air duct was cut off, the weapon was officially upgraded. Roland advised that the new rifle should be named after Van'ér.

Soon after the news was announced, the Ministry of Engineering suddenly received tons of recommendations and feedback.

Roland was pleased with the turn of the event.

He finally saw the result of universal education.

The success of his education plan excited Roland even more than the new weapon itself.

Also, there was another piece of good news.

Celine told him that there was a breakthrough in the research of the Magic Ceremony Cube.

She found a way to significantly reduce the consumption of uranium when she was making the sixth batch of cube replicates.

#### Chapter 1210: A Cube-Powered Vehicle

In the underground laboratory in the Third Border City

Roland immediately took Anna to the laboratory. Through the thick protection glass, he saw two activated Magic Ceremony Cubes at the center of the laboratory. The wall of the laboratory was plastered with lead plates. One of the Cubes looked quite normal while the other ejected much shorter red laser beams.

"Is the one that ejects shorter red light the new replicate?" Anna asked perceptively.

"That's right. Actually, it was purely an accident," Celine replied brightly. "Normally, Slimwrist carves the patterns on the parts. If the materials are damaged, then it won't be easy to duplicate the patterns, so we normally dispose those damaged stones. However, a week ago when Slimwrist was carving Part No. 236, we found the stone crack, which means this specific part is defective."

Roland asked meditatively, "But you didn't throw No. 236 away?" As all the materials used to create duplicates were collected from the Southernmost Region, and since those tablets had been buried underground for 1,000 years, it was normal to have damage here and there.

Celine tapped her main tentacle and said, "I thought it would be a waste to throw it away, so I kept it just in case. Then I installed it on the Magic Cube previously made to see whether it would function properly."

Roland looked at Celine incredulously. That was a nuclear torture device!

"Don't worry, Your Majesty," Celine said as if seeing the thought in Roland's mind. She raised her blobbed head and continued, "I conducted the test in the Impassable Mountain Range. Nothing would happen to Neverwinter even if something went terribly wrong. This is a principle followed by the

members of the Quest Society. You don't need to feel sad for me in the event I'm killed. For the sake of truth, I really can't care less about my personal safety..."

Looking at eloquent Celine, Roland realized his concern was unnecessary. He thus said, "Now, your finding!"

"Ahem, sorry," Celine said while clearing her throat. "Anyway, just as what you've seen, the Magic Cube could still be activated, although the range of the red beam shortened by 90%. However, the tri-tank magic power unit could still transmit energies. I conducted a heating test to see whether the shortened red beam affected heat transmission. It took me two to three days to complete the test. When I examined the uranium chip, I was amazed to find that it did not change much. Also, it appears that much less magic power was consumed when the range of the red beam shortened."

Anna asked thoughtfully, "So, most of the magic power was used to maintain the red beam?"

"I now understand why you became a Senior Witch even faster than Agatha," Celine praised. "It took me quite a while to reach the same conclusion. If that beam is comprised of numerous tiny particles, it'll be hard to direct them all to the same spot. The experiment indicated that the heat transmission on the front, left and right sides wouldn't be affected as long as you didn't touch the red beam. Therefore, I conclude that the decrease in the laser range did save a lot of power."

"Hang on," Roland interrupted suddenly. "This means that Part No. 236 determines the radiation range?"

This was definitely a major discovery even more important than the sustainability of the power system. There were around more than 300 parts in one Magic Ceremony Cube. Nobody knew how magic power worked through those patterned stones. Now, there seemed to be a solution to analyze the power within the cube.

"Yes," Celine assented, a twinge of excitement in her voice. "Perhaps the patterns on each part have a specific function. If we could decipher those patterns, we could probably understand how magic power worked within the Magic Ceremony Cube."

"Each part functions differently. It looks like the radiation clan shared the same mindset with us," Anna said with a smile. "Aren't we lucky?"

"Of course," Roland confirmed with a nod. He knew what Anna meant. Civilizations varied drastically in terms of language, mindset and appearance. It was almost impossible to find a similar one to learn from. The underground civilization, for example, could only operate the core device after transferring the soul to a carrier. Celine had spent hundreds of years trying to understand its mechanism, but the research was fruitless.

Therefore, each civilization, in a way, was lonely.

Although Roland had promised earlier that human beings could still learn from lost civilizations without the legacy shards, it was actually not easy to do so, especially when there was no guidance or assistance available. How could one learn about the other when they had different mindsets?

If Celine was right, then the radiation clan, which was the first civilization that shared some similarity with the human race, might enlighten them on the research of magic power.

"By the way," Anna said as she suddenly grinned at Roland. "Since the magic power unit has been finalized and we have also solved the sustainability problem, isn't it time for you to fulfill your promise?"

Gazing at Anna's bright, blue eyes, Roland found it hard to turn down her request.

"Yes, yes... Your Highness," he said while smiling back. "I'll start working on it once I'm back to the castle."

...

The dawn broke with loud noises.

Soraya sat up from her bed in a daze.

She yawned dramatically and fumbled for her clothes. These were the noises produced by steam engines that she heard every morning. They marked the beginning of another busy day.

But she noticed it was particularly early today. Soraya cast a glance at Echo who was still deep in her sleep, and put on her clothes quietly. She wondered who else in the castle got up earlier than her.

Then Soraya suddenly realized that this was not the industrial zone. Why were there noises of steam engines. It was weekend today, and most of the witches slept in. The castle would be empty until it was time for lunch. Was she dreaming?

The roar started again outside the window, and Soraya heard someone talk and laugh sprightly.

"This is so interesting!"

"Your Majesty, let me try it."

"Me too, me too!"

"What happened?" Echo asked blearily as she rose.

"I don't know. It's probably Mystery Moon..." Soraya said as she stretched and pulled back the thick curtains. Sunlight spilled across the room through the window. It was actually not early anymore.

After she became more comfortable with the sudden brightness, she peered down from her window and was surprised at what she saw.

Many witches were congregated at the castle gate, staring at something at the center of the yard, looking excited.

Soraya then saw Anna sitting in a peculiar four-wheeled carriage. There were no horses, but the vehicle ran on its own. Anna's face split into a big smile.

Immediately, Soraya's eyes were glued to the strange vehicle.