

Witch 1301

Chapter 1301: A Battle in the Snow

White thought he was going to die when the strange gray bird zoomed toward the mountain.

The only thing he was thinking at that moment was that he should have not come all the way here to do business!

He blamed those sailors!

Had those sailors not been so envious of coachmen and also started to transport refugees, he would not have had to come to the interior of the Kingdom of Wolfheart.

He simply wanted to earn more money and survive the fierce competition!

He had not expected that this time, he would encounter real demons.

He could probably still survive as long as he ran faster than the other refugees. However, when the strange birds appeared in the sky, he knew that he was doomed.

No men could outrun something that had wings, not to mention that he only had one leg.

White buried his head in his arms and knelt down. *"God, please send your pious believer to the divine land you created after he dies and make sure that he has endless gold royals to squander..."*

But the weird birds did not tear him to pieces. Instead, they produced a series of familiar sounds.

He had heard similar "neighing sounds" at the Sedimentation Bay. When the Graycastle men fired, those sounds would reverberate across the whole battlefield. Within just half an hour, the invincible knights from the Tusk and the Redstone Family were all reduced to ashes.

Did the Graycastle men come to their rescue?

White looked up gingerly and saw the most incredible scene in his life.

A jet of silver white flash erupted from the head of the strange bird. As if it had consciousness, the flash reached the demons. The snow was kicked up into the sky, and the demons fell down one after another, as though the flash contained indefinite power.

He was flabberghasted.

What excited White more was that the demons were also caught totally unprepared. They not only stopped chasing them but also started to flee.

"Mr. White, what, what's that?" some refugees asked tremulously.

White shook his head involuntarily, and suddenly, a bold idea flashed across his mind.

White pinched his leg and forced himself to stand up. He spread out his arms at the horrified refugees and yelled in a quavering voice, "Don't be scared. This is the Graycastle army I told you before! I summoned them here!"

“Graycastle men?” the refugees echoed in disbelief. “From the sky?”

“That’s right!”

“Do you mean... that we’ll be saved?”

“For now, yes, but it’s not free. Indeed, their service is quite expensive! I don’t have much savings, and I don’t know when they’ll leave — ”

Before White could finish, the excited crowd interrupted him, “Don’t let them go! I’m willing to pay double!”

“I’ll pay two silver royals!”

“If I could arrive at the Sedimentation Bay safe and sound, I’ll give you my gold ring!”

“And me as well...”

The refugees, who had been desperate just a moment ago, again burst into life as they saw a ray of hope.

“I’ll deliver your message to the Graycastle men. Now, please follow me. Well, my leg doesn’t work properly. Can someone carry me on the back?”

“I’ll do it!” a burly man answered and immediately carried White on his back.

In that way, White did not have to be worried that he would fall behind.

If everything went well, he would probably retrieve his carriage with the money from the refugees.

White did not mind telling a little lie. The most important thing now was to raise the morale and help all of them escape.

“Don’t be panic. Open your eyes and watch the others’ footprints. Make sure that you don’t roll down the mountain!” White instructed on the man’s back at the front as the latter ran toward the foot of the mountain.

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After firing at the demons for a while, Good noticed something had gone wrong.

One plane seemed to be missing.

Although the demons were completely flattened, it was still not that easy to exterminate 30 to 40 demons all at once. Apart from the harsh weather, the power of the gunfire was also quite limited compared to their training.

Good rose and made a count. He shuddered at his finding.

The “Unicorn” operated by Her Highness was missing!

The Unicorn was completely the same as the Fire of Heaven, only that the former could only accommodate one person. It was normal that he missed the Unicorn in such a great blizzard, but Tilly

was His Majesty's sister. If anything happened to her, nobody could be absolved of the responsibility by blaming the weather condition.

Before Good could inform Finkin of the news, three more green flashes ignited the sky in the north.

That was the signal indicating that there were more enemies!

But were the demons not here?

Good's heart skipped a beat. He immediately abandoned the severely injured demons and tore toward the green light.

"Hey, hang on, where are you going? We'll be prosecuted in the military tribunal if we desert our post!" Finkin said while still shooting fervently.

"Shut up," Good said irritably. "Haven't you noticed that Her Highness isn't here?"

Finkin turned around and gasped.

Apparently, he had also seen the three flickers that were now slowly descending.

Fortunately, as the planes were relatively close to each other, it took Good only seven minutes or so to get where the signal was.

He was a little relieved.

The biplane firing downwards not far away was none other than the "Unicorn".

Her Highness was attacking a group of demons hiding in the forest. There seemed to be more demons here than where the refugees were.

Why were there two troops of demons?

Why did the smaller group go after the refugees?

Good was still lost in thought when Finkin at the rear shouted in excitement, "There are more demons here! Let's follow Her Highness. I can't wait to pull the trigger!"

The other two "Fires of Heaven" also arrived.

"Whatever," Good thought to himself, " *the Mad Demons can't fight back anyway.*" Perhaps, the troop of demons they had met earlier had completely lost their fighting capacity. They could probably kill more of the enemies if they chose to fight here.

Just at that moment, however, a pack of Devilbeasts flew over the forest and shot up in the air. They streaked toward the "Unicorn" while howling.

It was their first time seeing their "imaginary enemies" in person, but Good instantly recognized them.

All his blood froze.

There were at least a dozen Devilbeasts.

He was only 400 to 500 meters away from them. How could he win without abandoning the princess?

He revolved rapidly a multitude of thoughts in his mind but denied his ideas. It was a split second that seemed to last forever. Before Good found the answer, Tilly reacted.

The “Unicorn” rose abruptly and jerked around before she flew toward the east. At the same time, a red flare was sent into the air and lit the sky.

It was a signal of retreat.

Good pressed hard on the gas and followed the “Unicorn” to retreat to the east.

The biplanes flew at a tremendous speed.

The fleet immediately passed the Devilbeast that was almost close enough to spear at them, and soon the four planes shook the enemies off and disappeared in the snow.

Chapter 1302: Perspicacity

Five days later...

“Is that Your Highness?”

“Yes, this is a piece of news that just arrived at the headquarters. We’re still in the process of confirming the number, but there are at least 600 people.”

“The garrison at the Gust Castle has taken them in. They’ll travel to Neverwinter by land after they recover from the trip.”

“No, this is our obligation.”

“Thank you. Please take a good rest.”

Edith hung up the phone after she delivered the report.

As the most advanced communication tool, wind-up telephones had become indispensable to the General Staff. However, due to the limited data transmission, the service in the Cage Mountain area was only available to the encampment of the Aerial Knights outside Thorn Town.

Edith saw an amazed Lance Kant, her third brother, as she turned around.

“What’s the matter?”

Unlike the way she treated her second brother, Cole, Edith directly hired Lance to work for the General Staff in her official capacity after the latter passed the elementary education exam. As her third brother had an exuberant and audacious personality, she thought it would be better to keep an eye on him.

Another reason was that Edith enjoyed seeing him deflated like a punctured balloon upon a failure.

“Ah... nothing. I was just surprised that you’d be so respectful to another person, sister,” Lance said as he walked up to Edith while holding a stack of documents. “You’ve never even been so polite to father.”

“I thought you’d become a little smarter after you grew up,” Edith said indifferently. “I don’t need such formalities when talking to father because I know he doesn’t care. But Tilly Wimbledon is His Majesty’s

sister. If she says something about me behind my back to her brother, what do you think will happen to the House of Kant?"

"But I feel that His Majesty... doesn't care about that either..."

"Because he's a man, so sometimes, it works even better when you take the initiative."

"Er... I don't quite understand..."

"To understand people is always the hardest part. It's perfectly normal that you don't follow," Edith said while shrugging. "Even if you're extremely talented, you can't gain the final victory if you don't understand people."

"Could you teach me, sister?" Lance asked hopefully.

"Naturally," Edith replied while casting the latter a glance with some interest. "However, it'd be more effective to learn on the go than just taking the lectures. Cole actually does pretty well in that. Do you want to give it a shot?"

Lance felt a coldness prevail him as he thought of Cole's act of demeanor at home. He swallowed hard and said, "Well... I think I'd hold off on that."

Edith replied casually, "It's up to you."

Lance instantly switched the subject as if he had just been exonerated from a horrible crime. He said, "By the way, did you call Her Highness to tell her that the refugees have arrived safely?"

Edith confirmed with a nod, "Her Highness asked the General Staff to take care of this matter, so I must report to her in a timely fashion."

The whole rescue operation exceeded everybody's expectations. Not only had the Aerial Knights reached the battlefield 200 kilometers away within less than two hours, but they had saved a great number of refugees and crushed the demons as well.

That was right. This was not just an ordinary hunt. From the information they obtained, the refugees were probably a bait the demons used to lure the army. The troop coming after was the real deal.

What if the First Army had really sent their force to support the refugees?

Due to the harsh weather and the long distance, the army must ride light and swift. The demons, on the other hand, would have awaited an exhausted troop as a hunter awaited his prey. Once the two parties clashed, the rescue team would have found themselves not only being outnumbered but also surrounded by a group of Devilbeasts.

Even if the army retreated immediately, they would have to travel nearly 100 kilometers in the snow. How many soldiers would survive this trip? Perhaps, not a single one.

This was the demons' first tentative attack after the First Army reduced their force.

Even if the First Army had turned a blind eye on the refugees or completely overlooked the demons to the north of the Gust Castle, there was nothing to lose for the demons.

The demons had probably noticed that the Graycastle men were completely different than the soldiers in the Kingdom of Wolfheart and the Kingdom of Everwinter. Killing tons of local civilians would make no difference to the outcome of the Battle of Divine Will. However, they could weaken the human race if they managed to exterminate a rescue team.

Nevertheless, the Aerial Knights had caught them totally offguard.

The whole battle became somewhat similar to the one at the Northbound Slope a year ago. Both the demons and the First Army made judgements that they believed to be in the best interests of their own party, but the result was completely different.

Even if Tilly had not discovered the troop hiding in the forest at the rear, the outcome of the battle would not have changed.

The fleet all returned safely, and the refugees survived the hunt. It was indeed a major victory.

“The Aerial Knights are so amazing...” Lance sighed. “They not only killed dozens of Mad Demons but also got themselves out of the battle while being besieged. Even the Blessed Army of the Union couldn’t do that, right?”

“Yes, they’re wonderful.”

Edith sighed deeply and cocked her legs onto the desk while swivelling in the chair, looking a little dejected.

A bit surprised, Lance said, “You don’t look very happy.”

“I’m not unhappy, but I feel... that the General Staff has become somewhat useless now.”

“Huh?” Lance’s eyes were wide open.

“The four planes could repel more than 200 demons. What if the First Army has 100 or 1,000 of ‘Fires of Heaven’?” Edith said with a faint smile. “In that case, we simply need to send the Aerial Knights where in need. Military tactics and strategies would be simply unnecessary. Everybody can command the Aerial Knights. If that happens, what’s the point in keeping the General Staff?”

In fact, the first time Edith had seen this type of automatic flying machine, she had foreseen its great military potential. She had indeed discussed a lot with Roland regarding the application of the air force. She had even founded a research group within the General Staff to specifically study the Aerial Knights, in an attempt to maximize their power.

However, when the Aerial Knights really revealed their strength in a real battle, Edith felt somehow regretful.

The overpowering force that the Aerial Knights presented made military strategies less important. Before knights had been replaced, military tactics and formations used to be two major parts of a war. Now, they were much simplified. Since the Aerial Knights could see the entire battlefield clearly from above and possessed immense power, they could literally take over the whole battle.

In other words, they would see every move of the enemies in the sky while the demons could see nothing. The demons were groping in the dark without the ability to fight back or develop any countermeasures.

Furthermore, this was just the beginning. The “Fire of Heaven” was just a very crude model, like the original flintlock that was later transformed into more powerful and advanced Mark I.

“Then... we can go back to the City of Evernight,” Lance answered quietly.

“It’s probably too late now,” Edith said smilingly. “I’ve offended so many people to come this far. Do you think those people will let us go?”

Edith knew very well that if Roland became the ruler of this continent, nothing like this would happen. However, she had to think about the worst scenario because foul languages could always hurt people.

“I’ll... protect you,” Lance said while biting his lip.

“With what? With your current social status and official capacity? If you can’t become a leader, you’d better save these empty promises,” Edith snapped, a hint of callous pleasure in her tone. “Otherwise, it’d only be worse. For example, your enemy will probably humiliate me right in front you — ”

Edith broke off.

Soon they heard footsteps outside the door, and Ferlin Eltek entered.

“Your ladyship, you’re here...”

“What’s the matter? Any news?”

“I wish,” Morning Light said, looking troubled. “I just checked the supply list for the Aerial Knights. Perhaps, we have to adjust the logistics.”

“Yes?”

“You probably don’t know that they used thousands of bullets in the past few days, not including those consumed in the real battle,” Ferlin said agitatedly. “There are only 20 or 30 of them, but they request more ammunition than 10 Gun Battalion units put altogether! Not to mention that we have to supply them fuels and spare parts of the planes. If the number of the students doubles or triples, what should the logistics department do? Your ladyship?”

Lance suddenly found that the languid air his sister had presented just a moment ago was gone.

Edith rose to her feet and replied casually, “You have to figure that out. You must make sure that the Aerial Knights have enough supplies.” She then turned to Lance and said, “What are you doing here?”

“Yes?” Lance was still in a sort of daze.

“Come to the intelligence room with me. It isn’t time to take a break yet,” Edith said while swinging her sheet of hair in a trenchant manner and walked out of the room.

Chapter 1303: Hints and Clues

The intelligence room was the largest organization in the general headquarters of the First Army. This organization was responsible for screening and storing tons of information. Lotus and Fran created an underground chamber specifically for the General Staff, and 70% of the 200 General Staff members were working here.

At the same time, it was also the most energy-consuming office. The room was not only illuminated with the Stones of Lighting, but the workers here were also offered free Chaos Drinks at night. Many other departments were envious of the intelligence agents.

However, only the intelligence agents themselves understood the hardship they had been going through every day.

After Edith proposed the intelligence collection plan, they started gathering information. Every week, they received two to three encrypted letters from the Kingdom of Everwinter and the Kingdom of Wolfheart, and now, they had collected nearly 100 so far.

Although the General Staff's main duty was to analyze information, most of the time the letters were from the scouts, which were usually well-written, concise and easy to understand. However, the 100 messages they had recently received were all pieces of information written in broken sentences. It took them quite a while to first decipher the messages. As such, the screening process was as boring and time-consuming as playing a puzzle game.

This was, nevertheless, not the worst part.

The hardest part lay in handling the encrypted letters.

The agents did not understand why there was an increasing number of messages all of a sudden, as it was quite hard to obtain information now when the demons had closed the border of the Red Mist area. Yet after Hill Fawkes became the main intelligence officer, his agents started to use various strange ways to get the messages out.

For example, the letters could be hidden in animal skins or the interlayer of a shoulder pole. Sometimes, they could be inserted in the stomach of a pickled fish. Trading merchants in the occupied area became a fantastic channel to communicate information. A lot of times, those noble merchants unknowingly became the couriers.

Because of this, the encrypted letters were sent in all kinds of manners. The agents, for instance, had to take out a silk ribbon from the stomach of a fish while enduring the terrible odour. Before reading the message, they had to clean up the letter first.

Everybody would feel resentful when their work suddenly switched from writing reports leisurely while sipping the tea to transforming a variety of garbages into useful letters and information.

Nevertheless, although full of complaint and dissatisfaction, nobody slacked off, as both Edith and Iron Axe were keeping an eye on this department. Therefore, nobody would be foolish enough to delay the work under these two people's noses.

Edith saw Iron Axe discuss something with Hill Fawkes as she entered the intelligence room. There were around dozens of pieces of paper on the desk in the center of the room. Apparently, the clerks had made a copy of the letters.

She skimmed them through and found that most of them were from the Kingdom of Everwinter.

A large part of them seemed to be useless information providing few clues, such as “a new troop of demons garrisoned in the northern city today”, “a noble suddenly passed away, and someone inherited his title”, and “a giant stone monster is lurking around the border area”.

Edith was not surprised that the intelligence collection plan could go so well in such a short time. The success was not only attributed to Hill’s hard work but also the “Black Money”.

After she suggested Iron Axe making contact with the sender of the black card, the mysterious man agreed to work at the front. Although he only sent a messenger, he overtly expressed his wish to provide help to Graycastle. The “Black Money” was started in the Kingdom of Dawn and also had certain influences on the Kingdom of Wolfheart and the Kingdom of Everwinter, mainly on the underground market and the Rats.

Rats could not collect very useful information due to various rumors and misinformation circulated in the neighborhood, but it was better than nothing.

Edith also noticed a particular message that indicated that “sailors were forced to work” in some cities.

“What do you think of it?” Iron Axe asked as he also noticed what Edith was staring at.

“If I remember it correctly, the third princess, Garcia, brought many ships when she attacked the Kingdom of Everwinter,” Edith said thoughtfully. “If the church didn’t destroy those ships, they’re probably still in somewhere in the Kingdom of Everwinter.”

“It appears that you’re quite concerned about this matter.”

“Compared to the others, this piece of news was obtained from various sources and is relatively reliable,” Edith said while extending out her hands. “Ships are mainly used for transportation. The demons may use them to transport their army or they plan to launch an attack on the sea. However, I don’t think they’ll attack us from the ocean.”

“What’s your reason?” Iron Axe questioned.

“The demons must have known the power of cannons after so many battles. They should have known that we’ll use cannons to repel them if they sail to the Archduke Island and the Sedimentation Bay. They won’t survive on a sailing ship,” Edith explained. “If they choose to go around the port of the Kingdom of Wolfheart and get to the interior of the Kingdom of Dawn, they won’t have enough Red Mist supplies. Therefore, I’m inclined to the former possibility. To win the war, the demons must assemble their army at the front as fast as they could and attack us by land and water.”

With these words, she looked toward Hill and asked, “What do you think?”

Hill bowed to Edith and answered, “Your ladyship, I’m not good at analyzing wars, so I don’t know which way the enemies would go. The only thing I can do is to collect the information and send it to the General Staff.”

“This is a smart man,” thought Edith.

He did not blindly follow her but made his own judgments based on the information he had. He certainly knew what his strength and weakness were. No wonder the king asked him to organize the intelligence collection work.

“Even you can’t find more clues out of it. It’s probably a dead end,” Iron Axe said resignedly. “So, we only know that the demons would assemble armies, but we don’t know where they’ll go or what their intention is. This is so frustrating.”

“The Kingdom of Wolfheart has been completely evacuated, which is why Hill can’t put his man there. If you didn’t evacuate the country, we would have probably found some clues as to the whereabouts of the demons,” Edith said half-jokingly.

“I must obey His Majesty’s order,” Iron Axe defended while shaking his head. “Plus, the First Army can’t put their hope in some Rats.”

“We’ll send you more useful information in the future, sir,” Hill Fawkes suddenly spoke.

Iron Axe raised his brows and asked, “Are you saying the information later on will be more in detail?”

“That’s right,” Hill replied. “I’ve been staying in the circus in the Kingdom of Dawn for so long, and the most important thing I’ve learned is that as long as we plan it well, we’ll naturally obtain more information.”

“Really? Could you tell me more about it?” Edith demanded with some interest.

Chapter 1304: Hints and Clues (II)

“In short, we just let those birds conduct the search themselves.”

Hill Fawkes produced a pencil and sketched a tree diagram on a piece of paper. “Since we pay for information instead of the person who collects them, the more information he gets, the more he earns. To obtain more information, he’ll find a way to hire more people to do the work for him. In His Majesty’s words, it’s called a top-down approach.”

“I see,” Edith commented, who immediately grasped the nature of this management style. “To expand the lower-level organization, we, as the stem of the tree, must give them some incentives to make sure that they keep working for us.”

Hill nodded and said, “Exactly. Scouts and detectives are all at the very end of the chain. They won’t change much over time. Therefore, the information would become more reliable as time progresses, although their search area can be fairly limited.”

“But they’re essentially Rats...” Iron Axe said, frowning.

“No, sir. This is the interesting part. The stem and the branch don’t have to be managers and subordinates necessarily. Soldiers have to listen to officers, but Rats don’t necessarily need to obey Rats.”

“As long as we promise that they’ll benefit from their work, Rats can also make nobles work for them,” Edith supplied slowly.

Hill looked at Edith approvingly and said, “Yes, these incentives don’t have to be gold royals. Everyone has their own need. We simply need to know what they desire, and it doesn’t have anything to do with social classes. This means that secondary agents can be people of different socio-economic status. The reason that the information we’ve collected so far is not that comprehensible is that the Rats are still digging the surface. Once nobles start to join us, we’ll have more valuable news.”

Iron Axe pondered for a moment and said, “Even if that’s true, it’ll probably take a long time for nobles to work for us.”

“That might be the case in peacetime,” Hill returned. “However, the Kingdom of Everwinter is now undergoing dramatic changes. I believe that this process will be largely shortened. In fact, some messages have already provided us with a hint.”

“Like?” Iron Axe questioned while stroking his chin.

Hill explained smilingly, “According to our statistical report, we’ve been receiving fewer reports about the nobles. Most of them, if any, are negative news, such as debauchery, public brawling, etc. Rulers shouldn’t be like that in wartime, which reflects that the rulers of the Kingdom of Everwinter have abandoned their duties to protect their people. They’re having a lot of pressure, so they need to let these negative emotions out in some way. I believe that such things started after the evacuation unit of the First Army defeated the alliance army formed by the nobles.”

Hill took a pause and resumed, “Although at that time, I was in the City of Glow in the Kingdom of Dawn, I can imagine what a huge blow it was to the nobles. When people begin to feel insecure, they would put their hope in anyone that could help them, even if this person is someone that they despise the most. Sir, please rest assured. You won’t wait for too long.”

In the Snow Reflection Castle in the Kingdom of Everwinter.

“Sorry for the long wait. His lordship isn’t feeling well today, so he can’t come out to greet you. I would advise that you call on us on another day,” the butler suggested as he swept a bow. “Once his lordship feels better, he’ll let you know.”

The hall was instantly stirred.

“We’ve been waiting for weeks! Even if he’s infected with some serious disease, at least he can come out and say a word.”

“I don’t believe a single word he says. We fought for him, and where’s our lands?”

That’s right. Even if he’s not well enough to meet us, he should at least hand us the deeds!”

“This bulter is lying. I saw Viscount Narnos come out of the castle four hours later after he got in.”

“Not only the viscount but also many dancers from the tavern. Is the duke now seeking women instead of scholars to cure his disease?”

“Please, mind your language,” the butler said coolly after clearing his throat. “You’ve been without a land for too long, so you’ve probably forgotten that you’re still the subordinates of the Duke of the Northern Region. The duke is your master. You should know better than me what a crime it is to slander a lord! I don’t think you would like to sit in a cell instead of your hotel room in this weather.”

At these words, the guards at the door came forward, their armors clanking on their sides.

The hall immediately fell quiet.

The nobles knew it would not do any good if they engaged in a verbal altercation here.

The butler lowered his voice and continued, “I know you’re anxious, but the most important thing now is to defeat the Graycastle soldiers. By the way, his lordship will hold a banquet tonight in the castle parlor to receive you. Although he can’t come, he wishes you a lovely evening.”

Because of the perspective banquet, the crowd finally withdrew from the hall while muttering under their breath, looking a little more satisfied.

They immediately began to talk about the delicious food and beautiful women they would encounter in the evening.

Only Fueller still felt unhappy when he returned to his hotel.

After dealing with Marwayne for a while, he became morbidly disappointed with the duke.

The defeat at Frost Town was mainly because of the fact that the Graycastle soldiers were more proficient in using the weapons and had higher morale. The nobles could have learned the lesson and fought again. However, what had the duke done? He was not only the first person that had fled the battleground but he also locked himself in the Snow Reflection Castle, having completely forgotten about his ambition prior to the battle.

Apart from that, he failed to fulfill his promise to grant the nobles lands and treated them equally. Viscount Narnos had now the access to the castle, but the knights relying on the great nobles were shut out.

Yet before the battle, the duke had sought Fueller’s counsels a lot.

A competent lord should never broke his promise, but Marwayne broke this rule simply because he wanted to hold onto his tiny territory.

Fueller worked for Marwayne, in a hope of reviving his family. Now, all his squires and guards had been killed in action. He literally had nothing at the moment.

Could a knight with neither squires nor land be really considered as a noble? The others could still afford to wait, but what about him? Who would acknowledge his family half a year or one year later? If the demons did defeat Roland Wimbledon, Marwayne would rise to power and easily help him revive his family. The problem was that, a dishonest man as he was, would the duke really help a person with practically nothing?

Should he put his faith completely in such a careless duke or find himself a way out?

Fueler paced up and down in his bedroom and finally came to a stop.

He walked up to his desk and took out a folded envelope at the bottom of the drawer.

After a moment of hesitation, Fueler tore it open.

There was a velvety black card in it.

Chapter 1305: Lurking

This is an easy job. You won't need to take any huge risks. All you have to do is place the message in the allocated location and no one will know that you did it. The voice of the silver-masked man who called himself the leader of Black Money sounded from beside his ear once more.

Utterly ridiculous! Why earth would I help Graycastle? They even eradicated the nobles, what will I gain even if I win? Images of the conflict seemed to occur before his eyes once more.

I had thought Black Money were intelligent merchants, to think that you would utter such foolish words! Aren't you afraid that I'll just tie you up right now and hand you over to Lord Marwayne in exchange for a generous award instead?

If you really wanted to do that, then this conversation would have never taken place in the first place.

The man's tone did not change, as if he didn't care for his own safety at all.

The fact alone that I'm still sitting here is enough to prove your intentions, and it's because that you are clever, that we're willing to give you this opportunity.

Fueler replied in response, *Unfortunately you have misjudged me. My loyalty to the Duke is unshakable. Now scram before I change my mind!*

Of course, I'll take my leave now. But my lord, this is how "opportunities" are. By no means does Black Money want to force you into this, it is your freedom to decide how you act.

The silver-masked man stood up, gave a deep bow and then lightly placed a black card onto the tea table.

I want to say something before I go: Graycastle will never forget anyone who serves them. Now...I hope to see you again.

Fueler inhaled deeply, interrupting his chaotic thoughts. The room became quiet.

Will Graycastle never forget anyone who serves... them?

How ironic. He served Duke Marwayne for the sole purpose of reviving his family's prosperity. Roland Wimbledon, the enemy of all nobility was originally the most unforgivable person, yet now, Fueler was finding himself to be uncertain.

Although those bastards from Black Money were scum, they were utterly right. If he was really going to serve the Duke of the Northern Region to the very end then he would have ripped the card into threads ages ago, rather than carefully hiding it beneath the drawer.

After a long period of silence, Feuler arched his head backwards, sighed, then sat down in front of his desk.

He pulled out a white sheet of paper and a goose-feather quill.

Was there anymore he could lose?

The notion of taking back his territory was becoming more and more distant. It seemed like he didn't really have a reason to grit his teeth and keep persevering.

Who cares. He wouldn't be affected negatively in any way as long as he followed Black Money's instructions. It would simply be akin to placing a bet on both sides. If the demons win, the current situation couldn't possibly get any worse. If the people from Graycastle are triumphant, there may be a way for him to acquire compensation through other ways.

Finishing his thoughts, Fueller put down his quill.

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At dusk, Fueller put on his trench coat and felt cap and walked into the "Horn Alley" of the inner city.

Horn Alley was territory belonging to the Northern Chamber of Commerce. All of the passers-by were merchants. By sunset, there were very few people out and about.

Fueller found the location that the silver-masked man had described in a place on a gentle slope. In between two brick houses sprouted a large, silver fir tree.

In fact, the delivery method that the masked man spoke of was also one of the reasons that prompted Fueller to make his decision.

With no physical contact with the recipient, the risks were largely diminished. With this, at least he wouldn't have to worry about Black Money blackmailing him with the message, or someone seeing him interacting strangely with an unknown person.

Fueller wandered around the vicinity for a while and upon affirming that there were no suspicious people near him, quickly strode towards the back of the silver fir tree and felt at the hole in the middle of the trunk—sure enough, there was a secret compartment hidden inside. The door of the compartment was made completely out of an ordinary wood, if he hadn't touched it with his own hands, he wouldn't have noticed it.

He stuffed the letter containing the message inside the compartment and pushed the wooden plank back in place. Now he had completed the task of placing the message. He had intentionally written the message in script so that even if a third party discovered it, it would be impossible for them to connect the handwriting to him.

Of course, his mission was not entirely complete yet.

Next, Fueller returned to his residence and placed a flower pot on the window sill of his bedroom. For a person living in the high-end section of the Inner city, such decorative items were easily accessible. Nobody would care about an inconspicuous pot plant. However, to those that were observing him in the dark, this was a sign that the message had been delivered.

From the beginning to the end, he didn't need to meet anyone in person. In regards to who would take the message, or how it would get into Graycastle's hands, these things no longer had anything to do with him.

In the moment he set down the flower pot Fueller almost seemed to experience a liberating feeling.

To think they'd be so meticulous in even the simple act of gathering intel, the gap between the two kings is truly redoubtable... Fueller thought as he stood before his window, gazing into the distance at the castle district, ablaze with lights under the red haze. When he thought about how the "losers" of the battle were still cheerfully enjoying the evening party, any hope he had in Marwayne died.

There was only one more question remaining.

Could Graycastle really defeat the demons?

The messenger pushed a thick stack of paper onto the damp and dilapidated wooden table.

"Is this today's portion?" Smarty lit a candle, "Thank you."

The messenger gave no reaction.

Smarty sighed and repeated himself with hand signals.

Only then did the messenger nod.

Indeed, this messenger was a silent warrior trained by his master. He was deaf and mute and could only be commanded or interrogated through simple hand gestures. Unfortunately, there wasn't a hand gesture to express gratitude.

"Keep watch outside, don't let anyone inside." After he got silent warrior to leave, Smarty began carefully reading through the messages page by page.

This place was the allocated property where Black Money organized their underground chamber of commerce. Typically only the invited could enter so in theory the possibility of outsiders breaking in was small. Nevertheless, Smarty chose to go through the intel in the basement, in the case that if something did occur, he would have more time to destroy the evidence.

Although Smarty did not know why his master was so serious about Graycastle's battle, this was not an issue he could intervene in. Since his master had commanded to support Graycastle with all his power, the only thing he could do was obey to the best of his ability.

Currently, his most important mission was to organize the intel and deliver it into Graycastle's hands silently and without a trace.

Although the people from Graycastle demanded that not a single piece of intel could be missed, opportunities to secretly sending things outside the city were scarce, thus there was an issue of prioritization to consider. Considering that the trading caravans qualified to pass came through once a week, he had to turn the most reliable intel into a confidential letter and mingle it amongst the trading

goods going towards Wolfheart within a week. As for the rest of the intel, he could only search for another way.

Most of the time, intel came from a Rat's words, causing them to be extremely disorganized. Usually he would have to waste huge amounts of time to filter it. However this time, Smarty noticed a letter amongst the intel that stood out from the rest.

The characters on it were neat and organized. They definitely were not words that were carelessly copied down in a bar or on the streets. The words were also written with high-grade ink and there was not a single wrinkle on the paper. Clearly, the letter was written in an environment far superior to ones that Rats are usually found in.

Subconsciously holding his breath, he read the letter carefully from start to finish.

Indeed, the contents of the letter were far different from the rest.

It was the first to mention the core of the Army of Demons: Sky Lord Hect Zod.

Chapter 1306: The Bloodstained Message

After flipping through the letter, a chill ran down Smarty's back.

A demon lord that could open the gate to Hell, letting troops come and go as they like?

Unquestionably, this intel was of utmost importance—In truth, he had been perplexed by the oddly unscathed fall of Snow Reflection Castle. The only thing that could be said from it was that the demons invaded from the north side. All the other explanations varied and contradicted each other. Evidently, all the citizens who witnessed the arrival of demons with their own eyes had died during the invasion.

At last he had conclusive affirmation to his questions.

But what shocked him even more was that the demon lord spoken of was familiar with human laws. Not only was the demon lord able to engage proficiently with the nobility, but in a short span of time, he was also able to become the real ruler behind the scenes of the Kingdom of Everwinter. Currently, the enlistment of citizens in the domains of the kingdom was all his doing. The handsome benefits promised by the demon lord were also far greater than what the people of Graycastle were capable of.

Additionally, the letter's illustration of the patterns in the drafting of citizens was extremely valuable. Although it wasn't the same as information on the power distribution of demons, one could at least infer from it approximately where resources were allocated.

What was certain was that this letter was definitely not written by the likes of a Rat or merchant. The writer's perspective betrayed that he was undoubtedly a member of Everwinter's upper class.

The contents of the entire letter were organized, logical, clear and concise. There was no need for transcription—it would be difficult to make it anymore concise than it already was. All Smarty had to do was send it out in one piece and it would already be a critical piece of intel. In terms of priority, it was without a doubt the highest.

The problem now was that the merchant group used to deliver intel left Snow Reflection Castle yesterday. In order not catch anyone's attention, Black Money only planted one of their members inside

the merchant group, and that member was merely a cart driver, making it virtually impossible for him to make the entire group pull back in the direction they came. The next merchant group would only be able to leave the following week.

If we were to add on the time spent stopping and moving along the way, the delivery time would be drawn out even longer.

After hesitating for a long time, Smarty finally jumped up, gathered the rest of the paper on his table, and put them away in his drawer, leaving only the letter on the table.

Next he had to seal it with waterproof wax.

After he finished, he blew out the candle, slotted the letter somewhere close to his body and returned to the first floor. Using hand gestures, he told the silent warrior, "I'm going to personally leave the city for a while. If something unprecedented happens here, light the fuel oil downstairs."

Just when Smarty was about to turn and go out the door, the silent warrior caught Smarty's arm and very slightly shook his head. Then, the silent warrior pointed to himself.

Stay, and leave the dangerous things to me...?

Smarty chuckled lightly. "I'll only be sending a letter. I'll be back in two or three days at most. You can't speak, nor do you know where the exchange point is, so you can't help me with this mission."

However there were no hand gesture to express such complicated words so he only made one hand gesture: "This is a command."

The hand gripping him released.

Smarty patted the silent warrior's chest and left the room without looking back.

Since his master told him to support Graycastle with everything at his disposal, the most important thing he had to do now was deliver this letter as soon as possible. After all, in the words of the Graycastle folk: intel is dependent on timeliness; the longer that intel is held back, the more changes that occur and the less reliable it is.

For such occasions, they had even set up an emergency contact point a bit over five kilometers away from the border of the city. At the contact point, they prepared an incredible animal courier. Smarty had heard that it could deliver messages to the Kingdom of Dawn within a few days.

That village would be the destination of his journey.

Leaving Snow Reflection Castle without permission indeed had its risks, but in general they were all within his control. In reality, people were escaping the Northern Region via all sorts of different methods everyday. There were even people leaving Everwinter—the red haze and blood-red moon above people's heads didn't actually affect their lives in any way, it was just that Graycastle's propaganda and the rumors about the demons had already cemented themselves in them; no matter how much the feudal lord tried to stop it, he was unable to completely dissipate the fear the people had of these terrifying barbarian races.

Undoubtedly, these daily escapists were Smarty's best camouflage.

Smarty knew that as long as he moved alone, the probability of him getting caught by flying demons was low. The guards on the streets were even easier to deal with as in the end, gold royals were the ticket to all passages in the human world.

Reality was not much different to Smarty's predictions.

As dawn broke the following morning, Smarty safely passed through the southern gate of Snow Reflection Castle. In order to enjoy the gold royals all to himself, the guard even made sure not to alert anyone else, quietly opening a small door for Smarty on the inner side of the city wall.

Once he crossed the icy abyss, the rest of the journey would be free of obstruction.

Everytime Smarty caught sight of a black shadow in the sky, he would quickly tuck himself under the snow. His white coat was a natural camouflage and for those flying in the sky, his footsteps did not really look much different to the ones left by wild beasts.

When it was afternoon, Smarty could already vaguely glimpse smoke curling upwards from the kitchen chimneys of the village.

Wiping the white frost from his nose, he couldn't help but quicken his pace.

Just like the system inside the city, Smarty didn't need to directly meet with anyone from Graycastle. All he had to do was place the intel in the agreed spot and leave a secret signal.

Yet at this moment, Smarty heard the clip-clopping of horse hooves coming from behind him.

Smarty jumped and twisted around. His heart dropped slightly. *What the hell, why are there Snow Reflection Castle soldiers here?*

Graycastle had chosen this village specifically because it was remote. It would be difficult to notice even if one or two outsiders snuck in. Usually if the nobles wanted to intercept runaways they would choose to do it near the main road since they unlikely had any reason to be here.

The distance between Smarty and the soldiers quickly shortened. Clearly they had seen his figure, so there was really no point in hiding anymore.

Smarty decidedly stopped walking and turned towards the oncomers with an ingratiating smile plastered across his face. There were two riders in total, this probably wouldn't be too difficult as long as he gave enough gold royals.

One soldier reined in his horse in front of him and looked down at him condescendingly. "Older brother," he said, "I just knew that these fugitives would choose a remote path for their escape. We found one just like I said."

"Ah, lucky us."

As he thought... *Were they one of the patrol parties sent to catch escapists?*

"M-My lord, I beg of you, spare my life!" Pretending to be scared out of his wits, Smarty fell to his knees into the snow and held up his money bag in both hands, revealing a sparkle of the gold royals inside. "I

couldn't stand staying in the same place as those demons from hell, they're monsters who'd eat you without a blink of an eye! I can give you all of my savings, just please let me go!"

"Oh? You've saved up quite a bit there." The rider took the money bag with a hint of pleasure in his tone.

"It's all yours now... O-oh yeah, I have some relatives in the Kingdom of Wolfheart, as long as you don't take me back, I'll definitely find a chance to repay you in the future!"

"You can stand up now."

Smarty silently released a breath. Usually, once he reached this point he had basically made it through. Refugees who had saved up gold royals were definitely a small minority; what's more he had "relatives in a neighboring country," so coming across someone like him was unbelievably unlikely. If killing people didn't give them any advantages, the soldiers wouldn't want to cause any more unnecessary trouble. After all, letting one or two refugees off didn't incur them any losses, so there was no point in destroying the possibility of being repaid in the future.

But the rider didn't wave his hand for him to scam. Instead, he raised his vizor and said, "Look at me carefully."

A glaring scar was scrawled over the rider's cheek, as if his face had been gnawed on by some ferocious beast. His entire ear was gone and even half of his eye was deformed and twisted.

The flapping of his skin showed that this injury had only recently healed.

"My lord, this is..."

"This was caused by Graycastle's firearms," the knight said slowly, "I thought I was a goner then, but I managed to survive. Until now, I can still feel the heat piercing my face. It reminds me constantly, who it was that caused all of this—"

At the end of his speech, the rider's tone turned completely cold.

An intense feeling of alarm arose inside Smarty.

But before he had the chance to create a distance between them, the other person who was referred to as the younger brother raised his hand and struck Smarty's face hard with his horse whip.

The scene in front of him turned black. Smarty collapsed with his hands to his face.

"Yes, it's you! If it weren't for you damned runaways, why would I be fighting Graycastle with my life? What 'Battle of Divine Will', what 'fate of mankind', that's all bullsh**!" At this point, the knight's voice had already escalated into a roar. "Be at ease, I won't take you back and I won't kill you here and now—the only thing I want to do is let you fugitives taste my pain!"

Afterwards he raised his reins and ushered his horse towards Smarty's legs.

"Crack—"

A wave of indescribable, excruciating pain immediately shot through him as Smarty subconsciously let out a strangled yell.

Then came his second leg.

Until the snow was spotted with blood and his legs had become a clump of vaguely connected muddy flesh did the rider stop the horse's trampling.

"Relax, you are not the first and you will not be the last," the knight laughed sinisterly. "Now... you can run away as much as you want."

Smarty didn't pay attention to when the two riders left.

Only after biting and breaking open his lip, could he force his wandering attention together.

The lower half of his body had already turned completely numb and the snow was sapping his body heat away from him bit by bit.

He felt at the clothes on his chest—the letter was still in its original place. In those two riders' eyes, he was probably no different to a corpse now.

Surprisingly, he bore no hatred towards the two, nor did he feel any intense dissatisfaction at being so easily trampled over. Under the ruthless torture of both the piercing pain and cold, thinking had already become an unbelievably difficult task. The only thought lingering in him was of the message close to his chest.

With the last of his energy, Smarty began shifting his body towards the agreed location.

By the time he wriggled to a place on top of a hill that overlooked the village, the curtain of night was slowly draping over the horizon. The occasional coruscating lights inside the village seemed to be right next to him; yet at the same time, as far from him as the stars of the night sky.

He had not put the letter into the hiding spot, because he himself was the final vessel of the letter.

In the moment when the darkness was about to swallow all living things, his master, Banach Lothar's kind face emerged before Smarty's eyes.

Smarty closed his eyes and lightly murmured, "Father..."

Chapter 1307: Flaw

Three days later, after the letter had been transferred several times, it finally landed in the hands of the command headquarters at Cage Mountain. After Hill Fawkes opened the letter and scanned it, it was once more classified as "highest-priority intel" and immediately transferred into Edith's hands.

After skimming over the letter, the Pearl of the Northern Region furrowed her brow.

"How many people are on Archduke Island right now?" she demanded loudly.

The advisors immediately exchanged looks. Morning Light was the first to reply.

"My Lady, there are over three hundred people stationed on the island from the First Army, around twenty-five hundred from the construction team, and about the same amount of island civilians. If you'd like the finer details on staff composition, I can get the data—"

“There’s no need,” Edith interrupted. “Invite Iron Axe and the other military officers inside. We need to adjust our plan immediately! Quick!”

“Adjust...?”

“It doesn’t matter if they’re soldiers, construction workers, or people from Graycastle, Kingdom of Dawn or Kingdom of Wolfheart, everybody needs to evacuate Archduke Island immediately!” she declared gravely. “That place is already a dead island.”

A clatter of shock followed; however, even in their surprise, their long training in their professions prompted them to immediately follow through with the command.

In the midst of the clamor inside the office, Edith’s gaze fell onto the piece of paper in her palm.

It had come along with the letter.

After several breaths, she clenched her fist and lightly released a sigh.

The high-ranking officers of the First Army very quickly gathered together and took turns in reading the letter sent from the Snow Reflection Castle in Everwinter.

“Sky Lord Hackzord...” like the others, Brian’s face was pale and unsettled. “If the contents of the letter are completely accurate, this damned ability is way too overpowered. A range of several kilometers, one that can be used repeatedly... If that’s the case, it would not not even take a few days before the entire Everwinter will be obliterated, even the most stubborn city wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Lightning and Maggie had come across a high-ranking demon near the rapture before. Its untraceable power was enough for it to be classified as an opponent to be highly wary of. Now, they knew that this demon was most likely the Sky Lord Ursrook talked about, and what they witnessed was far from its real power—not only could he pass through the portal himself, he could even maneuver entire troops through it. Such formidable power was terrifying on a strategic level.

The full weight of the title, “grand demon lord”, settled on everyone’s shoulders.

Evacuating Archduke Island was now a crucial task nobody was doubting.

After all, getting on the island was easier than leaving it. If the strait, a natural barrier, was unable to obstruct the movements of the enemy, it would become a cage trapping them all.

Moreover, they had to utilize every single minute!

According to the citizen drafting patterns described in the letter and the clues derived by the general staff, the demons had probably gathered an army of a considerable scale on the frontline. A massive attack could be launched at any time.

Iron Axe commanded, “Stop all construction and fortification on Archduke Island. Start moving everyone on the island immediately! This is not limited to the rented ships, I want to see everything that can float participating in this evacuation!”

“Yessir,” the troops responded in unison.

After everyone left with their orders, Agatha said worriedly, “Why didn’t such a powerful demon shown up in the second Battle of Divine Will?”

“I believe it’s due to one of three reasons.” Edith’s voice was still calm as usual. “One, Hackzord had yet to evolve into a grand demon lord and didn’t possess his current abilities back then. Two, they believed humans were insignificant and regarded the Sky-sea Realm as their top priority. As for the third reason...” she said as she paused intentionally, “perhaps the higher-ranking demons believed that Hackzord was not suitable to battle humans.”

Iron Axe seemed to be able to read her mind. “You think it’s the third reason?”

The Pearl of the Northern Region shrugged. “Although the first reason is valid in theory, it’s really just avoiding the issue. The second one’s does not have a solid reason—although the demons have always been battling with the Sky-sea Realm, considering their strong attention towards the relic of the gods, they definitely wouldn’t have let the relic escape their hands if they could have easily defeated the Union. Underestimating the enemy is undoubtedly the most foolish thing you can do in a battle that determines the fate of your race. In other words, I’m guessing that they have already used their power to their maximum potential.”

At this, the Ice Witch’s dulled-gray eyes finally seemed to brighten up a bit. “But... the Union hadn’t learned of how to make firearms at that time. If even the city walls are no longer effective, I’m afraid that the Union will be defeated even faster this time. They might not even have the time to move the relic of the gods.”

“Thus, this is something worth thinking deeply about.” Edith lightly tapped the table surface, not directly answering the Ice Witch’s worries. “There are some descriptions in this letter that interest me—according to the few interactions that the writer has had with the Sky Lord, not only does Hackzord never used his power to directly enter the feudal lord’s castle, he barely ever meets with multiple nobles at the same time. Most of his commands are conveyed through Sigils, as if he is wary against them. Such behavior is clearly disadvantageous for him if he wants to win their loyalty; this is evident from the contents of the letter. But the question is, what threat could those nobles possibly pose to him?”

The Ice Witch looked dazed. “Could you be thinking of... God’s Stone of Retaliation?”

“No matter how I look at it, it’s the only possible reason.” The Pearl of the Northern Region nodded in reply. “Since Extraordinaries can be ashes or books, why must a grand lord be a Magic Slayer?”

“That...” Agatha failed to react immediately. The biggest difference between a high-ranking demon and a Mad Demon was the amount of power they had. Indeed there was no concrete evidence that a demon would then have the power of a Magic Slayer upon advancement. What’s more, this would answer all the questions she had previously—the reason why the Sky Lord didn’t appear on the frontline of the Fertile plains was because he simply wasn’t good at direct battle!

It didn’t matter whether he was invading the the Holy City built via the God’s Stone mines, or battling the Extraordinaries wearing God’s Stones of Retaliation, or suffering the blow of Divine Will, which was even stronger than the Extraordinaries’ power—all of this was a great threat to any demon that was not a Magic Slayer. The Sky Lord’s power was vital for the demons, so he didn’t show up in the previous two battles!

“But this time he is participating personally...” Iron Axe said in a low voice.

“Perhaps some change left him with no other choice.” Edith walked towards the window and gazed out towards the mainland in the north. “For example, the first main attacker could have been Ursrook or some other grand demon lord, but under some circumstances, Hackzord was forced to emerge from behind the scenes. If this is really the case, it’s definitely good news for us—no matter what, facing one grand demon lord definitely beats facing several grand lords at once.”

“Have you already figured out how to deal with Hackzord?”

“His ability to maneuver armies at his will is unique in terms of strategy, but using it to attack is not actually a great choice,” Edith said slowly. “As long as we don’t suffer too many losses on Archduke Island, the outcome is still up in the air. Thus, the most important thing for us to do right now is evacuate as many people and firearms from the island as possible, especially the cannons.”

Iron Axe released a long sigh of relief. “From what you’ve said, this piece of intel is really valuable. I wonder who the writer and sender is? If the information is reliable, we really owe it to him.”

After a long silence, Edith handed the crumpled piece of paper over to Iron Axe.

There were only a few simple sentences written on it.

It was written by Hill’s subordinate before he sent it to them.

I do not know his name.

When I discovered him, his body was already frozen in a way no different from ice.

At his chest, I found this letter.

Only this item still held a trace of warmth.

Chapter 1308: The Great Evacuation of Archduke Island

Via the flying animal courier, the evacuation command rapidly spread outwards from Cage Mountain.

The instructions were carried out to the maximum capability wherever there were Graycastle forces. There was no prevarication or fooling around. Over half a year under Roland Wimbledon was enough to make the nobles who chose to serve him clear about the way he did things.

Honestly, they were shocked by the unexpected “power” they were exhibiting themselves—going all out in the current situation, they were achieving demands they used to think impossible. When they encountered a complex problem, they thought about it and then solved it. Although they were still the same group of people, they produced vastly distinct results under a different governing system.

Baron Jean Bate was one of these people.

Jean Bate felt conflicted as he watched the busy scene inside his mansion. Originally, he regarded his family as an insignificant family lacking in both ability and ambition. It was only because he posed no threat to them that the King of Wolfheart, Tusk and Redstone allowed him to perpetually manage Sedimentation Bay, thus maintaining the fine balance between the noble families.

Now, his scholars and subordinates were responsible for planning the movements of tens of thousands of people and thousands of ships. Even though a large number of those were fishing ships, they were under his jurisdiction nevertheless as even the smallest of ships needed to be docked before they could be unloaded. Tens of thousands of people was equivalent to the total population of a large inner city in the continent and the number of ships he now controlled was more than all the merchant ships docked on the shores of Wolfheart added together.

Ordinarily, the baron would never believe that his family could manage a project of such immense scale. If someone had suggested it prior, he would have thought that they were either joking or didn't understand the complexities of management at all.

Now, Jean Bate realized that not only had he underestimated his own abilities, he had underestimated his clan's.

As long as they were given a hard push, and led via appropriate methods and regulations, astonishing potential could be squeezed forth from the people.

In the beginning, he mostly served Graycastle because he had no other choice; after all, the fate of his family and assets had been completely in Graycastle's hands; disobedience was not an option. Gradually, however, he found himself taking a liking to this feeling. Thousands of people moved just from a single command of his, accomplishing their given task with high precision and efficiency. Perhaps this was the true essence behind power.

Even though he had many more superiors above him compared to the past, the power he held in his hands was now far more physical and tangible, and he was certain from the energetic expressions on their faces as they rushed about that his subordinates shared his sentiments.

Leading one hundred intelligent people surpasses leading ten thousand idiots by far. This was probably the most memorable lesson the baron got out of this.

This governing regime, which was polar opposite to the "aristocrat way", could turn not-so-bright people into clever ones. Then what would be the potential of people who were naturally geniuses?

Jean Bate no longer held any doubts that Roland Wimbledon would become Emperor over the four countries.

—That is, as long as humans could survive the Battle of Divine Will.

...

Reminiscent to the higher-class managers, the situation among the civilians was also hectic.

What Graycastle had demonstrated in the past—that they were true to their words and always repaid their debts—caused their evacuation announcement to be held in high esteem. Upon hearing that the First Army was handing out a munificent reward to all who helped transport soldiers and weapons, everyone who had the ability actively participated in order to get a share of the spoils.

People who relied on the sea to make a living were the first to respond. The sailors had been searching all over the place to borrow carriages in hopes of transporting goods on the mainland to earn a living. Now, they were all returning to their main professions.

Following them were the fishermen. The value of the reward given by the First Army was calculated by the number of people and weight of cargo transported. Because the strait separating Archduke Island and the mainland was not wide, people were bringing out their sloops and even their heirloom dinghies. If they didn't have sails, they used paddles. Just one round trip across the strait earned them several gold royals. Anyone could do the math.

Thus, in order to hold a larger number of people and supplies in one go, civilians even created multi-bodied dinghies and dinghies connected to each other in a train-like formation. To them, it was still worth it even if their creations broke apart after one or two voyages.

The First Army only made one requirement: "Boats are forbidden to contain any sort of shade that would block falling snow". Aside from that, all other floating apparatuses were accepted without a question. Within a short period of time, the sea was covered in boats of all sizes coming and going from the shore. From afar, they looked like the migration of ants to different nests.

Of course, the Witch Alliance was not idle either.

"Seagull" was the most effective transporter out of all the transporting apparatuses. Within a day, it made almost fifty round trips between the two shores. Lightning and Maggie accompanied the Aerial Knights in patrolling the western side of Archduke Island, fighting away the occasional beasts that were scattered around the area. Molly and Hummingbird, coined the "ultimate pair", made the originally extremely time-consuming labor of unloading a breeze. It could be said that without their help, it would have been impossible to undertake such a large-scale moving operation, especially when the handling capacities of a few harbor city wharfs were considered.

People, weapons, construction equipment... What had taken several weeks to transport onto Archduke Island were all transported back within a couple of days. Most people had expected such a hasty evacuation to end up in a catastrophe. It would have been unsurprising if over half of the paraphernalia went missing; in fact, managing to transport all the people back alone would have been a great feat. But reality proved that pretty much all of the objects came back in the same way they were delivered on the island. Excluding the abandoned construction materials and some insignificant tools, the losses incurred in items such as weapons and explosives were less than ten percent. The shockingly efficient management of this whole event reminded everybody of Graycastle's prowess once more.

Just when the evacuation was nearing completion, Sylvie sent a warning of the highest threat-level to the command HQ!

Traces of a huge number of demons had appeared in the red haze!

...

At almost the exact same time, Hackzord "saw" the observer through the parasitic Eye Demons. It was as if she had suddenly materialized in his mind; her every single movement was clear and precise.

She was a female Awakened with long, curly green hair, the one described in Ursrook's report as the key extermination target. With her extremely expansive wide field of view, she was strategically a huge threat to the demon race. Only a God's Stone could stop her.

He silently remembered her appearance and looked away from her.

She was staying in the center of a highly guarded city. Getting rid of her was a good suggestion, but it was not something he needed to do personally. He was the King's most important asset, his right-hand man. If he was harmed, it would be an indelible pity for the whole race. Thus there was no reason for him to put himself in danger.

What's more, Hackzord had a more important target right now.

According to the reports of his sentries, the humans had been moving about a lot near the coast of Wolfheart, especially around Archduke Island. Clearly, his enemy had set their eyes on the strait and was not ready to hand it over to him on a silver platter.

Without question, the humans were going to pay a terrible price for their mistake.

According to the intel he acquired from the nobles in the Kingdom of Everwinter, the Graycastle's army numbered in the tens of thousands. If he could devour all of the defending troops on Archduke Island in one fell swoop, it would deal a huge blow to the humans.

He was going to prove to all the other demons and grand lords that he, the Sky Lord, was also a grand lord that could lead the western front to victory!

With this in mind, Hackzord summoned the first distortion door!

Chapter 1309: Thunder

The outbreak of war on the western front had dramatically changed the Sky Lord's mindset.

In the past, his understanding of humans came from various battle reports and Holy See meetings. Along with their obvious contempt for the lowlifes, it was the general consensus of virtually all grand lords that humans lacked Awakened warriors. It was just as difficult for humans to upgrade as demons. The humans' overall strength was volatile as it was impossible to tell the extent of an Upgraded's power beforehand.

Human males who possessed no magical power at all were on the battlefield purely to add to the headcount. They were akin to the Inferior Demons of his race; however, Inferior Demons were utterly abandoned after the first Battle of Divine Will. Now, they weren't even allowed to participate in battle, and were only used for manual labor at most. Just from this, one could see the difference in strength between the two races.

The Sky-sea Realm inhabitants were even more highly-evolved. From their land-engulfing ships to their most basic soldier, every one of them possessed remarkable magical power, as if they were designed just for war. Even several of the demonic beasts that they corrupted and controlled eventually grew into ones containing magical ability. Undeniably, the Sky-sea Realm was the strongest among the four races.

Precisely because of the difference in strength, senior demons regarded the legacy that would be left behind by humans after the second Battle of Divine Will as something in the bag.

This was also why Ursrook's last words caused such a great stir on the Presiding Holy See.

Now however, Hackzord had come to believe with a greater certainty that Ursrook had not been exaggerating.

Even if humans' exceptional utilization of fire was not enough to raise the King's concern, the new weapon Hackzord's people had discovered two weeks ago was a completely different story.

Without the help of witches, human males—creatures that were supposed to be merely extra trimmings—actually flew via a strangely modeled iron bird!

His first reaction when he heard the news was that it was definitely impossible.

Since ancient times, excluding birds, the sky was a place dominated by magic users. The saying that God resided in the place above the sky layered the blue dome above their heads with a greater sense of holiness and divinity. Yet how could species without even a drop of magical power intrude this holy domain?

However, there was more than one witness to this phenomenon. Upon accepting the news, he realized that that the humans' rapid growth in strength may not only be owed to their manipulation of fire.

Indeed, he was slowly being convinced of Silent Disaster's shocking "Upgrade Theory"—It was likely that the Nightmare Lord had realized this possibility before him, which was why she decided to enter the Realm of Mind in search for answers.

After all, the rate that the humans were evolving was way too fast.

There wasn't any mention of the iron bird in Ursrook's report. If humans already possessed such a weapon at the time, there would be no reason not to use it. The only explanation was that in less than a year, the developments of humans had already reached the realm of the sky.

Such a sudden change could only be explained by upgrading.

Once males also become a main force in battle, the humans' fighting ability would undoubtedly multiply dramatically. Perhaps this was Ursrook's real warning in his last words.

Fortunately, Hackzord was substantially more familiar with the sky than fire. The iron birds the humans created were not much stronger than Devilbeasts. As long as he was here, nobody else was allowed to touch the sky!

This time, the attack will not fail like the previous time.

His confidence was not because he looked down on his enemy. At this point, underestimating the enemy was unquestionably stupid.

His confidence came from his own title.

Because he was the supreme lord of the sky!

After passing through the door, the Sky Lord appeared on the edge of the island.

Constantly lingering by his side were Parasitic Eye Demons who came with him. If Eye Demons were regarded as a rare species, then the scarcity of Parasitic Eye Demons was on a whole other level; they were an extremely precious resource.

Despite the high price, Hackzord placed them on the front line without hesitation, letting them travel by his side. This was the only way he could handle the other key target mentioned by Ursrook: a witch that specialized in exceptionally long-range attack.

Up until he arrived on the island, the witch's appearance still hadn't materialized in his mind. This meant that humans' only asset that could threaten him wasn't present on the island.

At the same time, he didn't see any observers that would be able to catch sight of him.

There was no better time than now.

Hackzord didn't hesitate any more and activated the complete form of the Distortion Door!

A black hole rapidly spread out from behind him and very swiftly extended several meters outwards. Any natural barrier would be rendered useless against the Door!

A red haze gushed out. Siacis, a higher ascendant, was the first to appear before him. "My lord, your army is ready."

"Convey my command: Seize this island and kill all who resist!"

"As you wish!" Siacis let out a piercing scream. As a psychic who had undergone three upgrading ceremonies, this scream was more than enough to drop any human who didn't wear a God's Stone instantly. Even if they did have one on them, the mind blast would cause them to fall in a trance. Simultaneously, it was a signal to commence the attack. When the scream ended, massive numbers of Primal Demons and Symbiotic Demons poured out from the Distortion Door towards the center of the island.

The strength of humans' fire bolts lay in their long range. As long as they could close the distance, these new Symbiotic Demons would definitely be able to break through the enemy's line of defense in one go.

Very quickly, the vanguard traversed the peripheral of the island and closed in on the humans' settlement.

Yet there were still no sounds of fire.

This caused Hackzord to feel a shred of astonishment.

Just when he had managed to get himself to view the humans as equals to his own race, what was with the huge oversight they were making? Could it be that they still hadn't noticed that their territory was being invaded?

"My lord..." A quarter of an hour later, Siacis hastily hurried over. "We have already captured the inner city; however... we didn't discover any traces of humans. This place is an empty city!"

"What did you say?" Hackzord's eyes widened.

"There are still many uncompleted buildings inside the city. From their color, it seems that the buildings were recently under construction, I'm afraid the humans have probably abandoned Archduke Island one or two days ago."

So he was saying... the boats spotted by the sentries were not for sending weapons onto the island, but evacuating the soldiers from the island?

But... how could this be possible?

The humans acted as if they knew he was going to attack Archduke Island! He had intentionally made his troops avoid all cities and towns. Every path he traveled had been checked by Eye Demons. The easiest way this secret could be leaked was via those human workers, so he ordered his subordinates to put them under centralized supervision, removing all possibility of communication with the outside. Even if the enemy had noticed that something was odd, they wouldn't have evacuated so quickly!

How did the information get leaked?

Before he could think about the problem properly, an ear-splitting explosion suddenly erupted from the island centre. In an instant, the earth began to violently shake.

A cluster of blindingly bright fireballs illuminated the cloudy day. In the midst of their light, rolling clouds of black smoke shot into the sky and an intense air wave swept across the entire inner city. All the soldiers in the city were engulfed by the surging smoke in a blink of an eye.

Chapter 1310: Trapped Beast

Hackzord closed the Distortion Door with a grim face.

Even the stupidest person would be able to tell that they had just been completely outwitted by the humans!

"Those lowlifes—!" Siacis roared furiously. His murderous intent was clear in the wild twisting of whiskers on his cheeks.

"Shut up!" Hackzord interrupted him. "If they were lowlifes, then who are we, the ones got outwitted by lowlifes? From now on, I don't want to hear you calling them 'lowlifes' ever again!"

Then he leaped up and flew toward the other end of the island.

The black smoke was still billowing upwards ceaselessly, forming a thick column of smoke. The indistinct flashing of firelight from below it caused the column to resemble a jet of magma shooting upwards from the ground. The interior of the city was in disarray. Even in places where the fireball's shockwave hadn't reached, there were bodies of several Primal Demons strewn in across the area at different angles, dead or alive.

However, this was not what he was focusing on at the moment—the milk had already been spilt. Staying there would not make his losses any smaller and would only add fuel to his fury. If he had the energy, he would rather use it to make his enemies pay.

As expected, on the south side of the island, the Sky Lord spotted some boats that had not yet gone far from the island. Even though they were in full sail, in the face of his abilities, they were equivalent to being stationary.

Just when he was about to close the gap in a single stride, a ray of light below him caught his attention.

A silhouette flew out from the outer region island and rapidly towards the southern side.

No wonder! He had believed that the person responsible for the detonation of the explosion had been buried in the flames together with his vanguard troops. To think that the humans had actually planned a full retreat!

Getting a witch to activate the explosion in order to retreat easily from the battlefield?

As if it was going to be so easy!

The Sky Lord immediately switched targets, opened a distortion door and appeared in front of the witch.

She was a female with pale, blonde hair. She revealed an expression of shock, as if she didn't expect him to suddenly appear. Without another word Hackzord reached out to grab her—

Yet his hand grasped thin air.

The female before his eyes suddenly moved with an explosive speed, tearing hundreds of meters away from him in a blink of eye. At the same time, the shock wave from her movement slammed into Hackzord and the Parasitic Eye Demons like a wall. The spell blast glistened and rippled outwards before slowly easing away.

After the witch flew out a distance and slowed to a stop, she looked like she used up over half of her energy.

He harrumphed and then chased her once more!

He planned to close the distance in one step again, however this time just as he exited the Distortion Door, the witch was already miles away, leaving a trail of white clouds behind her.

Hackzord was furious. He used his ability for the third time, thinking that he might as well open the door three hundred meters in front of the witch.

However when he exited the door this time, he suddenly felt the gazes of numerous eyes on him. It was as if he just entered a city center from an empty plain.

Shocked, the Sky Lord looked in the direction of where he felt the gazes—numerous black figures were coming in his direction, both from the horizon of the sea and from the land. Among them were iron birds and witches.

This is...a planned ambush?

*So that b*tch was intentionally stopping and starting, fooling him believe that she could only perform brief moments of accelerated flight because she was being limited by her magical power?*

“Ha... humans... hahaha...”

Hackzord laughed as his fury rapidly boiled up to its limit.

Not only did they outwit his troops, they were also planning to trick him?

Retreating now would be as easy as taking a breath.

But he didn't do so.

Indeed, he wasn't a Magic Slayer and it always bothered him, but that didn't mean males wearing God's Stones of Retaliation would be able to defeat a grand lord!

He had to let his enemies know who the real ruler of the sky was!

In an instant, eight iron birds had already charged towards him, spitting out streaks of fire from their heads—

Hackzord waved his left hand, directly opening a Distortion Door at his side, swallowing the iron bolts that shot at him; at the same time he opened the other side of the door beside the iron birds. After the fatal iron bolts passed through the door they swept straight back towards where they came from. In an instant, several iron birds were struck and their formation fell into a disarray.

But what surprised him a bit was that the iron bolts which were supposed to be fatal didn't cause the iron birds to break apart; instead, they only left a few dents in their iron bodies.

The Sky Lord quickly pushed his surprise to the back of his mind and made a stride to a higher place, putting the entire battle area under his feet. The iron birds were clearly unable to follow his pace. As much as they tried to climb up, their stupid and clumsy bodies were slower than worms.

Just as he was planning to rip them apart one by one, a passing bird suddenly transformed into a devilbeast and propelled towards him with its jaws wide open!

His Eye Demons hadn't regarded the birds that were commonly seen at sea as threats at all. Hackzord dodged abruptly, just avoiding the attack in time. Fuming, he widened his palm and a black streak of light instantly appeared in the space between them. This was also a Distortion Door, except it's width was only a finger thick, any body that passed through would not emerge in one piece.

As if it realized that it was in danger, the devilbeast shrank back into a seabird. But it was too difficult to stop its momentum in such a short amount of time, and half its wings swept through the black line. The sliced wing tip and feathers burst apart like blossoms.

But before he could attack again, a thunderous roar erupted once more.

The golden-haired witch turned into a streak of golden light and shot straight towards him! Not having enough time to use the same tactic, Hackzord could only gather all the magical energy in his body and turn it into a shield cocooning his entire body!

"Bang!"

The two collided, and the immense impact caused the witch's golden light to shatter into innumerable small pieces and raised a feeling of stuffiness in Hackzord. The opponent's injury was clearly more serious; not only was blood seeping from the edge of her mouth, one of her arms was bent into multiple sections. Yet the witch thought nothing of her injuries. With her remaining hand, she pulled out a short fire fork from her waist.

Damn!

Left with no other choice, Hackzord opened another Distortion Door. If she was going to shoot, the iron bolt would be directed towards her companions.

But what infuriated Hackzord was that not only had the previous attack been a guise, the witch didn't shoot anything at him but accelerated downwards to catch the falling seabird.

"I'm going to smash you all into pieces!" he roared for the first time in this battle.

But at this moment, the highest-priority warning rang inside the Sky Lord's mind—the source came from a large iron bird that was in the clouds below him. Through the Eye Demons' view, the source was indeed the witch that Ursrook made sure to point out as a key target.

He felt his body being latched on by something—

Feeling an increasing sense of crisis, Hackzord expanded the Distortion Door to its biggest range, covering his enemy's entire attacking range!

One of his Eye Demons violently pushed him.

There was a flash of fire. After what felt like both a long time and a brief moment, a black shadowy cluster flashed across like lightning. Innumerable cracks appeared on the Distortion Door and then it shattered apart in a deafening explosion like glass.

After the door, the next victim was the Eye Demon that pushed him aside—the blue light on its body pulsed and blood, flesh, and organs squirted outwards, raising a wave of blue fog among the lingering shattered pieces. The two events occurred almost simultaneously, so quick that Hackzord couldn't react.

Finally, it was his turn.

Even though the attacking God's stone had already shattered, it still sliced away half of his hand, leaving multiple dents in his armor. The turbulence in his magical power caused him to lose control of his body, and he fell straight towards the ocean.

The iron birds, having finished redirecting themselves, surged straight towards him.

After he left the Forbidden Area, Hackzord used the last of his energy and opened a new door below him.

Then, as if he had fallen into a bottomless pit, he vanished above the ocean.