

Witch 311

Chapter 311 War of Mortals (Part 1)

Seeing this scene, one of the other prisoners turned and ran away which caused Zero to look somewhat disappointed.

She turned into a ray of light and entered the fleeing captive's body, who immediately stopped his steps. The captive's eyes turned white, and his body began to undergo strange changes – this wasn't Mayne's first time seeing such a scene, but no matter how often he saw it, he couldn't prevent a chill from arising within his heart.

A dim ray of light burst out from within the captive's body and his body began to twist and deform until finally changed into the very appearance of the Purified who had entered him.

He knew that this wasn't a simple act of replacing and slaughtering, but what exactly happened during this transformation process, Mayne was afraid that only the Pope or the people involved could fully understand.

Zero took a deep breath and went back to the last prisoner.

He was the youngest of three captured spies, probably only fourteen to fifteen years old. His young and inexperienced eyes were filled with shock and fear, unable to accept what had happened just now.

"Now, you're the only one left," she whispered, "Eyre."

Hearing these words, the trembling boy who had originally wanted to pick up the machete froze in shock and started to stammer, "H-how..."

"God told me everything. Actually, you were merely a farmer's child living in the outskirts, but because of the Wolf King's order, you and the other village people were forced to move into the city, and became responsible for repairing the city walls, creating the military supplies, transporting the army's provision and so on. In other words, forced labor. Instead of letting you go because of your young age, they rather decided to recruit you into the investigation troops. In reality they've planned for you to emerge and perish on your own," she reached out and touched his cheeks, "The best evidence for this is that at the time you sent back the intelligence about the large military operation of the Church, the captain of the guards didn't even let you enter the camp. Instead, after listening to your report he immediately sent you back to us, right?"

"I..." Eyre opened his mouth, but couldn't find any words.

"Of course, they couldn't let you enter, because your family had already ceased to exist. Your parents were accepted, while your brother was the same as you, merely consumables for the Wolf King. So, if you were allowed to return, wouldn't it make all the other scouts know about it?" Zero said, "Your father fell to his death while trying to fill a gap in the wall. Your mother, trying to find the workplace overseer had to suffer punishment with a whip and is now on the verge of death. In a world where God doesn't examine everything, evil always wantonly flows around like sewage. Are you sure you really want to fight for such a ruler?"

The young boy stared with wide eyes at her, unable to mask his sorrow, "This... is impossible, you're lying to me!"

"God never lies," the Purified shook her head. "And in the bottom of your heart, you know that I'm telling the truth. The root of all this evil is the nobility. They never regarded you as one of their own kind, they merely see you as livestock. What the Church is trying to do is to put an end to all this evil and injustice, they want to build a new world under the care and watchful eyes of God."

With a popping sound, Eyre sank to his knees, lowered his head and began to cry bitterly, "What should I do?"

"Follow your heart, only God can issue the ruling."

He choked with sobs and said, "I was wrong. I am willing to tell you everything I know, I will do anything I can to save my mother."

"Such a clever child," Zero patted his head then took out a plant with slender leaves from her pocket and held it in front of him, "Eat this, and you will have a good sleep. It will also help you stabilize your mood." She tore off half a leaf, put it into her mouth, and began to chew, before saying, "Just like me. Wait until tomorrow, after breaking through the walls of Wolfsheart City you might be able to see your mother again."

Mayne puckered his brows, the Peacefully Sleeping Bracken was something used in the making of Dream Water. It didn't show any effect on witches, but when taken by ordinary people it was a very severe poison, which required that they intake the Winterflower to neutralize its toxicity. Sure enough, after eating it, it didn't take long until the prisoner's face turned ashen. He forcefully gripped his throat, and looked with an expression of absolute disbelief at the smiling Purified, only able to release some incomprehensible 'och och' sounds. His own fingernails quickly tore open his skin and blood vessels before the blood that came splashing out dyed his neck bright red. His painful struggle continued for half an hour until his body gradually turned limp and he finally stopped breathing.

"It's such a pity that God didn't forgive your sins," Zero said while smiling. Then she walked over toward the Archbishop and bowed in greeting, "Your Excellency, how do you feel about the trial? Did it have the same elegant manner of Excellency Heather?"

"Why must you deceive him into eating the Peacefully Sleeping Bracken?" Mayen asked with a heavy tone, "If it had been Heather, we could have added one devote believer to our ranks. Rather than making him kill himself while thinking he is moving back on the right path."

"If the situation of the captive's loved ones were like I had said, I would naturally have recruited him as a believer, but unfortunately I do not know what really happened to his parents. Those words of mine were nothing more than me talking nonsense." She said in a carefree voice while shrugging, "The moment he discovers that my words were all lies, he would obviously turn against the Church. Believe me, I serve the Church wholeheartedly."

If you served the Church wholeheartedly, you would have properly waited for my orders in the tent, Mayne thought while impatiently turning his head and stating, "The attack will begin soon. You must immediately prepare yourself and move according to the plan, the Wolf King and the Queen of Clear Water —"

“—Must die, Your Excellency,” the Purified said, “If it was me alone, I might not have been able to do it. But since even Isabella has come with me, they absolutely won’t be able to run away.”

*

“Woo-woo-”

The bugle horn’s trumpet, which was the signal to attack, rolled across the horizon. Under the pressuring dark clouds and in the middle of the rustling autumn wind, it raised the curtain to the second act of the siege against Wolfsheart City.

One mile away, the frame of the ‘Siege Beast’ that launched the spears gave out rays of magical light. The moment the light was as bright as the sun, the iron spear suddenly burst straight toward the walls. Flying as though it had been thrown by a giant’s hand, it reached a speed that made it difficult to sight, and a moment later was followed by an earsplitting roar.

After crossing such a long distance the spear had hardly lost any of its might. The moment it hit the wall, it crushed the stone into powder. Even the house-sized boulders were easily pulverized and the soldiers standing behind the wall were coincidentally also shot dead. After merely three rounds of fire, the city gate was completely smashed, and the surrounding walls utterly broken.

Even though the firing rate of the Devil’s siege weapon was equivalent to an ordinary catapult, its range was several times further. Against this kind of offensive, it was absolutely impossible for the garrison force to try and strike back. Unable to see the trajectory of the launch, they weren’t even able to determine where the next attack would be hitting, The Church’s army hadn’t moved, yet the defensive line was already in imminent danger.

Just then, a world-shaking loud boom suddenly sounded behind the wall!

Seeing a massive fireball soar into the sky, the people on the battlefield all felt the earth starting to shake beneath their feet. Then, accompanied by black smoke and fire, the wall collapsed with a loud rumble. Finally creating an opening in this mottled wolf’s tooth.

The sharp horn sounded again, the mixed forces composed of the Army of Judges and God’s Punishment Army initiated their charge against the city wall. Looking at it from afar, they looked like a flowing reddish-gold ocean, mercilessly swallowing everyone who even dared to stand against it.

Now Wolfsheart’s defenders would have to rely on their own flesh and blood in order to withstand these soldiers who stood apart from the mortal world.

Chapter 312 War of Mortals (Part 2)

Mortals cannot defeat the Devils, Isabella thought to herself, therefore the Church created the God’s Punishment Army.

They possess considerable strength, feel no pain, and know no fear, making them the best weapon against the Devils. Although they don’t possess the ability to act on their own, that isn’t necessarily a disadvantage in battles between armies.

Against such a powerful force, a garrison of mortals naturally would never be able to resist.

Especially after losing the backing of their city wall, seeking to beat the Church's elite force in a melee fight is nothing less than a wishful dream.

Like a powerful golden current, the Army of Judges dashed through the main gate of Wolfsheart City's wall, entering hand to hand combat against all of the assembled defenders. The red colored God's Punishment Army looked as if they were walking on level ground as they climbed over the collapsed city wall and started to massacre those who attempted to stop the flood of enemies.

"Do you want to go and help them?" Isabella asked after turning towards Zero.

The latter yawned and then said uninterested, "No, my magic is limited, so I have to save it for the important targets."

"You could just use the sword, hammer, or crossbow to fight ah," Isabella said, feeling displeased, "No matter what they wouldn't be able to beat you."

Zero shook her head, "If I go, they will easily win. If I don't go, they will still easily win. There is no point in doing it, so I don't want to."

"Alright," she changed the subject. "Why did you do that before?"

"Why?"

"While you were playing with the prisoners, the Bishop's face was stiff for the whole time," said Isabella. "It seems that he doesn't appreciate your kind of trial, and also he is the most likely candidate to be the next Pope, when that time comes you might suffer a lot."

"The reason why Excellency Mayne becomes angry is only because he hasn't become the Pope yet," Zero said carelessly. "When he goes into the library at the top of the Pivotal Secret Temple, he will come to understand that my way of handling things is exactly the way in which to please God."

"What... way of handling?"

"Playing with, ah," the Purified ran her hands through her hair to tidy the mess created by the wind. "God has never descended on the world, he also doesn't protect his people. Only by having a single illusory objective can we guarantee to take over when someone else fails to reach it, in hopes of receiving his favor. Doesn't this concept resemble the trial I just held? I at least provided him with a real objective, something that God never will. It isn't even guaranteed that his objective is realistic or whether everything is our own crazy raving. Yet even with so much uncertainty, we still dash onward with no thought to our personal safety... Tsktsk, it is truly the most thorough play."

What's this woman talking about? Why can't I understand one word? Isabella knitted her brows and asked confused, "Have you ever been to the library?"

"No," She shrugged her shoulders, "These were words His Holiness O'Brian had said to me. He isn't a witch, and his lifespan is already approaching its end. I heard that when mortals reach their end, they will start to reminisce on their life and will always hope to find someone to talk to about it. He even wants to let me swallow him before his death."

"You can't —"

“Of course I mustn’t, that would make Excellency Mayne furious,” Zero interrupted, “Rest assured, I know what I’m allowed to do and what not.” A mysterious smile played around her lips, “There is another possibility. What will happen if I lose? Can’t I then offer up my body as a present to him?”

“I don’t think so. If you lose, chances are that nothing is going to happen.” Isabella sighed, this woman is a strange one, probably because of her ability – after swallowing so many people, it’s very hard for her to find something she hadn’t experienced yet. Which leads to her seldom being interested in anything and instead is simply doing everything for the sake of pleasure, furthermore, only an unusual pleasure will suffice.

Isabella moved her line of sight back to the battlefield. A group of desperados suddenly appeared from the gaps in the city wall and started charging into the ranks of the God’s Punishment Army. Most of them came to a screaming end at the end of a spear, but there were still a few who managed to slip through the net. The sound of explosions began to rise, followed by smoke rising to cover all of the gaps within the wall.

This should be the new alchemy weapon which started to appear during the last siege, she thought. It seems quite powerful; thus it would be a good choice to use it against the demonic beasts. But using it in an attempt to deal with the God’s Punishment Army is just a quick way to commit suicide. If it weren’t for those pills, they would never even have dared to approach the soldiers of the God’s Punishment Army.

On the other side, the mighty current of the golden ocean slowed as raging flames suddenly emerged on the path through the city gate, isolating the soldiers who had already entered the city from the Judges still standing in front. Some people who were caught by the flames desperately started to roll over the ground to try and extinguish the flames, but it was to no avail.

“Hmm... the amount of the God’s Stone of Retaliation has increased exponentially behind the gates. There are even two high-quality stones present. It seems as if someone important has come.” Isabella opened her mouth.

“That being the case, let’s go and end it,” Zero said, and leisurely stretched her waist.

“But those two are neither the Wolf King nor the Queen of Clear Water,” Isabella informed while glancing at the city, “The most intense reaction is still inside the castle. Are you sure you want to go?”

“Isn’t the army in trouble? Winning easily and winning miserably isn’t the same. I still have to help His Holiness O’Brian reduce the losses,” Zero tilted her head and continued in an earnest tone, “Just like I said before, I serve the Church wholeheartedly.”

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It was already afternoon when Wolfsheart City’s defensive line finally broke under the siege warfare. After the soldier of the God’s Punishment Army got control over the city gate, the Army of Judges began to chase the enemy’s soldiers through the streets to clear up all the resistance.

“The targets have started to move,” Isabella said after looking toward the direction of the castle, “It seems they intend to go to the river dock.”

Those two people who had come to organize the resistance at the wall and city gates were the Wolf King's sons. And now, through the information she gathered after swallowing both of them, Zero further confirmed that the two moving God's Stones of Retaliation with the highest reaction were indeed the primary targets of this mission.

In addition, they had also taken care of a fallen witch who looked and dressed as if she was of a different tribe. After the death of the witch, the militia forces who dared to go against the God's Punishment Army suddenly reduced by a lot.

"They probably want to leave by ship," Zero said with a blooming smile. "Let's go and complete the mission given to us by His Holiness."

The action of the other side made it clear that they were very cautious. On their way toward the docks they changed routes several times and when they finally arrived at the pier they didn't board one of those huge ships with black sails, but instead chose the small sloop of a merchant.

But no matter how hard they tried to cover their whereabouts, in front of the constantly monitoring Isabella their movements were immediately exposed.

The moment the Wolf King and the Queen of Clear Water boarded the deck of the ship, two people came over from the other side of the pier. There were twenty additional soldiers on top of the ship, most of them were personal guards. When they saw the two appear, they immediately knew that something was amiss without even needing to think about it. Thus everyone drew their weapon and jumped off the vessel, throwing themselves straight at the Purifieds.

It was once more time for Zero to display her superior fighting skills. She was empty handed as she seized the sword of a personal guard and drew everyone in to start fighting against her. With every sword stroke she made an enemy collapse, her footsteps lithe and quick, with only a few people able to anticipate her next move. Whether it was a poke, strike, chop, or block, Zero always used the appropriate amount of strength and the trickiest angle to strike, and soon, more than a dozen personal guards were lying on the ground, everyone having been killed by one sword.

The Wolf King pulled out the sword at his waist, ready to throw himself into a desperate fight.

"Isabella!" Zero cried.

"I know," the latter immediately launched her ability – forming a circle of light that was only visible to the magic eye. Within Isabella's field of vision, the lightless domains formed by the God's Stone of Retaliation appeared, each of them was trembling at a different frequency, like ripples on the surface of water. She controlled her field until it trembled at the same frequency, then connected it with the domain of the God's Stone of Retaliation. Both sides of ripples immediately canceled each other out, leading to the domain becoming level and smooth.

At that moment, Zero immediately turned into a beam of light, and drilled herself into the Wolf King's body.

The Wolf King began to twist before changing into the form of the Purified, after seeing this the Queen of Clear Water revealed an incredulous look, "How can this be possible? Why are you able to use your power around the God's Stones of Retaliation?"

“Because the God’s Stones of Retaliation isn’t what you believe...” Isabella said while still smoothing out the ripples of her opponent’s domain, “But there isn’t really a reason for you to know this, because... your end has come.”

The moment her voice had fallen, Zero threw herself directly at Garcia.

Chapter 313 The Battle of the Soul

She hadn’t felt such a warm sunshine in a long time.

Garcia stood in the garden and took in a deep breath, inhaling the smell of rosemary coming along the breeze.

This was no longer the Kingdom of Eternal Winter; besides the forever frozen soil and the non-aromatic Winterflower, that country in the extreme north really had nothing to offer. Within that castle’s backyard, lumps of meat and pig guts would always be hung out to dry in the open air, making it impossible to get rid of the awful smell. This place was also not the Port of Clear Water, with its familiar taste of salt and its moist air, where if she closed her eyes, she could hear waves breaking over the beach.

This is the palace of Graycastle, she thought.

But... its appearance was somewhat different from what she remembered.

Garcia sat down at the central flowered pond, gently caressing the slightly rough rocks – back in her childhood, while playing hide-and-seek, she had fallen to the ground and fiercely hit her head against the stones on the side of the flower pond. Since then her father had ordered for all the stones to be broken into small pebbles. As a result, it was then impossible to hurt oneself when stumbling, but it had also become impossible to hide oneself behind them.

At that time, she remembered, that besides herself, Gerald and Timothy had also been present. Seeing their younger sister fall down both of them had become very frightened. To coax her to stop her sobbing, one by one they’d made themselves fall and deliberately knocked their head against the stones at the side of the pond. Of course, afterward, they were ruthlessly beaten up by their father.

It was a period in her life that Garcia thought she would never recall again. It was like a secret hidden beneath a tree, deeply buried in the earth. But now that she’s returned to this familiar place, she discovered that the scenery hasn’t faded in the slightest. After digging it out of the earth, it still appeared just as vivid and lifelike as in the past.

It seemed as if everything has returned back to the time in her childhood.

“As it turns out, this is your world,” an unknown voice sounded from behind her, “As a resting place, it’s a pretty good choice.”

Garcia turned around, and saw a woman dressed in white coming from the direction of the flowered pond. She had a pair of light red eyes and long, snow white hair, her facial features were so delicate that they seemed to have been carved, and her voice was ethereal and melodious, all in all she was like a god who had fallen into the mortal world.

The face of the Queen of Clear Water completely darkened as she stated, “You are the Church’s witch.”

“My name is Zero, the word ‘witch’ doesn’t suit me,” she laughed. “I’m called a ‘Purified’. My blood, and that of those fallen, is entirely different.”

“A Purified? That’s just the term the Church uses for the toys they’ve raised,” Garcia said coldly, “What kind of trick is this scenery? Does your ability allows you to create illusions?” She suddenly picked up a stone and squeezed it in her hand. “It’s just an illusion! None of this will fool me!”

The Queen’s cry traveled far, but the scenery remained entirely unaffected. When she opened her hand, she saw that the stone in her hand wasn’t crushed, instead, her skin was cut by its hard edges and corners. The pain bursting from the wound seemed clear and real.

“It appears that you aren’t completely unaware of witch abilities. That makes things much easier,” Zero grasped the hem of her skirt and gave a slight bow, “Welcome to the World of Consciousness, I call this place the Battlefield of Souls. It is here where we will carry out our fight. The winner gets everything, the loser loses all... Just as God proclaims in the Holy Book.”

Souls... battlefield.

Garcia stared blankly, trying to digest what she had just heard when she suddenly felt a sharp pain coming from her lung. She didn’t know from where the pike had come, but somehow Zero had had directly thrust it into her chest. Her breathing immediately turned heavy, when she tried to open her mouth and shout, not even the smallest of sounds came out. Meanwhile, Zero turned the pike around and fiercely pulled it back, blood came spraying out of the wound, soon covering half of her body. Garcia sank to her knees, trembling as she tried to cover her wounds, but due to the enormous blood loss, her consciousness had already began to blur.

The next moment she found herself standing at her former place in perfect condition. The shadows standing a few meters away from her, as she had never left her place to begin with.

What happened? Garcia opened her mouth wide, taking in a deep breath, an illusion? Her hands were still fiercely pressing against her chest, and she could still feel an aching pain at the place the wound from a moment ago had been. Lowering her head, she saw a large spray of blood scattered around her feet.

“This is the basic rule. One’s consciousness isn’t immortal,” Zero explained, spreading out her hands, “The pain of every death will feel real to you. It will slowly consume your mental and physical strength, and when this sense exceeds your limits it will be time for your eternal rest.

“Every time you die, your body will return to its original state. An average person can withstand at most three to four times, of course, I have also seen a lot of determined individuals who managed to go through seven, eight, or even more deaths,” She explained gently. “Although I am looking forward to your performance, I can also understand if you give up. After all, the feeling of continuous death is an unbearable suffering. At this point, choosing to escape isn’t a cowardly behavior, especially when the outcome has already been decided.”

Finished speaking with the dropped pike in her hand and a great sword on her back she leaped forward and tried splitting Garcia apart.

The latter stared with wide open eyes, she is wearing a white gown, there is no way for her to hide such a huge weapon. All these weapons are... coming out of thin air? Suddenly the other's words reappeared in her mind –

“This is your world...”

“I call it the Battlefield of Souls.”

“One's consciousness isn't immortal... everything is real to you.”

The great sword chopped down, but instead of cutting the former Queen of Clear Water in two, it slammed against a huge iron shield. Confronted with the huge unexpected rebound, Zero lost her grip on the sword as it flew into the air, at the same time her body was also forced a few steps back. Garcia, because of the great strength she'd used to deflect the heavy blow, fell to the ground.

“The end is already destined?” She ground her teeth and sneered, “Previously you said this is ‘my world’, didn't you?” The moment the words fell, she popped up, and a crossbow suddenly appeared in her hand immediately releasing the arrow at Zero. Simultaneously a crucifix raised up behind her and firmly trapped her body.

In a flash the crossbow arrow drilled into the abdomen of the Purified, immediately causing a suffering expression to appear on her face. After gasping twice, Zero opened her mouth, “Th-that surprised me... cough cough, as an ordinary person... just accepting this is already very hard, n-not to mention using your own consciousness to retaliate. You just proved... why the Queen of Clear Water is able to cause Mayne so many headaches.”

“Thank you very much for your praise,” Garcia said while picking up the spear that had fallen on the ground. “If it weren't for you talking too much I would never have been able to comprehend the wonders of the World of Consciousness so quickly. Now, should I put some more holes in you?”

Zero laughed challengingly, “For now, I'll let you do as you like.”

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When Garcia stabbed her for the tenth time, the Purified finally died – she had deliberately avoided piercing any of the fatal points, slowly moving from the hands and feet toward the abdomen. At first the Purified had cried out miserably, but later on her voice had gradually started to break.

Next, that animal should be restored to her original state, right? However, this is the palace of Graycastle, it's my home ground. Since it is possible to change the environment and objects at will, I cannot lose.

Sure enough, the body of the Purified flashed in a white light. In the blink of an eye, all of her wounds had disappeared, and Zero once again opened her light red eyes.

Garcia lifted the pike, readying to send her to her death once again, but suddenly everything changed – the hands bound to the crucifix easily broke the rope, kicked against the pike, then instantly appeared at Garcia's side and delivered a strike with her raised hand. Before Garcia could respond, she had already lost sense of her body.

With a loud bang the headless body collapsed, yet the other's hands were still empty.

How can this be?

After her restoration, the Queen of Clear Water clutched her neck and took two steps back and felt somewhat uncertain... Just now, did she use her empty hands to cut off my neck? Seeing the broken hemp rope and the blood on her hands, it became apparent that the previous scene hadn't been an illusion.

"If you couldn't understand the nature of the World of Consciousness, how could I get a real fight?" Zero smiled and said, "You seem very puzzled about how I got my hands out of the thick rope, isn't that right? In fact, this isn't so difficult to understand, 'The winner gets everything, the loser loses all'... Among those people whom I've swallowed, there is a class of witches who are unusually powerful. Their might is boundless, their body is nimble, and they don't need to fear the effect of the God's Stone of Retaliation. You might not know of them, but the Church has a particular term for them – Extraordinary.

She opened her hands, "It is impossible to beat me by only using common methods. If you want to survive, you will have to double your effort... Now, it's my turn."

TN: Many thanks to Zackarotto for creating the full list of characters.

Chapter 314 Annihilation

It was Garcia's first-time experiencing the horror of an extraordinary.

The weapon in her hand was obviously only an ordinary one-handed sword, but the burst of pressure from her every move seemed to absorb parts of her soul. Each blow that came raining down on her shield was as heavy as a strike from a two-handed sword. Two or three blows later, Garcia could no longer even lift her arm and was hit on her chin by an upwards moving strike.

After her restoration, the Queen of Clear Water thoroughly abandoned defense, and before she could second guess herself, a ballista had already appeared in front of her body. She pulled the trigger, it wasn't an iron spear that she released, but several jars of black water. Reacting instinctively, Zero cut the jars apart, only to get showered in the black water. When the pieces of fire crystal hidden inside the jars came in contact with the air, they quickly began burning, and turned the whole area into a pillar of fire.

However, it was still not guaranteed that this would work. After all, Zero could still use her speed which far surpassed everything an ordinary person could ever achieve to move around the flower pond while the ballista couldn't even turn around. Thus, Garcia had no other alternative than to rely on raising the stone walls embedded with spears to restrict the Purified's movement. In addition, she turned the flower pots surrounding the pond into explosives by filling them with snow powder, and hid several pits into the ground, setting up a formation of deathly traps.

After killing the other side several times like this, Garcia discovered that her breathing gradually became heavy, beads of sweat started running down her forehead and waves of dizziness started to attack her mind, leaving her almost unable to keep standing upright.

"Well done," the once again reborn Purified said, she wasn't taking advantage of Garcia's weakened state and was instead clapping her hands. "That you are able to do all this far surpasses my expectations. However, there is something I forgot to tell you. Even though you can use your

consciousness to change the environment and venue in this world, it will consume a much larger amount of energy than creating completely new things... the amount is even similar to one's restoration. You should already be feeling the weakness and exhaustion taking over your body, maybe after your next death, you will already fall into an eternal sleep."

"Ah, that's still better than getting one's neck cut off," Garcia panted heavily, "But you seem to forget the screams you made when being burned by the evil fire. I do not think you'll be able to hold on any longer than me."

"..." After a moment of silence, Zero said, "Ever since I've become a Purified, the Church has given me a lot of support to improve my abilities. From increasing my knowledge to teaching me fighting skill, to feeding me with Judges to improve my ability. Those Judges, even knowing that they would be sacrificing themselves, were still glad to enter the Battlefield of Souls. Here, in the World of Consciousness, they honed my skills in life and death struggles, reassuring me that they accept their death before transmitting all of their insight and experiences to me."

Garcia did not interrupt her words. Even if the other was stalling for time, she also needed a break.

"I have swallowed up an extraordinary, and her strength was impressive – I nearly lost a Battle of Souls. But in the end, I relied on the Devil's weapons to prevail over her and then got everything from her. Due to the different characteristics of magic, I can't actually turn into an extraordinary or use the abilities of the witches I swallow. However, here in the World of Consciousness, these differences don't matter to me. In the last two hundred years, I can't even remember the number of people I have swallowed, but there have only ever been a few individuals who could threaten me. All their pain, happiness, sadness, and delights they've had in their life, became part of my own personal experience..." She paused, "Including their death."

"What exactly do you want to tell me?" Garcia cautiously asked.

"The difference between you and me," replied Zero calmly. "The assimilation of so many souls has made my will matchless. In case you want to know the number of death I can survive, I think I can bear at least hundreds of death by now."

"In that case, I will have to help you to verify it." She scoffed. But inwardly her heart sunk... When looking at her demeanor, it doesn't seem that she is merely bluffing. From the time at the pier, where she cleanly and easily killed all their personal guards, it could be seen that this Purified possessed fighting skills that went beyond her age. If that's the case, I need to use even more powerful weapons... quickly, what can I think of that can easily kill even an experienced super witch?

"The Battle of Souls isn't a contest to decide who has the greater imagination," Zero said, as if she already seen through her, "You cannot make yourself impervious to sword and spear without foundation, nor can you summon the weapons which destroyed heaven and earth from the legends of ancient times... Things you cannot understand you also cannot create, what we have seen and understood is the key to success."

"Then I'll just cover the whole garden with strong snow powder, even you will be unable to avoid it," Garcia declared coldly, "Even if I die, at least I will drag you down with me!"

“Even if killing me doesn’t have the least bit of importance?” The Purified looked at her with eyes full of pity. “In that case, let me show you the real power of the Church.”

Suddenly a red light appeared behind Zero and condensed into a ferocious looking war chariot. Its shape had such extreme dimensions that it immediately crashed against the walls of the garden. To Garcia, the two sharp metal spears at the top of its head looked like the report given by one of the Wolf King’s personal guards – a kind of never before seen ballista which was attacking the walls. Both its range or power are at unprecedented levels. Don’t tell me that this monster in front of me, is what the guard has been speaking about.

Then she heard a loud hum.

The thick and solid spear directly broke through the layer upon layers of barriers Garcia had set up, not even bothering to spend any power to tear her in half as she was immediately sent flying backward. As she flew she could see her own organs and blood being left behind.

In unbroken succession, the war chariot continued to shoot those spears, thus soon after being restored, she again suffered the same death. She didn’t even have enough time to create the snow powder and take the enemy down with her. Under the constant pain, her consciousness gradually became blurred, the earth began to shake, cracks appeared in the sky, lightning flashed, thunder rumbled, and the garden burst into a blazing fire.

“A strong will can only delay defeat, it cannot change the outcome. Close your eyes now,” Zero said, “You’ve held it for long enough, rest in peace.”

The moment her voice fell, the whole world broke apart.

...

“Is it over?” Isabella curled her lips, “Shouldn’t it be done in an instant? You’ve already changed back into your original appearance, but for quite a while now you haven’t said a word... I thought you really failed this time.”

“I found some fascinating things in her memory,” Zero opened her eyes, “This way of thinking... makes me sigh.”

“Oh? There are still things which can make you sigh?” Isabella said carelessly, “That kind of strange alchemy powder should be something you have found out, right?”

“Well, the alchemist called it strong snow powder and the composition is quite simple. All the needed components are the most common things in the workshop.”

“If it’s like that then let us go back to the Holy City to report, we have already fulfilled all the orders given by His Holiness O’Brien,” she spat out. “This battle will continue for at least three to four days, but now without a leader or witch to guide them, those remnants won’t count as a threat to the God’s Punishment Army.”

“Let’s go,” Zero nodded.

“Hold on...” Isabella shouted for her to stop.

“What happened?”

Was it an illusion? Obviously, there’s no change in her appearance from before. But why do I feel that the look from her light red eyes has become somewhat different? Isabella carefully studied her counterpart but then shook her head, “No... it’s nothing.”

I guess I’m just overthinking things.

Chapter 315 Celebration Feast

A grand celebration banquet was being held in the main hall of Border Town’s castle.

In addition to the witches, the high-ranking staff in City Hall and the First Army all fully attended this feast. There were the nobles Barov Mons and Carter Lannis, and also Iron Axe and Kyle Sichi who were from a civilian background. Especially for the latter, Roland had to spend a lot of effort to persuade him to come out of the laboratory and attend this according to him “meaningless” banquet.

To include his subjects in this joyful event, besides giving a public speech he’d also ordered the kitchen staff to bake a large amount of white bread by using the leftover refined starch from manufacturing explosives, and distribute the bread to all of the town’s people. As long as they were in possession of an identification card, they could get a limited amount of delicious food at the City Hall. Even while the First Army was on their way home, most of the town’s inhabitants had already learned of their victory in battle.

Of course, they may not necessarily understand the purpose and significance of the expedition, but as long as there was free bread it counted as a day of celebrate for them.

This was also Roland’s first time imitating those “lofty” banquets hosted in King’s City.

There was no barbecue and no large pieces of stewed meat, all the food was cut into small pieces and splendidly arranged on spotlessly white plates. At the edge of the table stood several basins that contained all kinds of seasonings, so that they could flavor their food according to their own taste, similar to the buffets of later generations.

“Welcome back,” Roland said, carrying two glasses of wine to Anna, “The journey must have been hard for you.”

“You already said that at the pier,” Anna took one glass, “And my answer is still the same, ‘it wasn’t hard’.”

When their glasses faintly touched each other, her eyes were filled with a sweet smile. Seeing this, Roland had to struggle to resist the impulse to embrace her on the spot. Instead, he went on and exchanged a celebration cup with the other witches.

“What about me?” Lightning shouted.

“You’ll also get your share,” Roland said, calling over a waiter from whom he then took a glass of cider for her, “Work hard.”

“I demand to drink white!” The little girl looked at him with big eyes.

“Uh huh...” After thinking about it, Roland finally decided to fulfill her wish. After all, this kid’s curiosity had always been quite high, so if he refused her all the time, maybe she would learn from Nightingale and sneak into the kitchen, but she’d be stealing wine instead, “Alright, but only one drink.”

“Yeah!”

When Roland handed her a weak white wine mixed with ice and grape juice, she suddenly approached and gave him a kiss on his cheek.

“Keke... Is this the custom from the Fjords?”

“Sure,” Lightning nodded seriously, “That’s what my father told me!”

Because it wasn’t the first time they saw it, the other witches of the Witch Alliance didn’t feel that it was too strange. However, Sylvie’s eyes became round from shock before throwing an accusatory glance at Roland, and saw he was moving along while wearing an awkward expression – does there really exist such a custom of kissing the head when celebrating heroic deed in the Fjords?

Then it was time to exchange a toast with the ministers.

When it came to the chief alchemist’s turn, the man leaned over and whispered, “Your Highness, since you gave me the ‘Intermediate Chemistry’ I have already read it twice, but, there are still a lot of things that I can’t understand.

“If you are talking about that sub-atomic constitution of matter, that part involves a lot of physical knowledge, so you have to read another book to understand it.” Roland pointed out, “So, I suggest that you first read the ‘Elementary Physics’ before going through the remnants of the Intermediate Chemistry again. This way, many of your doubts should be answered.”

“That’s what I was going to do, but...” he hesitated for a moment before continuing, “Your Royal Highness, why are the colors used on the cover of each ancient book different? Does it have any special meaning to it?”

“That is...” Roland pondered for a moment, “The color represents the requirements and time needed to comprehend it.”

“It was like this?” Kyle mused, “From green to purple. So, it seems that the deeper the color, the more profound is the knowledge recorded within. In that way, ‘Advanced Chemistry’ must surely be black?”

“No, it is orange.”

“Ah,” Kyle got startled, “Why?”

Roland smiled, “Who knows?”

...

Halfway through the banquet, Roland stepped out of the hall and went to the castle terrace. Standing in the gently blowing evening breeze, he couldn’t help but feel a slight chill. Half of autumn has already passed he realized, so in other words, it wouldn’t be long before the lengthy winter would cover the whole Western Territory with snow and bring about the Months of Demons.

But the situation during this year and the previous year had become as different as black and white. The trade with Margaret's Chamber of Commerce had brought in a lot of floating amount of money, and in exchange for food and materials many of these gold royals were paid to the people in the form of a salary. According to statistics from the convenience market, the recent sales of products has shown a lot of growth, from which some of the goods would significantly improve the people's quality of life. Sales for products such as steak and eggs was growing especially quickly.

There was no doubt that this was a sign of the gradual improvement in the living standards for the people. In particular, the indigenous population had all received new free housing, while their salary, compared to before, had also increased a lot. Nowadays, they had even started to buy food which they usually could only enjoy during festivals. The newly introduced population was still at the stage where they were busy saving money in order to purchase a house, but when they manage to settle down the market was bound to usher for a new peak in sales.

What exactly do people need? Sometimes, eating and drinking one's fill was already enough to be grateful to their Lord and follow him until their death.

During this era, most civilians were easy to please.

"Your Highness, beware of catching a cold," Nightingale said, and appeared behind him with a thin coat in hand. She threw the cloth to Roland, took out a piece of dried fish from a bag and came to stand beside him, "What's going on here?"

"Nothing," Roland said, showing her a smile while he put on the coat, "I just suddenly had the urge to see my territory."

"It seems the town is still very busy," Nightingale said and pointed to the still brightly lit town square, "It's already night time and there are still so many people who haven't gone home."

"That's because today was the first time they were showing the new drama, 'Dawn'," Roland explained happily, "Furthermore, it was also the first show after the troupe's several months of departure from Border Town. So, the villagers have probably been full of anticipation to see Miss May and Misses Irene again."

But that being said, Miss May would soon become Lady May Lannis. He actually had never expected that his own Chief Knight would act so decisively to hold the hands of the Star of the West. When the other side had informed him with a sincere face about his intention, he was first stupefied for a while before he was finally to respond. The wedding of the Chief Knight needed the approval of his Lord, but Roland naturally had no objection to this kind of happy event. In the end, the wedding for the two was scheduled for after the end of the Months of Demons, more precisely, for the day when Border Town officially became a city.

"It was a dead place when I first snuck into this town," Nightingale exclaimed, "But now, even while standing in the castle, it seems I still feel the joyful atmosphere surrounding us."

"Life will improve, day by day," Roland looked up, looking at the cloudless night sky as he took in a deep breath. There were still many things left to be done such as expanding the scope of education, setting up a public health care, increasing the amount of cultural constructions, encouraging birth rate and so

forth. All these things would transform the Western Territory into a stable force and lay out the foundation for the unification of Greycastle.

Nightingale tilted her head and looked at him with keen eyes as she asked, "So what about us?"

"Of course, the same is also true for you," Roland said as he patted her head, "I promise."

Chapter 316 Re-exploration of the Stone Tower

When Lightning saw His Highness leave she pulled Maggie to the corner of the hall.

"Goo?"

Maggie's hair was almost hanging to the floor, giving her the appearance of a floating ghost whenever she moved. Pushing aside the white hair covering her cheeks, Maggie's high puffed up cheeks and the half swallowed crisp pork chop dangling in her small mouth became visible.

"I found a fascinating place," Lightning whispered. "It's hidden inside the Concealing Forest, I intend to go and explore it tomorrow. Would you like to come with me on an adventure?"

"Guru," Maggie swallowed the food in her mouth and nodded again and again, "I want, I want. What should we prepare?"

"To go on an adventure, you need three items... Wrong, three of the most commonly used things," Lightning discovered that from time to time she has started to use His Highness' strange vocabulary. "You need a flint, dry food, and a dagger. The place isn't far from here. So it will be fine if you just take along enough food for a day. Don't fill your whole pocket with it like you did last time."

"Okay goo," Maggie patted her chest, ready to leave, but Lightning stopped her once again.

"Remember, that this adventure is our secret. Don't tell anyone else about it," the little girl said, "We'll start early tomorrow morning."

Looking at Maggie's back, who couldn't wait to get back to the table full of food, she curled her lips and began to think about their plan for tomorrow.

Despite the success of the bombing mission and meeting His Highness' expectation, she found that her flying has become much less flexible than before, as if something was holding her back. Whenever Lightning raised her speed, she would always have the feeling that a Devil was chasing her.

This obstruction was brought by fear, she realized. Furthermore, the source of her fear was the exploration of the Stone Tower, when she saw the horrible figure in the basement doorway, she had lost her cool and calm. At that time, her only thought had been to flee from that place as quickly as she could. Ever since then she had started to question her identity as an explorer.

"Fear is not terrible, terrible is the unknown. If you want to overcome it, you must approach it first."

Within her heart, Lightning silently repeated her father's teaching again and again. Tomorrow she might encounter real danger, but an explorer should not be afraid of risk, nor should they shrink back. If she couldn't get over it, she was scared that she would never be able to fly freely again.

This was also the reason why Lightning decided to keep the adventure hidden from His Royal Highness and act without authorization. According to His Royal Highness' plan, the exploration of the Stone Tower was scheduled for after the Months of Demons and would be a cooperation between the First Army and the witches. However, she was worried that by that time, even if they visited the Stone Tower once again, it would be hard for her to see it as somehow fulfilling the idea of "conquering the fear" – only daring to approach the danger zone by relying on the strength of everyone, just couldn't be called an adventure.

Afterward, His Highness may scold her, even going so far as confiscating her ice cream, and her sisters from the Witch Alliance would surely also be worried, but she was still determined to go through with it.

As the daughter of the Fjord's greatest explorer Thunder, Lightning just couldn't accept her cowardly self.

But it didn't mean that her decision was a reckless act. Compared with her unprepared attempt a few months ago, she now had a revolver -a gift from His Highness-, possessed a greater understanding of the Devils, and lastly, she was being accompanied by Maggie.

Especially the last point... If they really did encounter a group of Devils in the Stone Tower and even if Maggie couldn't change into her demonic beast's appearance to drive them away, they would at least still be able to flee on their own.

An explorer doesn't need a brigade of troops to increase their courage, she thought, but they can still have a few trusted teammates.

After dinner, Lightning gathered some pieces of honeyed meat and put it into a cloth bag, she then added torches, weapons, and water bags.

The successful completion of the bombing mission gave her some confidence, together with His Highness's encouragement and her slightly cheeky reputation let her feel doubly courageous. And just like the blacksmith's saying went, 'it's best to strike while the iron is hot', tomorrow would be the best time for them to depart.

At first light, Lightning flew to the top of the castle, where Maggie was already sitting on the wall and waiting for her.

"Let me check your package."

"I got everything you told me, goo," she changed back to her original form, opened her backpack and held it in front so that the little girl could confirm its content. This time she had reduced the amount of food to half, but at least had also added a dagger and a flint.

"Alright, this can be counted as qualified... let's set off," Lightning said rising into the air, flying together with the pigeon toward the Concealing Forest.

...

In her mind, Lightning had already repeated the journey many times, reaching a point where she could find her way there even with her eyes closed. The weather was a bit overcast today, but it was still much

better than the dark clouds that had been there last time. As the color of earth slowly fell away behind them, the closer they came to the Stone Tower, the greater became Lightning's nervousness.

"Did you say you found an interesting place last night, was it a new eagle nest?" Maggie asked after a while.

"No, it's much more interesting than that," Lightning shook her head. "The target we want to explore is an ancient relict, a stone tower that has been left behind for more than four hundred years. Since the basement hasn't collapsed yet, we might be able to find some ancient books if we are lucky."

"Ancient books?" Maggie shook her wings, "That doesn't sound as if it's more exciting than digging for eagle eggs, goo."

"An eagle nest has at most two to three eggs, something which you finish up in a flash," the little girl said. "But, if you actually can find such a book and bring it back to His Royal Highness, he will surely reward you with a basket full of eggs. Whether you cook or steam them, you'll be able to eat three eggs every day for a long time to come."

"Really?" Maggie was full of spirit immediately, "Then let's hurry up and look for ancient books! Googoo!"

Around noon, the two successfully arrived at their destination.

The remaining half of the stone tower was still hidden within the woods covered in moss and vines. Everything around them looked the same as a few months ago, it didn't seem as if anything had changed. Yet, Lightning still lowered her height and flew a few rounds around the tower to confirm their safety before landing gently.

"Have we arrived, goo?" the pigeon shouted from above her head.

"Hush—" Lightning signaled her to be silent, within the silence of the forest their voices seem particularly noisy, "Speak softly. There could be Devils nearby."

"The Devil?" Maggie's tail immediately erected.

"You wait for me at the top," Lightning said with a lowered voice, pointing to the upper part of the broken tower. "I will go and take a look at the situation first."

When she walked over the gradually withered grass, she could hear a slight rustling sound coming from her foot. Reaching the entrance of the tower, she saw that it hadn't been covered by plants and that the small cluster of vines cut off by her dagger last time was still there. Holding her breath, she moved forward along the former road and entered the tower. Taking one step after another, she slowly neared the center of the tower with its passage to the basement. At the time she saw the stair leading into the darkness in front of her, she even heard her heart loudly pounding.

Fear comes from the unknown, to overcome the fear, you have to approach the unknown... the little girl constantly encouraged herself, then lit a torch and climbed the stairs leading down.

Reaching the corner of the channel, she quietly shot out a probing glance, only fragments were left from the collapsed wooden door. The basement entrance also wasn't blocked by the Devil, the only thing left behind at the door was a thick darkness, like an open mouth waiting to swallow the people who enter.

At this moment, she suddenly heard traces of a voice floating over from the darkness, only faintly discernible but still feeling very familiar –

Immediately all of her hairs were fully erected, her body was grasped by shivers and the almost uncontrollable urge to turn around and flee came up once again! She grit her teeth and struggled to suppress the boiling fear at the bottom of her heart. Then, covering her mouth, she bent an ear and listened attentively one more time.

This time the call was much clearer, the tone exactly the same as last time.

“Help me...”

Chapter 317 “Ice Coffin”

Lightning felt goosebumps roll over her body.

She suddenly remembered all the stories that were spread among explorers – Demons crawling from the abyss, the vengeful ghosts still bearing a grudge at the end of their life, or the wandering undead. These were the nightmares of every explorer, even if they were already dead they were still able to take someone’s life. They were exceptionally good at using illusions and deception, so could it be that one of these monsters were hidden within this ruin?

Although Thunder had said that these stories were just some nonsense made up by third-rate explorers, but at this moment she still felt shaken to her core. Otherwise, who would ever be able to keep shouting under the Devil’s siege, even holding the same tone and interval after several months have passed?

She was now facing a dilemma – if they were indeed one of these evil things from folklore, they would have killed all Devils, but then it would become difficult for her to escape after having trespassed into their domain. But if the other party was still able to hold on until now, shouldn’t those Devils still be inside then, what should we do?

After hesitating for a moment, in the end, she decided to fly back to Maggie to discuss the next step with her.

After hearing a short narration about the current situation, Maggie raised her head and said, “We could extinguish the torch and stealthily find our way in goo, this way those Devils won’t be able to see us.”

“Uh, but then we won’t be able to see them either.”

“I can turn into an owl,” said the pigeon rubbing her face, “The dark of night isn’t a big problem for me, goo.”

Lightning’s eyes lit up, “That’s a good idea, but... those legendary evil creatures, they live in the dark all their lives. Doesn’t that mean they might have a way to find their prey? Otherwise, they should have died from starvation long ago, right?”

“Didn’t you say that they were all made up stories meant to frighten people?”

“It wasn’t me who said that, it was my father.” The little girl corrected.

“That’s all the same. Anyway, living in Greycastle I have never heard of those undead monsters, if they were indeed so horrible, they shouldn’t only remain in a little place like the Fjords, right?” Rays of light suddenly broke out of Maggie, and the pigeon suddenly began to swell, turning into a gray-brown owl, her eyes full of eagerness, “I thought you would be interested in these legends.”

That’s right, if I want to qualify as an explorer, I should never let go of an opportunity to verify a legend. Not to mention that I still have to defeat my heart demons, if I flee now, I will waste all of my previous efforts. After hesitating for a moment, Lightning decided to go along with Maggie’s suggestion.

But wait... the reason why I want to explore the ruins at all cost is so that I can overcome my fear, but why is Maggie so interested in exploring them? Could it be...

“It can’t be that you’re so impatient because of the basket of eggs, right?”

Hearing the question, the owl blinked her two big eyes before turning her head away.

...

Once again standing in front of the entrance to the basement, Lightning took a deep breath, tightly gripped her revolver as she silently entered into the deep darkness.

She felt much calmer compared to before, that was probably because Maggie was squatting on her shoulder.

The ground under her feet felt very wet, even so far that they could encounter some puddle of water from time to time. This area was the terrain’s lowest point, thus the rain falling over the tower would slowly come to gather here. Although the basement was equipped with a drainage system in general, after facing wind and rain for hundreds of years, these hidden ditches were most probably already clogged up since an earlier time.

Maggie patted her head with her wings, signaling that there were stairs leading downward in front of them.

Lightning slowed her pace, and carefully, little by little she searched her way to the edge of the stairwell. Then, after having cautiously gone all the way down the stair and turned a corner, she suddenly saw a light appear ahead of them.

A soft yellow light coming from the end of the stairs penetrating all the way through the dark, which, when falling onto the ground, would be reflected in shaking waves.

She carefully studied this for a moment only to discover that the slight shaking on the surface was actually a piece of sewage. By looking at the lower half of the door which was buried in the water, it could be seen that the water level in the basement was about knee deep.

She slowly walked to the point between the staircase and the water, lifted both her feet from the ground, then slowly floated over to the door and throwing a probing glance to the inside.

And saw that the area behind the door was spacious and empty – the stone tower’s basement was unbelievable huge, offering far more space than the area it had covered on the ground. She couldn’t detect any burning torch which created the yellow light. Instead it seemed that the light came directly

from the stones that were embedded in the walls. It roughly outlined the contours of the basement, while at the same time allowing Lightning to see everything within the room.

A stone platform was erected in the middle of the chamber with several figures standing on top of it. According to their burly size and the carapace on their back, it seemed that they were all Devils. Luckily, the enemy hadn't yet noticed any movement coming from the door, Instead each of them were holding a spear in one hand and a large shield in the other, surrounding a blue stone erected on top of the platform.

At this moment, the cry for help was becoming clearer and clearer, as if someone was shouting directly into her ear.

"Save me, save me..."

Lightning had to swallow. What should I do next?

"We..."

"Go and save her, goo," Maggie whispered into her ear.

"Eh?" The little girl got startled," But there are several Devils... We cannot win against them!" She felt her hand that was firmly gripping the revolver begin to sweat, "It wouldn't be a problem if it was Sister Nightingale instead of me, but I alone... cannot do it."

"Are they the demons you spoke off?" Maggie inquired, "It seems as if they are already dead, goo."

"What? Dead?"

The moment her voice fell Maggie had already thrown herself into the air flying toward the stage, giving Lightning quite the scare, stunning for a moment. Otherwise, she would never have forgotten to pull her friend back. But when she finally came back to her senses Maggie had already thrown herself against one of those Devils. With no other option left, Lightning clenched her teeth and raised her gun; trying to remember all the important points that Nightingale had taught her.

But what she then saw, was completely unlike what she had expected, when the owl pecked a Devil twice, it crumbled down, just like a piece of broken stones after experiencing countless years of wind and frost, turning into a pile of floating ashes.

What's going on? Lightning stepped beside Maggie and looked at the other three Devils in amazement.

Looking at them under the weak yellow light, she discovered that their bodies were covered with tiny cracks, and that spiders had spun nets between their legs, looking through their hideous helmets, she could see that their eyes and skin had turned pale, showing no traces of vitality. It was like this, she thought, within the dark light, an owl's eyes are indeed several times better than mine, which allowed Maggie to be able to speak so confidently.

But before she could relax, Lightning's gaze was already completely attracted by something else.

On the high platform surrounded by the Devils stood a huge cube. What had looked like a stone column from a distance actually turned out to be transparent crystal when seen from up close. Wrapped within

the crystal cube was a woman who wore a gorgeous robe, her eyes were closed, her hands stretched open, and her hair spread out behind her as if it was still fluttering in the wind.

“Is she a witch, goo?” Maggie asked as she flew to the top of the crystal then fiercely pecked against the surface. However, this time it didn’t crumble into countless pieces, but instead sent out a sharp and clear hitting sound, “Very hard, goo!”

“I do not know,” Lightning murmured as she laid her hand against the crystal. A cold chill penetrated her skin – the crystal’s surface was covered with thick dust, which made it obvious that the woman had been in this “sarcophagus” for a very long time. Yet her expression was still so lifelike, her eyebrows were raised into a frown, looking a bit confused, but even more than that, they also seemed a bit anxious and worried.

“Save me...”

The sound could be heard once again, it was coming from behind the crystal.

Chapter 318 Unknown

Roland scratched over the surface with the brush, writing a long paragraph on paper.

Before he came to this world, he had only drawn mechanical blueprints using the computer. At that time he had already thought that there would only be small chances where he would ever need to write characters using a pen, never did he expect to have to use this kind of ancient form of recording ever again.

Two papers filled with text laid next to his hand, containing the next plans for what he wanted to implement.

One plan was the large-scale production of sulfuric acid and the new equipment that was needed, made by the hands of Anna and Soraya. Instead of using lead for the reaction vessel, they would use the more robust and reliable iron together with an anti-corrosion coating. Furthermore, the vessels would be made three times larger than the previous trial version’s.

Considering that at the present stage there was fundamentally no way to collect or purify the produced industrial waste gas (mainly used from combustion of sulfur and leakage of nitrogen oxides), Roland decided to place it at the southern end of the industrial park – far enough away from the residential area and the Redwater River. Furthermore, he planned to use stones so as to better isolate the building and also erect a chimney to raise the altitude at which the emissions would be released.

Increasing the output of sulfuric acid was of great help to enlarge the scale of concentrated nitric acid, so putting this equipment into production would be the most important task at present. The content of the document were instructions to Kyle Sichi to select a group of disciples who will be specializing in the production of sulfuric acid. In addition, Barov also needed to recruit some reliable local residents who could work as auxiliary handyman, raising the number of staff required for the chemical plant to around 100 people.

The second document was the formation of a public health care system.

To be honest, Roland wasn't familiar with this subject. Talking about it, he didn't even understand a single thing about modern medicine. However, this didn't prevent him from using his common sense to develop a plan which meets all of their current needs.

First of all, the biggest task of this department would be to give publicity to modern scientific discoveries. Things such as boiling the water before drinking it, the fact that meat has to be fully cooked before eating, the cause of illnesses and how they manage to spread, the difference between parasites and microbes, and so forth... Thanks to his growing prestige it wouldn't be difficult for him to get people to do what he wants, but if he wanted them to understand why they should do something, he would need someone to do the publication and education for him. It would be useless if they only spoke once about these things. Instead, it had to be repeated seven or eight times, maybe even dozens of times, like those slogans that were hanging at the edge of the field. If they continually spoke about it, their view would always become accepted in the end.

The second part was encouraging the birthrate – since the City Hall only had a limited number of staff, Roland did not want to set up a separate family planning department. Thus he temporarily also placed this under the public health care's responsibility. The population was always the most scarce resource in this era, and the best way to confront this was by leading people to give birth to more lives. Nana's ability completely erased the risk of giving birth and many of the other thorny problems. And with her help, the post-natal survival rate would almost be around one hundred percent. In order to avoid the abandonment of baby girls, as well as restricting any changes of something like that happening in future, Roland developed a full subsidy and punishment policy. For example, the subsidy for baby girls was slightly higher than for baby boys, subsidies would be given in installments, and the abandonment of babies would be punished with fines or imprisonment, and so on.

The last point was the regulation of payment. Except for fertility treatment, the hospital would charge a fee in accordance with the amount of magic that Nana needed to use. This way it would reduce the little girl's burden as well as lay the foundation for the future hospital system. Roland had also already found the first person he wanted in charge of this department, Viscount Tigu Pine, Nana's father.

The third document, was currently in the state of being written, and was the most complex and far-reaching plan – it was the plan to establish Border Town as a city.

It was related to the problems created by the expansion of Border Town and the later merger with Longsong Stronghold. When that time came about, there would definitely be a demand for new laws concerning the governance of these two places, and both the judicial system and the public security system would have to be implemented. However, if he wanted to make these points watertight, merely relying on his own knowledge wouldn't be enough, thus Roland intended to draft a list first, and later discuss all the details with City Hall Premier Minister Barov.

After finishing the introductory part, Roland felt some pain in his wrist from all the writing so he went to the window to take a break.

Today's weather was very gloomy, and from morning to afternoon he had yet to see the sun. The sky was consistently being covered with dark clouds, and gave the impression that torrential rains would soon be coming. The chilly autumn wind swept over the castle backyard and Roland heard the olive leaves rustling.

At this moment, a black spot appeared on the horizon, flying in the direction of the castle.

"It's Lightning," Nightingale's voice came from behind him.

"She probably went to the Concealing Forest to pick some mushrooms again," Roland said with a smile. Usually, when they weren't on investigation duty, the goal of Lightning and Maggie's practice was left up to themselves. Therefore, it was entirely reasonable for them to not come back to the castle to eat lunch. According to the two, they would often be somewhere in the woods looking for some eggs and honeycombs, or catching some strange animals to barbecue and eat. It was likely that all explorers would ultimately transform into Bear Grylls.

Although the bird kissing mushrooms mainly grew on trees, he could not help but always think of the story called: 'The mushroom plucking girl'.

"Your Highness, your... smile is a little strange."

"Keke, I had to think of a little short story, do you want to hear it?"

"Ok?"

Roland cleared his throat, "Once upon a time, there was a little girl, she liked to gather mushrooms... Wait." The shadow was slowly growing, but contrary to what they expected it didn't fly over the castle, but instead lowered her altitude and went straight to the window of their office. Feeling shocked, Roland opened the window only seconds before Lightning directly flew into the room without stopping.

"Y-Your Highness!" Hardly had she landed when she already started to shout in excitement, "I found a witch!"

"A witch?" Roland asked full of curiosity, "Where?"

"In the Stone Tower hidden within the Concealing Forest," Lightning pointed to Maggie, who flew into the office just at that moment, "She can testify!"

"Googoo!" Maggie agreed.

"Stone Tower?" He frowned, "Carefully tell me what happened, from the beginning to the end."

After listening to Lightning's narration, Roland could not help but suck in a mouth of cold lump. This fellow is too bold, actually only taking a pigeon along she dares to explore a ruin which contained Devils. But what's even more frightening, is that there is still a witch sealed inside these ruins. Of course, there is also the possibility that she could be an ordinary person sealed away by a witch... In any case, this is incredible news.

"What was the cry of help?"

"It is coming from this thing. I found it on a table behind her," Lightning pulled a palm-sized square box from her pocket, at first glance it looked just like a small make-up mirror. However, when she opened the lid, Roland saw a red gem embedded inside of it, and when Lightning pulled a trigger next to it, the anxious sounding voice of a female suddenly appeared in everyone's ears.

"Save me..."

Hearing the voice, Roland's body began to shudder, the sound seemed to flicker, sometimes appearing near sometimes coming from far off. It was indeed somewhat horrifying, if he imagined himself hearing this distressed voice after entering a dark underground chamber, he would certainly turn around and flee without any hesitation.

"The gem contains magic," Nightingale appeared behind them and said in astonishment, "Within it, I can see a weak magic whirlpool, just like inside a witch's body."

Well, it seems to be a magic machine which continuously repeats previously spoken words. With this, the probability that the other person is a witch has increased. "Did you find any other stones inside the basement of the Stone Tower?"

"I didn't take a closer look, also, many parts of the room were flooded," Lightning shook her head. "At that time, I only thought about coming back and telling you about this news as soon as possible."

"Never do something like this again, especially if you want to go to a dangerous place, you should first ask for permission," Roland patted her head, then looked over at Nightingale, "Call Iron Axe and all of the members of the Witch Alliance over to the office. The exploration of the relics will be scheduled earlier than planned."

Chapter 319 Autumn Snow

After the others arrived, Roland informed them about Lightning's discoveries from beginning to end. "A transparent crystal coffin in the basement of an ancient ruin, without any sign of corrosion even though the environment is damp and moist, a magic stone which regularly released a call for help, and Devils broke into countless pieces upon contact... What do you all think about this?"

"You mean she could be a witch?" Anna pondered, "If she is still alive, we can probably learn more about what happened four hundred years ago."

"It is also possible that she isn't a witch, or even from that era," Scroll said after a moment of hesitation, "Furthermore..."

"Furthermore, she might not necessarily be on our side," Leaves added.

This sentence left Roland slightly shocked. Indeed, if these remains had been left by the Church, it is more than likely that the other side could be a member of the Church. Also, according to Lightning's description, she was wearing a gorgeous gown, which could mean that she was a high-ranking member. In the case that she was an ordinary person everything would be alright, but if she really is a witch, then dealing with her would be quite tricky.

Looking at the fights Ashes and Nightingale had been in, it could be seen that it was impossible to predict the kind of attack a witch could perform beforehand. Furthermore, there was no clear dividing line to rank witches by strength. The extraordinaries might be unable to contend against witches with unique abilities even when they were wearing the God's Stone of Retaliation, and if combat witches were surprise attacked by support witches the situation would be equally worrying.

No one can guarantee that her ability won't pose a threat to the Witch Alliance if she held any malicious intent towards us... unless, we wake her within the influence of a God's Stone of Relation.

“You’re all crazy, how can you even think that she won’t be on our side?” Lily, grasping her forehead, could no longer sit still and decided to interrupt, “She should be from more than four hundred years ago, how could she still be alive today? It goes without saying that witches all die young, even if they possess the strong body of an extraordinary witch, they might never exceed a hundred years of age. All of you are thinking too much. Most likely it’s just like I said, the moment we free her, the person inside will be just like the Devils and turn into dust.”

“The reason why most witches die young is because of the so-called Demonic bite,” Roland corrected, “A witch’s physical fitness is generally much greater than the average person. Thus their actual lifespan should also be longer.”

“The average person’s lifespan is forty to fifty years, ah,” Lily grunted, “Do you think everyone can live as long as a turtle can?”

The reason why the average lifespan is merely forty to fifty years is because of an inadequate food supply and the low level of medical care; as long as the standard of daily living is increased, it should quickly increase by another twenty years. However, what she said is by no means utterly unjustified, Roland conceded, even if I add those twenty years, there still remains a gap to reach four hundred years... Even if we were turtles, I’m afraid we could never live for that long.

“But she is still alive, really,” Lightning cried aloud, “If you could’ve seen her, you’d immediately understand why I say so. Compared with the dead Devils she looks entirely different, her skin is smooth, and her lips are full of color. Tell them Maggie!”

“Goo! What Lightning said is true!”

“Alright, don’t fight,” Wendy stood up and interrupted. “No matter if she is still alive or already dead, it’s worth a try.”

“Are you sure?” Scroll asked unsure while knitting her brows.

“If she really is one of those Church’s witches, as long as we hang a God’s Stone of Relation around her before she wakes up it should be all right. Moreover, we also have Anna and Nightingale, so I believe she won’t be able to cause much of a problem.” Wendy calmly said. “The key point is, it is possible that she might know about the incident that occurred more than four hundred years ago. The possibility that she can bring light into the darkness is worth the risk of rescuing her.”

Indeed, gathering more information about the Devils is very critical for the survival of Border Town. Moreover, any news the Church desired to hide so much will surely be extremely unfavorable for them. Thus, if we can take hold of this knowledge ahead of time, there’s a chance that it might help us take the initiative in the future battle.

Soon after, Anna and Nightingale also agreed to Wendy’s view, so even though she still thought that it was wrong, Scroll no longer opposed them and the Witch Alliance came to a consensus.

“The First Army?” Roland looked toward Iron Axe.

“At most, you can send up to fifty people,” the latter started to talk, “Your Highness, you already sent out several squads to assist City Hall to recruit refugees from the other regions, by now there are only around 500 left in Border Town. Even though Timothy has encountered Heaven’s wrath, there’s still a

chance he might become desperate and launch a large-scale assault on the Western Territory. Thus, the First Army needs to have enough soldiers to guard against a possible attack from King's City."

"I understand," Roland said while nodding. A size of fifty people is a little small, if they happen to have to face a long-range attack from the Devils who can throw their spears from out of view, the damage caused could be quite serious. If I want to make up for this, in addition to Lightning's and Maggie's air surveillance, Sylvie's magic eye ability will also be essential. The ideal force to send out would be a ground force, supported by a team of witches stationed in a hot-air balloon. The witches will be responsible for observation and close combat battles, while the First Army will use their flintlocks to suppress the enemy over a long distance.

But then, the witches from Sleeping Island will also learn about the existence of the Deep Sleeper in the ruin. Roland thought through all the possibilities again and again, but in the end, he still decided to bring Sylvie along. After all, during this rescue mission, their safety would still be the most important consideration.

Just when he planned to arrange the rescue plan, Mystery Moon exhaled loudly before exclaiming, "Heavens... What is happening?"

Hearing her cry, everyone followed her gaze and looked out of the window, only to freeze up immediately.

Roland not daring to believe what he saw opened the window, then was finally forced to accept what he saw, beyond any of their expectations white flakes had begun to fall from the gloomy sky. They were hiding the sky and covering the earth, but completely lacked any sound. He stretched his hand out, catching a handful of white drops, which made an ice-cold sensation spread through his palm.

It's snow.

This is not normal... According to his knowledge, it would only snow in the Western Territory during winter, but now, it wasn't winter yet!

"It is normal for it to snow during the last month of autumn?: He looked at Iron Axe, but the latter wore a serious expression and said, "I have been in Border Town for seven or eight years, and until now I have never experienced something like this."

Once the snow began to descend from the heaven, it meant that the Months of Demons had arrived, and the sun would be buried behind a wall of clouds until its next brilliant bloom. During this time, the entire Western Territory would face the threat of demonic beasts. Not to mention the First Army, even when using a hot air balloon, the witches would still be in danger – at this time, the Concealing Forest was full of savage demonic beasts. So leaving the protection of the wall was an incredibly risky matter.

For now, he was forced to call a stop to the rescue mission and wait for the sky to clear up.

At the bottom of his heart, he felt that the early snow was likely an accident and would soon end. After all, the temperature was still at the average level of autumn and it also hadn't dropped by much.

However, three days later, the town was wrapped in silver, the distant mountains and woods were covered by a layer of white gauze. A beautiful scenery like this was definitely a rare view in his past, but Roland wasn't in the mood to appreciate the landscape.

Although the snowfall had weakened a lot, there were still some snowflakes falling from the sky. The First Army had also entered a state of full alertness, and has established regular patrols along the new wall. Furthermore, they had also erected a temporary camp at the foot of the new city wall, so that the soldiers would be able to quickly enter into battle. The temperature had changed almost overnight, forcing Roland to change his clothes from his unlined garment to a knitted cotton coat.

On the fourth day, hearing the news from the front made Roland's heart drop.

The western city wall had suffered an attack from demonic beasts.

The Months of Demons had arrived more than one month ahead of time.

Chapter 320 "Sleeping Spell"

Fjords, Sleeping Island.

"I never expected that the first guest of the 'Sleeping Spell' would actually be you," Tilly smiled and said as she handed over a cup of boiling hot fish soup, "It was only due to your help that we could explore the Shadow Islands."

"You are too polite," Thunder answered as he received the fish soup, "Regarding the Mysterious Sea, even if I don't receive any more commissions from you I would still like to go there a few more times for myself. To be honest, without your witches' support, exploring the sea east of the Shadow Island would definitely be very dangerous for an explorer." He sipped his fish soup, then let out a sigh, "Ah... it's boiled black-tailed fish soup, it's really delicious."

In the Fjords, black tea and barley wine from black tea were considered to be unpopular, she was used to the custom of eating a bowl of ice cold frozen fish during midsummer, while here they drank a bowl of boiling hot fish soup when it got cold. They used a different method to cook the fish so the taste was not at all the same, this was something Tilly had gradually come to understand after arriving at Sleeping Island.

"Therefore, you were impatient to come and visit the Sleeping Spell?"

"The right thing to say would be that I can't wait to go on the next expedition," Thunder straightforwardly stated. "The scene I saw last time when I looked through the observation mirror left me stunned – what is there on the land and for what reason is there a stone gate embedded inside that overhanging cliff? I wish I could fly there and go take a look."

"Is that it..." Tilly also poured a cup of fish soup for herself, "You should already be aware that I'm planning to personally go to Border Town. One reason is to personally speak with the feudal lord and Witch Alliance, another reason is so that I can increase my knowledge by experiencing the Months of Demons in Border Town. You... don't you want to come with us and take a look?"

For a moment Thunder was silent, but then he said with a broad grin, "Not yet. She should be having quite a good time over there. The way it is right now is also good... After all, the thing with exploring is, an accident can always happen one day. I already lost her mother, I really don't want to also lose her. When that time comes, I ask you..."

"I will," Tilly nodded, "After all, she is also one of our members." Speaking until here she stopped and showed him a smile before continuing, "But business is business. Even though you have helped us a lot, you still have to take the costs to employ our witches on the table."

"Of course, business is business, that is the way of the Fjords." Thunder drained his bowl of fish soup before he laughingly agreed.

...

"So, who did he hire?" As she saw that Thunder had left the palace, Ashes entered the hall from outside, sitting cross-legged before Tilly.

"'Magic Servant' Molly, 'The Door of Random' Orbit, and 'Puppet' Remote Shadow." Tilly spread out the contract, "In the end, the fee was set at four thousand and eight hundred gold royals. The payback is very generous, right? "

"Four thousand..." Ashes' eyes became big, "Where did he get all the money from?"

"Don't forget, Thunder is the most famous explorer in the Fjords," the 5th Princes said laughingly, "No matter if it is the discovery of new routes or finding treasures when exploring new areas, all of it can bring in plenty of money. It was only because of this that he was repeatedly able to recruit such a large group of experienced sailors who would be willing to follow him to explore those mysterious and dangerous zones. But, with witches, he can greatly reduce the risk, and ever since ancient times it has always been thought as a good bargain when one can offset risk with money."

"However, is that really okay?" Ashes asked unsure, "The establishment of a bounty guild will indeed bring a lot of wealth for Sleeping Island, but, at the same time, the abilities of us witches will be exposed; if this ever spread to the Church's ears..." "

"Sleeping Spell" was a new guild that Tilly had formed. From it, explorers could hire suitable witches to help them complete their expeditions. Of course, in addition to the main project, they would also provide many convenient services, such as repairing damaged items, producing exquisite works of art, quickly constructing houses, providing insecticide for growing flowers and so on – as long as the witches don't use their ability to do anything evil, 'Sleeping Spell' will come to be accepted."

Of course, all this was only possible under the premise they announced their abilities publicly.

Tilly took Ashes' hand, "Didn't I already tell you? I do not care about those gold royals, but I hope that through the bounty guild more people will learn about Sleeping Island, and thus reach out to us to make a deal. Thunder has a saying I agree with, 'Fear comes from the unknown', the same is true for the witches. The fear of the people of the Fjords and the Four Kingdoms is nothing more than the slander of the Church and the result of their own ignorance.

"I can't force them to take the initiative to come in contact with us and try to understand us witches. Therefore, we can only step forward and actively go and promote ourselves. Telling them again and again that we witches aren't the Devil's messengers and that our abilities aren't strange and unpredictable – that they awaken from ordinary people, and that our essence is still that of a human being. 'Whenever there is a complete understanding of each other, there will no longer be anything left to fear'." She paused for a moment, then continued, "As for the Church, they have never cared what we

are capable of. They simply send out their Army of Judges to capture us, they even occasionally send out the God's Punishment Army. Furthermore, regardless of our abilities, in front of the God's Stones of Retaliation, they are all the same."

"I hope you are right," Ashes whispered, "I only know how to fight and kill, but regarding this matter I'm unable to help you."

"You have already helped me a lot," Tilly said showing her a reassuring smile. "If we want to further develop Sleeping Island, the most important thing for us will be to associate the Fjord's inhabitants with us witches from the island. The creation of mutual understanding will be a slow process, and I'm only doing all this in order to shorten the process as much as will be possible. In addition, the bounty guild can also play a special role in achieving our goal," she stuck out her tongue and revealed a sly smile before saying, "That's to find new uses for the seemingly useless abilities, so that support witches will no longer be discriminated against or think of their abilities as useless."

Hearing her reasoning Ashes began to laugh, "There are always so many reasons for your actions, whenever you reveal so many layers one after another it makes it hard for other people not to come to accept them."

"That's because I'm always saying the correct thing," Tilly said before changing the topic. "Maggie has not returned to Sleeping Island yet, could something have happened?"

"Perhaps something has delayed her travel," Ashes pondered about her next words, "Or..."

"What?"

"She might no longer want to come back," Ashes said, while shrugging, "Compared to the Fjords, the living condition in Border Town is much better. In the past, I already told you not to send witches there. What will we do if Honey or Lotus also don't want to come back?"

"Then we should head over there at once," Tilly said.

"Oh, well, I will immediately get ready... what?" For a moment Ashes froze before she recovered enough to ask, "W-We are going to travel to them?"

The 5th Princess curled her lips, "Didn't we reach an agreement that we will help them resist the demonic beasts, and, while doing this, we can also conventionally pick up the other witches. If we don't have Lotus, the people coming with the Crescent Moon Bay immigration next year won't have any houses to live in."

"But right now, there is still one month left to the beginning of the winter, do we really have to go so soon?"

"We will have to spend a lot of time on the road. And if Border Town happens to encounter any trouble along the way we might have to help the witches as soon as possible, and..." She winked at Ashes, "I also want to go see what kind of person my disgusting older brother has turned into."