

Witch 331

Chapter 331 The Key to “Art”

‘It feels as if the Church just suddenly has appeared from out of nowhere.’

This sentence continued echoing through Roland’s mind as he was returning to his office.

He closed his eyes and carefully looked through the memories of the 4th Prince, but he still couldn’t find any relevant information about this. His understanding of the Church was the same as that of any other ordinary nobleman. During his time at the palace the 4th Prince never bothered spending that much effort in learning anything useful, so his knowledge concerning the occult was practically a full-on blank space. But, if what Tilly had said was true, then the Church’s propaganda strategy was also rather strange.

Taking his former world of religious myths, for example, since the beginning of the world there have always been gods and the routine everyone agreed on was that the gods were the ones who created the world. Stories such as the creation in seven days, karma, reincarnation, and so on... those were legends used to describe the power of the Gods and were a standard part of every religion.

Compared to them, the Church of this world was quite... lacking.

But Roland didn’t have any more clues to consider, so he shook his head and decided to put such thoughts behind him.

Maybe their questions would be answered when they went to explore the ruins within the Concealing Forest.

He went to the window and looked towards the garden where a huge coating was laid out on the ground – in the middle of the vast expanse of white snow its bluish green appearance seemed particularly eye-catching.

Nowadays Soraya was creating a bigger air sac, the new hot air balloon’s volume would become much larger and would thus be able to transport a larger crowd of people. This was preparation in case they were unable to free the trapped woman when going to the ruins in the case that Anna wasn’t able to cut-down the whole “ice-coffin” and bring the woman and some of the transparent stones back to Border Town.

They would depart in in two days.

The people that would be going along had already been decided. Tilly, Sylvie, Shavi, Ashes and Andrea would be from the Sleeping Island witches while the Witch Alliance would send Anna, Wendy, Nightingale, Nana, Lightning, and Maggie. This line-up could be said to be unprecedentedly powerful. Its attack, defense, and battlefield awareness were of the highest level, so as long as there was no God’s Stone of Retaliation being used, the Devils wouldn’t even have a chance of approaching them.

“Your Royal Highness, Chief Alchemist Sir Kyle Sichi wishes to see you,” one of his personal guards said from the door.

“Let him in.”

Kyle wasn't alone, this time he had come together with his colleague Chavez, "Your Royal Highness, the outline for your requested large-scale production of nitric acid has been completed."

"Really?" Roland stared blankly but soon after a burst of happiness flooded his heart. This was probably the best piece of news he had heard within these past few days. He stood up in excitement and personally poured a cup of tea for the two chemists as he asked, "Tell me, how did you manage it?"

"The credit for this belong to Chavez," he said laughingly, "so I will let him explain it."

"Your honorable Highness," the young Chavez bowed, seeming somewhat reserved as soon as he opened his mouth. "Your alchemical... no, the chemical reaction used in the laboratory to produce nitric acid is produced by distilling saltpeter to obtain diluted nitric acid and then it's purified with concentrated sulfuric acid. I tried to put the two together by placing the saltpeter directly into the concentrated sulfuric acid for shared heating. By doing so I successfully obtained nitric acid, even more, its purity was very high, so much so that it was possible to observe the phenomenon of fuming which was spoken of within "Elementary Chemistry".

"Shared heating? But combining those two isn't the same," Roland said baffled, "The temperature used for dry distillation is much higher than the temperature that is used for shared heating, the gas produced by the dry distillation should be nitrogen oxide. Only by bubbling it through water it would become diluted nitric acid. Concentrated sulfuric acid is only used for purification because of its high boiling point and its strong water absorption which in turn reduces the moisture content in the nitric acid, this doesn't involve any sort of chemical reactions."

"I myself also don't quite understand why it happened, but Mr. Sichi, thinking that my discovery was merely a coincidence, then went and did a couple of experiments."

"Coincidence?" Roland stared at the Chief Alchemist.

"Indeed," Kyle said with certainty, "The two are not the same, but they still produced the same effect. Following the chemical formula, I guess that there is a component within the saltpeter that reacts with the sulfuric acid but evaporates in the heat, leaving only nitric acid behind. According to the formula, it looks like some kind of... well, nitrate."

It suddenly occurred to Roland that the chemistry textbook did mention that before synthetic ammonia was invented, people had used nitric acid or potassium nitrate to react with concentrated sulfuric acid to produce nitric acid, this was also the oldest manufacture method known. Because the main ingredient of saltpeter were two different kinds of nitrate, it was, easy to obtain. Furthermore, the extraction was also relatively easy. So as long as the temperature could be controlled, they would have a steady stream of evaporated nitric acid to collect.

Of course, because this method consumed a large amount of sulfuric acid, and at the same time easily led to the corrosion of the equipment, it was later replaced by more advanced technology.

But to Roland, these two points weren't much of a problem. After all, the fertilizer and pesticide industry hasn't been established yet, so the produced sulfuric acid could only be used for the purification of nitric acid. While Soraya's coatings could easily solve the problem brought from the strongly corrosive nitric acid steam.

“Well done,” Roland said while happily patting Chavez’s shoulder, “You were unexpectedly able to come up with such a method by chance.”

“You’re unaware of it, but his outstanding luck has already revealed itself within Redwater City’s Alchemic Workshop,” Kyle Sichi said as he raised an eyebrow. “Before learning chemistry, the exploration of alchemy was something which relied on luck. Within his early twenties, this kid had already discovered the double acid preparation method and had become the youngest alchemist within the workshop, that was enough to turn the eyes of the other thirty to forty years old apprentices red with envy. You can imagine how most of them will be stuck as apprentices for the rest of their lives.”

“Anyway, this is good news for the town,” Roland praised. “First, you should try to make a batch of equipment to examine it further, I will let a witch cooperate with you. If feasible, we will then expand the scale of production.”

“As you will.”

“Alright, I still have another task to give you,” Roland said, putting away his joyful expression and continuing in a solemn tone, “Now that we will have a reliable source of nitric acid, I will need you to produce something that is very dangerous – nitroglycerin.”

“How dangerous is it?” Kyle asked.

“It is actually very simple to use the raw materials, namely, letting concentrated nitric acid react with glycerol, supplemented with concentrated sulfuric acid to act as a catalysator. However, during the reaction process you must strictly control the temperature and the ventilation. Since the nitrification produces a lot of heat, it would also be best to put the container into iced water for the experiment. Bear in mind that alteration between hot and cold, vibrations, impacts, or friction might lead to it exploding.” Roland didn’t know how reliable his amateur knowledge would be in the end, but the ingredients were undoubtedly correct, so even if there was likely to be some danger, it was still something he had to try. “During the experiment, it will be alright to merely use a small amount of ingredients, so that in case a mishap occurs Lady Nana should still be able to heal you.”

“This...” Chavez opened his mouth to answer, but even before he could say another word, Kyle had already given his promise, “I understand, and its power is something comparable to snow powder?”

“It’s entirely different.”

“It looks like an interesting experiment.” The Chief Alchemist said and laughed.

So it’s true that nine out of ten chemists are explosion maniacs... Roland thought.

Nitroglycerin is extremely unstable, Nobel especially added diatomaceous earth to it to make it blunter and this increased its safety. However, while this did, in fact, improve its safety, it also reduced its explosive power. Naturally, Roland wouldn’t be using that classical method. Instead, he intended to add nitrocellulose or nitrostarch into the nitroglycerin, both of which could stabilize it while further enhance the explosive effect. The former would make an excellent smoke-free explosive, while the latter would produce a stronger explosion. From their names alone it could already be seen that a lot of nitric acids would be key in the evolution of black powder into gunpowder.

And now he was in the possession of that very key.

Chapter 332 What one has seen and heard

In the days before they would set out to explore the ruins Tilly's greatest interest was slowly strolling along the flat streets of Border Town, observing the remote territory which had already undergone such startling changes in the hands of Lord Roland.

This small town stands out from the masses, she thought, the more carefully she observed everything, the more she became aware of this. It was entirely different from any other place she had been to before... and what left her the most impressed was probably the gorgeous and unparalleled vitality which this small town radiated.

Even the up-and-coming Sleeping Island couldn't compare with it.

"Aren't these people afraid of the cold?" Andrea said, full of amazement at seeing the pedestrian coming and going on the street. "What did your brother do that they'd be willing to work during the winter?"

"It's still autumn," Ashes retorted, "You can't even tell different season apart."

"But there is no difference between the current weather and winter. This is analogous with the argument which frequently appears within 'her dream, his country'," Andrea elegantly raised her long hair and said, "Of course, a barbaric woman such as you would never understand something like this."

"What's 'your dream, my dream'..."

"It is difficult to communicate with a vulgar person who hasn't ever even enjoyed the drama, but Lady Tilly must surely have watched this famous drama from the Kingdom of Dawn."

"There is no need for you to fight," Sylvie sighed. "I think the reason behind this is quite simple. Usually the common folk do not want to be active during winter because it would increase food consumption greatly, in case they can't eat their fill it would be very easy for them to catch a cold. However, this issue doesn't exist in Border Town. The price of grain isn't high, firewood is also quite abundant, and Miss Lily is easily able to cure a cold. It would therefore be better if they continued to work hard even within the cold and snow, and try to earn one more day's salary."

"I am able to understand that there would be enough firewood due to the Concealing Forest West of the town, but the reason for the price of grain not being high... how is that possible?" Andrea asked feeling puzzled, "My family has also been involved in the food business so I know that crop failures caused by natural disasters could lead to everyone raising the price of grain by a lot. With such a bad weather, how could he keep the nobles and merchants from selling food at a higher prices?"

"Nobles, merchants?" Sylvie asked laughingly, "Here in Border Town, there is only one person who is allowed to sell grain, that is His Royal Highness."

"All those fields along the river belong to him?" Tilly frowned.

"No, that's the land of the serfs," she told her what she had seen and heard, as well as the scene occurring during the bumper harvest. "He made two food prices, one was the purchase price and one was the selling price. Those two prices are fixed, with the latter being higher than the former."

“Isn’t he forcing them to sell low and buy high?” Ashes asked while showing an expression of disbelief, “If he can sell at a high price, why won’t he allow others to sell it at high prices as well?”

“No, it’s not the same,” Tilly said, “After the wheat is taken in, it also needs to be threshed, ground and stored in a warehouse. All this produces further cost, thus it’s normal for the price to rise.”

“What Lady Tilly said is right. I had the same question, so I later asked Teacher Scroll about it,” Sylvie smiled, “She said that the extra expenses were paid off, some were paid to those who deal with the farmers, it is also used to build new granaries so that the production can be expanded, which in turn will provide Border town with new...” she stopped for a moment, thinking about the right word to use, “Jobs, right, that’s what she called them. I heard that His Highness was very concerned about that.”

“But he is still buying weak selling strong,” Ashes stressed, “Shouldn’t trade be free?”

“Perhaps, but His Highness’ selling price is at a rate that still allows everyone to buy it. Furthermore, if the price stays constant, people will also become more comfortable.”

“Sometimes freedom isn’t always for the best,” Tilly said, she already had a clear idea of what Roland was doing. The rule prohibiting anyone else from selling grain within the territory might at first seem overbearing and unjust. But in fact, it put an end to hoarding and profiteering, which could effectively prevent any events of food shortage. If it was King’s City, which had to face times of snow during autumn, the food prices would inevitably rise up to five or six times more than usual with more than half of the populace starving due to not having enough grain to eat. If the situation went on for long enough, it could easily cause riots, and eventually, the palace might even be forced to release grain from their own reserves or dispatch the guards to suppress them. Either way, it would still be a big burden on the state’s treasury.

Although this policy looked good, it also wouldn’t work just anywhere. The majority of the grain traders were aristocrats and rich merchants who also owned large amounts of serfs and fields, making it impossible for the royal family to buy out all the grain and prohibit people from hoarding. However, here in Border Town, except for Roland Wimbledon, there was almost no other aristocratic family around, he was indisputably the one who had the final say in such things.

When Tilly expressed her own opinion, Ashes still hold some grievances, “What about the serfs? They normally would get more income when the grain price rise, but now they get exploited by fixed prices.”

“Pfft,” Andrea laughed, “As if these people could escape the same exploitation if they were in a city with free trade. At times of bumper harvest, not only wouldn’t they be told to hand over more wheat, they’d even be told to sell it at a very low price. Yet when there is a poor harvest, they’d still have to pay their share, while it would still be a question whether the grain leftover would be enough for them to survive the famine. In contrast, fixed prices are actually more reasonable, as long as the harvest is better, the income should also be better.”

“Here they can choose whether they want to sell.” Sylvie’s words slightly shocked the other three, “His Highness said that in case where the harvest reached a fixed amount, the serfs could be promoted to free people. From then on they can either continue farming or go and choose new jobs, completely according to their own will. However, free people would only need to pay 2/10 of their grain. Furthermore, according to this year’s bumper harvest’s price, their salary was also very impressive.”

“Pro...moted?”

“Uh, His Royal Highness said that after two or three years there won’t be any serfs left in Border Town.”

So, actually it was like this, Tilly’s heart was suddenly touched by what she had heard. That’s the reason why the town is full of vitality... When he made his policies, he considered the people’s way of thinking and added an incentive system to encourage them to work more and better. This way of handling things is completely different from any other noble. Motivation isn’t only expressed through words, rather, he let the people achieve some tangible benefits through hard work instead of hiding his wealth in the castle treasury.

At this moment, she finally understood the real meaning of those red slogans at the river side.

However, the Roland Wimbledon in the royal palace was never such a generous person... So, is this also something brought forth by the sudden change in memory? In addition, those evening lessons of “Elementary Nature”, and “Mathematics” are very fascinating too.

Tilly had believed that it would be difficult for her to find something new to stimulate her curiosity and interest after she had finished reading all the books in the palace library, but she now had discovered there were still many things left for her to learn.

Within her heart, she suddenly felt that even doing nothing more than just live in Border Town’s castle and flip through all those books filled with miraculous knowledge while watching the changes around the Town... it would still be a very enjoyable life.

Suddenly, a long ringing sound of a bell came over from the city wall, announcing a new demon beast attack.

Tilly immediately put her previous thoughts to the back of her mind, after all, nowadays, she was no longer the worry-free 5th Princess, but rather a leader shouldering the destiny of all the witches living on Sleeping Island. Now, some things could no longer be imposed solely according to her own preferences, thus she said, “Let’s go to the wall and see if we can help the guards.”

“Of course,” Andrea smiled, “That’s why we came here in the first place, so they can see how we Witches fight!”

Chapter 333 The Defense Battle at the New City Wall

In that instant, the sound of the bells echoed. It was as if the emotions of the entire camp had been roused.

Van’er rushed out of the tent. Along with the stream of people, he rushed to the top of the wall with hurried steps and took his combat position. This series of maneuvers had already been rehearsed countless times. Even without someone to command them, everyone was aware of what they should do next.

It was the same as the Month of Demons last year. Under a state of alert, only a small patrol team would be assigned to each segment of the wall as two or three soldiers were enough to deal with the scattered demonic beasts. Only when the lookout post detects a large scale attack from the demonic beasts would an alarm be rung.

In the horizon, a shadow was approaching. Van'er did a rough calculation of the enemy's numbers and found that they numbered around a thousand. If this happened a year ago, what followed would absolutely be a bout of arduous fighting. Back then, as a pikeman responsible for buying some time so the Firearms team could reload, it was necessary for him to take turns rotating with a member that was in reserve. Only by doing that, would he be able to persist to the very end.

But now, the strength of this small town had already undergone an earth-shaking change.

Cat's claw removed the cover on the cannon and shook off the snow that had been collecting on it, while Rodney inspected every inch of the artillery's barrel. After confirming there was no foreign matters inside, he began to load it with gunpowder. Although the current city walls were altered and made using a pile of mud bricks, its height and width had been increased to a certain extent. In addition, a shelling platform was set up every hundred meters, causing its defensive ability, as well as firepower, to improve greatly.

The width of the passageway allowed four people to fit through it side by side. During a battle, the first row would consist of soldiers from the firearms team, while the second row would then be recruits who would load up the guns. The latter group was responsible for putting bullets into the cylinder of a gun, then handing it over to the regular soldiers ahead of them.

"They just never get bored of this, do they?" Rodney yawned. "When the Month of the Demons arrives each year, all of them run towards this place like a bunch of lunatics. Even if they succeeded in attacking such a small town, they wouldn't get any sort of benefits from it, right?"

"Well, they're here just in time for us to hone our skills." Horatio said with a smile. "Compared to immobile wooden targets, it's more interesting to shoot at demonic beasts."

"Speaking of target shooting, I recently heard an interesting rumor that had something to do with us, the gunner team." Jop said with a mysterious expression.

"What sort of rumor is that?"

"From what I heard the people in other gunner groups say, the people that were able to hit their targets accurately would be incorporated into an elite gunner team, where they would undertake new tasks." He paused for a moment. "Do any of you here have any more insider knowledge about this?"

"An elite gunner team?"

"How could it be possible for us to know more when even you, who proclaims yourself as experienced and knowledgeable about matters is clueless about it?"

"I bet it's a cock and bull story made up by some bored person."

Within the gunner group, only Van'er was silent. After listening to Jop's words, he couldn't help but furrow his brows. Someone had actually treated this matter as flaunt-worthy material and blabbered it out?

Sir Iron-axe had previously looked for him a week before and told him that His Royal Highness had intended to develop a new type of artillery. It would be completely different from the field gun they were currently using and would also not be dispatched for use in the First Army. Instead, it would be

installed on the bridge, turning it into a warship that was capable of long distance attacks. The operators of the new artillery gun would be undertaken by the most outstanding members of the gunner team. If one wishes to be a member, they could send their application to Iron Axe.

It went without saying that Iron Axe agreed without the slightest hesitation. This was evidently a chance for him to advance a step further in the army. According to what Iron Axe said, His Royal Highness had an extremely high expectation towards this new branch of the army, to the point that it was possible for it to break away from the First Army and become a brand new army. If one is able to perform great feats, the new warships manufactured in the future would be named using that person's name too.

It was such a honor! If there were a warship named Van'er, he would be perfectly contented for the rest of his life. Recalling his origins, he was just an odd-job labourer in the mines, yet had always posed as someone extraordinary. In the end, Van'er was not able to save even his brother's life when he was in the slums of the stronghold. However, the current him no longer required to flaunt about anything. There was no need to worry about food or drinks in the army while the uniforms were thick and warm; Even when he returned to the district, the surrounding neighbours would greet him as well.

All of these changes were brought about by His Royal Highness.

When he recalled his decision to join the militia for an egg at that time, he felt it was simply the smartest choice he had made in his life.

Besides that, Iron-axe had also inquired whether he had any suitable candidates he wished to recommend and that he could apply together with them when the time comes. In other words, it was possible for all of these youngsters to receive a life-changing opportunity, but since their personalities were still too energetic, it would be better to wait til they settled down first. Moreover, if they happen to lay down a big accomplishment, wouldn't the warships have to be called Jop, and Cat's claw too? Those names were simply horrendous to the ears...If it were the names Rodney or Nelson, then it could still be taken into consideration.

As for the matter of someone leaking out this information to their subordinates out of impulse, he still had to report and explain to Iron Axe. After all, it had been explained very clearly in their regulation class that any news of the First Army shouldn't be spread without permission unless clearly requested to by the higher ups.

"Stop making such a racket. I want all of you to bring your attention back to the battlefield." Van'er coughed twice, breaking off the discussion within the gunner's members. "Do not forget what Sir Iron Axe had repeatedly emphasized in class. Any lapses made could probably bring about an unsalvageable defeat."

"Understood!" Everyone spoke in unison.

As the killing rate of iron balls was extremely low, when dealing with packs of demonic beasts, canister shells were used to fire at them once they approach. At the moment when the sinister-looking wolves took the lead and crossed past the 100 meter line, the bombardment began.

Heatwaves swirled the snow underneath the gun muzzle, the gigantic boom shook Van'er's eardrums to the point that it hurt. In the distance, a black bloody mist suddenly rose and a field of demonic beasts

instantly collapsed. No matter if it was a species of a boar or a bear, the pelts on their bodies were not sufficient to withstand the close quarter bombardment of iron pellets.

“There’s a huge one over there.” Cat’s claw pointed to the left ahead of him. “It’s a redskin wolf!”

A group of people nimbly moved the gun carriage and adjusted the muzzle, pointing it to the direction of the target. They then reloaded and fired it once more. In theory, it wasn’t necessary to aim while using the canister shells. As long as it was fired while facing ahead, it would always mow down a large number of enemies. Furthermore, as the newly constructed clay walls were taller than the stone walls, there was also no way for the wolves to be of threat to the people at the top of the wall. They would only be practicing their target shooting if they preemptively attacked nimble beasts like that, that’s all.

Next in line would finally be the firearm team that had been restraining themselves for a long time. In order to ensure a higher hit rate, they would always wait for them to come close to 50 meters before opening fire.

The sound of the revolver rifles weren’t as unified as that time with the flintlocks. Rather, it was crowded together and continuous. On the top of the city wall, a wave of white smoke began to float upwards while the overpowering smell of gunsmoke wafted over, causing Van’er to uncontrollably sneeze.

“This bunch of morons. Even though their might is unacceptably weak, when they fire in unison, the smoke coming out from their rifles is much more overpowering than anything else.” Jop said while grumbling.

“But ultimately, it is still the artillery which will decide the outcome of the war.” Rodney expressed his approval.

“It’s the same when we’re dealing with knights, and would probably be the same when dealing with demonic beasts as well.”

At this moment, a brief and hurried bell toll began to sound from the direction of the lookout post. This was the warning that a hybrid species of demonic beasts had been sighted.

Van’er squinted his eyes and looked ahead, only to see two massive shadows slowly making its way forward within the mist. From the looks of its size, it should be a siege beast that possessed a thick carapace.

“What did you say was coming earlier?” The corners of his mouth rose. “It’s now time for us to show off our worth, switch to solid tipped ammunition.”

In order to deal with enemies that had comparatively high defensive capabilities, the munitions factory had developed a new type of artillery shell that was capable of penetrating the carapace of an enemy at a range of roughly 200 meters. If the attack on the wolf-like demonic beasts was considered a warm-up exercise, the one at present would be considered the real deal.

“I want everyone to do a good job of it.” Van’er clapped his hand and said, “We will show the other gunner teams who the most skilled artillerymen are.”

Chapter 334: Heart Stopper

After scaling up a corner of the city wall, Andrea was immediately greeted with an astonishing scene.

All she saw was a row of soldiers, dressed up as militia, standing on top of the wall grasping a strange, stick-like weapon in their hands—those are probably the firearms Ashes was talking about. Following the approach from the group of demonic beasts, flames as well as dense smoke erupted out from it, causing the sound of continuous explosions to echo in her ears.

That ought to be a type of weapon similar to the crossbow, but she couldn't see the bolts that were shot out by the other side, probably due to the large cloud of smoke and dust. The demonic beasts that were charging at the very front of the pack acted as if they had been ruthlessly smashed by something. Their bodies coming to a halt as they began to fall onto the ground in quick succession.

Even so, the soldiers didn't observe the aftermath of the battle, nor did they load up a new bolt. Instead they continued to fire at the enemy with a speed that was a bit quicker than her fitting an arrow to the bowstring.

"Is this the frightening weapon you spoke of?" Andrea felt her lips slightly drying out, turning somewhat coarse. "Its rate of fire is definitely fast, but the accuracy is somewhat..."

"Before these people were recruited into the First Army, they were all miners, farmers and hunters." Ashes interrupted her speech. "The time they spent using this weapon is just shy of six months."

One normally required at least 5 years of time to groom a well trained warrior, and even more time was needed to train an archer. Even crossbows, which required the least amount of training, still required one to train for at least half a year. Even with training, it would only prevent situations like farmers placing a bolt upside down in panic. As for actual combat? Only God knew whether they were capable of hitting anything. In most cases, they were only brought along to increase one's prestige.

Andrea couldn't help but swallow her saliva. She was extremely familiar with these kinds of practices, as her clan had nurtured their fair share of outstanding knights. Because of that, she naturally understood the significance of soldiers being combat ready with roughly 6 months worth of training. With an ample supply of weapons and rations, Roland could potentially assemble a massive army within a short time period. Furthermore, there was no need to worry about the troops being routed at the first contact during close quarter combat. Even an elite group of cavalymen would have a hard time coming close amidst an onslaught of attacks with no intermission.

This had nothing to do with the courage or willpower of the militia, but rather, tremendous strength bestowed to them by their weapons.

"Do you know something else about the firearm?" Tilly asked Sylvie after contemplating it for a moment.

The latter nodded her head. "I've examined it inside and out countless times. It's definitely similar to a crossbow, but the arrowhead that is shot out is tiny and has neither a shaft nor tail feathers. The difference lies in the arrowhead not relying on the elasticity of a bowstring, but rather the propelling force of a black, fine powder when it explodes—It can raise the velocity of the arrowhead to extreme speeds instantaneously.."

"A black, fine powder?" Tilly asked. "What is that?"

“It’s probably a byproduct of alchemy.” She shook her head. “I am not clear about its specific composition either.”

“It must be very expensive.” Andrea said. “The things that alchemists create have never been anything cheap.”

Ashes curled her lips. “Really...From how they’re firing it, it totally doesn’t look like they’re using anything costly.”

“Hold on, something’s approaching.” Sylvie, who was in the process of sizing up the battlefield, was slightly shocked. “My goodness, that’s also a demonic beast? It’s almost as tall as the city wall! From the looks of it, it’s a huge turtle, and it’s carrying a huge carapace behind its back.”

Andrea immediately came to her senses. “Carapace? I am afraid these guns won’t help much. As long as I am within 10 feet of it, even the city walls would not be able to withstand my magic arrows. Ashes, cover me.”

“Sigh, alright.” Ashes helplessly removed the claymore behind her back. “For the record, you’d better not tarnish the good name of Lady Tilly.”

“There’s no need for you all to go,” Sylvie said, in an attempt to stop them. “They still have—”

Andrea didn’t hear the latter half of what the opposite side was saying. She only heard an earsplitting boom that sounded like lightning exploding right beside her ears. Turning her head back, she saw flames erupting out from the pipe-shaped metal objects erected all around the city wall that happened to coincide with each other. This time, she had faintly caught the trajectory that the arrowheads took as they flew—they were like a series of shadows. Like a thunderbolt that leaves no time for one to cover their ears, they flew into the distance where the recently appeared monster was.

After a number of breaths, snow pillars that were several feet tall began to spring up near the side of the creature. After the snowflakes that were disturbed and flying around had all floated down, the ugly and massive demonic beast continued to advance at a fixed speed—It was evident that this attack had not managed to hit the target.

But even so, it was enough for Andrea to feel extremely shocked... That distance had already surpassed the range of the longbow and the heavy crossbow. “This is...”

“His Royal Highness calls it field artillery. Simply put, it’s an enlarged firearm.” Sylvie relaxed the hands that was covering her ears. “Its might is much stronger than the firearm, and its range had been increased by quite a lot. This was what he used to easily rout Timothy’s militia fleet at the bifurcation point of Redwater river.”

The luck of the demonic beast didn’t manage to last for long. During the second wave of bombardment, two rounds had accurately struck its carapace. Andrea saw it extremely clearly; along with the muffled sound of the collision, there was a layer of mist that began to rise up from the bumpy carapace. Two holes had directly exploded at the side that was close to its head, causing black blood and viscera to spurt out from it, splattering all over the ground.

Not long after, the battle ended. Pieces of demonic corpses laid in front of the city wall. The warm, flowing blood created a haze of white mist above the snow-covered ground. While the soldiers had

began reparations, she was still processing the incident, unable to find an opportunity to show off her skills from beginning to end.

“Looks like my estimation was off.” Tilly smiled helplessly. “He didn’t need any assistance from the combat witches.”

“The last time I came to this small city, this type of weapon wasn’t widely accessible, and only the Knight Commander could possess them. But now, he had actually produced many of it...” Ashes sighed. “Perhaps this is exactly the reason why His Royal Highness dares to publicly support the existence of witches, despite being under the heavy pressure of the Church.”

Andrea didn’t respond. If it was during normal times, she would definitely ridicule Ashes. However, the current her only felt abnormally depressed in her heart. She didn’t even have the strength to muster an argument.

When they returned to the castle, His Royal Highness, Roland still continued to prepare a sumptuous lunch for the witches.

Seeing the dishes laid out before her in brilliant colors, Andrea felt even more stifled in her heart.

The upper class nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn were very particular about the taste authenticity in their food. They were willing to spend gold royals and energy to buy precious and rare ingredients, and use the most authentic way to cook them. In her eyes, food that was sprinkled with all kinds of spices and sauces—such as the one in Greycastle, was a very raffish means of preparation. Seasoning only existed for the sake of covering up the natural defects of the food; Adding more simply signified how poorly it tasted.

But unfortunately for her...every plate of food on the table was extremely delicious.

Like these plump and juicy charcoal grilled mushroom, where exactly did His Royal Highness find them from? The juices that were flowing out from just the slightest bite were practically capable of filling up one’s entire mouth.

And then there was this bowl of green vegetable soup. From its appearance, it seemed like an extremely unremarkable bowl of clear soup, but once one took a sip of it into their mouth, a fragrant and flavorsome taste could be felt. It was almost like an entire chicken, some pork ribs and kelp, were thrown into a pot and left to simmer.

The most unique food was the dessert after the meal—Ice cream bread. It consisted of ice cream, whose milky aroma filled the room, wedged between two pieces of bread. After taking a bite from it, she was lost in its cold and soft texture and was unable to remove herself from it. The fact that it was “winter” didn’t prevent her from eating slice after slice of it.

Blast it, I thoroughly lose even in this aspect!

Looking at Ashes, who was flashing a provocative smile towards her, Andrea found herself being unable to come up with a response for the first time in her life.

Chapter 335: Sudden Changes

The third day. Along with the assembly of the large hot air balloon, the day had also arrived for them to depart and explore the ruins.

The new hot air balloon was named “Hawk Eye”, and its massive basket was capable of accommodating many witches. In addition, it would be enveloped and wrapped around by a canvas, preventing chilly winds and heavy snowfall from affecting it.

Since the operation would be safer if it were done quickly, the witches boarded the hot air balloon in succession after bidding a simple farewell to Roland. From the garden behind the castle, it lifted up into the skies and began making its way towards the stone tower.

In order to be able to rapidly descend to the ground in times of danger to meet enemies in combat, they had flown the “Hawk Eye” at very low altitudes this time around, to the point where it was sweeping past the roofs of the small town. A large number of residents were witnessing the “extraordinary sight” while a sizeable amount of people were standing at their original spot, stupefied. There were also people loudly shouting “Long Live His Highness!”; in their eyes, it was probable that they believed only the lord of Border Town was capable of bringing about such miracles.

When it passed by the western part of the wall, the soldiers of the First Army began to salute in an orderly manner towards the sky. Regardless of whether it was Lightning or Maggie that were flying alongside the hot-air balloon, they were all witches who they were familiar with. It was exceptionally apparent for the young lady Lightning, who had received passionate cheers from the soldiers, as she had regularly given the gunner team directions on where to fire.

Very soon, under the fluttering snowflakes that were scattered about the skies, Hawk Eye casted the small town behind it and entered the area where the Concealing Forest laid.

Tilly stood at the side of the basket, gazing at the boundless sea of forest far away.

The snowy season that had persisted for the entire Month of Demon had turned the place into a sea of dazzling white. The highest branches of the tall trees had all been enveloped by the snow, which at first glance, looked like a sea of dais protruding from the ground, smooth and broad. On the opposite side of the view was a vast range of mountains, which was grey in color under the hazy fog. The foot of the mountain, which was connected to the ground, wasn't visible at this point, making the arrowhead mountain peaks in the distance seem as if they were floating in mid-air.

“What a beautiful scenery.” Shiva let off an emotional sigh. “This is still the first time I've seen such thick snow cover the western region.”

“But, aren't you a witch from the Western Region?” Wendy curiously asked.

“I originally lived in Fallen Dragon Ridge. That place was closer to the south and it rarely snowed during winter. It wasn't until later when I heard the news of Lady Tilly developing Sleepy Island did I covertly sneak into a ship bound towards Clearwater port and met up with the other witches.”

“That explains it.” Wendy smiled while shaking her head. “Our Royal Highness has always been grumbling about the absence of witches coming forward even after rumors of the association settling down in Border Town had been disseminated...Turns out he was one-step behind all along.”

“Oh, is your side circulating news of a gathering place for witches too?”

“They are. It’s a shame that the person in charge of it is pretty inexperienced. He was discovered right away by me when he had just arrived at Fallen Dragon Ridge.” Ashes said in a self-complacent manner. “I had even managed to catch him red-handed in Silver City. Apparently, his name was Theo?”

“You’re a witch after all. It’d be natural for you to notice such a weird rumor.” Andrea curled her lips. “If you hadn’t met Lady Tilly, you would have probably gone to Border Town a long time ago.”

“There’s no way I will serve under His Royal Highness—”

“Hoh.” She mimicked her voice and said, “His Royal Highness...sounds to me you had quite the talent in calling him that.”

“Pfft!” Tilly couldn’t refrain herself from laughing loudly. Yesterday, she had saw Andrea wearing a sulky expression on her face, but from the looks of it currently, she had seemingly returned to normal. Within Sleeping Island, the only person that dare to find fault with Ashes would be Andrea, who had an illustrious family background.

“No matter if it’s at Sleeping Island or Border Town, we’re all family here. There’s no need to discriminate here, alright?”

Turning her head, her gaze swept past the large group of witches in succession.

Everyone had already found out what ability the other had before setting off. This was done so that they could find a reasonable role for everyone in the case of an enemy attack. One could say that the number of combat witches in Border Town completely paled in comparison to that of Sleeping Island, who had a large number of them. In fact, it was to the point that a large number of witches were incapable of combat. However, it was exactly because of their relentless efforts that turned the little town into what it was today.

Tilly’s line of sight stopped at Anna. If she had to choose someone within the group that left the most profound impression on her, it would probably be this woman who awoke her powers in the Border region and had the deepest impression of Roland.

As long as she stood near her, she would be able to feel a heavy and gentle feeling that was difficult to describe. It was still the first time Tilly had encountered such a feeling. If she really had to describe it, it would be the soft and firm feeling coming from someone’s back when they were lying on a vast plain. It was the kind of feeling that allowed someone to truly feel relaxed.

Other than talking to Roland, Anna was a silent person and her expression rarely changed as well. However, as long as she was standing within a group of witches, her presence was something that was very difficult for people to overlook.

Moreover, from what Sylvie said, Anna was also the quickest witch that had undergone an evolution in Border Town. She possessed a huge, stunning amount of magical power and her black flames, which she could freely manipulate the shape of, was abnormally strong. What’s more, she was also the first witch to read through and finish the “Theoretical Foundations of Natural Science”. This fact made Tilly feel as if she had found a kindred spirit.

If she was able to sit around a fireplace with Anna and properly discuss the miraculous knowledge present in the book during such a winter, it would presumably be an incomparably happy occasion. Tilly was filled with anticipation for that day to come.

The fifth princess then shifted her gaze towards Lightning, who was outside the basket. Being the daughter of Thunder, she was in many ways similar to the No.1 adventurer of the Fjord. She was lively, possessed an inquisitive heart, was filled with energy, and had an innate nature that was suitable for flying. Tilly believed that only the vast and limitless skies was capable of accommodating her free spirited mindset.

Although Thunder had hoped her daughter could live her entire life in a conscientious manner, after seeing the young lady, Tilly knew she was destined to become an adventurer, whose achievement in the future might even surpass her father.

The only thing she could do now was to protect her the best that she can.

“We’re almost there.” Lightning informed everyone. While Tilly was engrossed in her thoughts, she had since drawn close to the side of the basket.

“Come in and rest a little.” Wendy had a deeply concerned expression on her face. “Your lips have turned white from the cold.”

“No worries, my face is just feeling a bit numb.” She patted her rosy red cheeks. “Fortunately, there’s the scarf His Royal Highness gave me. My ears don’t feel cold at all.”

On the way there, they did not run into any of those ferocious-looking devils. Even though the demonic beasts that were in the forest they were traversing through would raise their head and let off a roar or two from time to time, it was evident they didn’t have the ability to attack the hot air balloon that was above them. As such, the first half of the journey went by without much of a hitch. However, when the “Hawk Eye” was above the destination, everyone was stupefied with the scene in front of them.

The only thing they saw was an aftermath of a large beast sweeping past a chunk of the forest. At every spot, fragments of tree trunks and branches laid scattered about while snow had been flipped over and mixed with the soil. From the looks of it, it was an extremely chaotic sight.

“Where’s the stone tower?” Ashes asked.

“It was originally there.” Lightning’s voice was filled with disbelief as she pointed at the empty patch of land underneath her foot. “It... disappeared.”

Tilly looked towards the direction she was pointing at. On the surface of the ground, which color alternated between brown and white, was a large hole. It was pitch black, bottomless and looked as if someone had excavated a passage at this area towards the abyss. Based on the size of the hole itself, the excavator must certainly be somebody who possessed an astonishingly huge body.

“Sylvie, take a look at what was in that hole.”

Sylvie’s brows very quickly creased while her complexion began to look very terrible. “It’s a—it’s a monster that looked like a maggot. It is currently moving towards the Northwest direction— Hold on a second, the ruins are in its stomach!”

“What, in its stomach?” Ashes said in a shocked manner.

“That’s right, I saw the stone tower...as well as the ice coffin you all were talking about.” She said, while carefully examining it. “My goodness, it had swallowed the whole ruins down into its stomach!”

What should they do next? Everyone began to look at Tilly spontaneously.

“Is there anything else besides the worm?” The fifth princess asked in a deep voice. “The devils in particular.”

“Hmm...There are some demonic beasts, but they’re all in its belly. Seems like they were already dead.” Sylvie observed for a moment before shaking her head.

Tilly contemplated for a moment and spoke in a decisive manner. “We descend now. A team will keep guard outside while the other team will follow me into the caves. We will slay the demonic beasts and take back the ice coffin.”

Chapter 336: The worm’s belly

“Tilly, you can’t!” Just when Ashes wanted to stop Tilly, she was cut off by her.

“In order for someone to enter the hole, they needed to rely on witches who can fly to bring them out.” Tilly waved the ring that was on her finger. “Although carrying a heavy object will greatly increase the consumption of magical power, I can at least bring another witch along. This is something that will play a big part in this operation—if we can bring another witch with us, we will be that much more adaptable when a situation arises.” She paused for a moment and looked at the witches in Border Town. “Anna, Lightning and Maggie, I’ll have to ask for your help.”

The three did not raise any objection and the little girl, Lightning, even had an eager expression on her face.

Tilly heaved a small sigh of relief. “In that case, we will also include Ashes, Shiva and Sylvie into the list of people heading into the hole. I will entrusting the safety of the surface entrance to you, the remaining home girls.”

“Lady Tilly, please allow me to come along with you.” Andrea opened her mouth and said.

“If they happen to come across a group of demonic beasts, I am afraid it would be impossible for Nightingale to handle it all alone.” Tilly shook her head. “As the two of you happened to be skilled in long and close range combat respectively, you’re able to coordinate your attacks with each other.

“Rest assured. I will protect the entrance in your stead.” Nightingale appeared to be very confident when she said that. “Whether is it a devil or a demonic beast, they will be unable to take a step close.”

Tilly had considered the matter very clearly. The few witches that had been chosen to go down the hole were greatly dependent by the carrying capacity of the flying witches. The first and heaviest object that needed to be taken into consideration of was the “coffin”. If they were unable to awaken the girl on the spot, they would have to break the coffin into pieces and bring it away. In that case, it would roughly be equivalent to the weight of 2-3 witches. Only Shiva’s invisible barrier was capable of moving such a heavy object.

Sylvie's magic eyes was necessary as well. Without her, it would be impossible for them to locate the precise location of the ruins in the creature's stomach. The same was true for Anna's cutting and heating ability, although they were unable to fly. Thankfully, they were relatively light and could be carried by Maggie after she transformed into a demonic bird. Finally, was Ashes, an extraordinary who could easily fight in any situation. She would be moved and carried by Tilly herself.

According to what Lightning said, even though she was capable of flight, her altitude would decline extremely quickly the moment she took someone along. It was possible she would not be able to fly out of such a deep hole.

Her advantage laid in her excellent flexibility and speed. With her around, their awareness and probing abilities would be effectively increased along with their capability to pull off a pincer attack.

The importance of these few witches was almost irreplaceable and the absence of the one person would make things especially complicated. Because of that, her decision to head down wasn't done in the spur of the moment, but rather something done after taking all the factors into account.

As for Andrea... While her destructive power was extremely stunning within close range, her power will be greatly reduced under the narrow and pitch dark terrain. Since that was the case, it would be better to have her guard the surface with Nightingale as precautions against the demonic beasts patrolling nearby.

It wasn't as if Tilly hadn't considered the idea of giving up the rescue and returning back like that. However, there was always a sort of uneasy premonition in her heart. Of all the undamaged region near it, why did it only settle on the remnant of the stone tower? Especially the direction where the massive beast was crawling from—she gazed at the northwestern mountains. Following that, was exactly the place where the devils were residing.

Could it be possible that there were some sort of relation between the two parties?

Under the control of Wendy and Anna, the hot air balloon quickly and steadily reached the ground. After Tilly put aside the distracting thoughts in her mind and reviewed the plan once more, she took a deep breath and spoke while emphasising every word, "We shall now depart."

.....

The hole was much deeper than she had expected and the height of its interior was about two stories high. The passage stretched vertically downwards at the beginning, but started slanting shortly after and eventually formed a horizontal passageway. All around its wall, the soil emitted an unpleasant smell. If one were to come closer, they would be able to see a sticky liquid dripping down from the surface of the soil which resembled the mucus of a slug.

As the group of witches continued to head deeper, the light that was shining into the hole quickly faded away. Other than a few feebly illuminated areas lit up by the few torches, the entire cave were immersed in a sea of darkness. Furthermore, the whistling sounds of the wind had subsequently gone quiet as well. The feeling of coldness was gradually being replaced with heat that was coming from the core of the planet. Tilly felt warm coming into her body again.

Looking at the flames that were sometimes close and sometimes far, she couldn't help herself from associating it with fireflies.

"The massive beast is just at the front." It was at that moment that Sylvie softly spoke.

However, there was no need for her reminder; everyone was aware that they getting closer to the objective. A strange noise began to come from the depths of the cave. It sounded somewhat similar to the rustling sounds made when an autumn wind blew through a forest, but at the same time, it also sounded like "kachi kachi" chewing noises..

"Let's descend." After Tilly had Ashes who was on her back hold two of the torches, she reduced their elevation through the magic stone until her feet were in the flexible and sticky mud.

Soon after, Anna began to illuminate the place with a chilly and bright light.

She had once again turned her black flames into the heart of fire. The chilly and gentle rays of light immediately flooded the vicinity. Under the dark green flame, the witches could clearly see the tail of the massive beast. It was slowly crawling forward while it's grey, wriggling outer skin secreted mucus unceasingly, making its rotting smell become even more pungent.

"A large and disgusting worm." Ashes pulled out her claymore. "What should we do next? Should I slice its belly open?"

"Wait, Anna has to be the one to kill it." Tilly shook her head and said. "I am still unaware about how big of a threat the things in its stomach will pose to us. It will be too risky for you to approach it using a sword."

"Mhm, let me give it a try." While maintaining the green flames and making sure they did went out, Anna summoned a ball of black flames once more. In an instant, the black flames turned into a string the thickness of a finger and flew directly towards the massive beast.

The thin string penetrated the skin of the monster effortlessly and sliced the side of its belly. Perhaps due to the high temperature, the skin that was in contact with the black string immediately began to burn. The liquid inside its body evaporated, causing billows of white mist to spurt out of its body. Shiva, who had long been equipped for this, activated her invisible barrier, blocking the juices that were flying out from all directions, one after the other.

This is the power that comes from evolution. Tilly quietly thought to herself. Even though Anna had introduced her abilities before departing, seeing it actually happen with her own eyes still shocked her. It was capable of operating outside of her body through her consciousness and it was much sharper than any greatsword in thin string form. What's more, it was extremely difficult to see its trajectory, making it impossible for an enemy to evade them.

The creature let out a sharp and anguished howl, while its body began to squirm around frantically. However, the black flame continued to slice everything ahead of it and speedily shred a greater part of its body. As for the flowing liquid, before it even managed to come near the witches, it had all been evaporated by the lump of the green fire.

Gradually, the massive beast stopped its struggle. Its skin also began to relax.

“It’s dead.” Sylvie said. “Its heart already stopped beating.”

“This thing has a heart too?” Ashes asked while pitching her nose.

“It’s at its head and is almost as big as the basket of Hawk Eye. What’s more...” She paused for a moment. “Magical power is circulating all around its body.”

“In other words, this is a mixed breed of demonic beast?”

“No one knows the answer.” Tilly said. “There are very few records regarding demonic beasts and the wilderness in the history books. As there are still a lot of unknowns around here, it’s best if we hurry and dig the coffins out.”

After going through another round of burning from Anna, the rotting smell was not as intense as before. Under the guidance of Sylvie, they speedily discovered the ruins that had been swallowed.—Needless to say, the present basement had already been turned into disorderly pieces of rocks to the point that it was virtually impossible to make out its original shape. As for the magic illumination stone that Lightning talked about, they had all become lumps of mush. Fortunately, the transparent crystal columns were still as good as before. Despite being rummaged out from the beast’s sticky belly, there was not a strand of corrosion on top, and the girl that was sealed within the crystal still carried an appearance as if she was alive.

“What happens next is up to you now.” Tilly said to Anna.

Chapter 337: Rescue

Anna nodded her head. She stretched the black flames out into a thin thread, and lightly pressed it against the crystal column.

The crowd of witches involuntarily held their breath; they only saw a continuous stream of green smoke rising from the point of contact. In actuality, that wasn’t the true color of the smoke, but instead a different color tone that emerged under the radiance of the green flame.

The black flames dug deeper into the crystal.

“How is it?” Tilly asked.

“It might be a little taxing, but I will be able to slice it open.” Anna replied.

Suddenly, the “ice coffin” began to change. Along with a crisp breaking sound, a few cracks appeared at the spot the black flames had dug into and began to extend throughout the coffin. In an instant, it had covered the entire coffin like a spider web. Almost at the same time, Shiva brought up the barrier and enveloped the witches within it.

However, the expected explosion did not happen. The shattered crystal fragments began to fall apart piece by piece, exposing a core that emitted cold air. The interior was a genuine ice crystal. At that instant, everyone felt a chilly wave hit them in their face, and the surrounding temperature rapidly decreased.

Fortunately, Anna quickly prevented the temperature from dropping further and raised it back to its original state.

Under the scorching heat of the black flames, the crystal began to melt even faster while it rapidly lost its transparency. The edges and corners that made up its shape was no longer apparent. Like an ordinary ice cube, it was shrinking as it melted. However, Tilly noticed that the floor wasn't covered in a large pool of water. Instead, all the parts that had melted turned into smoke and drifted away, making it seem as if the "ice coffin" had never existed in the first place.

When all but a miniscule amount of the ice crystals had melted, the body of the girl who was sealed inside was uncovered.

She had seemingly remained in the midst of a deep sleep. Her long hair, as well as her garment, did not possess any traces of being soaked and were no different than the time she was sealed in ice. Her powerless body began to fall backwards after losing the support of the cylinder and was caught by Ashes' embrace.

"Is she still alive?"

"Although it's very weak, her heart hasn't stopped beating." Ashes pressed one of her hand onto the girl's chest. "This...is just implausible."

It was indeed implausible. Tilly thought. For the duration spanning this short week, she realized the incredible things she witnessed in Border Town were far greater than anything that she had seen within the past year. Tilly let off a small sigh of relief. Her identity was all but confirmed. Since she was someone that was capable of surviving within the extremely cold ice crystals. She was a witch.

The foray this time had, at long last, not been for naught.

As for her name, origin, and the reason she was trapped within these ruins, those questions could slowly be answered once they returned.

Andrea was guarding the side of the cave in a seemingly bored manner. Occasionally, she would cast a gaze towards the bottom, hoping that the first thing she saw was Tilly in the midst of returning.

There was no presence of devils near the cave and even demonic beasts were rarely seen. Occasionally, some common wolves and boar species would come out from the forest. But before she could even draw her bow, Nightingale had already stabbed her dagger into their head.

The passing of time had seemingly become slower. Apart from her, the witches that had remained near the cave were all from the witch association. Even if she wanted to, it was incapable for her to talk to someone to pass time. Although the girl named Wendy appeared to be extremely amiable, Andrea couldn't find the resolve to strike a conversation with her.

As an upper class noble from the Kingdom of Dawn, grace and self-restraint were essential qualities a non-married woman should possess.

Forget it. I will chat with Nightingale instead. I heard that she recently fought with Ashes. Surprisingly, they fought to a stalemate. That being the case, if I treat it as gathering information about my rival, it shouldn't be considered as striking the conversation.

Mhm, this is just a necessary job I have to accomplish.

She stretched her hand to pat away the snow that had collected on her head and looked up. Her heart however, abruptly skipped a beat—Nightingale was gone.

The woman who possessed golden curls and an air of elegance similar to that of a noble, was originally leaning against the side of the basket. However, she had now vanished without a trace.

Oh that's right, her ability was invisibility.

Thinking up to this point, Andrea calmed her heart and began to perceive any sounds of movement around her. When one's sight was unable to be put into good use, their ears and nose would become their best assistant in ascertaining the whereabouts of an enemy.

Soon after, she heard the soft noises of footsteps brushing against something.

Is it Nightingale?

No, that's not right. Andrea felt her hairs standing on end. It was obvious that these footsteps weren't something a single person was capable of producing—There was a group of people that were currently approaching this place. They were in the jungles ahead of them, and were only a hundred steps away from herself! However, when she looked ahead, the place her eye landed on was still undisturbed. There wasn't even a trace of shadow could be found...

The sound of the footsteps very quickly sounded in close proximity to her. My god, the enemy is invisible!

Just when she was about to alarm the others, a sound of explosion suddenly rang in her ears.

A flame suddenly appeared and disappeared in mid-air. Following after was a wave of shimmers in the air and a monster who possessed a peculiar physique appeared. It had a long and narrow head and possessed a pair of sharp sickles. From its appearance, it was like a mutated praying mantis. However, the only thing that made it different from other insects was that it was walking upright.

The bullet shot from the firearm smashed the side of its face into pieces. Black blood began to spurt out from its skull and had almost landed on Andrea's body.

With a loud thud, the creature fell down to the ground. Following which, she saw Nightingale's white cape and hood fluttering in the wind.

Following which, the second gunshot rang!

Damn it, I was careless! Andrea bit her lips tightly. She wished that she could have noticed it earlier.

Although she had summoned her bow, she was not aware of which direction she should have fired her arrows. She could only retreat back to the side of the basket and stand together with the other witches.

Four gunshots rang forth and four monsters toppled over, all of them killed with a shot each.

When Nightingale once again materialized herself beside a monster, Andrea put down her weapon and quickly walked towards Nightingale.

"What is that?"

“If it isn’t a demonic beast, then it should be a devil.” She crouched down and fiddled with its talons and hand sickles. “But judging from its blood color, it’s probably a demonic beast.”

“When did you discover them?”

“Ever since they appeared.” Nightingale smiled. “In the dense fog, the radiance coming from the magic in their bodies were as showy as the sea of stars in a night sky.”

“Can a demonic beast possess such an ability?” Andrea knitted her eyebrows and asked.

The smile that was on the other party disappeared. “Hmm...I guess it’s because mixed breed are somewhat special.”

At that moment, the witches that entered the depths of the cave earlier just so happened to return to the surface as well. Besides the original 7 members, there was also an additional blue-haired girl on Ashes shoulder as well.

“Is she the person that was crying for help in the ruins?” Andrea said while going forward to welcome them.

“That’s right.” Tilly nodded her head. “I will explain the situation in detail once we get back to the Hawk Eye. The longer I stay in this forest, the more uneasy I feel. That reminds me, did any of you encounter any dangerous situation on the surface?”

“Only a few strange and mixed-breed demonic beasts came. However, they’re all dead.” Nightingale lightly shrugged her shoulders.

The hot air balloon quickly inflated and rose up into the air. The basket rose to the very top of a tree and began to make its way towards the small town. At this moment, Sylvie cried out in alarm, “My god, what are those things below? Are they demonic beasts?”

“Demonic beasts?” Andrea extended her head and looked towards the directions of the ruins. However, she was unable to see anything.

That’s not right. There was indeed something moving on the surface. The corpse of the monster which originally laid on the ground had lost half of its body all of a sudden. The bloodstains that was on the ground had been trampled upon and fell apart. Strange worm wriggling movements could be seen between the border of the mud and snow. The scene was almost as if one was looking through a glass cup; if they didn’t examine carefully, it would be very difficult for them to spot the changes.

“It is those strange mixed breed species again.” Nightingale spoke in a careless manner. “There are probably about a hundred of them or so. They were trying to outdo each other in running towards the hole...Could it be that they were attracted by the large worm and wanted to make a hearty meal out of it?” She yawned. “Although, that has nothing to do with us anymore.”

Chapter 338: Police

Vader got out of his bed with a flip and attempted to do a series of exercises with his body. He didn’t feel the least bit of pain from his back. Apparently, what the Knight was saying was right: as long as the wound was left as it was, it would quickly recover.

“How does it feel?” Kukasim asked. “It’ll be better if you’re able to rest up a little more.”

“I won’t be a burden. Didn’t I do a pretty good job yesterday?” Vader put on his shabby jacket and set his feet into his knee-high boots. “Besides, only by working for them earlier did I get a share of the wheat porridge. After all, I can’t eat your portion every time. One bowl is simply insufficient to split between the two of us.”

“Truth be told, I think that it’s pretty good. Compared to the porridge they offered for the needy, the wheat porridge here is much more substantial. I can still taste a bit of meat in them.” The old man shook his head. “Kid, you’re a member of the patrol team. It’s possible you’re not clear about life in the slum district. In that place, the gruel is just like a clear soup, except that the soup has a few more wheat grains. In order to make it appear a bit more nourishing, they normally cook it together with grass and tree leaves. While it’s possible the wheat porridge the Lord gave out will not fill our stomachs up completely, it will not starve us too badly either.”

“I only want the two of us to eat our fill.” Vader said with a smile as he finished tying his shoelaces.

“Alright.” Kukasim sighed. “In that case, make sure to take good care of your body and not overexert yourself.”

It was a strange feeling. He was originally just a scapegoat chosen by a street rat, but now his behaviour was resembling that of his own elder, Vader thought to himself. What was even more strange, was that it hadn’t actually felt that bad.

“I will.” He shook his head, as if he had found something amusing, and put on his hood. “You too.”

Right as he pushed the door open, he saw two men who were currently standing outside the door. The shallow blue color that had been embroidered on their shoulders and armbands, along with the white uniform they wore revealed the visitors’ identity—clerks under the employment of the city hall.

Vader’s brows couldn’t help but crease slightly. “May I know who you are looking for?”

One of the men took out a slip of paper and gave it a quick glance. “Are you Vader?”

“Yes.”

“Did something happen?” Kukasim had also noticed the situation that was unfolding outside the house.

“Congratulations.” The other man revealed a smile. “You passed the paper test to become a public security agent. What follows will be a week of comprehensive training.” He passed a small card over to Vader. “This is your temporary identity card. Head with it to the camp of the Second Army, someone will be there to receive you.”

His eyes were wide open. “I... have passed the lord’s assessment?”

“No, not yet.” The clerk replied. “The paper test was just the first round of selection. You will still have to complete the training and receive the approval of the chief knight. Only then can you consider yourself through the assessment and an official public security agent.”

The two left promptly after saying their piece. They did not demand any money from him, nor did they try to win him over emotionally. The purpose of their visit was seemingly just to bring the news to him.

“You’ve made it!” The old man patted Vader’s shoulder emotionally and said, “Back then, you were still saying something along the line of how it was impossible for you to be chosen.”

Vader was shocked for a good amount of time before he muttered a reply. “Because those questions were really most odd.”

The old man was slightly startled. “What questions are you talking about?”

He involuntarily thought back to the incident a week ago. Once he came to know that His Royal Highness was recruiting public security agents—the new name for patrol guards, he went to the city hall as the recruitment posting had suggested and expressed his interest. The response had also been relatively quick; just five days had passed before he received a letter about a test.

Vader had been full of confidence. Not only did he fully satisfy the requirements for the post, he also possessed more than five years’ worth of practical experience. Besides, this town was indeed lacking someone to keep an eye on the populace. Because of that, he felt that his chances of being chosen were great. If he could become a member of the patrol team, he would be able to provide aid to Kukasim any time, even if his place of residence was in the inner city.

But he didn’t expect, indeed the test surpassed what everyone on the scene expected.

More than a hundred applicants were sitting in a large hall, while the Knight handed out papers to them one by one. He requested that they answer all of the questions listed on top of the papers and write them down in a neat and orderly fashion. He had even said that the person who would ultimately be looking through their papers would be none other than His Royal Highness himself. This format immediately led to a loud outcry among the crowd. Even though the requirement that one needed to be literate had been clearly stated, no one had expected that it would actually be incorporated into the test.

At that moment, over half the people were dumbfounded. Even though Vader was able to understand the questions on the paper, he sat frozen at his place after carefully scanning through it one more time—What sort of weird questions are these?

This was one of the question, for instance. “You’re a coachman for a four-wheel carriage and are travelling along a narrow strip of mountainous road. Inside your carriage are two citizens. At this moment, a group of refugees suddenly appears on the road ahead. You cannot avoid them, and can only choose to collide with them head on, or let the carriage fall from the precipice. The former choice will cause the deaths of a large number of refugees while the latter choice will cause the death of the two citizens. No matter the choice you make, you will always be able to rely on your athletic skills to survive. In this case, what would your choice be? Please explain your reasons in a minimum of 300 words.”

This question would putting anyone at a loss. Even though it mentioned which side was the commoner and which was the refugee, the specific number of refugees was completely unclear. Because of that, even if he wanted to weigh his choices, he was clueless as to where to begin. Moreover, he had always believed that running over a bunch of refugees wasn’t anything too serious. However, perhaps that wasn’t the answer His Royal Highness was after.

In that case, should he choose to have the citizens die? Could it be that that was also an accurate answer?

At that point, he had even convinced himself that His Highness was deliberately making things hard. He believed that in reality, the true public security agents had long been decided already.

"It's nothing. Perhaps it's just been my imagination." Vader inhaled a mouthful of air. "Well then, I will be heading to the camp now."

"Mhm." Kukasim heartily laughed and said. "I believe you will definitely become an official public security agent."

.....

The camp of the Second Army was located on the north side of the small town, outside the stone walls that made up the inner city. When Vader rushed to that place, he discovered that the Chief Knight was already waiting for him in the camp.

"From today onwards, all of you are police cadets." After waiting for everyone to arrive, Carter opened his mouth and said, "In the coming week, all of you will be required to stay in this camp and receive special training. The people who pass will stay, while the people who fail will scam back to where they come from! I will teach you all discipline, and what it means to work under His Royal Highness!"

In Vader's memories, this was exactly how a test should look, except... there were only 15 people remaining out of the 100 applicants. He cast a few quick glances around. From their dress and complexion, with the exception of himself, the rest of the people should be natives here.

As expected, the literacy requirement hadn't been a joke.

"Permission to speak!" Someone raised their hand and said.

Carter's lips parted into a grin and said, "Oh? Seems like you're pretty familiar with customs in the army. Speak."

"Haha, my big brother is in the First Army." He stroked the back of his head and said, "Sir, may I ask what exactly is a police? Aren't we supposed to be public security?"

"The police is part of the public security service. Think of them as the crew that is responsible for enforcing law and order within His Highness's territory. They're required to arrest criminals, crackdown on illegal acts, maintain order in the territory, carry out policies issued by His Royal Highness and the city hall and help the commoners in need."

"Help the commoners? But you just said that we will be serving under His Royal Highness..."

"There is no distinction between the two. Serving the people under His Royal Highness means serving His Royal Highness as well. What, do you want to enter the castle and attend to him personally?" Carter shrugged his shoulders and said, "We can talk about that once you have become an outstanding knight."

But knights are nobility... Vader thought. Compared to commoners like them, the difference in social status was like heaven and earth. Not something one can bridge just by thinking about it.

"Remember, you're both executors of the law and guardians of the people. For now, go to your tents and change into your uniforms." The chief knight clapped his hands. "After that, I just happen to have a mission that I would like to entrust to you all to complete."

Chapter 339: Assassins

When Vader took off his patch-covered coat and put on his brand new uniform, he began to feel his entire body warming up nicely.

The top layer of the clothes was a thick leather material, and the inside also had a cotton lining. They possessed both the heat retention of leather, and the softness of the cloth. Just these materials alone were worth several silver royals.

Although in shape it was similar to the uniforms of the city hall, the color was, on the contrary, worlds apart. The predominant color of the outfit was pure black while the shoulders, collar and cuff had a white stripe border, making it very eye-catching. After the fifteen of them had put on their new uniforms and once again stood in a row, they were unable to restrain their emotions and stuck out their chests a little.

“Not bad,” Carter revealed a satisfied smile. “Now, all of you follow me.”

At this point, the snow was still drifting in the sky. For Vader, it was still the first time he had witnessed snow falling unceasingly in autumn. Snow would occasionally fall in Valencia, but it would stop after one or two days at most. When that happened, children would frequently line up snowmen along the street. They would roll the snow up into snowballs and throw them back and forth between each other. As a result, children thought of snowy days as holidays.

These were days of extreme inconvenience to the grown-ups, however. The excess snow made their shoes wet and moldy, which made it extremely difficult for them to traverse the streets. Shops ended up virtually devoid of people... The weight of snow would even cause the roofs of houses to occasionally collapse.

At such a time, the patrol team would be dead set on staying indoors. Even if they had to go out, they would only find a tavern for everyone to sit around the fireplace. Drinking warm ale, they would flirt with the barmaids.

However, none of that was evident in Border Town.

Every day, there would be someone clearing the excess snow from the street, and sweeping it to either side of the road— This was a job that the city hall had long been recruiting for. It was possible for one to work on a daily or monthly basis and people considered it a job with a low but fast return.

There were a large number of residents heading to and fro on the streets. Some were wearing straw hats, while others had cloaks draped over them. All of them were busy minding their own business. If one could get rid of all of the fallen snow in the town, it wouldn't be too far out of the question to call it summer.

If he hadn't witnessed it with his own eyes, Vader would absolutely not believe that a small town at the edge of the kingdom would appear much livelier than Valencia. If it hadn't been for the absence of a tall chapel and bell tower in the town, he would have seriously believed himself to be in some large city.

The party arrived at the wharf very quickly. Ten or more sailboats had been docked on the Redwater River and several hundred people had already gathered near the shore. Seems like I've encountered

such a scene before... that's right! An image came to Vader's mind. When he, and other refugees from the Eastern Region, had arrived at this small dock, this was also the scene that had greeted them.

"Permission to speak! Were those people..."

"They were refugees from the South and the North. In order to allow them to get through the winter safely, His Royal Highness specially sent people to bring them to Border Town. Your role is to assist the city hall in maintaining order and to get those people in a line into the inspection checkpoint. Once that is done, you will quarantine them and write each of them into the record," Carter instructed them. "As the police officers are still few in number, the First Army will be assisting you. However, this job will be assigned to all of you to accomplish on your own in the future."

"Yes, sir!"

From the sound of it, it wasn't a hard task at all and was little more than directing refugees into a queue to collect their porridge. Vader walked towards the front of the checkpoint and began to yell in a loud voice so that everyone could hear his instructions clearly and approach him in an orderly manner.

"What's your name? Where're you from? Do you have any thing you're good at? Can you read?"

Every refugee that passed through the checkpoint would be subjected to a round of inquiries by the clerks in the city hall, following which their responses would be roughly recorded. Vader knew that this was just a rough estimate. Once everyone had settled in, a further investigation would verify everyone's responses. The people who possessed special abilities or knowledge would be prioritized in their transfer into the inner city.—This process was something he had personally experienced once.

Suddenly, a burst of commotion rang out behind him. Vader turned his head only to see a man clad in a furry gown arrive at the wharf under the protection of a group of guards. The long, grey hair blowing in the end made his status clear—He was the feudal lord of the land, HRH Roland Wimbledon. A number of people dressed up in fine clothing, who ought to be the people in charge of city hall, stood beside him.

Never in his mind had he imagined that His Royal Highness would brave the flurry of snow to personally observe this batch of refugees. In a severe winter, it was rare to find a higher noble who was willing to leave a warm bed at the crack of dawn, especially when there were servants present to take care of everything.

"My name is Jockmau, and I am from the Northern Lands. Er... my sp-speciality lies in farming. I can't read."

"Farming?" The city hall official checked the relevant box on his form. "Okay, pass on."

It was at this exact moment that Vader noticed the individual casting a glance in the direction of His Royal Highness. There was not the least veneration present in his eyes. In its stead was an emotion completely different from that of the other commoners.

"Hold it." He said unconsciously.

"W-What's the matter?"

"You're a farmer, right? Can you tell me which month one should sow their winter wheat?"

The city hall official looked at him as well with a somewhat annoyed look on his face. "I am only going through the preliminary registration for now, and I don't have the time to distinguish whether every single one of them is telling the truth. Didn't Sir Carter explain clearly how the process should work? All I need you to do is maintain order around these parts."

After hearing what the official said, the man immediately shut his mouth.

Seriously, what an idiot! Vader pursed his brow and continued speaking, ignoring the official. "The way you speak doesn't resemble a northerner. Instead, it is similar to the accent commonly used near the middle of the kingdom. Which town in the North did you come from? I'm very familiar with the places there."

Jockmau hesitated for a moment, but remained silent.

"Your attire is also strange. Even if you were lucky enough not to freeze to death in the North in this outfit, your fingers ought to have developed frostbite by now. The temperature there is below freezing all year round, you know." Vader grabbed his right hand. "What about your gloves? Don't tell me you threw them away because you realized when you arrived that it was slightly warmer?"

Even the personnel manning the checkpoint had now noticed the fishy part of his tale. It might be understandable if one lied about being skilled at something, probably trying to obtain better treatment. However, if someone chose to conceal their own origin, that action was much more suspicious. "Where exactly did you come from?"

Jockmau clenched his teeth. Suddenly, he took out a red pellet from his breast. He slapped it into his mouth and yelled, "Out of my way!"

Vader suddenly felt his wrist become scaldingly hot. Although his conditioned reflexes kicked in and made him want to pin the man down to the floor, he found that even with all of his strength, he was not moving at all. Jockmau raised his shoulder and Vader felt his entire body fly into the air.

He fell to the ground heavily and a scorching pain ignited in his back. Dammit, my wound opened! Spitting out a mouthful of saliva, he shook off some of the dizziness in his brain and turned over, getting himself up. Alas, Jockmau was no longer in his original position.

Four or five refugees scuttled out of the crowd, and their actions were as nimble as the demonic beasts outside the town walls. With a few steps, they vaulted over the temporary railing set up by the City Hall and ran toward the prince.

The goal of the group of people was painstakingly obvious. They were here for the high-ranking officials of Border Town, as well as their feudal lord.

Recalling the monstrous strength that had erupted from Jockmau, Vader's mind could imagine the prince's royal guard being torn to shreds on the spot. Even the prince himself would be hard-pressed to escape that fate.

However, that did not come to pass.

He quickly heard a string of bangs—the same as when the soldiers stood off against demonic beasts.

In front of the prince, clouds of white smoke floated upwards into the sky.

Within the sea of smoke, Jockmau's head had blossomed into a sea of blood.

Chapter 340: The reason for the assessment

When all of the freaks rushing out of the crowd had been shot dead, the unexpected change sank in and the refugees suffered a burst of panic. As tens of soldiers that carrying peculiar weapons began to gather around the refugees, fearful cries began to rang out and the situation was becoming harder to control by the second. At this moment, the loud voice of His Highness suddenly echoed above the crowd—

“Settle down, my citizens. I am your Feudal Lord, Roland Wimbledon. Please listen to what I am about to say.”

Although the voice was loud, it was not a hysterical shout. Rather, he spoke as equals, with a clear and calm manner. It was almost as if he was speaking close to his ears, Vader felt. His words carried unquestionable might and calmed the clamor and panic on the scene.

The crowd suddenly got quiet.

“Just as you heard when you arrived, Border Town will provide you with three things: somewhere to say which resists the cold wind and blocks the snow, ample food that will allow you to fill your belly, and even numerous, reasonably paid jobs. I am here to tell you all that these are real.”

“The house is made of thick clay, without the slightest crack for the wind to enter. A charcoal stove lies underneath the bed. When you sleep on it, it is as comfortable as lying on a meadow warmed by the summer sun. As long as the door and windows are closed, you won't feel even the slightest bit of chill, even if you are wearing the thinnest clothes.”

“The food is wheat porridge, accompanied by meat jerky. When you scoop it up, you will be able to see the grains wheat falling downwards drop by drop. When you put them into your mouth, the rich viscosity will slow their descent into your stomach. Just one bowl alone will fill you to the brim.”

At this point, Vader suddenly began to feel his belly getting hungry. The things that His Royal Highness was speaking about were extremely novel. He was different from the majority of nobles, who repeatedly stressed their power and duty as leaders of the masses and proclaimed that everyone under their jurisdiction should comply with their wishes. Instead, he took the people's point of view and described his promise through basic necessities. It was obvious, looking at the rapt expression on the refugees, that his words had moved their heart.

“My wish is for all the citizens under my rule to live out happy lives, lives where they do not have to worry about basic necessities. However, the enemies hidden in the shadows are not willing to see such a sight. Those beasts rushing out earlier were undoubtedly sent out by them. Their motive is very simple. They do not wish to see me alive; nor do they wish to let my citizens lead comfortable lives.”

“If I disappear, would another feudal lord provide you with warm housing and delicious food? I am sure everyone understands this point clearly. The answer is also clear from what you have experienced thus far. There is no one except myself who's willing to do this .”

Vader realized that everyone's panic had dissipated. When the refugees began to treat the supernatural monsters as a common enemy, their unease gradually turned to anger. —The villains trying to harm His

Royal Highness are also scumbags trying to harm our beautiful lives! People like them must never be forgiven!

"In order to prevent such a surprise attack from happening again, we will have to conduct the inspection again. This time, my personal guard shall personally take charge of conducting the body check. We shall definitely not give the enemy any chance to destroy what we have here!"

Everyone complied with the order. The people who had already passed the checkpoints were once again taken to the wharf by the personal guards. No one expressed any dissatisfaction and the queue was even more orderly than earlier.

"As expected of His Royal Highness." Vader couldn't help but be deeply moved. Just a few sentences were able to eliminate the imminent chaos.

"From what I heard, you were the first person to discover the problem. Am I right?" Carter Lannis approached him and said, "Follow me, His Highness wishes to see you."

He followed behind the Chief Knight and went before the young prince. Kneeling down on one knee, he said, "I pay my respects to the prince."

"Tell me, how did you notice something fishy about him back then?" The prince asked.

Vader went over his observations once more.

"An acute sense of perception. Are you sure you were just an ordinary citizen before?"

"No, Your Highness. I used to be part of the patrol team in Valencia." He replied candidly. "I worked for roughly six years, until a large group of pirates raided Valencia."

"However, in your CV, it wasn't clearly stated that you have any personal strength." The prince said, "I checked with Carter. He said that you're still staying in the temporary settlements. In other words, you concealed your experience when City Hall was initially trying to keep track of people entering Border Town, when there wasn't any need for you to do so. Why?"

Even though he didn't know what a CV was, it didn't affect his ability to answer this question. He hesitated for a moment and explained about Kukasim to the prince. "I would not have made it to Border Town alive, if it hadn't been for the convict. For that reason, it's impossible for me to leave him alone in the western district."

"And thus you were willing to become a member of the patrol team. Are you thinking of giving him some extra benefits when you're out on patrol in the future?"

"I..." Vader's heart suddenly tightened. From the previous sentencing that he had suffered, he knew that His Highness was very particular about how nobody was above the system of laws he had set up. But his words earlier clearly carried a hint of crossing that boundary.

"Don't worry. You haven't done it yet. Just thinking about it won't get you in trouble." It seemed his mind had been read; the prince smiled and spoke.

However his words also left Vader with a hint of disappointment. It was beyond doubt that His Highness did not endorse his thoughts. Even if he successfully became a police officer, he would be required to settle disputes fairly and follow lead of the city clerks .

“Do you have a family?” The prince suddenly asked.

“...They lost their lives in the raid in Valencia.”

“How about Kukasim?”

“He probably doesn’t have any.” Even though he was unsure why His Royal Highness was asking that, Vader still truthfully replied, “If he had any, the street rats wouldn’t have chosen him as a scapegoat.”

“As long as one possess a special ability, they will all get priority for the right to a small residence. Furthermore, they will receive an identification certificate from the city hall and enjoy all of the rights of citizens. This offer naturally extends to their family members as well.” The prince smiled and said, “I believe you should be able to tell where I am going?”

Vader was startled, and was uncontrollably surprised. He said, “Do you agree to let me have Kukasim...”

“Bring the old man along to the city hall for registration. They will arrange everything for you.”

He endured the emotions stirring within him, got on his knees once again and said, “Thank you for your benevolence, Your Highness!”

“You still mustn’t let your guard down, though. You have to maintain vigilance as you have today.” The prince nodded his head and said. “Even if the two of you officially became relatives, you will still have to stay in the temporary settlements for the time being if you’re unable to pass the coming tests.

“Understood!”

The matter that had weighed down his heart had finally been answered and Vader began to feel a great tension leaving his entire body. Just when he was ready to leave, he suddenly recalled the written test he had taken. Hesitating for a moment, he couldn’t suppress his urge and asked, “Your Highness. During the first test, there were a lot of questions I did not know answers for and my answers were all confused. Why did you still pick me?”

“Because there were no correct answers to begin with.” The corners of the prince’s mouth curled upwards. “The answers themselves are different for every individual. What’s more, the key point of this test wasn’t in the answers. Instead, they were used to assess the candidates’ reading and writing abilities. As long as they understand the topic and articulate their ideas, they will pass the test.”