

## Witch 361

### Chapter 361: Expansion

According to the records of Stall Literature, temperature control was the key in large-scale production of nitrifying glycerol because the excessive heat of exothermic reactions was extremely prone to cause the sensitive dynamites to explode. As long as the temperature of the large reaction vessel could be kept constant, the nitrating glycerin could be safely manufactured in batches.

However, the ice-water mixture had limited performance in heat absorption, especially when a large amount of heat was released. Its cooling rate was slow while the consumption of itself was fast. Besides, it was very troublesome to produce ice cubes. In light of these, ice cubes were suitable for laboratory tests, but not for the mass production. As the Frozen Coffin of Agatha could easily produce low temperatures, such as nearly 100 below zero, it was undoubtedly a great way to cool down the container.

Roland did not know whether the news was reliable or not, but it didn't stop him from trying one by one. Even in the event of an accident, Nana could always save her life.

Back in his office, he wrote a reference letter and gave it to his guard, who brought Agatha to the chemical laboratory and sent the letter to Kyle Sichi.

Besides introducing Agatha's abilities, he also made up an upper-class identity for her in the letter to mellow the alchemist so that he would take good care of the witch who might bring great help to the chemistry experiments. Roland was still worried after the guard left. He knew Keymor was straightforward while Agatha was arrogant and hoped they would not get into a big fight with each other.

Scroll pushed the door open and walked into the room while he was pondering whether he should go to the lab to take a look.

"Your Highness, here are the results for the second batch educational examination." She smiled with a curve at the corner of her eye and continued, "This time, 762 students have passed the exam and half of them are adults."

"So many?" Roland was pleased. Compared with the first group of more than 50 kids from Karl College, half of the adults graduated this time proved that night school training did work. At the same time, it verified the feasibility of a series of training programs formulated by the Ministry of Education based on different training schedules and durations.

"Yes, you've been implementing universal education for almost six months now, and these students are generally under 25 years old, it's not too difficult for them to master the basic reading and writing skills."

It probably has something to do with the characters themselves. It would never be as fast if it was Chinese instead." Roland thought to himself, although he always felt that these earthworm-like characters were awkward.

During the initial implementation of universal education, he had no idea how far it would go. After all it was utterly new to the Kingdom of Graycastle. In accordance with the principle of encouragement and subsidy, he had been discussing with Scroll for a long time to formulate a set of educational programs for minors and night classes for the workers and make a series of incentives to tempt the workers to study. The result appeared to be really good as of now.

Of course, all of these were attributed to the executor Scroll for she really did a good job in management.

"Thanks for your hard work." Roland nodded.

"It's my pleasure to be at your service, Your Highness." She bowed.

As she was the eldest witch in the Union, it was hard for Roland to compare her with the young girls like Anna and Lightning. Scroll always gave him a feeling of remaining stable and well-organized. When discussing things, she would both silently listen to his thoughts and brutally point out his mistakes. Sometimes, he even felt like a junior in front of Scroll.

Probably... she was born to be a teacher.

Roland smiled and shook his head, putting these thoughts aside.

Anyway, the long-standing factories could finally be put into use with the new productive forces.

"Please invite over Barov," he said with great excitement.

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The City Hall Director rushed to the castle quickly. As his workload had been increasing since he started building the city, he seemed older now with balding head and more wrinkles on the forehead. But there was not any fatigue on his face, he seemed increasingly energetic instead.

"Your Highness, are you want to see me for the recruitment matter?"

He probably had also received the news of the new group of graduates in town and took the initiative to ask.

"Exactly," Roland nodded, "since the Months of Demons this year came earlier, Timothy won't be able to disturb the Western Region. I'd like to scale up the army of Border Town in order to deal with the war next year and increase the number of factory workers at the same time."

"And, the City Hall as well." Barov added. "After the town is expanded into a city, your territory will be five to six times bigger. The City Hall will need more officers to manage such a vast land."

"No worries," the prince smiled and said, "you're not forgotten." He drew out a piece of paper and said while writing, "For the new group of 700 graduates, the City Hall will provide 20% of the graduates' jobs, and the acid plant 40%. The rest will be recruited by the steam engine plant and the bicycle plant, with at least 100 allocated to the latter. You may set the salary based on the previous standards, but that for acid factory workers can be a little bit higher. Try to fill all the vacancies quickly."

As for the soap and perfume plant, the main tasks were completed by the witches, and the ordinary people will only need to repeat a few simple operations. The workers there don't need to be literate, so there is no need to recruit graduates for them.

Roland believed that education could not only improve one's knowledge and vision, but also improve his sense of responsibility and sociality, which were exactly the significance of enlightenment. That was why advanced factories required large numbers of elementary educators, who knew their social attributes and the importance of cooperation, altruism and self-discipline better than the illiterate. This was critical to the fine work featuring many complex procedures.

"Yes, Your Highness." Barov replied. "How many people does the army need?"

"At least 1,000. Start recruiting from the newly promoted civilians and the refugees from the Eastern Region." Roland commanded. "As in the past, the City Hall issues the notices and the First Army is responsible for the reviewing and hiring."

"1,000... headcounts?" Barov startled and said, "This is equivalent to the amount of the current headcount of the first army, Your Highness. If they're equipped with the resources and weapons in accordance with the specifications of the First Army, the cost won't be low. "

"I have taken these into consideration. Just do it."

Knowing the danger of the demon's invasion, he naturally could not be planning as slow as before. Besides ruling the entire Western Region, the first task in the spring of the coming year was to completely defeat Timothy. As long as he wiped out the regime against him, the new town of the Western Region would become the veritable King's City even if the other areas were not seized. By then, both the expansion of population and the promotion of trade would be allowed, rather than be limited as it was currently.

However, the prince did not think Barov had to know the plan since all the latter needed to do was to arrange financial and material distribution.

After the City Hall Director left, the guards brought a new message.

Margaret's caravan had arrived.

## Chapter 362: Predicament

At the pier, more than 10 sailships were lined up in a column, with the top of their masts and their interlacing hemp ropes covered in snow, such that they looked like threads of clear silver. Refugees filed out of the cabins and rushed towards the large open space in front of the pier.

This was not the first time Border Town welcomed refugees from the Kingdom of Graycastle, and therefore the entire procedure seemed very orderly. Four lines of iron fence separated the crowd into two columns, which helped to control the crowd movement and prevented a stampede. On both sides of the fences, there were policemen carrying batons on patrol. Anyone who pushed his way through or attempted to climb the fence would be beaten. Although there was punishment, there was also reward—in order to comfort them after an arduous journey, the refugees would each receive a hot bowl

of gruel when they passed through the railed passageway. In any case, filling up their stomachs before all else could effectively abate the refugees' fear and discomfort of being in a foreign land.

This time, aside from the policemen, First Army soldiers, and City Hall officials, Nightingale and Sylvie also took part in the inspection to locate the drug users who were planted in the crowd by Timothy. Under the surveillance of the Eye of Magic, pills and snow powder had nowhere to be hidden.

"Thank you for all that you've done for Western Region." Roland looked away from the crowd and said to Margaret beside him. "If it wasn't for your fleet, these people would've to spend the winter in the slums of other cities."

"It was rare for Your Highness to ask me for help in such an urgent tone of voice, and naturally I had to do my best." She laughed. "However, many sailors were unwilling to set sail in the heavy snow, and hence I was only able to pool together these 13 sailships."

"It's better than not even one." Roland puffed out a white breath. After he learned that there were still large numbers of refugees held up in Silver City, Redwater City and Willow Town, he sent a letter of help to Margaret's Chamber of Commerce, hoping that it could deploy a fleet of sailships to help him transport the refugees.

Although 13 was a smaller number than he expected, all of the refugees could be transported by making the sailships take two extra trips. Assuming that each sailship could accommodate 100 people, and each trip to and fro required an estimated two weeks, the 3,000 stranded refugees would take roughly a month and a half to be transported. Because the gold royals brought along by a small platoon of the First Army were insufficient to last for this entire duration, therefore, on the last return journey, the sailships had to transport food and winter clothing as well. Roland did not wish to see the refugees carry their hopes of a better life on board the ships yet eventually fail to reach the destination.

Thanks to Lightning, Margaret calculated the transportation costs to be two times the normal daily rate. Any other merchant would have considered this to be a foolish transaction, as the transportation costs alone exceeded the value of the goods. On average, it cost one gold royal per two people, which, according to the current market price, would be enough to purchase several strong and high-quality slaves. Margaret had initially expressed her doubts to Roland, but he was insistent on bringing these people over to the Western Region.

From the moment the refugees stepped on board the ships together with the emissary delegation, they were considered subjects of the Western Region, and it was in line with his duty to provide them with asylum. Furthermore, in Roland's eyes, the value of these refugees was far greater than that of slaves. After receiving education and training, and eventually given employment, the wealth they would create through their jobs would be immeasurable.

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Returning back to the reception room of the castle, Roland ordered the kitchen to prepare a hot pottage for Margaret. "Drink this, it'll make your limbs feel much warmer."

"Thank you for your kindness." The businesswoman scooped up a spoonful of the soup and sniffed. "There seems to be White Liquor in it."

"Indeed." He laughed, "In addition, there's also pepper and honey, and the base is chicken soup. Spirit is always an excellent drink to dispel the cold, and when heated with chicken soup, it becomes even more delicious. The other seasonings are added to cover the pungent taste, as well as add flavor and a little spice to the soup, such that even a person who rarely drinks alcohol will find it palatable.

Margaret slowly drank the pottage and finished it with a loud burp. "That's great. Every time I'm on the way to your place, I'm filled with anticipation, never knowing what novelty is in store. It's a pity that next year I'll probably be unable to visit you."

"Are you referring to a trading opportunity?" Roland subtly caught the meaning in her words.

The businesswoman nodded, "Timothy has decreed a ban on saltpeter trade, and therefore, sales are prohibited not only to King's City, but also Silver City and Redwater City. Aside from supplying at a low price to the Alchemist Workshop, the only other customers are the nobility in the city.

Roland frowned.

"Furthermore, according to a piece of news that I heard from a City Hall source, Timothy is planning to blockade the Western Region. It won't be just saltpeter, but also merchants, which will be stopped at the frontier of Redwater City. When the time comes, not only Border Town, but also Longsong Stronghold and Willow Town will be affected. Although many nobles have expressed opposition, it's unlikely that Timothy will revoke his order." She shook her head in resignation, "From next year onwards, I'll not only be unable to ship saltpeter and ingots over here, but even the steam engine trade will probably be suspended."

"I must have pushed him too far, or he wouldn't have issued a decree that's so damaging to the royalty." Roland silently thought. "Before completing the centralization of authority, hasty interference in the trading activities of other territories is always likely to evoke the resistance and defiance of the lords and nobles. Even if Timothy sends his own troops to blockade the land and river routes, the troops would easily be eliminated by assassins covertly sent by the local lords—just let him try to enforce this policy for a year and a half."

However, trade was the lifeblood of Border Town. Let alone a year... even half a year of blockade was a huge no-no. Saltpeter was a material used in large-scale acid production, and before the problem of synthetic ammonia was solved, it remained an irreplaceable component. If supply was cut off, the 152 mm artillery would become useless, and the reloading of the new repeating rifles would also be massively delayed.

However, compared to weapons, the prohibition of the steam engine trade was even more destructive. At present, the amount of gold royals stored in the City Hall's vaults was not much. A portion of revenue was used in infrastructure projects and increasing the number of jobs, while another portion was distributed as pay to the townspeople and recollected through the sale of food, convenience goods and housing. This economic model necessitated a continuous injection of gold royals into the market, which had to be at least equal in amount to the wealth created by the subjects.

At present, Border Town remained in a state of primitive accumulation and also did not issue credit. If the revenue from the steam engine trade was lost, finances might dry up to the point that pay cannot be issued to the people, and a full economic meltdown would follow.

In any case, the interruption of funds was absolutely unacceptable.

"This situation won't last long." Roland spread his arms, "I believe that you'll soon be able to visit our town again... no, when that time comes, you'll see a brand new city."

Margaret was slightly surprised, "Are you planning to build a city here?"

"Indeed, after the Months of the Demons." He smiled. "Also, I plan to set up a trade shipping route that connects directly to the fjords. Instead of passing through Seawindshire or Port of Clearwater, it'll set out directly from the Western Region towards the Fjord Islands. Will you be interested to participate in this?"

Chapter 363: New Trading Route

"Setting out from the... Western Region?" Margaret asked curiously. "I didn't know that there's a good harbor that leads to the sea here."

"There isn't yet, but we can build one."

Her eyes widened, "Your Highness, are you serious?"

"Of course. By next spring, we should be able to begin the construction." Roland smiled and said.

In this era, harbors were, without exception, natural. Construction projects which required transforming the natural landscape, such as man-made harbors, were practically impossible.

However, now that he had obtained Tilly's full support, he simply had to wait until the housing construction in Sleeping Island was completed, after which Lotus would come back to the Western Region, and furthermore, the crisis caused by the demonic beasts should have subsided by then. It would then be a suitable time to start work on the harbor.

He stood up and pointed to a map that was hung behind him. "In the south of Border Town, there's a shore where the depth of water is ideal and the surface area is highly suitable, sufficient to accommodate all of the facilities required by the harbor. By making only a few modifications, and also flattening the ridges along the coast, I'll be able to transport goods from the inland of Western Region to the harbor."

"Modifying the shore... and flattening the ridges? Why is it that when you speak of these astonishing plans, I seem to get the impression that they are not difficult at all?" Margaret said with interest.

"However, do you have a merchant fleet? You should know that sea ships and inland river ships are very different."

"At the moment, no." Roland spread his hands. "This is also one of the reasons why I hope that you'll participate."

"I'll provide the ships?"

"And also be responsible for shipping and selling," he added, "while Western Region will only provide the goods."

This was equivalent to possessing the exclusive dealership in the fjord region, and with her experience, Margaret could smell the potential profits. If he created his own merchant fleet and sold goods to the Fjords himself, the profits would be higher, but Roland did not want to expend too much energy and manpower in this area. He simply wanted to obtain some funds as soon as possible, in order to maintain the rapid development of his territory. After the primitive accumulation was completed, it would only be a matter of time before he introduced credit.

As expected, the businesswoman blinked her eyes and excitedly asked, "You're entrusting it all to me?"

"If the price is reasonable." Roland nodded. "If you're willing to take care of Western Region's overseas trade, we can discuss the details right now. The selling area is limited to the Fjords, and the selling price must not be lower than the price at which we're currently selling to the Crescent-Moon-Bay Caravan."

"That's for sure. The steam-powered boat, which doesn't rely on wind power to sail continuously, has alone made it worth it for maritime trading teams to compete for and buy goods at high prices." She said in a highly assured voice, "If selling directly to the Fjord Islands, I'm confident of doubling the price."

"We can share the excess profits together." Roland laughed. "And, aside from the steam engine, there's also another major product." He clapped his hands, and a guard who was waiting outside the hall immediately walked in with a plate in hand. On top of the plate was four or five gleaming crystal bottles, and each of them was only about the size of a thumb.

"This is..."

"Open it and smell."

Feeling curious, Margaret pulled the cork from the top of the bottle and sniffed. Her eyes immediately lit up. "My gosh, you actually created perfume!"

"I wonder, how is it compared with the perfume created by the Alchemist Workshop in King's City?"

"The fragrance seems to be stronger." She raised up and scrutinized the bottle, seeming very fond of it. "Was this manufactured by the Alchemist Workshop in Border Town?"

"More or less." Roland also took a bottle and placed it in his palm. In accordance with his demands, the perfume bottles were made by firing crystals of excellent transparency, and each of them had the same hexagonal prism shape. By spinning the bottle gently under light, the perfume inside the bottle would change into various shades of color, and looked extremely aesthetically pleasing. If the sales concept of later generations was anything to go by, exquisite packaging could greatly increase the quality of the product itself. As the perfume served as the hit product to open up the Fjords' market, he naturally took great care with every aspect.

Compared to the steam engine, the perfume could be described as real low-cost goods. When Evelyn realized that "the spiciest White Liquor" was also a type of liquor, she started to continually produce liquors with very high concentrations and even skipped the final step of distillation. As for roses and other flowers with unique smells, they were made into various oil products by Leaf. By mashing only two or three stalks of flowers, it produced sufficient fragrance to fill a bottle of liquor.

"If you like, I'll give these few bottles to you." He placed the perfume back on the plate.

"Really?" Margaret smiled, "Then I shall not be courteous."

"I heard that this thing can be sold in the Fjords at a high price?"

"You should know, the Alchemist Workshop in King's City sells only a very limited stock of perfumes every year. The thousand or so bottles don't come anywhere close to fulfilling the demand. In fact, of the perfumes sold in other regions, a large portion is bought by maritime merchants and resold in the Fjords."

Margaret paused after she said this. "I wonder, how many bottles of perfume can your Alchemist Workshop produce a year?"

"If there's sufficient material, it should be approximately ten times the amount produced by the Alchemist Workshop in King's City." Roland deliberately downplayed the actual figure. He did not want to sell this highly profitable good as if it was cabbage, or earn only four or five thousand gold pieces a year. Along with the steam engine, the perfume served as his hit product, and Roland hoped that it would be able to bring back a similar profit.

"..." The businesswoman remained silent for a long while before she heaved, "Your territory is truly full of the unexpected."

"So, does that mean you're willing to manage the sales of these goods?"

"Of course, Your Highness." She stood up and bowed to Roland. "I find this to be a rare opportunity."

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After a general agreement was reached, the specific details and contractual terms were handed over to Barov to negotiate. Roland returned to his office and prepared to write a letter to Theo, who was hiding in King's City.

Whether to initiate an attack and overthrow Timothy, or to open up a new trading route, a fine balancing act was required. Roland did not want to put all his eggs in one basket. He hoped that even if the attack failed, he could continue to obtain saltpeter.

And the way to do this was self-production.

In the letter, aside from mentioning his intention to attack, he made a point to encourage Theo to contact the nitre plants in the surrounding areas of King's City and purchase a batch of nitre workers to send to Western Region.

This year, life was certainly not rosy for saltpeter merchants. Apart from prohibiting exports, Timothy also forced the merchants to sell at a low price to Alchemist Workshop. As a result, the profits of saltpeter fields naturally sank. Roland believed that as long as the pay was good enough, it would not be a problem to obtain entire factories' worth of workers.

The principle of saltpeter production was not complicated. At present, the population of Border Town was continually increasing, and could already satisfy the large amount of faeces required by the saltpeter fields. All of the conditions for self-production were fully met. Before defeating Timothy, this was undoubtedly one of the most stable guarantees.



## Chapter 364: Double Image

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The snow outside was becoming heavier again. Snowflakes that were the size of a fingernail fell from the sky and covered Border Town. Gray elves danced in the wind and descended towards the land together, where they blended in with the white roofs and tree branches. In all probability, witnessing such a scene made one feel nothing but cold.

Yet, the more it was so, the warmer Tilly felt.

She leant back on her deckchair, with half of her body covered by a soft woolen blanket, and her legs extended towards a fire barrel. This convenient device for warming oneself was invented by Roland. A charcoal brazier was placed inside a square barrel, which was arranged in line with a chair separated by a horizontal wooden plank. It was different to a blazing bonfire, which could cause burns if one got too close, yet did not provide much heat if one was far away. By placing one's feet on the wooden plank, one could safely enjoy the warmth of the charcoal fire from a close distance. And by additionally tucking into a blanket, one's entire body would feel warm.

The swirling snow outside the window accentuated the cosiness of indoors, and the sense of bliss created by this contrast was deeply memorable.

She had to say that the treatment that the witches received in Border Town was completely different from one year ago. Understandably, the witches did not wish to leave as even she herself was immensely enjoying the stay.

Apart from her, Anna and Agatha were also staying in the room. This was originally Anna's bedroom, and whenever there was a rare downtime, Tilly would bring her books to the room and seek advice from Anna for things she did not understand. At first, there were only the two of them, but now, there was also an ancient witch who had awakened from the ruins. Anna simply moved the fire barrel from beside the table to an empty space in the room and asked Roland to install two more deckchairs. The three of them sat around the fire barrel with their legs resting on each other, and together they learned eye-opening and arcane knowledge.

Of course, most of the time, Tilly and Agatha asked questions while Anna answered.

"It's hard to believe that a book like this could be written by a mortal." Agatha closed the cover of *Natural Science Theoretical Foundation*, and inhaled deeply. "The more I read, the more I realize that the world is the way it is. Amidst the mass chaos there are hidden rules, and everything operates according to the same rules. If he was born in Taquila, the Union would certainly accept him as a member, and there's a chance that he'll possess the same status as a Senior Witch."

At first, she asked many questions regarding the book's contents, but through Anna's detailed explanations, Agatha's attitude towards Roland changed significantly.

However, Tilly believed that this change was only directed towards Roland, while together, they continued to see other mortals as extremely dull and stupid.

As she thought of this, Tilly sighed uncontrollably. Only she knew that all of this knowledge did not originate from Roland Wimbledon but another person who suddenly appeared in his mind.

Through these few days of contact, as well as Sylvie's supporting evidence, Tilly was able to confirm this explanation. However, it would be impossible for them to prove he was still Roland Wimbledon. What was even more suspicious was that he did not know where this portion of memory came from or who it belonged to. It was hard to believe that memory could be completely separated from his life, or at least, she herself was unable to do so. As long as he recalled in his mind the knowledge of the court mentor and professor, the relevant segments of memory would flash in front of his eyes.

"Where exactly did he acquire all of this knowledge from?" Agatha sighed and said, "I had thought that the mortals' research has been extensive, but after these few days of observation, it seems that there's not much difference from 400 years ago—and perhaps even a little behind."

"I don't know either." Tilly shrugged. "In any case, the knowledge couldn't have been acquired in the palace."

"How was he like in the past?"

This question made Anna raise her head.

"In the past..." Tilly hesitated for a moment. "He was arrogant, cowardly, bigoted, ignorant, unskilled and terrible... His only merit was probably that he didn't make use of his status as a prince to commit any atrocious act."

"Oh... so, he was equal to other mortals?"

"No. Even among mortals, he was considered a terrible fella." She said, grumbling, "Though he improved after coming here, it's still never clear what he's thinking... He would always hold back his words and yet wanted people to trust him. How is that possible?"

The room suddenly quietened.

"What's the matter?" Tilly sensed something odd in the other two's eyes.

"No... Nothing." Anna smiled with her mouth closed. "This is the first time I've heard you speak about this."

"Damn, she only now realized that she had spoken too much. This kind of complaint shouldn't be coming from an ally. It was probably because in recent days she had been too relaxed." She tried to explain. "What I mean is..."

"It's OK, His Highness wouldn't care." Anna shook her head and laughed. "He probably has his own reasons."

"Roland..." Tilly hesitated briefly and asked, "didn't mention these to you before?"

"No," Anna said casually, "I haven't asked him either. If he wanted to talk about it, he would."

"Indeed," Tilly sighed in mind. The first time that Anna met the prince, he was already a changed person, and hence it was meaningless to consider this question.

"From what you said, he was a totally different person in the past?" Agatha asked with interest. "There used to be a saying in the Quest Society that the more uncommon a person is, the more distinct quirks he has. Perhaps this kind of change is a normal occurrence. While in the palace, did Roland howl at the moon, or spend a long time staring and gesturing at the wall?"

"What kind of quirks are these?" Tilly could not help but shake her head. "Apart from being a little eccentric in the way he did things, he was no different from ordinary people. However... I heard people mention that once during a court lesson, he publicly exclaimed that he would marry a witch, and probably because of these words, Gerald and Timothy constantly picked on him in the name of purifying the Devil's minions, while his own father was also unhappy with the behavior. After that, his personality became more and more stubborn and unruly."

"He was discriminated against because he wanted to marry a witch?" Agatha curled her lips. "This was a noble goal in Taquila. Of course, the number of people who were successful to do this was very small, because most witches were unwilling to spend their lives with only one man."

"But we're different from 400 years ago. If he married a witch, it would mean that he wouldn't have children to succeed him. How could his father feel good about such an idea?" Tilly sighed, "It has already been more than 10 years. He has most probably already forgotten those silly words."

"Is it?" Anna spoke suddenly, "But now he's still willing to marry a witch."

"Oh, he still remembers? Wait..." Tilly's eyes widened uncontrollably. "You said now?"

"Yes," Anna laughed gently, "His Highness said so himself."

Tilly suddenly froze.

#### Chapter 365: The Journey to the West

Petrov yawned, sat up in his bed, and immediately felt a chill run through his upper body. He would stay in his bed forever if he could, where it was warm and had Shirley's company.

"Don't you want to sleep a little more?" The woman beside him turned over and mumbled groggily, "It's still early, isn't it?"

He bent over and kissed her forehead—Shirley had brown hair that fell in soft ringlets, skin as smooth as a baby's, and a pair of lovely round eyes. When he first met her at the Longsong Theatre, it took no more than a glance for him to be completely drawn by her eyes.

"I think it's almost noon, so I should head downstairs to see if there is any official business to attend to." Petrov whispered. "Go back to bed if you don't want to get up, and I'll have attendants bring lunch to you a while later."

"But I want you to stay here with me." Shirley wrapped her arm around his waist. "It's snowing outside anyways, so what official business could there be?"

She wasn't wrong. Ever since the Months of Demons arrived, the entire city immediately fell silent. Theater performances became weekly, all the merchants left the markets, and even the taverns shut

their doors. If someone had walked on the streets during the day, he might have even thought this was a ghost town.

So... should he sleep for a little longer? After pursuing Shirley for nearly a year, Petrov's dream finally came true, and he felt a little reluctant to leave. Yesterday's entire night of joy really wore him out, and now that he had regained his strength, perhaps there could be a second round of joy with Shirley after lunch.

Right at this moment, a knocking came from outside the bedroom.

"Sir Petrov, there is a blue-envelope letter."

He was shocked and immediately rolled out of bed, picked up the robe that was carelessly tossed on the ground, and draped it on. "I'll be there in a second."

"Sir?" Shirley murmured.

"Give me a minute." Petrov said as he tied his belt hurriedly and left the bedroom. After a while, he returned to the bedroom and crawled into the quilt holding a letter encased in a blue envelope.

"What's this? Who wrote this to you?" At this point, the woman was basically wide awake. She yawned and sat up to lean against Petrov.

"It's from Border Town." Petrov replied. "It must be a letter written by His Highness."

He opened the envelope and took out the letter, and as he quickly scanned its contents, he couldn't help but frown. "His Highness orders me to pay a visit to Border Town."

"Right now?" Shirley exclaimed. "Even in this weather?"

"Yes, it must be about something urgent." Petrov sighed, "I'll pack later and leave in the afternoon. You should go home for now, and I'll visit you as soon as I get back." He couldn't help but think of the time a year ago when he sailed through a blizzard to Border Town, bearing the warning from Longsong Stronghold for Duke Ryan. Yet now, he was summoned back to that god-awful place because of a letter from the town Lord in a cruel twist of fate.

"Can't you just pretend you didn't receive it?" She said, annoyed. "Even though he conquered the Longsong Stronghold, you're the actual ruler here. Even if it were the King's order, you didn't have to immediately carry it out, right?"

If it were from the Duke, it would have been possible. However, Petrov knew Prince Roland's impatience full well. He could only lovingly stroke her head. "That's not the same. The King might not pay attention to the Western Region, but His Highness Roland can... He isn't only the Lord of Border Town, but the ruler of the entire Western Region."

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During the Months of Demons, there truly wasn't much official business to attend to in Longsong Stronghold. After delegating a few tasks to his underlings and placing the town under his father Earl Hull's charge, Petrov left the castle. Different from last time when he was only accompanied by one

assistant, this time he sailed on the Duke's private ship—the Lionheart, with more than ten attendants and apprentices, as well as two family knights. It was quite a spectacular scene.

Just as they were passing through the outer city and heading towards the Stronghold harbor, sounds of an uproar coming from the street corner caught Petrov's attention.

He saw ten or so men in a circle watching something. Judging from their dress, they were all civilians. They were probably attracted from their homes nearby by the noise. A few cries of "demon" also occasionally erupted from the circle. "Hang her!" Someone screamed sharply.

Petrov felt a twinge of sympathy and told one of his knights, "Go check it out. If it's a regular brawl, tell them to get back into their houses."

"Yes, Sir."

The knight pushed through the people and walked into the middle of the crowd. As he pulled out his swords, the crowd quickly dissipated. He brought back a woman and two children, one of which still had a rope tied around her neck.

"What happened?"

"Sir!" The woman knelt next to Petrov's feet. "Kill her immediately! She has fallen to temptation and become a witch!"

This word shocked Petrov. "Witch?" He cast his sight onto the other two people. The slightly taller boy immediately stood in front of the girl and looked as if he was ready to attack. His face was badly bruised, revealing that he had been beaten brutally. "She isn't the demon's minion! I saw in plays that there were both good and bad witches. Why do you punish her?"

"Are you certain she's a witch?" Petrov ignored the boy and continued asking the woman.

"Yes, Sir. Don't be fooled by the plays. If the Church were still here, it would have never allowed them to spread such lies on stage. This thing here is also a little demon, and I was punishing her on behalf of the Church. Sir, hang her right now so that the influence of Hell won't spread in Longsong!"

"Get to the point!" Petrov snapped.

After the woman had jabbered on for quite some time, Petrov finally understood the whole story. After the church was burned down by Timothy, this woman and some other believers continued preaching of their own accord in the outer city, and at the same time waited for the Holy City of Hermes to send a new priest to rebuild the Western Region's church. This chaos happened out of pure coincidence. Just as the girl was using her abilities to help her neighbors clear out the snow on their roofs, the woman ran into her, which led to the debacle at hand.

While she was talking, the woman kept complaining about the absurdity of primary education and the demoralization of theater performances, which led to the onlookers only dared to hold onto the boy but not help her kill the damned demon. If it were in the old days, her corpse would have already been hung on a beam... These hateful words made Petrov's face twitch.

"Take her back and interrogate her thoroughly." He spoke to his knight. "You'll stay in the Stronghold this time. When I come back, I expect all the disciples similar to her to be in prison."

"What... no! Sir, how could you..." The woman had not even finished protesting before she was silenced by a few slaps across the face from the knight.

"Are you really a witch?" Petrov asked the terrified little girl. "Show me your abilities."

The girl could only kneel weakly on the ground and gave no response.

Petrov shook his head, raised his voice, and repeated, "If you can prove that you are really a witch, I'll let you go."

After a long time, the girl stuck her trembling hands in the snow. Soon, a layer of snow that was nearly an inch thick melted into flowing icy water.

"So I see." Petrov nodded. "Come with me."

"Come?" The girl raised her head. "Where to go?"

"A place fit for witches to live." He motioned for his servant to pick up the girl and continued walking to the harbor.

"Put her down, you liar! You promised to let her go!" The boy wanted to rush towards her, but he was blocked by the other attendants, and his voice faded slowly into the distance.

Chapter 366: Paper

After the snowfall during the Months of the Demons, the Redwater River became the only path in the entire Western Region that could still be traveled.

Compared to the small sailboat Petrov used before, the Lionheart was much more spacious. It had room for a simple kitchen, so that even during travels, the passengers could eat piping hot food.

His bedroom naturally was the single bedroom at the stern that the Duke used to live in, which was essentially the poop of the boat. It had windows that allowed Petrov to see the currents and floating ice running under his feet.

"Sir, the egg soup you demanded." The knight carried a clay jar and a ceramic bowl into his room.

"Thanks for the trouble." Roland nodded and said. "You should sit down and have a bowl to warm yourself up."

After His Highness drafted all the knights of the other four noble families to Border Town, the first thing those nobilities did was to send the knights' families over as well. All the empty lands left behind were used for soliciting new knights, or directly taken up by the nobilities themselves.

Only the Honeysuckle Family didn't suffer too many losses in this war, and they actually expanded swiftly after they were placed in charge of Longsong Stronghold. Now, they were high above the other four families and still owned a relatively complete platoon of knights. Sise, the knight next to him, was a member of this platoon. Although he was not as well-known as Morning Light, he was still one of the more outstanding young knights.

"Yes, Sir." He smiled, opened the lid of the jar, and poured a bowl of soup for Petrov. "But... Sir, do you really think this is alright?"

"Are you talking about the witch?"

"Yes. Even though the church was burned down, it's pretty easy to rebuild it, and the church will surely return to the Western Region someday. If you place all the blame on Prince Roland, there won't be anything they can do. However, you rescued a witch in public and arrested the believers of the church..." The knight hesitated and continued, "That's an outright opposition to them."

"If it's easy to rebuild it, then why is that place still a pile of rubbles?" Petrov blew on his fragrant egg soup. "The church won't ever come back to the Western Region again."

Sise blinked confusedly and didn't seem convinced.

After the egg soup had slightly cooled, Petrov took a little sip and puffed a cloud of smoke in satisfaction. "As an escrow, my most important duty is to figure out the true intentions of my superior. The real purpose of His Highness' efforts to normalize education in the Stronghold, utilize the newly trained Border Town soldiers, and act out plays with obvious messages was to weaken the church's influence. Since I'm the caretaker of the Stronghold under His Highness, I have to follow his intentions in governing this area. If I can't even figure this out, he'll probably replace me with someone else." Petrov shrugged. "Preventing the church from being rebuilt is as easy as lifting a hand—the stonemasons and carpenters should have all gotten their warnings. Even if the believers want to rebuild the church on their own, the Rats won't let these artisans work for them."

"But the church..."

"Since His Highness did it, he's not afraid of the church's retribution, which is to say that he's confident that he can fend off the church. If they can still set foot in the Western Region, it'll mean the prince has failed. If he fails, I won't be able to sit on the Stronghold throne anymore. I think you can understand this."

"Do you think Prince Roland can defeat the church's army?" Sise asked.

"Who knows?" Petrov shook his head, smiling. "A year ago, no one thought that he could fend off Duke Ryan's knights." He stood and lifted up the jar. "I'll go check on the little girl, who may be hungry."

...

The girl's name was Paper.

There was no doubt that only an orphan could have such a meaningless name.

Ever since she boarded the boat, she stayed silently in the cabin under the deck. Even when her hands were frozen and red, and her body was trembling in the cold, she didn't make a sound. For safety reasons, Petrov still placed a God's Locket of Retribution onto her. Although His Highness kept claiming that witches were just like normal people, he still didn't fully believe that someone with such extraordinary powers could be like a normal person—even the slightest wrong move could end up in being hurt.

"Why aren't you lying in the blanket?" Petrov pointed at the hammock hanging in the cabin. Cabin space was limited, so sailors usually slept in suspended hammocks, and used coarse linen blankets. Although it wasn't the most comfortable thing, it was still warm.

"I'll get it dirty," she whispered.

"Sailors can't be any cleaner than you." He found a relatively dry spot and sat down. "This journey takes three days. Are you just going to sit like this the entire time? I'm worried that you'll starve to death before we even reach Border Town."

"Border Town?" Paper stared in confusion.

"Didn't I tell you? You're going to a place fit for witches to live in." Petrov opened the jar. "Drink some hot soup and go lie on the hammock."

This time, the girl did not refuse. It was obvious that she was starved as she began drinking directly from the jar without the fear of burning her tongue.

Petrov shook his head. She was as skinny as a monkey, her hair was matted with dirt, and there were holes all over her clothes, which she probably found somewhere. At a glance, she seemed no different from all the other orphans in the Stronghold.

"Who's he, the boy protecting you?" He asked, "Your orphan friend?"

"Snaketooth. He... often brought us... food to eat," Paper swallowed the soup, stuck out her tongue, and mumbled. "If I go with you, you won't... arrest him, right? He's not... a witch."

"Of course," Petrov said expressionlessly. "He isn't important." The phrase "often brought us food to eat" slightly surprised him. There were few people like that boy in the slums. Usually, a lack of food pushed people to steal from each other—people who were already struggling to survive rarely had the energy to worry about others. And the name Snaketooth... sounded a bit like a Rat.

At that thought, he couldn't help but ask, "You said 'us' - were there other witches besides you?"

"No." Paper shook her head. "All of the others were just orphans."

This relieved Petrov a little. "So what was that old bat talking about when she said you were using your abilities to clear snow? This's the first time I've heard about a witch who used her abilities in public."

"It was Snaketooth's idea. He said that I could help the residents clear the snow on their roofs in exchange for food, so no one would go hungry. The theater puts on stories about witches all the time, so no one is afraid of witches now. As long as I'm willing to do it, he can negotiate with the adults."

"It is that so." Petrov thought, the corners of his mouth curling into a smirk. "This kid is quite interesting. He knew how to make the most of his resources, but he underestimated the church's influence." Then, he asked, "So, did you get food in exchange?"

"Um..." Paper bowed her head. "I cleaned three roofs. One family chased me away, while the other two gave me half a loaf of bread and a pancake. However, when I got to the fourth..."



She met that hateful old woman. Petrov patted her head. "Get some rest when you're done drinking. I'll send someone to get you when it's dinnertime."

Three days later, the Lionheart arrived in the harbor of Border Town.

#### Chapter 367: The First Step to Building the City

Petrov stepped out of his cabin and was surprised that he was not greeted with the smell of rotting wood. There was a newly built bridge next to the boat, and the harbor had doubled in size and thudded instead of creaking when stepped on—he could tell that the planks had been laid sturdily and that the material was of great quality.

After leaving the harbor, a few uniformed guards immediately walked over. The leader of the group gave the family crest hanging on the Lionheart's flagpole an once-over and asked, "Are you... Sir Hull of the Honeysuckle Family?"

"Yes." Petrov nodded, feeling quite important. "I am Petrov Hull, and I came here at His Highness' invitation."

"Lord Iron Axe has already told us about you. Please come with me." The guard waved his hand.

"We're walking?" Petrov was shocked.

"Yes. All the stables have been demolished," the guard smiled apologetically and said. "Don't worry. The town roads are in great condition."

Petrov soon understood what the guard meant by "great condition".

The road was smooth and wide, and all the snow had been cleared so that there were barely even any puddles. It seemed to be paved with many little black stones that had tiny spaces between them and glistened with moisture. Furthermore, what surprised Petrov the most was that this wasn't the only road like this. There was an intersection every hundred steps. The roads were so straight and symmetrical that they seemed to be drawn on paper. During the half-hour walk, he didn't see a single bit of mud.

Petrov was stunned to find that this town looked completely different from the one in his memories.

"Sir, is this really... Border Town?" Sise stared at the scenery around him. "Wasn't it only a temporary living area for miners?"

"It used to be that way," the guard said, smiling, "but ever since His Highness arrived, everything has been changing. Take these roads for example, they were all built six months ago. Back then, there were thousands of people working together every day, so we could practically build a new one every month."

Petrov noticed a strong tone of pride peeking through the guard's voice, as if he felt proud to be a member of the town.

But... this was so unbelievable! Neat rows of trees bordered every road, which he imagined to form a beautiful canopy of leaves to block out the scorching sun in summer. Then there were the houses—all

the short mud huts and shabby wooden inns were nowhere to be seen. Instead, there were clean-cut brick buildings with two to three stories that all shared a similar style. They obviously must have all been built by the same group of stonemasons.

How could he possibly transform a poor little town in only one year?

The shocked and confused Petrov followed the guards into the castle grounds. His guide was replaced by an armored knight, while his attendants were left to wait outside the castle walls.

When he stepped into the Lord's castle, Petrov finally felt the same as he did one year ago.

It seemed that not much had changed here. Compared to the Stronghold castle, the prince's was still much smaller.

The knight pushed open the door to the hall and made a motion for him to enter. Petrov immediately saw the prince sitting on the throne.

It was His Highness Roland Wimbledon.

"Welcome to Border Town," Roland said with a smile, "Mr. 'Ambassador'."

It seemed the prince hadn't changed much. For some reason, Petrov felt relieved. He raised his hand to his chest and bowed solemnly. "The Honeysuckle Family pays you our respects, Your Highness."

"Have a seat." The prince nodded. "I call you here because of a very important matter. It concerns the future of the entire Western Region, Longsong Stronghold naturally also included."

"Please, go ahead."

"I plan to build a city here, which will extend westward to the Misty Forest, eastward to Longsong Stronghold, and it'll include half of the Western Region in its bounds. From then on, the Stronghold will be an eastern fortress for the new city and the first line of defense against the church's army instead of an independent city like it is now," Roland said in a methodical manner. "In such a vast and expansive region, it's important to pass the same laws everywhere and centralize their enforcement to the City Hall of the new city. No nobility can meddle in city affairs, which includes the five main noble families of the Western Region."

Petrov felt a sudden shock! A year ago, he had a similar idea to have Duke Ryan move the defense line against the demonic beasts to Border Town and utilize the space between the two towns. He would never have expected that the prince would use this method a year later with a much heavier hand. Turn Longsong Stronghold into a section of a city? He could only imagine how terrifyingly massive this city would be!

He felt an impulse to question the prince, but stifled his words—if the prince was telling this to him, it meant he had already made up his mind, and no one would be able to stop him from carrying out his plan.

Petrov didn't dare to challenge the prince. Duke Ryan's fiasco was forever burned in his mind and made him believe that this man with gray hair was unbeatable... at least by him. The only thing he could do was to reap as much profit as possible during this immense change.

"You said that the five noble families can't meddle in city affairs, so how can the Honeysuckle Family continue to serve you?"

The prince was silent for such a long time that Petrov began to feel uneasy. Then, he chuckled and said, "You've really surprised me, Mr. Ambassador. Both your asking to ransom the Stronghold and your positive attitude right now are wise and calculated decisions that are rarely seen made by nobles."

After a few words of praise, his smile faded, and he said seriously, "As long as the Honeysuckle Family is willing to accept my rule, you can continue to assist me to govern the Longsong region."

"Both my father and I will always do as you wish—"

"I'm not talking about individuals—I'm talking about the whole area," Roland interrupted. "From now on, the nobilities under my rule will have the ownership of their land, but not the right to govern it—whether it is regarding the law, law enforcement, or other policies, they'll all have to defer to the decrees of the City Hall."

"Um..." Petrov hesitated.

"Land can still be passed on through family lineage, just like titles. Any industries that your family conducts, such as farming or craftsmanship, will also belong to the Honeysuckles along with your land. That's your indisputable right, and I promise you my blessing. Aside from governing rights, nothing will change about the land you own. It might even flourish under new policies." The prince continued. "Of course, you can also choose to return to your land and continue to live as a feudal lord. However, when I finish building my new city and begin expanding, any land I conquer won't belong to its original owner anymore."

Chapter 368: Filling in the Gaps

...

"Do you really think he'll agree?" asked Nightingale after Petrov left, whispering into Roland's ear.

"I'm not sure. In addition, even if he does, he'll still need to persuade Count Hull for it to be of any use," said Roland as he took a sip of his hot tea, "If his father still insists on his position as a noble, then there'll be nothing we can do."

"You can't bear to see him go, can you?" she teased.

"Of course not." Roland pursed his lips. "As a noble, he's both intelligent and humble, as well as having a penchant for managing commerce. As long as he studies in Longsong Stronghold for a year or two, he'll definitely become a capable government official."

"If he manages to persuade Count Hull, you'll really hand the Royal Capital over for him to govern?"

"If I manage to conquer Graycastle, the capital will naturally need to be moved elsewhere... In addition, cities that are far from the Western Region will need to be managed by officials sent from the west. As such, the terms I laid out may have sounded fantastical but were nevertheless legitimate."

Towards the end of his conversation with Petrov, Roland informed him that from henceforth, he would not appoint any nobles. In fact, after consolidating Graycastle, he planned on establishing a brand new model for society throughout the kingdom based on that of Bordertown. He planned to consolidate and create a central government with a single word of law and judicial policy. Should Petrov decide to stay, Longsong Stronghold would be far from his final destination. Be it a mayor of a major city or chief bureaucrat of the new central government, neither was impossible for him.

As for how far he'll go in reality, it'll be up to none other than himself.

Roland sincerely hoped that Petrov would understand his implications and anticipations from the conversation just now.

"Alright then, it's not as if I understand these things anyway," Nightingale patted his shoulder and continued, "in any case, the new witch is coming over soon. It's best if you go elsewhere for a while."

"You're going to question her by yourself?"

"I'll call Wendy over." The sound of her laughter rang out beside him. "She's better at these things than I am."

The Witches Union for the sake of safety (a cause mainly championed by Scroll), had established a rule: prior to any further interactions with an unknown Witch, their identity had to first be confirmed by Nightingale. Doing this required her to enter her mist, and therefore also take off the God's Stone of Retaliation. Thus, it was best if Roland was not present, lest the outsider revolted and anything unexpected happened.

Scroll even managed to come up with a series of 10 questions specifically to determine one's identity, such as "Where are you from", "What is your real name", "Do you recognize the prince", "Do you hold any hostile intentions towards the prince", etc. Since Nightingale could only determine the veracity of someone's statements based on the target's own beliefs, this battery of true/false questions aimed to establish the target's true intentions without leaving any loopholes. Even if they could deceive her once or twice, there was no way they could pass every single question.

Roland didn't know whether to laugh or cry when this was brought up, but in consideration of the witches' good intentions, he could only go along with this plan.

...

After leaving the main hall, he returned to his office and immediately sent for City Hall Director Barov.

After reading Petrov's report on the discovery of new witches in Longsong Stronghold, Roland realized his oversight. Though he had sent Anna onto the ceremonial award stage and acknowledged the existence of witches in Border Town, no official decree ever explained their status and how they should be treated. Thus, Border Town might very well have a similar situation as the Stronghold, where a witch would hide herself upon awakening and lie unknown instead of revealing her talents.

The second Barov stepped into the room, Roland immediately ordered, "I'm declaring a long term recruitment drive, and the details are on this paper here."

Barov received the draft and took a cursory glance, "Your Majesty... you mean to recruit witches at a monthly salary of an entire gold royal each?"

"That's right," Roland nodded, "This is also the Witches Union's standard salary." A monthly salary of one gold royal in this era was for only the most prestigious of positions. Border Town's average salary and standard of living were already well beyond those of other cities, with the highest paid being the workers in the acid manufacturing plant at 20 silver royals. Yet, this new decree set the witches' wage at five times the current highest, cementing their position in society.

"Since you want to recruit more witches, why not send people to search for them?" asked Barov, "the same way you had the citizens report spies. After all, their eyes see more truth than anyone else's."

"Even my Director has learned to fight [The Peoples' War]." Roland mused, holding back the delight in his heart, "And should I offer a reward for finding them? What difference will there be between me and the church then?"

"But... you're doing this to recruit them, whereas the church means to hang them."

"Even if we say so, the witches forcibly exposed this way might think we're actually persecuting them. Though new witches in Border Town may have not experienced the persecution of the populace, the same cannot be said for those who have come from elsewhere," said Roland, declining Barov's proposal. "My hope is for them to stand forward of their own volition, for the sake of making their own contribution to Border Town."

In addition to the witches' own inhibitions, Roland was also worried about the effect declaring a reward would have on the populace, possibly creating a new wave of "witch hunters", or making witches out to be valuable "commodities" to be created and found. Giving birth to a witch would become more profitable than hard work, which though in the short term would elevate the witches' positions, but in the long term could easily hurt Border Town's "American Dream" that Roland had worked so hard to achieve.

Right after Barov left, Wendy immediately entered, placing the results of the investigation on his desk.

"Your Highness, we've confirmed her identity. There are no problems as her answers line up with what the Honeysuckle's eldest said."

"See," smiled Roland, "I told you guys you were being too careful."

"Nevertheless this level of caution is necessary," Wendy persevered, "Your Highness' personal safety will always be our first and foremost priority."

"Alright," said Roland, suddenly feeling a little touched, as he took a deep breath and said, "bring her here then."

The girl seemed around 15 years old, her dirtied hair a muddled brown, eyes brimming with timidity and slight panic. It seemed to be the first time she'd ever stepped foot into a carpeted room, as seen from her restless fidgeting as she tried to determine where to put her feet.

According to the information on the report, she called herself Paper and was born just outside of Longsong Stronghold. She became an orphan during a blizzard three years ago, a background shared by

many of the street urchins in the western region. These orphans' fates were usually to either die scrounging for food, or join the underground street rats, becoming a pickpocket, thug or scapegoat.

"You..." Roland paused, unable to decide what to say. The girl was neither like Agatha, resilient and adaptable, nor like Anna, determined and firm of heart. Even Mystery Moon and Lily, whose situations most resembled hers, had the sisterhood and companionship of the Union. As a young girl in a completely new place, she was probably in a state of constant panic, and most likely required a lengthy period to acclimate to her new environment. From Petrov's report, her ability to melt snow was most likely related to the control of temperature.

"Anyway, there's no rush to test her ability, we can slowly learn about it as she becomes familiarized with this place." With that thought, Roland turned to Wendy and said, "She must be exhausted from the long journey, why don't you take her for a bath first and let her rest awhile. Arrange for her to stay in the witches' building. As for any instructions she requires with respect to magic, I'll leave that to you, alright?"

"Of course," she smiled coyly, "As you wish."

#### Chapter 369: Changes

Steam billowed out of the bathroom's bathtub.

Wendy lathered the soap and rubbed it everywhere on the little girl's body: behind the ears, under the arms, not even sparing the area between her fingertips. Upon seeing the layers of dirt intermixed with foam slide into the bathtub, revealing the tender skin underneath, Wendy felt an unprecedented amount of satisfaction.

It had been quite some time since Wendy experienced this feeling. Back in the days when the Witch Cooperation Association was still fleeing for its life, every close call or scare and every newly awakened witch that had given up all hope was made well again under her care, recovering a state of peaceful normalcy. Leaf, Lily, even Nightingale all found their hope with her help.

Yet, ever since they had come to Border Town, the witches' lives had undergone a 180 degree change. No one had to worry anymore about any life necessities, as everything was now provided for them—of course, she had no problem with this, and was incredibly grateful for everything Roland had done for the sisters. It was merely the fact that there were no longer any witches that needed her care—even Mystery Moon had become open and carefree that led Wendy to feel a little frustrated.

Now, she finally once again had the opportunity to feel the joy of being a big sister.

"Close your eyes. I'm turning the water on."

"Okay," the little girl's voice quietly slid out, soft and graceful like a droplet of morning dew.

It must be said, His Highness' decision to give her a bath was truly genius.

The water ran past the girl's bangs and trickled down her back, taking with it the now ashy brown foam. Only after rinsing her body three times did the color of the water turn back to normal.

Without any set of clothes to cover it up, the girl's frail and emaciated body was completely revealed to Wendy's eyes. "What a poor, skinny child," Wendy couldn't help but think. Her spine could be seen protruding out of her back, her arm so thin that a single hand could easily grasp it, and her skin not white like her namesake but instead a pallid yellow revealing her years of living in hunger.

Luckily she was a witch, and as long as she was properly taken care of, it wouldn't be long before she could recover.

After rinsing her body clean, it was time for them to enjoy a bath. Wendy first tested the temperature and then carried her into the bathtub, the water quickly submerging and enveloping them. Though the water was near scalding, after enduring the slight discomfort and acclimating, one would soon be able to savor the joy and comfort of being cradled by its warmth.

Paper involuntarily let out a low shout, most likely because it had been a long, long time since she was last able to bathe in hot water. She tightly grasped Wendy's hands, and then gradually loosened her grip. Wendy then spun her around so that the girl faced away from her, letting her sit in her lap as she meticulously began to parse through the little girl's twisted bun of hair, strand by strand.

"When did you find out you were a witch?"

"Two... two years ago," Paper quietly replied, "I think in the winter, just like now."

"That's not surprising." Wendy smiled and continued, "Most witches awaken during the Months of the Demons. According to rumor, it's during this period of time that magic power is most abundant."

"Isn't it demonic magic power?"

"Of course not," she patted the little girl's head and said, "becoming a witch is a very, very normal thing. Besides from having the abilities to do some things other people can't imagine, we are no different from your everyday normal person. You should know that several hundred years ago, witches were even viewed as those blessed by the gods.

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

"In reality, the difference between witches and mortals was quite large, such as their superhuman physical abilities and sterility," thought Wendy as she replied, "but these things could be slowly taught to her at a later time."

"Then, what's magic power?" Paper asked shyly.

"Magic power is a type of natural energy, just like the sun's ever-present light." Wendy thought for a second. "Well, sort of. The sun has a time when it sets, but magic power is always there. All in all, you can regard it as an extension of yourself, an extension that's constantly growing."

"Constantly growing?"

"That's right, your magic power will grow as you do, becoming increasingly powerful. In order to accommodate its growth you must also increase the limits of your own body. Otherwise there will be a backlash." Wendy meticulously explained, "The church abused this very fact, claiming that witches were

being devoured by the energy of the devil when in reality it couldn't be further from the truth. As long as you continuously practice your control of your powers, even if your magic power grows, there will be no need to worry about it harming your body. If you awakened two years ago, you must have already experienced a Day of Awakening already. Back then... it must have hurt a lot."

Paper gently nodded her head.

"Worry not though, now that you've arrived in Border Town, everything will be better." Wendy tenderly consoled her. "As long as you make the most of this time and practice, this year's Day of Awakening will be quick and painless."

Just as she was about to continue, the door to the bath was shoved open, revealing Lily running in with a towel in her hand.

"I heard there was a new sister? Where? Where? Mystery Moon's so anxious to see her!"

"It's obviously you who's anxious!" Mystery Moon, dragged all the way here by Lily, shot her a glare.

"Why take a shower now? What if we have to use our abilities this afternoon?"

"Don't worry, there's no harm in resting for a day. His Highness probably won't need you for anything, after all, you're not Miss Anna."

"... You traitor!!"

Upon seeing the two barge in, Paper quickly shrunk her neck, the bottom half of her head submerging itself into the water.

"Oh, so this is the new witch?" Lily climbed to the edge of the bathtub and looked at Paper, eyes brimming with curiosity. "You look around the same age as me, but you can still call me big sister."

"Why would she call you big sister if she's around the same age as you?" Mystery Moon noisily interjected. "And how come you've never called me that?"

"They're both witches of Border Town," Wendy introduced with a smile. "You may think they are open, but when they first arrived here, they were both just like you... especially Mystery Moon, she wasn't much braver than you, always speaking with a very quiet and soft little voice."

"Ahem. I was just worried His Highness would look down on me for having such weak magic power." Mystery Moon mumbled to herself.

"His Highness has told me several times, your power has incredibly unexplored potential." Wendy shook her head. "As long as you finish reading and learning Elementary Physics, it might evolve into something surpassing your wildest dreams."

"Forget the books. She doesn't even understand all the words yet. She barely even passed the last examination." Lily interjected, shrugging her shoulders. "She even came to me at night asking me to help her with her studies. By the time she's done learning all the weird theories and formulas in that book, His Highness Roland will probably have already conquered and unified all of Graycastle and won't even need the witches' help anymore." Ignoring Mystery Moon's annoyed expression, her gaze turned towards the girl sitting in Wendy's lap. "Oh, that's right. What kind of power does Paper have?"



"... Melting snow." The little girl pondered for a while before replying.

"Anything else?" Lily curiously asked, "Can you freeze the melted snow back into ice?"

"No," Paper meekly replied, "and also... also I can make hot water cool really fast."

"Temperature manipulation then?" Wendy mused and said, "But melting snow is adding heat, whereas cooling water is removing it, yet the two processes can't be reversed, so it's probably not temperature control. Have you only tried your power with water?"

"With other things, the difference is very small."

"Try using this." Lily held up a basin full of soapy water.

The little girl cautiously placed her hand into the basin. Very soon, the steaming hot water began to cool. Then, before everyone's eyes, a change occurred in the murky soap water. The soap bubbles on the surface began to disappear, the white kernels of soap also vanished into thin air, and the basin was once again filled with pristine, clear water.

#### Chapter 370: Rhythm

Three days later, Roland received an affirmative answer from the eldest son of the Honeysuckle Family.

"I'm willing to continue serving you, and so is the Honeysuckle Family," he said, bowing his head. "I'll convince my father—he's a little... different from the other families."

"Is that so." Roland suddenly felt quite cheerful. "That's great to hear."

"In the past few days, I've witnessed all the extraordinary changes that have taken place in your town, and I realized that this was the city I wished for all long," Petrov confessed. "If the Honeysuckle Family can flourish like this, Father won't mind merging with the new city."

This struck a chord in the Prince's heart. He originally only had two reasons for bringing Petrov here: The first was that it was more sincere to share such momentous news with Petrov in person, and the other was to observe his attitude towards the decree. Roland never imagined that Petrov would react this well. Roland nodded and said, "Of course. In time, every inch of land in the Kingdom of Graycastle will be home to the people."

"Then I must return to Stronghold as quickly as possible and relay this news to my father."

"Don't forget the other four noble families and all the nobilites of the Western Region." Roland added, "Any family who wishes to accept my terms will be welcomed unconditionally into the new city, regardless of past conflicts. You can hold a banquet in the Stronghold to spread the word."

"You mean you want me to tell them?" Petrov asked, stunned.

"Yes," the prince said, smiling. "This time... you can act as my ambassador."

"Yes, Your Highness," the eldest of the Honeysuckles raised a hand to his chest and said.

Just as he was about to leave, Roland stopped him and said, "By the way, you did a great job with the witch incident. There'll be no more hiding from now on. After all this universal education, if anyone is still blindly hanging onto the church's teachings, they should be removed from the Western Region. You can decide how exactly you want to do it."

"Yes, Your Highness."

After Petrov Hull left, Roland stretched and yawned, and then continued flipping through the data that the City Hall had compiled on various construction projects.

Due to the heavy snowfall, the construction of the Kingdom Main Street had to be halted, and the construction of houses had been slowed down as well, so there were only a few indoor maintenance projects underway. Fortunately Lotus had constructed a series of cave dwellings to shelter the refugees before she left. Even if more refugees came, they could be distributed among the current caves—this was the advantage of using heated brick beds.

According to the Ministry of Construction, at least more than 60% of the workers were currently employed, so any last-minute recruitments from the City Hall were always snatched up quickly, such as clearing the snow off the streets, transporting goods in the Blast Furnace Zone and so on. If this were in any other city, having this many eager workers during the Months of Demons would be unbelievable. Winter was already the most difficult season for civilians, so most people usually shut themselves in their homes and survived by their fall harvest. However, Roland felt dissatisfied with seeing all this manpower being idle, so he racked his brain trying to think of something that could utilize it all.

After all, Margerie's Chamber of Commerce had bought the last batch of steam engines manufactured this year, and the City Hall had more than enough money and grains, so that he could carry out many of his plans.

At this thought, Roland had his guard summon Karl Van Bate, the Minister of Construction.

After he explained his ideas, Karl couldn't help but stare. "You want the masons and clay artisans to build ships for you?"

He nodded and said seriously, "Yes, right by the harbor. Build a temporary workshop out of wood and keep a brazier burning inside to maintain the temperature. When the ships are completed, they can go straight into the water."

"But, Your Highness, how can they ever know how to build such a thing?"

"Of course they can. It's just like building the witches' tower," Roland said as he took out a piece of paper and drew a diagram. "Just set up a frame, lay down steel bars, and fill it in with concrete. I'll instruct you in building the first ship, and then you'll be solely in charge of supervision, so all the workers can be utilized as well."

Karl looked at the blueprint skeptically. "Is this... a bowl?"

Roland couldn't help but smile. "Yes, it's a giant concrete bowl."

Karl had not participated in the construction of the Littletown, so it was natural that he did not understand it. In fact, ships were constantly changing their shapes over time, with those of the next era

barely inheriting those of the previous one. Roland had no idea how to design an ancient wooden ship with keels, but building a concrete ship was essentially no different from making a clay model—all it had to do was to float. It was the same for steel ships. With the improvements in welding technology, most modern ships abandoned the keeling method and were instead pieced together with steel plates so that the entire floor sustained its weight. There was no need to bother with wooden ships.

He had already considered building a new fleet of concrete ships for a long time. Both the coal mining excavations in the nearby mountains and the transportation of refugees required large riverboats, so a flat-bottom design with a low draught was the best option. Compared to the conservative design of the Littletown, the new ships should have longer hulls to ensure a larger load, better stability, and higher speed. In order to also reduce construction difficulty, Roland decided to use paddle wheels to propel the ships. This had already been tested on wooden ships and was easier for the masons to achieve.

"Your Highness, how many men do you plan to employ to build these... concrete ships?" Karl asked awkwardly.

"Round up all the idle workers and build multiple ships at a time, just like when you were building houses."

This way, even if no one bought the newly produced steam engines, there was something for people to do. The Furnace Area could continue producing cement, which would kill two birds with one stone. In the coming years, if he could command a large fleet of cement ships, the First Army would always have reliable logistic fallback wherever it attacked.

After dealing with this matter, Roland decided to check out the castle backyard.

The olive trees and grape vines that Leaf planted provided a shelter against the snow. If they weren't working, the witches would usually practice in the backyard, including the newcomer Paper.

According to Wendy, her abilities weren't temperature control, but they weren't material restoration either, and they had little effect on any substance other than water. This intrigued Roland to no end. After three days, the little girl shouldn't be as timid as she was when she first arrived, so he wanted to see her for himself.

As soon as he entered the garden, Roland felt that there was something off.

All he could see was lush greenery, as if he was in a different world from the snow outside—the olive trees were evergreen and had vines winding around their branches. Although it wasn't surprising that the trees blocked out the snow, all the plants here were still a little too vibrant. What made it different from a forest was that although there was no wind, the grass and trees swayed rhythmically in unison.

He thought it was an illusion, but as he walked deeper into the garden, he saw the olive branches bend over as if they were greeting him, and the grass around his feet fell to the side as if to welcome him.

This made Roland a little uneasy, and goosebumps began to appear on his back. He felt as if he was not walking in a garden, but inside the body of a giant creature.

The whole garden seemed to be breathing.