

## Witch 371

### Chapter 371: The Heart of the Forest

Roland walked into the center of the garden and froze in shock.

At the end of the path, a small house made out of plants suddenly appeared, with tree trunks and reformed crops forming its walls and layers of woven vines hanging up above, with some even carrying bunches of glistening grapes. A bonfire burned in the middle of the room, and there was green furniture placed all around. A closer look would reveal that they were actually shaped by strange plants that grew from the ground. For a moment, Roland felt as if he were in a fairyland. If it weren't for the familiar faces next to the bonfire, he truly would have thought he was dreaming.

"What's this?"

Tilly turned around and exclaimed, "Leaf's ability has evolved, and she's transformed herself into this garden."

"Where's she?" Roland asked surprisedly.

"She has become one with the plants," Tilly said, looking around her. "Everything you see right now is a part of Leaf."

His feeling of walking inside a creature wasn't wrong. It was just that the "creature" was actually Leaf. Roland suddenly felt a tug on his heart, "She can still turn back, right?"

"As soon as I call off my powers, I can return to my normal form." Leaf's voice suddenly echoed.

However, when he listened carefully, he realized that it wasn't Leaf herself who was speaking. The voice came from the rustling of swaying leaves and the rubbing of branches.

Her answer calmed Roland down a little bit. "Can you hear us talk?"

"Not only can I hear you, I can also see you, smell you and feel you," Leaf answered happily. "I can feel the slightest changes in the garden, including the birds building their nest on a branch and a bug crawling on a trunk... It's hard to explain, but Lady Tilly is right. I am the garden itself, and I noticed you as soon as you walked in."

Suddenly, a giant leaf hanging from the ceiling was lowered down next to Roland and unfurled slowly to reveal a cup containing purple liquid. The intricate cup was made from four overlapping olive leaves with their stems curving into a handle. Roland raised the cup up to his lips and realized that the liquid was freshly-made wine, a perfect combination of sourness and refreshing sweetness. Clearly, both the wine and its container came from this garden.

Roland downed Leaf's "toast", walked up to the bonfire, and sat excitedly on a plant chair—its frame was made of rough branches, and its seat and back were covered with a heavy layer of wheat leaves. Sitting in it was like sinking into a soft couch. Next to the bonfire stood a grill, where Andrea was roasting apples and corn for everyone. These foods were undoubtedly also taken directly from the garden.

"How did you manage to do all this?" the prince looked up and asked.

"I don't really know either," the voice answered immediately. "I was just taking care of the newly planted crops and your messenger birds as usual, while also practicing my abilities—and they responded to my call. Maybe this is the reconciliation I have been searching for—bringing the forest and the lives inside it together as one."

"Could you use your abilities in the Misty Forest? Could you also turn it into a part of you?"

"I don't think so..." She hesitated. "Even if I could, it would take a really long time. Maintaining this state doesn't require a lot of magic power, and I can even draw power from the forest, but every time I expand my area of influence, my mind becomes more sluggish."

"Sluggish?" Roland asked confusedly.

"I don't know how to describe this feeling," said Leaf. "If I kept expanding slowly, I might become one with the entire Misty Forest in a couple of years, but I'm scared that I might lose my consciousness. When I first started fusing with the garden, my mind felt so overwhelmed, as if it suddenly became very expansive. It took me a long time to get used to it." She paused and added, "However, re-entering plants that I have already controlled doesn't give me this unfamiliar feeling, and it only takes the slightest thought to accomplish."

"How incredible," Roland thought. "Compared to Anna and Lily's micro-evolution, Leaf's new abilities were a breakthrough in macro-evolution. If she could one day control the entire Misty Forest, not a single move of our enemies would escape her."

"Congratulations," Wendy said, smiling. "Now there's another evolved witch in the Witch Union. According to Elsa, we have about half the amount of evolved witches as the Union."

"If she were here, she must have gone on and on about this for ages." Roland chuckled and glanced over at the little girl who was peeking curiously at him. "What about Paper?"

"Her ability... unfortunately requires further testing," Wendy responded, "but we found a strange phenomenon."

She snapped her fingers, and two piles of packed snow immediately fell off the roof.

Wendy placed one pile next to the bonfire and another in a corner of the room, and then she asked Paper to use her powers. "I'm currently teaching her how to use her magic power evenly so that its effects are consistent—just like how you taught me. Although she can't control her power very precisely, it doesn't differ too greatly in general."

Roland noticed that the snow next to the bonfire had quickly melted into an icy puddle, while the farther pile had only melted halfway.

Wendy scooped up the melted water, carried it to one side of the room, and knocked on the wall. The tightly woven vines shrunk back to reveal a fist-sized hole, letting in the chilly wind.

"Here, now use your power on this," she said to Paper.

The girl nodded and raised her hands, and Roland was shocked to find that the water had formed a thin layer of ice crystals.

"So her power is to... speed up time and accelerate results?" He doubted his theory as soon as he said. "That can't be right. Time is but a concept created by humans for convenience, so it doesn't exist on its own. How can she affect something that doesn't exist?"

"That's what I thought as well, but Lady Tilly said it wasn't the case." Wendy tied a stone to the end of a vine and swung it back and forth in front of Paper. As much as Paper tried to use her powers, the pendulum continued to swing at the same speed and eventually stopped. "If she could speed up time, the stone would have swung faster."

Indeed. Roland quickly realized what her power was—she wasn't affecting time, but molecular movement. Her magic power could lower or raise the energy levels of molecules, which led to freezing and melting. Of course, Paper probably didn't understand this, so she simply used her intuition to control her power, which was why she had little impact on other objects. Oxidation was a long process and needed time to show visible results.

If he guessed correctly, her power made her a natural catalyst.

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## Chapter 372: Leisure

A week later, Border Town welcomed its last month of fall with a giant blizzard.

Roland gazed out of his office window at the dark figures on the snowy rooftops—these were the townspeople carrying out their daily task of shoveling away the snow on their rooftops, so their houses wouldn't collapse under the weight.

This day marked a full year of him being in this world, but last year's fall was not nearly this cold, and his view from this window was not nearly this orderly.

At that time, the town was practically a wasteland. Besides a few decent wooden houses around the square, there were only shabby clay huts and straw shacks. Most of the nobilities lived near the square, from which the only stone road led to the castle. Otherwise, there was not a single inch of clean ground in the entire town, and everything reeked of the faeces of human and livestock.

Now, all the roads here were built from cement pavement, and even the uncovered roads were expertly packed solid. Dark lines separated the town into various sections, with the two sides of the main road reserved as a commercial district and the surrounding areas as residential complexes.

In addition, Border Town's manufacturing industry was beginning to take shape, which was to say that it finally replaced workshop manufacturing with a continuous assembly line—although this was only the case for steam engines. The Blast Furnace Zone produced enough iron ingots for processing, while the steam engine factory turned these raw materials into machine parts. The blacksmiths had all become familiar with their various tools and took on many apprentices. Even though Anna was still needed in producing the highly precise tools, the blacksmiths had already achieved great progress on their part. After all, before the appearance of tools, these men only knew how to use a hammer, while others started out as miners and hunters.

He might as well call these engines the fruits of these workers' labor.

There was also the production of ammunition and gunpowder, which was also entirely done by civilians. Anna still needed to produce the firearms herself, not because of a lack of machine tools, but because the town's blast furnace couldn't produce iron with consistent quality. This had already been added to Roland's list of problems to tackle.

The achievements in chemical engineering were even more exciting; because Roland didn't have any high expectation, any result was a pleasant surprise. Now, sulfuric acid and nitric acid were being massively produced, and chemical explosives were beginning to be developed. As long as ammunition production could increase, switching to repeating rifles wouldn't be an issue.

It didn't matter that their production methods were outdated, because producing anything at all was more important, given the town's current state. When Paper's abilities stabilized so that she could precisely control her own magic power, there might even be another peak in chemical engineering.

What mattered the most was that all aspects of Border Town, whether it was production, education, or construction, were all on an upwards developing trend. In time, as more and more people became educated, there would be more frequent breakthroughs in every field.

He felt his heart burst with pride for transforming a run-down land into what it was today within only a year.

Roland felt as if he could stand by the window and watch this town all day long.

At that moment, the sounds of tolling bells came from the north-west direction.

That was the alarm for a demonic beast attack.

After the arrival of the Months of the Demons, the alarm would sound every three to four days. However, the First Army was already very experienced in handling attacks and no longer required Roland's supervision—if he had not stood alongside the Militia a year ago, they all would have dropped their weapons and run away.

"The demonic beasts are back. Should I go take a look?" Nightingale's voice emerged next to his ears.

"Sure." Roland nodded. "Be careful."

"Don't worry. They can't touch me."

He felt a slight warmth on his cheek, and the voice disappeared.

Roland shook his head helplessly. The witches were probably sick of hiding indoors from the snow, so Nightingale might just want something to do. The combat type witches who came with Tilly were especially eager to rush to the city wall and watch the battle, waiting for demonic hybrids to rush up the wall so they could put their abilities into play. Nightingale was intrigued after hearing about this and began joining the combat witches every time the alarm sounded. Perhaps she intended to compare herself to others and determine who was the strongest combat witch.

Roland sighed. "If only she could be this eager in her training..."

However, fighting side by side could bring witches and mortals closer together, so he didn't bother to stop them. The current revolving rifles were enough to fend off regular demonic beasts, but they faltered in the face of demonic wolf-lion hybrids, so having powerful witches present could stabilize the defense line and reduce casualties.

So far, there hadn't been a single death in the First Army.

Nightingale's exit reminded him that the combat witches had found a way to entertain themselves, but the assistant witches still didn't have much to have fun with. It was time to think of some new activities.

At that thought, he summoned Soroya.

"Your Highness, do you have a new task for me?"

This painter who had accomplished so much for Border Town seemed to be in good spirits. The Freckles on her face had lightened, and her eyes shined with a piercing vitality.

Her pleading question stifled Roland a little—why did he suddenly feel so remorseful?

"Um, have you been busy lately?"

"No, why do you ask?" Soroya pushed a lock of hair out of her forehead. "Recently, fewer workers have been going to the factory, so it only took me a few hours to finish my coating everyday, and the weird metal boxes made by the alchemist Sir Kyle kept me busy sometimes." She paused, tilted her head, and smiled. "However, compared with being in the camp of the Witch Cooperation Association, I prefer this fulfilling life here, and I'm really glad that my abilities are helpful to you."

Wow... What a blinding smile.

Roland couldn't help but feel a little guilty. "Ahem, I called you here to draw some new cards for me."

"More Gwent Cards?"

"No, you all are probably tired of those," he waved his hand and said. "It's too simple. As long as you know your opponent's hand, the game is basically predictable."

"Yes, you're right..."

"See, this's what the new cards look like—very simple." Roland took out a piece of paper and drew a rough sketch. "There're four different symbols, each with cards numbered from one to thirteen, as well as two jokers, so it's 54 cards in total."

Soroya's abilities had evolved greatly, so she was able to quickly produce a deck of cards directly from his sketch. "How do we play them?"

"There're a lot of games you can play with these, but let's start with an easy one." Roland tested the cards with his hands and felt as if he were time-traveling again. To celebrate a Spring Festival, his family would always sit around their fire barrels, watch the Spring Festival Gala, and play poker until the next morning, when they would light firecrackers to welcome the spring.

Different from mah jong, poker could be played anywhere and had many variations, so it was probably the most popular game in the world.

"Go fetch Anna," Roland said, smiling. "I'll teach you how to play Fight the Landlord."

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Chapter 373: A Clue at the Market

Ferlin stood behind his wife and smiled gently as he watched her pick out pieces of meat from a stall.

There would always come a certain time when the look in Irene's eyes became extra serious.

"Actually... every piece of meat is priced according to its weight, so you don't have to spend so much time choosing."

"That won't do!" she said in firm rejection. "Although I know that you like lean meat, without the fat, the dish won't have any flavor. A layer of fatty meat for every layer of lean meat will make the best ribs, and is also ideal for slicing and frying. I have to choose carefully."

Ferlin laughed uncontrollably. "Fine, you take your time. I'll go and buy a sack of wheat. The queue is quite long, so when you're done, come and find me."



"Okay," Irene replied without turning her head.

He shook his head helplessly and advanced towards the wheat stall in the Convenience Market.

Ever since snow started falling, Lord Roland had put up wooden sheds, which acted as wind shields, around the market. He also specially posted an announcement that even though it was winter, the sales in the market would not stop.

This implied that during the long Months of the Demons, Border Town would continue to be provided with a stable supply of food.

To the townspeople, this measure effectively granted them peace of mind.

Compared to the meat stall, the wheat stall was much more frequented by customers. A long queue was formed in front of the counter, while surrounding the queue were two patrol members wearing black uniforms whose task was to maintain order. In Border Town, they were given a unique name: "policemen".

Morning Light had already gotten used to seeing all kinds of amazing initiatives by Lord Roland, and a change in name was nothing interesting. He also knew that the name "patrol members" was commonly associated with rogues and ruffians, and therefore changing the name gave a wholly different impression.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Eltek." Someone in the queue recognized him. "You've also come to buy wheat?"

"Stand here with me."

"Let me offer you my position."

"No, that's unnecessary." Ferlin waved his hands and stood at the back of the queue. "Thank you."

"You're so popular," A middle-aged man in front of him laughed and said, "the former First Knight of the Western Region indeed."

Ferlin was slightly stunned. "You know about my past..."

"Haha, of course. This is no secret in Border Town." The man touched his own chin and grinned. "My sons and daughters are highly fond of you. Ever since my eldest son, Nat, heard about your background, he can't stop telling us how much he wants to become a knight too."

"That's all in the past." Ferlin shook his head. "And His Highness no longer needs Knights."

"That's because we have the First Army." The man said casually. "In the past, I wouldn't dare to talk to you like that."

Indeed, while he was still a knight of the Duke, most common folks did not even dare to look straight at him. The rumors about him were filled with words of not only envy and admiration, but more commonly, fear. The only person who dared to make eye contact with him, and who was able to speak straight to him without scruple about status, was Irene. The first time they met at a theatre, his heart found its home.

After being defeated and brought captive to Border Town, Ferlin originally thought that it simply entailed a change of the lord he worked for. He did not expect that he would become a teacher to many people and receive widespread respect.

The form of respect shown towards him was completely different from the old times when he was a knight. People no longer avoided him and instead came close to him. Compared with the respect shown by keeping a distance, it was the latter which made Ferlin feel more comfortable and satisfied.

Perhaps, I'm not suited to be a Knight.

...

After waiting for more than a quarter of an hour, it was finally Ferlin Eltek's turn.

"Identity card, please." The counterperson said before she got a shock. "Teacher Ferlin?"

"Betty." Ferlin was also a little surprised that the girl standing behind the counter was a student from his first batch of graduates. He soon understood, and said happily, "You're working in the City Hall now?"

"Indeed," she revealed an expression of joy and bowed towards Ferlin as if she was still in school. "I'm now a trainee in the Governing Hall, and I am currently working in the Agriculture Department."

Ferlin did not want to make the people behind him wait, so he hastily presented his identity card together with six silver royals. "I want to buy a medium sack of wheat."

"Sure!" She recorded his name in the daybook and shouted towards the back room. A porter walked out of the warehouse and placed a sack of wheat on the counter. Inspection and selection of goods were prohibited at this stall. Every sack was filled beforehand and classified as large, medium or small according to its weight. A small sack was roughly able to feed two people for a month. The food prices were fixed and fluctuations were very rare. Identity cards had to be presented during purchase, and each customer's purchase volume was limited. Ferlin understood that the purpose of this measure was to prevent a single person from purchasing a large volume of food, which would cause a shortage of food for other people with actual needs.

"Teacher, when you have time, visit me at my house." Betty returned his identity card.

"Sure." Ferlin smiled and replied. He carried the sack and walked off to one side so that the next person could make his purchase. Irene was still nowhere to be seen, and he guessed that it was because she had taken a fancy to other products. He thus thought about finding a prominent and dry spot where he could place the sack and sit down for a rest.

Just then, a faint blue figure flashed across in front of him.

Morning Light flinched and turned his head instinctively, and then felt a full body shiver. It was a beautiful woman with exquisite facial features and a head of blue hair which was rarely seen. She was the type who one would absolutely never forget after the first sight. Ferlin felt the blood throughout his body freeze. This was not because of the person's outstanding beauty, but because... he had seen her before in the family hall.

When he was young, he asked more than once about the person in the portrait that was hung in the most prominent position on one of the hall's walls. Yet, his father always kept silent. The person was

undoubtedly a woman, but her portrait was ranked higher than the portraits of his other ancestors. It was only once, when drunk, that his father mentioned the person.

If I remember correctly, the person in the portrait is... the founder of the Eltek Family.

How... is this possible?

"Sorry for making you wait." Irene's voice snapped him out of his confused thoughts. "I went to choose some eggs, and also bought a small sachet of butter. Have you bought the wheat?"

"Yes..." Ferlin replied with his mind elsewhere.

Back home, he continued to see the woman's figure linger in front of his eyes. "Why would I see an ancestor of the Eltek Family when I'm in Border Town?"

After deliberating for a long time, he decided that he would make a trip back to Longsong Stronghold.

When he informed Irene about this plan, she frowned. "Haven't you severed relations with your family? Why do you want to go back?"

"Uh... because," he said hesitantly, "because of some matters."

"Succession rights?" Irene tilted her head and said. "That's not it. Or is it because of... a woman?"

"Ugh," Ferlin replied. "That's impossible!"

"But your eyes tell me that you are lying." She pressed Morning Light against his chair and looked down at him. "You promised me to be my knight, and I believed that you would not break this promise. That's why I'm now feeling so curious... What could it be that you cannot tell me about? Remember that in the farmhouse on the outskirts of Longsong Stronghold, we promised not to hide anything from each other."

He looked into her clear and beautiful eyes. At all times, she would want to share everything good or bad with him. Despite experiencing so many hardships together, Irene never changed.

Ferlin took a deep breath and held her in his arms. In a soft voice, he told her about what he saw.

"So that's what happened." After listening to his story, Irene nodded. "Go."

"You... believe me?" Reasonably speaking, even he himself would not believe such an absurd tale that an ancestor was still alive.

"Of course." She blinked her eyes. "This time, you did not look away."

#### Chapter 374: Returning Home

Having separated from the family, it seemed inappropriate for Ferlin to return to the domain of the Elteks. However, he was not doing this to address his own doubts, but instead, for the sake of his father.

During that particular banquet, Sir Eltek not only talked about the person in the portrait, but furthermore, in a very emotional speech, he claimed that the Eltek lineage existed only because of her

benevolence, which was betrayed by his ancestors. Ferlin did not understand the meaning of the speech at that time, but his father's expression—which showed remorse for his ancestors' behavior—made it memorable.

Since remorse has been shown, is there a chance to remedy the situation? Perhaps, the woman who I saw is the descendant of my family's founder.

After all, he left his family only because he did not want to separate from Irene. As the eldest son, his family could not accept him marrying a commoner. This was only a difference of choice, and he did not have any other problem with his family.

After his marriage, although his father never visited him once, his mother arranged someone to send some daily supplies together with a letter which said that his father had forgiven him.

It was because of these reasons that Ferlin decided to return home and tell them about what he saw.

Due to the impact of the Months of Demons, the number of ships which travelled between the two lands had significantly reduced. He had to wait three days for a merchant ship that came from the Stronghold, and including the time required to unload the cargo, he would arrive at Longsong Stronghold only in a week's time.

When he finally arrived and got off the ship, Ferlin immediately felt the emptiness of the city. The ground snow was up to his ankles, yet he saw that apart from a few lanes which left different depths of footprints, most of the snow on the streets was flat and even, implying that no one had passed through for a long time. Compared with the crowded Border Town, it was hard to believe that this was actually the largest city in Western Region.

The Elteks' estate was to the north of the Stronghold, and included a village of nearly two thousand acres. If even the Stronghold was this empty, it was, needless to say, more empty in the village. As his coach travelled along the road towards his family's mansion, he saw bodies of starved people on the way. Every year, if snow started falling early in autumn, most poor people would be caught unprepared without sufficient food and firewood, and approximately half of these people would not be able to hold out till the next spring. Although what he saw was very common during the Months of Demons, Ferlin could never get used to seeing it.

After passing through several more scattered huts, Ferlin finally returned to the doorsteps of his family home for the first time in many years.

The iron gate in the courtyard was firmly locked, and the front yard was covered with snow. However, the slabs of the walkway were cleared of snow, evidently showing that there was someone in the family who took care of the estate.

He knocked on the iron gate forcefully, and after a short while, two guards walked out of the mansion. One of them quickly identified Ferlin and said surprisedly, "You are... Eldest Master."

"I want to see Sir Eltek," Ferlin said placidly.

Although everyone living in the mansion knew that Morning Light had severed ties with the family, this was after all a matter among the noble family, and hence the guards did not dare to make any decision.

The two guards quickly opened the iron gate. One of them led him into the lobby to wait, while the other went to inform the butler.

Ferlin did not expect that the first person to rush over would be his younger brother, Miso Eltek.

"You don't belong here anymore. Why are you back?" He frowned as he sized up his elder brother. "You walked over here? "Where's the squire?"

"I'm no longer a knight." Ferlin laughed. "Naturally, a squire no longer accompanies me."

"Ah, I almost forgot that you were brutally defeated by the prince of Border Town and became his prisoner. Has he released you or what?" Miso snorted. "Is it because you don't have money to tide over winter? I can give you a little, but you'll then have to leave."

His brother's attitude made Ferlin sigh. It was understandable that he would behave this way—Miso Eltek was presently the heir apparent in the family, and naturally did not wish to see him return and cause complications.

"I'm not here for money, and have no intention to fight over heirship." Morning Light said in a low voice. "His Highness appointed me to become a teacher, and I'm very satisfied with my current life."

"Teacher?" Miso looked astonished. "I don't remember you possessing so much knowledge that you can teach other members of the nobility."

"I don't teach nobles, but rather commoners to read and write."

"Teach commoners..." Miso sneered. "The lie you're fabricating is getting more interesting. Did that commoner wife make you lose your mind?"

"Enough!" A low groan was heard from behind, causing Miso to tremble. Ferlin looked towards where the sound came from, only to see his father, Sir Eltek. "Ms. Irene isn't inferior to the nobility. All that she lacks is status. It's rude to continue talking about it."

"Father!" Miso cried.

Sir Eltek did not pay attention to his younger son. "I heard the guard mention that you have information for me."

"Yes." Ferlin bowed and said.

"Come into my study."

...

Ferlin followed his father up to the study on the second floor of the mansion. When he passed through the hall, he took the opportunity to look towards the portrait wall. The blue-haired woman appeared before him once again, looking exactly like she did in the Convenience Market. Compared with the other portraits, her portrait appeared more vivid and elaborately detailed, such that even the mole on the corner of her eye was clearly visible.

When they entered the study, his father was the first to speak. "During a theatre performance in autumn, I had the chance to see your wife. Her complexion was excellent, and her acting skills didn't pale in comparison to Miss May's. It seems that the two of you are getting along fine."

Ferlin suddenly felt his eyes welling up with tears. He did not expect his father to mention this first. After a brief moment of silence, he nodded and said, "Indeed. We have our own house in Border Town and plan to have a child after the Months of Demons."

"That's great." Eltek took a sip from his cup of tea. "It must be difficult to come over from Border Town now. What's the information?"

Morning Light checked his emotions and said, "I saw a woman while out in the market. She looked exactly like the person in the large portrait in the hall."

The father's hands trembled and nearly overturned his cup of tea. He raised his head with his eyes widened. "What did you say?"

"Her blue hair was rarely seen and her beauty was unmistakable. I'm sure that I didn't see wrongly." Ferlin replied. "Could she be the descendant of the person in the portrait?"

"Impossible! That person was..." He paused and shook his head. "It's impossible for her to have descendants."

"Is... that right?" Ferlin looked downwards. "Then maybe I'm wrong."

"You rushed all the way here just because of this matter?"

"Yes, because I remember that you once... expressed your remorse towards her."

Sir Eltek lowered his head and pondered for a moment. "Did she really look alike?"

"Apart from a slight difference in hair length..." Ferlin recalled. "Everything else was exactly the same." "You know, since I was born, I have only ever seen this hair color in that portrait, hence I paid extra attention."

"She couldn't be a descendant of that person." Sir Eltek said tentatively. "However, she could be the person in the portrait herself."

Ferlin almost could not believe what his father was saying. This idea seemed even more inconceivable than his own imagination. "Herself?" You mean... she has lived for more than four hundred years?"

"I didn't want to tell you about this." Sir Eltek stood up and said. "She is a witch after all, hence anything is possible. Follow me."

"To where?"

"The basement. I have a few things to show you." Sir Eltek said slowly. "Our ancestors' heritage includes a relic that she left behind."

Chapter 375: Last Wish

Ferlin was not unfamiliar with the basement in the Eltek mansion.

When he was young, this place used to be his personal playground. He took immense pleasure in finding all kinds of strange artifacts in the dusty boxes. Of course, for this reason, he was often beaten by his father and was eventually forbidden from entering the basement alone, but he somehow always found a way to sneak in.

This time, Sir Eltek led him into the furthest stone room. The four walls of the room were embedded with pale blue crystals which were the size of a fist. Ferlin inhaled a cold breath involuntarily. To his surprise, every block of stone was a high-quality God's Stone of Retaliation. As a young boy, he was unaware of this, but now, he naturally understood the implications. High-quality magic stones were worth a lot of money, and those as big as these were worth at least five or six hundred gold royals each.

Is the Eltek Family actually so wealthy?

He suddenly recalled that the treasure map was also found in the Elteks' house.

A circle of boxes was placed in the stone room, and the arrangement was similar to the impression in his memory. Sir Eltek took out a bunch of keys from his pocket and opened the largest box in the circle. Following a loud creaking sound, a cloud of dust kicked up at once.

Ferlin held his breath and looked inside the box. The interior was divided into numerous layers, similar to the dressing boxes used by young noble ladies, and on every layer was placed gemstones of different colors.

"Which ancestor had passed this down?"

"I've not been here for a very long time." Sir Eltek sighed. "Every time I see these Magic Stones, I would remember the past events which my ancestors told me about."

"Magic Stones?" Ferlin asked in surprise.

"Yes, they are treasures which only witches are able to use." He nodded. "This is a long story. Our family was established under the blessings of a witch."

Ferlin's father started to recount about the family and its history. Some of the details of his story were different to what Ferlin had heard as a child. The first Eltek ancestor was in fact not from Western Region, but instead, from the remote and unexplored Barbarian Land, which was located past the Impassable Mountain Range.

Ferlin's eyes gradually widened. He did not imagine that the portrait could have concealed such an amazing secret.

"Our family's founder, Ancestor Elsa, had once established a huge kingdom together with many other witches. The witches were part of the dominant class, akin to today's nobility, in the kingdom. It was an offensive by the demons from Hell which brought about the demise of the kingdom. In the final battle, the survivors fled in different directions. Elsa led a group of people towards the stone tower in the Misty Forest to collect experimental materials, while another group of people followed the troops to Graycastle—at that time, the land on which the Kingdom was eventually built was barren and desolate."

"Were our ancestors part of the other group?" Ferlin asked hoarsely.

"Indeed. He used to be the housekeeper of Elsa. Accordingly, he was supposed to follow her into the forest, but he cowered and suggested that he would stay behind to look after the materials. His request was accepted by his master." Sir Eltek spoke in a deep voice. "You should know what this means."

Ferlin nodded. The housekeeper was typically the person the master trusted the most in the household apart from her kin. At most times, the housekeeper ought to have accompanied the master wherever she went, unless she commanded otherwise. In a sense, proposing to leave was equivalent to betraying the master even if she did not refuse.

"When he arrived at Western Region, he began to feel remorse for what he did, and recorded his sentiments in a book." Sir Eltek took out a black-coated book from another box and handed it to his son. "His master never returned, and after that, he broke off from the Union and left the refugee camp. He took many servants with him and settled down on this piece of land, which was yet to be cultivated."

Ferlin grasped the black-coated book without opening it. Instead, he thought of something frightening. "So, does that mean that you knew from the beginning that everything the church did was wrong?"

If the witches had fought against the demons before, why are they now branded as the Devil's minions? There's definitely much more to this than meets the eye.

"I knew, but I couldn't do anything." Sir Eltek said calmly. "If a witch was found in our territory, I would definitely help to hide her. But in the Stronghold, I wasn't able to do so, because of Duke Ryan's disagreement—he hated witches more than the church did. From the records of some of our later ancestors, it's evident that they did the same thing as me... except that they never informed the survivors about what happened in the witches' kingdom."

"Are these survivors still in the household?"

"Of course not, they're all in their graves already." He spread his hands. "It was very rare to live until 60 or 70 years of age, and being humans after all, they aged and passed away."

"But you believe that our first ancestor could still be living."

"This is only a possibility—witches have many different abilities but are unable to breed children, hence I made this supposition."

Ferlin pondered for a brief moment and then changed the subject. "Did our ancestors never think of entering the Misty Forest to find Ancestor Elsa?"

"Easier said than done." His father shook his head. "If even witches were unable to return safely, ordinary mortals entering the forest would simply be courting death. Furthermore, four hundred years ago, the Western Region was a wasteland with beasts and jungles everywhere. It was extremely difficult to settle down upon, and hence there wasn't time to take care of other issues. However, our ancestors did indeed write in their wills that they hoped that someday a descendant would enter the stone tower of the Misty Forest, even if it was just to take a look."

Morning Light inhaled a deep breath and flipped open the dust-laden book. From the very first page, he already felt a sense of regret written between the lines. Much of the writing had faded over time, but perhaps because of this reason, the heavy feelings of his ancestors became even more pronounced.



After reading for a long time, he finally flipped to the last page of the book where the wills, which seemed more like unfulfilled wishes, were written.

This was, in all likelihood, the page which made his father become emotional on that night when he was drunk.

As a former knight himself, he could empathize with this.

"Do you need me to find her?" Ferlin asked after a brief silence. "If she's indeed Elsa, then she must be staying at the prince's castle, and as far as I know, many witches are also gathered there."

"Witches are gathered in the castle?" The knight responded while deep in thought. "Little wonder that Longsong Stronghold made an announcement to recruit witches a few days ago. It seems that His Highness is intent on becoming an enemy of the church." Then, he shook his head. "No, you don't have to find her."

Ferlin felt surprised. "Don't you want to see her?"

"It's wrong for an ancestor to visit a descendant." Sir Eltek laughed. "Of course, we should be the ones to visit her."

"W...we?"

"Indeed. I'm following you to Border Town." His father stroked his chin and smiled. "Bring all of these things. If she's really Elsa, our ancestors' last wish may finally be fulfilled."

Chapter 376: The Castle's new facilities

"What are they?" Andrea asked while chewing on the dried fish.

The prince of the Kingdom of Graycastle was tossing about something new again. He spliced sections of brass together, having Anna melt the joint and Soraya wrap a soft layer of magic coating around it. At first sight, they looked like the water pipes installed in the bathroom, but they were much larger in size and each of them was about the size of a human thigh. It was impossible for a man to move it without the help of Hummingbird, who reduced the weight.

Yet, the brass was not installed only in one or two rooms but horizontally throughout the whole castle and the Witches' House. It entered from the corner of the room, connecting with a strange metal louver along the bottom of the wall, crossed the next room and joined with the longitudinal pipe at the very end.

This large project attracted a lot of witches to surround and watch it, in which the witches from both the Sleeping Island and the Witch Union showed great interest.

"Any guesses?" Roland smiled mysteriously and said, "If you get it right, an extra ice cream bread for dinner."

Ice cream bread! This caught Andrea's attention. It was the most amazing food here, a layer of sweet ice cream stuffed in two slices of toasted bread. It had never been heard of before in the Kingdom of Dawn.

She instantly fell in love with the delicacy the moment she tried it. Despite being teased by Ashes repeatedly, she would still eat it. Otherwise, watching it being left on the plate would still be nothing short of torture to her.

"Does this supply water to rooms?" Ashes frowned.

"Of course not." Andrea pouted to herself. Copper was not cheap. Since the small pipes in the bathroom could distribute water, why use such a huge one?

However, considering she was always teased by Ashes' jeers of "who was the one who said the food from the past was the most delicious", which she had indeed once said in front of Tilly and could not deny, Andrea could only pretend that she did not hear such superficial words.

"What a shallow opinion. Who needs such a big pipe for water supply?" someone said behind Andrea, "His Highness would never do such a pointless thing."

Incisive! That was exactly what Andrea was thinking. Her spirit was lifted right away. No one else would dare to use such a tone to talk to an Extraordinary other than herself and Miss Nightingale from the Witch Union. She turned around and saw a woman looking at Ashes in disdain, with her chin being lifted to just the right angle.

This is the expression the nobility should use!

Andrea secretly praised this mysterious woman who was the most cordial witch she had met since she came to Border Town. Nightingale showed her extraordinary skills during the rescue of the witch in the relic. She was also from a noble background, and even her hair color was similar to Andrea's. In the battles against the demonic hybrids on the city wall, Nightingale had recognized her ability and shared dried fish with her. She was just acting like a noble.

Most importantly, she didn't like Ashes at all.

Andrea didn't know how Ashes offended Nightingale when she first came to Border Town, but wasn't it true that the enemies my enemy was my friend? Not to mention that her character was very compatible with Andrea herself.

"You're talking as if you know the answer," Ashes shrugged and said.

"Of course, I know," Nightingale grinned and said, "I've been in the office when His Highness was drafting the design drawings. All of his plans were drafted in front of my very eyes."

"It's not fair!" Mystery Moon muttered.

"She doesn't take part in the examinations though," said the prince. The prince's words made Nightingale's proud expression stupefied right away. "A hint for you all, these pipes are only parts of the system and you may want to look elsewhere in order to better figure out the answer."

"Goo!" Maggie flew out of the room with Lightning immediately, the other witches were not far behind. Everyone had scattered away, trying to have a look at the pipe. Andrea fell behind everyone else on purpose. When everyone left, she winked at Nightingale and called her out to the door.

"What's that?" Andrea whispered, "I'll share half of the dinner bread with you if I got it right."

"I don't know either." Nightingale's reply shocked her.

"But you just said that you had gone through all the designs, didn't you?"

"Yeah, just like Natural Science Theoretical Foundation, even if you understand the individual words on it, can you understand them when they're put together? "

"Uh..." Andrea opened her mouth but she found that she was quite right. She had tried the book herself and found that it was just like hieroglyphics.

"I'm afraid only Anna has the ability to understand His Highness' intention by simply looking at his drawings," Nightingale said, "If you ask her, she'll definitely tell you the answer."

After Nightingale left, Andrea hesitated for a while and finally didn't call for Anna to come out from the room. It was not being reserved or embarrassed, but rather... out of respect. She was not afraid of the heinous criminals nor the cruel Verdict Army, but she was in awe of such a girl less than twenty.

She remembered when she passed by the prince's office once and overheard the conversation of Anna and His Highness. Their conversation still brought her goosebumps now. Those strange terms like the high angle calculation, orbit-trimming with drop-point parameters and the conversion from kinetic energy to potential energy in an ideal state, all made her rooted to the spot immediately. They were both witches, but why Anna could fluently speak such terms that Andrea didn't understand at all? From that moment onwards, Andrea had an extended admiration towards Anna. She thought that Anna was a totally different type of person from herself but at the same level with Lady Tilly instead.

Since she could not ask for the answer, she could only rely on herself. Andrea went around to explore each of the rooms according to His Highness' advice. She found that there was a rectangular metal railing separating the pipes in the room that had completed the installation as if it was to prevent anyone from touching the pipes. Upon seeing this, she thought, if it wasn't for the presence of barbarians like Ashes, even if someone touched them it probably wouldn't be a big deal. Thinking of what Nightingale said—"His Highness will never do such a pointless thing", Andrea thought that these metal railings should have their own functions.

She had a new discovery when she came to the first floor of the Witch House. There was a newly built bungalow between the castle and the Witch House and that was where the copper pipes leading to the two buildings extended.

There was a huge iron box in the house, it was hollow at the bottom half of the box and there was a huge chimney on the top... It looked almost like a cooking stove. And she saw a pipe connected directly to the well in the yard, which looked rather similar to the water supply system in the water tower.

Wait... Was it supposed to be used for boiling water?

If the pipes were used for hot water distribution, there was no need to be such humongous at all.

Andrea still couldn't understand what it was for after a long contemplation.

His Highness gathered all the witches in the hall before dinner. He smiled and said, "The heating system in the castle is officially launched from today."

"Heating system?" Ashes puzzled.

"Yes. Water will be boiled in the boiler, and the high-temperature steam will enter the rooms through the pipes and increase the temperature there, as long as the doors and windows are closed, the whole room can be warmed up pretty quickly," Prince explained, "comparing to fire barrels that are too heavy to move and require a good air flow to prevent anthracemia. The new heating system doesn't have such concerns at all. It'll make you feel as warm as in spring while sleeping." When the debug ends, the residential area will be gradually equipped with such heating system."

"Next, the ice cream bread winners are, in addition to Anna, Soraya and Hummingbird who were participating in the installation of the heating system, there was only one person who guessed it right. And, it was... Tilly!"

Andrea helplessly stared at Lady Tilly who was smiling while eating the delicious dinner, completely losing her reserved manner of a noble.

Chapter 377: Under Low Temperatures

The boiler heating system was not too complicated and essentially just involved boiling the water and distributing the heat through pipes and radiators into the rooms. The heat could be carried by water or steam, and Roland preferred the latter because it had a higher temperature and was more convenient. As long as the boiler kept on running, the steam pressure would fill the pipes with hot water droplets without the help of a pump.

Of course, there were also shortcomings to a steam heating system. The pipes were always under very high pressure, so weak infrastructure could cause leakages or even explosions. The steam would reach temperatures of 200 to 300 degrees Celsius, making it extremely damaging to human flesh and thus raising the safety standards for the steam heating system. Anna's Blackfire welding technique, combined with Soraya's coating, guaranteed system integrity and reduced these risks to a minimum.

Roland also installed an automatic valve on the boiler, which had the same mechanical principles as the centrifugal governor on a steam engine. When the furnace pressure was too high, the high-speed rotation of the flywheel would pull the valve upwards, releasing steam and lowering pressure.

The last safety measure was located between the boiler and the two main heating pipes. Roland asked Anna to carve several grooves around the connecting copper pipe in order to decrease its strength, just like in the design of tin cans. Even if the pressure valve failed to turn on, the explosion would still be contained in the boiler and would not harm anyone in the room.

The castle was completely transformed after the heating system was up and running.

The witches' thick winter clothes were replaced with unlined fall garments. Watching the girls talking and laughing in their colorful attire greatly increased Roland's motivation to work.

Of course, these facilities could only act as a supplement to their lifestyle and help create a better working environment.

His next task was much more important and decided the future of the Western Region.

He had to find a way to produce synthetic ammonia and reduce dependence on nitrate, which would allow chemical explosive production to reach new heights and satisfy the amount required to use automatic firing weapons.

If he could achieve this by the end of the winter, it would undoubtedly serve him well in his planned offensive in the spring.

Roland summoned Kyle Sichi and Agatha to his office.

"How have you two been working together during these past few days?" he asked with a smile on his face. Kyle Sichi was the Chief Alchemist of Border Town, but besides his love for alchemy, he hardly cared about people's feelings or opinions. On the other hand, Agatha came from the Witch Kingdom from four centuries ago and was a proud member of the Quest Society, the kingdom's most prestigious research institution. Both of them were straight talkers and had highly reactionary personalities. Roland was often worried that they might fight, but he needed them to work together to produce nitro-explosives and ammonia. Thus, he had to personally check in with them, because if they argued, only he would be able to work things out.

"Very well." Kyle's words shocked Roland. "Miss Agatha's abilities are of great help to my experiments. I've found the stable synthesis temperature of nitration glycerol, and there have been no problems with laboratory preparation, so we're currently testing the possibility of industrial production. None of this would be possible without the ice cups... Oh, forgive me, I was so busy that I forgot to inform you of this." He paused and said, "By the way, if you called me here to ask about this, can I return to my laboratory now? I still have many things to do."

"Um... is that so?" Roland looked towards Agatha, and she nodded.

"Sir Kyle has an extraordinary amount of knowledge, especially in regards to the elements, which is somewhat similar to that of the Quest Society. We're cooperating very nicely, and if he was in Taquila, he would definitely have been accepted by the Union."

"Was it actually easier for two straight talkers to get along? It seems I was worried for nothing. But why does the chief alchemist more respectful towards the witch than towards me? How sad..." Roland thought to himself and cleared his throat. "Then I'm relieved. I gathered you here to assign you some new research."

"Please." Kyle perked up as soon as he heard the word "research".

"As I said before, there are many different gases in the air, and it's time we start using them. According to 'Elementary Chemistry', oxygen and nitrogen make up 99% of the air, and I need to separate these two gases for chemical production," Roland explained.

Kyle contemplated for a moment. "Do you mean we should separate them by using their different characteristics, such as their different boiling points and melting points?"

"That's right." Roland nodded. "Condense and then reheat the gases. As the boiling point of nitrogen is lower than oxygen, it can be distilled from the liquid first. Since the temperature needed is far below the freezing point for water, the experiment is difficult to conduct with conventional methods, so Agatha's abilities are crucial."

"Turning air into liquid," Kyle said, stroking his beard. "It sounds very interesting."

"If the temperature was brought low enough, they could freeze into solids," Roland smiled and said. The alchemist probably never dreamed that the seemingly elusive gas could be held in a person's hands – as long as adequate anti-frostbite measures were taken.

Agatha asked confusedly, "I flipped through the same book a little, but I didn't see anything about air being frozen into a variety of gases."

"It's difficult to distinguish them with the naked eye because they are mixed together and show no distinct layers," Roland explained. "The first step is to eliminate carbon dioxide, which has the highest freezing point, but it makes up a very small percentage of air, so you wouldn't even notice its solid form. Next, oxygen and nitrogen would fuse together to give off a light blue hue. If you don't separate it, it would look like a pure substance, but liquid nitrogen is actually colorless."

"What should we do?"

"First, prepare the distillation vessel." The prince grinned. "This is a very important project."

There was no doubt that depending on Agatha alone would not be enough. Glass could easily break under repeated temperature changes, so the vessels for the liquid air could only be made of steel. This was not difficult for Anna, but the closed shell would make it impossible to see the liquefied air changing during the heating process. Therefore, Sylvie's Eye of Magic was necessary to observe the situation inside of the vessel. Then, Agatha would record the magic consumption at the boiling point of nitrogen, as well as the stable production temperatures.

Preparation alone took three days.

When the vessel was completed, Roland went to the chemistry laboratory to personally oversee the town's first oxygen-nitrogen separation experiment.

Chapter 378: Oxygen and Nitrogen

Agatha, Sylvie, Chavez and Kyle Sichi would conduct the experiment. Carter, Iron Axe, Barov and all the other witches of the Witch Union were also required by Roland to come to the lab, as it was an experiment of great practical and educational significance. The fifth laboratory was chosen for this event, given that it was the largest lab and had enough space for the two dozen people.

Considering the experiment was the first of its kind, Roland had built a tower-shaped vessel which was only as tall as a man with a diameter of one meter instead of a giant fractionation vessel. The inside of the vessel was divided into three parts. The air would enter the vessel through the bottom part and come out through the two parts above.

Before separating the air, Roland gave them a simple lecture on chemistry, telling them what was going to happen and putting forward a few questions for them to think about and try to answer. It was a trick frequently used by chemistry teachers to intrigue their students and enhance the effects of the lesson.

"... theoretically, when Agatha cools down the vessel and brings down its internal temperature, the air inside will gradually be condensed into liquid, and drip down into the bottom of the vessel through the holes in the plate. So when you see liquid at the bottom, please let us know."

Roland explained to Sylvie in detail, because no one except her could directly see into the vessel and describe the changes happening inside.

Sylvie nodded somewhat skeptically, "Will I really see liquid appear? Will it not be only the water vapor inside the vessel?"

"No, it's different. The liquefied air is light blue, completely different from water vapor." Roland shook his head and explained further, "Plus, at that temperature, the water vapor will be solidified into ice crystals long before the air." Then he made a gesture toward Agatha and said, "Let's get started."

"Wait... Do we not have to plug up the hole in the vessel's bottom now?" she asked.

"Block it up later. Otherwise, the vessel won't have enough air inside to bring about significant changes." As this was only an experiment, he chose the easiest way for air intake—when the air temperature inside the vessel was rapidly lowered, the internal pressure would fall, and thereby draw the air into the vessel. In mass production, cooling down the air cost too much energy and the cool air would run off continuously. Therefore, this cooling method was considered inefficient and rarely applied in practice. However, Agatha's magic power could bring down the vessel's temperature more efficiently than any refrigerators, saving Roland the trouble to prepare an air pump.

Agatha took a deep breath and pressed her hands onto the fractionation vessel.

About half a minute later, whistling sounds could be clearly heard as the air was rapidly passing through the air intake pipe. White frost could be seen by the naked eye around the pipe hole, and its area gradually expanded—the water in the air nearby was quickly solidified, and then adhered to the vessel. Anna turned her Blackfire into threads to clean up these continuously thickening ice crystals.

"I see some liquid appearing on the plate, but there's more white frost inside." Sylvie said in an amazement a moment later.

"The white frost may be the solidified water vapor or the crystallized carbon dioxide," explained Roland. "Considering that there's only a small portion of carbon dioxide in the air, most of it should be solidified water vapor."

In normal production, air must be dried out first before being sucked into the fractionating vessel. Otherwise, the solidified water vapor would block the parting plates and the holes, and thus decrease the production efficiency.

Several minutes later, Sylvie reported to Roland that the bottom part of the vessel had been filled with light blue liquid. Roland immediately instructed Soraya to block the holes in the air intake pipe and seal them with coatings.

The next thing to do was heat the vessel, a crucial step in this experiment.

When the liquefied air was heated, the nitrogen would first reach its boiling point, vaporize and run off due to the different boiling points of nitrogen and oxygen. In this way the two could be separated. Due

to the fact that Roland forgot the exact temperature at which nitrogen reached its boiling point, and that he had no way to measure it either, it all depended on Agatha to control the temperature. If she managed to heat the fractionation vessel to the right temperature, the nitrogen gas would come out via the exhaust pipe and the liquid in the bottom part would grow bluer and bluer, with an increasing purity of oxygen.

Fortunately, Agatha was familiar with magic power control. She accurately adjusted the cooling range, increasing the temperature slowly. After a while, Sylvie observed that the liquid was boiling. She saw bubbles around the coating pipe which was plunged into the water. At the same time, Keymor quickly collected several bottles of gas, using the drainage gas-gathering method.

"This is nitrogen?" Lily twitched her lips and said, "I can't see anything at all."

"That's exactly the first question I put forward earlier," Roland said, "How do we prove it's different from the air?"

"Test it with a piece of burning wood," Tilly answered first, "it'll extinguish the fire instantly if it's nitrogen. According to Elementary Chemistry, everything requires oxygen to burn."

"Cool it down again and condense it back into liquid," Agatha said after thinking for a while, "Didn't you say that liquefied nitrogen is colorless?"

"How about pouring out the remaining liquid in the vessel and proving it's pure oxygen? By doing so we can verify the diversity of air composition." Anna suggested.

In the lab, only a few quick learners eagerly proposed different methods and began a heated discussion, while the others remained silent. Roland looked around and found Nightingale, Andrea, Maggie, the City Hall Director and the Chief Knight Carter all seeming confused and at a loss. Iron Axe, the commander of the First Army, on the other hand, always maintained the same facial expression. Roland believed that Iron Axe would probably give him a nod no matter what he said.

Roland sighed silently. "It looks like this chemistry lecture is a little above their level."

Perhaps the only ones who could really share His Highness's happiness at this moment would be Kyle Sichi and Chavez.

"Your Highness, it's really... amazing," the young alchemist exclaimed, "and you've proven what's written in the Elementary Chemistry is true. I'm afraid it has never occurred to alchemists that even the air around us is so complicated."

"With pure oxygen, it's possible to observe more intense oxidation reactions, right? I have a lot more experiments to try out now." Kyle said in excitement.

Roland nodded and an idea suddenly jumped into his head.

Nitrogen was the most important raw material for synthetic ammonia. It can react with hydrogen at a high temperature and under high pressure to form ammonia that can be used to manufacture nitrogenous fertilizer and synthesize nitrogen oxides, which can be further used to produce nitric acid. However, in order to carry out this plan, much work needed to be done and many pieces of equipment



needed to be built, such as air pumps and vacuum gasholders. Even if Paper has the magic power to work as a catalyst, it would require repeated testing.

Now, with pure oxygen and pure nitrogen, why not try to produce nitrogen monoxide?

The reaction of oxygen and nitrogen in nature wasn't an automatic one because it was an exothermic reaction that required external energy, such as an electric discharge in which an electric arc can instantly heat the air up to a temperature of thousands of degrees. That's why places where thunder and lightning frequently occurred had more fertile lands, and why ammonia was often used instead to produce nitric acid in the chemical industry. The electrical method of production was not a common practice as it costed too much energy and required extremely high-quality equipment.

Yet it was the most efficient method in case of an emergency, as it didn't even require any catalyst, simply constant electric discharge... in fact, any other means that produce the extremely high temperatures that electric arcs can achieve will do.

Roland naturally thought of Blackfire.

He was sure that it was easy for Anna to manipulate her Blackfire, which worked as an efficient and powerful electric discharge. Now all they needed to do to produce nitrogen monoxide was mix purified oxygen and purified nitrogen in the proper proportions and pour the mixture into an airtight reactor.

He decided to give it a try.

Chapter 379: Attack

"Move faster!"

"Keep your hands steady. Insert the bullets into the cartridge one at a time!"

"Your teammates at the front need you to act quickly. Otherwise, you'll give the enemy the chance to approach and kill you!"

"Don't look at other places. Stay focused on the job in your hands!"

"As long as your teammates are still shooting, you just keep on reloading!"

In the First Army's military camp, Lord Brian was loudly urging the new recruits to practice, and Nail was one of them.

He was not newly recruited, but instead a veteran in the First Army. After the Militia defeated the demonic beasts under the leadership of His Highness, he joined the army at Iron Head's strong recommendation. In Iron Head's words, it was much more promising to carry a flintlock to fight and protect His Highness and Miss Nana than to spend the rest of his life mining in the pit.

Not long after Nail joined the Militia, they were reorganized into the First Army. Guided by Prince Roland and Lord Iron Axe, the army in which he served defeated not only demonic beasts but also great nobles whom he used to regard as unbeatable. They overthrew Duke Ryan and even prevented the

troops of Timothy, the new king, from setting foot in Border Town. After those battles, Nail was promoted to a team leader in the Flintlock Squad.

However, according to the First Army's tradition, whenever a large number of new recruits came, some veterans would be chosen to join the newly formed platoon. They would live and eat together with the new recruits and accompany them in practices, as their instructors. When knowing he was chosen for this instructor job, Nail was at first not willing to take it. He was just reluctant to leave the front line and his familiar battle companions, but thinking of the veterans who had helped him when he was a new recruit in the Militia, he had no choice but to accept this task.

At that time, the instructor in his squad had been Lord Brian, who now was the commander of the First Battalion in the Flintlock Squad.

Nail hoped that one day, he would be someone like Lord Brian, wearing a medal bestowed by His Highness and giving commands to nearly a thousand soldiers. Iron Head was right. "This job is far more promising than operating a steam engine in front of a mining pit."

"My lord, how long do we have to continue with this practice?" A young man in his platoon grumbled. "It's still snowing."

"Keep practicing until you can finish the reloading in about half a minute with your eyes closed," Nail stopped in front of him and said. "You're Haimon, right? Remember to say 'Report' before you speak. That's a rule in the First Army! "

"Report," shouted a little man next to Haimon, with his hands filling the loader all the time, "do we have eggs for dinner tonight?"

Hearing this question, many soldiers in the platoon started to lick their lips.

Nail could not help but grin. He understood aside from the two weeks' strict military training, sufficient food supply was also an important factor to keep these new soldiers from the Northern and the Southern Territory well disciplined even on such a snowy day. They had oatmeal and salty dried meat for every meal, and sometimes a piece of pickled fish or even an egg. Yet eggs were only provided after a battle against demonic beasts or a field training.

"Well, you'd better ask demonic beasts whether or not they're coming to Border Town today." Nail shrugged. "What's your name?"

"Al Bitter, my lord," answered the little man.

"It takes you almost half a day to insert one bullet. My next-door neighbor, an old lady, is far more nimble than you," Nail suddenly stopped smiling and said seriously. "If you can't improve when today's training is over, I'll cancel your share of oatmeal and meat, let alone the eggs!"

The new soldiers immediately lowered their heads and focused. No one wanted to be punished like that.

Just at the moment, the bell on the city wall tolled rapidly.

Demonic beasts were coming.

"Stop practicing!" Brian shouted, "Instructors lead your men into the city wall area. Get ready to fight!"

"Have you heard it?" Nail urged. "Carry your ammunition, everyone. Line up and go up to the top of the city wall, as what you did in the training. Our position is the fourth section of the city wall. Move quickly!"

"The new soldiers now do get a chance to have eggs for dinner tonight." Nail thought in secret.

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After arriving at their position, Nail saw the Flintlock Squad was ready. Seeing the dark shadows gradually approaching, he calmly did the last fire check and instructed his men to mount the guns upon the wall piers.

Nail somehow felt a little disappointed. He himself could have given those beasts a hard strike with his revolving rifle.

The bullets were filled into the loaders one by one and then put at handy places that the soldiers at the front could easily reach. There were one to two people responsible for loading behind each veteran. If necessary, the veterans could fire five bullets in a shot. The new weapons were much more powerful than previously-used flintlocks.

"Look! Here comes the witches!" Haimon whispered.

"They're so... pretty." Al Bitter murmured. "Before I came here, I only heard about them via the church and thought they were ugly and dreadful."

"That's the only thing you've noticed?" Haimon grunted. "Don't you remember the witch carrying a big sword? The girl could chop and kill demonic hybrids. Oh! If only I had powers like that."

"If it's truly the power of demons..."

"Shut up!" Nail shouted loudly. "Miss Nana is also a witch. You think she's a demon?" Then he lowered his voice and said, "Miss Nana is our town's angel. The power she has is the power of gods, understood? If you dare say anything like that in front of any veteran in the First Army, I promise you'll be beaten up really badly. Now focus on the reloading. It's not practice!"

After shouting at the two gabby guys, he cast a glance at the coming demonic beasts, "They look almost the same as the ones that have come before. It appears to be a short battle... Wait, what's that?"

There seemed to be a giant figure among the dark shadows, something like a tortoiseshell Siege Beast, but it seemed much bigger and faster.

When it came closer, Nail could not help but stare at it. It was a super giant demonic beast that he had never ever seen! Its huge tusks were almost thicker than a human's body, like sickles sticking straight up. Its four legs looked like pillars of rock, kicking up layers of snow mists. At each step of its running, the earth beneath its feet trembled. The city walls of more than four meters in height was even lower than its jaw. If the beast ran into the wall, this mud wall would probably crack into pieces.

The artillerymen!

There was no doubt that flintlocks had very limited influence on such a giant monster, but only the big equipment of the artillerymen was able to stop it! The new culverins mounted upon the sixth section of the city walls were the most powerful artillery equipment they had.

At that moment, the new recruits started to scream in fright, "Good God. Look! What's that?"

"Gods have mercy on us. Is it a demon from the Hell?"

"Close your mouth and focus on what you should do!" Nail swallowed the lump in the throat and looked at the new cannons at the sixth section of the city wall. The barrel, which reflected the silver light, slowly turned around and projected in the direction of the giant monster.

Then bright flames were shot into the air, and the cannons thundered and boomed!

Chapter 380: Flesh and Blood

Nail felt his heart suddenly in his throat.

At that moment, time seemed to slow down. He stared at the giant demonic beast without a blink, while at the same time prayed in secret that the new cannons could hit the target. However, the demonic beast was still safe and sound, rushing forward by the time he started to breathe again.

About half a minute later, a snow column was kicked up far away from the monster.

This is gonna be bad.

Nail's heart suddenly sank. As the monster was not coming toward the sixth section of the city wall, it left an included angle between the cannons. The artillery unit had to constantly adjust the angle of the culverin, while at the same time also estimate how fast the beast was moving and fire in advance. Otherwise, the shell would land somewhere behind the target just like what was happening now.

Based on the firing rate of the field artillery, they only had one last chance before the monster broke into the city wall!

Nail had already been able to see the thick fur that covered the enemy's body, as well as its huge crimson mouth beneath the tusks. Witches were coming in this direction, apparently planning to stop this monster. Yet the four of them altogether was not even as big as the beast's one leg. Were they able to succeed with pure magic?

He was so anxious and worried that he even wanted to run to the sixth section of the city wall and remind the cannon team to aim forward. However, since there were supervisors standing on both sides at each section of the city wall, he eventually suppressed this impulse—he would be very likely accused of being a coward if he left his post now without permission. Lord Iron Axe had stated repeatedly that behaviors that would break down the line of defense were absolutely forbidden. Once such a person was discovered, the supervising team could directly shoot him down.

The demonic beast running at the very front had already entered the shooting range of the revolving rifles. There was a series of cracking shooting sounds upon the city wall.

Nail had no choice but to continue with his mission, putting the already prepared loaders one by one next to the shooters.

Just at that moment, there was a second ground-shaking roar, which was less than half a minute after the first firing of the culverin.

"That... fast!?" Nail looked at the sixth section of the city wall in great surprise. The smoke above the muzzle had not completely disappeared and some smoke was continuously running out of it, making the cannon look like a litten silver pipe. Nevertheless, what was shocking was yet to come. He had not even had time to notice whether the enemy was shot or not when the dazzling blazes appeared again.

The third firing!

Good Lord. Don't they need to load the shells?

Nail only saw four or five people busy working at the rear of the barrel, but none approaching the muzzle. It appeared that entirely different from the short thick field artillery, this new cannon could fire in succession like a revolving rifle!

This time the firing was effective.

Nail did not see the shell entering the monster's body. What he first noticed was a mass of blood mist bursting out from one side of the giant demonic beast. Aside from the black blood that spilled over, there were also furry skins torn apart, as well as large pieces of flesh. The demonic beast suddenly quivered. Its entire body seemed to be flattened a little bit, and there were streaks of crinkles showing up on its thick furry skins like the ripples on the water surface—but he was not sure whether it was an illusion, because in the next minute, the sunken body restored to normal again, except for the eye balls of the monster, which had been pushed forward when the body was flattened. Meanwhile the eye balls ejected something thick and sluggish in black and white.

With a dull crashing sound, the giant beast fell all its length onto the ground, lying on its side even without an agonal growl. It was until then that Nail found where the shell hit—there was a big hole close to the beast's neck. It was so insignificant compared with its robust body that it was hard to relate the hole with the fatal shot that occurred just now. Strands of smoke was coming out of the hole, and the furry skins around it were blackened.

The monster from the Hell just died like this?

Nail could no longer restrain the excitement in his heart, but vent out all his earlier anxiety with a roar.

"Long live His Highness!"

Even such a terrifying and fierce enemy could not possibly resist the powerful weapon invented by His Highness! Apart from that new cannon, he could not even think of any other ways to kill this huge hybrid demonic beast—even if a witch could manage to do so, it would not be such a clean shot. Thinking further, he could say that His Highness, in a way, had granted them a supreme power comparable to witches'!

His shout, like an introduction, was responded by more people and it soon created an uproar among others. At first only the new recruits responded with loud shouts, but later even the veterans could not help clenching their fists.

There were loud cheers bursting out from the top of the city walls.

"Long live His Highness!"

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Roland was only informed that the beast was killed by the new cannon after the battle was over.

He put on a woolen coat and hurried to the West Wall. The demonic beast's gigantic body was still lying quietly in the snow, with its black blood melting the snow around it into a pool of black water.

It seemed that no matter how horrible these monsters might look like, they were after all carbon based organism. When faced with ammunition and steels, they were as weak as a piece of thin paper.

This solid pointed shell rolled over due to the loss of its stability after being projected into the beast's body, and thus transmitted its kinetic energy throughout the entire torso, and finally went through the body while swirling—as it could be seen from the scene, the other side of the beast's body was completely torn, with the internal organs and broken bones scattered around. Even its head, which was the hardest part of all, was shattered by the vibrating energy and collapsed in total.

However, he still felt a little concerned. "The bone strength of creatures has a limit. This beast is apparently several times bigger than an elephant. How does it support its body without being crushed by its own weight? This is the exactly why terricolous animals have much smaller body builds than marine lives, as they can't overcome the pull of the gravity."

Would it have anything to do with the magic power? He remembered Nightingale once said she could see there were magic powers flowing inside some of the hybrid demonic beasts' bodies.

"How... could this be possible?" Agatha who arrived later had her eyes wide open, "Isn't this the Fearful Beast of Hell?"

"What's that? Is that the name of the hybrid demonic beast?" Roland asked curiously, "It has also shown up at the Fertile Plains before?"

"Yes, and when they showed up in group, they were difficult enemies to both witches and demons. Many cities and towns were devastated by the Fearful Beasts of Hell," Agatha's voice sounded a little dry, "However, they could only be seen when the arrival of the Bloody Moon was drawing near."

"The arrival of... the Bloody Moon?" Roland suddenly remembered what was written in the ancient book, "When there was a Bloody Moon in the sky, the Gates of Hell would open once again." He frowned and asked, "What does that mean?"

"This was a record passing down since the first Battle of Divine Will when the magic power was the strongest. The appearance of witches would bring another peak in magic power, but likewise, demons and demonic beasts would also be extremely powerful." Agatha said nervously, "I've perused the history book you gave me. Based on the years, I deduce that there're still at least 20 to 50 years before the arrival of the Bloody Moon. It's impossible to see such monsters."

"But it has still appeared," said Roland in a deep voice, "What does it mean?"

"It means that we don't have much time left."