

Witch 381

Chapter 381: Evelyn's Resolution

Roland was frightened by the sentence "we don't have much time left", but he was a bit relieved after hearing the full explanation. "Don't stop in the halfway. It sounds scary."

"You think five years is a long time?" Agatha frowned and said, "The timing was accurate at the first and the second Battles of Divine Will. I don't know why the cycle has now been shorten, and... it may become even shorter."

"I thought you would say the Bloody Moon would come this winter," Roland shrugged and replied. According to the current research and development plan, he would be able to universalize the new firearms throughout the whole army in one year. As long as the enemies were not impervious to blades and spears, they still had a chance to win the war. The only thing he needed to pay attention to was that the construction of the territory should be developed to an extent where it was able to support a long lasting war. This required its land, population and resources to be all at a high level, and that the territory had sufficient strategic depth to allow people to retreat temporarily and recover upon a defeat.

Therefore, the difficulty did not lie in weapons, but in the establishment of two to three industrial cities to constantly provide population, ammunition and food. Logistics guaranteed a victory, while staff guaranteed logistics. In the end, he found what he needed most were still reliable leaders, cadres and clerks. Without these, even he had unified the Kingdom of Graycastle, he still could not integrate it into a war machine, and the nobility would probably drag him down.

It's indeed true that a country capable of waging a war always has a high level of educational popularity.

"What's this weapon called?" Agatha suddenly changed the topic, "Back then, I remember you called it 152mm Stronghold... "

"Stronghold Standard Artillery," Roland added, "There'll be naval artilleries in the future."

"If you can fill the city wall with weapons like this prior to the arrival of the Bloody Moon, we probably can resist the attacks from demons. According to Kyle Sichi, what I made in the chemistry lab is also a part of the cannon, right?" Agatha seemed to be determined and said, "I'll try my best to produce liquid nitrogen and liquid oxygen, as long as you can... "

"Don't worry." He comforted her. "We'll defeat demons."

"Was this all that I needed to do today?" Evelyn dipped her finger into the wine and touched her tongue. The spicy taste appeared to be more intense. According to His Highness' requirement, the purer the white liquor was, the better it would taste. The best spirit did not even have any water, and every drop of it was mellow and rich—although she felt the white liquor she made became increasingly close to what His Highness described, it could lesser and lesser be considered as "tasty".

"Yes, good work." The manager of the brewery labeled the wine jars and nodded to her. "Remember me to His Highness."

"Can you... really sell these?" Evelyn asked, confused. From her past experience of running a tavern, she was afraid that only few people could take such a spicy flavor.

"For this, I don't know either," the manager smiled and said, "but there would be someone coming to ship liquors every now and then, so I think there're still some people who like it."

Evelyn was relieved instantly. If nobody was willing to drink this, not only did His Highness fail, but she herself would become useless as well... It was fortunate that things turned out not to be what she thought was, and it appeared that His Highness was a true great noble who knew the taste of the nobility very well. She smiled, "I'll take off then."

Evelyn left the brewery and went across the streets filled with bitterly cold wind. Upon returning to the castle, she sensed the warm air surrounding her. The world inside the castle was totally different from the one outside. She took a deep breath, taking off her coat to be closer to the warmth.

This kind of comfortable life was unimaginable at all in the past. In winter, she used to either tightly sit with her families by a brazier, or curl up beneath a blanket. "What's the difference between the life in the castle and the Kingdom of God that the church has alleged to be like spring all the year round? Plus, His Highness had said that he would popularize the central heating system throughout the residential area, and enable all the subjects to stay away from the piercing coldness of the Months of the Demons." She had no idea how many believers of the church had arrived at the Kingdom of God, but in here, witches who were considered as Devil's minions and ordinary civilians were the first to enjoy this privilege. If it was known by those believers, they would probably grit their teeth out of envy.

His Royal Highness is truly capable of everything.

Across the hall, Andrea, Ashes and Shavi were playing poker.

"Double eight!"

"Pass."

"Double two! I win," Andrea smiled proudly and said, "Ashes has the most cards, six. Hand over the IOU for ice cream!" Then she turned around and waived at Evelyn, "Hey, do you want to play with us?"

Out of curiosity, Evelyn could not help asking, "What's an IOU for ice cream?"

"That's a bet," Ashes waived her hand and continued, "Whoever has the most IOUs will have to give her next ice cream bread to the winner. How does it sound? Do you want to give it a shot?"

Evelyn was very hesitated. "This is a rare chance for her to make conversations with combat witches. If it was on the Sleeping Island, both Andrea and Ashes would be figures only next to Lady Tilly, who were rarely seen, and would certainly not invite her to join their activities voluntarily. Besides, Fighting the Landlord is indeed very interesting, with simple rules but numerous variations, and it also requires teamwork. One can easily spend the whole day just playing it. However..."

"Um, it'll be the final exam soon. Aren't you going to review what you've learned?"

"Did you mean the exam for that basic course in the evening?" Andrea pouted and said, "It's very simple. Probably I can pass it without much reviewing."

The other two seconded with a nod.

Right... Andrea is the nobility, whose insight and knowledge are greater than ordinary people. Both Ashes and Shavi can read and write. It appears now that she's the one that falls behind.

"I... I might as well not play," she hesitated for a moment and said, "and I'd better go back to my room and do some reading. You guys please continue."

Leaving the three people who were a little surprised behind, Evelyn rushed to Witch House. She pushed the wooden door open, and found Candle sitting at the table in the living room practicing the arithmetic exercises at the back of the textbook.

"You're back?"

"Yes." Seeing the hard-working Candle, she felt a lot relieved at once. "How did your revision go?"

"Not bad. Nature and arithmetic are a little hard to understand," Candle smiled and said. "How about you?"

"Me too," Evelyn nodded and said, "Let's list all that we don't understand and ask Miss Anna in the evening."

"Sounds good."

According to Miss Scroll, these books were written by His Royal Highness himself, and they were part of his knowledge in his head. If she mastered them, did it mean that she would also possess one part of his almightiness? Evelyn thought in secret that although she couldn't change the ability she was born with, at least she could achieve progress in this regard by working hard. Even if the nobles no longer liked to drink spicy white liquor, she could still work as a teacher in the territory rather than being useless. To this end, she pretty much read the textbook and studied those difficult phrases and equations whenever she had time, and she had become a frequent visitor of Anna', Scroll' and Wendy's room.

She had the lowest score during the last test, but she firmly believed that it would not be the case this time.

"Let me set an achievable goal first—I want to exceed Maggie!" she said to herself.

Chapter 382: Final Exam

The day of the final exam soon arrived.

In the hall, the witches sat in neat rows as they waited for Teacher Scroll to distribute the test papers.

Meanwhile, Andrea was elegantly trimming her nails with a clipper. She was already thinking about dinner—according to His Highness Roland, the first semester of school would conclude as soon as the exam was over. To celebrate, every student would receive a roll of ice cream bread for dinner.

This meant that Andrea would receive much more than one roll.

In recent days, she would play "Fight the Landlord" with Ashes and Shavi whenever she was free. This game of tactics and technique was somewhat similar to beasts chess, which used to be popular among the upper-class nobility. In both games, the key was to make use of one's advantages and hide one's weaknesses, and deep planning was required. She would often brag about never having lost a game of "Fight the Landlord" to Lady Tilly and, even more so, Ashes, and she was indeed telling the truth. At the moment, she was owed six rolls of ice cream bread, of which four were from Ashes and two were from Shavi. In other words, whenever His Highness arranged this delicacy as dessert, the two of them would have to give their portions to Andrea.

It was going to be a "bumper harvest" for Andrea. She would be able to enjoy three rolls of ice cream bread for dinner, which would be finally enough to satiate her craving.

Naturally, she was also confident about the exam.

As soon as she heard that there would be an exam, she asked Sylvie about the previous test and even attempted the questions on her own. She realized that the test was very simple and was basically equivalent to the basic education for nobility. The test paper was mainly about recognizing words and phrases, and there were also a few simple arithmetic calculations of profit and loss, which were not as difficult as accounting problems, let alone family finance calculations. She was widely known as her family's prodigy in this area, and at the age of 15, she was already able to check her family's account books.

The true way of the nobility was to do everything to one's best.

The test papers were soon distributed.

Andrea took a quick look through the paper and raised her head. The test consisted of three question sheets, which were each labeled separately as "Kingdom Language", "Basic Arithmetic", and "Elementary Nature".

Great, exactly the same as last time.

She grinned uncontrollably as she opened the "Kingdom Language" question sheet and began writing with her goose quill pen immediately.

Within 15 minutes, she completed the questions on the first sheet. Although the range of vocabulary was greater than that of the previous time, and there were a few unexpected segments such as "reading comprehension" and "filling in the blanks", the test remained easy for her. "Well, it's just answering the questions after comprehending the passage and completing the sentences. It only looks confusing, but it's quite simple."

The next sheet was "Basic Arithmetic".

The front segment comprised of simple calculations of profit and loss, but gradually, Andrea's progress slowed down.

"What does 'Use an equation to describe two intersecting lines with a few dots above them.' mean?"

Her heart suddenly clenched. She began to have the feeling she got when she read Natural Science Theoretical Foundation. "Why is it that I can understand the words separately, but not when they're connected?"

This was also the case for the subsequent questions.

Andrea started to sweat profusely.

She took a deep breath and held it in her chest. Then, she turned towards Nightingale, who was seated in the back row. "As a fellow noble, can she give me some hints?"

But Nightingale's facial expression shocked Andrea.

Nightingale was staring dully at her test paper while holding her goose quill pen in her mouth. She did not shift her gaze for a long time.

Are the questions also difficult for her?

Lady Tilly did not attend the exam, while the legendarily gifted Miss Anna was also nowhere to be seen. Andrea saw that most of the witches were still stuck on the first page and unable to answer the questions.

After another 15 minutes, everyone flipped to the second question sheet. Even though they were much slower than Andrea for the first sheet, they did not stop writing even for a brief moment on the second sheet, and even Maggie was writing furiously. "Oh dear, Maggie doesn't even hold the pen properly and looks as though she's clawing the pen in her fist, yet she's able to answer the questions?"

Andrea felt entirely helpless. Pretending that she had completed the "Basic Arithmetic" sheet, she flipped to the final sheet, "Elementary Nature".

Compared to the previous test's straightforward question-and-answer format, there were numbers and incomprehensible symbols this time. "Wait... this requires calculation as well?"

She suddenly began to feel that things were not going according to what she had anticipated.

The only relief was that Ashes had stopped writing a long time ago, apparently because she was equally stumped by the questions.

"But... what the heck," she thought, "what joy is there in beating a meathead?"

Amidst her anxiety, she heard Teacher Scroll announce the end of the exam. Slumping back in her chair, she watched as the teacher took her test paper away, and she felt that her three rolls of ice cream bread for dinner were no longer that sweet.

"Your Highness, here are all of the test papers." Scroll placed a stack of paper on Roland's office table. "Are you sure that you want to mark them yourself?"

"Indeed." Roland smiled. "Sometimes, reading test papers is a form of pleasure."

For example, he could read their bizarre answers, or discover the test takers' anguish and suffering by reading between the lines. These served as spiritual food during his leisure time.

"Shall I collate the scores for you?"

"Yes, sorry to trouble you." Roland nodded, and then he shouted, "Nightingale, no peeping."

"You knew." From the couch, Nightingale revealed her form and smiled. "Why doesn't Anna have to attend the exam? Isn't it the end of the semester? All sisters of the Witch Union should have to take the test."

Roland burst into laughter uncontrollably. "Because this test was formulated by Teacher Scroll and her."

Nightingale kept silent for a long while before she asked, "How about your younger sister?"

"Lady Tilly? She helped review the test paper and took the exam beforehand in order to check for errors." The prince spread his arms. "By the way, she got full marks."

Nightingale's shadow appeared to grow heavier.

Roland shook his head and started to mark the papers.

...

After all of the scores had been collated, Roland stretched his sluggish body. The Sleeping Island witches showed considerable improvement this time. Candle, Evelyn and Sylvie all passed the exam, and among them, it was Evelyn who improved the most. Although she had the lowest score among the trio in the previous exam, she improved from 5 to 62 marks this time, undoubtedly because she had put in a great amount of effort.

Conversely, the three combat witches who had recently arrived attained low scores, none of which went above 50 marks. This was understandable because they had spent a much shorter time in the classroom and their scores for "Kingdom Language" were assigned a relatively low weight.

However, it was Nightingale who fared the most terribly. Although she had attended class with everyone else, her total score was less than her last test's. Roland did not know whether to laugh or cry. "It appears that learning ability is indeed a natural gift that can't be forced."

The only one who surprised him was Maggie.

Although she was not able to solve more than a handful of calculation problems in the "Basic Arithmetic" and "Elementary Nature" sections, she correctly answered most of the multiple-choice and true-or-false questions and ultimately scored 63 marks, which Roland found rather unbelievable.

"How did she manage it?"

Roland could not think of a reason.

Chapter 383: The Bite

Inside the Tower of Babel at Hermes Cathedral.

The newly-crowned Supreme Pontiff, Mayne, was quietly listening to the reports of the three Bishops in the secret room.

Aside from the elder Bishop Tayfun, the other two were newly-promoted Archbishops, Soli Darl and Ell, who came from the Verdict Army and Tribunal respectively. The former had been a gallant and heroic Presiding Judge who had gained a stellar reputation over the course of more than 25 years of service in the army, and the latter had been Heather's adjutant and was also widely respected.

"The intake of orphans from the Kingdom of Everwinter has been very successful during this year's Months of Demons. The nobles of every major city have fully yielded to the church. At present, the number of orphans sent to the Holy City is already three times more than the planned," Tayfun said with a sigh. "This is the only piece of good news recently."

The nobles were always like this—as soon as they saw that the situation was not advantageous to them, they would change sides faster than they drank water. Mayne nodded and replied, "This is only the first year, and there will be more and more in the future. If we're able to take over the whole continent, our yearly intake could fill up an entirely new city."

"I hope so." Tayfun sighed deeply. "How many times has this place been attacked by demonic beasts since the heavy snow began to fall?"

"Six times," Soli replied.

"Six times... and hundreds of Verdict Warriors have already died on the frontline," Tayfun said in a heavy tone. "The God's Punishment Army has also lost ten of its personnel, and the demonic beasts' offensive will only become fiercer next year."

"This is easier than fighting the demons," Ell said and gestured with his hands. "Although I haven't personally witnessed the might of the demons, the Holy Book describes them as invincible. Is it really necessary to defend this place to the death?"

"What on earth do you mean?!" Soli frowned upon hearing Ell's words. "God gives us our direction and strength. As his disciples, how can we not stick to our faith and run away instead?"

"Stop quarreling," Mayne said, thumping his scepter on the ground. "After working with Heather for more than ten years, Ell has been affected by her loose-lipped temperament." As he watched Soli and Ell bicker, he could not help thinking about the partnership between Tayfun and Heather in the old times. He glanced at the old Bishop, only to discover that the latter was glancing back at him, as if they were thinking about the same thing. "Our ultimate goal is to sustain the human race, and the only way to do so is to defeat our enemies."

"Understood, Your Holiness." The two Bishops bowed their heads in respect.

Although, even he himself was not sure if they could defeat the demons by maintaining their position and defending Hermes.

Mayne suddenly thought about O'Brien's entrustment and felt his shoulders grow heavy.

The Fearful Beasts of Hell had already appeared, and the demons would arrive in five years. Mayne would get to witness the next Battle of Divine Will while he was alive, but unlike O'Brien, he would not

be able to entrust his duties to a successor. He could neither sleep nor eat well whenever he thought about this.

In truth, he had also thought about leaving a way out for himself. When Garcia's Blacksail Fleet was captured, Mayne did not order the ships to be burned nor execute all of the rebels, but instead locked them behind bars. Apart from executing a few of the fleet leaders together with a large number of scapegoats who were actually commoners living in the slums, most of the fleet crew were kept alive and were presently locked up in the harbor of the Kingdom of Everwinter by Mayne's most trusted subordinates.

If the defensive line is completely broken, the Fjords will become the final refuge—even though retreating to those islands will mean that Mankind is near extinction and has no chance of redemption, at least I'll be able to live out the rest of my life.

After all, hasn't Mankind already done everything it could and not been able to defeat its enemies in two attempts?"

In the subsequent discussions regarding how the church should expand and how to stabilize the governance of the Kingdom of Wolfheart, Mayne did not pay much attention. He waited until the three bishops finished discussing before saying absent-mindedly, "We'll do as you three have said. That'll be it for today's meeting."

"Yes, Your Holiness." The three bishops hurriedly stood up and bowed.

Mayne left the secret room and made his way towards the Pivotal Secret Area together with his guards.

According to the plan, a new batch of Verdict Army soldiers were to be converted to members of the God's Punishment Army today. This was what he was truly concerned about. Whether it was standing their ground or retreating, these powerful warriors were guaranteed to follow his orders.

However, before this, he had to handle another problem.

He passed through the stone steps and entered the Pivotal Secret Area. Then, he turned into the long prison corridor that was situated in the middle of the area. The last time he was here, it was to secretly execute the King of Graycastle, Wimbledon III.

The long corridor was extremely deserted. The rosin torches that were placed on both sides of the corridor emitted a dim yellow light. The far end of the corridor was covered in darkness as if it was the entrance to a bottomless abyss. Many people who had been imprisoned here never saw sunlight ever again.

Mayne walked towards cell No. 85 and signaled to his guards to open the door.

The thick wooden door gave out a harsh grinding sound. Then, fits of wailing and crying were suddenly heard. When the cell door was closed again, these fits were shut out on the outside.

Through the iron railings, Mayne saw Zero's figure.

The Pure Witch's back was facing the entrance. Her upper body was bare, while she was handcuffed to an iron bar overhead that forced her to tiptoe at all times. A dozen fresh lash marks were visible on her white-skinned back, but the streams of blood that flowed downwards had already solidified.

"How does the tribunal's Sermon Whip feel?" Mayne asked. "I hope that this teaches you the meaning of obedience."

"Uh..." Zero groaned softly as if she had just awakened from a dream and turned her head meekly. "So the Supreme Pontiff has come. Do you mean obedience towards you, or towards other bishops?"

Her frivolous tone made Mayne frown. However, his displeasure diminished when he reminded himself that he was currently the Supreme Pontiff, which was very different from his previous position as a bishop. "After this lesson, she should understand that I can decide whether she lives or dies."

"Obedience towards me. And when I ask you to assist another bishop to complete a mission, you have to obey his orders."

"Is that all?" She asked noncommittally. "If this is what you demand, I'll agree to it."

"Release her handcuffs," Mayne ordered a guard.

Having been handcuffed up high for a long time, Zero's hands seemed to be dislocated, and they dropped down as though they did not have an ounce of energy left. The Pope picked up Zero's clothes using his scepter and tossed them on her shoulder. "I have a task for you. Follow me."

Zero allowed her clothes to dangle on her shoulder and nonchalantly followed Mayne out of the long prison corridor.

"This year's Months of Demons could be as long as five months. This is a daunting challenge for the Holy City, and even more so for other places that are affected by the Months of Demons." Mayne walked to the border of the Trap Area, and then passed through a narrow iron-walled passageway and arrived in front of the elevator cage once again. Ever since he was crowned as the Pope, he had been busy with the various matters of the church. This was the first time he stepped foot in this place as the ruler. "I order you to follow the other Pure Witches to the Kingdom of Graycastle and kill the rebels Timothy and Roland Wimbledon by taking advantage of the disorder brought about by the heavy snow. Is that understood?"

As the door of the elevator cage closed, the clicking sound of the capstan rotation was heard overhead and the elevator began to descend slowly. But Mayne didn't hear Zero's reply.

"Damn, the whipping hasn't taught her to obey." With a sullen face, Mayne turned to look at Zero, only to see her smiling with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

Then, he saw a beam of bright light heading straight at him.

Chapter 384: Sin and Redemption

After the darkness disappeared, Mayne found himself standing in an empty square.

Everything in front of him seemed vaguely familiar... short houses, a monastery still in construction, and a new stone church. The dirt floor was dry and firm without a trace of snow, the sun was peeking through the clouds, and a warm breeze kissed his cheek. It didn't feel like the Months of the Demons at all.

"Wait." He suddenly realized. "Was this the old Holy City where I first became a believer? At that moment, His Holiness O'Brien was hosting a cleansing ritual on the square."

"So this is the most prominent place in your memories," said Zero coldly from behind him. "It's a pretty nice place."

The Pure Witch!

His fragmented memories suddenly came together, and he felt a fit of rage come over him. He turned around and glared straight at her. "Zero, are you insane?!"

How dare she use her powers against me!

Also, why doesn't the God's Stone of Retaliation that I wear have any effect?

"I know exactly what I'm doing." Zero smiled. "It's you... who is still confused. It's alright. There's more than enough time in your subconscious world for me to explain this to you."

Mayne was familiar with Zero's power of the Soul Battlefield, which allowed her to battle the possessed victim using only her mind, and the victor would gain everything, while the defeated would lose it all. This was an extremely rare type of summoning power and could only be resisted by God's Stone of Retaliation. "But... damn it! I'm clearly wearing a God's Stone of Retaliation!"

He reached into his pocket and took out the blue crystal, the silhouette of which reflected a cerulean light under the sun, showing no defects.

"Why?" Mayne asked, gnashing his teeth.

"Are you talking about the Stone?" Zero smiled. "Basically, its sphere of influence has been removed. Of course, a mortal won't be able to feel the difference."

"Its influence has been removed?" The Pope couldn't help but stare. "There's only one person in the entire Holy City who can counter the effects of God's Stone of Retaliation, and that's the Pure Witch Isabella."

This is... blatant betrayal!

"These b*tches!" A vein throbbed on Mayne's forehead, and his hands shook with anger. "If I knew how unreliable these tools were, I would have added them to the God's Punishment Army when I was appointed!" He tried to control his temper and said bitterly, "When did this happen?"

"How could I know when she struck, since you put me in a cell to teach me a lesson?" Zero shrugged. "I only asked her to do it and that's all."

"You asked! If you hadn't been planning this for a long time, how could she do such a blasphemous thing so easily?" "No." His heartbeat suddenly stopped. "Even the two of them wouldn't be able to pull this off..." After he became the Pope, he moved into the bedroom that used to belong to His Holiness O'Brien, which had all kinds of booby traps and Verdict Warriors standing guard at all times. Not to mention there were Advanced Magic Stones by his bed, which he carried with him every day, and guards followed him everywhere. How did they manage to find an opportunity to strike?

Mayne was so angry that he actually grew eerily calm. "What do you want? Are you doing this just to get back at me for my punishment? Even if you kill me, the entire cave below your cage is the influence area of God's Stones, so you have nowhere to run. As soon as the elevator stops, you'll be spotted and captured by the waiting Verdict Warriors. Don't even dream of escaping this cell, because when they start interrogating you, you'll feel like the days of whipping is just tickles to you."

"I don't want to escape." Zero shook her head. "I want to replace you and become the Pope."

"..." Mayne was stunned. He had predicted all kinds of reasons, but he never expected to hear this answer. "A Pure Witch as the Pope? You have quite an imagination, since I'm the one who was crowned as the Pope in front of all our believers! If you kill me, do you think they would accept you?"

"I don't need to appear in front of everyone because I can just have a 'mouthpiece' to act as the Pope," said Zero unconcernedly. "See, His Holiness O'Brien also stayed in the Pivotal Secret Temple most of the time and would wear a mask on the rare occasions he came out. Under these circumstances, who could tell that the Pope was actually someone else?"

"You won't be able to keep up your ruse for long! Didn't you hear what I just said? As soon as your cage hits the ground, when the Verdict Warriors realize I'm not here, they'll immediately arrest you!" Mayne roared. "If you let me out right now, I can still forget that you ever did such a reckless thing!"

"As soon as the Battle of Souls begins, it won't ever end," said Zero with a smile. "Also, you were wrong from the beginning, because they won't arrest me."

"Won't arrest her... What does that mean?" The Pope stared at the Pure Witch's eyes with a frown and tried to see what she was thinking, but her eyes only shined with excitement and didn't reveal a trace of fear or panic. She didn't avert her eyes and instead stared calmly at him, as if she was saying a completely normal thing.

Mayne suddenly felt a bolt of electricity flash through his mind!

"Even giving up... may also be a wise choice."

"I'm sorry, child."

He opened his mouth, but he felt that his throat was choked by a pair of large hands and couldn't make a sound. He felt his heart sink, as if it fell into a pool of icy water. After a long time, he said with great difficulty: "Is this all O'Brien..."

"So you finally understand." Zero arched her eyebrows. "The Supreme Pontiff has given orders to all the guards and Verdict Warriors in the Pivotal Secret Temple—they'll never leave their position below ground and will only listen to the Pope. You accepted the scepter above ground, but you don't have the control of the Pivotal Secret Temple yet." She chuckled quietly. "Think about it. We're currently above the cave and the core organization of the church, as well as the only place free from the guards above ground and from the influence of God's Stone of Retaliation. Don't you agree that this is the perfect arena?"

The Pure Witch stopped smiling, and her eyes flashed like dancing flames. "This is the battlefield His Holiness arranged for us, so whoever survives will become the true ruler of the church."

"How... how could this be?" Mayne felt his throat dry up. "This stupid old man. Is he doing this to repent for his sins of taking the power that belonged originally to witches? How absurd!"

The flames in Zero's eyes were clearly from ambition, an emotion that was rarely seen in Pure Witches—they were trained as tools since birth and were all supposed to be unwaveringly loyal to church officials. "If we hadn't conquered those reckless... No, shoot!" Mayne suddenly remembered what His Holiness said to him before invading the Kingdom of Wolfheart.

"I'm sending two Pure Witches to fight alongside you. No one can escape their wrath."

Why didn't he ever consider how acquiring the memories of the King of Wolfheart and the Queen of Clearwater would affect Zero?

As he recalled O'Brien's relieved expression in his last hour, he finally understood the meaning behind his dying words. Mayne gritted his teeth furiously. "How did the old man not consider this issue? He had already been preparing for the ambition to return to the Pure Witch's heart."

Is this the ending you hoped to see, Supreme Pontiff?!

Chapter 385: Cause and Effect

"Don't be so upset, Lord Mayne." Zero held her hands behind her back and slowly circled the square. "The church was originally founded by the Union anyway, so His Holiness only did this so that the witches could get back what was theirs. If you win, you can also get my memories and experiences—wealth I accumulated over the past 200 years."

"I see. Letting Zero use the Reflection Church was already strange because even if she were the Pope's favorite, she was still a Pure Witch and shouldn't have been given access to the church's deepest secrets. Unfortunately, I didn't realize this soon enough." Mayne was silent for a while before saying, "If you win, where do you plan to lead the church to?"

"To victory," she said, raising her head, "or destruction... just not towards the Fjord Islands."

"W... what?"

"You think no one knows about your secret orders?" Zero's tone contained a trace of mockery. "Right before a great battle, you sent resources to the port of Kingdom of Everwinter to repair ships and support sailors. Plus, you sent a large number of scapegoats to the gallows. These are all costly expenses, practically impossible to hide from the church."

"Shoot, O'Brien even entrusted her with the Pivotal Secret Area's intelligence agency." He thought silently. "That doesn't prove anything! As the Pope, I need to think in the long-term to ensure that the church survives under any circumstances."

"Do you even believe your own words?" Zero laughed. "Right after you accepted the scepter in front of all those believers, you started thinking about your own future, and you lost your will to win the Battle of Divine Will before it even began—do you think a mortal like you can earn the approval of God?"

"What approval of God?" Mayne couldn't help but scream. "If his approval was really protecting us, why were the humans suffering defeat after defeat?" He panted heavily and rasped. "Meanwhile, we need to rely on God's Punishment Army to battle the demons, so time is of the essence, and there's nothing you can do to change that."

"No, not just God's Punishment Army," whispered Zero. "The fate of mankind shouldn't rest in the hands of a few people."

"Are we supposed to count on you witches?" Mayne chuckled coldly. "Don't forget that it was your kind who failed us 400 years ago!"

"The witches are also only a small group." She stopped walking and stared directly at the Pope, her eyes chilling him to the core. "This battle will decide the survival of all of the mankind, so everyone needs to be involved—men, women, the elderly and children will all become honored warriors and join the fight against the demons, or else... they'll all die."

"That's absurd. You plan to send those civilians who are scared senseless by demonic beasts against actual demons? You must be out of your mind..." Mayne suddenly stopped, as he realized she wasn't joking and was seriously sharing her plans with him. "The only way to give civilians the ability to fight was..."

"You want to feed all of them Pills of Madness?" He asked in disbelief.

"One enchanted person is no match for a God's Punishment Warrior, but what about ten?" Zero turned her head and asked. "Not only is there currently a steady supply of demonic beasts running rampant, but the Pivotal Secret Area might also be able to invent a few new formulas. Five years later, the church will have a supply of around three to four million pills. What does this mean?" She paused. "It means that besides God's Punishment Army, the Holy City can also send out an army of millions of maddened men to participate in the battle against demons."

"You're... insane!"

"Insane? You're the insane one for not taking the Battle of Doomsday seriously!" The Pure Witch suddenly roared. "Both the Union and the church used small groups to fight against their enemy's full force, which is why they failed. No one is exempt from this battle, and mortals can't hide behind God's Punishment Army or witches forever—as I said, this is a fateful battle that requires everyone's full efforts, otherwise we won't be able to contend with the demons in the Barbarian Land!"

A Pure Witch raised by the church would never say such a thing because this was the mentality of a conqueror. Mayne's face grew pale. "You are... an absolute mutt!"

Your Holiness O'Brien, did you really foresee all of this?

"Accepting knowledge is a part of the process of self-change, and only the exchange of thoughts can bring progress." Zero inhaled sharply. "Perhaps we should stop chatting and decide who the ruler of the church should be."

"Don't bet on winning," said the Pope through gritted teeth. "I built this world!"

As soon as he finished speaking, Red Mist appeared at his feet and began to spread. Zero seemed slightly taken aback. Suddenly, she grasped her throat and screamed a tortured cry, her face curling up like orange peels, falling off in chunks, and spewing blood everywhere, soon losing its human form.

"This is the demonic mist hidden in the Pivotal Area's traps and only affects witches with magic power," said Mayne bitterly through the Red Mist. "If I fill the entire square with it, you'll be left to suffer endlessly and die a thousand times!"

"Is that so?" A gust of wind suddenly cleared all the Red Mist around the Pure Witch, and the reborn Zero said painfully, "Of course, the new Pope has some tricks up his sleeve. If you headed straight to the library of the Pivotal Secret Temple in the beginning, this battle would be even more difficult—but this is also the fun part of the Battle of Souls.

"Is that... a Stone of Windpower?" Mayne noticed a ring with a green crystal on her finger. "The stone's area of influence is limited, so as long as I keep my distance, I can break this shield with a God's Stone of Retaliation bolt. But just to be safe, I should make some preparations." He racked his brain, created two Pills of Madness, and swallowed them.

"Oh, smart idea," said Zero with a grin. "Your biggest weakness is in your fighting ability, so the duo-colored pill can increase your strength, agility, and pain tolerance, so it's much harder for me to attack you from afar with weapons such as crossbow bolts."

Mayne ignored her, moved to an area unaffected by the Magic Stone, and focused on creating a God's Stone of Retaliation. The Pills of Madness were kicking in, and he felt his strength increase rapidly and sight become very clear. When he created the God's Stone of Retaliation, it would make the most effective weapon against the witch, and she would die of erosion by the Red Mist if she tried to attack him.

She's also making her own weapon—what is it? A pair of long swords?

It makes sense to have bolts, but what does she need swords for?" Also, the structure of the swords is very strange, with a blade as broad as her torso and encrusted with many crystals, seeming strangely familiar.

Zero raised the weapons in her hands. "Do you know? In the Illusion Room of the Reflection Church, there is more than one recorded image."

What does that mean?

"Did you forget what His Holiness O'Brien said? Alice's battle with Natalia was completely recorded by the Union," she said carefully. "Besides absorbing memories, watching and learning are also talents of mine."

As she said this, the crystals on the swords lit up one by one, as if they were signaling something. And then a bright golden light emerged from the swords and ripped through the Red Mist, shooting straight into the sky. The sky also seemed to respond to this power by shooting down thousands of bolts of light.

"What... kind of ability is this?" Mayne stared in shock.

Before getting the answer, he was surrounded by an engulfing golden light, which seemed to tear the entire world apart.

The cage fell slowly to the bottom of the God's Stone cave.

Zero threw the clothes on her shoulder onto the ground and walked out of the cage. The scars from whippings had all disappeared from her back, as if they had never been there.

The Verdict Warrior standing guard lowered his head respectfully and handed her a prepared golden robe—the clothing signaling the highest authority in the Church.

With the help of many attendants, Zero put on the baggy robe and walked straight to the Pivotal Secret Temple, not sparing even a single glance ba.

Chapter 386: A Different Story

After a busy week, Roland built a new chemical factory next to the Redwater River. Considering the toxicity of nitrogen oxide, this factory was built like the Convenience Market, with a gaping wall and wooden roof, a one-story tall gap in the middle, and awful ventilation. Of course, the temperature inside was pretty much the same with that outside.

The new oxygen and nitrogen synthesizing system was already in use. The heat produced instantaneously by the Blackfire was the same as an electric arc and was much more efficient. After the raw materials were placed into the reactor, Anna only needed 8 minutes to turn them into nitrogen dioxide, which produced nitric acid when combined with water.

The system that synthesized ammonia from nitrogen and hydrogen was also in full swing—the amount of liquid nitrogen resolved from cooling was much larger than the amount of liquid oxygen, so the leftover nitrogen was used to produce ammonia. Roland also did not cease the regular industrial production of nitric acid so that he could cover all his bases. Every new production line for nitric acid was an opportunity for more chemical explosives.

According to the test on Paper's abilities, he found that she truly could speed up a heated nitrogen and hydrogen reaction to the extent that it seemed like the results were instantaneous. The problem remained that she still could not control the release of her magic power, and her young age made her consume the little power she had very quickly.

However, this could be fixed through practice. According to Wendy, the girl was improving quickly, and she would be able to maintain her power at a basically stable level in about a week.

With these two production lines and a stable glycerol nitrification output, achieving modern smokeless powder became possible. The next step was to design a repeating firearm and begin producing it as soon as possible.

Roland was just thinking about his design for the new weapon when a guard walked into his office and reported, "Sir Ferlin Eltek and his father Duke Eltek are here to see you and are waiting in the lobby."

"Ferlin?" He pondered for a while. "Wasn't he the first knight of the Western Region, Kingdom of Dawn? All his family should be at Longsong Stronghold. Why is he suddenly in Border Town?" Did they mention why they were here?"

"Sir Ferlin said it had something to do with witches and told me to give this to you." The guard handed him a piece of delicate parchment depicting the treasure map previously drawn by Morning Light, but compared with the previous rough draft, this map almost seemed to be printed.

Roland suddenly remembered that Ferlin once said this map had been passed down in his family for 400 years, and that Lightning used it to find the stone tower where Agatha was being held.

He was suddenly very interested. "Go summon Agatha; she should still be in the chemical lab right now. I'll go and see them right away."

"Yes, Your Highness."

After the guard left, Roland rolled up the map and went to the lobby.

Ferlin and an old man immediately stood up and bowed in respect.

The prince noticed that both men were wearing thick leather jackets with sweat stains on their shoulders, and the old man's forehead was already brimming with sweat. He smiled and said, "If it's too hot, you can take off your coats. There's heating in the castle, so it's much warmer in here than it's outside. Don't make yourself sick."

"Heating?" Ferlin was stunned.

"It's a new type of heating equipment that's much better than a fireplace." Roland didn't waste time on explaining and instead directed the subject to his visitors' intentions. "I heard you came because of the witches?"

"Yes, Your Highness," said Morning Light, nodding furiously. "I met a woman with blue hair at the Convenience Market..." He briefly summarized his experience during the past few days. "When I returned home, my father told me about my family's history, and I thought that she might be a witch."

"I see." Roland was shocked to hear his story. He didn't think that Agatha's family had any mortals who survived till now. "There's such a witch at Border Town, and her name is Agatha indeed."

Duke Eltek bolted out of his chair in excitement. "Then could Your Highness..."

"Let you meet her?" Roland nodded with a smile. "Of course, she should be on her way to the castle right now. Also, considering that she's a witch, I think you should do her the courtesy of taking off that God's Stone of Retaliation you're wearing."

"Ah, you're right." The Duke hastily removed the stone from his shirt and placed it on the table.

"There was no such courtesy in Taquila 400 years ago, and witches weren't hunted like animals by the church yet," Nightingale whispered in his ear. "This stone is nothing but research material for Agatha."

"This way, you can determine whether they're telling the truth or not," Roland said, hiding his smile.

He felt Nightingale lightly pinch his neck.

"Liar."

...

"Why do you summon me back?" Agatha pushed through the lobby door and demanded. "The Battle of Divine Will is looming and I need all the time I have to produce weapons to fight... in battle." She fought down the word "demons" when she noticed the strangers. "If it isn't important, you can just send someone to tell me."

After working with the Chief Alchemist for a long time, she started to sound a little like Kyle Sichi, and her tireless attitude in serving Border Town's production industries made the town leader Roland feel a little guilty. He cleared his throat, "Ahem, this is a very important matter. Do you remember, when Taquila was on the verge of collapse 400 years ago, that one group of servants was separated from you and followed the masses to the south of the Impassable Mountain Range?"

"I think so." Agatha took off her hat, which was covered in snow, and tossed her blue hair. "What kind of important matter is this? It happened a long time ago."

When she showed her full appearance, Ferlin and the Duke gasped, and the Duke immediately kneeled in front of her. "You really are Lady Agatha!"

"And you are...?" Agatha frowned.

"I'm a descendant of Kagar. Do you still remember that name?" The Duke asked, looking up expectantly.

"Kagar... of course. I gave him that name." She shrugged her shoulders. "I purchased two mortal servants and named one Kaff, who was the head of my family guards, and the other Kagar, who was my housekeeper." She paused slightly. "So you're the descendants of that housekeeper who snuck away with my Magic Stones and experiment notes?"

"Snuck... away?" The Duke stared in shock. "No, he..."

"Get out." Agatha's face darkened. "I don't ever want to see you again."

Chapter 387: Inheritance

The witch left the hall as soon as she was finished talking and gave the two men no time to explain.

Roland turned his head slightly. "Can you tell what's going on?"

"Both sides are telling the truth," Nightingale whispered in his ear.

Roland pondered this for a bit and quickly guessed what had really happened. What was spoken truthfully wasn't necessarily the truth, but only what one thought was true. It seemed that the issue lay in their family history book.

"Since you came all this way from Longsong Stronghold, don't go back so soon. Stay in Ferlin's house for a couple of days and tour the scenery of this town." Roland turned to the confused Duke. "I'll try to reason with her, and maybe you will get to talk again."

"Is that... is that true?" The Duke was shocked, but he bowed his head and said, "Then I must trouble Your Highness."

"By the way, where are the Magic Stones and ancient books that you brought?"

"There're more than ten boxes on our boat."

"Great, let's bring them all to the castle," Roland said, nodding. "I think she'll soften up a little after seeing all of her things that survived for over 400 years."

...

After dinner, the Prince called Elsa to his office.

"You should give Duke Eltek a chance to explain himself." He told her the Duke's entire story. "No matter what your housekeeper did, this man is trying to return your belongings to you, and he may even be trying to right his ancestor's wrongs."

"My housekeeper deceived his descendants, so this man doesn't owe me anything." Elsa pouted. "Also, witch families mean nothing now. They belong to the nobility of the Western Region, right? If I accept them, it would make things difficult for you, because you want to seize all the ruling authority of the Western Region for yourself, don't you?"

Roland was shocked that she even considered this issue, and he shook his head with a smile. "Alright, that makes sense. But you don't seem to blame them."

"I shouldn't place my anger towards a mortal from 400 years ago onto his descendants, especially if they don't know what happened."

"Spoken like a true enlightened member of the witches' kingdom!" Roland thought. "Whether it is towards mortals or accepting new things, she always has a positive outlook. To me, this is no doubt an outstanding mindset, but it was probably a rare one in Taquila, so it's no surprise that she was rejected by other witches in the Quest Society."

"In that case, I'll explain it to them," he said, smiling. "Do you have any interest in going through your belongings?"

Elsa rolled her eyes and scoffed, "They're not mine. They're the Quest Society's belongings."

...

All the boxes were brought to the castle basement. Beside Elsa, Roland also invited Tilly, Silvio, and Anna.

The boxes were opened one by one under Silvio's watch—ten out of the fifteen boxes contained Magic Stones. Roland picked up a fist-sized crystal and clicked his tongue. "You said that they were all transformed from God's Stone of Retaliation, so a stone this big must be worth 200 or 300 gold royals."

"200 or 300 gold royals?" Elsa said, unimpressed, "Magic Stones can only be produced by Chaos Beasts, so every piece is practically priceless."

"What kind of Magic Stones are these?" Tilly asked. "They don't seem easy to carry."

"Stones of Light." Elsa pressed on the stone in the Prince's hand and channeled her magic power into it, causing a pale yellow light to stream out of it, which quickly exceeded the light of a torch. When the blinding light became too much to bear, she finally lifted her hand. "More than half of these are Stones of Light. Besides the ones produced by the Chaos Beasts, the rest were all battle spoils we gained from attacking Devil's Towns."

"How were the Magic Stones made into different sizes?" Anna asked curiously. "If they were all God's Stones of Retaliation, then they couldn't be cut with magic power, but the block of God's Stone of Retaliation was extremely hard and couldn't possibly be cut with knives either."

"An entire block?" Elsa was stunned. "Are you talking about the God's Stone of Retaliation vein?"

"It's right under Border Town's mines." Roland explained the story of the treasure map. "Its surface is very hard, and even a flintlock can only leave a tiny dent in it."

"I see." She couldn't help but smile. "You used this map to find my laboratory tower. Yes, it really was used by the Quest Society to mark the God's Stone of Retaliation vein and was a chosen location for the next Holy City."

"Holy City?" Everyone asked surprisedly in unison.

"Why else do you think there would be hundreds of cities on the Fertile Plains, but only three Holy Cities?" She lifted the corners of her mouth. "These supposed Holy Cities are all built on top of God's Stone of Retaliation veins. We needed a lot of God's Stones of Retaliation to research the relationship between magic power and Magic Stones, and also to prevent large-scale damage in conflicts between witches.

"So you were planning to build a New Holy City on North Slope Mountain?" Roland asked in surprise.

"Yes, if we weren't defeated so quickly in the Battle of Divine Will." Elsa sighed. "It was the same case with the Barbarian Ridge in the Impassable Mountain Range—you now refer to it as the Hermes plateau, which is where the church's Holy City is now."

"The church also continued using the term 'Holy City'," Tilly said with a frown, "so it is even more possible that they are descendants of the Union."

Thank goodness they didn't build the church's Holy City in Western Region. Roland sighed quietly in relief.

"Anyway, the God's Stone of Retaliation is basically indestructible, so cutting it requires a special solution," Elsa continued to explain. "It contains the blood of witches with magic power... or the blood of demons."

"Blood?" Sylvie couldn't help but gape.

"Yes, and the amount of blood needed depends on the Stone," she said, spreading her hands. "In the Holy City, all adult witches were required to donate blood. Once it leaves the body, the blood lost magic power very quickly, so it must be used on the spot. Every two or three years, eligible witches would be ordered by the Union to go to the mines and donate blood, and any captured demons would also serve this purpose."

"Have you done this as well?" Anna asked.

"Of course," Elsa said, nodding. "Even the Three Chiefs of the Union were no exception."

"What about demonic beasts?" Sylvie asked. "Some demonic hybrids also seem to have magic power."

"Yes, but the levels of their magic power are very low, so their blood can only be used to deal with shattered stones, and they have no effect on the actual veins," Elsa replied. "After the God's Stone of Retaliation is cut, its hardness will greatly decrease with its size, and its range of impact will shrink as well. For example, the God's Stone of Retaliation that people carry around with them can be easily smashed with a hammer."

Chapter 388: The Sigil of God's Will

These words confirmed Roland's guess, which was that the God's Stone of Retaliation did not affect magic power, but witches' abilities.

"Besides the Chaos Beast, did the Quest Society find any other ways to produce Magic Stones?"

Agatha shook her head. "It's easier said than done. The Union once had a witch who could turn God's Stones of Retaliation into regular stones, but all she did was to remove the magic power—it wasn't nearly enough to even produce the simplest Stones of Light." She turned to Sylvie. "You can see the form of magic power, so you should also be able to see the real forms of these crystals."

"It's a ball of faint... fog," Sylvie said with an unsure tone.

"This is one of the ways magic power gathers." Agatha nodded. "The Quest Society examined and recorded almost 10,000 witches and Magic Stones, and they found that most unevolved magic power came in the form of fog, cyclones, blown sand, light balls and flames. They might look similar, but each had an infinite amount of minute differences, which was why we believed there were no two identical magic powers. As for magic powers that were condensed after the High Awakening, their shapes differed even more."

"Its light is dimming," Tilly suddenly pointed to the Stone of Light in Roland's hand and said.

"That's because I only channeled a small amount of magic power," Agatha explained.

"But I once saw a Stone of Light in the Fjord ruins that never dimmed," she said confusedly. "If those underwater ruins belonged to you, then can you also make a Stone of Light shine for 400 years?"

"Underwater ruins?" Agatha was shocked. "Did some Union members go to the Swirling Sea?" She shook her head and dismissed this thought. "It's possible to make a Stone of Light shine forever, but it requires more than 10 witches."

"More than 10..." Anna mumbled. "Is it transferring magic power?"

"Yes. Some witches can refill others' magic power or directly exchange the magic power collected from two people. This way, a witch can channel much more power than the amount she has in her own body and cause a Magic Stone to act continuously." Agatha returned the Stone of Light to its original

brightness. "However, this method doesn't work on every kind of Magic Stone. Usually, only the Stones of Mist with the simplest form of magic power can be used this way, such as Stones of Light or Echo Stones, which aren't much help in battle."

"But they would be very useful in the castle," Roland said excitedly, staring at the box of Stones of Light.

In a time before the Electrical Age, these things would be perfect lighting, and he was sick of weak and flickering candlelight. Candles were alright in the winter, but working in the office in the summer was absolute torture, not to mention it's horrible for his eyesight. Now, these magic stones could brighten the entire castle, even at night.

"They would?" Agatha asked disapprovingly. "I think they would be more useful in the laboratories, especially if we want to keep producing liquid oxygen at night, because open flames are too dangerous."

"Um... Is she asking to work overtime in addition to the eight hours during the day?" Roland tilted his head. "Ahem, let's take a look at the Magic Stones in the other boxes first."

A quick check showed that besides Stones of Light of various shapes and brightness, there were also some random Stones. According to the Ice Witch, although these were all priceless goods, they were still of the lowest tier of Magic Stones. For example, there were Stones of Vigilance that sent out signals and Stones of Pathfinding that located things. "I wasn't in charge of everything in the Holy City's stone tower, and I was basically estranged from the Quest Society at the time, so all the goods I transported were unimportant."

"What about these books?" Roland pointed to the black books in the other boxes. "Are these all lab records?"

"Some of these are the General Principles." Agatha blushed. "I wanted to save a copy as a promotion guide to the new witches who had to reclaim wastelands."

Why was this embarrassing? Roland glanced at her curiously and continued to sift through the remaining boxes.

"This wooden box... is a little strange." Sylvie's words caused his hands to tremble and recoil immediately.

"Is there a booby trap?"

"No... there's an interlayer," she said, examining the box. "It's at the very bottom. I didn't notice it at first because I thought it was only a regular partition."

Roland took out all the books from the box, exposing the thick bottom. Anna carefully cut open the wooden plank and retrieved a cast iron box.

"What's it?" Roland curiously opened the lid and saw a thick metal plate encrusted with four colorful crystals. Its design revealed that it was obviously very unique. "Perhaps the Quest Society did leave you with some valuable objects after all."

Agatha gasped. "This... can't be possible!"

Her dramatic reaction confused the other four people, and Roland immediately put the metal plate back into the box. "What's wrong?"

"This is the Sigil of God's Will!" the Ice Witch said in disbelief. "How did Kagar manage to get his hands on this?" She rechecked the box a couple of times. "Did he steal it from the other witches in the Quest Society?"

"Maybe his fleet was attacked and someone entrusted him with it," Roland guess randomly. "It's been 400 years, and it doesn't matter who the box belonged to... What on earth is the Sigil of God's Will?"

"Some Magic Stones, when pieced together, can have extra abilities, alter their magic powers' properties, or increase their effects—this was the most important topic of research for the Quest Society." Agatha carefully scooped up the silver plate. "Magic Stones that are pieced together are called Sigils, and the Sigil of God's Will is the most powerful kind. Its Magic Stones all come from Senior Demons, and there are only three or four of its kind in all of Taquila."

Roland couldn't help but whistle in awe. "How powerful is it?"

"It can wipe out your entire castle."

The prince choked in shock.

"Don't worry, it also requires an alarming amount of magic power—the more Magic Stones are on the Sigil, the harder it is to activate." Agatha closed her eyes, and two of the Magic Stones on the metal plate began to glow, while the third remained dull. After a while, she seemed to be exhausted and let go of the plate, panting. "The only witches who could use the Sigil of God's Will were the Union's two Chiefs."

"You mean... Transcendents?"

Agatha nodded.

Roland thought for a while and said, "Let Anna have a try."

"That's useless," Agatha said, shaking her head. "Extraordinaries use their magic power differently from ordinary witches, basically practicing all the time. Once they evolve, the amount of magic power in their bodies will greatly surpass... What?!"

Everyone saw that as soon as Anna touched the Sigil, the four Magic Stones immediately began lighting up one by one, and the edges of the metal plate began streaming with a gold light that looked like lightning. The gold light became more and more intense, and the Sigil shone like the rising sun!

"Let go of it right now!" Agatha screamed.

The light immediately vanished as if it had never even appeared. Anna let out a gasp and gently placed the Sigil back into the iron box. "It does use up a lot of magic power, so I can probably only use it twice."

The basement was dead silent.

Chapter 389: Entrust

"Duke... Eltek, dinner is ready."

Irene opened the room door and bowed rigidly. Her voice sounded more restrained than usual. This was the first time Ferlin had seen his wife behaving in such a manner. Even when she met the prince, she was not as nervous as this.

"Father?" He raised his voice and glanced at the knight who had not spoken a word since he returned.

"Ugh..." Duke Eltek blinked his eyes as if he had just woken up from a period of meditation. "Come and eat."

The dishes placed on the small dining table were especially sumptuous. To Ferlin, it was apparent that his wife had made a trip to the Convenience Market. He looked at her and smiled, as if to praise and encourage her. He started the dinner by slicing the bread as usual and then proceeded to divide the main course into four equal portions—apart from the three of them, there was also Irene's friend, May.

Earlier, when he came home, he saw May discussing the content of a drama with Irene. After he introduced his father to the two of them, he expected that May would choose to leave, as most people would do. However, she did not, and instead, after making a simple bow towards Duke Eltek while revealing a frown on her face, she remained beside Irene. Even more uncommonly, she proposed that she should stay for dinner.

Ferlin was boggled by all of this. In the past, when he wanted to thank her properly, he invited her several times to attend a banquet, but she never agreed even once.

However, Morning Light had no time to think about all of this. Although on the surface he appeared calm and collected, his heart was in an utter mess. The first reason was that he was worried about what his father thought about his wife, and the second Agatha's attitude. From the look of disappointment on his father's face, it was evident that, as the current head of the Eltek family, he cared a great deal about the matter. However, Ferlin did not know how to console his father, particularly because the many years of separation had created some estrangement between them. All he could do was continue to eat quietly.

Fortunately, Miss May was around.

Her conversation topic regarding the drama aroused the interest of Duke Eltek, and together they had a nice chat about the charm of King's City and the lives of the nobility. Hence, the dinner was not so dreary at last. Moreover, Irene was able to participate in the discussion regarding the new drama, and Duke Eltek even enquired about her recent performances. This allowed Ferlin to feel relieved.

After dinner, May swiftly took her leave.

After helping his wife to wash the cutlery, he was asked by his father to meet in the study.

"Your wife has made a good friend."

"You mean Miss May?" Ferlin was slightly surprised. "She's indeed an outstanding actress, and has assisted Irene tremendously in her dramas. She took care of Irene during the show in the Stronghold..."

"No, I'm not referring to acting," Duke Eltek said. "Didn't you notice? She kept asserting power over me."

"Assert power?" Ferlin's eyes grew bigger. "Weren't the two of them simply having a nice chat?"

"Hahaha..." The old man laughed uncontrollably and shook his head. "You really don't understand how nobles deal. Her story regarding King's City was taken from a legend about the interaction between a commoner girl and a noble man. It's called Cinderella. When discussing politics, she even referred to His Highness' intention to reclaim feudal land. I believe that she knows that you willingly severed ties with your family to be with Irene, or else, she wouldn't have opposed me in every sentence."

"Is... that right?"

Duke Eltek smiled. "Rather than be in awe of superficial things like status and title, you should know that it's one's practical actions which are more important. After talking to Miss May, I've figured out what to do regarding Miss Agatha. Whether or not our ancestors lied, we've returned the items that she entrusted to us wholly intact. Even if she's unwilling to accept us, we can serve her through other means." As he spoke, he sighed loudly. "Although I personally disagree with your view, yet after seeing your life here with Irene, I suddenly realize that these efforts may not be futile after all."

"Thank you..." The sense of affirmation which was revealed in his father's words made Ferlin's eyes well up with tears. Although he was very firm about severing his family ties back then, he still hoped in his heart that his marriage would be endorsed by his family.

However, what Duke Eltek said next astounded him.

"Have you ever considered returning to the Eltek family?"

"What? No, I... you..." Morning Light was stupefied. He opened his mouth but did not know how to reply. "Return to the family? Why would father suddenly mention this?"

The old knight said slowly, "Since you know that your initial decision was a mistake, it's not too late to turn back."

After a long while, Ferlin said cagily, "I feel that my current work is decent, and also the life in Border Town is..."

"I'm not asking you to go back to become a knight in Longsong Stronghold." Duke Eltek interrupted.

"You should understand what I mean." He then enunciated his words. "I want you to inherit the family."

Kingdom of Dawn swallowed his own saliva. "But brother..."

"Miso Eltek won't make a good successor," Duke Eltek said openly. "At first, he wanted to become a renowned knight in Western Region just like you, but after the Duke's defeat, he lost his direction. As a family of the losing side, we should pledge our allegiances to the new ruler of the city, but your brother continues to keep in close contact with the other four big families, and I'm unable to change his mind about it. You should be able to guess the reason for this."

"Because he's sure of becoming the next head of the family." Ferlin guessed. After he left the family, his father had no other option except Miso to succeed him. This was also probably why his brother gave him the cold shoulder when he returned to the family mansion after so many years.

"This has nothing to do with ability and knowledge. Ability can be developed and knowledge can be taught. But a suitable successor should know how to observe the current situation," his father continued

saying. "Lord Petrov has announced His Highness Roland's new policies. By also inferring from Miss May's drama in the Stronghold, which is titled "New City", I suspect that he's going to shape the entire Western Region into one entity soon. It's uncertain whether the four big families will accept this change, but the situation is definitely not calm. At this time, the most suitable thing for us to do is to observe the changes quietly, rather than be used by these families as pathfinding stones."

Ferlin had heard this news before. His Highness had never concealed his own intentions and policies, and in fact, he would publicize them to his people before implementing them. This included the plan to build Border Town into a city.

However, he did not wish to participate in a contest over leadership of the family. Despite his father's words, Miso would definitely not take things lying down. Ferlin understood his younger brother's personality very well.

Finally, he shook his head. "Sorry, Father. I... "

"I'm not asking you to make a decision now." The knight gestured with his hands. "After all, I'm still very healthy, and with me around, our family won't lose its direction." His smile appeared to have aged somewhat. "If Miso could understand these, I wouldn't need to say so much. All I'm hoping for is that, should our family ever fall into some kind of trouble, you'll do us a favor—on behalf of your mother and me."

This time, Ferlin was not able to refuse.

Chapter 390: Winter

After Paper finished washing up, she wrung her towel and hung it on the snow-covered balcony.

By leaving the towel outside for a day, it would freeze completely. Before she used it again, all she needed to do was to knead and pat it a few times, and then remove the remnants of ice. Of course, she could also remain warm indoors and use her magic power to vaporize the moisture on the towel, but that would reduce her number of daily practices.

Paper was aware that her body's capacity for magic power was considered to be one of the worst among the witches, hence every drop of it had to be used wisely.

Just as she completed the cleaning work, someone knocked on the door. Almost every day at this time, big sister Wendy would bring her to the castle hall to enjoy a hearty breakfast.

"Coming!"

Paper opened the door cheerfully. It was indeed Wendy who was standing outside—she proceeded to hug Paper lovingly and sniffed her cheeks. "Excellent, you've cleaned up already."

"Hehe." Paper grinned and held Wendy's hand as they walked towards the castle hall together.

It had been nearly half a month since she came to Border Town, and she had become accustomed to the way of life.

Here, there was no need to leave her shack early in the morning to find food, and no need to worry that the firewood she gathered would be stolen. Aside from the time she spent filling her stomach and

keeping warm, she could concentrate on practicing her magic power and acquiring knowledge. In the past, she could only imagine having such a life while chatting with her companions. A life where one had no worries about survival seemed to be reserved only for the masters and mistresses of the great noble families.

Paper had never expected that someday, she could also have this kind of life.

Wendy's palms felt soft and warm—a feeling Paper had never experienced while living in the slums. In her present life, Paper felt that there were people who constantly loved and cared about her. She hoped that she could remain permanently in this warm and loving place.

If it was only a dream, she would rather not wake up.

As they walked into the hall, Paper noticed that the witches were not sitting at the long table and eating their meals as usual. Instead, they crowded around a wall and bawled incessantly.

She blinked her eyes in curiosity, but was too embarrassed to ask Wendy what the witches were doing.

However, the latter seemed to read her thoughts, and said, laughing, "Our sisters are testing out their fighting capacities."

"Fighting capacity?" Paper was intrigued. "What... is that?"

"It's something that was invented by His Highness' eccentric rhetoric. Don't take it too seriously." Wendy bent her waist and lifted the young lady onto her shoulder. "See that silver sheet of metal? It's said to be a relic from the witches' kingdom, which existed more than four hundred years ago, and was used by Extraordinaries as a battle weapon. Only those with strong magic power can summon its might. His Highness has placed it in the hall so that everyone can test the level of their magic power, or should I say... to satisfy the curiosity of our sisters. Those who are able to illumine the four magic stones placed on the weapon in one breath would be considered to have divinely willed fighting capacity."

"..." Paper felt extremely confused. "Witches' kingdom?" "Extraordinaries?" "Magic Stones?" These foreign words left her scratching her head, but that did not mitigate the shock caused by the incredible sight before her—as the witches took turns to place their hands on the metal sheet, the embedded crystals glowed brightly and resembled a kaleidoscope of colorful stars.

"I can illumine two magic stones!" exclaimed Lightning, who was the same age as Paper. On her shoulder sat a stout-looking dove—Paper recalled that the bird was also a witch who was called Maggie around here.

"Two and a half, coo!" Pigeon cried out proudly.

"Aye, you actually did better than me? That's impossible!"

"Do you want to try?" Wendy laughed. "I guess that you won't do very well now. You haven't learnt how to imbue magic power into a magic stone, let alone summon a sigil. But, His Highness has stipulated this as a required course for witches, and therefore, you'll soon be given a Stone of Light to use for practice."

"Would it be as crystal-clear and shiny as these gems?" Paper was suddenly excited. She looked at Wendy and nodded. "I'll practice really really well!"

"Good girl." Wendy laughed and rubbed the young child's cheeks. "Eat first, then you'll have the energy to practice."

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After finishing her oatmeal, Paper returned to the Witch Tower and began her daily practice.

Wendy had told her that everything on this Earth was formed of tiny balls which the eyes could not see, and material changes were the result of these balls separating and bonding. One's abilities could only accelerate these processes, rather than simply, for example, melting ice or cooling hot water.

Although she was not able to understand the meaning of Wendy's words, she conscientiously followed Wendy's request—she would feel the magic power that was contained in her own body and released it as evenly as possible. From her earlier years living in the slums, she understood that the fact that she was now able to live a good life was because His Highness required the power of witches—this was her only worth, and therefore, if she did not want to be abandoned, she had to work hard.

Suddenly, Paper felt a twisting pain in her abdomen. Magic power was vibrating inside her body and seemed like it wanted to burst out, causing her to groan uncontrollably.

"What's the matter?" Wendy, who was by her side, asked.

"No, nothing." She shook her head. "Just now, my magic power felt like it wanted to break free."

"Break free..." Wendy pondered for a moment. "Do you remember when you became a witch?"

"It was probably winter," Paper said softly. "I cannot remember the exact date."

"It's now the end of autumn, and winter will be here in a few days." Wendy's smile disappeared. "As we near the Day of Awakening, our body's magic power will become active as a form of bite. Take a rest first. I'll call Nightingale over. She'll be able to see the changes of your body's magic power." She walked to the door, then turned back and added, "Don't worry. For a witch from Border Town, this is not a life and death issue."

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Wendy's prediction was confirmed.

After three days, Paper was about to have her second Day of Awakening.

Lying on her large bed, she looked around at the circle of witches that had come to visit her. Listening to their gabble of comforting words, she suddenly felt like crying.

The pain of being burned by magic power, which she remembered from her first awakening, seemed to become much more bearable.

"Because your practice time is relatively short, it's not guaranteed that the pain of the bite will completely go away." Wendy sat at Paper's bedside and stroked her hair. "But remember, don't ever think about giving up, and don't lose your sense of awareness."

Paper nodded.

She did not dare to speak up, afraid that the moment she opened her mouth, she would start to cry loudly.

She did not want to disgrace herself in front of everyone.

While living in the slums, crying was seen as the weakest expression, something which only people who gave up would do.

Paper closed her eyes and quietly waited for that moment to arrive.

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When she opened her eyes, she saw that outside the window was a sea of white.

The bite was weaker than she had expected, such that the various means of rescue which everyone had helped to prepare turned out to be redundant. When she awakened, she felt that her body's capacity for magic power had increased considerably. Small changes had taken place all over her body. Her eyes could see further, and her limbs possessed greater strength than before.

After she washed her face, she once again heard Wendy knocking on the door.

"I'm coming." Paper opened the door cheerfully and held Wendy's hand. However, this time, Wendy did not bring her to the castle hall, but instead, to the Lord's office on the third floor.

The gray-haired big shot smiled gently at Paper and held a piece of parchment in front of her.

"From today onwards, you're officially a member of the Witch Union."