

Witch 391

Chapter 391: The Sigil's Secret

After winter arrived, the snow seemed to subside considerably.

Roland was humming a tune as he read through the three manuscripts on his table.

They were, separately, the plan for the trial and production of the latest type of ammunition, the blueprint for the latest generation of small weapons, and the construction plan for the Spellcaster Tower.

The former two manuscripts were ideas which he had conceived for a long time. Now that he could make use of Agatha's abilities to freeze and control temperature, the town's nitric acid output increased manyfold. The problem regarding the stability of the mass production of nitroglycerin had also been solved, and therefore, all of the conditions for the manufacture of double base propellants were fundamentally provided.

Even though Roland knew that this type of propellant was created by dissolving nitrocotton in nitroglycerin, and eventually obtaining a viscous jelly that could be sliced or granulated, he still required an alchemist to test and find out the mixture ratios involved.

Fortunately, Kyle Sichi was already very experienced in conducting both quantitative and qualitative experiments. If this task was given to him, the results should be obtainable in one or two weeks.

Since Roland was already trying to produce a brand new propellant, naturally, the development of a new type of light weapon was also on the agenda.

Compared with blackfire gunpowder, which required the use of a large-caliber revolving rifle, only a small amount of a double base propellant was necessary to achieve an equivalent lethality. Therefore, based on firepower and cost-to-performance ratio, it was definitely better to switch from rifles to light-caliber automatic weapons.

Of course, the specific parameters were to be further determined according to the results of Anna's processing.

Roland drank a mouthful of hot tea and placed the third manuscript in front of him. This was what excited him the most at present.

Compared to the other plans, the contents of this document looked very discordant. At Agatha's request, he planned to build a Spellcaster Tower beside the Witch House and use it for the research and manufacturing of sigils.

He imagined a lofty Magic Tower standing high among the masses of chimneys and factories. It felt simply... too cool and fancy.

Roland started laughing uncontrollably.

Nightingale, who was at one side busy gnawing on dried fish, looked at Roland contemptuously. "Are sigils really so interesting? The witches' kingdom possessed many sigils, yet still lost to the demons."

"But there're some very interesting things inside." The prince took a thick book out of a drawer. It was a sigil collection that was translated from the experimental notes left behind by the Quest Society. It recorded all of the formulas discovered by the Quest Society over more than 200 years.

To him, this was a completely new territory.

After Agatha had completed the translation, Roland spent most of his nighttimes reading the book. As he read about the uses and composite lists of the magic stones, He felt as if he was assembling runewords. Probably, when the Chief Alchemist first received the book of Elementary Chemistry, he carried similar excitement as he studied the different chemical formulas.

"Knowledge that's new always seems especially attractive, even if it's only basics."

"For example?" Nightingale leant over to Roland.

"Like this." Roland pointed to a sentence in the book. "The ancient witches called this the Sigil of Listening. It is used for long-distance communication, and, like the Sigil of Tracking, it'll remain effective even if it's separated into parts." He shifted his pointing finger downwards. "The materials are very simple. All you need is a piece of Echo Stone and a piece of Marking Stone."

According to the book's description, the effective range of this sigil was dozens of miles. Although it could not compare to the mobile phones of later ages, which were supported by many signal towers and satellites, it could still suffice as a walkie-talkie.

"Is it?" Nightingale glanced at the page and then pulled Roland's finger towards the page on the right. "However, it's written here that 'Echo Stones come from Fearsome Demons, and Marking Stones are commonly seen in Devil's Town.' How are you going to obtain these two magic stones?"

"No, we already have the materials," Roland said zealously. "The piece of red crystal which Lightning found in the ruins was an Echo Stone. As for the Marking Stone, it's one of the composite materials of the Sigil of Tracking—Tilly has brought along a few of this, and they simply have to be disassembled."

"Even if Agatha is able to create it, you'll only be able to obtain one Sigil of Listening."

"Just let her try. Anyway, when we fight demons in the future, we'll acquire more and more Magic Stones." It was too bad that, previously, there weren't the conditions for research on new applications of magic power. Now that Roland had the technical support of Agatha, he was not about to let go of these resources which cost nearly nothing.

"Alright." Nightingale shrugged. "As for the Sigil of God's Will, what magic stones does it require?"

"This... I remember seeing it on the last page." Roland flipped to the final page of the book. "By the way, how was the result of your fighting capacity test?"

Nightingale flinched for a while and then uttered a single word. "Secret!"

She seemed to have been frustrated by Anna.

"Found it, over here." Roland pouted his lips. "The four required magic stones are all written as unknown... probably, out of confidentiality considerations, the Quest Society didn't record them in the written form. However, according to Agatha, these magic stones mostly come from the Senior Demons, and therefore, even if they were written down, no one would be able to obtain them."

"And yet you display such a precious object openly in the hall." Nightingale groaned. "If the Transcendents find out, they'll be so angry at you that they'll even come back to life."

"Because it's nothing precious, probably... as precious as a few dozen kilograms of TNT." Roland laughed but did not reply.

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This time, he waited until Agatha had completed her production of acid for the day before he called her into the office.

"Have a look at the Spellcaster Tower that I've designed for you." Roland held up his sketch. "The basement is a warehouse, and there are three storeys above ground. They are, separately, the apprentice lab, the tower master's lab, and the office."

"Wait... why is it called the Spellcaster Tower?" Agatha frowned. "All I want is a chemical lab like Sir Kyle's, except a little more spacious and bright. It'll be very troublesome to build a tower like this. In Taquila, towers were built only because the land area of the city was small. You have lots of open space here."

"That's not fashionable already!" Roland shouted in his heart. "Anyway, the problems regarding the construction aren't difficult to solve. Aside from the facilities that I have stated, do you have other demands?"

"No." Agatha raised her hands. "If you insist."

"Great." Roland placed the sketch down and started talking about the idea he thought of in the morning. "Can you complete the sigil production alone?"

"No, I can't." Agatha shook her head. "Although sigils are created by linking magic stones, the materials required to transmit magic power are very complicated. Most importantly, it requires the blood of demons."

The prince was stunned. "What?"

"You didn't hear wrongly. And it has to be fresh blood." She said solemnly. "When the Quest Society was figuring out the nature of magic power, it conducted thousands of experiments and eventually proved that the flesh and blood of witches, demons and demonic beasts are completely different in nature, and their functions are also remarkably different."

"The flesh and blood of...witches?" Roland received a shock when he suddenly realized the meaning behind these words. He asked impulsively, "What are their functions?"

"To create God's Punishment Army," Agatha said stoically.

Chapter 392: Determination

Roland widened his eyes and said, "Using dead..."

"No." Agatha interrupted him. "Just as with demons' blood, the flesh should be taken from a living witch."

He heard Nightingale gasp behind him.

"This was the most important secret of the Quest Society. Not long after the experiment began, I left the stone tower of the Holy City. The only thing I knew about the experiment was that it used the blood of weak and old witches, mixed it with God's Stone of Retaliation, and injected it into the bodies of mortals to make mortal's body change." Agatha's tone was a bit grave. "Judging from the notebook you found, this research must have succeeded."

"How much blood was needed?"

"More than half." Agatha's answer saddened Roland. "The blood must come from the same person, otherwise the magic powers contained in it would reject each other and their effectiveness would greatly decrease." She paused. "You guessed correctly. A witch died for every experiment, and mortals could barely survive the erosion of the weakened magic blood. In the beginning, no one could survive. A great number of society members objected to it because they believed that mortals could never gain magic power. If not for the insistence of Chief Alice, this plan might not have been carried out fully."

"But now the church has a huge God's Punishment Army... According to Tilly's information, there may be 500 to 1,000 God's Punishment Warriors," Roland said, frowning.

"Suppose the success recorded in the notebook refers to the increase of the transformation rate to 10%, it means that at least half of the witches had been killed. I don't think those people could gather such a large number of old witches."

"The church arrested and raised witches so that they could drain their blood and create powerful extraordinary warriors?" Roland felt the hand on his shoulder clench involuntarily. "Damn it. Hundreds of witches with all kinds of magic powers died in the Holy City of Hermes for no reason, and they were branded as the Fallen and were loathed by the public. Such an ignorant organization must be destroyed, even if its original intention was to fight against the demons."

"Rest assured. I'll stop them," Roland said word by word.

After Agatha left, Nightingale shut off her Mist and appeared in front of him. She gritted her teeth and said, "I didn't expect that was how God's Punishment Army was produced! If the Church really came from the Union, their chief must be a lunatic! "

"Indeed." He sighed. "Now it makes sense why the church has been adopting female orphans and abandoned babies everywhere—they were only collecting materials for creating a huge army. Perhaps slandering the witches as Devil's minions was also part of their plan, in order to justify their treatment of witches."

"..." Nightingale did not respond, but her face was full of anger.

Roland slightly worried about her. Holding her hand, he said, "You don't intend to..."

"Pick a fight with the church by myself?" She shook her head. "I'm not that silly. If they were so fragile that they could be overturned by a witch, someone else would have done it long ago."

The prince felt a little relieved. "The ultimate goal of creating the God's Punishment Army is to strengthen the church. If there're extraordinary ones among the witches the church raised, they won't have to give blood... Even escaping into the Mist won't guarantee safety when facing witches loyal to the church. When we wage a war against the church, the safest strategy is to push forward step by step following the firearms of the First Army. Whatever the enemies are, they are no different in front of bullets." He paused. "I've said that in the new world, witches will be able to live a normal life without restrictions, just like ordinary people do."

"Hmm." Nightingale whispered, putting her forehead on Roland's head. "I'm sure you can do it all."

Wendy sent Paper back to the witches' building and happily returned to the Lord's castle.

Recently, she felt her days were very fulfilling. Although her previous life was quite comfortable, she'd always felt something missing. Now, with this little girl who was well-behaved and full of admiration for her, she believed there was nothing more pleasing than this.

"Winter has come. This is when the witches' awakenings happen the most. In the following months, there might be more new witches joining the Witch Union, so there'll be more kids for me to take care of." This thought excited Wendy very much.

She gently hummed the song she heard from His Highness. But when she pushed open her bedroom door, what she saw startled her.

God, what do I see? Nightingale sits in front of the book table, reading the Natural Science Theoretical Foundation!

Did she fight with His Highness Roland?"

"Ahem." Wendy coughed twice. "I'm back."

Nightingale nodded, giving no response. From the side, her face seemed very upset and sad.

She must have guessed correctly.

Wendy stepped forward, patted Nightingale's shoulder, and softly comforted her. "This is love. You sometimes quarrel, but when you think about it, it's nothing serious. Sleep on it and you'll feel better afterwards."

"What are you talking about?" Nightingale frowned.

"You and His Highness... Fighting is only temporary, so don't take it seriously."

"Why would I quarrel with him?" She said, touching her forehead.

"Uh... you didn't?" Wendy paused. "Then why are you reading all of a sudden?"

Nightingale sighed and told Wendy about the Experiment of God's Punishment that Agatha had revealed to her. "I just feel I need to become stronger to help more in future battles to overthrow the church."

"I see." Upon hearing what Nightingale said, Wendy solemnly nodded. "I didn't expect that the church built monasteries to obtain witches' blood... If it weren't for Ashes, who had suddenly awakened as an Extraordinary and drew all the guards' attention, I'm afraid I would have been among the other corpses in the church."

"Nightingale is right. Perhaps the environment in the castle is so relaxing that I've let my guard down." Wendy suddenly realized that the enemies were very close. Be it from the church or demons, their threats weren't completely eliminated, yet she hadn't improved for a long time. Although her magic power was slowly increasing, her fighting skills and ability to create wind weren't so different from the time when she was in the Witch Cooperation Association, and evolution was totally out of the question.

Sisters such as Mystery Moon, Hummingbird and Echo were studying very hard. Compared to them, she seemed to be slacking off. As an older predecessor, she couldn't even light two Magic Stones on the Sigil of God's Will. If this continued, she would feel like an unworthy elder to the other witches.

"You're right. I need to study hard as well." Wendy took a deep breath. She decided that from that day on, she would spend two hours every night before bed learning the knowledge from His Highness.

She went to the bathroom to have a quick wash, returned to the room, and found Nightingale lying on the desk, asleep.

Chapter 393: New Boats Entering the Water

A crowd of people surrounded the temporary shipyard by the Redwater River.

Everyone knew that in the wooden shed some strange boats were being built with shells resembling a huge bathtub. The boats were made of gray cement—a material which was no different from rock after it set. If they were put into water, there would be no trace of it except a splash.

The craftsmen who worked here gave it a proper name: Bathtub Ship.

Today would be when the first two boats went into the water.

The crowd was composed of two kinds of people. One kind was civilians who had just joined Border Town and were curious about the event or felt it unconceivable, so they came to check it out with great skepticism. A great number of them were fishermen and sailors from the Eastern and Southern Territory. The other kind was locals who were used to His Highness' various "miracles". They had heard of the previous Littletown and gathered here in the drifting snow to see His Highness.

Cacusim was among the first kind.

When Cacusim first saw the notice about the test of new boats and the new recruiting order of His Highness, he said he would come and watch the boats entering water no matter what. Vader had no choice but to ask His Excellency Carter for a leave and accompany Cacusim. Considering Cacusim wasn't familiar with this area, and the ground was covered with thick snow, Vader was worried about his going

to a crowded place all by himself. If he fell down in a push-squeeze situation, it could mean incurable injury.

"You're underestimating me, child." The old man waved his hand, suggesting Vader not to follow him. "I've been through winds and waves. Although I'm getting old, my physical condition isn't much worse than yours."

"Sure, sure," Vader said carelessly. "I've already asked for leave, so any rejection is too late. I just don't quite get it—why do you have to come and see this thing enter water? It's only a boat."

"But you said it was made out of gray stone." Cacusim shook his head. "Have we entered a time when even a bathtub-sized stone could float on water?"

"It's my own fault." Vader thought. "I shouldn't have mentioned the notice at the square." "Maybe His Highness was only bragging. Probably it's a wooden boat with a few parts made out of that... cement."

"That's even more unlikely." The old man insisted. "Think about it—when was this wooden shed built?"

"About... over a month ago."

"That's right. It's before when you were recruited as a policeman. When we first moved to the Inner City here, this place was still empty!" His beard shook. "It took a month to build the shed, so it means building the first boat only took half a month."

"Uh, isn't that normal?" Vader was bewildered.

"Of course not!" Cacusim exclaimed, "In the name of the Sea God! I've never seen a boat that could be built within half a month. It's not a matter of size—for any type of sailing boat, processing keels alone would take more than a month, because you must wait until the wood is totally dried to then curve it with steam. This is a very complicated process that can't be completed in a short time."

Vader was very surprised. "Why are you so familiar with shipbuilding?"

"I was once a captain, child." The old man sighed. "When I was young, I used to sail with lots of goods through Seawindshire and the Port of Clearwater, and I reached as far as the Kingdom of Dawn and Fjord Islands. Then something happened... and now I'm here. "

"You've never told me any of that." Vader said with his eyes wide open.

"You've never asked, child." Cacusim shrugged.

"Alright." Vader shifted his attention to the shipyard. "So what you're really curious about is the technique His Highness used to build a sailing boat within half a month."

"Any captain would be curious." Cacusim touched his beard. "If His Highness isn't lying, do you know what this means?" One or two years later, his fleet will be sailing through all the rivers in the Kingdom of Graycastle."

Vader's heart twitched. "You don't intend to..."

Cacusim smiled, "I can't always eat your oatmeal."

"His Highness never lies." Someone nearby suddenly said. "Besides, that's not a sailing boat."

Vader turned around to find that the speaker was a young man. Judging from his accent, he seemed to be a local Western Region resident. "Not a sailing boat?"

"No. It can travel without wind and at a speed faster than any sailing boat." "The young man continued proudly, "Have you seen the steam engines in the mines? They can easily drag a basket of ore out of the mine hole. These cement boats are driven by those steam engines, and according to His Highness, they're actually steam-powered boats!"

"Travelling without sails?" Cacusim said with disbelief, "Kid, that's nonsense. If a boat has no sails, it can only rely on paddling. Such a boat can never travel faster than a sailing boat. Besides, they're not in the water yet. If you haven't seen it, how can you be sure that they can move in water at all?"

"Of course I've seen it," said the young man. "You must be newcomers from other territories, so it's normal if you don't understand. In the summertime, I modified a steam-powered boat for a Caravan across the strait. But the boat was still wooden and not as durable as those cement ones."

Vader intended to argue more, but that young man's eyes suddenly brightened up. Pointing to the shipyard, that man said, "Look over there. His Highness is here!"

Cheers and applause erupted from the crowd as all the people raised their hands to greet the Lord.

Prince Roland went up to the temporary wooden platform next to the shipyard, conveyed a few congratulatory words, and then announced the entering water of the new boats.

With rhythmic chants, the workers opened the wooden shed towards the Redwater River. A boat with a 40-meter-long gray hull slid down the river levee, collecting snow, and plunged into the icy water.

Vader felt his heart jump into his throat. He thought this thing would sink directly to the river bottom, but to his surprise, after the rear half entered the water, the front lifted up and splashed with foam.

The crowd burst into applause again.

"Gee, it really floats up." Cacusim froze in shock. "But is it really made of stone?"

Vader had the same question—the surface of the Bathtub Ship looked so smooth, as if it was made of finely polished granite slabs seamlessly connected together. The hull of the boat looked like one whole piece. The boat cabin was shallow and it had no decks, so there were no places for the crew to sleep. Furthermore, the boat bottom was too flat for masts to be fixed on. As its nickname indicated, this thing looked exactly like a bathtub.

Either way, His Highness had indeed managed to produce the boat within half a month.

Vader looked at Cacusim and found his eyes glinting with excitement.

"I want to apply to be captain," said the old man.

Chapter 394: The Seed of a Navy

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Roland watched the second cement boat slip into the water with satisfaction. His subjects cheered loudly.

The two cement boats looked simple in terms of structure, but they were actually much better than previous models, namely the Littletown. A framework of dense steel reinforcement had been added to the internal structure, and the quality of the cement had improved tremendously. The overall strength of the boat was thus several times greater than the Littletown.

To expedite the shipbuilding process, Roland reserved slots and ports for steam engines, transmission mechanisms and paddle wheels when he designed the hull. This way, laborers only needed to weld bolts into the metal components. They could quickly build the boat putting pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle.

Meanwhile, the mold was now made of iron rather than temporary masonry. This change not only guaranteed a high density of the poured concrete, thereby improving the boat's waterproof performance, but it also ensured that each boat was almost exactly the same. This helped to avoid errors when installing the power system. In order to create a complete design of the mold, Roland had scrapped at least seven or eight testing samples. Fortunately, cement was no longer scarce these days. Steam engines had replaced human labor, from stone grinding all the way to kiln feeding. It was the only large-scale industrial project that did not rely on witches' abilities in Border Town.

With ample materials, reliable molds and skilled laborers, the only factor that limited the production of hulls was the hardening rate of cement. However, with the help of Paper's reaction acceleration ability, it only took one day (rather than the original one to two months) to launch a cement boat. In other words, the shipyard could launch an unpowered vessel every two or three days if Roland wished to.

If the speed of steam engine manufacturing could catch up with that of crew training, he would most likely develop a huge shipping fleet in a short period of time and fill the Redwater River with his own cement boats. They would look like "dumplings in boiling water".

That was the appeal of industrialization.

Now that the hull had been completed, the next step would be the installation of power units. The mechanical equipment was pretty much the same as those on the modified boats of the Chamber of Commerce at Crescent Moon Bay. The craftsmen already had practical experience, so he didn't need to worry about it.

"I don't understand. Why did you tell these things to subjects?" Nightingale asked.

"To advertise the national power." Roland smiled faintly.

"I'm sorry?"

"I mean to behold the tremendous changes the town has gone through." The prince stroked his chin. "You probably never expected a boat made of stones could float on the water before seeing the Littletown. My subjects think the same way. After realizing what is impossible, they'll have a greater sense of township. It's a comprehensive upgrading in mentality, which can even turn into a belief that there's nothing they can't achieve."

"I don't quite understand." Nightingale sounded a little confused.

"You just see it as a means of propaganda, and that will do," Roland smiled and said. In this era, the nobilities only celebrated with civilians for big events or ceremonies, both of which were almost entirely noble affairs. If it weren't for the free food, many civilians wouldn't attend. Nevertheless, the cement boats were the combined work of hundreds of laborers, and they were part of the festivities.

After witnessing constant miracles, members of the territory would gradually develop their confidence and sense of identity, collectively referred to as "superpower mentality" in later generations. Once a territory had become powerful and prosperous, the mentality of its subjects would inevitably experience positive changes.

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A week later, Roland met over twenty townies who had applied for the captain's position in the castle's hall.

He was quite surprised at first when Barov reported the number, as he did not expect there would be so many "top-notch talents" among the refugees taken in by this town. When he read the detailed report that he couldn't help laughing. There were quite a few fishermen who operated rafts and small fishing boats, even some boatmen who made a living providing ferry services. They could indeed be regarded as "captain", in a sense.

Among all the applicants, there were only three people with experience operating sloops on the inland river, one of whom claimed that he used to work as a commander for a merchant fleet, and had earned a living on the sea for a long time.

Roland thought for a while, then decided to recruit all twenty people.

Steam-powered boats belonged to a completely different system from that of sailboats, and were also operated in a distinct way. Even an experienced captain would not necessarily learn the operation of paddle steamers that fast. Besides, he knew nothing about operating a boat himself, so it would be better for them to learn as they went.

Since he was starting from scratch, he needed to be resolute and have the courage to explore.

"I've reviewed your applications," Roland glanced at the group of people kneeling in the hall, "Today I've summoned you here to tell you that you've passed the preliminary assessment, and have gloriously become the first group of captain interns. Please rise."

"Yes... Your Highness," all the people rose gingerly, exchanging looks with one other. They looked rather confused about the term "captain intern".

The prince took the initiative to explain, "Being an intern means you haven't been officially hired yet. You'll only get half of the salary stated in the post until you are officially on board, ten silver royals a month. The first two months will be the learning period, during which you will get yourselves familiarized with the performance, operation method and procedures of the new boat. The third month will be the trial period, during which you'll be assessed in terms of your learning ability. Only the qualified ones will be promoted to official captains and paid full salary. Those who aren't willing to accept these terms can leave now."

Nobody in the group moved. After a while, an old man suddenly spoke, "Your Highness, who'll teach us and who'll assess us to see if we're qualified?"

Roland cast him a glance with great interest. He was the one who claimed to be an experienced fleet commander. His name appeared to be Cacusim. If Roland remembered correctly, he was a relative of the policeman from the assassination case two months ago. Judging from the old man's tone, Roland could tell that he didn't think there was anyone qualified to teach him how to operate a ship. Indeed, there was none.

"The 'teachers' will be yourselves," the prince nodded and said.

These words caused a stir among the group.

"Your Highness, what does that mean?" Cacusim asked, confused.

"How much do you know about steam engines?" Roland replied with a question. As he expected, not a single person could answer. "The steam-powered boat is brand new in every aspect. Your past experience will not actually help much, therefore you need to explore and find a way yourselves. Of course, I'll send the craftsmen from the steam engine plant to assist you in familiarizing yourselves with machines." He paused for a little bit and said, "The assessment approach is very simple. Those who are able to operate the boat with a group of sailors and complete a transportation task will be regarded as qualified."

Although the saying 'It takes ten years to build an army and a hundred years a navy' was exaggerating slightly, it did indicate the difficulty in building a navy. If this group of people could master the operation of the steam-powered boat, they could for sure foster a large group of capable crews for the Western Region. These crews could be directly employed to build steam-powered shallow water gunboats later.

He wondered what kind of navy it would turn out to be.

Chapter 395: Deep down inside the Winter Forest

Leaf passed through the branches and foliage looking for Lightning and Maggie.

In actuality, she was not exactly passing through them, but moving just her vision—her body was integrated into the thick forest.

It was an amazing feeling. She felt like a bird, except a bird would fall to the ground if it wasn't flapping its wings, whereas she wouldn't. As long as she maintained this form, she could cross from one end of the Fusion Forest to the other instantly. Of course, compared to the entire Misty Forest, the range that Leaf could cover now was just a drop in the ocean.

Ever since her ability had evolved, she had longed to experience the Misty Forest to the west of the town. If she could control this vast forest it would be of great help to His Highness, whether it was fighting against demonic beasts or collecting goods and materials. There wasn't much she could do for His Highness in return. Apart from improving crops, this was the only thing she could do, so she wanted to be good at it.

Compared to the castle's back garden, this was a real forest. Its complexity was far greater than the ecosphere of the castle's olive trees and grape vines and beyond comparison. There were numerous creatures hiding beneath every inch of earth. Looking down along the roots of plants she could sense dormant animals, squirming insects, and decaying remains, along with tiny babbling streams.

To prevent losing herself, Leaf expanded her territory with great caution—starting from the city wall on the west, extending little by little each day. Once she completely adapted to an environment, she would then try to control a new plot of forest land.

At this rate, she could cover the entire Misty Forest within two or three years.

Shortly after, Leaf found two people hunting in the forest. If she had been walking in the snow instead of flying above the treetops, she would have noticed them sooner.

"I found some prey," said Leaf, shaking the branches.

"Ah!" Lightning patted her chest after a shudder. "You scared me!"

"Coo, coo!" Maggie nodded repeatedly.

"Sorry." Leaf revealed herself through a tree trunk, just like a twig growing out of the branches. "Is this better?"

"Well, at least I'm not talking to a ghost." Lightning landed quietly. "You can appear anywhere in the forest at will?"

She nodded. "As long as it falls in the territory that's under my control."

Maggie landed right on Leaf's back, walked a few steps back and forth, and even pecked where her body and the trunk joined. "You've even grown into a tree, coo!"

Feeling her back tickling, Leaf couldn't help laughing. "Because this is my ability," said she.

"It feels a little weird, coo."

"How can you call someone else weird? You've turned yourself into a giant demon bird." Lightning rolled her eyes and looked at Leaf. "Where's the prey?"

"Follow me," she said, turning her head.

Leaf couldn't sustain a human form while moving, instead she made vines grow up from the ground to lead Lightning and Maggie on the way.

"What kind of prey?" Lightning asked.

"A big boar that ran out of the depths of the forest," she replied. "Do you really want to catch it yourself? I can just tie it up with grape vines and throw it at the foot of the city wall."

"Of course. Explorers seek more than just results." The little girl raised her head. "The process is sometimes more memorable than the outcome."

"I'm good as long as there's meat to eat, coo!"

Leaf could not help smiling. The two of them had already become frequent visitors to the Misty Forest before she had integrated into it. They hunted in the forest to practice their magic powers, and Maggie would carry all of the prey they caught back to the castle. Half of the meat on the table these days was provided by them.

"Look, there it is," said Leaf.

There was a huge boar squatting down by the stream, lapping up the cold water. With large, sharp tusks at the side of its snout, and a raised mane that was almost finger-length, it appeared to be a tough enemy. Hunters would normally stay away when coming across such an animal, but it was just a feast in the witches' eyes.

"I'm ready," said Lightning, who pulled out her dagger.

"No gun?" Leaf asked in surprise.

"That would be too boring." She wiped her nose with great confidence and rushed straight toward the target.

"Good luck, coo!"

The little girl's figure, like a streak of golden light, sprang onto the head of the boar from behind. As she rose, the boar shook its head fiercely, bursting out a high-pitched scream.

"She missed it?" No... Leaf noticed one of the boar's eyes had become a bloody gash. It seemed that Lightning was planning to take advantage of her flexibility and first eliminate the threat of counterattacks from the enemy, and then exhaust it through a battle of attrition.

The boar was as clumsy as a stone facing Lightning's attack from the sky. It soon fell to the snow without the strength to resist.

She whistled, "How was that?"

"Good job," Leaf said. She tied the boar's rear legs with vines and hung it up. "First let's bleed it out. His Highness says meat without any traces of blood is tastier."

"Purr." Maggie's mouth was watery. "It's gonna be a big meal tonight, coo."

"Wait..." Leaf suddenly sensed there were other creatures entering the forest. She looked toward the edge of the controlled area and saw two grey wolves approaching.

She frowned, something was wrong. This type of animal usually lived deep within the forest and wouldn't normally come so close to Border Town, even in the winter.

She was just debating whether she should tell Lightning when a familiar figure suddenly appeared before her eyes. Leaf felt all her hair stand up as she remembered the tragic battle she had experienced in the Barbarian Land.

"Demons!"

She saw two demons slowly walking in the direction of the city wall. There were no Magic Stones on their arms, nor spears on their back, so they weren't carrying any weapons. However, Leaf noticed that they both wore a black iron glove, the same weapon that had killed Red Light.

"Why would demons come here?"

With great horror and uneasiness, she turned to Lightning and said, "Get out of here, quick! Demons are coming!"

"What?" Both of them were slightly startled.

Leaf briefly told them what she saw and urged them on, "Hurry up. They don't have a mount and can't catch up. I'll come later."

To her surprise, Lightning hesitated for a moment and then shook her head, saying, "I'm staying here to fight them."

"F... Fight?" Leaf was stunned and asked, "Why?"

"If I run away from the enemy now, how can I defeat them in the future?" The little girl took a deep breath, pulled the gun from her waist and said, "My father told me to get up from where you fall. I won't run away any more."

Chapter 396: The Fierce Battle

"The explorers will never be afraid of the adventures, but they will definitely not take an adventure recklessly.

Demons are not that horrible because they can also be killed. And they have a huge weakness—they can't survive without Red Mist.

Leaf once used the crossbow bolts to kill a trapped demon. Nightingale managed to kill the enemy under a very unfavorable circumstance." Lightning secretly cheered for herself and she believed that she could also make it.

"We should first report this to His Highness," Leaf said hurriedly. "Comparing with us, both Nightingale and Ashes are much more experienced in fighting the demons!"

"But, the demons may have already left by the time they reach here." Lightning checked the pistol's cartridge to ensure that it was filled with bullets and said, "By letting such dangerous enemies wandering around the border, we'll face much more serious risks."

"I... can stay and keep an eye on them."

"What if they walk out of your control area," the little girl insisted and continued, "and if you try to stop them, you'll end up exposing yourself. Three of us might as well work together."

Leaf relapsed into silent. She seemed to be persuaded.

"Coo coo!" Maggie stood on top of Lightning and fluttered her wings.

"Alright," she scratched the pigeon's neck and said, "we'll each take care of a demon."

"What did she just say?" Leaf asked.

Lightning pouted and said, "She said she wants to break the head of the enemy with her claws and pound the flesh into a meat pie with her wings. Finally, she will toast it in the fire to find out how it may taste like."

"She just said 'Coo' twice!" the latter questioned.

"It's basically what it means." The little girl nodded earnestly.

"An excellent explorer is not only extraordinarily brave but also has the ability to lead the entire team, helping them to relax when they are nervous and keeping them when they are over relaxed. I'll try my best to follow your words, father."

Lightning shook her wrist and the cartridge was closed. Trying not to look nervous, she pretended to look calm and said, "How far are they away from here?"

"About three hundred meters away from our right." Leaf answered.

"I should have seen the enemies if I was not blocked by the woods." She was thinking that she definitely had the advantage of taking the first shot, and the pistol obviously outperforms the Magic Stone due to its long range. "You can trap the demons with vines, right? Just like last time at the Barbarian Land."

"I believe I should be able to trap them for a short period of time."

"OK. We can attack from the sky." Lightning said, "It's the last direction the enemies will notice. They will temporarily focus on the vines only. We can end this fight in seconds."

"I... understand." The leaves shook slightly. Perhaps because there were too many related horrible memories when Leaf was in the Witch Cooperation Association. But Lightning had no time to worry about this at this moment. She would probably lose her courage if they kept waiting. After all, she and Maggie were the ones that fight the demons. But Leaf would hide in the woods. She wouldn't be hurt no matter how the demons attacked the vines.

"Let's get started!" Lightning flew right into the sky.

"Coo!" Pigeon was following right behind her.

The forest instantly looked like green and white patches below her. The little girl put on the goggles given by His Highness and she felt braver right away.

"They're over there." Maggie transformed into a Gray-tailed hawk and found the targets just after seconds of searching—with her hawk eye, she would never even miss a running rabbit in the snow.

Lightning took a deep breath. Thunder and His Highness flashed upon her mind. She shook her head and made her mind clear. With her hands holding the pistol grip, she said, "I'll take care of the left side and you, the right side. When we are half way through then you turn into the giant-winged bird again."

"Leave it to me. Coo!"

"Go!" The little girl shouted and then began to dive in. With the cold wind roaring through her cheeks, her ears were hurting. She moved her head a little bit into the scarf. Thinking of the shooting method she learned from Nightingale, she pointed the flintlock forward. The effective range of the bullet was about 100 meters, but it was clear that she should move as close as possible to make sure the target would be hit. Assuming that Leaf's information was right, the demons' iron gloves must be inlaid with the electrical Magic Stone. Their magic range was around five meters, almost the same as the witches'. It was the best choice to shoot them at a distance of seven to eight meters.

The enemies' figures became clearer. And she could see their horrible headgears and scarlet masks. Suddenly, a demon stopped to look up and roared towards them. "Are we... exposed?" Lightning's heart sank. "Why does the enemy act as if they can perceive her?" At the same time, countless vines rose around the demons. They twined the enemy's legs and continued to climb upwards. Finally, the enemies were totally twined by the vines.

A white flash shined from Maggie's body and she turned into a huge monster instantly, diving and screaming at the same time to show her strength.

"Whatever." Lightning grit her teeth and decided to speed up again. When she was about fifty meters from the enemies, she took a sudden turn and rushed down to the back of the enemies like a shooting star—she could only hit the heads of the enemies if she shot straight down, while she could expand the shooting area if she shot horizontally. And Nightingale had also repeated many times that she should fire on the widest body part of the enemy.

The demon struggled to lift his right hand twined by the vines. Dazzling light burst out from his iron gloves. Almost at the same time, Lightning pushed down the trigger. A huge boom suddenly went through the sky above of the forest.

As she expected, the attack range of the Magic Stone was really limited. The blue and white arc light just existed for a very short time. With the sounds of gunshots, blood mist burst out from the back of the demon—the bullets not only went through its body but also smashed the gas bottle on its back.

However, Maggie was not as lucky. Another demon hit her body with its lightning. Sparks burst out from her body and her mighty screams turned into terrible ones. She curled up her wings and then heavily fell down on the demon, kicking up large snowflakes. When they hit the ground, Lightning felt the ground shaking. It was probably because of the severe impact, the demon's gas bottle was smashed and Red Mist was overflowing from under the giant bird. The little girl was very anxious and worried, looking at this.

Leaf reacted immediately. Dozens of vines gathered on Maggie's body and moved her away from the demon. The giant bird rolled in the snow twice, and lay still with her face on the ground.

Lightning rushed towards her. She held her giant head, shaking it and said, "Wake up, Maggie! Are you alright? "

"Coo... I feel numb," Maggie opened her eyes. She transformed back into her human shape with her magic power faded off and said, "what just happened?"

Lightning checked every part of her body, feeling relaxed after confirming her safety and said, "I'm glad that you're alright."

It seemed that in the shape of the flying giant monster, Maggie would not be hurt by the blood mist and she could endure more harms with her giant body. The electric arc just knocked her out for a moment, and there was a demon right below her as a cushion when she was falling down. It was a frightening attack but she was barely harmed. This could be the best out of the worst.

"Both of them are dead." Leaf moved half of her body from the trunk, examining two lifeless demons and said, "What should we do next?"

"Bring the bodies back," Lightning said, "His Highness should know how to deal with them."

Chapter 397: A Close Study

Hearing the news, Roland was shocked.

Rushing after Leaf he couldn't even attempt to question her further until they had reached the castle's backyard. As he stepped out of the castle he saw Lightning dragging two dead demons off of Maggie's back.

"Your Highness, look, we won!" Seeing the prince, the little girl jumped up straight into Roland's arms. "We defeated the demons!"

"No one is hurt?" Roland asked.

"No, everyone is fine." Lightning looked up, her eyes sparkling with eagerness and hopes of praise. Her metaphorical tail wagging was with excitement.

Roland sighed. Seeing her look of sheer joy made him reluctant to point fingers. So, instead of asking why no one had reported seeing the demons he decided to say, "I am glad there are no injuries, but what just happened exactly?"

The three witches all replied at once. Roland had to listen for a long while before he was able to piece together what had happened.

The way they told it made the fight seem easy and it was over quickly. However, there were many moments that could have ended in disaster. If Maggie had not been able to withstand the impact of the electric arc, or if the demons had been able to shake off Leaf's restraints, the consequences would have been unthinkable.

"Don't you ever do anything like that again." Nightingale couldn't keep quiet any longer. Stepping from the cloak of her mist as she said, "To fight with demons is to leave us. With Sylvie, there is no escape."

"But we won," Lightning said while pouting.

"I call it dumb luck. Before the fight did you know Maggie was going to be hit?" Nightingale countered sternly, "I taught you to use a gun so you could protect your sisters and self. Instead, you drag them into danger!"

"No..." Lightning dropped her head in contrition and said, "I was wrong."

"And you," Nightingale said turning to Maggie, "You know you are obligated to fly back and report and yet you chose to stay? If you make a mistake like this again I won't give you anymore dried fish!"

"Sigh..." Maggie's head drooped, too.

'Nightingale is indeed the toughest witch fighter Border Town has to offer,' Roland thought, giving Nightingale a glance of approval. Then he said, "Well, as long as it was just this once. Go and bring Tilly and Agatha to me. It's time for us to examine our new trophies."

...

In the castle's basement, on the cold stone floor lay two bodies stripped bare, their shabby clothes and meager belongings stacked beside them.

"Are they demons?" Tilly inquired while covering her nose, hoping to block the fetid stench.

"They don't look stronger than ordinary people," Ashes said, twitching her mouth.

Agatha looked glum. "Don't underestimate them. Any demon is a tough opponent, with or without magic powers. A senior demon or even a Transcendent would wear a God's Stone of Retaliation," she stated frowning. Looking over at Roland she then said. "They really showed up near the town?"

"Pretty much, Leaf said they were less than two miles from the town's city walls." Roland nodded his response while looking at the bodies displayed before him.

The demon bodies were tall, over six feet, they had strong powerful limbs, and their skin was a shade of light blue. One of the bodies appeared to be severely mutilated and the organs could be seen peeking from its collapsed chest. It looked almost as if it had been crushed by a steam roller. This in combination with Lightning's narrative, Roland could almost see the great impact that had caused the damage.

The other body was in better shape and the only visible damage was two puncture wounds. He could still see the demons blue blood trickling from the perfect holes. Of the four shots Lightning took, only two had hit their mark, fortunately they were fatal.

The blue blood makes sense since demons don't need oxygen like humans, they have no need for hemoglobin. Technically a demon's blood could be any color.

And their massive bone structure was also logical. It was necessary to support their height and powerful frame.

What is confusing is their striking resemblance to humans, minus the reproductive organs.

"How do they... reproduce with their own kind?" Roland asked Agatha curiously, "Don't they have gender differences?"

"To my knowledge, no, they don't," she said shaking her head. "It has been an unsolved mystery for me. No one can get close enough to Red Mist tower to find out. There is speculation that they were born in the tower, formed by the mist. However, the Quest Society rejected the notion claiming that the demons were regenerating and every battle was with the same demons, in different forms. They called it the 'regeneration upgrade phenomenon'."

"Regeneration upgrade phenomenon?" Ashes frowned and asked, "what is that?"

"Some of the demons that were severely wounded by our witches would again appear on the battlefield. Based on the pattern of the wounds, we could tell they were the ones that had been beaten previously even though their forms had changed. This implies that Senior Demons were not born but instead likely evolved through battle. Once they reach their full upgrade their forms would change." Agatha explained.

'Well... the magic stone technology by itself is worrying enough, and now the enemy seems to have the ability to upgrade from battle. No wonder they defeated the human beings in the last two Battles of the Divine Will.'

Roland squatted down to have a closer look at the demons' stacked clothing and belongings.

Fortunately, it did not look as if they had anything that could be considered advanced. Their belongings actually looked a little out dated. The clothing was a mix of animal skins and ugly primitive weaves. The ferocious masks were actual skulls from demonic hybrids, clearly not manufactured.

Even the transparent portion embedded into the eyes of the skulls were no more than a polished crystal, tinged and clouded from the Red Mist. While wearing the masks, they would only be able to see a bloody red shadow. How did they learn to fight with something like this?

In addition to the clothes and masks, there were a dozen black slates and a few magic stones.'

"Has the Quest Society ever seen anything like this?" Roland asked Agatha as he laid out the slates, side by side, they made him think of the towering buildings in the red mist. A few of the slates had distorted red marking, while others had nothing you could see with the naked eye.

"That's the way demons keep records," she nodded while answering, "and they record with magic too, so we can't decode their meaning at all."

"Maybe the way they think is completely different," Tilly suggested.

"That's a possibility," Rolland agreed, "and what about the magic stones?"

"Stones of Perception, Stones of Pathfinding... and Stones of Marking," Agatha answered while glancing over them, "Nothing precious. They are only basic equipment for Scout Devils."

'Scout Devil...' Roland felt a dull pain in his head as he asked Agatha, "Does it mean that the demons have already noticed this place, and have started to send their scouts to the town?"

Chapter 398: Puzzle

"Don't bet on it." Agatha shook her head, "Based on what we experienced during the second Battle of the Divine Will, if they wanted to investigate a human town, they wouldn't act this carelessly."

"What does that mean?" asked Prince Roland.

"To make sure information makes it back to Red Mist tower, this type of reconnaissance would be conducted by two or even three platoons. Quite often the soldiers rode demonic beasts and acted as a

unit, under the protection of Spear-wielding Demons," she said slowly. "In order to destroy the investigative platoons, the Union would often send out flying witches to block their rear and they would send out twice as many Blessed Warriors as there were demons for a head on assault. In the last war, the investigative platoons just kept growing in numbers and even Fearsome Demons and Flying Demons joined the recon. It would be odd for them to send out only two ordinary Mad Demons to investigate. Not to mention they were unprotected and really poorly equipped."

"Maybe they don't think it is necessary to send large platoons to investigate Border Town and that only two ordinary demons would be enough?" Ashes suggested.

"That doesn't make sense," Agatha said after a thought, refuting Ashes' theory. "During the time of the Union, every town near the border, no matter how small it was, would be protected by witches. Since the demons couldn't possibly know of the changes that have happened in the human world over the past 400 years, they would have been more cautious and investigated like they had done previously."

"So you think... they were not here deliberately but found the town by accident?" Roland couldn't help but relax at the thought.

"Very likely." she frowned and seemed to be pondering something. "The demons probably had no idea the town was even here, but it's more likely they were scouting the area surrounding their camps. It's unlikely they thought they would meet anything more than a few demonic beasts. That would explain why they only carried Stones of Lightning for protection, instead of Stones of Unifying Strength which manifest spears that can not be used continuously."

"Wait..." Roland was startled, "You think there are demon camps near by?"

"Of course. What other reason would cause them to be out this way?" Agatha stated simply. "They must have established strongholds on the Fertile Plains and from there spread into the Barbarian Land... Oh, I forgot it is now called the Four Kingdoms."

'Awe, Hell, that's a big problem! If the enemies establish themselves under my nose, how will the town survive?' The prince worried to himself. He then asked aloud, eyebrows raised, "Are they like the camps behind the snow-capped mountains?"

"Yes, they are pretty much the same. During the war, there were several storage towers to store the Red Mist at each outpost. Each tower was guarded by 100 to 200 demons." Agatha stated while nodding, "Considering the Bloody Moon hasn't arrived yet it is not likely that they have built a new Towering Stronghold on the Fertile Plains. Since it isn't easy to transport Red Mist the camps are probably small."

"What are you going to do?" Tilly asked, looking at Roland with concern.

"First, we find the camp—see if it really exists," he paused and said, "then... we wipe it out."

"A decisive choice," said Ashes, smiling. "That's indeed a lord's decision, and don't worry, we'll help too."

'If Agatha is right, before the third Battle of the Divine Will officially starts, demons are unable to spread their influences to the whole Fertile Plains. Given that, once the camp near the Western Region is

eliminated, there will be at least a few years' peace during which demons won't have the ability to strike back even if they wanted to.

However, this plan could be risky due to the fact it would inform the demons that there are humans who live to the east of the Misty Forest and reveal that they have the ability to take the initiative and attack the demons.

If I leave the camp alone, it'll expand and cause me even bigger trouble. First, they'll probably send out more demons here after they realize those two Scout Demons are missing, and after that, it is just a matter of time before they find the town. Second, if it is a larger camp, the demons will just increase in number and attack the town whenever they desire. Even after the Months of Demons has passed, which is very dangerous. How can I expect the First Army to complete their spring plan of attack if they are trapped in the town, busy constantly fighting demons?

When Roland returned to his office, he immediately sent for Lightning and Maggie and quickly gave them a task,

"Please remember that you are never to act without authorization. Once you find the camp, fly back here immediately. Don't engage the demons in battle, they may have flying beasts on hand. Your first priority is to keep yourselves safe."

"Yes!"

"Coo!"

He paused before adding, "If you do find the camp, you'll be rewarded with ice cream bread for dessert after every meal this coming week."

Maggie stretched her neck and said, "You can count on us, coo!"

...

Three days later, Roland received Lightning's report. Out in the Barbarian Land, there was a place suspected to be a Demon's Town, it was located about 130 kilometers away from Border Town.

After roughly mapping out its position, he noticed that it was right in front of the route that the Witch Cooperation Association used to follow. This was less than ten kilometers away from the place where the Association was attacked by demons.

"What do you mean when you say 'suspected'?" he asked Lightning. "Have you not seen their black stone towers?"

The little girl shook her head, her expression perplexed, "I have only seen what appears to be... wreckage."

"What?"

"What I saw was crushed black stone, broken fences pieces, and... a huge hole in the ground," she continued while rubbing her forehead, "the place looks like the one where Agatha found the relic. I didn't track any demons though. After surveying the destruction, I flew back here immediately."

"Another hole?' Roland was stunned, 'Are there giant maggot-like beasts inside this hole too? Last time, there were maggot-like beasts with the relic and they devoured the stone towers remains, this time... did they swallow the demon camp as well?

Did I miss some important clue that links those two events?'

He shook his head and pushed aside the puzzling pieces and asked, "Did you find anything else?"

"No... the camp was deserted. There were no demons there." Lightning replied.

"And no sparkling magic stones either, Coo!" Maggie added.

"I see," Roland mulled over the information he had been given and then quickly began to make arrangements. He looked over at the white haired girl and said, "You take Nightingale and Soraya to the suspected camp site and get pictures of the scene. Then escort Nightingale and Sylvie there so they can check it out further."

"Why not just let Soraya and Sylvie go there together?" asked Lightning.

"Just in case the demons have flying beasts that Maggie can't get rid of," Roland explained briefly.

"Nightingale can use her Mist to help you escape. In any dangerous situation, you just get out of there as quickly as possible."

...

Soraya's "photo" of the scene was soon placed in front of Roland.

Just as Lightning had described, there was a massive crater in the ground, stretching five to six meters across, with broken debris scattered around its edge. The fringe of the hole looked almost like the earth and been churned from below. The snow and dirt were mixed, along with various pieces of the crushed black stone and that was exactly how it looked, like it had been crushed by a massive creature.

Sylvie's findings made him even more uneasy—the underground passage there led towards the snow-capped mountains, the same direction as the one relic they found in the Misty Forest.

Both tunnels led to the same place.

Chapter 399: Contact

In the basement of the palace, King's City, Kingdom of Graycastle.

Timothy sat on the throne with his cheek resting on his right hand. He watched impatiently as the candidates performed their assassination stunts.

"How many fools have I watched since winter begin?

I must have been too lenient recently, to have allowed these clowns to perform."

He sneezed and felt the dryness in his eyes.

Ever since the Hall of Sky Dome was destroyed by snow powder, Timothy had moved the venue of the Council Meeting to the basement of the palace. After some renovation, including opening up several storage chambers, the total space was large enough to accommodate all of the Council's ministers and nobles. Most importantly, this place was absolutely safe. There was only one entrance, and the magnificent palace was directly above. No amount of snow powder could disrupt matters in here. The only disadvantage was the lack of sunlight, and thus light had to be supplied using turpentine torches. The torches, which were placed on the surrounding walls, caused the air in the room to become abnormally dry and stuffy. Furthermore, the turpentine gave off a sweet yet foul smell which made Timothy feel drowsy.

Whenever he thought about his Fourth Brother, Timothy would become furious and spiteful. Had it not been for the eyewitnesses who noticed that the attacks came from the sky, Timothy would probably still be building guard towers recklessly. After he realized that this method was completely ineffective, all he could do was to hold his meetings in this place for the time being.

"Roland Wimbledon will surely pay for this!"

"Your Highness." The voice of a candidate disrupted his thoughts. "Have a look. If that traitor Roland ever dares to appear in front of me, I'll accomplish the mission that you've entrusted to me!"

Timothy took a swift glance at the candidate. In a split second, the candidate landed four flying knives accurately on a barrel that was twenty steps away.

"Is this the stunt that you mentioned?"

"Indeed, Your Highness," he replied assuredly. "Frankly speaking, I was in this line of business previously. I've killed dozens of Rats using this method. If I hide in a crowd, most of my targets won't even know where the knives are flying out from."

"How much do you want?" Timothy shifted his stiff body a little.

"Just 25 gold royals," the candidate counted his fingers and said, "five of which will be used to cover the cost of my journey and my disguise—I'll dress in a common and unattractive fashion in order to get closer to the traitor."

"Knight Weimar." The King beckoned.

"Yes, Your Highness." Steelheart Knight walked into the hall, brandishing his saber and shield.

"Your Highness, what do you mean by this?" The candidate was startled.

"If you defeat my knight, I'll give you your reward straight away." Timothy winked at Knight Weimar.

The latter nodded his head. Then, he took off his head armor and walked towards the candidate.

"Wait, wait... no, Your Highness, this won't do." The candidate flipped his body distressedly to dodge the knight's incoming slashes, and stammered, "I can't fight head on! Ah!"

The knight swiftly followed up with a vicious kick to his stomach, causing him to swallow the rest of his words.

After rolling on the floor for a while, the candidate flimsily flung a flying knife at the knight, but it was easily deflected by the knight's shield. The knight stomped on the candidate's hand and, using his sword, sliced off half of the candidate's arm. Blood spilled on to the ground in a curved line.

"My hand...!" the candidate cried in pain. He held onto the remainder of his right arm and coiled his body.

"Firstly, the royal family isn't as dumb as your average target. Even that foolish brother of mine won't easily go near crowds. And secondly, if you can't even handle a knight, what makes you think you're able to assassinate a lord who's protected by many knights? I'm afraid that once you receive the 25 gold royals, you'll never be seen again." Timothy gestured with his hands. "Throw him out."

Had it been a month or two ago, he would not even entertain this bunch of ignorant and greedy people. He had given a small sum of money to those whom he deemed to have a slight chance of succeeding—yet until now, Roland was still alive and kicking.

It was probably because of this 'benevolent' attitude that caused more and more people to come forward and declare that they could solve the problems created by the traitor, and the methods they proposed became increasingly absurd. There was even a fella who suggested using a tavern maid as the assassin, claiming that her technique was outstanding and that no man could refuse her service. "Utter ignorance! Don't they know the difference between a normal female and a witch?" It was already well-publicized that Roland had raised and groomed several witches, so there was zero chance that Roland would fall for someone so cheap.

Timothy let out a long sigh. "By teaching these ignorant candidates a lesson, perhaps others will think twice about coming forth.

Maybe it was a mistake to recruit an assassin from the citizenry.

The only things that could defeat Roland are pills and snow powder."

He swept a glance around the hall, and, seeing that there were no outsiders remaining, he asked the Prime Minister, "How's the progress of the development of the snow powder weapon?"

According to successive intelligence gathered from Longsong Stronghold, the reason that Border Town miners were able to defeat the Duke's knights and the mad militia was because they used an unusual snow powder weapon. It was, in all likelihood, a semi-closed iron pipe which made use of the force generated by the explosion of snow powder to propel a lead shot towards the target, similar to how a crossbow worked. Timothy was highly interested in this, and had immediately gathered the experienced blacksmiths of King's City to begin creating an imitation of this unique weapon.

"Not ideal, Your Highness." Marquis Wyke shook his head. "The blacksmiths have created 10 or so prototypes of this weapon in accordance with the intelligence, but none of them have anywhere close to the alleged firepower. Only a few can penetrate a knight's breastplate within 10 steps, while all are inaccurate over 50 steps."

"10 steps?" Timothy frowned. "Might as well aim at the face, no? At this rate, how are we going to stop the charging knights?"

"Indeed, there may be some tricks we have yet to master... Another thing, even if we gather all of the city's blacksmiths and apprentices, we can at most produce 20 of these weapons per month, and there's no guarantee that every one of them will work." The Marquis sighed. "Until today, there have been four cases of iron pipes exploding during training, and the guards are rather reluctant about training with this kind of snow powder weapon."

Damn it. Border Town was several times poorer than King's City, yet Roland was able to produce hundreds of iron pipes in one winter. He must have received the assistance of demons.

Timothy angrily switched the topic. "How about the pills? Hasn't the church replied to us yet?"

"Yes, Your Highness." The Marquis responded. "The High Priest said that Holy City was busy fighting the invasion of the demonic beasts, and therefore temporarily unable to provide more pills of madness. He hoped that we could wait until after the Months of Demons to discuss things."

"I don't want to see the traitor remain peacefully in the castle of Western Region, not even one day longer!"

"Looks like I have to personally write a letter to the Holy City of Hermes," Timothy thought spitefully. "In the future, if they want to continue recruiting believers in the Kingdom of Graycastle, they'll have to bring pills for exchange."

Just as he was about to announce the end of the day's Council Meeting, the Minister for Diplomacy, Sir Bullet, suddenly walked up to him and said, "Your Highness, messengers from the Kingdom of Dawn have arrived in King's City, and they wish to see you."

Chapter 400: Alliance Agreement

"According to the customary practice, the reception of messengers from other kingdoms should be conducted in the Hall of Sky Dome. However, it was only recently cleared of rubble from the collapsed ceiling and is still a long way from restoration." As Timothy thought about this, his resentment against Roland grew.

"Bring them to my study," Timothy ordered. After a brief hesitation, he decided to receive them in the palace anyway. No matter what, it would be rude to receive messengers in the basement.

He was clueless as to why the Kingdom of Dawn would send messengers to the Kingdom of Graycastle at this time, especially with no prior notification. Had it been one of the other two kingdoms instead, it would most certainly be a request for aid—either for food or materials to resist the winter cold. There was a saying among the nobility that people who made contact in summer were friends, while those who did in winter were enemies. It held true among all of the kingdoms, except for the Kingdom of Dawn. Although its territory was small, it did not lack in materials, and, in fact, it sold a large amount of food and cloth to the Kingdom of Graycastle every year in exchange for perfumes and crystals.

Timothy shook his head discreetly. He had many things to attend to and therefore intended to dismiss the messengers as early as possible.

When he returned to his study, he saw that the two members of the emissary delegation had been waiting for a long time under the companion of Sir Bullet. Upon seeing His Majesty enter the room, they stood up and bowed. "To the honorable king of the Kingdom of Graycastle, Wimbledon IV, the king of the Kingdom of Dawn sends his regards."

"Bring him my regards too." Timothy nodded inattentively. "Have a seat."

He noticed that the pair of messengers, which comprised of a man and a woman, was very young and looked rather alike. The family insignia on their chests was an antler scepter, and if he did not remember wrongly, this meant that they came from the illustrious Luoxi Family of the Kingdom of Dawn.

"What exactly is Mia IV thinking? Why did he send these young 'uns?" Timothy felt rather curious. Nobles of this age were typically haughty and arrogant, and were vastly different from older nobles who would fight for every little bit of benefit on the negotiating table.

"Are you both members of the Zulu Family?" Timothy pointed to their chests. "I once briefly met Duke Luoxi."

"Indeed, Your Highness." The young man smiled. "I'm Otto Luoxi. This is my younger sister, Belinda Luoxi."

"They're even siblings." Timothy raised his eyebrows. "If that's the case, I don't have to beat around the bush with them."

"It's currently the massacre period of the Months of Demons. Why did the king of the Kingdom of Dawn send you here?" Timothy took the lead and asked. "I guess you are neither short of cotton and cloth, nor of wheat and bread. And of course, even if you met with a disaster, the aid that I can provide is very limited—you should know that the Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince has left my kingdom in a mess. Many places have come to a standstill, and just helping the refugees has stretched the City Hall thin. It's very difficult for me to pull out more supplies."

"With regard to this, I express my deepest regrets," Otto felt his chest and said. "However, Mia IV did not send us here to request aid, but to respond to an even more dangerous threat."

His words startled Timothy. "What threat?"

"The church, Your Highness," Belinda replied. "Currently, the Church's army has seized the Kingdom of Everwinter and the Kingdom of Wolfheart, and large numbers of refugees have swamped into the Kingdom of Dawn. According to the information the refugees brought, the church's methods are abominable and in serious violation of the rules of engagement agreed among the nobility. Those who resist are either hanged or exiled, while only the nobles who agree to switch allegiance are allowed to live."

"This method intends to completely eliminate the noble class and bring the territories under the full control of the church," Otto spoke in a rather heavy tone. "Mia IV believes that the Kingdom of Wolfheart won't be their last target. Given the critical situation that both our kingdoms are in, the church is likely to bring the flames of war to our lands in the coming year. Our king hopes that we can work together and fight back against the church."

"Are you sure that Wolfheart City has already been captured?" After hearing from the other party, Timothy began to frown.

"A thousand times sure, Your Highness." The two messengers nodded in unison.

Timothy had caught wind of the church's aggressive war, but he did not expect that it would be able to seize two large kingdoms in such a short period of time. If the messengers were not lying, the strength displayed by the church was a little too frightening.

Certainly, it was best to verify this matter with the Minister of Intelligence first. The early arrival of snow during the Months of the Demons had impeded his caravan's route, and thus he had not received messages from the Kingdom of Wolfheart for a very long time.

After a long silence, Timothy asked, "What's the specific plan?"

Otto moistened his lips and pulled out a map underneath his arm. Spreading the map in front of Timothy, he said, "If the church sets off from Holy City and attacks the Kingdom of Dawn or the Kingdom of Graycastle, then the other kingdom should lead an army towards the north and invade the Holy City of Hermes. Doing so will suppress the church's offensive and divide its troops."

"Is this an offensive-defensive agreement?"

"Indeed, Your Highness," Otto replied. "No matter the starting point is Coldwind Ridge of the Kingdom of Graycastle, or Northshire of the Kingdom of Dawn, it'll be possible to reach the Holy City of Hermes in a week's time. As long as our main forces are stationed in these two places, the church may decide to retreat wisely—it'll be a blessing to both kingdoms if we can prevent this war from happening."

"If that's the case, I might as well forget about buying pills from the church." Timothy thought silently. "But without them, how am I supposed to drive Roland Wimbledon out of the Western Region?"

Timothy understood that precautions had to be taken against the church. But he felt that it was best to first purchase the pills he needed and unify the entire Kingdom of Graycastle before he reached an agreement with the Kingdom of Dawn.

"This is a matter of great importance. I'll need to consult with my ministers before I decide. The two of you can stay in the palace while you wait for my decision."

"Sure, Your Highness."

"There's another thing I would like to ask. How much do you know about the situation in the Kingdom of Everwinter and the Kingdom of Wolfheart? Did all of the information come from refugees by word-of-mouth?"

"There are a few reports from spies, but not many... When the church sieged Broken Tooth Castle and Wolfheart City, it also sealed off the surrounding roads. That's why we don't know much about the progress of the battle," Otto replied. "According to the refugees, the church used a terrifying siege weapon which demolished the walls of Wolfheart City in only one day."

"It was probably a snow powder weapon, which was possibly revealed from Garcia's side." Timothy gestured with his hands and asked, "I'm not interested in this. Have you heard of any news about the Blacksail Fleet or Garcia Wimbledon?"

"This..." The two messengers exchanged glances before Belinda said cautiously, "We heard that when Garcia was fleeing from King's City together with the King of Wolfheart, she was struck by the church's arrows and perished."

"Garcia was with the King of Wolfheart?" Timothy's heart skipped a beat. "Was her body found?"

"Not that we're aware of. Judging from the church's publicity after the siege, as well as the lack of news from the Kingdom of Wolfheart, it's highly unlikely that they managed to escape."

"Really..." Timothy exhaled and felt a little relieved. Although there was a bit of regret, this was one of the few pieces of good news he had heard since winter arrived, and he hoped that the messengers were right. "Okay then, you two can go and have a rest."

As the messengers took their leave, a smile began to form on his face. "Hear that, Roland Wimbledon? This is the kind of demise which, as a fellow insurgent, you'll end up in as well."