

## Witch 491

### Chapter 491: An Assassination Story

For a moment, Nightingale felt as if the entire world trembled.

As she walked out of the Mist, the scene before her eyes regained its usual color. The darkness created by the magic stone also began to dissipate, allowing her heart to stop beating frantically. The man lying on the ground was not Roland, but a guard whom Nightingale had never seen before. He was wearing the standard uniform of the Honeysuckle Family, and on his chest was a dark red mark which looked like a gunshot wound.

"Why are you here?" She heard a familiar voice cry out from beside her.

She turned her head and realized that the person speaking was Roland himself. He was surrounded by layers of bodyguards at one corner of the hall, which explained why Nightingale did not notice him when she rushed in.

"I..." As Nightingale opened her mouth, she realized that her throat was terribly hoarse, while her limbs were cold and numb. Her body felt so feeble that it was as if she had just narrowly survived a disaster. All that she desired to do at that moment was to hug Roland tightly, but she knew that she could not do so as there were other nobles around. Therefore, if she truly wanted to lead the Security Bureau and protect this territory, she had to avoid acting overly intimate with Roland.

Although her brain forbade her from doing so, she entered into the Mist and walked up to Roland, cutting through the lines of guards. Then, she hugged him with all of her remaining strength.

At once, gasps were heard from the crowd. The onlookers apparently could not understand why a witch appeared out of nowhere and disappeared without saying anything.

In the Mist, Nightingale held on to the prince with both arms. She tucked her head against his chest and listened attentively to his heartbeat. Perhaps, this was the only way to confirm that it was all just a false alarm.

Roland also began to sense what was going on. He clapped his hands and announced, "Everyone shall proceed to the dining hall for lunch first. No one is to leave the castle in the meantime. We'll resume the meeting in the afternoon!"

When only his guards, as well as Petrov, Sylvie and Lightning were left in the hall, Roland asked, "Does the murderer have anything to do with this assassination attempt?"

When she heard Roland's voice speaking to herself, Nightingale began to calm down gradually. She took a few steps back reluctantly and revealed herself once again, pretending that she did not move towards the prince at all, and replied, "Indeed. When I found out that the person directing the criminal was a guard of the Honeysuckle Family, I immediately rushed here." She then explained her findings and Maans' confession. "I couldn't tell that the real purpose was to divert our attention in order to create an opportunity to lay hands on you... thankfully, you're safe."

"His plan worked until the last step, and he accurately calculated the time that I would arrive, as well as predicted the witches' movements." Roland gave a sigh. "This person is wasted as an assassin."

Petrov immediately knelt down on one knee and said, "Your Highness, I really didn't know that he's..."

"Stand up. You've said this before, and you know I don't like to punish people." Roland interjected. "But it was no doubt that due to your negligence of duty, there were agents among the castle servants and the outer guard."

"I..." Petrov opened his mouth to speak, and then lowered his head. "I'm guilty."

"Find out the identity and background of the assassin. I want to know as soon as possible."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

After the eldest son of the Honeysuckle Family took his leave, Nightingale enquired about her worries.

"How was the situation like?"

"Threatening but not dangerous," Roland replied, laughing. "Thanks to Sylvie's warning... but then again, the assassin was already at a disadvantage when he chose to do it in the meeting hall."

After listening to the prince's account, Nightingale began to understand how the attempt took place—but in reality, it was not as easy as Roland put it. Though weapons were not permitted to bring into the hall, the assassin had concealed a dagger under his clothes, and because he was a castle guard, no one conducted a body check on him before he was allowed in.

The assassin's only error was to carry a God's Stone of Retaliation. It was common for the outer guards to adorn magic stones, but in the hall, it appeared particularly prominent—in order not to distract Sylvie, all of the nobles would comply with the request to take off their adornments. Hence, Sylvie noticed the assassin the moment she saw the black cavity, and when he moved towards the prince, she immediately issued a warning.

Although Roland described the following scene as simple, Nightingale broke into a cold sweat as she listened to his story. The hall was approximately 20 meters in length and width, and when the assassin heard the warning, he picked up speed and charged towards the main seat of the long table, where his target was sitting. By the time the prince pulled out his revolver and opened its safety lock, the assassin had already struck him on his lower back with the dagger. As someone who had undergone assassination training, Nightingale naturally understood that compared to the chest and head, which a person would protect subconsciously, the waist area was very difficult to protect, and the severe pain that could be inflicted by a single strike might cause the target to lose his ability to resist, enabling the assassin to easily go for the vital blood vessels in the neck next.

Luckily, Roland was wearing the protective clothing that Soraya specially made for him. The dagger failed to penetrate its coating and thereby could not prevent Roland's subsequent defensive action. He opened fire at the assassin while the gun was literally pressing on the assassin's chest. The two 12mm caliber bullets fired immediately killed the assassin, causing a loud booming sound which led to a huge commotion in the hall.

Nightingale could clearly visualize just how risky this sequence of events was. If His Highness did not manage to open the safety lock in time, or the gun failed to fire off, the consequence would have been

unimaginable... Nightingale turned her head and cast a glance at Lightning, who immediately dropped her head as though to acknowledge her mistake.

"Your Highness, we've figured it out," Petrov re-entered the hall and said. "His name's Shio. He's not a native of the Western Region, but was formerly one of Duke Ryan's castle guards."

"Duke Ryan?" Roland frowned. "Why did you choose someone like that to be your guard?"

"He's just an ordinary guard. At that time, every family lost a lot of manpower, and thus I brought in those who weren't so attached to the Duke. This is how it's usually done in Stronghold..." Petrov answered cautiously. "I believe that it's unlikely that he committed this attempt as revenge for the Duke."

"He's not lying," Nightingale thought. "When a large family fell, apart from the subordinates who were given land and title, the remaining people were perceived by the other families as resources that can be divided. To them, it's simply a change of owner. Because the Honeysuckle Family had long surrendered to His Highness, plus the fact that Stronghold was always managed by Petrov, this portion of people was never examined."

"How many men with a similar background are there?" Roland asked. "Did you also hire men from the Wild Rose, Maple and Wolf families?"

"There're only three or four of them in the outer guard," Petrov replied, nodding his head. "The servants, citizens and serfs from the other three families were assigned to the Honeysuckle and Elk families. I guarantee that they won't appear in Stronghold."

"Okay, then I shall not concern myself with them. But remember, in the castle area, even the men of the perimeter garrison must be chosen from your family, understood? As for the inner castle, I'll arrange them myself."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Meanwhile, seal off Shio's residence. I'll find out the real reason behind his attempt." Roland then turned to look at Lightning. "Inform Maggie to fetch Countess Spear here."

Chapter 492: Reality & Illusion

As she followed Roland back to his office, Nightingale muttered to him, "I failed to protect you..."

"No, you did well," Roland responded, shaking his head. "Think, why did the assassin, Shio, choose the meeting hall of all places? Because he knew that I'm being protected by an extremely powerful witch, and if he didn't trick her away, he wouldn't have a chance. The more arrangements he had to make, the weaker his attack became, and he was ultimately able to strike me with only a tiny dagger."

"But he nearly succeeded."

"It can't be considered a success without killing me right there, and your presence served to restrict this possibility." Roland laughed. "What would he have done if I didn't have you? He would have waited patiently for a chance to launch a fatal attack—there would be chances as long as he could remain in the

castle. This shows that you've already protected me very well. In fact, the safer the territory is, the safer I am as well."

"These aren't empty words of consolation..." Nightingale mused. "His Highness seems to really believe so." She felt a warm surge run through her body, and the nagging feelings of remorse allayed considerably. "Understood. But you mustn't let Lightning and Maggie off the hook this time!"

"Uh, what did they do?"

"When I wasn't around, they should have been by your side to guard against lurking enemies!" Nightingale pointed out. "Like in today's situation, the assassin wouldn't have been able to hurt you at all if Lightning was there to fly you up."

"She's just a little more active..."

"That won't do! Wendy and Scroll will definitely agree with me if they're around. If we don't let Lightning and Maggie understand their mistake, things may go wrong the next time when something like this happens!"

"Oh..." The prince deliberated briefly while stroking his chin. "I got it. I'll punish them by forbidding them to go outside until they complete three sets of MPC (Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry) comprehensive exercises. How does that sound?"

Nightingale inhaled a mouthful of cold air. "Comprehensive exercises... the math section is still okay, but the physics and chemistry sections are even scarier than the basic natural principles. Just the first page alone can make you sleepy, especially those weird formulas and diagrams, which are no different from the incantations in the legends." If it was herself who had to do the exercises, she would likely never be able to go out ever again. Yet, she was the one who came up with the suggestion and thus she felt that it was inappropriate to take it all back. Hardening her heart, she nodded at Roland and affirmed. "Great. This way, they'll surely recognize their mistake."

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The afternoon meeting proceeded smoothly, with Nightingale staying behind and guarding Roland until it was dusk. The general framework and first batch of candidates for the secondary City Hall were finally confirmed.

Petrov Hull was appointed as Chief Executive of the Longsong Region. Apart from overseeing the City Hall, he was also concurrently Minister of Finance, while his father, Earl Hull, served as Minister of Construction. Therefore, Petrov could be considered one of the biggest winners among the Stronghold nobles this time. Even Nightingale gasped silently at this decision. Indeed, His Highness did not place the blame for the assassination attempt on the Honeysuckle Family—by the lords' standards, this could be considered to be a wonderful expression of fairness and clemency.

The other ministries were to be helmed by several outstanding people from the lower nobles. These people were formerly barons or knights, who would normally not be qualified for the higher levels of government. They were highly touched by His Highness' decision to remove the restrictive criteria and thereby expressed their willingness to serve him for life.

Although they sounded sincere, Nightingale had no doubt that should the situation ever change, such as if Timothy or the church captured the Western Region, there was a high chance that these people would quickly forget about their vows.

Before the meeting was dismissed, His Highness repeatedly emphasized two employment principles—the manpower of each family could be used within the ministries, but the proportion must not exceed 30 percent, and their files had to be reported to the City Hall beforehand. Another point was that no matter whether family manpower was used or not, the salaries of all employees would be paid by the City Hall, and any ministry head who kept the money would be harshly punished as criminals.

Nightingale was completely uninterested in these details, and thus she yawned repeatedly as she listened, until she caught sight of Maggie flying back into the castle with Countess Spear on her back, and her spirits lifted at once.

After the dinner party, a line of people followed Earl of the Elk Family to Shio's residence—it was a regular bungalow located in the castle quarter, and the inside of the house was extremely clean, such that not a single shred of paper could be found. Apparently, Shio was well-prepared and had destroyed all possible evidence before he acted.

"Shio spent his days in the castle, and thus we only need to reconstruct what he did at night." The prince advised Summer. "I'll need to find out everything he did here from the first time he contacted patrol member Maans until today. Every segment of activity in this house is important."

Countess Spear summoned her magic power to connect Maggie and Summer together.

Obtaining an abundant amount of magic power temporarily, Summer began to recreate the details of each night. Shio seemed to come back to life. He would sometimes sit in deep thought by the fireplace, and sometimes write things down on paper. All of these segments were recorded by Soraya's eyes.

On the fourth day, he sat as usual by the fireplace, but this time he had an emblem in his hands.

"Wait... I think I've seen this thing before." Roland's voice sounded surprised. "Draw it for me."

By using a Magic Pen, the emblem was quickly drawn on paper. It was roughly the size of a thumb, and its body was a gem that was polished into the shape of a button. Identical logos, comprising of a tower and a spear, were engraved on both sides—this was the typical emblem of the royal family.

"Could he be Timothy's man?" Nightingale asked unconsciously.

Roland frowned without saying a word, and seemed to ponder for a long while before he shook his head faintly and said, "No, this is the keepsake of King Wimbledon III."

"Are you saying... your father?" Rene looked completely astonished.

"Wasn't the king already.... by the eldest prince, Gerald..." Petrov was equally shocked.

"When I was little, I saw this emblem on my father's study desk and even asked him what it was. He told me that every piece of gem represented a warrior who was loyal to the royal family, and therefore the more gems there were, the more stable the throne was." The prince then took a deep sigh. "By the looks of it, Shio was a pawn placed by my father by Duke Ryan's side, and helped him to monitor the development and trend of the entire Western Region."

"If so, why did he want to kill you?" Rene asked.

"Most likely, Timothy found the gem list and ordered the assassination... to these warriors, the emblem means everything, and hence any and every order must be carried out."

"That's why..." Nightingale glanced at the illusion of the assassin—he observed the emblem for a long time and eventually tossed the gem into the fireplace. His expression seemed a little sad, and at the same time, he revealed a hint of relief on his face. Probably, in Shio's eyes, the order represented a kind of freedom.

Having understood clearly the reason for the attempt, Roland did not seem relieved nevertheless. With a grim face, he stared at the sparks in the fireplace and did not shift his gaze for a long time.

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Late at night, after Summer had fallen asleep, Nightingale quietly snuck into Roland's room.

Ever since she was admonished by Wendy, she had not done this again, until now. The assassination attempt had caused a constant undulation of her emotions, and without the presence of Wendy and Anna in the castle, she felt a little more unfettered and free.

Watching Roland Wimbledon in his deep sleep, she emerged from the Mist and quietly walked up to the bedside. She bent down and kissed Roland on the forehead.

Sorry, Your Highness, I can't control myself.

Chapter 493: The Gem Mine

Roland rolled out of his bed under the glare of daylight.

He put on his coat and walked to the window. The snow covering the buildings outside had partially melted to reveal some areas of red roofs and gray walls, which brought both colors and vitality to the landscape. Inside the room, it was still cold, but if you faced the sunlight, you could also feel a little bit of warmth.

The snow had begun to melt.

He stepped into his office and saw his breakfast arranged neatly on his desk. As usual, there was a fried egg, two pancakes, and a cup of warm water. Nightingale had prepared it for him just like always.

"Thanks," Roland said to the empty couch.

"How do you know I'm here?" Nightingale said from the couch as she gradually revealed herself.

"You'll never sit if you get the chance to lie down." He smiled and then put the egg between the pancakes and raised it up to his mouth. "Besides, the couch was sinking where you are sitting. How could I not know?"

"No, I like sitting, too." She dashed to the desk and perched herself on the edge of it "Like sitting here," she added.

Roland would never get tired of seeing her graceful, airy movements, especially the amazing ones she made when she quickly stepped in and out of her Mist.

"You look good. Did you have any nice dreams?"

"Uh-huh, Indeed, I had a very a nice dream," she answered while raising her eyebrow a little.

"Good." Roland hurriedly ate his egg and pancake "hamburger" and continued, "Today, you ought to follow me."

"Because of the assassin?"

"Yes," he replied, "If Timothy gave orders to those on the gem list, perhaps there are still other assassins in the Western Region. However, it's impossible for us to check every single person." He felt it was a shame that people so brave and smart and so loyal to the royal family were employed as assassins. People as capable as they should be placed on more promising positions. With this in mind, Roland became even more resolute to eliminate Timothy's influence as soon as possible.

"As you wish, Your Highness." Nightingale said with a smile, "Where are we going?"

"The mine and the salt well. That's one of the reasons I came to Stronghold."

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Having summoned Petrov and other relevant personnel in the castle, the exploration group proceeded to the suburb of the city.

Roland actually cared more about the iron mines of the Maple Leaf and Wild Rose families, but he still made the gem mine his first stop on the investigative tour, given that gem trade was the primary industry of Longsong Stronghold, and the gem mine was the closest one.

The road leading to the mine became spongy and muddy because of the melting snow, making it impossible to access with a carriage. Therefore, the group rode horses and moved very carefully and slowly. It took them almost the whole morning to get to the edge of the Impassable Mountain Range. This experience strengthened Roland's belief in the saying that "a good road is an access to wealth". Without a hard-surfaced road to the mine, raising its output would be meaningless since any inclement weather could easily hamper transportation of the ore.

They went through a narrow passage and walked into the spacious mine cave, where the mineral vein lay. While 100 torches lined the cave, they could barely light the space inside it. Roland looked around and asked, "Is this a natural cave?"

"Yes, Your Highness." Petrov nodded and continued, "It was found by accident. It used to be a smooth rock wall, but about 300 years ago, it collapsed during an earthquake and revealed this cave. At first, it was only used by local hunters taking shelter from the rain in the entrance, but eventually, they ventured deeper into the cave, and they found these colorful stones."

"You know its history very well," Roland said with a smile.

"These stories are known to every household in the Western Region." Petrov waved his hands to beckon to a man and introduced him to Roland. "This is Denver Crain, the manager of the mine. He will know much more than I about the details of the cave."

"You're Duke Ryan's man?"

"No, Your Highness. The Crains doesn't belong to any lord," replied the man called Denver. He looked as if he was in his early thirties, but he spoke like a composed older man. "We've lived near this mine for generations and my ancestor was one of the hunters who found this gem mine. We've worked for three Dukes, and the mine maps my family has drawn could be piled up to the height of a man. No one knows this place better than the Crains."

He was extremely confident with his knowledge of the mine as he spoke with ease and fluency even in front of a prince of the Kingdom of Graycastle. His sedate manner and black uniform reminded Roland of the stewards of aristocratic families in movies he had seen before.

Due to the fact that everyone had been checked by Nightingale, Roland knew this man was not a lurker. So he asked "Why is nobody working here right now?"

"It's because the Months of Demons has just ended, Your Highness." Denver answered automatically, "The snow in the mountains will melt into water and flow down here. Even though we've built drainage ditches and pools to carry water through the mine, we can't take the water out as quickly as it flows in. As a result, we won't be able to get into the mine hole at the bottom. Based on our usual procedures, we have to wait until summer to resume normal mining."

"Are the iron mines in the territories of the Maple Leaf and Wild Rose families faced with the same situation now?"

"I've never been there, but I've heard that their iron mines are located in higher places, and their mine tunnels stretch upwards. I would guess that their situations may be better, but they'll still have to wait another month before they can mine in their pits."

"It seems that you may need several steam engines to draw the water out." Roland shrugged.

"Steam... engine, what's that?" Denver looked confused.

"A machine that enables you to continue your mining job in all seasons." answered the prince, smiling. "You have a lot to learn about mining."

Denver moved his lips a little in disbelief, but he was able to restrain himself from refuting Roland's comment.

Roland did not notice Denver's expression. He thought it was only a matter of time for this mine to be equipped with tram roads, water-drawing steam engines, and a traction system similar to those widely used in the North Slope Mine of Border Town. They had already successfully sold out a set to a mining tycoon in Silver City. Only he had little interest in gems, so he would put his focus on the iron mines first.

"Okay, we're done here. Let's leave for the next stop now." Roland turned around.

"Wait, Your Highness. The Crains have a little gift for you." Denver, surprised by the prince's sudden decision, walked fast to catch up with him. He took out a small wooden box and handed it to him.



"Ah?" Roland took it with interest. He opened the box and saw two glittering gems inside, reflecting dazzling red and green beams in the light of torches. He was startled. "Th-they're multicolored stones?"

"Yes, Your Highness. They were picked from the highest quality gemstones and a treasure kept by my family for hundreds of years," said Denver, with a hand on his chest. "The Crains are honored to work for the new lord of the Western Region."

Roland was so attracted by the gems that he missed the latter half of the sentence. They looked very familiar, and even a layman in mining like himself had heard their names.

They were called diaspores.

水铝石.

Chapter 494: New Resources

When diaspores reached the gem class, it gave off a dazzling light due to its high refractivity and was highly polychromatic. Unlike other gemstones, which changed from one color to another, it gave off many different colors at the same time, most noticeably red and green. It was obvious why locals called it the multicolored stone. Roland did not connect the stone to diaspores when Barov was introducing it, but he instantly recognized it when he saw it in person.

Also, when diaspores was dehydrated, it would turn into corundum and gem class corundums were the famous ruby and sapphire. Compared to the former, the latter was even more renowned.

However, it was not the gemstones themselves that excited him.

"What about the residue dug out from the mine?" the prince asked excitedly as he closed the wooden box after a long time.

"Are you asking about... the debris from digging the mine tunnels?"

"That's right, and not just rocks, but mud as well. How did you deal with them?"

"They were all carted out and dumped at the bottom of the mountain." Denver seemed confused about why the prince was interested in this. "Don't worry, Your Highness, all good quality ores were carefully picked out and the remains were either broken in the mining process or of poor quality and can't be polished into gemstones. Moreover, the screening process is done by the most experienced members of my family. They never miss out good quality ores."

"You're wrong." Roland smiled and shook his head. "Those things you dumped... might be the real 'treasure'."

"What?" Denver froze in shock, and the other people also seemed confused. None of them could see the mine residue as treasure.

At the time, Roland found it hard to explain this to them, because in this world even steelmaking was difficult to imagine, let alone pure aluminum extraction.

Diaspore consisted mainly of aluminum oxide and was a by-product of bauxite and its discovery suggested that there was probably a large amount of aluminum in this area. That meant, the mud and rocks dumped by them could be used as raw materials for aluminum extraction. As the most abundant metal element in the earth, aluminum was more common than iron and could practically be found everywhere. Lucia could extract small amounts of aluminum from any rock on the ground, but it was clearly not efficient enough for industrial needs. Only places that were rich in aluminum were worth excavating.

This cave in front of him was one of those places.

Roland called Petrov aside and asked quietly, "How has the Crain Family managed this gem mine in the past 200 years? I mean... how did the past lords pay them?"

"I checked Osmond Ryan's checkbooks, and the payment methods were simple. Every year, the Crain Family could choose a box of second-tier gemstones as their fee in a similar manner as weighing grain," explained Petrov. "This box is as long and wide as one hand and deep as half a hand, and as long as the cover could be closed, they could take as many gemstones as possible. Of course, the rarest gemstones had to be given to the lord."

"That means the two gemstones from their family treasure that he just gave me aren't of the best quality?"

"They really are the best in terms of quality, since he wouldn't dare to deceive you, but you know that gemstones are always more expensive when they're bigger."

"You've also accepted his gifts, correct?" Roland stared at the eldest son of the Honeysuckle Family with great interest.

"Um..." Petrov replied awkwardly, "Yes, Your Highness, I'll give them to you as soon as I get back."

"Keep them, I don't care," said the prince nonchalantly. "I'm just curious about how we can assure that this payment is accurate. What if the family secretly takes more gemstones during the excavation? Unless we turned their entire house upside down, we wouldn't be able to detect it."

"There're people monitoring the transport and filtering each cart of ore, and even if the Crain Family steals some, they wouldn't make it too obvious—this is a relationship of checks and balances, since the family is afraid of being punished by the lord, while the lord can't find other people who know the mine so well." Petrov paused. "Anyways, if we replace them with our own people, we still can't ensure that no one will steal."

"I see." Roland nodded. "Then let's continue with this practice. But besides the multicolored stones, I also want the rocks and mud that they dig up. When we get back, I'll draft an initial gathering plan for you to follow."

"Your Highness, is the mud... really more valuable than gemstones?"

"It depends on whose hands it falls into," replied the prince.

What's so important about aluminum? It has numerous uses. Having low density and lasting quality, it plays a vital role in the industrial production and is a crucial material used in aviation technology. To be

honest, aluminum extraction is extremely difficult now, since the amount of electric power required by the electrolysis equipment is way beyond the capability of City of Neverwinter, but Lucia can offer another solution to this problem and may be able to extract some aluminum first with her ability. Then, weapons that are once impossible in this time period will become a possibility, such as large airships.

Roland originally planned to focus excavation on the two iron mines, but now it seemed that he had to adjust his plan.

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When he returned to the castle after inspecting the two mines and a salt well, the sky was already pitch black.

After dinner, Roland excitedly took out a pen and paper and began drafting a utilization plan for the new resources.

First was the steam engine.

It would drastically increase the efficiency of the draining system in the mines, transportation and brine extraction in salt wells. As the Maple Leaf and Wild Rose families had fallen, he planned to relocate some experienced workers from the North Slope Mine and recruit more workers in the Longsong Area, in order for the two new iron mines to be operated first and their ores could be transported back to the Border Area for refining. Meanwhile, the gem mine's excavation would have to wait until Lucia got to Longsong Stronghold to determine the aluminum content in the mine.

The other focal point was the salt well.

As Roland had predicted, besides using the steam engine to drain water and increase production, he also lacked the vital step to refine the products into pure white salt. Since the mineral contents were quite complex, he decided to take a tube of brine from each well, take them back to the Border Area, and give them to Chief Alchemist Kyle Sichi to find out the specific refining process. After the process was obtained, he could set up a factory on the spot to produce table salt on a large scale.

Of course, the salt industry would be managed exclusively by the City Hall, just like grains. The Elk and Honeysuckle families' salt wells could receive the City of Neverwinter's technological support, but the refined salt they produced must be sold to the City Hall at the set market price, not sold to other buyers in order to gain profit. If he could obtain large amounts of refined salt at a low price, he could undoubtedly create a new commercial path for the City of Neverwinter.

Roland believed that this could all become a reality after he defeated Timothy.

Chapter 495: On Top of the Sealine

As the Charming Beauty slowly approached the harbor, Tilly walked out to see that the dock was filled with witches who had come to welcome her.

"Lady Tilly, you're finally back!" Molly rushed up to Tilly first with the help of the Magic Servant.

"Wow, how sneaky!" Honey complained.

"Yeah, where's Orbit? Open the door so we can go over too!" shouted Shadow.

"Stop it. My ability isn't for you to harass Lady Tilly!"

The crowd immediately erupted into a fit of laughter. Looking at everyone's genuine smiles, Tilly felt her worries from the past few days disappearing.

No matter what, this was her real home, a kingdom built by witches.

Camilla Dary greeted her on the dock. "You've gone for so long that I was even worried you wouldn't come back."

"No chance," Tilly said with a smile. "I just didn't expect the Months of Demons to last so long this time. How has Sleeping Island been?"

"Of course, since you entrusted me with it, I wouldn't let you down," said Camilla with one hand on her chest. "The situation has improved overall. Using the Sleeping Spell was a good idea. I'll report the specifics to you later, but now... I'll hand you over to the witches." She blinked. "Otherwise they'll eat me alive."

As a great noble from King's City, Camilla was very skillful at managing things and played a key role in recruiting witches for Tilly. She was the reason why Tilly felt confident leaving the Fjords for a long time and investigating the Western Region.

Tilly shook her head helplessly, passed the Chief Butler of Sleeping Island, raised her hand to the crowd, and was heavily surrounded by a sea of witches.

"Your Highness, did you see your brother? How did he treat you?"

"I heard that the town also has a witch organization, so will they come and live with us?"

"Is it true that in that desolate little town, people don't have to worry about food and clothing, and they all live in new houses?"

"I'm so glad you're back. Everyone really missed you."

Tilly responded to their questions and concerns one by one until Shavi flew onto the dock with a pile of books, and everyone directed their attention to these "priceless treasures".

"What're they?" someone asked curiously.

"Documents from ancient ruins?"

"They don't look like ancient documents. The pages are new, so they're probably legends."

"Or maybe they're play scripts? Honestly, I haven't seen a play for a long time."

"Um... but what should I do since I can't read?"

Tilly clapped her hands to silence everyone. "This is His Highness Roland Wimbledon's presents for you—they include reading and writing pamphlets, basic mathematics, and natural science! Simply put, these are full of knowledge!"

"Knowledge?"

Most of the witches looked confused, while Camilla and some other noble witches were surprised. "Do you actually want to spread knowledge to everyone?"

Tilly nodded. "This is the only way to improve our abilities."

Roland once mentioned that universal education was not easy to achieve and needed a great amount of money and time—when people put their jobs on hand to learn, it meant that the domain would temporarily lose some laborers. Also, encouraging them to study required the support of money, which, combined with teachers' salaries and the cost of building school houses, was not a small amount. Most importantly, it would not have instant profits like businesses and needed to be carried out in the long term by the ruler.

However, it brought profound changes, even more so for witches and normal people. Tilly had already witnessed this at Border Town. Before she went to the Western Region, she could never have dreamed that a group of commoners could have such vigor and vitality.

After returning to the keep, when she was about to arrange the plan for universal education according to Scroll's methods, Ashes knocked on the door. "Thunder wants to see you."

"Ah, it's been for a long time, Your Highness." Thunder smiled as widely and genuinely as usual. "How did it go? Did your trip to the Western Region address your confusion?"

"Honestly, I didn't get my answer." Tilly shook her head with a smile. "He was still reserved towards me. But in our current circumstances, these issues aren't so important for the moment... by the way, do you know about demons?"

"Monsters from hell?" asked Thunder, raising his eyebrows. "I've heard a lot about them in epics and legends, where brave knights killed these terrifying enemies with spears dipped in dragon's blood."

"This time, they're no longer just enemies in books." She sighed.

"Um... what do you mean?"

"I don't know if those dragons exist, but demons... are real." Tilly briefly explained the Witch Union and Battle of Divine Will to him. "Where the Four Kingdoms settle on is used to be Barbarian Land, so if we lose again, humans will have nowhere to retreat."

"How could this be?" Thunder exclaimed after listening to her silently. "All the ruins in different locations are the works of witches, and an ancient witch from 400 years ago was discovered in Border Town? This, this is unbelievable! The mysteries you uncovered in one journey are more than I did in a lifetime!"

Tilly was shocked. "Aren't you afraid?"

"Afraid? Of course, I am..." he said excitedly, "but compared to the burning desire for exploration in my heart, this fear means nothing! Damn it, I wish I could go to the Kingdom of Graycastle to see this living fossil with my own eyes!"

Princess Tilly wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry—his motivation to go to the Western Region was to see Agatha instead of his own daughter. She did not know how to feel for Lightning.

"If not for my recent expedition, I'd probably have to give you the title of the greatest explorer of the Fjords," said Thunder after a fit of exclamations, "but... I also found something quite amazing."

"Please, go ahead."

"I sailed to the east of the Sealine again."

"Sealine?" asked Tilly confusedly. "What's that?"

"Ah, I forgot that you were still in Border Town the last time I returned." He stroked the back of his head. "It's a cliff made from seawater that splits the sea into two surfaces, but boats can still sail freely on it like... spiders climbing a wall."

"What? That's impossible!"

"I had the same reaction as you did the first time I saw it, but the Sealine does exist." said Thunder with great pride. "What's more incredible is that I sailed on the Courage over the Sealine and was lucky enough to witness the tide rise—you have to see it to believe how majestic it was. The flow of the sea water gradually quickens and eventually rushes downwards like falling off a cliff. If Molly's Magic Servant hadn't protected the boat, the Courage would have been snapped into two!"

"I turned the rudder to steer the bow directly towards the current, which formed a delicate balance with the wind. The Courage couldn't move forward, but also couldn't be brought down the cliff by the current." He panted as if he were reliving the excitement. "Of course, the Sealine isn't a real cliff. We all know what a waterfall looks like, with water dropping straight down, splattering droplets everywhere and creating a loud rumbling sound—but there, there wasn't any of that except an accelerating current. I was sure that even if the Courage fell over the Sealine, it would have returned to the lower side, just like how it climbed up."

"What happened next?" asked Tilly impatiently.

"And then the Swirling Sea was filled—I could only clearly see this standing on the Sealine," said Thunder with a low voice. "By the name of Three Gods, I don't know how to describe my shock at that moment. The height of the Sealine shrunk from over 200 meters to about 100 meters as the sea below rose up. This is the reality behind tides!"

Chapter 496: Under the Deep Sea

"The water from the Sealine flows downward to cause the lower level water to rise? How is this possible?"

Tilly pondered for a while. "So when the tide falls, will the water flow backwards?"

"Good question." Thunder clenched his fists excitedly. "Afterwards, my fleet stayed near the Sealine for two weeks, until the tide fell. During that time, we tried all kinds of ways to break through the Sealine, and the most amazing part was sailing on the Sealine itself—do you know what kind of feeling that is?"

To outsiders, it seemed as if we were stuck to the face of a cliff, with our sails completely paralleling to the ocean, as if we could fall down at any second. But we couldn't feel this on the boat at all, and it was like the Courage was sailing in a narrow river, with the vast wall of seawater on one side, and the expansive sky on the other. Of course, we had to wait for the water to slow down to do this, otherwise even the Magic Servant couldn't protect the boat."

"This... makes no sense." Tilly felt her brain sink into total confusion. If some other explorer other than Thunder was telling her this, she would have immediately thought they were making it all up.

"I think so too, but I trust my own eyes more than common sense." He continued, "After two weeks, the tide began to fall—it happened at exactly the same time as the tides rose and fell in the Shadow Islands. The seawater did not regorge and simply backed off slowly, and the Sealine raised from about 100 meters to over 200 meters once again."

"Do you mean that all this seawater just disappeared into thin air?"

"Maybe, but it might have also flowed to somewhere else."

"Where could it flow to?" Tilly said, rubbing her forehead. "The tides are drastic in the Shadow Islands, much calmer in the Fjord Islands, basically nonexistent at the shores of the Four Kingdoms—if this isn't vanishing into thin air, what is it?"

Thunder pointed at the ground.

She sighed. "I remember that you once said the sea level in the Shadow area dropped very quickly as if there was a giant hole sucking it in at the bottom of the ocean. However, no matter how big the hole is, it should still be filled up after a few years."

"I'm only guessing. No one has actually seen what the ocean floor looks like... but I'm very curious about one thing."

"What?"

"Why is the ocean we're in called the Swirling Sea?"

Tilly felt her heart skip a beat as she came to a realization and shook her head, saying, "That's impossible and insane. If an underground cave expelled water to create a whirlpool, how could we not notice it? Also, this name has been around for hundreds of years, so who knows what our ancestors were thinking?"

"That's right. I conducted a simple experiment and found that the water must be shallow enough for the whirlpool to show, but we don't have the ability to see the ocean floor." Thunder smiled. "Meanwhile, that doesn't mean that witches can't do it—I never thought of this before, but when you told me that witches ruled this land 400 years ago, I realized that this sea was probably named during that time."

"I'm a witch," said Tilly with a shrug, "and not a single witch on Sleeping Island can do it."

"I know who can."

"What?"

"The witch lives right on the Fjords but hasn't had any human contact for a long time..." Thunder sighed. "She used to be a close friend of one of my crew's best assistants, but after she awakened as a witch, she left the continent forever. Now, you can only hear her beautiful singing when mist sets on the sea. You've probably heard stories about her before."

"The mermaid that guides the ships... Are you talking about the subject of this legend?"

"That's right." Thunder nodded. "Although I don't know if she'll help me, it's still worth a try. I might need the help of my old friend Margaret."

"I see. Then you must hurry," said Tilly with a frown. "The merchants in the Fjords seem to want to hunt mermaids. A month ago, Sleeping Spell received several offers to capture mermaids. Honey sent me a carrier pigeon telling me the request, but I refused."

"Her songs are the symbol of peace and safety to the sailors and explorers in the Fjords. Those merchants are insane." Thunder asked quietly, "Can you tell me who they are?"

"Sleeping Spell shouldn't reveal the identities of its customers, but..." Tilly wrote a few names in the air with her hand. "You didn't hear it from me." Since she was also a witch, Tilly could not sit by and do nothing as the leader of Sleeping Island.

"That's right." He smiled. "They'll get what they deserve."

The two smiled at each other, and Thunder said, "I came to tell you about my new adventures. Besides, I want to ask you a favor."

"Go ahead."

"I heard that Crescent Moon Bay has a new kind of boat that isn't powered by wind and can sail much faster than sailboats. My sources told me that this kind of boat was produced in Border Town," said Thunder. "If I want to keep exploring the Sealine, I'll need a much bigger and faster boat that can withstand the currents under strong winds." He handed her an envelope. "Money isn't an issue, as long as the boats are fast. Can you give him this order?"

Tilly understood his intentions. "You don't want Lightning to know?"

Thunder said helplessly, "If she finds out, she'll insist on going with me. There're too many unknowns in the Sealine, so it's too risky for me to take her."

"But she's already a great explorer. She was the one who found the stone tower ruins in the Misty Forest," Tilly thought. However, she still nodded. "I understand. I'll act as a temporary messenger between you and Roland Wimbledon."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

After Thunder left, Tilly pondered for a long time and took out the ancient books from the ruins in the Shadow Islands, hoping to find clues about the Sealine or tides. Following the method Agatha taught her, she twisted her magic power according to the shapes of the letters, and their meaning appeared in her mind. It was as if she wasn't reading, but the books were telling her their contents.



Some of the books recorded the writers' experiences in the Barbarian Land, some were sailors' diaries, and others mentioned important plans of the Union. The more she read, the more confused she became. These books had nothing to do with each other, obviously not written by the same person. To her surprise, none of them mentioned anything about the Sealine, the spire under the sea, the telescope, or the Giant Stone Gates, totally different from what she expected. She thought that as long as she could read the Union's words, she could uncover some of the ruins' secrets, or even find the reason why the Shadow area's sea level rose so quickly. But now, she felt like she was piecing together random scribbles.

"Wait... piece together?" An idea popped into Tilly's head. She spread open three of the sailing diaries, placed them together, and checked them carefully. Their dates were far apart, some even decades apart, and their routes varied from the seas near the mainland to the Fjords. It was like someone had gathered all these things from different sources and placed them into the ruins.

At this thought, she felt a chill creep up her spine.

Who would do such a thing?

Chapter 497: A Chaotic Departure

The Longsong Area Harbor, City of Neverwinter.

Two concrete boats were docked as workers carried linen bags onto the shore, and the newly appointed officials in the Ministry of Agriculture counted them. The entire harbor was bustling with energy, which was a rare sight for Stronghold, a place still experiencing the aftermath of the Months of Demons. After being inspected and counted, the seeds in these bags would be distributed directly to every farmer.

"Your Highness, can the Golden Ones seeds really triple the wheat production?" Petrov was still a little skeptical. "Won't that mean that the produce could feed everyone in this city?"

Barov had said something similar to Roland before. To most of the noble, constant hunger was quite common among the civilians. "Feeding everyone is the basic responsibility of a lord. We're only taking the very first step. Also, it's not just because of my benevolence. Hungry subjects can't fully devote themselves to the construction of the city."

"But... this is no doubt an incredible accomplishment. I don't know of any other city in this kingdom that can achieve it."

"It's indeed an achievement, but I contributed very little to it. This is mostly the witches' work—without Leaf's modifications, there would be no Golden Ones."

Petrov was silent for a while. "Perhaps we really were wrong before."

"What do you mean?"

"We had the wrong attitude towards witches." Petrov sighed deeply. "Most of the nobles didn't care about the church's propaganda, but we still despised and distrusted the witches, so it wasn't hard for us to go along with the church's violence. Even if we used the witches, we treated them like slaves... Only

Your Highness saw their true value and treated them like humans. This is the most incredible part—they really are special."

"Not only did you ignore the value of witches, but also ignore the power of the people, which is actually even stronger. Witches are like a catalyst and when they work together with the common people, there can be great improvements in civilization." However, Roland did not say his thoughts out loud. "We can still make up for the lost time. After all, we're all the same."

"Your Highness, the boiler is ready, and the Victory is set to sail," reported a guard.

"Tell everyone to board the boat. I'll be there shortly." The prince turned to Petrov. "The instruction team of the Ministry of Agriculture should arrive by this afternoon. They will show you how to plant the Golden Ones. As for the mine construction, population growth, universal education, and building factories, we've already discussed enough in the meeting. Just follow the plan and try to address any problems you run into by yourselves before asking me." He patted the eldest Honeysuckle son on the shoulder. "I'm leaving this place in your hands. If you serve me well, you won't be just the executive officer of the Longsong Area forever."

"I won't let you down, Your Highness." Petrov bowed.

Roland boarded the concrete boat and ordered to set sail. Following the long sound of a horn, the Victory slowly left the shore and sailed towards the Border Area.

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"How many Bald Boats are there already?" Joe clicked his tongue. "They're all coming from Border Town!"

"It's called the Border Area. Didn't our Lord say that we're all part of the same city as the town now?" Snaketooth twitched his mouth. Joe nicknamed the strange sail-less boats "Bald boat", but he preferred to call them Concrete Boats—their broad gray hulls looked like giant bedrocks, not even budging an inch as the movers ran around on them. "What's it called again?"

"City of Neverwinter," Tigerclaw chimed.

"Who cares? It has nothing to do with us." Joe exclaimed excitedly. "You're going to be taking this kind of boat to Border Town, right? Be sure to figure out why it can move without oars and what the white mist and black fog it spouts are!"

"This really has nothing to do with us," thought Snaketooth. "At least the city construction will give everyone a job."

"Are you really planning on leaving?" Sunflower seemed upset. "If you have to work as a handyman no matter where you go, why would you go to a foreign place?"

"Because we can earn one extra silver royal," said Tigerclaw, chuckling. "We can earn six silver royals if we stay here, but seven if we go there. If we can work on either place, we're obviously choosing the one with more money."

"I wasn't asking you." Sunflower rolled her eyes at him and turned her attention to Snaketooth.

For some reason, Snaketooth suddenly felt a little guilty. After the construction of the City of Neverwinter, the Lord kept his promise, and countless recruitment notices suddenly appeared in the square. However, the Rats had very few job options, which were mostly handymen and mason apprentices, and they were offered a lower salary than others. Of course, this was still better than their former lives, when they lived lack of food-if the salaries could really be distributed on time.

He told his friends that he was going to Border Town for the higher salary, but what he really wanted was to be closer to Paper. Faced with Sunflower's intense stare, he decided not to tell the truth and said, "My reasons... are the same as Tigerclaw's."

"Are you ever coming back?"

"Beep... Beep..." Suddenly, a siren began to wail at the harbor, and a red flag began to wave.

"It's our turn to leave, hurry!" Tigerclaw grabbed Snaketooth's hand and dragged him towards the harbor.

The crowd behind them also began to move as the siren rang. When they entered the security inspection area, Snaketooth felt as if he was being carried by the masses. He held his suitcase to his chest and kept staring back, but he couldn't see Sunflower or Joe over the dense waves of people.

A few officers in black uniforms were checking tickets at the end of the line. "What's your name? Assigned group? Take out your documentation!"

Snaketooth came immediately after Tigerclaw. He took out a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and handed it carefully to the officer. "Snaketooth, Fifth Construction Team of Redflag Group..."

The officer ignored his introduction, scanned his ticket, and slapped it onto his chest. "Boat on the left. Next!"

Tigerclaw was already waiting for him at the entrance. "They didn't ask for bribes. That's amazing."

"Indeed... they didn't." Snaketooth half-heartedly folded his documentation, put it in his pocket, and scanned the harbor for his friends.

When the Concrete Boat sounded its horn and slowly sailed away from the harbor, he finally saw them on a flight of stone steps—Sunflower was waving Joe's jacket, while Joe hugged his elbows and crouched behind her.

Snaketooth also took off his jacket and waved it furiously, ignoring other passengers' stares of confusion.

Their eyes finally met once again.

"Take care!" he shouted. His friends also seemed to say something, but the sound of the boat's engine drowned out their voices.

Sunflower followed the boat along the shore for a while, but the Concrete Boat was soon too far away and disappeared from her sight.

Even then, Snaketooth failed to give her his answer.

## Chapter 498: The Roland Gunboat

It took Roland a whole day to return to the Border Area, and his back ached with weariness. After washing his face and brushing his teeth, he went to bed early, and he didn't feel refreshed until noon of the next day.

He thought, "I must have a soundproof cabin, a soft desk chair, and a large bed on my private boat. Otherwise, I'll have to sit on a trembling hard deck stool and listen to the roar of the steam engine, which will torture both my body and soul."

The first thing Roland did when he walked into his office was to call his director, Barov Mons, and Minister of Agriculture, Sirius Daly, to his office. Although there was only one week left before the planned date of the spring offensive, he could rest assured since Iron Axe was governing the military. The most important thing at the moment was to manage the agricultural production well, namely spring sowing. After all, he would be much less worried when he had a supply of grain.

"I saw seeds being transported at the Longsong Pier, so with enough Golden Ones, the crops there won't be too bad this year. But we should focus on the Border Area, since we're everyone's model, proof, and example!" Roland said with one hand knocking on his desk. "How is the spring sowing going? Someone tells me."

"Your Highness, here's the situation," Barov spoke first. "Among the first batch of promoted serfs, only 30% of them are willing to continue farming; plus the newly employed ones, the agricultural population is about 10,000. According to last year's average wheat yield, the grain that these 10,000 serfs produce should be able to feed 40,000 to 50,000 people." He paused and then added, "And this number is calculated according to the official citizen's quota for purchasing grains, which is far more than the daily consumption of other cities' citizens. If we calculate according to the minimum amount of grain people need to stay alive, this number can increase by 20,000."

"That's about it, Your Highness," Sirius added. "But those conclusions are made by the Ministry of Agriculture according to the statistics from two years ago. This year, half of the serfs, mainly newly employed, will use the Golden Twos modified by Lady Leaf. Honestly, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed that one wheat straw could produce so many ears. Also, more than 2,000 serfs will change to planting potatoes and corn this year, which makes it hard to predict the actual yield for this year."

"As for the sowing process, farmlands are currently being plowed. According to the Crop Farming Brochure, farmland needs to be plowed three times, and raised compost must be mixed in the soil—usually, this process takes three to four weeks, depending on the number of laborers and the farm tools they're using. But the serfs employed last year all rented iron tools, which should greatly shorten the plowing time."

"As for the ditch depth and seeding distance, I've arranged apprentices to educate the serfs to farm with the optimal methods introduced on the farming brochure."

It was easy to see that the former knight of the Wolf Family had done a lot of research on farming. He obviously had considered all aspects and made points that Roland could not help but agree with.

The excessive dependence on the land itself led to the agricultural underdevelopment in this era. Namely, people believed that owning land was all there was to farming. Sometimes, in order to protect the farmlands, they would let farmlands rest for a few years, which was very inefficient. Now that the City of Neverwinter had controllable water irrigation, natural fertilizer, and scientific planting methods, plus Leaf's modified seeds, the land yields greatly surprised all the residents. However, a third of the 30,000 total population was engaged in agricultural production, which was too high of a percentage for Roland. He wanted to efficiently reduce the agricultural population by improving farming tools, such as manufacturing agricultural equipment which used animal or mechanic power.

"Well, keep the momentum going," Roland said with satisfaction, "and people who have been assigned to the Longsong Area should keep everything well documented, in case we want to extend this model to other cities."

After dealing with agricultural affairs, Roland left the castle. Accompanied by Nightingale and the guards, he went to the dock of the Redwater River.

The ship, which was constructed by Anna, entered the weapons installation phase two days ago. Now, with its hull painted with a gray and red anti-corrosion coating, the ship quietly stood on the crossties. It was the size of about three concrete boats and seemed extremely mighty. Unlike the cement paddle steamer, which had no cabin, this ship's side port was almost three meters wide and could fit the boiler and steam engine. There were also no paddle wheels on both sides. Another characteristic was a bridge at the center of the hull. Although the bridge was only about six meters tall, it looked very prominent.

Of course, as a shallow water gunboat, its most important equipment was its 152mm giant cannon. In order to save the manufacturing time, Roland did not let Anna produce the naval artillery, but tore down the one on the city wall and planned to install it on the ship.

Now, it was standing in the dock, waiting for hoisting—the final step.

"Your Highness." Anna waved at Roland when she saw him. "Over here!"

The prince walked over with a smile on his face. "How is it? Is the construction going well?"

During his absence in Border Town, Anna took care of all the manufacturing work. Although she had all the blueprints of its key parts, it was entirely an unprecedented huge project, so it was natural to run into all sorts of problems.

"Not so well." Anna shook her head. "There were some tricky problems—side hull deformation, propeller leaking, hull tilting after being welded with a bridge, and the gun platform couldn't hold a cannon, but I solved all of them."

"All... solved?" Roland asked surprisedly.

"Yes." With a big smile, Anna explained while counting her fingers. "There was a hull deformation because the steel plate of the board was too thin, so I added fixed carriages. The propeller leak was caused by the gap between the casing and the gear lever, so I wrapped the gap with a sink so that the water inside won't run everywhere and can be pumped out by a steam engine. The bridge tilting was caused by uneven weights, which were fixed with a little modification. The gun platform problem was the most difficult one, but I drew inspiration from the revolver design—I first cut a row of indentations

on the bottom ring, then I put in a falcula, which could be inserted in between gears, and it could simply fix the upper rotating gun carrier in any direction."

Roland blinked his eyes and spoke after a long pause. "You're a genius." For him, those problems were not difficult to deal with, but he had drawn countless mechanic sketches. Especially for the last problem, probably only someone as observative as Anna could associate a revolver with the fixing method of the gun platform.

"By the way, Your Highness, does the boat have a name?"

"Not yet," he said, raising his eyebrow, "and why do you ask?"

"The soldiers from the First Army came every few days and fought eagerly to carve their own names onto the bridge," Anna said with a smile. "They say you promised that the best gunner could have a gunboat named after him."

"Ah... I see." Rodney from the Artillery Battalion and Nelson from the Artillery Battalion came to Roland's mind. "But not for this ship, because the name of the first warship not only represents the ship itself but also represents its rank and model number." He tilted his mouth. "I can't hand over this honor to anyone else, so I'll name it the Roland—the Roland No. 1."

Chapter 499: Prelude to the Spring Offensive

Garden Mansion, the Inner City of King's City, Kingdom of Graycastle.

Since Roland Wimbledon's surprise attack on the palace which successfully destroyed the Hall of the Sky Dome, Theo's status had greatly improved. Every member of the "Dove and Cylinder" showed him great respect, and this intelligence organization was finally established.

Along with several core personnel, Theo could also affect Skeleton Fingers' decisions as a result of his contributions over the past six months. He also had a good knowledge of the activities of the other Rats' organizations, since he had informants in both the patrol team and the Black Street. They provided him with privileged information only for the money, and they did not care at all who they worked for. However, his gold royals still could not buy his way into the circle of the upper nobles, who cared more about family background and titles. Fortunately, through his connections with the heads of the Rats, who had close relationships with the great nobles, he managed to get some less important information now and then.

For example, he heard the news below.

"Timothy is sending a platoon of 500 men to block the Redwater River?" Theo tapped on the arm of his chair and asked. "Is he really going to do that?"

"Yes," Rockhill answered, "half of his platoon will be Blood Sail Rats. That's what the boss said himself. It's a profitable job, so the Rats fought each other over it, and several of them even got injured or killed."

"Indeed, it's profitable," Clown whistled and said. "Just think about it... What will they block in the river? The merchant ships! And what's the punishment for violating the king's ban? Confiscating the cargo and

imposing a fine! Who can do a better blackmail job than Rats? Ah, of course... the patrol team is also good at it?"

"Half of them are Rats, so the other half must be Timothy's guards," said Hill Fawkes calmly. "I'm told that in the countryside this morning, there were four hawk-headed ships in the harbor."

Theo could not help but frown. The hawk-headed ships were high-speed, inland river warships that had slender hulls, with sails and oars, as well as embolons below the water and iron hooks on both sides. Once they caught up with their target, they could be tightly hooked together to enable the soldiers on one ship to easily jump onto another one to fight, making it difficult for merchant ships to escape from them.

"Based on all the information we've collected already, it's clear that Timothy is going to send a fleet of four warships carrying more than 500 people, including over 200 fully armed guards, to block the Redwater River." He sighed inwardly, thinking that it was really bad news.

They had got wind of Timothy's intention to block the Redwater River trade route before the Months of Demons, but most people did not take him seriously back then and thought he would only set a blockade in the canal of King's City. Nobody believed that he would dare to set a blockade between the Western and Central Region to declare an economic siege on the City of Neverwinter. That would anger the lords of Silver City and Redwater City, who would never allow this ban to cost them any great economic loss.

However, now with four warships that could easily block merchant ships anywhere they wanted, Timothy's situation was different, as the other lords could not compete with him at all on the water. Even though this blockade would turn the lords against him, nothing could shake his resolve to defeat Roland.

Theo looked at Hill, who nodded at him and voiced the same thoughts, "Timothy may not set a fixed blockade on the Redwater River. He'll just attack any caravan he spots, and his troops will act as pirates on water and bandits on land. An enemy force of 500 people is indeed a nightmare for any caravan. By doing so, he'll probably succeed in cutting off the Western Region's supplies."

"We have to report this to His Highness as soon as possible," Theo said in a deep voice.

Last year, Border Town had bought a large amount of grain, clothes and ore, and this year, because of the town's merger with Longsong Stronghold, it had a much higher demand for resources. If Timothy succeeded in his attempt, it would definitely cause Prince Roland massive trouble. They worried about this vexing issue for His Highness and wondered if he could solve this problem.

Sounds of flapping wings then came from the backyard.

As Theo stood up to open the door to the backyard, a gray falcon flew in as quickly as a flash of lightning and gently landed on his shoulder.

The circus members simultaneously lowered their heads, putting their hands on their chests, to show respect for the message from the Western Region.

Theo took a piece of paper from the messenger and glanced at it. His heart skipped a beat.

"Ha... haha." He could not help himself from laughing out loud, even though he knew that he should hide his emotions as an intelligence officer. It was such timely, good news for him. "We don't need to worry about it anymore," he said with visible joy.

"His Highness already knows about it?" Hill asked.

"No, but he's going to solve it once and for all," he said in a low but excited voice.

"Once and for all?" Clown was confused. "You mean..."

"Yes, the First Army of His Highness has already left for King's City!" Theo clenched his fists. "It's time to overthrow Timothy!"

He had known that His Highness would launch his attack this year, but he never expected it to happen so soon, as the prince had not told him any specifics about the attack in order to keep the plan secret. Now, he finally knew that the attack was actually scheduled for spring, just in time for the plowing season.

"It's finally time." Hill inhaled deeply, suddenly got down on one knee, and said, "Just give us His Highness's orders."

"For the new King!" the other five people shouted and kneeled likewise.

The thought of the new kingdom also excited Theo. If Timothy was overthrown, Roland Wimbledon would become the only successor to the throne of the Kingdom of Graycastle. And if Roland was crowned king, Theo would probably gain greater power and reach a new height that he had never dreamed of before.

He did not even have to think about their chances of winning. Anyone who had witnessed the First Army in action would never doubt that Roland would be victorious over Timothy in this attack.

"His Highness orders us to stay away from the west gate of King's City. He also orders us to prevent the Rats from taking advantage of the chaos during the attack, and to restore the social order as soon as possible after the war." Theo slowly read out the remaining part of the secret letter. "Do everything in your power to help the civilians suffering in the war, such as providing medical aid, free shelter, and food, and hand over this job to the First Army when the situation is stable."

"Th-that's it?" All of them looked at each other and were totally at a loss. "His Highness didn't order us to trick the guards into opening the city gate, or set fires in different directions in order to mislead the enemy?"

"No, those're His Highness's wishes," Theo put the letter away and said with a smile. He thought it was just like Roland's style to care more about the people and social order, not to compel any intelligence personnel to step onto the battlefield. He felt that Roland's order also suggested that the prince thought nothing of Timothy's forces.

Chapter 500: Body of Steel (Part I)

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Roland stood on the balcony on top of the command room of his boat and felt his heart stir with pride as he watched his fleet of boats lined up behind him.

Besides the flagship, the Roland, all the other boats were slow and clumsy concrete boats. However, with more than ten of them in a fleet, they still looked magnificent. The massive fleet puffed long trails of white smoke out of their chimneys and parted the river as they crashed through the waves, and they seemed to be completely unstoppable.

The gunboat was apparently the fleet's main attraction—its towering bridge and sleek appearance separated it from ordinary sailing ships and concrete boats. It dominated the inland rivers with its weapons, including a 152mm main cannon and two Mark I machine guns, custom-made high-pressure steam engine, and a propeller driving system that enabled it to reach a speed of 12 kilometers per hour.

"You seemed to be in a good mood." Nightingale observed as she tidied her windswept hair. "Is it because you'll be returning home soon?"

"You mean, the palace? No way, I'm never going back there," he said, shaking his head. "The Western Region is my real home. I'm happy because this conflict will be over soon."

"Hm... half of that is a lie."

Roland remembered with a shock that she could tell when people were lying. "Ahem, alright, I'm actually proud of myself for managing to produce many boats during the Months of Demons."

"You're telling the truth this time." Nightingale blinked. "But you sound a little full of yourself."

"That's why I lied."

"That's understandable." She chuckled and walked over to Roland. "I don't blame you. I wouldn't mind if you told a little lie, as long as it has nothing to do with me."

"... If you don't mind, then don't point out my lies," thought Roland querulously.

"By the way, I never thanked you," whispered Nightingale as she gazed into the distance.

"Thank me for what?"

"For ending the conflict and bringing peace to the Kingdom of Graycastle. Both commoners and witches will live happily under your rule," she said slowly. "I always knew that you'd achieve this, but I didn't think it'd happen so soon."

"It's not that fast. Even after I dethrone Timothy, the noble will resist with all their might. Uniting the entire Graycastle may take another few years." Roland sighed. "Progress is never easy, so we still have a long way to go in achieving our goal."

"This is already so much better than I imagined. Before this, I was worried I would never live to see this day."

"Come on, don't say like that?" Roland glared at her. "Do you think I'll put you in danger?"

"It's expected for a combat witch like me to always be in battle, and breaking convention takes sacrifice." Nightingale turned her head. "I had prepared for this the moment I swore my loyalty to you."

"I'm sorry I let you down," Roland said with a shrug. "There will definitely be sacrifices, but our enemies will be making them. Anyway, I should thank you."

"Why?" Nightingale asked in surprise.

"Because if I never met a witch, I wouldn't have the confidence to do what I'm doing now."

If not for Anna, he would not have decided to save these witches, and if there was not magic power in this world, he would still be cautiously living his primitive life in a run-down Border Town.

"You're... telling the truth." Nightingale looked up at him.

"Of course I am," said Roland with a smile.

Suddenly, a golden figure descended from the sky and landed next to them. "Your Highness, four sloops with paddles on both sides are approaching us from 20 kilometers away, and they look like the hawk-headed ships described in the report." said Lightning, "but I didn't see any hawk statues on the ships."

"The hawk head probably refers to the embolon under water." Roland patted her head. "Good job, keep up the good work."

"So... can I do less practice questions as punishment?" The little girl stared at the prince with begging eyes.

He could not help but laugh. "Alright. If you promise to keep still in the future, you only have to do one set of questions."

"Yes, Sir!" Lightning's eyes lit up, and she immediately leapt up and flew towards the East in a flash.

"You shouldn't have let her off so easy." Nightingale complained.

"She'll learn her lesson if she's rewarded." Roland dismissed her criticism with a wave and turned to walk towards the stairs. "Let's go back to the command room. We have work to do."

...

The small, square command room contained nothing but a wooden table and four benches. The commander of the First Army Iron Axe, the leader of the Gun Battalion Brian, the leader of the Artillery Battalion Van'er, and the captain of the Victory Cacusim stood by the table to draft the battle plan for their first battle in the river.

"According to Theo's report, Timothy's four battle ships are inland galleys. They're about as fast as our concrete boats, but they're agiler." Roland said, pointing to the chart on the table. "Usually, these ships will approach enemy ships, so their crews can jump onto them and fight. They can also be filled with flammables such as gunpowder or sulfur and crash into their target, destroying both ships. However, since our enemies' goal is to block the river and plunder our boats, they probably won't use the second method. "This is our first time to fight on a river, so please feel free to share any ideas you have."

"Your Highness, it'll be hard to hit a moving target with a moving cannon, so I suggest we fire when we're closer to their ships," suggested Van'er. "As long as we're about 50 meters away, I promise every cannonball will sink an enemy ship!"

"But I hear that firing shells not only wastes a lot of gunpowder, but also requires Miss Anna to make the shells," said Brian, shaking his head. "I think it's better to wait for the enemy to board our ships and then riddle them with the bullets from our heavy machine guns."

Roland turned to Cacusim and said, "What do you think?" He summoned this old man into the command room because he was the only person in the City of Neverwinter who had fought on boats before. According to him, he ran into pirates many times when he was a merchant, and even being plundered still counted as a kind of experience.

"Um, Your Highness..." Cacusim hesitated for a while. "In my opinion, we should just charge towards them."

"What?" the other two men all asked, staring in shock.

"Your ship is large, fast, and made of steel, so their wooden ships will probably collapse upon contact. Even if you don't destroy them, any leaks will prevent them from moving further." He glanced at everyone. "Of course, this, this is just my personal opinion."

This tactic reminded Roland of a poem that said, "With the sun shining and waves high, a D flag hangs from the mast."

"Alright, let's follow this plan." He finally decided. "Even though we don't have a D flag, a flag with a tower and four stars will have the same effect." "I order the Roland to raise the flag of City of Neverwinter, sound its horn, and proceed at full speed ahead!"