

Witch 561

Chapter 561: The Magic Power of Blood

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Agatha was relieved when Roland and the woman finally left.

[Was I being too much just now? Perhaps I should be more kind towards the lord even in the face of a common people. After all, 400 years have passed, the world is different now.] Despite these thoughts, she still did not like non-witches entering the laboratory where the Sigil was produced and she did not want His Majesty to know the method of making the Sigil.

Of course, the latter would soon be revealed.

Agatha turned around to set up the six square wooden boxes she had prepared in the morning and inserted the God's Stones of Retaliation His Majesty collected into them.

It was the template for making the Sigil base.

Four Sigils of Listening, a Sigil of Screaming and a Sigil of Observing were what she needed to make.

As she had expected, His Majesty did not choose any combat Sigils, but instead, he chose the basic supplementary Sigils in accordance with the Magic Stones in hand. The action of using high-quality Magic Stones left by a Supermagic to make the Sigil of Screaming and the Sigil of Observing was considered a waste in the Quest Society.

Now that Roland possessed powerful firearms, the demand for the combat Sigils was of course, not as strong.

Not to mention that the stronger the Sigil was, the more magic power would be required.

A knocking sound came from outside the shed again.

It seemed that in addition to an independent research tower, she would also need a few servants. Agatha reluctantly put down the Magic Stone in her hands and opened the wooden door.

"What's the matter, Your Majesty? Anything else..."

"Thank you for waiting, Miss Agatha."

"Mmm hmm, do you need me to treat the demon again?"

It was Anna and Nana entering this time. They were the assistants Agatha had requested from Roland.

"No. Ahem," she corrected herself and said, "You're just in time. I've just finished screening. Let's put the materials into the boxes, and then we can officially start the production."

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When the bright blue blood flew into the wooden box through the coated flexible tube, some incredible changes began to happen to the God's Stones.

When the blood dripped onto the stones, a series of bubbles emerged. Like a burning candle, the corner areas of the hard stones were melted into sticky liquid flowing down from the stones, revealing the God's Stones themselves.

The demon was desperately struggling, exhausting the very last effort it had left as if it was aware of what they were doing. Unfortunately for it, the struggle was futile under the confinement of the solid iron chain.

Soon, the six boxes were filled with the blood of the Mad Demon. The first box looked as if it were boiling. The surging liquid was mixed with fine sand, mercury, and the God's Stone, looking sticky and muddy.

Anna carefully observed the changes and asked, "Does the raw materials affect the quality of Sigil?"

"Yes, it mainly depends on the God's Stone of Retaliation and the magic power of blood. The Quest Society thought that the magic power transformed all aspects of the body. The physical quality of Senior Witches was apparently better than that of ordinary witches. Moreover, the transcendents had achieved their limitation at this point. In order to improve the efficiency of the Sigil, we would try our best to choose the blood of the strongest demon and the God's Stones of the best quality to make better Sigils. For example, Lady Alice's God's Sigil of Retaliation was completed with the blood of a dying Supermagic on the battlefield.

"Will the same happen when a witch's blood merges with the God's Stone?"

"Not the same. The God's Stone won't melt like a candle and the reaction won't be as intense. The liquid formed can flow freely like water now. However, the demon's blood will eventually solidify and become as hard as stone." Agatha said while inserting a piece of separating panel into the wooden box, "Therefore, the process of making Sigil is similar to melting metal. Before it's completely solidified, we have to embed the Magic Stones and complete the most crucial step—connecting the Magic Vein.

"Vein?" Anna was curious. "Like a plant?"

Agatha nodded. "Remember what I said previously? The Quest Society thought that only life could carry magic power, and without the Magic Vein, a Sigil will only be a dead object. The Magic Stones would still be individual entities but would not jointly produce the incredible power after the combination."

"Does this mean that the demon's blood can give these ordinary substances... life?" she asked in surprise.

"It doesn't happen with the demon's alone." Agatha calmly answered, "We need a witch's blood as well."

Nana was shocked. She covered her mouth with her hands.

"The Quest Society only discovered this secret by accident. Mixing the witch's blood with the demon's would produce a strange effect, keeping the melted God's Stone 'alive', like a plant. The vein would not lose the effect of magic power even if it was left aside for a long time... I'm not sure how to describe it. Anyway, you'll understand when you see it. "

The first box of liquid had cooled down, revealing a layer of grayish light. It looked like condensed blue wax oil.

Agatha removed the panel, leaving two hemispherical grooves and a strip of shallow groove in the box. Then she picked up the knife on the table and slid it across her wrist—the bright crimson blood gushed out thickly, filling up half of a wine glass. She said to the little girl, "Help me heal the wound, please."

This was the reason Agatha had chosen both of them.

Anna had the best learning ability within the union. She was suitable for the inheritance of the skill and Nana could help to effectively reduce Agatha's pain. Healing witches were the main forces of the front-line combat in Taquila, it was impossible to arrange for any of them to support the Quest Society. Most of the time, the laboratory could only use herbs to treat the wounds after releasing blood.

If it were not for the hope of defeating the demons Roland Wimbledon showed her and the unbiased treatment to all the witches, she would rather bury the method of the Sigil making for good. The fact that the witch's blood could be perfectly blended into the demon's blood was unacceptable to most people even in the union. Even with her personal exposure to this matter, she had once suspected the origins of witches. Such confusion was very detrimental to the Battle of Divine Will, thus, the making of Sigil was one of the secrets that the members of the union had strictly kept.

She did not want His Majesty to participate in the observation for this reason.

Especially there were the rumors about witches being minions that had fallen into the demon's seduction.

Agatha hoped to delay the time when Roland would find out even though he would find out sooner or later.

[It's probably a self-delusion.] She secretly sighed to herself.

When the mixture was semi-hard, Agatha embedded the Magic Stone into the groove and poured her warm blood onto it. The crimson blood was flowing within the shallow groove and the cobalt-toned blood clots surrounding it started to wriggle; the edge of both gradually blurred, forming into an interpenetrated form.

After that, she injected magic power into the Sigil.

Suddenly, the red-colored blood line projected fine rays of light and numerous light-spots were flowing within the vein. It was rhythmically expanding and shrinking with wriggling movements, as if it were breathing.

Anna and Nana understood the meaning of Agatha's words at the same time.

The Sigil had come "alive"

Chapter 562: The Witnesses

"So... was it successful?" Anna softly asked.

"Yes. Then, it should be cut and sealed within the silver foil." Agatha nodded and said, "The final step is different depending on the type of Sigil. For example, the Sigil of Screaming should not be cut as it would be used a whole."

"What will happen if we fail?"

"The bloodlines won't be able to collect the magic power for some unknown reason. There's always a chance of this happening no matter how good the materials are. The solution is pretty simple as well, we just need to pry the magic stone off and redo it."

"But, it'd consume the blood..." Anna frowned.

"That's why the demon's blood was considered more precious than the witch's blood in Taquila." Agatha self-deprecatingly smiled. "No one cared if the witch's blood was wasted during an experiment. But we would be scolded and punished if we wasted demons' blood."

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There were two sigils that failed out of the six in the end. Although the steps were completely the same as before, two of the bloodlines did not respond to the magic power injection. In other words, they did not come alive.

Agatha pried off the Magic Stones and took the reserved wooden box out to continue the second production.

She had to hurry up since the demon was almost dead.

The alien that was fixed to the wooden table started having irregular spasms and the black-blue colored skin started to gradually turn gray. The excessive blood loss had caused its breathing to become intensively and the Red Mist below its helmet had obviously faded. Once the Mist had been exhausted, the demon would die shortly after and the blood would only last for about 15 minutes past death.

"Wait a minute." Anna stopped her when Agatha raised the knife. "Use my blood."

Anna had already cut the skin on her wrist open with her Blackfire when Agatha was about to object. "Nana can heal the wound but she cannot replenish the blood. His Majesty has mentioned that losing too much blood could cause dizziness and you may even pass out. It'd not be beneficial to you or your experiment. Of course, it'd be best for you to rest for a few days before resuming your practices and productions. You'll recover faster if you eat more meat porridge and liver during your recuperation."

"... Is that what His Majesty said?"

"Yes, every witch had to attend the injury self-help class," Anna said with a smile, "and, the main reason you selected me as your assistant was for me to learn the method of Sigil making, wasn't it? It's better for me to operate these two."

Agatha kept quiet for a moment and said, "In that case, thank you."

"You're welcome," she gently said, "I'm very interested in it as well."

"... The witch empire was split apart and completely disintegrated after the demon's attack. The people who survived traveled across the mountains and crossed the river to the Wild Places to rebuild the city. This is the third time—as well as the very last approach for us to prepare for the Battle of the Divine Will. It has become the truth of history."

With these words, Roland quietly observed Edith's expression with his chin propped on his hand.

The afternoon sun streamed into the room, shedding a touch of glory in front of the desk. The lady in deep contemplation looked just like a statue, and her green-colored hair reflected a pale-white color in the sunlight. Her beautiful face did not even show the slightest change at hearing the frightening news, but instead, Edith's eyes showed more of an excitement and curiosity as Roland had expected.

She kept quiet for a while and slowly said, "You wouldn't try to fool me by fabricating such an... incredible story. Are the demons really that powerful?"

"There's no doubt. Each of them is an aggressive individual and there're an astonishing number of them. My army could easily defeat Timothy's knightage but they cannot necessarily defeat the demons. After all, they've been lurking around the north-west region of the Land of Dawn, unlike the witches who will need to start from scratch. The most important danger is that there'll be no negotiating for this battle, and it won't end until one of the two parties is destroyed."

"In that case... are you planning to break the news to everyone?"

"Sooner or later." Roland sighed. "But not now, I'm not sure how the people will respond regarding the horrible and ruthless alien enemy and building confidence is a slow process."

"I agree with you. Panic is indeed scarier than any enemy," Edith nodded and said, "I've one last question. How far away from us is the Battle of Divine Will?"

"Five years or sooner... Nobody knows the exact time the Bloody Moon will arrive. I can only say that the war may break out at any time, and thus, I'm not able to slowly unify the Kingdom of Graycastle little by little."

She did not answer but stood up from her seat and kneeled down onto one knee and said, "In this case, the Kant Family is willing to be at your service. Your law will not be unimpeded in the North and your order will be the only voice there." She stopped for a moment and then said, "I also hope that all of your promises are honored."

"Are you still thinking about the steam engine plant?" Roland shook his head and smiled. "Your father may not necessarily agree with that and what can the Kant Family guarantee with..."

"Me," she said without hesitation.

"What?"

"Your Majesty, I'm the guarantee. If you're still worried about it, Cole can stay here as well." Edith spoke with confidence, "In this case, my father would have to agree even if he is unwilling to."

"You're saying you'll stay in the City of Neverwinter as a hostage?" Although Roland meant to do just that, speaking it out loud still made him feel slightly embarrassed. "Isn't that a threat in disguise in the eyes of the Duke?"

"Not as a hostage." she saluted in a knight's manner with a hand covering her chest. "Please allow me to join your City Hall; I'd like to witness the new world you have planned."

...

Roland received six of the newly-made Sigils that night.

"Thank you for all of your hard work." He looked at Agatha and nodded. "Did the process go well?"

"We failed twice with the first batch and Anna also participated with part of the making process," Agatha yawned and said, "Anyway, if you want me to make more Sigils, please give me a spacious independent laboratory instead of a simple shabby stable-like shed."

"I owe you a Spellcaster's Tower," Roland happily responded.

Nightingale stuck her head out from behind Roland's back after the ice witch left the office and said, "What's the use of these Sigils?"

"They're probably the equivalent of a phone, alarm, and camera?"

"What're they for?"

"You'll know after you try it," Roland said with a smile.

It was a pretty productive day today. The Sigils of Listening would temporarily solve the challenges of transmitting long-distance messages. Although they were scarce and could only be used by witches, they were still better than entirely depending on a carrier pigeon. The Sigil of Screaming tweeted at a high pitch when it sensed demon power and it also effectively suppressed any of the enemies' sneak attacks and the area of coverage was about the size of the Border Area. The Sigil of Observing could assist with Thunder's adventure plan. It would be a pity for Roland to miss the spectacular and strange sealine since he was unable to follow the fleet out to sea.

Of course, what pleased Roland the most was Edith Kant's pledge of allegiance.

Nothing was sweeter than the extra population and the added resources. If the North was really offering their comprehensive service to him, Roland's actual control of the territory would be doubled and the excessive power of the nobles at the Eastern Region would feel the pressure.

If everything went well, he might be able to accomplish the great reunification before the arrival of the Months of Demons this year.

Chapter 563: Joan

The Swirling Sea, the Fjords Islands.

A mist began to rise over the sea, making them feel like they were sailing through the clouds. Shortly after they left Snowwave Island, it was out of sight, except for a vast expanse of whiteness. It looked as if the island had never existed. Only the splash of the water hitting on the bottom part of the ship let Margaret, who now found it hard to tell their location in the mist, know they were still moving forward.

Sailors considered sailing in misty weather a taboo.

Usually, if a captain asked them to do so, they would tie him up and throw him into the sea.

They would always, however, follow Thunder's orders since he was not only the captain of the Chase but also the most famous explorer of the Fjords.

No matter where Thunder wanted to go, be it a bottomless pit or a stream of lava deep inside a volcano, he would always be able to recruit some people willing to follow him.

"Captain, the Dark Reef Area is just in front of us!" shouted a sailor, who was familiar with the underwater terrain here.

"Lower the sails and slow down," said Thunder while clapping his hands. "Attention, everybody. That's our destination! Prick your ears up and keep your eyes open to watch the water around us."

"Yes!" they chorused.

Since Thunder secretly met His Majesty in the king's city of Graycastle and got Roland's support, he had not wasted a single day to prepare for his third travel to the Shadow Islands. In order to explore the secret Sealine and tides, he needed a suitable ship, outstanding explorers, and more importantly, a witch who could observe the tides below the sea.

The witch he wanted was Joan, a childhood friend of Margaret.

"Are we really going to find her here?" Molly stood on the Magic Servant's head and looked around and added, "I see nothing at all."

"Joan only appears when we're in trouble. She won't just turn a blind eye to a ship that's going into a dangerous area," Margaret said in a low voice.

"She had transformed into a fish now?"

"The last time I saw her, only her legs had changed into a fishtail, but it was over 10 years ago. I'm not sure how she looks like now," Margaret answered while shaking her head.

"It's a type of summoning magic ability. She can transform into any animal in the sea. If she's lived in the sea for all those years as you said, she must have passed the Day of Awakening smoothly. But as so many years have passed, is it true that she's still in this sea?" Camilla Dary, Chief Chamberlain of the Sleeping Island said after a thought.

"My lady, please trust us. Since I knew she was a witch, I've kept a close eye on this sea. Her singing voice is the symbol of Snowwave Island and I've heard that some merchants attracted by it even desired to capture and keep her," Thunder said with a smile.

"Did you stop them?" Camilla asked, raising her eyebrow.

"A shipwreck stopped them, and no one dares to do that again. I promise," Thunder answered and blinked at her.

"I see... Thank you for helping the witches," she said with her hand on her chest.

"Thanks, Uncle!" added Molly.

"Hah-hah, I look that old to you?" Thunder touched his beard, and said, "It's not very long."

Seeing this, Margaret who stayed by his side, shook her head at the fact that he was still popular among girls. She knew on any island of Fjords, he was the most popular man and that was why he won her affection.

She thought it was a pity since he had his daughter Lightning, he had given up the idea of starting another marriage.

"Boss, I seem to hear a singing voice! In the northwest!" shouted someone suddenly, in the stern of the ship.

"Be quiet, everybody!" Thunder and the witches simultaneously run to the stern of the sailing ship, followed by Margaret.

Everyone held their breath and listened attentively. The tenuous, vacant singing voice gradually became clearer. It came from a certain direction instead of reverberating all around, acting like a beam of light coming through the thick mist to guide the Chase to a safe route.

"Reef the sails and drop the anchor! Put the landing shuttle down in the sea." Thunder ordered.

Ever since Joan awakened and became a witch, she always remained hidden to avoid being caught by anybody. As she guided the ships in distress with only her voice, very few people had seen her before. Given that, Thunder planned to let the Chase lay at anchor to attract Joan. Meanwhile, he took the witches and Margaret on a small boat to trace her by following her voice.

The Magic Servant dove into the water to carry the landing shuttle forward, saving the trouble of paddling.

They traveled in the thick mist for less than 10 minutes, and then Margaret suddenly saw a green figure in the sea.

"Joan!" she could not help but shout loudly.

The singing voice promptly stopped,

They saw a girl floating in the water while revealing only her upper body above the surface. She stared at the people in the boat and seemed at a loss. Her eyes widened in surprise, and her skin was pale white as if she hardly exposed herself to the sunlight. Her hair was like fluffy seaweed, hanging down to cover half of her face, but they could still see some markings like scales on her cheek and neck.

"It's me, Margaret! Do you remember me?"

"Yih-yih-yeh." The girl made some intermittent sounds.

"It's no use. She hasn't talked to people for too long. She can't speak now." Thunder interrupted decisively. "Now, let's leave this communication problem to you, Lady Camilla."

Camilla nodded and then put her hand on Margaret's shoulder.

Instantly, Margaret heard what Joan said in her head.

[Are you... bringing them here to catch me?]

[No, I come here to...]

"Say it in your heart. She can hear you that way and it's more sincere to communicate with your heart."
Camilla interrupted.

Margaret swallowed to calm down, thinking about what she should say.

[You once saved my life. Joan, do you remember? I come here to ask for your help.]

After a long while, Margaret heard Joan once again.

[I remember you, Margaret. We often played together in the past.]

Amazed by what was happening, Margaret was lost in thought. [This is the ability of the witch. It's incredible... Luckily, Thunder predicted the language problem before we set off and invited Camilla Dary from the Sleeping Spell to join this travel. She can enable people to communicate with their hearts.]

[Who is Camilla Dary?]

[Oops, I forget all my thoughts can be heard by her now,] Margaret thought and quickly concentrated again. She "explained" in her heart. [Camilla Dary is the lady who is helping us to communicate with our hearts. She's a witch just like you.]

[The sailors don't catch witches?]

[Of course, the church has been completely destroyed. Now witches have settled down on the Fjords and the Sleeping Island is a town built by witches. If you want to go there, I'll show you the way.]

[Oh?] Joan sounded excited and asked further, [What has happened recently? Someone intended to spear me with a harpoon. I thought they must come here for the church's reward.]

[Nothing like that will happen again. Lord Thunder has solved the problem.]

[Thunder? You mean the most distinguished explorer!]

[Yes, he's right behind me. You don't know, but I joined his exploration platoon shortly after I left the fishing village.]

[Really? Tell me more about it.]

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After a long time, Joan said, "Yeah!" and she dove back into the sea, leaving only ripples on the water surface.

"How's it going?" Thunder asked.

Margaret turned around and smiled, saying, "She's accepted our request."

Chapter 564: The Ambassador of the Kingdom of Graycastle

Noise suddenly filled the coach, as it had arrived in the City of Glow.

Yorko could not help but open the curtain to have a look. There were all kinds of shop fronts along both sides of the road. Some of the shop owners had erected tents in the front and offered some tables and chairs for the people to have a rest there. Some had their goods laid out on the ground, stood beside them and cried out to attract business. The long street looked just like a market.

For a moment, he felt as if he had come to the Eagle City which developed from a market,

But he soon thought of the fact that Queen of Clearwater had already burned the Eagle City to the ground. And the shape of the lofty buildings in a distant place also suggested that this city was large and different.

"What do you think of the king's city of the Kingdom of Dawn?" A woman behind him asked drowsily.

"It's indeed the city of merchants. Even peddler is allowed on the main street. If it's in the Kingdom of Graycastle, the patrol team will milk them dry. I'm afraid only the Fjords can compete with your city." Yorko exclaimed in admiration.

"The Fjords?" The woman snorted. "They're just porters who transport goods to remote places and sell them, taking advantage of price variations in different markets. The islands have nothing to sell except for cheap salted fish."

"Of course, you're the most brilliant merchant," Yorko said and turned around, smiling.

"You're not bad yourself, my ambassador," the woman smiled and said, putting her hands on his shoulders.

This woman was a noble merchant Yorko met in a border city of the Kingdom of Dawn. Different from the Kingdom of Graycastle, most nobles in this kingdom had their own business and a rich merchant had a status like a noble since the wealth was comparable to noble titles here. The Kingdom of Dawn was also the main producer of agricultural products and the biggest exporter of textiles among the four kingdoms. Yorko had crammed for his job as an ambassador, studying the history and customs of this neighboring country for a long time before he set out. He knew that playing dumb now and then could please women but being an idiot who knew nothing would not.

The female merchant's name was Denise Payton. She was about 35 or 36, but still had beautiful skin that was smooth and full of elasticity. She did her light brown hair up, and a wisp of her hair was dyed purple. Yorko found it quite weird when he first saw her, but now he thought it quite nice when he got used to it. As an unattended noblewoman who went on a long journey, Denise was naturally open to all kinds of fun.

Yorko spent only two days to become a good friend with her and then won her affection with a bottle of perfume. They became attached to each other after a one night stand and traveled together after that. Denise even pulled him into her own luxury coach.

"Oh, yeah, what's the best business in the City of Glow now?"

"Why? You want to do business here?"

"Because of my old friend, no, the respected king Wimbledon, I'd probably stay here for a long time, 10 years or even 20 years. As it's the city of merchants, I'd better be one of them, just like what you've told me..."

"Good nobles are good merchants," Dennis added.

"Yes, good nobles are good merchants. In the Kingdom of Graycastle, an ambassador was equivalent to an earl in status. Having such a title, how can I not do business?" Yorko said while clapping his hands and smiling.

"That's right. The most popular goods on the market of the king's city can be divided into two types. One type is the utensils that you used every day but not the ordinary things, such as crystal glasses, spectacles, perfumes and fine fabrics. The second type is the novelties. There're no standard prices for these kinds of things. How much you can earn depends on how much your customers like them. Trade exhibitions will be held every weekend in the city. Exhibitions of different classes have different entrance requirements." Denise whispered in Yorko's ear.

"It sounds interesting!" Yorko said and his eyes brightened.

"It's indeed interesting. You never know what you'll see at the exhibitions. If you're interested, I'll take you to the top one, but there's another business that has overtaken those two types recently." Denise paused momentarily to arouse his interest and then continued, "The slave trade."

"Slaves? Aren't they very common for cargo?" he was dazed for a moment and asked.

"I said 'recently'. A business that requires no capital is always the best. You've heard that the church had almost conquered the Kingdom of Wolfheart? Thousands of refugees flock into the Kingdom of Dawn. You can take them to the market and sell them out to make a lot of money. As long as you offer them food. Now, many merchants have gone to the border to make money in the refugee tide, since when the war is over, there'll be no more chances." The female merchant explained.

"But why did you go the border of the Kingdom of Graycastle?" Yorko asked.

"I don't like trading people... especially women." Denise shrugged.

"So, leave it alone. No capital doesn't mean no risk. When the refugees become mobs, it'll be a real headache for the slave traders." Yorko said, holding her in his arms.

"You seem to really know something about business," she said while covering her mouth.

Just at that moment, the coachman in front of their carriage said, "My lady, we've arrived at the palace district."

"Let's call it a day." Yorko kissed her hard and continued, "Our time on the road was so sweet though it was very short. I'll bear it in my heart."

"Won't you come to my place and have a rest?" Denise said while ogling him.

"No, I have to go. I'm here on official business."

Yoriko had to refuse her. Knowing that she was a married woman, he did not want to get beat up if her husband found out something when he visited Denise at their place. Yoriko hurriedly hopped off the coach and waved to her, saying, "I feel we're going to meet again."

"I also think so and maybe we're going to meet sooner than you expect," she said while raising her eyebrow.

"Huh?"

Denise drew the curtain and left with a smile.

Seeing Yoriko got off the coach, the emissary delegation that had followed behind the caravan now walked slowly towards him. "You really deserve the name of Magic Hand. What did you talk about for all these days?!" Hill Fawkes came up and exclaimed.

Hill was assigned by His Majesty Roland to work as Yoriko's guard. He did not look like a military man at all, but even Yoriko had heard that Hill had outstanding meritorious achievements before. "Business, of course. What else could I talk about with a merchant?" Yoriko replied.

In fact, business was just a subject to start a conversation with the woman. Knowing what made a woman light up was the quickest way to get closer to her and Yoriko could always sell what a woman bought, no matter it was language or a gift.

"What're you going to do now?"

"Hoist the flag of Hightower and hand in the document. Tell them the ambassador of the Kingdom of Graycastle has come!" Yoriko said with an air of contentment.

Chapter 565: A Delay

The welcome reception did not start until dusk.

The guests were warmly received at the palace hall by Deegan Moya, the first son of King of Dawn.

It was Yoriko's first time to attend such an exquisite banquet. The entire hall, bright as day, was lit by numerous candles and oil lamps that dazzled like stars. There was a wide-open skylight window next to each of the chandeliers hanging down from the ceiling, which drove away the sultriness from the room.

Tables covered with white draperies were arranged in the shape of staircases that were littered with all sorts of glassware. There were red wines which glistened in the candlelight and glowed like rubies. The hall was so extravagantly lavished with silver mirrors and goldware that it looked as magnificent as the palace of the Kingdom of Graycastle.

Nevertheless, what drew Yoriko's attention most was those noble ladies wandering among gentlemen.

Some of them were young and innocent, while some corpulent and mature. Each of the ladies, whether they put their hair up or not, had a strand of highlight hidden underneath the accessories. Yoriko thought of Denise and realized it was a style currently in fashion among nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn.

In addition to their hair, most of the ladies were wearing tight silk dresses that perfectly showcased their graceful bodies. Glints of fleeting light twinkled when they strolled across the room. Unlike the gowns girls normally wore in the Kingdom of Graycastle, these dresses were off-shoulder and cut above knees, beguiling and seductive.

Yorko was overjoyed. "It was indeed the right choice to come here."

Compared with reserved noble ladies in the Kingdom of Graycastle, the ones in the Kingdom of Dawn were exceptionally cordial.

Nonetheless, they showed affections only to good-looking young men and knights rather than plain nobles like him. Yet this was never a problem for Yorko, for he never relied on his appearance to attract women.

"Welcome to the Kingdom of Dawn." A slightly pale young man escorted by a large crowd came up to him. "I've read the introduction letter from Roland Wimbledon and the document issued by him. So, he has now unified the whole Kingdom of Graycastle?"

Needless to say, this man was the host of the banquet, Prince Appen Moya.

Yorko placed his hand on the chest. Since he represented the royal family of the Kingdom of Graycastle, he was not required to kneel. Yorko was a little surprised as he bowed. It was understandable that the king asked his eldest son to host the event since he might be caught up in some political affairs. However, it was kind of uncivil to let his son directly read the letter from His Majesty Roland. On a more serious note, it could be even considered as a diplomatic mischief.

Yorko answered Prince Appen's question and then asked pretty reluctantly, "Well, how is your father... "

"He's ill, very ill." Appen sighed. "That's why he couldn't receive you in person."

"I, I'm very sorry to hear that."

"No worries... Everybody in the City of Glow knows the king's been ill. He collapsed during a banquet one and a half month ago and has been sick ever since. He's only conscious for two or three hours per day and insensible for the rest of the time."

One and half a month ago... That was around the same time he set out from the king's city. "I'm sure His Majesty will be better. Please don't worry about it too much." Yorko comforted.

"Thank you." The prince managed to summon up a smile. "Enjoy yourself. I'll ask the ceremonial officer to arrange accommodation for you later."

"Thank you." While Appen was about to leave, Yorko suddenly thought of the real purpose of his trip. He ventured hastily. "Your Highness, what about the alliance between the Kingdom of Dawn and the Kingdom of Graycastle?"

"I've heard about this matter too. But my father is currently too frail to deal with political affairs. Let's hold off on that until he's better."

Yorko was slightly relieved after the prince and his fellows walked off.

It appeared that he was quite a competent ambassador by nature. He did not make noticeable mistakes during his first meeting with a royal family member of high rank, although things did not go as well as he had expected. However, it did not really bother him, because he would live in the city for a pretty long time regardless and Moya IV could not remain sick for the next few years.

He should, instead, take this opportunity to pay more attention to the beauties in the hall.

"We've met again, Mr. Ambassador." While Yorko was pondering, he heard a familiar voice coming from behind.

Startled, he turned around abruptly and found Denise Payton, the businesswoman with whom he had spent a great deal of time with on the way here.

"How come..."

"I told you that we'd meet again." She smiled while raising a glass of red wine. "Cheers, to our reunion."

Yorko hurriedly glanced about to make sure no noble was staring in this direction.

"Are you looking for my husband?" Denise raised her brows. "Relax. He's not entitled to attend this reception."

"Are you saying..."

"I'm the one who manages the Payton Family, not him," Denise said bluntly, "and there're more than enough housemaids for him to indulge in. He's not allowed to seek pleasure outside without my permission."

[That's the reason...] Yorko's heart lightened. It seemed that Denise was the real heir of the Payton Family. In order to inherit the family, the daughter would normally seek a partner, often a diminished noble, to live with her. Due to the huge difference in their status, it was usually the male partner that changed his name.

"You should have told me earlier." Yorko put on a relieved look. "I don't want to split up such an affectionate couple and interfere with your special relationship."

"Really?" Denise smiled. "It wasn't special when you held out your hand to me." She paused for a moment and then asked, "Do you have any plans after the banquet?"

"Well, I guess no," Yorko answered while winding an arm around her dainty waist, "if you invite me."

"Then I know a good place."

"All up to you, darling."

After the banquet, Otto pulled Prince Appen aside, looking quite confused. "I don't understand, Your Highness. Even if His Majesty is ill, you can still enter into an alliance with the Kingdom of Graycastle, as this is also what your father intends to do. Why do you want to set the matter aside? With the church putting pressure on us, it isn't a good idea to fight alone."

"I've heard that father asked you to meet with Timothy Wimbledon rather than Roland Wimbledon?"

"We're allying with the King of Graycastle. The ambassador has also confirmed that Roland is the new king of our neighbor."

Appen Moya nodded. "You did a great job on the confidential trip to the Kingdom of Graycastle. But I have my own thoughts on the alliance. Leave it to me."

"Your Highness!"

"You don't understand." Appen interrupted. "I'm, for the sake of the Kingdom of Dawn..."

"It's for the safety of the Kingdom that we need someone to help us stop the attacks from the church!"

"I said leave it to me!"

Appen could not help raising his voice.

"I'm sorry. I lost my composure."

As the prince insisted, he had no choice but acquiesce. Just as he turned around, Appen suddenly questioned him. "We're friends, aren't we?"

Otto was silent for a moment and then answered, "Yes. Andrea, Belinda, Oro and me... all of us are your friends."

"If father can't make it," Appen spoke slowly, "you'll help me to the throne, right?"

Chapter 566: A Promise and A Mission

Otto Luoxi locked himself in the study after he returned home.

He did not understand why things had turned out this way.

Ever since the king had been ill, Appen appeared to have been in a great shock until recently, when he was finally able to recollect himself. But the way he spoke and the manner in which he conducted himself were somewhat different than before.

To put it more accurately, he had become rather unfamiliar to Otto.

As Appen's playmate, Otto believed that he knew the prince very well. Appen was not that type of power-hungry person who would attain his ends regardless of the means. Sometimes he even felt the prince was too juvenile to be a competent king. Because of this, he planned to, in collaboration with Belinda and Oro, fully support Appen and help him with governmental duties after the prince ascended the throne. After all, the three families had been assisting the king since the foundation of the Kingdom of Dawn.

That was the reason he had replied "Yes" without hesitation.

However, Otto found that Appen did not care about his answer.

He asked him that question simply out of a sense of insecurity.

Although the three families were very willing to support the royal family, he had never thought about whether His Highness really needed their assistance.

At this thought, Otto felt Appen more distant.

He breathed a long sigh. Perhaps he should take the initiative to do something about it.

But what should he do?

Neither pharmacists nor alchemists could do anything about the king's illness. He had no knowledge of medical treatment and certainly could not completely ease Appen's mind.

[Or cheer the prince up?] Otto pondered.

He had vainly tried numerous times to do so. Perhaps it was impossible to raise the prince's spirits by himself.

The three families must cooperate and work together. Only in this way were they possibly able to find the reason behind Appen's behavior.

With this thought, Otto got to his feet abruptly and walked out.

"Master, it's late now. Where are you going?" The steward trotted to him as he passed through the hall.

"To Tokat's place. I'm staying over!"

...

Otto knew every turn of the road leading to the territory of the Tokats'. As Otto knew Tokat well, nobody in the mansion stopped him. Otto went straight to the martial arts room. As he expected, Oro Tokat was practicing with his guards.

"Hey, what brought you here?" Oro took off the sweaty headband and tossed the guard his wooden sword. "You need a wingman?"

"I have something to tell you."

He pulled Oro to the resting room next door where he spilled out his thoughts and plan. At length, he asked, "What do you think?"

"To find out why Appen has become so weird?" Oro twitched his mouth. "Sorry, I'm not interested."

"Hey, you..."

"He's a prince, the successor of the King of Dawn. He'll not be our buddy forever, don't you understand?" Oro shook his head. "Plus, Appen is 20 years old. He isn't a seven or eight-year-old any longer. We don't have the obligation to cheer him up every time he's ill-tempered. If he doesn't want to spill his guts, and then fine, I don't want to be nosey."

"Aren't you planning to assist Appen Moya?"

"It'll be called 'assistance' only if His Highness needs it. Otherwise, you're just being annoying."

[Did he also notice the change in the prince?] Otto thought with a quiver. "But we three families always support Moya..."

"Three families?" Oro smiled carelessly. "After Andrea died, there are only you and me." He turned around and walked out while waving his hand. "Since you're here, let me take you to Crimson Dream. Get yourself laid and forget about these trifles. You look so stressed."

"Andrea is alive."

Oro stopped abruptly.

[Sorry.] Otto apologized in silence. He had failed to keep Andrea's secret.

"Andrea Quinn is still alive." He repeated. "I saw her in Border Town when I went to the Kingdom of Graycastle."

Oro instantly turned around and dashed to him, almost pushing him to the wall.

"What, what did you say? Is, is it true?"

"I saw her with my own eyes. She's with Prince Roland Wimbleton."

"With Prince Roland Wimbleton..." Oro's eyes were wide open. "Like they're in a relationship?"

"I don't know." Oro bit his lip. "But she's become a witch. Only Prince Roland is willing to accept witches out of the entire Kingdom of Graycastle."

"Hang on. You said 'witch'?" Oro was stunned. "What actually happened at that time?"

Otto Luoxi related all the details of what Andrea had experienced back then. He felt the sweetness of revenge as he watched Oro torn by his emotions. It was too late for Oro to do anything about it now because he firmly believed that the Quinns had fallen off the cliff at that time. Now, Andrea would fall in love with neither of them.

"That was the reason her father made it look like an unfortunate accident and had people believe that Andrea fell off the cliff..." Greatly depressed, Oro threw himself on the floor after hearing the story.

"Damn! Why have I never thought of opening up her grave and looking into the matter?"

[Such a... cunning guy!] Oro snapped in silence. "Ahem. Therefore, we can see an urgent need to cheer Prince Appen up." Otto reminded him.

Oro gave his friend a side look. "Huh? What's the connection between these two incidents?"

"Of course there's a connection! Think about it. Appen's hesitating about forming an alliance between the two nations, and he didn't even give an explicit reason. If the plan of joint defense fails, we'll have to fight against the church alone in the event of an attack. If the church invades the Kingdom of Dawn first, you'll take the knights to defend the country, won't you?" Otto asked.

"Absolutely. It's my duty."

"If you're killed in action, you won't see Andrea again, correct?"

"Um, it sounds kind of rational. No, how can you be so sure that I'll be killed?" Oro challenged indignantly.

"Even the Kingdom of Wolfheart, whose people are famous for their strength and power, has been defeated by the church. What're your odds of winning?" Otto ignored his friend's protest and continued, "If the church, contrarily, attacks the Kingdom of Graycastle first, Roland has to fight back, right? If he's dead, Andrea will very likely die with him. Even if she's caught alive by the church, she'll suffer tortures more miserable than a clean death. If the two nations, however, enter into an alliance and agree to offer mutual assistance, the church won't boldly launch an attack. Both you and Andrea will be alive and will probably see each other in the future. In this light, do you still think the alliance is significant?"

"Yes..."

"We need the prince to help with that. Now, do you still think the two matters are relevant?"

"Yes."

"Are you in?"

Oro answered resolutely, "Yes!"

With these words, Otto and Oro clasped each other's hands tightly.

Yorke returned to his lodge, exhausted but pleased. As he pushed the bedroom door open, he heard a voice from inside. "You're finally back."

Yorke was shocked. Who would sneak in his room and wait for him right after his arrival at the Kingdom of Dawn? Could it be Denise's husband who married into the family? He was still debating whether he should run away or plead for mercy when the man lit the candle and walked to him. It was Hill Fawkes in the candlelight.

"You scared the hell out of me. Do you know?" Yorke heaved a long sigh. "Whatever you've got to say, can't you wait till tomorrow?"

"We can only talk unnoticed at nighttime." Hill threw up his hands. "Please understand that I have a habit of being cautious."

"Alright then." Although Hill was his guard, he was appointed to him by Roland and could not be treated as any other guards. "Well, say what you want to say since you're already here."

"It's now a good opportunity to recruit talents among the refugees from the Kingdom of Wolfheart. You can view it as a business and hire masons, literates, and anyone who has an expertise. His Majesty will disburse you all the necessary expenses. You'll get five silver royals for each person you hire."

"For God's sake, I know nothing about business! I talked to Denise just for a casual chat. You don't think I'll be really trafficking refugees, do you?" Yorke put his hand on the forehead. "Plus, slaves are usually traded on the border of the two nations. It doesn't look nice for me to go there as an ambassador!"

"This is His Majesty's order," Hill said in a steady tone. "You don't need to leave City of Glow. Tradesmen will sooner or later transfer slaves here, although at a higher price. It saves you trouble to screen them. As to the business side of the matter, you can discuss with Denise Payton. She's quite a well-known businesswoman around this area. It's a piece of cake for her to send refugees to the Kingdom of Graycastle. "We'll benefit a lot once the transportation route is determined. For example, we can disguise ourselves as tradesmen and retreat unnoticed when facing unexpected danger."

Yorko's jaw dropped. "Have you been to the capital of the Kingdom of Dawn?"

Hill shook his head.

"Then how do you know such details?"

"I was collecting information from people on the street while you were busy socializing."

"I thought you were just a great knight. I didn't know you're also a good tradesman." Yorko smacked his lips.

"I'm neither a warrior nor a tradesman, but I can protect you when there's a crisis. This is also what His Majesty entrusted me to do."

"So you are..."

"Just an ordinary... acrobat," Hill answered while smiling.

Chapter 567: Explosive Shells

A suburb beyond the west city wall, Neverwinter.

A great roar attracted the civilians to ascend the city wall to watch from up high. The First Army had sealed the entrances to the Misty Forest in case anyone broke into the experiment ground.

Although the location was not close to the city wall, one could clearly see what was happening with a telescope from there. "It seems we have to look for a remote place as a special base for testing firearms." Roland thought to himself.

"Your Majesty, the second volley is ready!" An artillery soldier reported.

"Everybody goes into the bunker." Roland waved his hand. "Start the countdown after confirming no one is on the ground."

It was the test fire of the 152 mm Howitzer. While researching on the Sigil of Magic Stones, Roland included the advancement of firearms. Now with Timothy being killed and the Northern Region having announced submission, the situation in the Kingdom of Graycastle was fairly good. Now Roland had time to put his mind on further promoting the shells.

But he had to admit that the technical difficulties of developing a howitzer with an impact detonator were much greater than those of developing solid shells. Anna would make four howitzer shells for test fire every day. Yet three consecutive days later, none had successfully exploded. What's worse, on the second day, one shell exploded right after it got out of the chamber, which damaged the new artillery

barrel too much for test firing. Fortunately, Roland took precautions by digging several trenches around the experiment ground, which successfully prevented casualties. The eardrums of a few soldiers who stayed close to the artillery were damaged by the roar, but Nana healed them in time.

"Is this thing really like what you said, exploding the moment it touches the enemy?" Agatha could not help but stick her head out to watch. "I've asked Anna. It's nothing but a few pieces of sheet metal put together. It's not alive, so how can it know whether it touches is an enemy?"

Agatha must be the most enthusiastic witch toward weapon test in the union. Upon hearing the test, she put aside her production work in the chemical plant and personally came to observe the research development of the new shell.

"It doesn't explode when it touches the enemy, but when it falls into the enemy's position." Roland corrected her. "It's a basic requirement the Howitzer has to meet—if there isn't a safety to make sure of it, the shell could fire accidentally at any time. That would be too dangerous."

The trigger safety was the most basic technology for the new shell, at the same time the focal point of the test.

To prevent explosions triggered by collision or accidental drop, Roland made great efforts to set three safety systems.

The first one was to separate, store, and transport the fuses and shells, and install them when needed. The fuse looked like a cone with a handle and was the size of a fist. With the threads on its bottom, it could be conveniently and easily screwed into the notch on top of the shell. The shell was filled with double base chemical gunpowder, a kind of material that was hard to ignite without a detonator, which essentially ensured the logistics work.

The second one was the inertia safety in the fuse.

The safety device resembled a gate lock. Unarmed, it could not move due to being held in place by a stiff spring; when the shell was fired, the tremendous inertia kicked back the lock cylinder, overcoming the resistance of the spring, pulling open the latch, and removing the safety.

The theory was easy, yet hard to put into practice. Roland and the witches spent most of the first two days on it. If the spring was too hard, the lock cylinder could not get enough recoil distance; if it was too soft, it could not guarantee safety. Anna had to gradually adjust it based on the test results. After eight rounds of test firing, they finally attained the relatively reliable statistics on the compressibility of the spring.

The last one was the centrifugal primer-detonator.

It was also the device with the most technology in the fuse. Simply put, it embedded the detonator in a coin-sized half-circle iron plate. Normally, while being fixed by a spring, the detonator would stand in the middle of the fuse at an angle. With such a set-up as this, the firing pin, detonator, and explosive powder were not aligned. This way, even if the shell fell off from high above, the firing pin would not touch the detonator, so as to prevent accidental explosions. Only when the latch was separated from the lock in the second safety, could the iron plate be mobilized.

After being shot, the grenade spun at a drastically high speed because of the rifling in the barrel. Under the centrifugal force, the tilting detonator gradually stood upright, just like a spinning top whose center of gravity gradually closed on its axis line. This process completed after the bullet had left the muzzle for 200 or 300 meters, so even if the muzzle was stuck or the bullet ran into tree branches, it would not detonate prematurely.

When the detonator returned to the upright position, it aligned with the firing pin and explosive powder. Under this circumstance, once the fuse touched the ground, the firing pin instantly inserted into the detonator, and then the explosive powder pushed the super-hot gunpowder into the warhead, which in turn exploded the surrounding enemies into pieces.

The advantage of the centrifugal safety lay in the fact that if the shell failed to explode, without the centrifugal force the detonator would be popped back to its original tilting position by the spring, which made the retrieving work much safer.

Besides, if the entire grenade was grasped or accidentally found by the enemy, it could only be used as a normal solid shell when it could not get enough centrifugal force from not being fired in a conventional manner. As for tearing it apart and replicating it, that would be merely impossible.

"Prepare to fire. Start countdown at five."

An observer gave the order.

The repeatedly lengthened lanyard was gradually tightened while the gunner in the trench retrieved the rope bit by bit.

"Fire!"

As the gunner yanked on the rope, the ground instantly trembled.

A roar and fierce wind from the muzzle passed across the spectators' heads. Roland felt numerous soil particles rushed at his collar. Even if he had his ears solidly covered, he could feel tremors coming through his feet.

"Found the falling point. Explosion failed. Repeat. Explosion failed."

Lightning's voice came from the Sigil of Listening in Nightingale's hand.

"I see. We'll be right there," she replied and took out a Magic Stone.

"... We failed again?" Agatha said with disappointment.

"Failure is too common while experimenting." Anna consoled her. "As soon as we find the correct direction, we can guarantee success in mass production."

"Nicely put." Roland praised her while patting her head. "Besides, now with the help of Summer and Sylvie, the research and development speed is astonishing."

Even in modern times, it was common if thousands of shells were fired during the grenade testing, so to find any problems with two to three shots was like mission impossible.

Reaching the falling point of the bullet, Anna cut the fuse with Blackfire to ensure the safety of the payload. The soldiers then collected the failed shell. Either the gunpowder or the metal shell could be recycled, so it would be a waste to throw them away.

"Summer, it's your turn," Roland said with a gesture.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Summer nodded. Exhibiting her playback ability, the phantom of a shell that was about to fall to the ground instantly appeared in front of everybody.

Although Summer's magic power was still at a low level—after four months' of practicing, she could only use it four times per day—with precise control on the magic power, she could fix the playback image at an exact moment.

Such an ability was to perfectly replay the scene. In other words, Sylvie could see the inside of the phantom—except being intangible, it had no difference from the real scene.

With the help of Summer and Sylvie, Roland was able to determine the spring tension after only eight rounds of test firing.

Chapter 568: The Dry Distillation Tower

"Um..." Sylvie carefully examined the shell and checked it against Roland's design for a long time. She pointed at the detonator and said, "It seems this bronze tube is not aligned with the nail on the top."

"How about the spring?" asked Anna. "Is it still stuck at both sides of the iron pan?"

"One has gone bad."

"To the left or the right?"

Anna asked about every detail, and then wrote all the problems down in a notebook.

After collecting the reasons leading to the failure, they began the next round of test firing, where Summer's playback ability could be used four times. Thus the efficiency of the improvement had become unprecedentedly high.

Unfortunately, the next two rounds of test shooting failed again. Roland had to declare that the testing would continue the next day.

To Summer and Sylvie, their work for the day was finished. Afterwards, they could either go back to the castle to enjoy a delicious afternoon tea or go to the Convenience Market to check for novel goods. But to Anna and Agatha, the test firing of the grenade was merely a small part of their tight schedule, especially to Anna. She not only had to improve the fuse based on the reasons that were found to have led to failure, but she also needed to finish the research and assembly of the steam turbine.

Roland had planned to follow her to the North Slope backyard to check the turbine model, yet his guard Sean brought a piece of news from the City Hall.

"Your Majesty, Lesya, Vice Minister of the Ministry of Construction, wished for you to visit the Furnace Area. He said he had completed the construction of the first oven for dry distillation."

...

As the necessary equipment of the coking plant, 10 towers for dry distillation were planned, and they were to be located around the furnace cluster at the foot of the North Slope Mine area.

Due to the over-cutting of trees for the burning of bricks and iron making, the area that the furnace cluster took up enlarged from the original open space of less than 1,000 square meters to a wide open area stretching along the mountain. If Roland had not strictly prohibited the cutting of trees near the town, none of the trees at the northern part of the Border Area would have survived.

Although coal had been found, charcoal that was easy to get was still the major fuel for iron making. With trees available getting further and further from the furnace cluster, the workers targeted the top of North Slope Mountain. Every day there were hundreds of logs cut off and rolled down from the mountaintop. Watching from a distance, it looked like the green peak had a small "bald spot".

Normally, Roland would not ask the workers to protect the environment in this matter. As long as the dust that would have risen did not affect the town, he would not care even if all the trees on North Slope Mountain were cut down. After all, to the Impassable Mountain Range, this protruding mountain range was nothing but an insignificant corner. With Leaf maintaining the basic vegetation, there was no need to worry about soil erosion.

As to the ground reclaimed at the foot of the mountain, it naturally became the most suitable building sites for coking plants.

Followed by Nightingale and his guards, Roland walked through the noisy Furnace Area and reached the first tower for dry distillation. Lesya walked up to welcome Roland instantly, bowed and said, "Your Majesty, as you demanded, I've constructed this double layer furnace with refractory bricks. According to the drawing, the upper layer should be sealed with an iron gate while the interlayer should be equipped with a mobile iron plate. But I don't know who can make them. The same is true of the copper pipe and chimney on the small side furnace. Apart from these metal components, the rest has been completed."

Roland lowered his head and went to the interior of the furnace to have a thorough examination. He was totally impressed by what he saw. He had to admit that Lesya, the former member of the Mason Guild, the old friend of Karl Van Bate, was indeed excellent at masonry. The inner walls of this nearly six-meter high tower for dry distillation was evenly constructed; the spaces between bricks were all of similar thickness; the bricks were all interlaced, without two layers of verticals seams aligned. One could see that Lesya's laying skill was extraordinary and his working attitude was very serious. After all, the products different people made could be drastically different, even if they referred to the same drawing.

"Well done." After the examination, Roland praised him saying, "I'll arrange the cast of the iron gate and iron plate. You'll only need to cover with refractory bricks on the side exposed to fire."

"Your Majesty," hesitating for a while, Lesya asked, "could you please tell me how the furnace operates?"

"Why? Do you wish to become a coking worker?" Roland said jokingly.

"Of course not." Lesya hurriedly shook his head. "Since I've never built such a strange furnace, I had to build according to my speculation for the places that I wasn't sure of on the drawing. So if I can understand its function and working mechanism, not only can I finish the second furnace faster, but also I can improve the places that I wasn't sure about before."

[Ah, that's his reasons.] Roland thought and said smilingly, "This kind of furnace is mainly used for the dry distillation of coal. You must have seen how the charcoal is burned. The burning of coal is similar but on a bigger scale. The lower layer is for burning, the upper layer is for baking, and both layers use coal as filling."

"Baking coal with coal?" Lesya surprisedly asked.

"That's right. After the dry distillation, coal can be transformed into coke. Coke can reach a higher temperature while burning, which makes it a better fuel for smelting steel. In addition, the process of dry distillation will create several by-products. The pipes on the tower wall are used to collect them, rather than to exhaust gases as a chimney does."

"Then... why do you build a small furnace at the side of the main furnace?"

"No air is allowed on the upper layer during the dry distillation, otherwise the coal will directly burst into flames." Roland pointed at the reserved holes between the two furnaces and said, "While burning, the limestone in the small furnace will produce a large amount of carbon dioxide—you can consider it as a sort of non-flammable gas..."

"Your Majesty, I know that," Lesya said, "I learned it from the night classes."

[That'll be easy then.] Roland felt gratified. [It seems that the universal education has broadened its content under the effort of Scroll.] He continued, "Through the pipes, the carbon dioxide will reach the upper layer of the furnace and push away the air, and then the coal can be dry distilled. As for the limestone, the off-white stones burned to make cement, are all over the North Slope Mountain."

...

After examining the dry distillation tower number one, Roland retraced his steps. On the way back, he took a short break at the Furnace Area.

Seeing this busy scene, Roland could not help but feel thrilled. Standing side by side, the various brick furnaces looked like an orderly red forest. Rising from the forest were tens of entangled gray, white, and black smoke columns, which constituted a rather modern picture when seen together with the plainly dressed workers and outdated equipment. Over ten steam engines were roaring, dragging the conveyor belt to carry chunks of materials and charcoals into the blast furnace. A track system was paved from the mine to the furnace and many mine wagons traveled between the two stops. The speed of transportation had greatly improved.

After finishing the construction of the steel plant and forge plant, this place would be another core location of City of Neverwinter. Ore exploitation and steel smelting proceeded the transformation of the steel into various raw materials which were then transported to processing plants. These processes symbolized an industrial flower arising from here. The human beings were bestowed with extraordinarily refining powers, which consequently gave them the courage to conquer everything.

Chapter 569: Power Threatened

As the desolate spring came to an end, summer was drawing near. The population growth rate of City of Neverwinter enjoyed its first explosive peak.

The mission of attracting refugees in the southern and eastern areas began to take effect. With the experience from the previous year, the working efficiency of the envoy teams greatly increased. Every day, hundreds of refugees gathered in Redwater City and Willow Town, waiting for the boats from the Western Region to transfer them to City of Neverwinter, which was said to be rich and stable.

In order to appropriately accommodate these people, the City Hall also commissioned businessmen to rent temporary barracks at the gathering place, and offered porridge and water, to prevent any accidents before the refugees arrived at the Western Region.

The pier of the Border Area had become the busiest location of the city. Ninety percent of the police were dispatched to maintain order and register the population. There was always a long line of people in front of the barrier for medical inspections. The officers who were responsible for residential control divided the swarmed-in refugees into several categories and moved them into riverbank boardrooms, west-city cave dwellings, and formal residences accordingly.

For this reason, City Hall turned into a bustling place every day.

"Three sailing ships from Redwater City just arrived at the pier, 126 people are on board, a blue flag is hanging on the mast, and Bob is in charge."

"Again? How many batches have arrived today?"

"Four or five batches? Stop nagging. Go and receive them."

"Well, who'll take over Bob's job and go to Redwater City?"

"I will. Hang on, I'll be ready right away."

"Take some soap with you. You can't buy any there."

Listening to the noisy chatters outside of his office, Barov felt distressed, not because he was too busy though. Usually, when he worked in the City Hall, more work brought him more pleasure.

But recently, the situation had become complicated.

The reason lay in Edith Kant.

"Director, the Ministry of Justice is urging us for more personnel again," an assistant walked into his office and said. "His Excellency Carter asked us to recruit another 100 people as backup policemen. He said if he doesn't get more hands, the city's order will be out of control. If anything happens and His Majesty asks, we should take the blame as well."

[Now that he's the Chief Knight, he could put more words in front of His Majesty.] Barov thought to himself. But for minor stuff like this, he did not have time to attend. While drafting a document, Barov said without raising his head, "Put it on the desk. I'll handle it later."

"Yes, sir!"

As the assistant left the room, Edith's voice sounded in his ears. "Is this the recruitment order? Since you're too busy, let me help you with it."

[Here she is!] Barov moaned in his heart. [Not even using honorifics.]

[Of course, Edith is the daughter of Duke of the Northern Region, a status much higher than mine. Before I became the real Hand of the King, she could address me by name without using any respectful form. But no matter what, I'm about half a mentor to her, because His Majesty arranged for her to be an assistant to learn the departmental framework and government process of the City Hall in my office. Yet it seems she doesn't think so.]

"Um... okay, that's fine," he said involuntarily.

No matter how reluctant he felt, he could not find any mistake in Miss Kant's behavior. If he repeatedly rejected her, he would appear in the wrong. Especially at this crucial moment, he could not risk leaving any bad impression on His Majesty.

He should never forget that Roland Wimbledon was a man with great insight.

"Thanks."

Soon, rustling sounds of writing came from the opposite desk.

Several minutes later, Edith put the recruitment order back onto Barov's desk.

"Judging from the drafts I went through recently, such recruitment orders usually require the personnel to be reliable and have a clean slate, but there aren't many such candidates left in the Border Area. Compared with posting recruitment bulletins on the square and asking for the candidates to apply for work at the City Hall, it'd be better if we extract the files of registered residence in the archives and select 100 unemployed locals. The Ministry of Justice is a large department in the City Hall. It provides relatively good salary and welfare. I think no one would turn down such a job offer. In this way, we'll save about a week over recruiting through normal procedures, and will, in turn, decrease the complaints from Chief Knight. If you approve it, I'll reply it on this recruitment order and give it to the archives."

Her voice was clear and sensible. It was hard to imagine that she joined City Hall only two weeks ago.

In the beginning, she was just quietly sitting aside and watching Barov review documents, seldom saying anything. But now, she could handle all sorts of affairs in the City Hall with high proficiency.

"Um... do it your way then."

For the moment, Barov could not find a better solution than Edith's suggestion. With his tight schedule, it would be possible that he ignored such petty things and just handled it in the usual way.

[Is this how a successor turned out to be after growing up in a duke's mansion and educated by the upper-level noble?]

Barov felt greatly threatened.

Yes, honorifics and respect were just minor details. What he really cared about was the power in his hands. [Now the propaganda that calls for submission is all over the Northern Region. If Edith is sent by His Majesty as an assistant to help set up a secondary City Hall in the Northern Region in the future, it would be no big deal. But what if she stays?]

[His Majesty is not yet married, and Edith is the daughter of a duke!]

At this thought, Barov could not help but feel distressed.

[This won't work. I must make her know that the management work in the City Hall can't be mastered that easily. His Majesty needs a minister who's able to take the whole situation into account.]

When Edith returned to the office, Barov cleared his throat and handed her a statistics form.

"What's... "

"We're in trouble," Barov said with a low voice. "The grain stock in City of Neverwinter might not last until the wheat bumper harvest day."

"Um, is it caused by an overflow of population?" Edith glanced at the form and said, "According to the consumption rate, the remaining grain should be able to last until the end of the summer. We can harvest the spring wheat in the middle of July. It should be enough if we stop accepting new refugees."

"But the City Hall can't stop accepting new refugees."

"Because of the population target of 100,000 set by His Majesty?"

"No, that's not the point," Barov said while shaking his head. "There's still a constant flow of refugees from both the east and south sides of the country to the gathering place. If we abandon them, not only will Redwater City and Willow Town face the risk of a riot, but also the image we worked hard to build up will be destroyed overnight. If we ever want to recruit refugees again, it'll be very difficult. His Majesty once revealed to me that the realization of his development plan needs a large number of people. 100,000 subjects are just the beginning, so the City Hall won't disrupt His Majesty's plan because of the grain problem. We must tackle this problem and it's also my responsibility as a minister." He paused, and then looked at Edith Kant. "Do you have any good ideas?"

Chapter 570: Edith's Reasons

In a sense, there was no solution to this problem.

The reason lay in the fact that the total amount of grain was limited. After the Months of Demons, the circulating grain in the kingdom would enter a state of shortage. Grain prices would definitely soar, and there would be none to be found in the market. The grain shortage could not be relieved until the new wheat was harvested. Autumn was the season in which grain was most frequently traded. After that, when the Months of Demons began, the situation would just worsen again.

Of course, the grain transactions were usually among businessmen and nobles. As for those penniless refugees and Rats, they would have to get through the winter with an empty stomach regardless the amount of wheat present.

According to Barov's years' worth of experience as an assistant minister, businessmen in the major cities were waiting for the ears of wheat to mature. Before that, they were unlikely to sell the grains at hand in large amounts. What remained in their hands might be enough to feed a few thousands of people, but never for ten thousands of people.

"Since we can't find more resources, we need to tighten the consumption.

"Cut the city's grain supply and reduce each person's quota for daily purchase. Change the subjects' diet from bread to oatmeal, and keep it that way till the day of bumper harvest. Those are the possible suggestions that Edith is going to make.

"Then I can refute her suggestions for the following reasons: they're against His Majesty's grain promises; they're contrary to the kingdom's intrinsic values; they might cause food panic and so on.

"Judging by Edith's expression, and reading the list with her eyebrows raised, I know she must feel it troublesome.

"It won't be long before she asks for my advice."

Thinking of this, Barov could not help but touch his beard. The so-called 'taking the whole situation into account' not only meant that the minister needed to be skilled and experienced in governmental affairs, but also needed to clearly know about the characteristics of the city. For example, when he was in King's City, he could recite the prices of the Alchemist Workshop's specialties, and the amount of Silver City's monthly silver ore shipment without hesitation. All those numbers could not be remembered in a short time.

The characteristic of City of Neverwinter was the witches.

Barov knew a green-haired woman called Leaf in the Witch Union who could make the wheat grow at an inconceivable rate. If not caring about the maintenance of the land, she could make the wheat ready for reaping within one day, and the ears they produced were not something that Golden Ones could compare to.

In other words, they only needed to ask her to manage a piece of wheat field for rapid production, and then the grain shortage could be easily solved.

Of course, he also knew that His Majesty had asked Leaf to control Misty Forest in the west, so as to build the early warning defensive line against demons. Given the emergence of such enemies, it needed several years, and so it would not matter much if Leaf took two to three months off.

But there was no way that Edith could know that information.

Even if she was super talented and took part in managing the Northern Region affairs since adulthood, there was no way that she could clearly know the city which was completely strange to her half a month ago, not to mention to know the abilities of each witch.

Also, she could not understand why the office of the Ministry of Education was adjacent to the archives, why the Minister of Education often appeared in the archives and had the authority to look at all the documents.

After a long while, Edith put down the list and slightly smirked.

"Actually, it's not a big deal."

"Em..." Barov nodded, then startled. "What?"

"Before the development of Deepvalley Town, most of the land in the Northern Region wasn't fit for wheat plantation. In every spring, grain shortage used to be very severe in this area, so the local lord set eyes on the Eastern Region and Kingdom of Dawn."

"You mean..." He suddenly realized something.

"Since they couldn't grow enough nor purchase any, the only choice left for them was to rob," Edith said with an easy tone. "Isn't it exactly the situation we're in? His Majesty's army is attacking Fallen Dragon Ridge. I heard Countess Spear's brother won over a lot of the local nobles in order to resist her. Is that right? Now that we have both the reasons and the means, we should directly go there and kill them one by one. Guess how many gold royals and grain is hidden in their basements."

"There's only a grain shortage because the amount circulating is too few. As a matter of fact, most of the grain output in the kingdom has been divided and taken by the nobles. They use that grain to control the freemen and farmers in their domains, and to earn many gold royals in a lean year." She did not talk fast, but yet her voice gave Barov a chill. "If we rake over Fallen Dragon Ridge, I think the problem of ten thousands of people's food will naturally be solved. If not, there are several cities in the Southeast Region awaiting His Majesty's ransack."

"But they're all nobles..." Barov shut his mouth before finishing talking. "That's right... After His Majesty took over the Southern Territory, they stopped being nobles. As long as we act fast enough, the captured grain will be able to refill the granary of City of Neverwinter."

Besides, different from King's City, Fallen Dragon Ridge has completely fallen into His Majesty's control, which is also the crucial pass on the way to the Southern Territory. By then, not only will the City Hall send people to assist Countess Spear to establish a new government, but the inner city will also adopt the laws, urban planning, and education system of City of Neverwinter.

What confused Barov was how Edith could accept His Majesty's will of eliminating the nobles so quickly. Even for himself, it would take a much longer time to get used to wholeheartedly supporting His Majesty's orders... let alone her who was the successor to the Duke of the Northern Region.

Edith returned to the Foreign Affairs Building. Pushing open the door, she saw Cole crouching on the desk and flipping through a thin book.

"What's that?"

"Um... I bought it from the convenience market. It looks like a picture book but it has stories. It's very interesting." The brother looked up. "You look happy."

"Do I?" Edith asked.

"In City of Evernight, you rarely smiled like this," Cole said, smirking. "Are we really not going back?"

"Only temporarily. Until father replies, His Majesty should allow you to return to the Northern Region." Edith sat down in front of him, closed the book to look at its cover and saw the words printed "The Witch Diaries".

"What about you then?"

"I'm going to stay here."

"Why?" Cold asked in bewilderment. "Is the City Hall that interesting?"

"What's interesting isn't the City Hall, but Roland Wimbledon's City Hall." She corrected him, smilingly.

"Do you know how I got things done in City of Evernight?"

"You only had to tell father and it was done."

"More or less. I just gave an order, and then naturally there would be people who did it for me. When I think back to it, they did that not because of me, but because of my identity. They knew father would follow my suggestions... Of course, this only worked in the Kant Family's manor," Edith said with great enthusiasm, "but here, my identity not only doesn't help but rather hampers. There is barely any noble in the City Hall, and no one actually cares whether I'm the daughter of the Duke of the Northern Region. Everybody is relying on his or her own capabilities. Do you understand what I mean?"

Cole shook his head.

"People are willing to listen to you, not because who you are, but because what you're capable of. This rule applies even out of your manor. His Majesty is right about one thing: Feudalism seems to give the nobles great power, but it also set an upper limit for their power. Judging from the current situation, His Majesty is totally capable of enlarging his domain into the entire continent, then the City Hall will turn into a huge institution, and its prefecture will expand into every corner of Graycastle. As long as you're recognized in this organization, this entire kingdom might just operate based on one word you said. So, why would I settle for that small manor?"