

Witch 571

Chapter 571: The Duke and Father

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"Edith, you cruel wretch!" Calvin, Duke of the Northern Region grabbed the teacup on the table, wanting to smash it onto the ground but suddenly stopped with his hand in the air. He felt a little reluctant since the cup was made of the best quality crystal glass and worth two or three gold royals.

After a thought, he gradually lowered his hand and put the cup back on the table.

Needing to worry about such minor gains and losses made him even more depressed.

Edith's letter was also put on the table. He could not believe what was written in it. Out of his expectation, His Majesty wanted to reclaim the power of the noble and his daughter who had always brought him profits before promised the king without hesitation this time. Besides, she even persuaded him to recognize the fact and stop resisting in the letter.

He felt that the way she wrote to him as if she was talking to a captive.

The duke thought bitterly that his daughter must be helping the others rather than her own father.

The guard outside the door probably heard the noise and looked in, asking, "My lord, what happened?"

"Get out, leave me alone!"

As Calvin was unwilling to vent his anger on the cup, he took out his fury on this guard who swiftly closed the door. The duke panted for a long time before he could return his gaze to the letter.

As he had eliminated the Howes Family and Lista Family, he finally was in complete control of the whole Northern Region now. If he chose to accept His Majesty's requirements, he would no longer be the lord of the Northern Region, at least, no longer the ruler who dictated in this region. He thought he would return to his original point, or even worse.

But if he did not accept his daughter's suggestion, what would happen?

Edith also described the result of this choice in the letter.

"If you choose to do so, Cole and I will be doomed. He'll be held captive in the prison forever, just like the heir of Duke Ryan. As for me, I'll end up even worse. What do you think Prince Roland will do to a defenseless daughter of a duke? I can list a series of torturing methods that'll excite a man without too many efforts. When he got tired of me, I'd be put into his dungeon or battalions and your Pearl of Northern Region will be covered with dust forever.

However, instead of worrying about me, you'd better worry about yourself first, since his army will besiege your city and your feudatory and knights can hardly resist for half a day. After that, it's impossible for you to be an ordinary person, let alone a duke. How is it? Are you going to make such an unwise choice?"

Calvin was familiar with this tone and he could even picture his daughter writing the letter with a sneer on her face. Whenever it came to failure, she would always describe her fate in an extremely cold tone as if she was waiting for the moment all the time and when she talked that way, Calvin was immediately swamped. He knew that she was apparently threatening him, but he could not lift his spirit up to scold her.

After all Edith Kant was his own daughter and the only child he had with his first wife.

Despite the fact that Edith exaggerated the matter, he still had to admit the possibility.

He himself had also heard lots about that dandy Prince Roland.

The duke gradually calmed down at this thought.

But he was still wondering whether the black steel machines were as incredible as she depicted or not.

He thought in surprise, [Edith used three sheets of paper to write the letter, and among them, she used a whole sheet of paper to describe what she had seen in Border Town, oh no, in City of Neverwinter.]

The description was even twice as much as that of His Majesty Roland.

Edith claimed that the super powerful machines beyond imagination could easily complete tasks that were considered to be impossible by the ordinary people and that if they surrendered to the new king, the Northern Region would be able to import those black iron machines which would bring an earthshaking change to their domain.

Calvin could tell from the description that Edith thought highly of the machines.

In the last part of the letter, she suggested that Calvin should send His Majesty a formal document to take an oath of allegiance and to show the submission of the Northern Region to the new king, and meanwhile, dispatch servants who could read and write to learn the rules and regulations of the City Hall, getting the domain prepared for the new system.

"Besides, I sincerely hope that you can order Cole to stay in City of Neverwinter instead of calling him back to the Northern Region, which will do him no good at all. If you agree, you can also send Lance here when he reaches an adult age. Given that the noble titles can no longer be inherited, only the men who well adapt to the new system of His Majesty can succeed the Kant Family and keep it thriving.

Your daughter, Edith"

After reading the letter, Calvin heaved a long sigh and put it away. He spread a new sheet of white paper.

Thinking that as Edith had already made the decision, he had to believe her and write His Majesty a letter showing his loyalty to the new King's City.

However, as a duke, he had to make his last efforts to ensure the family's profits. He believed that he would feel much relieved if he could bind the two families' interests together.

Such as... something like a marriage which would make his own daughter the queen.

By the Redwater River, Border Area, City of Neverwinter.

The sun was sinking into the mountains bit by bit, leaving the river afire with golden light.

Smoke rose in front of the shacks, and a faint smell of porridge made Snaketooth's mouth begin to water.

As he got closer, he could even smell meat.

"I'm back!" He caught Tigerclaw's attention as soon as he stepped into the battalion. Tigerclaw said, "Come up here quickly!"

Snaketooth swiftly walked to him and asked, "What? We have meat today?"

"Yes, you come back late, so you've missed the message. This is granted by the lord."

Snaketooth rubbed his sore shoulders and said, "What for? You guys still need a long time to finish the construction of the residential area, right?"

"It's for the completion of the Kingdom Main Street! Now the Border Area and the Longsong Area are finally connected together. I've heard that now it takes only one day to get to the Longsong Area riding a horse. In the past, it would take three days," someone nearby came up and said.

Hearing that, Snaketooth nodded his head. Every time when a major project was finished, they would get a bowl of meat porridge, just like what he had heard before in the square. He had been in the Border Area for two months, during which the construction platoon had never canceled a meal or deducted salaries. Now, he had already accumulated 14 silver royals and would get 7 more in the end of this month.

When his savings reached one gold royal, he could get a house from the City Hall and become an official resident of City of Neverwinter instead of a Rat, a nobody.

However, to own that house, he still had to work for at least 20 more years.

Nevertheless, he was confident that he could find a better-paid job, such as a furnace worker or a bricklayer.

Everything seemed to get better.

But he had not met Paper yet.

"When you get the meat porridge, remember to eat fast. Otherwise, you can't get a good seat," Tigerclaw whispered in his ear.

"What... seat?" Snaketooth was confused and asked.

"To celebrate the completion of the Kingdom Main Street, a new drama will be played in the square. I heard it's called 'The City of Love' and the Star of Western Region will be on the stage too. Oh my goodness... I can't wait to see it!"

"Go to see it with someone else. I'm tired and don't feel like going anywhere today," Snaketooth said in low spirits.

"Really? It's the premiere." Tigerclaw paused and then smiled meaningfully, adding, "All the locals know that the lord will take the witches to see the premiere of the Star Flower Troupe. Maybe you can see Paper there!"

Chapter 572: The Song of Praise

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By the time when Snaketooth and Tigerclaw came to the square, a huge crowd of people had already gathered up there. Snaketooth had never seen so many people get together in one place, even when Longsong Stronghold was distributing relief grains.

He counted roughly and estimated that there were probably over 5,000 people came to watch the play.

The square which used to be just a flat land was changed into a giant, sunken bowl in the ground, which was called an amphitheater. According to the locals, this was the third time that the square was rebuilt. Generally speaking, such a huge project would take one or two years to complete, but this amphitheater had been built in merely half a month and during the time, nobody had ever seen where the soil dug out went.

In this amphitheater, the audience could sit on the stone steps to watch the play, instead of standing until their legs were numb. It also enabled the audience to have a better view, as long as you could find a seat. As for those who came late, they could still stand on their tiptoes around the square to have a look.

Tigerclaw squeezed into the last row of the stone stairs and made a space enough for two people, saying, "Not so bad. We still make it."

Snaketooth clutched a cloth bag to his chest and sat beside his friend with great care. As the bag contained all his savings in the past two months, he had to be alert in such a crowded place. In the Longsong Area, at places like this one, Rats would be on the spree. Though the Border Area had no Rats now, he still felt that he needed to watch out for the Rats who were "temporarily transferred to civilian work".

When the last afterglow of the sunset melted into the darkness of the night, there were only several burning torches giving light to the square. The stage was still enveloped in darkness. Snaketooth could not help but feel quite strange when he found that nobody came to light up the bonfire and that there was no firewood in the center of the square.

He could not help wondering how they were going to play without firelight.

Suddenly, a bright beam of light shone on the stage. It was dazzling but Snaketooth soon got used to this pure light. Then the second and the third beam of light appeared, gradually lighting up the stage. Gasps of amazement that were produced by the audience reverberated over the square.

"They're the lights used in the plants!" he thought.

"Oh, my goodness! Nightless light! They bring nightless lights here!"

Rumor had it that it was a magic light that trapped the lightning of the sky in an expensive crystal glass bulb. Snaketooth had only seen it several times when he passed by the industrial district.

"Nightless light? Come on, it's called electric light and consumes electricity. It's made by the machines created by the witches! His Majesty planned to have every household equipped with electric lights, but the witch who provided electricity was unable to support so many lights. That's why only the plants are using this kind of lights now." Someone nearby snorted and said.

"How do you know that?" Tigerclaw asked with interest.

That person shrugged and said, "You aren't official residents of City of Neverwinter, right? The City Hall has done propaganda about electricity to tell us how to use the electric lights safely. They're like fire. If you don't use them properly, it'll cause disaster."

"Not like thunder?"

"Uhm... almost the same. Don't bother so much. When you become subjects of His Majesty and finish the primary education, you'll understand."

"Is there any way that I can become a formal subject faster? What's the primary education?"

Snaketooth asked and wanted to ask more questions, but Tigerclaw suddenly grabbed him up when the crowd burst into deafening cheers.

The Star Flower Troupe stepped on the stage.

"Ms. May! Ms. May!"

"Ms. Irene!"

"Mr. Gait!"

The crowd cried out the names of the troupe members and the atmosphere reached a crescendo.

Seeing that, Snaketooth was filled with admiration suddenly.

He wanted to become someone like them, the focus of people's eyes. He wanted the audience to cry out his name loudly... They were neither nobles nor sages. They were not out of reach.

After the cheers died down, the play began.

This was the first time for Snaketooth to watch a drama played by Star and Flower of the Western Region. He never thought that he would be interested in such an elegant event usually enjoyed by the nobles, but when the music started, he was absorbed into the story without noticing it.

The leading roles of the story were not the nobles.

Instead, they were just ordinary people like himself... a free citizen, a refugee and a Rat.

They had both dreams for their future and misfortunes in their own lives. They all fetched up simultaneously at the same city, Star City. They met and helped each other. They confided their thoughts to each other. They suffered from the pain of leaving their hometowns and the sense of loss in the new city. After that, they pulled themselves together and found their own ways.

Nothing could be heard except the lines of the actors and actresses on the square. All the audience held their breath, as they were deeply involved in the story played on the stage.

At last, the roles on the stage finally settled down in Star City and lived comfortably ever after. Strangers that had helped each other in the past became friends and lovers in the end. Snaketooth felt being touched when a moving music was played. He pretended to rub his eyes to hide his tears and meanwhile found out that Tigerclaw was all tears though he did not look sad.

He was not the only one moved that much. Everyone around was just like him, lost in that moving story. No one had risen to cheer until the end of the play.

Even if no one said it out, everyone knew it clearly that the "Star City" was City of Neverwinter.

Snaketooth was lost in thought, [Even a Rat could have such a story?]

Right at the moment, a foreign-looking girl from behind the background plate stepped on the stage.

Like someone in a delicate painting, she was tall and had waist-length long bluish-gray hair, wearing a white dress which glinted.

She started to sing.

Totally different from the music played before, her song was powerful, praising the great and glorious workers. She sang in a way different from all the other female singers. She was inspiring and encouraging. Hearing her song, Snaketooth felt that he could even see his own sweats in the distant residential buildings and that all the foreigners who devoted themselves into the construction of this city deserved to be remembered.

The impact and emotions brought by the play were finally released at this moment. The audience flipped out and applauded with their greatest strength. The song promptly made their emotions run even higher!

They were all His Majesty's subjects!

The glorious workers!

The builders of City of Neverwinter!

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After the show, His Majesty left with the witches via a raised platform which was built for temporary use. Snaketooth opened his eyes widely but still failed to find Paper in the crowd. Surprisingly, he did not feel as disappointed as he expected, since the song still reverberated in his ears, filling his heart with hope.

He believed that they would meet again sooner or later.

Like those foreigners, they would meet again right in this city.

Chapter 573: The Battle of Fallen Dragon Ridge

BOOM!

When the fire blasted out of the 152 shipboard artillery, Iron Axe felt the steel ship he stood on wobble slightly.

A few seconds later, a cloud of smoke and dust exploded on the foreign city wall, and then the roar quieted down for a while. After all the smoke and dust dispersed, he looked through the telescope and found that there was a now big crack in the lower portion of the stone wall.

Different from King's City, Fallen Dragon Ridge seldom encountered attacks from external enemies, being located in the central south of the kingdom. Thus, its city wall was quite low, not even half as high as that of Longsong Stronghold. The narrow wall at the top allowed only one person to pass, and they could not set up large defense equipment like mangonels. Therefore, the Artillery Squad had expanded field artilleries to the open space 500 meters away from the wall.

To make sure that the several hundred soldiers of the Vanguard Battalion could enter the city efficiently, Iron Axe decided to make three openings in the city wall before action. Any enemies trying to fill in and defend the open spots would be bombarded mercilessly by the twelve pounds cannons. Now that the gate and the north wall had been chiseled through, he would make a final command to attack once they seized the last entrance.

[If only the witches could've come with the army,] Iron Axe thought rather regretfully. It was a waste to use these precious shells on the stones.

If Lady Nightingale were here, they would only need three packs of explosives to destroy the whole city wall. After all, their defense was much weaker than King City's.

He was amused to realize the change in his belief. Half a year ago, he had insisted that the army should complete His Majesty's task independently. However, after conquering King's City with the help of the Witch Union, it suddenly occurred to him that the perfect way to fight was to use witches as their eyes or commandos.

"Sir!" a soldier on the observatory shouted. "Attention to the gate! They seem to be gathering horses!"

Iron Axe looked at the ruined gate through his telescope. With limited vision, he could only vaguely see the dust behind the wall.

"Do I need to adjust the naval artillery and fire in that direction?" Van'er asked.

"Not necessary. It'll waste at least two or three more shells." He shook his head and said, "Since they're horses, I think their plan is to gather knights and try to open the blockade line of field artillery through assault. There is nothing to worry about. While for you..." Iron Axe turned back to see Countess Spear. "After this assault, I'm afraid there will not be many knights left in your domain."

"They decided to stand on my brother's side. These people are no longer my knights." She answered quietly. "That's the price they have to pay for their betrayal."

"I see." Iron Axe paused for a moment and said, "Have you decided what to do with Redwyne Passi?"

Yesterday, he received a secret letter from the City Hall, which demanded all the noble except Spear's relatives to be escorted to City of Neverwinter. Anyone who resisted would be executed on the spot,

and their domain would be blocked by the First Army. The officers from the City Hall would arrive and seize their properties.

Based on that letter, the nobles would probably be sentenced to the mines with heavy labor. Currently several mines in Stronghold Area lacked sufficient labor forces. There should be hundreds of people, including family members, cronies and servants. It appeared there would be more iron ores in City of Neverwinter this year.

As for the culprit, Redwyne Passi, the letter instructed that he should be handed over to the countess herself.

The hesitation on Spear's face showed that she had not made a decision yet.

Iron Axe sighed in silence. If he were her, he would chop off his head without hesitation. Nothing was more unforgivable than betrayal.

"They're coming!" the observer shouted suddenly.

Putting aside these trifles, he continued to look at the battlefield through the telescope.

As he had expected, a group of knights rushed out from the gate heading directly to the edge of the artillery field.

The sound of gunshots suddenly echoed in the wilderness and forest. Puffs of smoke floated in the air in front of the battlefield. More than 20 knights and their squires fell down to the muddy ground in succession after rushing out less than 100 meters.

If Duke Ryan had led his troops to attack Border Town, the knightage might have still been able to cause a small threat to the First Army by acting in unison. However, now these iron turtles were almost living targets with no ability to strike back.

Revolving rifles and two HMGs (heavy machine gun) alone could firmly block the enemies on their way to attack. The field artillery did not even need to reload with grapeshots.

After another round of shots from the naval artillery, the thin wall finally collapsed. Iron Axe commanded to blow the whistle and attack immediately.

Soldiers in the Vanguard Battalion poured out from the alignment and separated into three groups targeting to the three openings.

The battle for recovering Fallen Dragon Ridge had officially been launched.

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Two hours later, the First Army took the castles and churches.

The enemies had been too frightened of the booming weapons for any resistance. The last batch of knights who were destroyed immediately when they left the gate were all the soldiers Redwyne could gather.

The church people did not show up at all, and all the goods and materials were cleared. Priest Rosad was also missing.

There was no secret tunnel or hidden side door in Fallen Dragon Ridge and there was no way to escape in a city of this kind, which was backed up by the mountains. Soldiers searched for the usurper and blocked him at the top level of the castle.

Iron Axe commanded to take away the ministers who were on their knees begging for mercy and ordered the soldiers to leave Countess Spear and her brother alone in the chamber. Of course, Redwyne was tied to the chair tightly, so he could not do any harm to the countess.

"I don't understand..." Spear said after a long silence. "What can you gain by being the lord? Our little brother and you know nothing about administration or trading. Even if you sit in this position, you just hand over your power to other feudatories. You think I'm less important to you than those strangers, don't you?"

"You're a witch, a demon's underling!" Redwyne craned his neck, crying. "Father was wrong about you. You cheated him!"

"But I'm still your sister!"

"You aren't!" He gritted his teeth and said, "You're just the bastard adopted by father!"

"Wh-what?" Spear was stunned.

"I heard with my own ears when he was drunk. You were the mistake he made when he was young. And you aren't a Passi!" Redwyne shouted with anger. "Why is it that you should inherit the family instead of me? I'm just taking back what was supposed to belong to me. You're the real stranger!"

Spear covered her head but she could not remember anything about her childhood. "The mistake he made?"

"If not, why do you look so different from mother? Can't you remember how you came to Fallen Dragon Ridge?"

"So... you are not my brother either."

"Exactly, I'm the true heir of my family, the Earl of Fallen Dragon Ridge! Release me immediately. I demand to be treated as a nobleman!"

Spear stumbled out the chamber. Iron Axe held her promptly and said, "Are you OK?"

"I'm fine." She took a deep breath. "Send my, no, send Redwyne Passi to City of Neverwinter. He has lost his mind. The mine is where he should be."

"As your wish." Iron Axe answered and nodded with agreement.

Chapter 574: The Expansion of Education

Summer began with a heavy rain.

Raindrops spattered on the windows, making the outside scenery a blur. One could only distinguish between the town and the remote mountains through the silhouette of the colors.

Standing in front of the French window and looking at the blurry sceneries in the rain, Roland still felt the singing of "The City of Love" reverberating in his ears.

He did not expect that, combined with Echo's ability, the first drama show performed three days ago could have such a striking effect.

The whole room had fallen into silence when the show finished. The audience had been so touched that their eyes had been filled with tears. Roland thought this scene could only be seen in the high-end opera house of the era where he came from. Even the audiences in the commercial cinemas aimed at the masses of his era could seldom be moved that much, let alone the ordinary people who lived in this backward era.

Even Roland himself who had seen all the scenes that made people shed tears, could feel the shudder deep down in his heart.

That was the strength of the "Resonance Song".

Roland recognized the importance of the inspirational singing during an enduring war in which the machines would not tire, but people would. Even if the guns and ammunition could be unceasingly transported to the battlefield, people would still be struck down by the endless pressure of survival, especially when the tide of battle was unfavorable and the army suffered heavy casualties. This kind of emotion was easily magnified, causing the soldiers to lose their faith in the ultimate victory.

Throughout history, people had thought many methods to boost the morale of the army. This first type of method included making sure the soldiers could eat as much hot food as possible or air dropping ice cream. The second type was assigning a commissar or an army chaplain to go with the army. But these methods were impractical for Roland. The former required a very good logistical supply ability and the latter was hard, in such a short period of time, to cultivate a group of core members who had strong faith that were also good at encouraging people.

Echo's ability let him see a shortcut to boosting morale.

It might sound a little absurd, but it was more reliable compared with other methods.

While he was thinking, he heard a knock on the office's door and then Barov walked in.

"Your Majesty, the recent house purchase statistics are available now."

"What's the result?"

"Just as you expected." He excitedly unfolded a list on the mahogany table. "Since the first night of the new drama, people who come to the City Hall to apply for house renting and purchasing has significantly increased, even the people who apply for marriage registration has increased a lot too."

"Really?" Roland went back to the table to look at Barov's statistics. "The City of Love" was not just meaningless entertainment. Apart from advocating that labor was glorious and construction was great, it also transmitted another opinion which linked marriage with a stable residence. Instead of letting the outsiders develop a sense of belonging slowly and making the locals accept those foreigners step by step through daily contact, it was better if he set a simple standard himself to advance the fusion of the refugees.

That standard was housing.

"You're one of us if you have a house in our place." This saying might seem a bit rude, but it saved a lot of time in this special period.

To gain people's recognition and build up their own families, the foreigners had to have a house. And once they owned real estate here, they would defend everything in this place voluntarily. Of course, these ideas were unsuitable to speak out directly, but they would be naturally born in mind by the audience seeing the drama stories.

It was just like diamonds.

The classics advertising verbal's "A diamond lasts forever" made it the king of jewelry, and everyone would want one when they got married, making people completely forget its true nature which was not rare or precious.

Compared with diamonds, housing at least was far more practical.

However, in order to realize his goals, he could not set a too high standard, making people feel it was impossible to reach. In his city, now people could apply for renting a house with one gold royal and after that, they only needed to pay one gold royal as rent every year. When the rent they paid equaled to the house price, the house would belong to the renter spontaneously.

The target was not easy to achieve, as even the cheapest single room would cost 20 gold royals. That meant all the workers, for example, the temporary workers and handymen, would take 20 years to afford such a house which was less than 15 square meters and could only contain one bed, one table and one bathroom. People would call him a black-hearted realtor in the era where Roland came from.

All in all, according to Barov's statistics, "The City of Love" was undoubtedly successful in promoting his idea.

Most of the renting applications came from the several batches refugees and serfs who arrived in the Border Area first, and house purchase requests were mostly proposed by the craftsmen with higher salaries and the broken nobles who had carried properties with them. After they all settled down here, they would become part of the City of Neverwinter forever.

Based on this successful experience, Roland had already figured out the contents of a new drama whose theme was getting married and working hard to buy a big house.

"Well done." He rolled up the list and gave it to Barov. "Besides, the recent solicitation of the refugees should continue to expand its scope, the plentiful population is the base for the development of the City of Neverwinter and other tasks can be put aside for it."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Barov laughed till his mustache was curled up.

"By the way, go and get Scroll. I have something to tell her."

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"Your Majesty, did you want to see me?" Scroll walked into the office in a black skirt and white blouse, looking very capable.

"I want to expand the education scope, which will cover the refugees who have just arrived at the City of Neverwinter." Roland poured a cup of tea for her. "If the education only aims at the official citizens, the refugees would have to wait at least one more year to receive primary education."

"I'm afraid this is untenable now," Scroll said after several minutes consideration. "There're too many of them. The current teacher couldn't take care of them all and the classrooms are not enough either. If we do as you ask, the number of the education ministry's staff would need to be doubled or tripled."

"I have a method which can reduce the teachers' pressure." Roland paused for a while and continued, "Let them study by themselves."

"Self-study?"

"Yes, every week we give one public lecture which only teaches them the basic reading and writing, and let them use the booklets with pictures and pronunciations to do some exercises by themselves in the rest of the time. There are no achievement tests and no mandatory requirements, and they learn according to their own free will."

"This..." She ran her fingers through her hair which was soaked wet by the rain unconsciously. "It's unlikely to have any effect. Your Majesty, without supervision, nine out of ten people won't learn well."

"It doesn't matter. I just want to offer them an opportunity," Roland laughed and said.

There was always someone who was unsatisfied with boring, low-paid jobs and was eager to achieve their goals quickly. In order to prevent these people from stepping aside, he must guide them to improve themselves in the right way.

In the future, more and more jobs would have literacy requirements, and the salaries for these jobs would be much higher than the handymen's. Given that, for those who wanted to buy a house and get rid of their poor and exhausting lives, it would be a better choice for them to learn how to read and write by themselves.

Through this method, those hardworking people could participate in the city's construction quickly.

To keep the new regime's vitality, the most important thing was never, ever blocking the way of promotion from the bottom layer.

That was what Roland believed.

Chapter 575: Wendy's Expectation

Wendy woke up and found that after a whole night, the rain had finally stopped.

She yawned and got out of the bed. The moment she pushed open the window, the sweet fragrance of wet soil swarmed into the room. After the rainfall, the garden was a bright shade of green and she could see droplets of water falling from the olive leaves near the window. The morning's gentle sunshine shone on the wet grass reflecting gleams of light.

A new day had begun.

After putting on her undergarments and coat, she went back to the bedside and patted Nightingale's cheeks, saying, "Time to get up."

Nightingale gave an obscure snort, and buried her face in the pillow.

Only in times like this, would she expose herself defenselessly, instead of hiding in the Mist. Wendy smiled and shook her head. "Then I'll go eat breakfast first."

Nightingale's ears moved slightly, like unconscious trembles, but Wendy knew she had heard.

She gently closed the door and went to the bathroom to wash up before she walked toward the hall to enjoy breakfast.

The chefs always woke up extremely early since they had to prepare food for everyone before daybreak. The firewood in the oven could burn for a long time, so there was no need to worry about the food getting cold half way. If she wanted to eat something, she could just grab a bowl and spoon and fetch it in the kitchen. His Majesty said it was called buffet and it seemed to be a very common dining style for him, but for her, this kind of life could be called extravagant.

In the Witch Cooperation Association, Wendy had never thought that one day she could eat as much as she wanted. Back then they were lucky to have sufficient food to eat, let alone to pay any attention to the taste, as the food was never enough.

But now, there were three or four dishes just for breakfast every day, such as porridge, toast, dried fish and fried eggs.

Even though she had been living in the castle for nearly a year, she still felt extreme satisfaction and happiness every time she ate.

Meanwhile, she was very grateful to the person who had brought all these things to the witches and let her sisters live a free life.

When Wendy picked up her bowl in the dining room, there was no one in the hall, just several used plates on the long table. Obviously, she was not the first to eat. The Witch Union had never set a time to wake up, so everyone came to enjoy breakfast one after another. Lightning and Maggie were always the first to leave the castle, followed by another group including Anna, Agatha, Lucia and others. She was usually between the two.

Nightingale was always the last.

This was because His Majesty loved to sleep late. When there was nothing urgent, he would get up at noon to deal with the government affairs. Nightingale was influenced by him.

She had once been the most discrete and acute person in the Witch Cooperation Association, alerted by even a small movement.

However, Wendy did not think this was a bad thing.

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After breakfast, she went to the first floor of the Witch Building. This place had been transformed into the Witch Union's office.

Ring walked toward her as soon as she entered. "Sister Wendy, you're here!"

"Hello, Lady Wendy."

"Good morning ladies."

Another two young women from the City Hall bowed to her. They had graduated from the institute which was originally founded by Karl Van Bate. They barely counted as Anna's and Nana's classmates and had no prejudice towards witches. The older one was Pearl and the younger one was Grayrabbit. Together with Lucia's little sister Ring, they formed the first clerks of the Witch Union's.

Of course, since Ring was under 14, she was just a fill-in for now.

Anyway, the jobs here were very easy, and she could consider it as extra education.

With the clerks' help, the Witch Union was finally getting on track.

"Good morning." Wendy nodded, sitting by the desk. "How are the sales of the first volume of "The Witch Diaries"?"

"Very popular," Pearl smiled and said, "and people love the story of Border Town's little angel, especially the soldiers from the First Army. They come to buy it almost every day. This week we almost sold more than 60 copies a day. At this rate, we may sell out the 1,000 copies we originally printed within half a month."

Hearing that, Wendy was a little surprised. After all, as a book which was purely for entertainment, "The Witch Diaries" could not feed people or help them with their studies, but yet it could sell this well at such a high price. It was incredible.

The idea was originally put forward by His Majesty.

As a drama trilogy with an intricate plot and moving stories, "The Witch Diaries" had been praised by the City of Neverwinter's subjects. So, His Majesty decided to follow the pattern of the drama and illustrate the witches' life stories in the form of pictures to sell it in the Convenience Market's boutique. But unlike the drama, this time all the major characters in the stories were witches from the Union, and apart from the exquisite pictures, it also had some designed dialogues, making the readers feel as if they were watching a real drama play on the paper.

The main character of the first volume was Miss Nana Pine.

The 15-year-old girl had already been very famous in Border Town, with the ability to heal the pain of others and her natural affinity. No one could hate such an angel. Coupled with His Majesty's strong supportive attitude towards witches, as well as the first army's spread of her stories, she was even more popular than Anna.

After Wendy decided the plot of the stories, Soraya painted them one by one and stapled the book together. It sold for five silver royals per book. It was the refugees who needed to know about the witches most, but many refugees could not read and they were not interested in buying an exquisite

album with half a month's salary. So, in the beginning, the potential buyers were locals and businessmen who came here to do business.

The former could spread the stories through the contact with foreigners and the latter could bring them to every city in the kingdom.

After seeing how popular "The Witch Diaries" was, Wendy felt inspired.

She could hardly wait to get the pen and paper, and was starting to think about the contents of the next volume.

"Have you considered the content of the next stories?" Ring asked curiously.

"Yes, His Majesty said Echo will be the major character of the next volume," Wendy smiled and said, "and what do you think of this title 'The Silver Moon Princess from the Southernmost Region, the Land of Swirling Sand and Volcanoes'?"

"Wow! It's awesome!" The little girl exclaimed smacking her lips.

"When His Majesty recaptures the Southern Territory, you can go to the princess's hometown to see the vast desert."

"Wonderful!"

It was her job, spreading stories about the witches and letting everyone know who they really were.

"The Witch Diaries" was just a part of it.

Echo had already gotten acquainted with the Star Flower Troupe, and all the actors were full of praises for her immersive music.

Evelyn had opened a tavern next to the Holy Mountain Hotel, mainly offering mixed liquor with a unique flavor.

Hummingbird also joined the City Hall and became the deputy minister of the Ministry of Construction, and she was also the second witch officer in the City Hall next to Scroll.

The witches all worked very hard to build the City of Neverwinter. At the same time, they also made people accept their existence and equally treat them.

Wendy felt that the day which His Majesty had promised was just within their reach.

Chapter 576: Deep Inside the Palace

Otto Luoxi and Oro Tokat lurked behind a rockery, in the palace garden, in the City of Glow, the Kingdom of Dawn

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Of course, they were not completely sneaking. At least when entering the palace, they had passed through the door, right under the guards' noses. No guard would stop them from visiting any place in

the palace, except for the forbidden areas, because all the guards knew that the Luoxis and the Tokats had always been loyal supporters of the royal family, and that these two young men would become the ministers of the eldest prince when they took over their respective families.

"Hey, are you sure about this?" Otto could not help but feel nervous.

If the Dawn castle where the King of Dawn spent time was a forbidden zone, his bedroom was even more forbidden. However, they happened to know a secret way from the garden to his bedroom. This narrow underground channel which they had explored with Andrea and Prince Appen in their childhood was meant to be one of the escape routes from the palace. They had considered it their own secret base and held small parties there occasionally.

Given that they were only 10 years old at that time, the worst punishment, even if they were found by His Majesty Moya, would have been being blamed. Now as grown-ups, if they entered the palace without permission, what would His Majesty think?

"Come on! Gathering the three families to find out the reason why Appen has been acting strange, isn't that the plan?" Oro twitched his lips. "And now, at this crucial time, you want to flinch?"

"I ..." Otto opened his mouth but he was speechless.

"But how stupid you are! To get messages from Quinn, you told him Andrea's recent situation. If you weren't Andrea's childhood sweetheart, the old man would have killed you," Oro said while looking around, "and now is the best time to tell the truth, will you do it or not?"

After a moment's hesitation, Otto gritted his teeth and nodded.

What Earl Quinn had told them was astonishing.

Since His Majesty had fallen ill, the prince often met with an alchemist in the palace, casting his visitors out. It was said that a special drug from the alchemy could resist disease and enabled His Majesty to remain awake for one or two hours a day. As the prime minister, Andrea's father naturally had access to the palace to obtain political suggestions from His Majesty. The old man had gotten a glimpse of the alchemist and to his great surprise, he saw that it was actually a young woman, covered with a black veil, only her bleak silver-gray eyes showing.

At this description, Otto immediately thought of the church.

If it were not for his recent trip to the Kingdom of Graycastle, he would not think this way. After meeting with Roland Wimbleton, the messages about the church secretly training pure witches, attempting to subvert the four kingdoms and accumulating its power to resist the Battle of Doomsday had rooted in his mind.

He did not tell what he knew from Roland to Earl Quinn. After all, the impact of the news was so huge that he must confirm his conjecture before deciding the next step.

Hearing from the Earl that the alchemist would appear today, Otto immediately thought of the secret channel from his childhood.

Now that it was impossible to get the support of the eldest prince, this was his only way to discover the truth.

With this thought, he nodded to Oro who immediately poked the knee-high weeds, using a dagger to pry a cover disguised as a stone from behind the rockery. Rusty steel bars appeared in front of them. The fence, which could only be opened from the inside, was about an arm-length in width, but this was not a problem for the two who were fully prepared.

Oro took a glass bottle from his pocket, opened the lid and poured the tawny liquid onto the lock catch.

A puff of pungent white smoke rose up and the steel bars gave off a sizzling sound, like butter being thrown into a hot pot.

The liquid was the iron-melting water created by a master alchemist of the City of Glow, and a fist-sized bottle cost more than 10 gold royals. Oro was told that iron would become molten in the blink of an eye when using it. But this was not the case. The lock catch first shrunk in half and did not fall off the fence until he had used up the second bottle.

The two men bent over to enter the hole, and Oro did not forget to turn around and close the slates.

After they had crawled more than 10 steps, the channel became slightly spacious, and they could walk. Otto skillfully fumbled for the oil lamp hung on the wall, flaming it with flint. The faint light illuminated the cliffs and the arched ceiling. This place was still the same even after more than 10 years as if time stood still here. When passing by the lounge halfway, they could still see the soft seats and wine glasses they had dragged here for parties.

The road began to shift upwards and Otto Luoxi knew that they had entered the Dawn castle.

Castle walls were divided into two layers, just like a sandwich. The middle part between the two layers was reserved for secret chambers and tunnels. Finally, the two arrived at the end of the secret channel which was the very back of the fireplace in the bedroom of the king.

As the mechanism needed to be opened from inside, they could not walk directly into the bedroom. But they could roughly see the scene in the bedroom through the small gap in the trap door. The voices of conversation in the room could be heard if it was quiet enough.

Otto blew out the oil lamp and peeked through the gap.

The King of Dawn, His Majesty Deegan Moya, was lying in bed facing the fireplace. And Appen, the eldest prince, was pacing by the bedside, looking worried.

They looked at each other, then tacitly nodded and carefully leaned against the door. It was obvious that His Highness was waiting for the alchemist.

About an hour later, there was a sound in the room.

They immediately turned their heads, squinting.

Two women walked into the bedroom. One was the black-veiled alchemist that Earl Quinn had mentioned, and the other was probably the alchemist's assistant. She carried a satchel, wore a red and white cope and cloak, and had beautiful golden curly hair.

"You're late!" Appen said, displeased.

"Sorry," the blonde bowed and answered, "we were delayed by an unexpected situation on the way."

"There's no need to explain. All we need to do is to wake his father up. It doesn't matter whether we arrive early or late." The woman in the black veil said this with an icy voice.

"You shouldn't say that! We still need the help of His Highness." The blonde took out a green porcelain bottle from her satchel. "It's good for both of us to maintain a harmonious relationship, isn't it?"

"Give me the medicine." Appen took two steps toward them, but was stopped by the woman dressed in black veil.

"Did you forget our agreement? This medicine is only effective if fed by me, and in exchange, you must meet the requirements of His Holiness."

His Holiness!?

Otto was shocked. This honorific could only be used to name the Pope. He wondered whether they were really sent by the church.

He could not help but bite his lip. Apparently, they were not alchemists, but Pure Witches instead.

Chapter 577: The Silent Massacre

"I remember a month ago I told you to close the way to Kingdom of Wolfheart as soon as possible. Why are there still so many refugees flocking in?" the black-veiled witch said wryly, "and your knights should have arrived at the border by now."

"You know clearly that there are a large number of refugees!" Appen clenched his fists and said, "If they were prohibited from crossing the border, most of them would die from starvation. There are no cities nearby, and no places to provide food. It'll take at least a week to go back to Wilderness Town if they retract their original steps, and they..."

"Does that have anything to do with you?" The black-veiled witch interrupted impatiently. "If they suffer from starvation or thirst, they have only themselves to blame, after all, they've abandoned their kingdom. And you'd better pay attention to your father. Or do you want to breach the deal?"

"They abandoned their Kingdom? Ridiculous!" Otto thought, with a burst of anger. "It's the person like the black-veiled witch who has waged the war, displacing these people."

When it came to a breach of the deal, Appen showed obvious hesitation. After a while he said, "The rest of the road will be closed in a week, I hope you're satisfied with such a result. However, if they cross the border through the wildlands or the mountain ridges instead of walking through the official road, it's none of my business."

"Of course. I won't ram an impossible mission down your throat." The black-veiled girl took the porcelain bottle and sipped. She walked up to the bed and bent down to feed the elixir to the King of Dawn with her mouth. Otto and Oro, who were hiding in the path behind the fireplace, stared at her but saw nothing. After a while, she lifted her head and said, "The King of Dawn will recover as usual in an hour."

"Does the elixir have to be fed from your mouth?"

"Yes, it'll only work if fed by my mouth." She shrugged and said, "As long as you comply with the agreement, you can feel relieved knowing that the King of Dawn will recover totally, even much healthier than before."

"The next time we come back the border is to be completely closed." The blonde-haired woman smiled. "Do not let His Holiness down, Your Highness."

Just as they turned to leave, Appen suddenly asked, "You're witches, aren't you?"

"Ehn?" The two witches stopped abruptly.

"Is it because of the magic power of a witch that the elixir can only be fed by you?" he said slowly, "and no other reason could explain this. Although the existence of witches within the church is incredible, all you have done is nothing different from the demons."

"Are you sure you want to say this?"

"Come out!" The prince shouted.

The prince's words gave Otto and Oro a scare, but what they saw were several royal guards with light armor appearing from the closet and under the bed. The Pure Witches were hemmed in by a flock of guards.

"Oh," the blonde witch gave a whistle and said, "what an admirably, reckless move."

"And it makes no sense." The Black-veiled witch shook her head. "It appears that the church doesn't leave you with a great impression."

"Do not bluff!" Appen roared. "Your God's Punishment Warriors are indeed a miracle and are unimaginably strong. However, they're not here! We have God's Stone in the Palace, as many as we want. Do you think you'll have any chance to flee away?"

"Wait." The blonde witch smacked her lips and asked, "Are the witches we have encountered along the way your arrangement?"

"Those aren't real witches, they're tricks the Rats often used." Appen suddenly snapped as if the long-repressed rage was finally coming unleashed. "A handful of Magic Fire Stones should give us a clear picture of your strength. Are there any differences between the witches and the common people without the protection of God's Punishment Warriors? It's not too late to beg for mercy if you hand over the elixir. Just do as I've said. Otherwise, we'll break your arms and legs, and pull out your teeth. You'll become humanoid pots to hold elixir."

"The others will be very angry if they hear your words." She sighed. "Young bloke, you should neither doubt the existence of witches nor laugh at their power. You'd better not let her see you next time, or you may have a very rough time."

"What?!" The Pure Witches' deprecating attitude just infuriated the prince further. "Hope you can stay so stubborn in the prison! Guards, take them down."

Otto stuck his face tightly to the flagstone in the hope of seeing more, but his body was soon stiff. He was too surprised to believe his eyes.

Before the guards could touch the Pure Witch, they changed the direction of the blades and committed suicide.

In a flash, blood bubbled and spurted out everywhere. The guards fell to the ground, silently. The smell of blood pervaded the room immediately.

However, Appen trembled ceaselessly as if he had seen something extremely horrible. The previous confidence and rage dissipated instantly. Urine trickled down his legs as he pissed his pants in fear.

"Let him go." the blonde witch shrugged and said, "He's still useful for us."

"Just a little lesson," the Black-veiled witch said and snapped her fingers. The elder prince sat down on the ground like awakening from a dream. He rocked back and forth trembling.

"Don't worry, you're still alive." She satirized. "But I can't guarantee you'll be so lucky next time."

"Why? How? Here, we ha-have God's Stone of Retaliation," Appen said stutteringly. "How could the witches..."

"Because we're Pure Witches," The blonde witch said with a hint of a smile on her face. "Why don't you comply with the agreement? Your father will be safe, and the existence of Kingdom of Dawn will be extended. You can remain a member when the church defeats Kingdom of Graycastle. Even though your kingdom will be under the governing of the church, you can still live a well-to-do life, and your subjects can be free from the war. Are there any benefits to doing these silly things?"

"And, don't forget to clean up the spot. Your father will wake up soon. Presumably, you don't want him to face such a bloody scene when he wakes up," she added as she left.

Otto felt his back soaked with cold sweat. He chilled at the thought of the Pure Witches who had no fear of the God's Stone, and the church's plan to capture Kingdom of Graycastle and to take over Kingdom of Dawn. As His Majesty Roland said, the church had taken the Four Kingdoms as a safe bet.

...

Appen was the only one left in the room when the King of Dawn woke up. The blood-soaked carpet was covered with cloth.

He fed his father oatmeal spoon by spoon. He seemed to forget his illness, chatting desultorily about government and family affairs with Appen. It appeared as if there were no changes.

Otto dared not catch his breath at the sight of this quirky scene.

Oro and Otto did not leave the hidden path until dusk fell.

"What should we do?" Oro, who had always been unflappable, questioned, panic leaking into his voice.

"Tell all these things to Earl Quinn... and our parents." He gritted his teeth. "The problem is beyond our capability."

"But you've seen the Pure Witch resist God's Stone. What difference does it make if our families and Earl Quinn know the truth?"

"I know someone who can deal with them." Otto looked at his friend and said slowly, "We can ask for the help. Have a messenger of Kingdom of Graycastle send the news to His Majesty Roland Wimbledon!"

Chapter 578: A Life-or-death Report

Yorke's life had been very comfortable of late.

With the King of Dawn still to recuperate, Prince Roland seemed to have forgotten about him as well. It was only the nobles who did not ignore this ambassador from a neighboring country.

He attended extravagant banquets and indulged in various pleasures with Denise, who even introduced him to exclusive clubs and brothels. The abundance and unique flavors of the capital were things he would never be able to enjoy in Graycastle.

His current life was only made possible because of his title as "Wimbledon's royal ambassador".

Although his rank was equivalent to an earl, yet in certain ways, he possessed more advantages than an earl. The latter could only do as he pleased within his own fief, while the former could enjoy the privileges of an upper noble in the other kingdoms as well.

This clearly showed him the benefits that status accorded.

The bodyguard assigned him to by His Majesty, named Hill Fawkes, was also a peculiar person.

Whenever Yorke made contact with a new person, Hill would sneak into that person's bedroom within the following three nights and later inform Yorke about that person's identity, status and interests. If the person was a big shot, nearly everything about his life (including his hobbies) could be found out. With Hill's assistance, Yorke was able to mingle within the noble community even more smoothly.

Furthermore, Hill's arrangements allowed him to make considerable progress on his plan to purchase slaves.

Once, after a great night in bed with Denise, he mentioned this plan to her and she immediately agreed to his idea—the existing caravan would be used to establish a slave trading route, through which he would purchase the refugees required by His Majesty from the other slave traffickers, and transport them to Graycastle where they would be resold. The condition was that the slaves had to each be given an identity as a free citizen, and not be treated merely as goods for resale.

Of course, merchants were merchants after all; even at a time of pleasure, they did not forget to negotiate the price. While Denise would not charge a commission, Yorke would have to cover all of the transportation expenses. After factoring in the manpower costs, meal costs, vehicle fees and other expenses, he calculated that the selling price of each slave had to be set at 10 silver royals in order for the business to reach his desired profit.

When Hill entrusted him with this task, he assuredly accepted and proclaimed that he would not let any more talented people end up as slaves. His attitude undoubtedly deepened Denise's attraction to him. After concluding the brief negotiation, the two of them returned to the bed for another passionate romp.

In the following days, Yoriko sent Hill to negotiate with the other parties involved so that he did not have to take care of these trivial business matters himself.

Soon, when he heard that the first batch of slaves, comprising of 25 people, had been purchased the previous day, he realized that it made him eligible for the 125 silver royals which His Majesty had promised as a reward.

Is there another job where I can make money just by lying in bed?

Being an ambassador is simply awesome!

Just as Yoriko was deliberating over where to go for fun today, a servant knocked on the door and walked into the room. "Your Excellency, the eldest son of the Luoxi Family, Lord Otto, wishes to meet you."

"Otto Luoxi?" Yoriko was familiar with this name. He knew that Luoxi was one of the three powerful families of King's City of Kingdom of Dawn, and was only second in power to the Moya royal family. Denise had even warned him that he was free to court any woman except those of these three families, especially the Quinn family. His status as an ambassador would be insufficient to protect him in that case.

Yoriko did not have to worry that this was the reason as he had paid great caution in all of his love affairs. "Perhaps, he has come to invite me to another banquet?"

"Bring him in."

A young man entered the study. He first took a good look around the place, and then closed the windows in the room on his own initiative before he sat down on the chair intended for him.

His expression looked somewhat anxious. The dark circles under his eyes revealed that he had stayed up late and not slept much the previous night.

Yoriko was against the idea of emptying one's vitality for the sake of enjoyment. In his opinion, the abstemious sexual pleasure was beneficial as it made both partners happy and healthy. In contrast, depleting all of one's energy in bed would harm one's physical potential in the long term. Prince Appen was a clear example of this. His face had turned completely pale, and if he did not change his ways, he would be incapable of seeking pleasure by the time he turned 30.

The young man did not say anything for a long time. This surprised Yoriko. It felt discourteous, especially coming from one of the three families. He waited for a while before he decided to break the silence.

"Greetings. You should be Lord Otto Luoxi. What brings..."

"You're able to contact His Majesty Roland Wimbledon, right?" The young man suddenly snapped. "I have an important report for him."

"Eh..." Yoriko was puzzled. "What report?"

"It's all written in here." Otto took out a letter, placed it in front of Yoriko, and added ten gold royals on top of it. "And this money is for reward. Please make sure that this letter reaches your king. The information concerns the survival of Kingdom of Graycastle!"

Yoriko inhaled a mouthful of cold air. "The survival of Kingdom of Graycastle? This has to be an exaggeration." Otto continued to stare at him with gleaming eyes until he collected his wits and replied, "I understand. Don't worry, I'll do as you say and deliver this to His Majesty."

"Make sure it's done as soon as possible." After exhorting Yoriko repeatedly, Otto got up and departed. His anxious demeanor clearly suggested that he was not lying.

Yoriko hastily kept the ten gold royals in his pocket. Instead, he left the letter untouched. He was aware that it had to be handled with great caution and thus it was best to ask Hill for advice first.

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At night, when Hill Fawkes entered his bedroom, Yoriko went through what happened during the day.

After listening to Yoriko's account, Hill pondered for a while before he pulled out a small knife and cleanly opened the letter.

"What're you doing!" Yoriko exclaimed in shock. "Opening a letter intended for His Majesty is a grave offense!"

"Shh." Hill made a gesture to keep quiet. "If the information is truly as important as he claims, it would be wrong for us to use conventional means to deliver this letter. A messenger from City of Dawn to Western Region will take at least a month, while bad situations may occur on the road. It'd be too risky."

"What has that got to do with opening the letter?"

"Do you remember the gray falcons I've been keeping? They're the fastest couriers of all. They can reach City of Dawn within two to three days." Hill explained. "At City of Dawn, they'll pass the letter to another group of falcons, and within a week, His Majesty will be able to receive it. However, they're unable to carry such a large envelope. After I've read the contents, I'll rewrite the letter as a secret letter."

"Gray falcons are able to send letters like carrier pigeons?" Yoriko was astonished. "I'd thought you raised them for hunting."

"They're much smarter than pigeons." Hill remarked. He then opened the letter and soon his expression turned grim. "Who would think something like this could happen..."

"What's written in it?"

"Do you really want to know?" Hill turned his head.

"Never mind." Yoriko coughed twice. "I'd rather be able to sleep well tonight."

"A wise choice." Hill approved. "Also, it's best you don't mention to anyone that Otto Luoxi came to find you. All banquets in the palace should be canceled or postponed for now." He paused briefly before revealing. "They're in deep trouble."

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Chapter 579: Two Incoming Letters

Roland received a letter from Calvin Kant, Duke of the Northern Region.

It was accompanied by a fingerprinted memorandum that expressed the Northern Region's intent of loyalty to His Majesty.

The letter itself talked about more trivial matters.

First, it asked when Roland would stage his accession ceremony, so that the Duke could prepare his journey to attend. This was the convention every time a new king was soon to be coronated.

The next question asked about the new policies, such as how they should be enforced, what the remaining powers of the nobles were, how succession arrangements should be made and what the management scope of the city hall should be.

These questions were predictable. But it was the last question which surprised Roland.

At the end of the letter, the Duke proposed a connection through marriage. An entire page was dedicated to extolling the beauty and talent of his daughter, Edith. It also claimed that she would be able to handle all kinds of issues and affairs, whether they were domestic or foreign, and therefore, she was the most suitable candidate to be queen. Roland laughed heartily as he read through this section of the letter.

"What're you laughing about?" Nightingale's voice came from the direction of the deck chair.

"A very interesting... father." He raised the letter. "Have a look at this."

Nightingale came out of her Mist, took the letter from Roland, and read it. Then she frowned and asked, "You won't agree to it, will you?"

"Of course not," Roland replied lightheartedly. "I don't need marriage connections to preserve the stability of my throne. Furthermore, the letter makes her sound so able that I won't even dare to let her into the castle. Or else, it may become unclear who the king is."

"You do sound truthful." Nightingale remarked and visibly sighed in relief.

"Hey, don't you believe me?"

"It's not that I don't believe you, but you know that witches can't..." She paused for a moment before continuing. "After our awakenings, we can't be considered complete women anymore."

"I don't think that way." Roland shook his head in disagreement. To him, the social perception that infertility was a defect would be expunged as civilization gradually progressed. Conversely, the beautiful appearances, attractive physiques and incredible abilities which magic power could bring about would become increasingly important and desirable over time. As long as Mankind lived on, witches would inevitably rise up as a group. Fortunately, they could be born in normal humans, and furthermore, there was no specific method to trigger an awakening. These thus allowed witches and normal humans to live and work together or perhaps even to marry.

Just as Roland was about to expound at length on his personal view of witches, a gray falcon flew into the room through an open window and perched on Roland's desk with a loud thump.

A loop of yellow cloth was tied around its claws—this meant that it was a secret letter which arrived from the old King's City.

Roland swallowed his words, took a piece of dried fish out of a drawer, and tossed it to the gray falcon which was already waiting for its reward. Then he unwound the cloth and took out the neatly-folded oilpaper from within.

As the size of the secret letter was limited, the contents written on it had to be extremely concise.

The first sentence of the letter was enough to give Roland a huge shock.

"The palace of Kingdom of Dawn has been infiltrated by the Pure Witch who can defy the God's Stone of Retaliation to use their abilities."

"Witches who're immune to the influence of the God's Stone?" As far as Roland knew, only two kinds of beings could do this. The first was Extraordinaries with their enhanced bodies, while the second was senior demons that were called Supermagic.

As Roland continued reading, he realized that each successive line of news got more and more shocking.

"When Prince Appen attempted to resist the Pure Witch, they manipulated his guards to slit their own throats."

"The church's aim is to establish firm control over the Kingdom of Dawn before it places full concentration on attacking the Kingdom of Graycastle."

"Otto Luoxi and Oro Tokat witnessed everything that took place. The three families hope to receive your kind aid."

Roland suddenly realized that his plans to recapture Southernmost Region would have to be adjusted substantially.

Three days passed.

Roland convened a strategy discussion meeting in the castle's reception room.

The attendees included City Hall Director, Barov; Commander of the First Army, Iron Axe; Chief Knight, Carter; Longsong Stronghold Consul, Petrov; Witch Union representatives, Wendy and Agatha; a representative of Sleeping Island's witches, Sylvie; and lastly, Pearl of the Northern Region, Edith.

"That's the current situation, basically speaking." Roland concluded after recounting the contents of the secret letter to the attendees. "Although we're unable to verify the information, if everything written in the letter is to be believed, the Kingdom of Graycastle shall unquestionably face its biggest challenge before the next Battle of Divine Will. After some consideration, I've decided that the Southernmost Region's battle arrangements have to be temporarily suspended." He glanced towards Iron Axe. "Will that be okay?"

As the chief commander of the spring offensive, Iron Axe had swiftly seized Willow Town and Fallen Dragon Ridge according to plan, and thus gave Roland control over the gateway towns that connected the City of Neverwinter and the Southern Territory. Iron Axe had intended to build on this success by completing the territorial expansion before autumn arrived. This would include bringing the Sand Nation under the domain of Roland's kingdom. The two people who would then be responsible for establishing good relations between the two races were Echo and Iron Axe. As both of them belonged to the Mojin Clan, they could serve as mediators in a racial conflict. Iron Axe had especially yearned to return to Iron Sand City to take revenge for being framed. Hence, allowing him to lead the troops to seize the Southernmost Region was the best reward that Roland could have given him. Now that the battle plans were suspended, it was understandable if he was disappointed.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Iron Axe did not reveal any expression, and his reply was as sure as ever. "I suggest that we let the newly-trained soldiers take the place of the First Army soldiers stationed at Fallen Dragon Ridge. They'll have no problems dealing with the nobles there, while this would allow the First Army to gather its greatest strength to fight against the church."

"We'll do exactly that." Roland nodded approvingly before he stood up and walked in front of the large map. "Presently, we face two main problems. The first is that we don't know when the enemy will attack. The second is that we don't know where they'll attack from. The church used to have only one route to invade the Kingdom of Graycastle. This would be traveling directly south through Coldwind Ridge to reach King's City. However, now that the church controls the Kingdom of Dawn, it's possible that the Judgement Army will attack us through their border. Does anyone have a good idea how we can cope with this?"

"No matter where they appear from, they'll first have to go through the Northern Region." Barov was first to speak. "Coldwind Ridge, Deepvalley Town, City of Evernight and Palisade City, all of these are places administered by Duke Calvin. I suggest that we allow Miss Edith to go back and inform her father about this. We'll then keep a lookout for enemies in the Northern Region. This is the most secure way. But, Your Majesty..." The City Hall Director rubbed his hands together. "Do we truly stand a chance against the church?"

This foolish question was badly received by everyone present. Edith unceremoniously replied, "If His Majesty says that we don't have a chance, are you going to wag your tail at the church and beg for mercy?"

"What nonsense are you talking? As the City Hall Director, I have to make contingency plans for the worst that can happen..."

Edith ignored him and turned towards Roland. "Your Majesty, while it's indeed necessary to send people to monitor every road in the north, it won't be an effective method on its own. The response will be slow, and by the time enemies are discovered, it'll mean that they have already begun to act. This'll give you very little time to respond."

"Do you have a better plan?"

"Of course." Edith replied confidently. "We should send people to Hermes."

"The church's holy city?" Carter frowned in disdain. "What use would that be? Do you think the Pope will inform you when he dispatches his army?"

"Also, the people living there are believers and zealots. It'll be difficult for spies to blend in." Petrov added.

"There's no need to enter the holy city." Edith laughed. "All we need to do is to have a nice chat with a nearby merchant."

Chapter 580: The Tooth Extraction Campaign

"Tell me more." Roland could not help becoming interested in Edith's idea.

"The terrain of Hermes is very unique. There's a slope around this area of the Impassable Mountain Range. The old part of the holy city is located at the lower end of the slope, while the new part is built on a plateau on the higher end. The environment there is very harsh. Although there're natural barriers that keep demonic beasts away, the highland isn't really suitable for living, let alone for cultivating and farming. Thus the food and supplies of the new holy city have to be provided by the old one, despite the fact that the latter's mass land can only produce enough supplies for the 20,000 or so people living downhill."

Edith walked to Roland's side, pointed at the map, and continued, "This means that they have to gather supplies from other places. For example, they would buy plots of land from churches and related organizations in nearby cities. Or they would rent wheat fields for farming. Every year during autumn, dozens of horse carriages would arrive from the four kingdoms every day to provide supplies to the new holy city. The old holy city has become something like a market town where these carriages may rest, as well as a checkpoint where the church can control the flow of people in and out of the new city."

"In other words, whenever they mobilize the Judgement Army, the merchants here would definitely witness it. In fact, even before the army acts, we can observe changes in the transportation of supplies to deduce when they'll move out."

The young woman spoke as if she was taking part in a modern-day oratorical competition. Her eyes routinely swept across everyone present to make sure that they were paying attention to herself. The level of confidence she displayed was rarely seen in women of her era.

Roland silently thought to himself, "Perhaps what Calvin Kant wrote in the letter isn't all boastful bullsh*t. Judging from Edith's manner, she is indeed worthy of being called 'Pearl of the Northern Region'."

"How do you know all of this so well?" Barov stroked his beard as he queried. "It's almost as if you came from there."

"I lived there for a period of time," Edith replied without a second thought, "because of the Agreement on the Months of Demons."

"What's that?" Roland asked doubtfully. He seemed to have an impression of what it was, but could not recall the exact details of it.

"How can you not know?" The young woman blinked in amazement. "To help the church tide over the disasters during the Months of Demons, the four kingdoms had to dispatch troops to aid Hermes and fight alongside the Judgement Army. Your older brother, Gerald Wimbledon, was the commander of Graycastle's border troops. I've fought under him before. However, there seem to be some mishaps over the past year. It's reported that the coalition of the four kingdoms has suffered many casualties, while the church's Judgement Army has suffered a similar loss."

"This is indeed so." Petrov corroborated what Edith said. "My friend, Rene Medde, completed his knight test in Hermes."

"Does every knight have to fight against demonic beasts before he can be granted his title?" Roland looked towards Carter. "Why haven't you mentioned this before?"

"Ahem, this is a method that knights from small towns love to use." Carter shrugged his shoulders. "The knighthood of King's City has its own rules for that. Apart from valiant combat, a knight's loyalty and knowledge are also very important considerations. These can't be proven simply by fighting against some evil creatures."

"By the way, Your Majesty." Edith did not refute Carter's words and instead turned to face Roland. "May I inspect how your army fights in combat? I've always been curious as to how you managed to capture King's City in just one day. If I can understand how the First Army operates, I may be able to contribute in future battles."

This was not a big problem. There were no issues of secrecy. With the weaponry that the First Army now possessed, it was impossible to emulate their methods just by observing. As technology advanced, wars were becoming more and more expensive. Without a complete logistics supply system and industrial production support system, a batch of flintlocks would be utterly useless on its own. Furthermore, by displaying his military strength to the loyalists of the Northern Region, he could not only increase their confidence in him, but also deter them from having any secession ideas. As he thought about this, Roland nodded at Iron Axe and ordered, "Go and make arrangements for her."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty, I suggest that you issue a decree, in the name of the king, to every city and town in Graycastle to expel their churches." Barov was unwilling to be outdone by Edith. "Or else, when the war begins, the churches of these places will become strongholds from where they devour the whole kingdom."

"There aren't many lords who would happily do so. The church is typically a major source of tax revenue, and its power can be quite frightening. The lords prefer to follow the way that the wind blows." Edith shrugged her shoulders. "This is also how the nobles usually act."

"In any case, it's better than not doing anything at all." The director glared at the young woman angrily.

"Of course." She laughed dismissively. "The Northern Region will fully comply with this decree."

"Then we shall do that." Roland nodded in approval of Barov's idea.

"This could be a very difficult battle." Sylvie's facial expression seemed rather anxious. "It's best that you inform Lady Tilly. The Sleeping Island witches may be able to assist you."

As Roland listened to Sylvie, he could not help laughing bitterly in his heart. Sleeping Island's problems amounted to no less than his. He had still not heard back from them after sending out the intelligence regarding the Bloodfang Association. If Tilly brought her subordinates to aid him while their internal issues were still not resolved, Sleeping Island might fall into big trouble. However, this did not mean that Sylvie's words were senseless. Witches were indeed the most effective way of dealing with the Pure Witch and their uncanny abilities. "I'll remember to write a letter to her," he replied.

"Don't forget to prepare God's Stones of Retaliation for your men." Agatha was next to chime in. "Throughout the Union's centuries of existence, there have been several witches with inconceivable levels of ability. Any normal person who didn't wear a God's Stone would have completely no resistance against them. One of these witches could easily take away the lives of thousands of people."

"Won't a flintlock or cannon work against them?"

"Let's not even mention a witch like Nightingale, who can move close to your army easily. Some abilities already take effect by the time you see the witch."

Roland was dumbstruck for a moment. The First Army, including its reserve forces, already comprised of 5,000 men. Where was he going to find so many God's Stones of Retaliation? Even if he used witch blood to split the God's Stones into more pieces, he would not be able to produce a sufficient amount in such a short time.

"Your Majesty, you can try extorting these Stones from the churches." Iron Axe suggested. "If we only attack the church halls and believers, while not affecting the lives of civilians, even the nobles would not dare to oppose you openly. This way, we can fulfill Lord Barov's suggestion while also obtaining a large amount of God's Stones for free."

The corners of Barov's mouth arched into a grin. "Do you mean we should send out the First Army to plunder the churches?"

"We'll destroy the strongholds of the enemy, just like breaking off the fangs of a poisonous snake." The commander corrected Barov. "This will also allow Miss Edith to observe the First Army engage in a real fight. Compared to a rehearsal, this would be much more informative."

"I also think so." Edith laughed in agreement.

"This is indeed killing many birds with one stone." Roland thumped the table emphatically. "Let's call it the 'Tooth Extraction Campaign'."

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