

Witch 611

Chapter 611: Protected

Danny was constantly aiming, shooting, until the clip emptied. Another two big shields fell down. Danny would not waste his bullets on the Judgement Warriors. With the thin armor, the Judgement Warriors looked martial, but yet they could not even withstand the flintlock. Lord Iron Axe once said that the God's Punishment Army was a dreadful opponent because one of its soldiers could fight against 10, but at the same time, they were scarce and troublesome to train, so they were the targets worth hunting.

The reason he disliked the machine gunners was that he felt those arrogant fellows, although they used exactly the same bullets as he did, shot with an astonishingly low efficiency.

During the only two times of live practice, a machine gun squad fired several chests of bullets within one hour, which even made Lord Iron Axe's heart ache. But while checking the bullet holes, only around 100 bullets actually hit the targets. Danny felt it was totally a waste of resources.

Of course, he also understood the significance of the Mark I machine gun. At least while faced with swarming enemies, it could stop their attacking momentum. But in terms of hunting results, sharpshooters were more reliable.

One bullet for one enemy.

This was his aim for strict training.

Danny pulled out the clip, and skillfully reloaded it. When he was about to stand up and start shooting, he heard someone gasping. Looking over his shoulder, he saw Malt.

"Damn it! Didn't I tell you to stay where you were?" He shouted at Malt, "You violated a military order!"

"Lord Brian said that a soldier can never leave his position lest for exceptional cases, so you've violated a military order," saying this, Malt wiped the sweat on his forehead. "As your protector, I must stay by your side!"

"..." Holding back the impulse to beat Malt, Danny grabbed a handful of bullets from his pocket and threw them in front of Malt. "Fill the clip. Stay down unless there's an emergency!"

"Yes, Captain!" the short guy saluted and said smilingly.

After Danny killed five enemies, there appeared to be some changes in the enemy's troop.

The church commander probably believed that they would not make it to the trench if they kept on charging that way and so they made a change. The God's Punishment Army abandoned their big shields and charged toward the trenches. They moved at such a fast speed that even horses would not outrun them. They were getting closer and closer!

The sound of revolving rifles and machine guns rang out at the same time.

Suddenly, some blood fog appeared in front of Danny. The dust rising from the ground was denser than the time when the cannons bombarded. It looked as if there was an invisible giant hand severely beat

the group of charging warriors. Facing this unstoppable force, the enemy's charging speed was greatly slowed down. Anyone touched by this invisible force was torn into pieces with blood splashing everywhere.

A soldier of the God's Punishment Army kept running forward even after one of his arms was shot by a bullet. When Danny aimed his gun at him, a 'sand snake' composed of dozens of lines of dust sloppily passed through the soldier's body, which was the unique trajectory of a machine gun. The soldier's chest suddenly wavered like a pool of water, blue blood splashed out of his back, and his ribs were even broken by the scorching airflow of the passing bullets.

The soldier, though he lost his balance and was wrinkled up like a piece of rag, still managed to run for another three to four steps before falling to the ground due to the inertia. Danny noticed that his back had gone rotten.

"Watch out, Captain!" Malt shouted suddenly.

Danny was shocked. When he turned his head, he saw another soldier from the God's Punishment Army, appearing from the boundless dust and holding a spear upright.

Then the soldier bent over and threw the spear at Danny.

He barely saw how the soldier threw the spear.

"Too careless. I've been so focused on observing the enemies that I attracted their attention. A hunter shouldn't expose himself under the prey's eyesight for too long," Danny thought.

Before he could react, Malt heavily hit him on the body. Both of them fell on the trench ground. At the same time, a loud sound came above their heads.

Danny felt a pain came from the back of his head, and his body was completely covered by dirt.

Danny felt the sound of gunfire suddenly faded away, and an unbearable buzzing kept echoing in his ears.

After a long time, Danny recovered his senses. Touching the back of his head, he felt something sticky. "I must have hit on something hard when I fell on the ground. Since I could remain sober, it must be nothing serious."

With his blurry eyesight, he saw a teammate coming to him.

"Are you alright?"

Danny could only vaguely hear it. He managed to wave his hand, indicating he was fine.

"Give me a hand. Two people are wounded," the teammate shouted.

Soon, Danny and Malt were surrounded by more teammates and were dragged out of the collapsed pile of dirt.

At that moment, Danny noticed that the short spear had torn apart the edge of the trench, creating a crescent-shaped gap. It did not fly away over his head but instead it hit the trench edge, penetrated the

thin soil, and struck into the trench wall. The dirt that fell on their bodies was from the spot where the spear's hit.

When he looked at Malt, his heart suddenly clenched.

He saw there was a bleeding wound as big as a bowl on Malt's shoulder, and his arm almost fell off, only a few strands of skin connected the shoulder, his white bones exposed.

"The spear wasn't thrown in vain. It hit Malt."

The teammates went back to the battle, leaving one soldier to take care of Malt. All the soldiers in the First Army understood that as long as a wounded soldier could survive till the end of the battle, Miss Nana would make him fully recover. So hemostasis and dressing was a compulsory course in the First Army. The soldier left pulled out a dagger, decisively cut Malt's arm off and then sprinkled the herbs in his pocket on Malt's wound before he wrapped the wound with gauze.

After suffering this treatment, Malt awoke from his coma, murmuring a faint groan.

"Lie still. You're not going to die." The soldier consoled him.

"Where is Cap-Captain Danny?"

"I'm here." Danny clenched his teeth, upheld his weak limbs, and climbed to Malt's side. "Why would you do that for me..."

"Because I'm your protector. Of, of course, I won't leave you behind." Malt's mouth slowly opened and shut. "How did I do? I fulfilled my duty, didn't I?"

Danny suddenly felt an unspeakable guilt surging from the bottom of his heart. "Sure... you did very well."

"Really?" Malt smiled with a difficulty. "This will pave my way to meet Miss Nana."

"That's right. Both of you can meet her." The soldier looked at Danny. "You can take care of him, right? I need to go back to my position."

"Yes, I can... Thank you," Danny said, nodding.

After the soldier left, Danny slowly picked up his gun from the ground, dusted off the dirt, and managed to stand up.

"I can still fight!"

"The enemy must pay for this wound with blood!" Danny thought.

However, the approaching army of the church was no more. In the pervading dust, the enemies were retreating in panic, and only their backs could be vaguely seen.

Cheers burst out from the trenches.

They had won!

Chapter 612: Battle's End

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Roland walked out of the cabinet as the gunboat staggered to a stop. He was fascinated by what he saw.

The arch-typed mountain rocks, which extended out from both sides, wrapped around the entire town like two huge arms. The rays of sunlight slanted along the finger-wide crevice, forming a wall of golden shimmers.

Numberless vines, which looked like green hair, grew out of the bottom of the rocks. Some bulky ones even reached the ground, tempting people to climb up.

When the sun rays sifted through dense twigs and branches and splintered up into glints of the muttering brook, Roland felt like he was in a untraversed forest. However, the area was not completely uncultivated. Along Soundless River stood different types of buildings constructed by men. Townsmen passed through waist-high bushes back and forth. Streaks of smokes could be detected from the distance. Everything around this area was in perfect harmony with nature.

Due to a lack of sunshine, the temperature in this town was slightly lower than that in other places. The colors of plants, naturally, were in much deeper shades. No wonder the town was called Deepvalley Town.

Roland and the witches stepped on the dock covered with mosses and met the people who had been waiting there for a long time. The three at the front were obviously the general commander of the First Army, Iron Axes, the Duke of the Northern Region, Calvin, and his daughter, Edith.

"We've met again, Your Majesty." Edith performed a curtsy. "Congratulations on the victory of your first battle."

"I've heard the news on my way here. You did a good job." Roland gave an approving nod. "Iron Axes told me you not only smoothed out the transportation of food and ammunition, but also successfully lured the enemies."

"These are the obligations of Kant Family," she replied with a faint smile. "The tradesmen in the Northern Region are happy to be at your service."

"But the owner of this town was still Timothy Wimbledon half a year ago," Roland said within himself. The tradesmen in the three cities probably had never heard of the new king. They were willing to offer their services and carry out his plan was simply because of Edith's advertisement and her tremendous personal influence over the Northern Region.

After giving a few words of encouragement, Roland turned to Iron Axes and asked, "Have you obtained the casualties?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Iron Axe administered a military salute and continued, "The detailed report has been sent to your office."

"O-office?"

"I've discussed this matter with Earl Haier. We've decided that you should use his castle as your palace during your stay at Deepvalley Town." Edith further explained. "Also, I've had the study refurbished, making it look like the one in the Border Area. Miss Maggie told me that you like a bright room. So, I knocked down a wall with a sunny exposure and replaced it with a French window.

"Really?" Roland asked with interest. "Then where will the earl stay?"

"In order not to disturb your work, he'll live in his mansion in the suburb." The Pearl of the Northern Region paused for a moment and then asked, "You want me to summon him?"

"No, that's fine. I bet he doesn't like partake in politics." Roland waved his hand. "Let's get into the castle first."

"Alright. Please follow me."

"Is this the wonder of power?" Roland thought while smacking his lips. "It isn't bad to have a taste of it from time to time."

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Roland thought he was back to City of Neverwinter upon his entry to the study. The large mahogany desk, along with the coffee table and the recliner at the corner was exactly the same as those in the Border Area. The only big difference was the sceneries outside the French window. Here, he could see the green dale through the window instead of the somber Impassable Mountain Range.

He wondered what the previous owner, Earl Haier, would think about the renovation after he left.

Roland sat back to the desk and started to read the report.

Although he had learned how the battle had progressed, he felt exhilarated when he caught sight of the church's casualties.

This was definitely a victory worthy to be remembered.

His concern about God's Punishment Army dissipated when he saw 156 deaths among the God's Punishment Warriors. It appeared that these powerful, fearless killing machines were not at all unconquerable. After all, flesh and blood could not compete against bullets and fire. Roland believed there should not be many God's Punishment Warriors left, as every conversion required a witch's blood. Agatha estimated the army should consist of no more than 1,500 warriors, provided that the Bloody Moon did not arrive.

A casualty ratio of one to ten was already high enough for the church to lament their loss.

In addition to the God's Punishment Warriors, there were over 300 members of the Judgement Army killed in action, more than 20 of them severely injured and four commanders captured. These numbers were trivial. Despite the fact that Judgement Warriors were mostly strong-willed and skillful combaters, Roland did not take them seriously, as they were essentially the same as knights.

What was really lucky was that they had not encountered any pure witches who were extremely difficult to deal with. If they unfortunately had, they probably would not have won that easily just with Sylvie

and Iffy taking charge. In fact, Sylvie had instructed the machine gun team to specifically tackle permeating pure witches.

"What about the casualties in the First Army?" Roland folded the report.

"Two killed and 21 severely injured," Iron Axe answered in a low tone. "All resulted from a close-range spearing from the God's Punishment Army. The wounded has now recovered and returned to service."

After learning that the church had launched the attack, Lightning brought Nana to Deepvalley Town in no time. Nobody could provide a better treatment than Miss Angel.

Roland knocked on the desk and ordered. "Arrange a boat to send the bodies of the killed soldiers to City of Neverwinter for a burial."

"Yes, Your Majesty." After a short pause, Iron Axe asked, "What will you do with the unit leader of the fourth premium shooting unit, Danny, Your Majesty?"

"That old hunter who shot five members of the God's Punishment Army?" Roland took up the teacup and sipped the tea that tasted exactly the same as the premium tea in the palace. "What's your opinion?"

During the rescue, Brian noticed that the injuries Danny and his protector sustained appeared to be inconsistent with their positions. The news soon reached Roland that very night via the Sigil of Listening. At that time, the war had just ended. Considering that the First Army was still absorbed in their celebration and that the protector was in a critical condition, Roland simply asked Iron Axe to first treat the wounded. Now, since they had arrived at Deepvalley Town, it was time to bring up this matter.

"I think although Danny disregarded the instruction and left his post without permission, he did make a big contribution to the victory. He shot five God's Punishment Warriors down by himself. Such a remarkable performance would be more than enough to make him a celebrity in the Army. Therefore, I reckon his merits offset his demerits." Iron Axes said slowly, "In the Iron Sand City, a fighter like him will even be rewarded by his master, so..."

"But the First Army was not any old-school army that rewards their soldiers based on how many they've killed." Roland interrupted. "Do you remember what I taught you during the first training session?"

Iron Axe swallowed hard. "You taught us disciplines, Your Majesty."

"Only a well-disciplined army can become invincible." Roland rose to his feet and paced to the French window. "I hope you bear this in mind all the time. Now, tell me, how are you supposed to deal with him?"

Chapter 613: Interrogation

"Suspension without pay and a detention of 15 days if no further harms are caused; dismissal and bring him to your trial, if further harms are caused, Your Majesty," Iron Axes replied immediately.

"Correct. You memorize it well. Do what you just said." As there was no military tribunal at this point, Roland had to try cases of serious misconduct in the army by himself. In this case, Danny's behavior was

apparently not so serious as to put him on a trial. "In view of the upcoming great war, we'll first detain him for five days and have him serve the rest in City of Neverwinter."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"You don't need to worry about the reactions among other soldiers. This sets a good example and tells them that everybody will be subject to punishment if he breaks the rules, regardless of how great his contribution to the army is." Roland paused for a moment and then continued, "Of course, we won't forget what he's done for the army either. If somebody ever asks, just tell him that I have my own arrangement."

In fact, Roland knew that he was also partially responsible for such a wrong conductive behavior. Although he had created a premium shooting unit of 50 people, he did not separate those talented, experienced snipers from the soldiers of the ordinary gun battalion. He simply instructed all of them to serve as flanks and shoot with revolving rifles from a farther distance, for the purpose of stopping enemies who tried to sneakily enter the machine gun bunker from the marginal area.

Danny, however, actually acted more like a professional sniper. He chose his position and fired based on his own judgement to eliminate the enemies who posed the greatest threats. Roland had thought about specifically forming a sniper team, and yet such a team had higher requirements for guns, ammunition and especially its team members. He had to, at the same time, keep an eye on the snipers to make sure that every one of them was proactive and productive.

Perhaps, he would make some improvements in the current premium shooting unit after this war concluded.

"By the way, Your Majesty, the captured church's commanders have disclosed some... particular information." Iron Axes was carefully choosing his words. "It's about the God's Punishment Army."

"What's it?"

"They said the members of God's Punishment Army can't fight on their own. They can only complete the most basic mission after a commander orders them to do so."

Roland turned around. "Really? Anything else?" Ashes had already told him about it, which was the reason he dared to take his armies to the north and provoke the church. If God's Punishment Warriors could fight independently, only a very few of them would be enough to cause riots across the kingdom and bring him trouble.

"A commander can be an ordinary person or a pure witch, and can't be changed once appointed." Iron Axes recollected. "Any new members of God's Punishment Army will attend a ceremony to pledge allegiance. One captive admitted that he attended such a ceremony once."

Roland instructed immediately. "Take me to them. Also, bring Agatha."

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Roland met the four separately-confined captives down in the dungeon.

Deepvalley Town was overall pleasantly cool and refreshing above the ground. Its underground surroundings, however, was freezing and damp. All four was blindfolded, drenched, with their hands

tied behind their back. Although no visible wounds could be detected, they were all shivering. Apparently, Iron Axes had applied some unique interrogation techniques, which, as he suggested, few people could endure for one day.

Yet the church's believers were not ordinary prisoners. Their ardent piety made them extremely strong.

"Only the two on the right are willing to speak up." The man from the Sand Nation said in a low voice. "One of them is the chief justice of the church, while the other is the priest in Holy City. The other two refuse to tell us anything. Of course, they don't know their friends have already confessed."

Not really familiar with the institution and hierarchy of the church, Roland asked directly, "Who attended the ceremony where the God's Punishment Army pledges allegiance? Take him to the interrogation room."

The jailor soon dragged the priest to a small chamber next door. Iron Axes poured some cold water on his head to awaken him. "Farat, I. have a few questions to ask you."

He quivered violently and started to speak feebly, "I've told you... everything I know. Please kill me now." The priest's voice was weak and faint as if he were in great agony.

"Tell me about the ceremony for the God's Punishment Army."

Farat did not respond but simply shook his head.

"Listen. This is the last round of the interrogation." Iron Axe bent over and whispered in his ear, "I'll let you go once you've answered all the questions."

It took him quite a while to speak again. "The ceremony... is usually held in the Tower of Babel, which is only accessible to God's Punishment Warriors, the pope and commanders. Everybody... must be completely silent during the process. Even the slightest sound will ruin the whole ceremony."

"Why's that?" Roland questioned.

"Because new warriors recognize their commanders by sounds."

"The first sound they hear?"

"It can be more than one." Farat gasped. "The chosen commanders will read hymns together. God's Punishment Warriors will accept everyone during that time period."

"What about you? Are you also a commander?"

"I'm responsible... for a group, a group of ten God's Punishment Warriors."

"But that ten people also need to follow the orders issued by your superior, correct?"

The priest nodded. "All the God's Punishment Armies should obey the supreme pontiff's orders."

"That's how it works," Roland thought. He had thought they commanded this unconscious army telepathically or via brainwaves, but they actually controlled them through sounds. To him, it appeared to be a very unnecessarily complex and less efficient method. Not only did soundwaves easily diminish,

but there was a big chance of issuing contradictory orders as well. Either of the problems would cause confusion to the God's Punishment Army.

"You said once a commander is appointed, he can't be changed. What if God's Punishment Warriors lose all their commanders?" Agatha ventured suddenly.

Hearing it was a lady, Farat was stunned.

"Answer!" Iron Axe got some more water.

"I... don't know."

"You're lying." Roland immediately received Nightingale's hint. "You'd better not play any tricks on us if you don't want to stay here for another half a month."

The priest clenched his teeth and finally said, "They, they'll go to Barbarian Land themselves. That's all I know."

"Barbarian Land?" Agatha echoed in surprise.

"It's just a hearsay... Usually, when this happens, some other warriors will stop him. But..." He hesitated for a moment. "It's rumored some God's Punishment Warriors, who weren't properly managed, fled to Barbarian Land many years ago, and have stayed there ever since."

"Do you know how the God's Punishment Army is converted?"

"Well... Only the supreme pontiff can host the ceremony..."

"When the pope retires, how does he assign his authority to control the God's Punishment Army?"

"I, I don't know..." Beads of perspiration started to appear on his forehead.

"Four hundred years ago, how was the church founded?"

"Have you heard of the name 'Alice'? How about the Union and Taquila?"

The priest was just irresponsible to any questions Agatha put forward afterwards.

"He truly doesn't know. Let's go. There's no need to continue with this interrogation anymore." After receiving the confirmation from Nightingale, Roland said.

When the three of them was about to leave the dungeon, Iron Axes trotted to them and asked, "Your Majesty, what about these captives from the church..."

"Do what you've promised earlier."

Chapter 614: Agatha's Prediction

When they returned to the castle, Roland turned towards Agatha and asked, "Have you recalled anything?"

"Most likely, the God's Punishment Army was only successfully researched after Taquila fell completely. I don't understand it much," she replied, shaking her head. "But... it's definitely not as simple as what the church priest said. At least, it doesn't explain how a newly-crowned pope is able to take over control of the God's Punishment Army from the previous pope."

"Also, it's very odd that a runaway God's Punishment Army would actively advance towards the Barbarian Land." Agatha continued after a brief pause, "The Barbarian Land that you people speak of should be the Fertile Plains of 400 years ago. There's nothing there apart from the ruins of the holy city. And it's too far-fetched to say that they were enticed by the demons."

"Who knows." Roland casually commented. "You've also seen that their blood is blue in color. They can't be considered the same species as us." He was not highly interested in what exactly attracted the God's Punishment Army. What he most wanted to know at present was their Achilles' heel, and how to effectively guard against an assault on his lines. As could be seen from the previous wave of spear throwing, the lack of fortifications made the God's Punishment Army quite threatening. "If they're truly vulnerable to noise, maybe Echo's ability can..."

"I don't approve of doing this." The ancient witch rejected his idea. "There are a lot of risks that way."

"Indeed, it's quite risky to sneak close to their commander, but we can..."

"No, I'm not talking about Echo." Agatha interrupted his words. "I'm talking about you."

"Me?" Roland was surprised.

"If Echo is to sneak up to the commander, she would need Nightingale's Mist. When so, you would be left without protection. The church would only need to send forth a pure witch with special abilities to claim your life easily," she replied unhesitatingly. "Although you're a normal person who's weak and powerless, we can't do without you at present if we're to defeat the demons. So, protecting you is still the most important thing to do. We can't take any kind of risk with that."

"I really can't tell if you're praising or insulting me." Roland laughed bitterly. "When that time comes, I'll put on the God's Stone of Retaliation."

"The God's Stone of Retaliation is only a means of insurance. It's not a completely secure barrier." Agatha stated bluntly. "Even Nightingale isn't completely failsafe, but we don't have a better way."

"As long as I'm still alive, His Majesty won't come under any harm." Nightingale could not restrain herself from revealing her figure. It was apparent that she did not take kindly to Agatha's words.

"I hope so." The ancient witch did not dispute this point further. She turned to leave the study but stopped when she reached the door.

"What's the matter?" Roland asked.

Agatha remained silent for a while before she replied, "I don't know whether to talk about these things... Her immense power aside, the reason why Lady Alice was able to become Queen of Starfall City and also the Head of the Three Chairs was that her intelligence and methods were superior to most witches. On a few occasions, her decisions saved the Union from the verge of collapse. Without her,

Taquila wouldn't have survived until then. Many people believed that if she was born before the first Battle of Divine Will, she would have ended this hopeless war early on."

"What're you trying to say?"

She turned her head back and frowned slightly. "What I mean is, the powerful warriors in whom she placed her hopes of saving the witches shouldn't have turned out this way."

"You feel that the present God's Punishment Army may not have been the same as the one 400 years ago?" Roland asked in surprise.

"The God's Punishment Warriors aren't afraid of magic power, never panic, and are extremely powerful. They indeed seem to possess a great advantage over the demons. But... they won't be able to make the decisive difference. Furthermore, they need a commander wherever they go, and don't have the ability to perform long-distance attacks. I feel that Lady Alice shouldn't place high hopes on this kind of warriors." Agatha sighed. "Of course, these are just my predictions. Only the church knows what exactly happened to the Union after Taquila fell."

A long time after she left the room, Roland was still stuck in his thoughts.

Agatha's words were indeed reasonable. Was it really possible that the God's Punishment Army project, which required the Queen of Starfall City to pay such a huge price to carry out, was only intended to produce an expensive yet cumbersome killing machine?

Just as he was about to head out of the castle to get some fresh air, the Sigil of Listening that Nightingale was wearing suddenly rang.

"This is Lightning here. My position is in the northwest, in the sky above Coldwind Ridge! I've just observed that the enemy is now retreating. I repeat, the enemy is retreating!"

"Retreating?"

"They're all running towards the holy city, cool!" Maggie added.

"I see." Roland immediately summoned a guard from outside. "Inform Iron Axe, Edith, Duke Calvin and all members of the Adviser Department to report here for a meeting."

"This is undoubtedly good news," Roland thought excitedly. He had not thought that the church's army would abandon Coldwind Ridge and retreat directly to the highland of Hermes. In this way, he would have a chance to evacuate all of the townspeople before the holy city recaptured Coldwind Ridge.

"They're afraid." Nightingale laughed.

"Perhaps so. But their retreat suggests that the church is unable to send out reinforcements on short notice." Roland surmised while stroking his chin. "Our earlier predictions weren't wrong. This contingent of more than 1,000 people was probably an advance force which the church came up with last-minute. If they don't take the initiative to attack our lines, I really don't know what to do with the church."

When he decided to use this tactic, he had already in a sense decided to give up Coldwind Ridge. After all, it was much closer to Hermes. Now that he had the chance to prevent the townspeople from becoming victims of the Pill of Madness, he felt considerably relieved.

The relevant members quickly gathered in the reception room. Roland retold Lightning's intelligence report to them and looked around at everyone present. "Are there any questions?"

"Your Majesty, why don't you guard Coldwind Ridge directly?" Duke Calvin asked in puzzlement. "It's strategically located, and there's only one route that leads to the holy city. Isn't it more advantageous than guarding the foot of the mountain?"

"It only appears so. In reality, it's surrounded by mountains on three sides, and the slopes pass directly over its top. The enemy only needs to use a rope to infiltrate our line of defense." Roland shrugged his shoulders. "We've discussed this in detail in City of Neverwinter. You can ask Edith for more specifics. Anyone else?"

Seeing that no one responded, he issued his order. "If so, the evacuation campaign will be carried out by the First Army. The grain reserves and gold royals can be left behind. Our concern is regarding the residents—whether by coercion or force, I don't want a single person to be left behind in Coldwind Ridge. In addition, the local nobles may have a better persuasive effect. I'm referring particularly to the famous Pearl of the Northern Region." He paused at this. "Iron Axe and Edith, you two will be in charge of this matter."

"Yes!"

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

"As for the Adviser Department." He glanced towards Earl Eltek and the others. "Your task is to assist the Duke of the Northern Region to make arrangements for the evacuated people. This will include computing the number of people, registering their identities, and finding food and lodging for them. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," the crowd replied in unison.

"Excellent, let's begin immediately!" Roland thumped the table and exclaimed.

Chapter 615: Wavering Faith

In the Tower of Babel of Hermes Cathedral.

The hurried footsteps of a guard spoiled the peace and quiet in the ring hall. Somewhat unhappy with this, Tayfun placed his breakfast down and glanced at the frantic comer. "Is there a problem?"

"Your Eminence, something's up in Coldwind Ridge." The guard moved close and whispered in Tayfun's ears. "It seems that Lord Soli Daal has been badly injured over there." He proceeded to explain everything that he had heard about the incident quickly.

"What!" Tayfun could not believe his own ears. "Our advance force has lost more than half of its men, while Soli was seriously bloodied?" The old bishop grabbed the guard by the neck and asked, "Where's he now?"

"Sent to the hospital."

"How about the God's Punishment Army?"

"They were ordered to hold their positions and await further instructions. Right now, they're gathered in the cathedral."

"Inform His Holiness and Lady El immediately about this matter. Also, gather and look after all those who took part in this expedition. Close the doors of the cathedral and prevent other believers from entering or leaving for now!" Tayfun seemed to forget about his breakfast. "I'll head to the hospital straight away."

"Yes, Your Excellency!"

How could this happen?

He could feel his heart palpitating non-stop. In principle, a 1,300-strong platoon, of which 300 were God's Punishment Warriors, should not have had problems dealing with Coldwind Ridge. Before Soli was promoted to bishop, he was a veteran chief justice, and one of His Holiness Mayne's most able subordinates. Even if they encountered demons or beasts, there should not have been so many victims!

Although fear clouded his heart, the old bishop remained very clear that the most important thing to do at the moment was to block the news from leaking out, so as to prevent the believers' faith from being shaken. The next most important thing was to find out exactly what happened to Soli Daal in Coldwind Ridge.

When he reached the hospital, El was already there—it was evident that the latter had an alternative source of information. The two of them exchanged looks and walked together solemnly into Soli's medical room.

A pure witch was tending to the archbishop's wounds. Soli was missing an arm, and the wound around the remaining flesh had been tightly dressed with cotton. When he saw the other two archbishops, his dazed eyes seemed to focus again, and he struggled to sit up.

"You may leave first." Tayfun urged the pure witch to depart and then assisted Soli to sit up. "How's your injury?"

"I want to see His Holiness!" Soli growled. "Bring me to the Pivotal Secret Area at once!"

"Tell us what happened first," El replied coldly. "Only then we'll consider whether to bring you to see the pope or to throw you in jail and await trial."

"Scoundrel, now it's not the time to quarrel." Soli gnashed his teeth. "Coldwind Ridge was a trap. Roland Wimbledon's firearms are much scarier than Timothy's. I have to let His Holiness know..."

"I don't want to be kept in the dark while covering your ass, Mister Soli Daal!" El raised her voice several notches. "Do you know how embarrassing your return was? When passing through the city gate, anyone could see how incomplete and defeated our advance force was. People in the holy city have already begun asking questions. If I didn't get the tribunal to detain a few busybodies, the whole city will be talking about these rumors tomorrow!" She grabbed him by the collar. "You should know how serious this will be!"

Tayfun knew that El was perfectly right. The loss of over 100 God's Punishment Warriors was equivalent to the loss over the past two years. And the enemy this time was only a small town in the mountains. This was an absolute disgrace to the church.

More critically, if the news spread, the faith of the believers would be immensely affected.

Ever since the God's Punishment Army started being sent to fight demonic beasts, there had been hearsay that it was all-conquering and invincible. It even appeared so. If even the enormous and savage demonic beasts were no matches for the God's Punishment Army, what kind of enemy could defeat it?

Just as Tayfun was about to give a few lines of advice, the room door was suddenly pushed open.

"Hope I'm not late." The white-haired witch, Zero, walked into the room. "The pope wants to see you, and requests that you don't divulge the specific circumstances of the battle. Are you able to walk on your own?"

"Lady Zero, we can't..." El protested.

Zero cut her off quickly. "Don't worry. The pope is only worried that the secret of the God's Punishment Army may be leaked out. After he has finished his inquiry into the matter, I'll tell you everything."

"What secret?"

"Forgive me, but I can't say." Zero laughed. "Because I don't know it myself."

"I... can walk." Soli struggled off the bed and took two steps before he fell down.

"No need to act tough." The pure witch snapped her fingers, and instantly, two Trap Area guards wearing blue cloaks walked in and lifted the archbishop up. "Once we're in the Pivotal Secret Area, you'll have a wheelchair to move freely in."

"F*cking b*itch." After Soli left with Zero, El spat on the ground angrily and walked straight out of the medical room.

Tayfun watched grimly as the pure witch's figure slowly disappeared into the distance, and did not say a word for a long time.

...

As Soli walked down the stone steps to the deep abyss below the cathedral, there was a look of excitement on his face. This was the first time that he entered the core area of the church. Even his breath became shorter and hurried.

"How do you intend to explain the heavy losses of the God's Punishment Army to Pope Mayne?" After he sat down on a wheelchair, Zero personally pushed him toward the Trap Area.

"The defeat this time was indeed caused by my carelessness. I'm willing to accept any punishment." The archbishop hesitated for a moment. "And, I... wish to apply to His Holiness to become a God's Punishment Warrior myself."

"Are you sure? You want to give up your archbishop position and become a minion?"

"They aren't minions!" Soli could not help arguing. "Every God's Punishment Warrior is a brave and steadfast soldier. That's why they are willing to sacrifice their lives and fight for the glory of the church! I've let them down and caused immeasurable loss to the church. The best way for me to compensate and make up for my mistakes is to throw myself into the fight!"

"Is that so?" Zero shrugged her shoulders. "I feel that the pope won't agree."

"I'll do my best to persuade him. I believe that Pope Mayne will definitely..."

"That's not the reason." She shook her head. "Converting into a God's Punishment Warrior requires witch blood, and every witch isn't easy to come by. Now that you've lost an arm, your fighting ability is much weaker than before even if the conversion is successful. Do you think the pope will waste witch blood on a handicapped person?"

"What're you saying? Wait... Stop!"

As Zero pushed the wheelchair along the long corridor, she paused at the end of the Trap Area.

"Is there a problem?"

"The incarnation ceremony of the God's Punishment Army is a secret that only the Supreme Pontiff knows. How do you know what the ceremony requires?" Soli's eyes widened. "It's impossible that Pope Mayne told you!"

"You're not wrong, he definitely wouldn't." She waited for the guards to open the cage and calmly placed the archbishop inside the cage. "But I don't need him to tell me, because... I'm the pope."

"That's... blasphemy!" Soli turned his head back in disbelief, only to see a beam of light heading in his direction.

Chapter 616: The Violent Tide Rises

...

Harsh and piercing booms were everywhere.

All that Zero could hear between these booms were faint cries of pain.

The frontline was a vanguard formed by God's Punishment Warriors, while the backline was the slowly advancing Judgement Army. This was the "Big Shield" formation that was rehearsed to deal with the swarm attacks of demonic beasts, but it was equally effective against crossbows and flintlocks. The iron shields, which were each only as thick as a finger, were able to deflect volleys of arrows, and could not be penetrated by Timothy's imitation flintlocks. Their only disadvantage was that they were excessively heavy, and thus only the God's Punishment Army could carry them into battle.

However, this time, it lost its effectiveness.

Every now and then, a God's Punishment Warrior would be split into two by iron balls that came whizzing towards him, and even the people standing behind could be struck by the same ball. Blood quickly burst out of the bodily punctures created by these balls. Those warriors who did not die on the

spot would clutch on to their innards or limbs and scream in pain, unintentionally sapping the morale of their comrades who were still fighting.

"This can't continue. Get the God's Punishment Army to charge!" an assistant shouted.

"I agree, Lord Soli." Another commander seconded while clutching his fists. "These iron balls can only travel in a straight line, and can't be fired too quickly. The right thing for us to do is to spread out, and then we won't be easily targeted anymore!"

"Got it. Pass down my orders to spread out our formation and perform a full charge!"

Zero heard Soli Daal issuing an order to attack.

However, right at this moment, a new kind of weapon entered the battlefield.

It sounded like an incessant sequence of raindrops, yet also like the buzz of gold daggers striking against one another. A cloud of smoke suddenly rose up in front of the charging warriors and caused them to fall on the ground like cut wheat. It was impossible for Zero to see where the attack was coming from.

The commanders' faces turned white all at once.

Everyone knew that the outcome of this battle was decided.

Zero heard a sudden hissing sound piercing through the air. It was sharp yet cryptic, like the utterance of a viper.

Danger!

She turned her gaze towards the direction that the sound was coming from. She subconsciously wanted to hide from it, but quickly remembered that the body she was in did not belong to her.

Unfortunately, Soli Daal did not have a fraction of her alertness.

A single iron ball fell from midair and bounced on the ground directly in front of him. As it rebounded up high, it brushed across his body.

Zero could only feel her vision spinning in circles before she fell on the ground.

Fresh blood gushed out from Soli's shoulders. The place where his arm should be had become vacant. He clenched his teeth to prevent himself from crying in pain.

The people around him frantically gathered around.

"Your Eminence!"

"My goodness gracious, your hand..."

"Retreat, get all of them to retreat!"

"Bring Lord Soli away from this place, and I'll stay behind!"

Her recollection broke off at this point.

Zero opened her eyes. In front of her once again were God's stone prisms and the Pivotal Secret Temple deep underground.

"So that's what happened." She lowered her head and grinned uncontrollably.

In this case, everything makes sense now.

Why Roland Wimbledon was able to become from the low-profile lord of Border Town to the new king of Graycastle; why he was able to defeat the duke's knightage and the 2nd Prince's crazed army time and time again, and was even able to seize King's City within a day—this was the reason.

The continuous booms, the smell of gunpowder smoke in the air... these things proved the existence of a new kind of firearm that was vastly superior to Timothy's imitation snow powder pipes.

If Zero had not "personally witnessed" it, she would never have imagined that snow powder weapons could be so powerful.

Of course, she knew that it was not a secret passed down within the Wimbledon family, or else Timothy and Garcia would not be ignorant of it.

Without a doubt, Roland had encountered something in Border Town which allowed him to have today's success.

Another possibility was that he had mastered the ancient tricks of some secluded family—ever since the Union was dissolved, a few builders and designers who had aided the local people were no longer in touch. Many of them possessed specialized skills and crafts, and therefore it was possible that one of them had devised these ingenious weapons.

Or, perhaps, the weapons were found in some ruins hidden deep in the Impassable Mountain Range. The historical records in the library had mentioned that there were a few strange ruins of unknown origin located around the border of Barbarian Land. In fact, it was the discovery of an underground labyrinth that had led to the eventual division of the Union.

But Zero was more inclined to believe that it was the ability of some witch that gave regular snow powder such deadly power.

This would also explain why Roland had changed his attitude, recruited witches in large numbers, and helped to clear the injustices they faced.

"Forget it, my speculation doesn't matter at all. No matter what the reason was, Roland Wimbledon knows best about it," thought Zero.

Zero knew that if she devoured Roland, she would get to understand everything about these weapons.

"Lady... Zero?" The guard captain standing at the cage exit asked worriedly, having not heard a sound from her for a long time.

Zero suppressed the excitement in her heart and waited until the grin on her face completely disappeared before she walked unhurriedly out of the cage. "I'm fine. Inform the intelligence agency to call back all of the pure witches that are still in Kingdom of Dawn."

"All?" The captain seemed astonished. "But the plan that you lay down before..."

"The decisive battle is about to begin," Zero explained slowly. "I want to see everyone."

There was no question that compared to Roland's knowledge, the Kingdom of Dawn's situation was insignificant.

"So powerful, such an amazing range of fire, and able to be used by anyone." Zero could understand its importance just by thinking about it.

If this weapon could be mass assembled before the Bloody Moon arrived, the Holy City's chances of defeating the demons would be significantly increased.

As for herself, she would be able to move one step closer to the divine will.

Deepvalley Town, the Northern Region of Kingdom of Graycastle.

After dinner, Iffy returned to her bedroom in the castle and immediately let out an uncontrollable yawn. In the past fortnight, apart from executing the Tooth Extraction Campaign, there was also no time for rest after reaching the small town. She not only had to assist the First Army in guarding their camp, but also then followed Edith and her entourage to Coldwind Ridge to resettle the local residents. Although she was extremely busy, she felt that her life was rather meaningful like this.

After her mood calmed down, she realized that the non-combat witches indeed possessed their own unique strengths. She also began to feel that aside from her abilities, she was not really different from most normal people.

As observed from her daily interactions with people, she was slowly being accepted by the members of the Witch Union. While she was performing a vigilance task, Maggie even said hello to her for the first time ever—despite Lightning looking unhappy about it.

Iffy did not expect them to forgive her, and instead, she hoped to make up for her wrongdoings through action. In fact, she did not care whether she could ultimately become a sister to them. She only focused on atonement.

Atonement for her one and only friend, Annie.

Just as she was about to go to bed, someone knocked on her door.

When she opened the door, she was surprised to see that it was the leader of Sleeping Island, Lady Tilly Wimbledon.

"I wish to talk to you about the Bloodfang Association." Tilly sighed softly. "As well as Heidi Morgan and... Annie."

Chapter 617: The Rose of Coldwind Ridge

Iffy silently listened as Tilly explained the whole story of the founding of the Bloodfang Association, as well as Heidi Morgan's real intention. When she heard that Annie was given to the noble by Skyflare, she felt as if something was squeezing her heart.

"Heidi... where's she now?"

"She has been served her due punishment." Ashes, who was standing behind Tilly, answered. "During the arrest, Skyflare attempted to resist and thus had gone down the same path as Heidi."

"Oh... thank you," Iffy said softly.

She unclenched her fists involuntarily and suddenly felt at a loss.

Even though those who were responsible for all of this had got what they deserved, she could still not feel at ease. Instead, now that there was no more revenge to exact, she felt purposeless. Furthermore, as the only person involved who was not punished, she felt even more guilt.

"I hope you can help Sleeping Island to get back on the right track," Tilly said after a period of silence. "Like you, the surviving members of the Bloodfang Association were also deceived and framed by Heidi. They should not be implicated and discriminated against. While the combat witches were wrong to bully the assistant witches, it wouldn't be right to bully them in return."

Iffy nodded without too much hesitation and said, "I'm willing to help you, Lady Tilly."

Tilly seemed a little surprised, as though she did not expect Iffy to reply so promptly. "It's great that you're willing."

"What should I do?"

"Talk to the other members of the Bloodfang Association about your story with Annie. I'll tell everyone about Heidi's crime," Tilly replied. "After the church is completely wiped out, I'll send people to Wolfheart to find the witches imprisoned by the noble. If they're still alive, Roland will rescue them."

"I see."

She was determined to do her best in anything that could lighten her sin.

"Are you... alright?" Tilly suddenly stooped down and rubbed Iffy's cheeks. The latter immediately felt a warm feeling spread out across her face.

"I'm fine." She blinked her eyes a few times. "I'm just feeling a little... tired already."

Tilly gazed at her silently for a long while. "Don't be too upset. Get a good rest."

Iffy only lay down on her bed after the two witches' footsteps could no longer be heard.

She did not cry.

"This is just my body's natural response," she told herself.

It was neither sorrow nor cowardice.

It was simply proof that she missed Annie.

Tears flowed faster and faster.

Roland sat in front of his desk reading through the Adviser Department's evacuation statistical reports. He had not read under lamplight for a long time and thus felt not used to it. He once thought that he had brought civilization close to modernity, but now in Deepvalley Town, everything was back to square one.

There were no showers, no scented soap, no electric light... this place was not much better than Border Town when he first arrived there. The beginnings of industrialization had only just sprung up in the Western Region. He still had much work to do before chimneys and boilers became common throughout the kingdom.

Roland placed the reports down. Just as he was going to rub his eyes, a soft pair of invisible hands reached out to his forehead and massaged it softly.

"Thanks." He tilted his head and mouthed before he continued to read through the reports.

When Barov was not around, Sir Eltek took up the role of office assistant very well. At least, he did excellently in computing statistics and preparing reports, and was nearly as good as the staff in the city hall who had received specialized training.

"How many people here are willing to go to the Western Region?"

"At least 70 percent, Your Majesty," Eltek replied. "Coldwind Ridge is not really a suitable place to live. I have asked the duke about this, and he told me that if it wasn't to monitor the whereabouts of the church, there wouldn't even be a town there. The remaining 30 percent are mostly people who have their own farmland or factories in the Northern Region."

"Okay, great. You may now begin the planning. Try not to let the ships return empty. Have them bring along a number of people every time, so that more people may go earlier to the Western Region."

"But, over at Duke Calvin's side..."

"I'll explain it to him." Roland drank a mouthful of tea. "Anyway, after the war ends, no matter whether we win or lose, there'll be no need to station people at Coldwind Ridge anymore..."

"What's wrong, Your Majesty?" Eltek asked.

"No... nothing." Just after he said "whether we win or lose", Nightingale abruptly covered his mouth softly so that he held back those words. "Anyway, just do as I say and it'll be fine."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Just as Eltek was about to leave, a personal bodyguard, Sean, opened the door and walked in.

"Your Majesty Roland, there's a woman outside the castle who wants to see you. After she was stopped by the guards, she knelt on the ground and vowed never to leave until she sees you."

"Now?" He subconsciously took a look out of the window. The entire town was in the midst of a quiet night.

"Yes. It seems that she deliberately chose to come at this time. I have seen her twice before in the castle area during daytime. And..." Sean paused and hesitated. "She claims that she's Mrs. Wimbledon."

After hearing this reply, Roland nearly choked on his own saliva. "Impossible!" As far as he knew, the fourth Prince had never been to the Northern Region before.

When the woman walked into the study, Roland was impressed.

Her looks were not particularly outstanding, but her facial features possessed a peculiar charm. Her small and thin body had an inexplicable sense of steadiness and gentleness about it. To use a common expression, she was obviously not big in size but looked like a very capable housewife. The mud on her long dress even more brought out this blend of femininity and strength.

"Dear Your Majesty." The woman curtsied and greeted. "Olivia of Coldwind Ridge pays her respects."

"May I know what you mean by Mrs. Wimbledon?" Roland went straight to his question. "I heard from my guard that you deliberately waited until night to enter the castle? Are you clear about the consequence of using this name for deception?"

"Pardon me, Your Majesty. If I didn't do so, you won't even see me." She bit her teeth. "I can't be considered your elder brother's real wife, but we were once in love."

As expected, it was just a fraud. "Wait..." Roland suddenly shook. "What did she say? My elder brother?"

"You mean Timothy?"

She shook her head.

"Gerald?"

Olivia's face reddened, and she immediately knelt on the floor. "I know that Gerald had designs on the throne, but he's now dead... Your Majesty, can you please help me on his behalf? I beg you!"

Chapter 618: A Posthumous Child

Hearing what Olivia said, Roland could not help sighing with mixed emotions.

It was not a complicated story. When Gerald Wimbledon had served as the commander of the frontier guards, he had made his customary visits to Coldwind Ridge during each year's Months of Demons to assist the church in fighting against demons. In one of his stays here, he had met a bar girl called Olivia in a tavern and fallen in love with her.

Given Olivia's status, it had been impossible for Gerald to marry her or make public their relationship. In the end, he had secretly bought a residence in the town as their love nest. Roland could not judge from the story whether it was true love or not, but he knew from Prince Roland's memories that Gerald had indeed refused marriage alliance with other nobles and had had no other lovers in King's City. As what Gerald had done was quite incredible for an adult prince, there was even a rumor remembered by Prince Roland that Prince Gerald was a homo.

The content of the encrypted letter that was presented by Olivia was even more incredible. According to the bar girl, Gerald had determined to make her his queen, and instead of just paying lip service, he had even written it down. If the written evidence had leaked out, King Wimbledon III would have given Gerald a really hard time.

Good times had not lasted long for Olivia. Quickly after the news that Timothy had sentenced Gerald to death had reached the Northern Region, her quiet life had come to an end and miseries weighed on her life continuously. The guards left by Gerald had left without saying goodbye and then her house had been burgled. With no source of income, she had had to go back to work as a bar girl in the tavern again.

Yet her bad times was not over. The owner of the tavern was still bitter about her sudden leave before and started to paw her now and then. He even coerced her to sleep with him.

During the most recent six months, Olivia's life was terrible. The owner's wife did not dare to complain in the owner's face, so she vented all her anger on Olivia. The owner often ignored what had happened, and sometimes even joined his wife in bullying and humiliating Olivia.

Roland would never criticize her for being weak-minded, as it was not surprising to him at all that she submitted to the unjust treatment. As a helpless ordinary woman, she had to face the biggest challenge in her life now, which was surviving. As for the disappearance of the guards and the following theft, Roland thought that it was not a coincidence. Given that the thief had been able to break into her house precisely when she had been away and had easily spotted the place where she had hidden her money, it must be an inside job.

"So what can I do for you?" Roland asked Olivia.

He decided to help her. It was not because of Gerald, a person who he had never met and could even be considered a half enemy based on Prince Roland's memory, but because Roland just wanted to help this remarkable woman who had endured such a misfortune but still waited patiently for a chance to save herself.

Besides, for Roland now, helping her was a simple task.

He did not covet his elder brother's wife as one would expect.

He swore!

"I want to leave the tavern... Your Majesty. Could you find a new job for me?" Olivia answered in a low voice.

"Are you sure you still want to stay in the Northern Region? If the owner of the tavern can't forget about you, he won't let you off easily. You can go to the Western Region by ship. You'll get a job, food and even a house there," Roland said while spreading out his hands. He did not want to degrade himself by getting involved in a civil dispute like this.

After a little hesitation, Olivia replied in an even lower voice, "Your Majesty... I, I want to stay here."

"I think she's afraid of you. As an ordinary woman, she's at least half as beautiful as Edith. It makes sense for the tavern owner to drool over her," Nightingale whispered in Roland's ear.

Roland said in silence, "Nonsense." After talking to Nightingale with the lip language, he nodded to Olivia and said, "Alright, I'll tell Duke Calvin to fetch you to City of Evernight. It's getting late now, Sean can find a hotel for you to sleep tonight."

"I shall never forget your kindness, Your Majesty." She knelt down again and said, "But... I have to go back tonight."

"It's up to you," Roland raised his eyebrow and said. He turned to Sean and ordered. "Give this lady a ride."

When Olivia reached the door, Roland suddenly asked, "By the way, do you have... any child with Gerald?"

She seemed startled and after a while answered, "I'm sorry, Your Majesty... I didn't have any child to carry on his family name."

...

After she left with the guard, Nightingale stepped out of the Mist and said, "Her last sentence is a lie."

"Uhm, I know." Roland twitched his mouth and said. "She isn't a good liar, and that explains why she was forced by the tavern owner."

"For the kid?"

"The owner must know that it was Prince Gerald Wimbledon who took her away. He was also clear about what would happen to the kid if Timothy found out the truth. To protect the kid she had with Gerald, she had to do what the owner wanted. I'd guess that's probably the case."

"Do you need me to investigate it for you?" Nightingale asked.

Roland stared at Nightingale for a long time and then summoned up a meaningful smile gradually curl his lips. He said, "Are you worried that I'm planning to bury this secret forever like Timothy? Relax, I won't harm innocent people. Even the family members of Duke Ryan are still under a house arrest in City of Neverwinter."

A feudal ruler would spare no one in his enemy's family but Roland did not like this idea of collective punishment, let alone killing a bastard child of a civilian woman, who apparently was not a threat to the throne.

"No matter what you say, I'll carry out your commands," Nightingale said slowly.

"I see. Well... give me a massage now," Roland took her hand and placed it on his shoulder and said.

Olivia went back to her wooden cabin which was built for immigrants. Her footsteps woke up the sleeping baby.

"Wah-wah-wah."

The baby cried.

The tavern owner's wife immediately started to shout in the next room. "Damn it, make him shut up! Otherwise, I'll put him down in the toilet and dump him into Soundless River!"

"I, I'm sorry. I'll quiet him down right away."

Neglecting the coolness of the night in Deepvalley Town, Olivia hurriedly took off her dirt-stained dress and held the baby in her arms. The baby instantly pressed close to her, skillfully searching for the nipple.

She finally let out a sigh of relief.

She felt lucky, as she was right about the tavern owner who had not come back yet.

Since they left Coldwind Ridge, he had become more and more ill-tempered. He spent most of his time in the local taverns and gambling houses, and seldom touched her. That was why Olivia had the chance to slip out of the cabin in the evening to ask Gerald's younger brother for help.

She did not dare to tell Roland that she had a child with Gerald or to go to the Western Region which was under complete control of the king. She was afraid that His Majesty would not want this child to exist. When that happened, she would be unable to protect her child anymore.

Olivia gently touched the baby's head. In the dim moonlight, she could see gray hair on his head, which was the feature of the Wimbledon family.

She felt it was a great pity that Gerald had not got the chance to meet his own child. She had not known that she was pregnant with the prince's child until she had received his letter in Coldwind Ridge.

After being fed, the baby happily hummed and fell asleep again.

Olivia lowered her head to kiss the baby on his forehead.

She made up her mind to raise him up alone, no matter what she had to sacrifice.

Chapter 619: An Unstoppable Path (Part I)

The red bricks and gray tiles of the cathedral gradually came into Isabella's sight, as her ship was slowly approaching the old Holy City.

It looked fairly prosaic. Unlike the new cathedral on the plateau, it did not have a magnificent chapel or a lofty building similar to the Tower of Babel. It might even be smaller than the churches located in the capitals of the Four Kingdoms. Despite that, in the heart of most believers, this old cathedral together with the cloisters, the Hall of Military Affairs and the Hall of Arbitration formed the palace of deities on the ground.

They considered this old cathedral the source of the church and the beginning of everything.

Isabella, however, rejected this saying.

She knew that the real place of origin for the church located inside the high mountains behind the old cathedral and that the truth was always kept as a secret from the believers.

As for the old Holy City?

It was just built to cover the secret.

After the sailing ship was anchored off by the dock, Isabella walked down the trestle bridge alone with light bags. Seeing this, the guard who came from Pivotal Secret Area to fetch her was taken by surprise and asked, "My Lady, where are the other pure witches?"

"They'll come one or two days later. I know His Holiness is rushing for us to return, but they still need some time to make some arrangements," she shrugged and replied.

"But Lady Zero said..."

"She wanted to see everyone." Isabella interrupted the guard. "I knew, but she didn't say that she wanted to see all of us at the same time."

She was puzzled by the recall order. Requiring all the pure witches to come back to Holy City would apparently ruin the plan to control Kingdom of Dawn. Without the medicine, the king would die in endless sleep. She could not think of a reason for Zero's abrupt change of plan, nor did she receive any explanation in the order.

"She's getting more and more like a real pope," Isabella thought, feeling a little unhappy.

Nevertheless, she had to still hit the road as soon as she had received the command. It had taken her a whole week to rush back to Hermes.

She turned around to ask the guard while boarding the cart, "By the way, do you know what happened in Holy City?"

"The advance force of the church fought a battle against the army of Kingdom of Graycastle at the foot of Coldwind Ridge," the guard hesitated for a while and answered, "and I think you'd better ask Lady Zero for the details."

"Did... the advance force lose?"

The guard slightly nodded to her without saying anything. He quickly left to mount a war-horse and then shouted to the coachman, "Let's go!"

Inside the carriage, Isabella let the curtains down and she was lost in her thought.

There were certainly many God's Punishment Warriors in the advance force, as top leaders of the church only reacted when there's a heavy loss to God's Punishment Army.

God's Punishment Warriors aren't immortals. They'll also suffer from heavy casualties, facing the harms more than they can bear. Since the church launched the attack at Kingdom of Everwinter, Holy City has already lost nearly 100 of them. I thought Zero had already got used to this situation, but maybe I was wrong. What a heavy loss could it be in this battle, which led to Zero's decision to recall all the pure witches.

The coach traveled through the busy streets of the old Holy City and came to a battalion near the cliffs of the Impassable Mountain Range. Like the cathedral, this place was also heavily secured. Isabella got off the coach and stepped into a tunnel which was cut into the cliffs. She passed through many iron gates, walking into the mountain.

In the cold light of the God's Stone prism, the towering silhouette of Pivotal Secret Temple was presented in front of her.

Guided by the guard, she directly went up to the library on the top floor. When she opened the door of the circular hall, the present pope was standing by the window and looking out, who seemed lost in thought.

"What's this sticky business that makes you forget about Kingdom of Dawn?" Isabella came up to Zero and whistled to her. "No matter what it is, why don't we leave Gentlewoman and Blackveil there to stabilize the situation?"

Zero did not answer her question. Instead, she pointed down to the people, asking, "What do you think they look like?"

Isabella frowned and asked, "Is that related to what I'm asking?"

Zero ignored Isabella's question again and said, "Those humble, ignorant people are on the go all day long without knowing what for, just like ants. Maybe that's also how deities think of us... We devote ourselves to bloody wars and then die on the battlefields, knowing nothing about the cause of this situation. Only standing on the top will give one a view of the whole world. Fortunately, now I get one more step closer to Divine Will again."

"What... is your point?"

"As long as I can devour the new king of Kingdom of Graycastle, my chance of winning the Battle of Divine Will will significantly increase." Zero smiled, her eyes were shining with an unusual excitement. "I somehow feel that... it's deities who send him to me."

After a moment of silence, Isabella said in a deep voice, "I just want to know how many God's Punishment Warriors were killed in the battle at the foot of Coldwind Ridge."

"150 were killed on the battlefield and 11 died on the way back to Hermes. However, the enemy hadn't even got a scratch. Neither big shields nor spear throwers could break through the defense line of Roland's army," Zero said while staring at Isabella with her gleaming eyes.

Isabella's heart vibrated in a sudden and her mind was in a tumult. "How come the God's Punishment Army suffered even a heavier loss in this single battle than it did in the battles during the Months of Demons and the actions of capturing Kingdom of Everwinter and Kingdom of Wolfheart? What makes the Prince of Kingdom of Graycastle so incredibly powerful?"

The witches? The knights? No, not them. Even a mountainous Fearful Beast of Hell will die when it's besieged by God's Punishment Warriors. How did he manage to do this?

"A dreadful snow powder weapon," Zero said as if she saw through Isabella's mind. "Even mortals could operate this kind of weapons. They could shoot targets a thousand steps away. They broke the armors plates and iron shields, and they're firing non-stop. Our warriors became easy targets for them."

After hearing the process of the battle, Isabella took a deep breath and the look on her face was uncertain. After a long while, she said, "So, you've lost."

"It's indeed a defeat for the church, and Soli Daal took the enemy too lightly..."

Isabella suddenly interrupted and said, "No, I didn't mean the battle. Do you remember? You told me only the winner was the deities' chosen one, and now you're clearly not the one."

"You think... Roland Wimbledon is the one who can win the Divine's Smile instead of me?" Zero peacefully asked.

Isabella could not help but raise her voice, arguing, "Don't forget about our goal! We must defeat the demons in order to enable mankind to survive. I don't care whether the church is the one to realize that goal! Given what happened during that battle, it's clear that even if you pool all your strength to defeat and devour Roland, it'll do no good to our goal. His army and witches will be slaughtered, God's Punishment Army will also suffer a heavy loss and in less than half a year Months of Demons will arrive again!"

For one split second, Isabella thought Zero was going to kill her, but Zero did not react until she finished.

"So what do you want me to do?"

The pope asked softly after a long silence.

Chapter 620: An Unstoppable Path (Part II)

"Tell Roland Wimbledon our goal, the truth about Battles of Divine Will during this 400 years and the secret of the church... No, I mean secret of the Witch Union," Isabella said explicitly.

Since Zero became the pope, all the pure witches who belonged to the Pivotal Secret Temple had been able to come to this library and know the true facts about Battles of Divine Will.

"What if he doesn't believe us?"

"He will! Bring him to the Illusion Room in the Reflection Church. He'll believe everything we say!"

"Or, he'll consider it a trick of the witches. Are you sure he'll devote all his time to fighting demons, once he knows the truth about the Union?" Zero said slowly.

Isabella was stunned. She opened her mouth but failed to say anything.

"Both of us know those nobles very well. They're interested the most in expanding their domains, increasing their wealth and enjoying their lives. Maybe they'll lead their people to fight against demons when the Bloody Moon arrives, but how can you be sure that the dandy prince will fight till death facing an adverse forecast?"

Zero held Isabella's hand and walked with her to the roundtable at the side and continued, "Isabella, he's just a fragile, weak mortal. His life is short and his willpower will vanish as time goes on. A common cold plague can easily end his life. Even if he believes in us and chooses to fight to his death against demons with the Union, nobody can promise that his people and successors will do the same thing. Are they willing to give up all their comforts and pool all resources of the kingdom to fight such an endless, brutal war? Only the church can do this, as our believers have a strong faith in deities and in us."

"At least... We should first send a messenger to talk to him."

Zero shook her head and said, "Negotiations can't solve problems like this. Indeed, devouring Roland will cause heavy loss to Hermes, but giving in to a secular lord will also crumble the people's belief in the church and destroy Holy City. Roland won't spare us or our God's Punishment Army as a way of stabilizing his own witch organization. These two choices aren't very different in terms of the outcome. Given that, why do you rest your hope on a mortal man?"

Isabella hesitated.

She saw the point of Zero's argument. Fighting against the prince would probably lead to a lose-lose scenario, but surrendering to him could not prevent Roland from seeking revenge for his witches. If he did so, the church would pay a heavy price and things seemed to return to the beginning.

Zero continued to say, "The knowledge of weapons isn't exclusive to a mortal, but a mortal can never have a body like that of a witch. Winning each Battle of Souls, I'll get my opponents' knowledge and lifespan. I'll stay energetic and determined for all my life and I'll be able to prevent our efforts from being ruined by later generations, no matter how long Battle of Divine Will will last. In the past 200 years, I've witnessed too many talented people being consumed by the time. No matter how brave and brilliant they were when they were young, they would become dust in the end. This fact alone suggests that I'm much better than him."

"But..."

"And most importantly, I'm the deities' chosen one, Isabella. No matter who's my opponent, I've never lost a battle. Thousands of souls absorbed by me can testify!" Zero emphasized the fact that could not be controverted.

Isabella heaved a long sigh.

She was persuaded.

"Well, what's your plan? If we can't get close enough to him, I can't eliminate the effect of God's Stone of Retaliation for you."

"Don't forget about High-Level Sigils left by the Union," Zero answered with a chuckle.

"No one can use 'Divine Will'... and 'Infinite' is a one-time sigil. Are you sure that you're going to use it for this?" Isabella said, frowning.

"It'll turn the tables on Roland. It's not a waste to use it on ordinary people or demons, as long as it can ensure our victory," Zero said with finality.

"I'll exhaust all my magic power. It's not a good feeling at all," Isabella twitched her mouth and said.

Zero nodded, adding, "And, you'll faint. Yet it won't do any harm to your body. Once I can approach Roland Wimbledon, the war will end soon."

"If you lose, we're finished."

Zero disapproved Isabella's guess, saying, "I never lose. When you wake up, you should be lying in the bedroom of the cathedral."

With these words, Zero poured a cup of red tea for Isabella and comforted her. "I know you're still hesitating, but don't forget you're raised by me. I chose you as His Holiness O'Brien's pure witch after your awakening and taught you knowledge and combat skills. You know my strength and my determination to defeat demons better than anyone. Generally speaking, I'm the better one to lead human beings in the coming Battle of Divine Will."

"Well... I hope so," Isabella took a sip of tea and said, "but according to the books, 'Infinite' is not really limitless, and the magic power can only remain effective for a short time when you're in the soul form. If you fail to catch him, you won't have another chance."

"So what we need to do first is to find him," Zero said with a smile.

"Finish reloading!"

"Angle 22, pitch 13, fire!"

Immediately after the order, the 152mm Stronghold Cannon set at the very back of the battle line gushed out bright orange flames and a strong airflow which kicked up the dirt and dust in the front into the air. Roland could still hear the deep roar of the cannon with his ears plugged.

The soldiers were tiptoeing and stretched their necks to look at the distant mountains, but they still could not see the falling point this time.

"This is Lightning speaking, the shell landed at... almost the middle part of the slope." The little girl's report came to him through the Sigil of Listening.

"Good, mark it down," Roland replied.

He was busy with directing a long-range shooting amending of two new fatal weapons, he started after all the residents of Coldwind Ridge left. As it cost a lot to make these ultra-long-range cannons, he won't let his artillerymen shoot them after spotting the enemy, thus creating the first beyond visual range strike in this era.

Roland was clear that he could not rely on the soldiers to correct the angle of the cannon according to the position of the target, so he used this basic shooting amending method. He recorded the point of fall and angles of the cannon for each shooting after the shell landed on the slope. With these recordings, Lightning would report the file number to the artillerymen once she found enemy stepping into the shooting range of the cannon in a battle, and then the artillerymen would adjust the cannon accordingly and fire directly.

These two Stronghold Cannons were enough to give a crushing blow to the enemy when they were moving down the mountain.