

Witch 641

Chapter 641: The Door to the Fragment

Now he was responsible for raising the newborn.

Roland yawned while getting up from the bed. He noticed that the ladder that he had used for falling was still laid on its side and that beyond the blinds, it was bright.

He had been wearing clothes when he fell from the ladder, and yet now he had nothing on but a pair of boxers. "Was this caused by the inertia of the subconscious?" It seemed that every departure from the Dream World would continue for some time until he fell asleep again, which would ensure that every time he entered the dream, it would be the exact moment he woke up in the Dream World... "How formalized was that?!"

He decided to depart the Dream World at midnight to see if he could eliminate the sleepwalking-like unconscious behavior.

In addition, Roland also felt exhausted from the lack of sleep, totally unlike someone who had just woken up. His eyes were bloodshot and dry, and his mind was fogged. He also could not stop yawning. He had stayed up for more than 20 hours if he counted the time in the Dream World too.

Roland thought that maybe he had better catch some sleep in the afternoon.

Roland put on a short-sleeved shirt and walked into the living room where he saw the diminutive figure again.

"You're up so early today?" Zero looked a bit surprised. "I haven't even started to make breakfast yet... You wait here for a while. I'll go and prepare it now."

Obviously, Zero just got up as well. Her white long hair hanging disorderly over her shoulders with wisps of hair sticking up, she looked completely different from the usual her who was neat and quick. She was still wearing the pale blue dress with white stockings, which, if Roland was not mistaken, had been worn for three days. Since Zero had kept her bedroom tidy, it must be definitely due to her shortage of clothes to change into rather than laziness or insanitation.

Somehow, Roland felt quite bitter in his heart.

Not only for her, but also for himself.

Roland could not believe it when thinking of the 300... no, 250 yuan in his pocket. How could he, the founder of the Dream World, and Zero, the trigger for the Dream World, descend to such a state? It could not be more tragic.

Roland would not let the situation worsen, since money was necessary when he wanted to buy books or explore this Dream World. He had to find a way to seek a stable income. 250 yuan could not even pay for a taxi, let alone to pay food and utilities.

When Roland was absorbed in thought about how to make money, Zero had busied herself in the kitchen.

She rapidly lit the fire to heat the pan before pouring in oil and heating it up. With a single hand, she cracked an egg and splattered it into the pan. Although the pan was too heavy for her to shovel up and down, she could just use a spatula to scramble the egg.

As the heated oil was sizzling in the pan, the tantalizing aroma of an omelet soon filled the living room.

Because of the limited cost of living, their breakfast had barely changed. Roland had two fried fritters and a fried egg, just as usual, and Zero had only one fried fritter.

"Were these fritters bought yesterday?" Roland took a bite and found it no longer crisp.

"Of course." Zero grunted. "They were the last fritters in grocery store last night, so they were especially cheap. Sometimes the owner would give me some of the raw flour dough from which I can simply make several fritters on my own."

Roland was surprised and asked, "Did you do the same thing at your home?"

"Almost." The little girl shook her head, saying nothing more. She seemed unwilling to talk about her family. After breakfast, she dressed up simply before carrying the bag and heading off to school. She walked to the door and said, "Uncle, as usual, I'll be out until noon. You have to wash the dishes."

"Ah, just go. Take care!" Roland nodded.

Zero could not help but get startled. After a while, she said yes and went out.

Well, it was time to check and count his property.

He returned to his bedroom and checked every corner of the bedside cabinets and wardrobe, sorting out all his belongings.

Firstly, it was the wallet that also contained an ID card and a credit card as well as the over 200 yuan. It looked so shabby. Roland, of course, threw some expired lottery tickets straight into the trash can. Even if those tickets drew prizes, they were overdue. Moreover, he simply did not believe anything with such a small probability would fall on him.

Secondly, there was a cell phone that had a completely empty contact list except for the bank information that showed him the cash flow in his card. Having read the message from the bank, Roland noticed that Zero's parents would send 1,500 yuan to him at the end of each month. But now, four days to the next remittance, there was only 20 yuan left in the card, which would be only enough to save him from starvation. In this case, there was no way for him to do other things.

Finally, there were some pieces of jewelry seemingly made of gold, and yet Roland was not sure about it. He wondered if they were prepared for marriage. If he sold them to a gold shop, Roland might earn almost 1,000 yuan, which could be used for emergencies.

This was all his disposable wealth.

But it barely helped the current situation, Roland sighed. He then turned his eyes towards the furnishings in the lumber-room.

He opened the door in the far end of the suite and looked at some old items in the room.

The iron bicycle and sewing machine, which was covered with dust and cobwebs, would presumably be worth 30 to 40 yuan due to its material, especially the latter one which was extremely heavy and hard for him to move alone. And the big iron door, which could count as scrap iron, might be worth over 100 yuan. These piddling amounts of money might seem of little importance in Roland's eyes at the usual time, but they were quite precious to him now.

If he went to a secondhand bookstore to buy abandoned schoolbooks, over 100 yuan would be enough to cover the used books of all subjects.

He made up his mind at the thought.

Roland remembered that there were small ads posted on the stairwell, which included the phone number of a recycle station. But before selling them, he had to clean them up first.

Roland thought that maybe they would be worth more if he made them cleaner.

Gasping, he carried and dragged the bicycle and sewing machine to the living room, and then he found something wrong.

The thick, big iron door did not seem to lean against the wall of the lumber-room, but was built into the wall!

"Damn it. Which bastard did this? What's the meaning of making a door on this wall? It's the outer wall of the apartment. Is it to make it more convenient for someone to commit suicide?"

"And there's also a lock hanging ridiculously on the door!"

"Wait..." It occurred to him that two keys were attached to his key ring.

Roland immediately went and fetched his keys which included the key to the main door. He put the other key into the keyhole. Unexpectedly, they were well matched.

With a click, the rusty lock flicked open and fell from the bolt.

Roland did not bother to pick it up but just pulled the bolt and forcibly opened the iron door.

The cold wind tangled with the snow and stormed in. This made him, who wore a short-sleeved shirt and a boxers tremble.

To his astonishment, there was a snow world behind the iron door.

He could dimly see a greige city surrounded by snow mountains that waved up and down far away. Built along the walls on both sides of the crack in the mountain, the city was wrapped in a big breach. In the center of the city, a towering building stood erect in the howling wind, like a pillar connecting to heaven.

Although it was the first time for him to see such scene, Roland immediately realized where it was.

"New Holy City, Hermes"

A stronghold city was built on the fractured area of the Impassable Mountain Range.

It was also a symbol that signified the mightiness and toughness of the church.

Chapter 642: First Exploration

"Bang!"

Roland fiercely shut the door and took a deep breath.

The Snow that adhered to him quickly melted into water.

Although he had long understood that dreams were variable, this scene still shocked him.

Roland walked to the window of the lumber-room and looked out to check the outer wall. The wall was flat and neat without even a trace of being inlaid a door or repaired.

In other words, the door was inlaid into the wall while the apartment was "finished", rather than being built in afterwards.

So... was the door only in room 0825, or in every flat?

If the door was also built into other flats, what kind of scene did they have and where did they lead to?

Roland felt excited about this idea.

He returned to his bedroom and rummaged through the wardrobe before slipping on a set of winter clothes. The dilapidated coat he picked looked like it had lost most of its feathers and the wool in the knitted scarf was forked, but since he did not have a better choice at this moment, he had to get accustomed to them.

It was a hot summer day, after he put on the warm clothes, Roland felt he was surrounded by stoves, sweating profusely, his body temperature soaring.

Once again he walked close to the iron door. He kicked off the flip-flops and replaced them with a pair of green leather shoes before pushing open the door and stepping out.

The moment he entered the snow world, the cold wind howled through the gaps of his collar and cuffs and drilled into his body. When the cold wind met the hot sweats on his skin, he felt extremely icy cold and could not help sneezing.

"Wait, if I keep this door open, does it mean that I'll have an air conditioner that costs no power?"
Roland thought.

He wondered what Zero would think this scene.

Roland rubbed his nose and looked back. The door looked like it was connected with a basement that was half buried in the slope. There were many similar low storehouses around this area which were obviously built by farmers or merchants who lived outside the city. But Roland noticed that these storehouses were unguarded, as if the entire campsite was abandoned.

However, what really marveled Roland was the scene that was hundreds of meters away from the slope. He saw a clear boundary of this world.

As far as he could see, the snow slope was abruptly cut in the middle while spall floated in the mid-air as if they had become weightless. Violent cyclones and endless darkness took place in that space. Occasionally a bolt of scarlet lightning crackled through the sky, illuminating the border area, and even so, the darkness stretched out beyond what he could see.

This scene was appalling but extraordinarily magnificent. If he could put words on it, it was like a lonely island floating in the void. The boundary had spread along the mountain land until it disappeared in the snowstorm. Undoubtedly, there must be another similar boundary on the other side of Holy City, but it was too far away for him to see it now.

Was this the memory fragment that remained in Zero's mind?

Roland did not dare go near the boundary to see through it. Both the violent wind that ripped the spall and the lightning that crackled the sky were dangers to him. He also did not immediately move towards Holy City. Overlooking from here, he estimated that it would take him at least half an hour to reach the city. It would take longer if he had to wade through the ankle-deep snow. He needed sufficient preparation.

After that, Roland wandered through this suburban campsite.

He could not find anything alive, whether in half-buried storehouses, dwelling houses or tents. All of the people just seemed as if they had vanished.

It was somewhat like the Soul Battlefield for him, nothing more than a stage built with memory.

Accordingly, Holy City should be unmanned as well.

Although there was no trace of life around, the storehouses were well filled, like a freeze-frame of the memory from when it was spun off.

Those fresh grapes in Roland's hand would be an example to illustrate his point.

Roland found them in the small basement next door. The iron lock on the door could not stop him. He simply twisted off the lock and the bolt with a wrench he found in the house. There was plenty of food in it, like cured jerky, fillets, wheat, and even a small half-box of grapes.

The grapes looked very fresh. They must have been carried from the old Holy City beneath the plateau. When Roland put one into his mouth, he could still taste its cool sweetness.

His biggest gain was a small iron box he had found in a hidden compartment in the basement. It was not because of his careful searching but simply because it had opened when he entered the basement. An oil lamp was lit beside it, as if someone abruptly vanished at the moment he was putting things into the compartment. The compartment was left open, revealing the half-hidden iron box.

The box contained over 10 gold royals and several translucent gemstones that were clearly of high quality. Roland pocketed all of them without hesitation.

After he confirmed the things in the memory fragment could be taken into his flat, he got busy at once.

After two hours of hard work in the snow ground, Roland moved anything valuable into his house. It included lots of food and several armaments, such as armor, short swords, and crossbows. The former would save on the expense of food while the latter might be worth some money if he sold them online.

Roland kept carrying things from the campsite into the lumber-room until the room was filled. After that, he had no choice but to lock the door with reluctance.

He felt so good after picking up so many things for free.

He could not hold back laughing when he thought there was a whole Holy City for him to plunder.

The wealth of the whole city would probably make him rich overnight. Living expenses were absolutely no problem for him now.

Roland was panting as he took off his clothes. When he was about to go and have some water, a turn of sharp dizziness suddenly struck him.

"What's going on?" He stumbled towards the tea table. But before he made it, he felt his field of view turn upside down, followed by a bang and then darkness took him.

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When Roland woke up again, he found himself in his bedroom lying on the bed, aching all over as if he had been through a marathon.

The night had enshrouded the city outside the blinds, indicating that he had been asleep for more than one or two hours.

Roland thought that it was probably because of his overtiredness, as well as the heatstroke caused by the alternate strike of coldness and heat. And that he probably should have caught some sleep before his labor.

But to his surprise, he did not feel much feeble at this moment. Instead, he was full of energy and so he disregarded the ache. It seemed as if a warm current was running through his body over and over again, causing his sense of touch to be super acute.

That was when Roland sensed a faint breath near his pillow.

He turned his head slightly and found Zero who was leaning beside him.

She was holding a wet towel, half her cheeks illuminated by moonlight, her eyelashes trembling slightly, her back moving up and down along with her breath.

Probably because the room was excessively sweltering, her dress was soaked and her arms covered with fine beads of sweat, sending out a unique aroma.

Roland knew that it must be the little girl who dragged him from the living room into the bedroom. Moreover, she tried the basic way to cool him down. He smacked his lips and could still taste the residual of the patchouli liquid in his mouth.

"How did she manage to pour the liquid in?" thought Roland.

Roland shook his head with resignation at the sight of Zero who slept defenselessly. He got up quietly and carried her to the bed. After that, he walked softly back to the living room. Zero who cared so much about the tidiness of her bedroom must have been unwilling to go to her own bed before taking a bath. He just simply left her on his bed.

Anyway, it was dirty enough.

Lying on the couch, he noticed that the ache was fading and that he could increasingly sense the warm current in his body.

Roland realized that it was not an illusion.

But something hard to describe.

He dug into his trouser pocket for a gold royal that he had brought out from the memory fragment and held it in his palm.

He willed the warm current to gather in his palm.

Roland clenched his fist, and when he unclenched it, the gold royal had been folded into a half-moon shape.

Chapter 643: How to Make a Fortune

The next morning, Roland opened his eyes as the first ray of sunlight shone into the living room.

The fan had kept blowing hot air all night, and cicadas were shrilling their familiar songs outside the window.

Now he had confirmed that the sleep in the Dream World would not get him back to reality, and Roland thought that he could rest during sleep.

Although this may sound a bit weird... Who cares. It doesn't matter if it works.

Yawning, he got off of the couch. When he was about to go to the kitchen to prepare breakfast, he heard Zero screaming in the bedroom.

After a moment, she appeared at the door, her face blushed. She pointed to Roland, stammering. "Yesterday I... You..."

"I slept on the couch last night." Roland shrugged. "Please, you're sweaty and unwashed. I would certainly not sleep with you."

The little girl pulled her collar to take a sniff and then she blushed even more like a ripe apple contrasting with her long white hair. In a flurry, she ran back to her bedroom, fiddled for a while, and rushed into the bathroom with clean clothes.

Soon came the sound of showering from the bathroom.

By the time she came out, Roland had finished preparing breakfast.

Today's breakfast was much heartier than the usual ones. Fried bacon, salt pepper egg, roasted dried fish, and a plate of fresh grapes.

Of course, they were all made of what he had taken from Holy City behind the iron door.

"You bought meat?" Zero asked in surprise, her hair wrapped in a wet towel. Roland could see her throat slightly stirring, apparently swallowing.

"Yeah, I bought a lot and put it all in the fridge." Roland handed her a pair of chopsticks. "I found a new job."

"Did you?" she asked suddenly with an excited voice, seemingly forgetting what had just happened.

"Yeah, I'll get paid soon." Roland laughed. "These were bought for celebration."

The little girl was relieved. "I thought you finally crossed your bottom line and did something irreparable."

"What does she mean by 'something irreparable'?" he thought inwardly, "Did she really think I would steal or rob? Uh... Robbery doesn't seem a big deal in the Dream World."

"So the reason that you had heatstroke was due to staying out in the sun too long looking for a job yesterday?"

"Probably..." he said as he threw a grape into his mouth, "In short, there's no need to worry about money anymore."

"You're so weak," Zero curled her upper lip and said, "When will I be able to stop worrying about you?"

Roland was almost choked by grapes as Zero said that. He retorted. "You make me feel like you've been worrying about me all the time."

"Uh..." This reduced her to silence. After a while, she glared at Roland. "You've really wasted ingredients when cooking breakfast. You added salt to the salty bacon!"

"She seems really good at changing the topic," Roland thought as he picked up a slice of bacon and place it into his mouth. "I think it's quite good except some corners of it were not well fried."

"You should leave it to me in the future." Zero complained, but she quickly gulped down the food on the dishes. Then she took her bag and was about to leave. "You just leave the dishes there. When I come back, and I'll wash them together with dishes for dinner."

"Wait," Roland stopped her and asked, "Is there a secondhand bookstore nearby? Do you know where it is?"

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This time he had stayed in the Dream World for three days before detaching from it. When he woke up in Neverwinter, the sun had risen high in the sky.

It seemed the speed of time in the Dream World was eight times faster than here, which meant a night in Real World would count as two days in the Dream World. Moreover, if he delayed his departure until the third day, others would just think he woke up late in the morning.

The first thing Roland wanted to do after getting up was to find a gold royal and clench it.

It turned out that the gold royal did not change even a little bit, but his fingers ached.

Roland sighed at the fact that the inexplicable power seemed to only exist in the Dream World as expected. He put the gold royal back to his pocket, slipped on a coat and sat at his desk.

Roland intended to copy out the key knowledge he had reviewed in the Dream World while his memory was still clear. It included the missing parts from every basic subject, as well as detailed designs for some large industrial equipment.

He had made the best of the last three days in the Dream Word. Selling those goods he stole from the campsite behind the door went quite well. He found a local second-hand goods forum where he posted the armor pictures and claimed that he had a number of imitated medieval crafts to sell at low prices. Before long, some buyers who were attracted by its absurdly low price and exquisite craftwork started to contact him.

In the end, armor, 500 yuan each suit, crossbows and daggers, 100 yuan each, were all sold out. The prices were incredibly low in the eye of others, but since Roland did not pay the cost of these goods, he was not distressed when selling them. However, he did not expect that gold royals would be much more difficult to sell. Even if he kneaded them all into round shape, the bank still would not accept the gold that was not traded in a formal way, whether it was gold bars or gold jewelry.

Roland could not manage to sell them to a gold shop nearby either, where they only accepted the accessories they had sold and the customers also had to pay an additional fee. A salesman was kind enough to give him an address of an old pawnbroker that accepted unidentified gold at half the market price. When thinking that he had only a dozen gold royals with a texture far from solid gold, Roland simply threw them all into his wardrobe.

He might as well move more suits of armor out of the campsite instead of wasting time on selling gold.

Meanwhile, Roland had no idea of where to sell three glittering gemstones. In the end, he just left them unsold.

With money in hand, he immediately swept through the secondhand bookstore near the apartment, buying all the textbooks he had ever read. Those he had not read were completely blank except for the covers. Obviously, the Dream World did not exceed his range of awareness, so it seemed impossible for Anna to cover all fields now.

However, thanks to his wide range of hobbies, he had browsed a large amount of all kinds of knowledge on the internet. And now he could get any detailed answers to any designs that he had ever run through, even something he had only just glimpsed upon.

In addition to those that were essential to quickly boost the technology in City of Neverwinter, Roland also bought two new sets of clothes for Zero, as well as a set of winter camping equipment for himself. As a result, he spent all of the money that he had just earned.

Roland could still remember how shocked Zero was when she received the new clothes. She tried to turn down the offer several times before accepting them, unlike any other girl of her age that should not worry about so many things. Roland learned the reason for her behavior after he asked about it. Strangely, this was the first time for Zero to receive a gift, which was something she dared not crave, as her parents beat her at home.

As the creator of the Dream World, Roland felt a strange sense of guilt.

Roland had been busy until noon when Nightingale quietly showed up in the room.

"Didn't you go down to have breakfast?"

"Yeah," Rowland said without looking up, "please fetch lunch for me. I'll eat it in my bedroom."

"Is that what you've been doing all morning?" Nightingale said as she surprisedly weighed the stack of papers at the desk, "How did you come up with so many ideas in such a short amount of time?"

"They've always been in my mind. I just forgot them temporarily." Roland rotated his wrist. "Take a look. What do you think?"

"Describe the electromagnetic field in... a certain volume... mathematical model using the form of... integral?" Nightingale put her hand to her forehead and said, "Your Majesty, I felt a little dizzy. I'll go and bring your lunch first."

Roland could not help but smirk before saying, "Go then."

"By the way, don't you have to go to the office today?" she turned to look at him and asked when she reached the door.

"Why?"

"Barov has business with you. He said there were two letters for you to read personally."

Chapter 644: Diplomacy in the New Era

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After lunch, Roland summoned Barov into the bedroom.

Barov, the Director of City Hall, who came to Roland's bedroom for the first time, seemed more cautious than usual but looked very excited.

Seeing his behavior, Roland could not help thinking of a story that a celebrity in history ran out to receive his subjects with his clothes in disarray, which considerably touched the visitors. It felt like his lazy behavior unexpectedly aroused a strong feeling of trust in his Director of City Hall and he had not intended it to.

He had to say that male official had a unique advantage in loyalty. For example, he could talk with him overnight, share one bed with him, and so on. But if it was Edith Kant, those things would be regarded as gossip.

Roland smiled and shook his head, setting aside those distracting thoughts. "How many letters have you received during the time I fought and slipped into a coma in the Northern Region?"

"A total of 16." Barov quickly reported. "Most of them are from lords of various domains asking for trade or visiting, and two confidential letters are from the Eastern Region asking for a peace negotiation. I've answered them all as you've required."

They had concluded the arrangements in a council meeting before the war. When the king led the army and marched on war, Barov would temporarily deal with the administrative affairs of Neverwinter in the king's absence. He would be responsible for reading all letters that were sent to the king. And the letters which were of particular importance and beyond Barov's power to answer would be sent to the battlefield by carrier pigeon.

"Just for a peace negotiation?"

"Yes... They're unwilling to surrender the right of enfeoffment. Moreover, they advise you to keep the tradition and honor of nobility."

"Next spring, those people will naturally know what kind of choice they should make." Roland shrugged. "Where are the letters for my attention? Where are they from?"

"One came from Astrology Association of the city of Dawn, the other from the Kingdom of Dawn," Barov said, handing over two sheets of paper, "They arrived in the moment you were in a deep slumber, and it tells something that is a bit... weird."

"Weird?"

Roland first spread out the parchment with the constellation pattern on it.

It was written by Astrologer of Dispersion Star. He had spent the first half page on greetings and gratitude. The astronomical telescopes Roland had sent to observatory had been put into use. Certainly, they should thank him for that, Roland thought, but the rest of the letter numbed him for a while.

"They've tracked the Star of Extinction in the sky?"

"A star that was sparkling red and was located in a permanent place?"

The first thing that came to Roland's mind was a synchronous orbit.

Judging from his poor knowledge of astronomy, he knew that only objects that traveled on a synchronous orbit could remain relatively still with the planet.

"If Bloody Moon appeared on this orbit, it would definitely influence the planet. Plus the observation also showed that its size should be extremely small."

"So Bloody Moon was not a natural celestial body, but a man-made satellite?"

After thinking for a moment, Roland denied his speculation. "If it was a satellite, how could it be descending to Earth?" According to Agatha's view, the moment Bloody Moon showed up, the entire continent would witness it. It was greater and brighter than the moon, and its scarlet light dyed the walls of Holy City bloody red. Even on a bright day, one could see its outline.

"It made no sense."

He was silent for a while before putting the letter aside. "Write a letter. Invite the astrologers to come to Neverwinter."

"But they rejected you last time," Barov said with hesitation, "I'm afraid this time..."

"Things have changed. Now that the Astrology Association has found the star they want to pursue, they'll just observe the sky where the star is located," Roland tapped the table and said, "You told them in the letter that Neverwinter has developed a better astronomical telescope and found some ancient books about the Star of Extinction. I believe they'll come."

"Yes."

He spread out the second piece of paper, or a slip of paper as he would call it. As per usual, a message delivered by a carrier pigeon was always very concise.

"The King of Dawn died, and his eldest son Appen Moya succeeded the throne."

"He ordered the elimination of believers of the church, cut off the trade route to the Holy City and has begun to hunt down witches."

"As a result, a rebellion broke out on the border that affected our caravan."

"The original plan may temporarily be suspended."

Roland could not help frowning. He knew that it was normal for Barov, who was unclear about what the church had done to the Kingdom of Dawn, to be confused. After Isabella and others retreated, the King of Dawn would sooner or later die of a lack of pills. He just did not expect that Appen would hate the church so much that he even involved witches.

Of the policies Appen had given, eliminating believers seemed reasonable. But the unilateral ban on trade basically cut off the source of wealth for border lords. The church must be behind the rebellion. Yet, hunting down witches was something that absolutely went against Roland's interests.

An order of such impulsion could not be drawn from the ideas of the three powerful Families. The only possible explanation was that the new king had lost his mind when seeking revenge for his father.

Roland had thought that the Kingdom of Dawn would be a potential ally, but this fact had disappointed him.

"Send a formal diplomatic letter to Appen," Roland said slowly, "First of all, it's to congratulate him for his coronation, and then warn him to stop hunting down witches. A pure witch isn't the same as a common witch and Graycastle has established a formal witch organization. Anyone who treats them as enemies will be against the Kingdom of Graycastle."

"Uh... Your Majesty." Barov wiped the sweat away from his forehead. "Are you sure you want to put those words in the letter?"

"Are there any questions?"

"He won't take it seriously. He may think you're threatening him."

Roland was very clear that sometimes even the feudatories under the local lords would not follow the king's order, let alone foreign kingdoms. But the era had changed. If the kingdom did not understand diplomacy, he did not mind teaching them what it really was.

"I'm threatening him," he answered nakedly, "If Appen Moya insists on his way, I may as well support a new king of the Kingdom of Dawn next year when we conquer Holy City, a wise king who'll fight with Graycastle against the Battle of Divine Will. Andrea of House Quinn will be a good choice."

Diplomacy in the new era would be built on steel firearms. Anything he failed to earn on the negotiating table would be taken by force. To deal with other kingdoms, intervening in their internal affairs, changing heirs, supporting oppositions, and directly stationing the troops into their lands would be common ways. Roland did not want any other kingdoms to stand in his way before Bloody Moon came.

Therefore, the core of this diplomatic letter meant to show "Don't say that I didn't warn you."

"I, I got it," Barov Mons answered with a complex look in his eyes. He was astonished, excited, and undisguisedly awed... He bent down deeply and said, "I'll send your will to the Kingdom of Dawn."

Chapter 645: Farewell and Promise

Finally, Roland could not stay in his bedroom all day and he had to go to the office.

It was almost dusk when Nightingale informed him that Tilly wanted to meet him.

Roland had to put on a coat, comb his long hair, and take a pile of writing papers to the office. He opened the door and found that Tilly and Ashes were there waiting for him.

Seeing Roland holding heavy stuff, Ashes immediately took the thick stack of papers. This left Roland feeling quite surprised as he never expected that Ashes, who had always been dissatisfied with him, would help him one day.

The sunset pierced through a French window, dying the walls orange-red. At the same time, it also left a ray of gold on them. All of this somewhat gave them a sense of parting.

Roland had already guessed Tilly's intention.

Though Roland did not want them to leave, he knew that this day finally would come. Besides, it was very sincere of them not to leave when he was in a coma.

"I'm here to say goodbye to you," Tilly said calmly, "I have to go back to Sleeping Island to resolve the Bloodfang Association issues."

Roland stared at Tilly's dainty face and eyes which reflected the sunset. After a while of silence, Roland said, "I see. When does the Charming Beauty arrive in the western region? I'll make a farewell dinner for you. Wait a moment..." He was suddenly stunned and asked, "You mean that you'll come back?"

Ashes could not help but cover her mouth.

Tilly directly chuckled and asked humorously, "Well, won't you welcome me? Brother."

"No, I mean... Why do you..." Roland opened his mouth in surprise but had nothing to say. After a while, he asked, "Is it because of the Months of Demons?"

"Could it not be for something else?" Tilly stretched her hands and said, "Don't you have higher expectations for me?"

He was completely astonished.

"Will you..."

"Yes, what you thought is right." Tilly outspokenly said, "I'll take the news to Sleeping Island that you won the battle against the church. I'll also tell them they needn't live a troubling life and hide on the small island any longer, because the church has completely lost control of City of Neverwinter of Graycastle in the western region. When you're ready, I shall bring the witches who would like to come to the western region to settle down here. At that time, I hope you won't to complain that they eat too much."

Roland's heart was filled with indescribable excitement as he said, "They're welcome in the western region at any time!"

"But your castle isn't big enough to accommodate so many witches. If only half of them would like to come, the number is still several times bigger than that of the Witch Union. What's more, most of them aren't combat witches. I'm planning to hire ships to deliver them when the Months of Demons are over, for the routes are much safer at that time." Princess Tilly revealed a sly grin.

He promised without any hesitation. "There wouldn't be any problems, for Karl will build enough accommodation before the next spring."

Tilly stretched out three fingers and said, "In addition, I hope that you can promise me three extra conditions, brother."

Tilly was so serious that Roland subconsciously sat upright. "Go ahead."

"Firstly, you can't constrain them if they want to leave City of Neverwinter for other towns."

"No problem," he replied instantly, "but at the moment, the Kingdom of Graycastle isn't unified and I can't guarantee that people in other domains will treat witches equally. Thus, for the sake of safety, I advise them to just settle in the western region or upon Sleeping Island temporarily. It won't be late for them to leave the western region by the time I'm able to control the entire kingdom."

"It's just a hypothesis." Tilly nodded with satisfaction and continued, "Secondly, you can't force them to work for you if they aren't willing to."

Roland poured two cups of tea for them and said, "Can I allure them to work for me?"

Tilly gave him an affirming look and said, "It's okay if you don't use forcible methods."

"Deal." He could not help smiling.

Since they were busy seeking shelters after basically awakening, it was quite easy for Roland to make those naive little girls plunge themselves into the waves of industrialization. He had a massive rewarding

mechanism to absorb them. Except for salaries, it would be attractive enough for them to work for him if he set the rule that only working witches had the rights to enjoy scented soaps, delicious wine, and ice cream.

Capital sugarcoated-bullets were far more compelling than pure violence.

"Lastly, I hope that Sleeping Spell can exist independently." When speaking of this point, Tilly appeared to be somewhat hesitant because she thought that this condition was a little harsh. "Of course, I'll hand over a part of the money earned by Sleeping Spell to City of Neverwinter."

"The Sleeping Spell?" Roland was in a daze. He remembered that this bounty organization was formed to resolve the conflicts between combat witches and assistant witches while making profits for Sleeping Island. In other words, almost all of the witches on the island belonged to the Sleeping Spell. If the organization became independent, it meant that Tilly got the control of all witches in it.

He soon realized why Princess Tilly had been hesitant to say the words. If the Sleeping Spell settled down here as an independently self-administrative organization, it was the Sleeping Spell that would still decide to accept bounty missions or dispatch witches to the Fjords. So what Tilly had asked for looked like she was taking precautions against him.

However, Roland agreed instantly. "Of course it can. Though only if they abide by the internal laws of the western region."

"Isn't the Sleeping Spell like a private company?" Roland thought.

Actually speaking, the minute he realized that the witches on Sleeping Island would settle down here, he had mixed feelings of joys and worries, not knowing whether he should conscript them into the Witch Union or not.

As one of the three major administrative agencies along with City Hall and the First Army, the Witch Union must be controlled by Wendy who was loyal to him, so that he could rest assured. But there were too many witches on Sleeping Island. Once all of them joined the Witch Union, Wendy's control would be abated and it would be less righteous for him to intervene and manage at that time.

But if they did not join the Witch Union, he did not want to seem callous towards those witches. As such, with Tilly's condition, Roland now felt relieved. In addition, it was normal for Tilly to feel a little worried, for trust itself needed time to build. Tilly gave more trust to him than before, which was huge progress.

"Really?" Tilly felt somewhat surprised at his quick answer.

"Don't worry. I always keep my word." Roland smiled.

"Well..." Tilly now felt relaxed, saying, "Then I shall go back to my bedroom to pack my stuff. The Charming Beauty will arrive in three days. Except for the combat witches who followed me, I'll take Iffy and Softfeathers with me. Once the Bloodfang Association issues are resolved, I'll send them back."

"You won't come back until the Months of Demons are over?"

"You've asked me whether it was because of the Months of Demons, and I've also said that I don't deny that." She blinked her eyes.

"That means you'll come back in advance?" Roland asked her closely.

Tilly nodded and said, "Just like last year, brother. I'll fight with you against demonic beasts until the heavy snow stops."

Chapter 646: Hotpot

...

When the two were about to leave, Ashes, who walked behind Princess Tilly, suddenly stopped and turned around to say, "Your Majesty, I owe you an apology."

This was the first time that Ashes had used polite words when talking to Roland. "Well. As for those episodes happening in the palace, I'm very..." Roland explained to Ashes.

Ashes shook her head and said, "We all know that he isn't you. He can neither lead us to defeat the church nor offer enough freedom and trust to us witches. I didn't believe this until you defeated the church and I'm very sorry for that." She paused and continued, "Each witch will remember what you've done, and you're more qualified to be Lady Tilly's brother than him."

If Ashes said such words, these would also be Tilly's thoughts. They did not believe that he was Prince Roland. Roland did not know whether to laugh or cry. Was this some kind of recognition?

Staring at his smiling sister behind Ashes, he abruptly realized something.

The Extraordinary covered her chest with the right hand and slightly bent. Her black ponytail hung down upon her shoulders and her golden eyes were like the shining stars in the evening.

"Envoy Ashes salutes you, Your Majesty."

Three days later, the farewell dinner which Andrea had long waited for finally arrived.

What she had awaited was not the farewell but the new delicious food His Majesty promised.

Since the last farewell, she had always remembered that there had been more delicious food than just ice cream. So Andrea had expected to taste it this time. But the battle against the church was of great significance and so she was reluctant to suggest it. But now, she could have a taste.

The dinner was not held in the castle but in the expanded castle backyard.

Through a long corridor formed by olives and entering the center of the backyard, Andrea smelled a thick scent before seeing any food. "Was it crystal fish from the Everwinter's glacier? Or was it flavored egg from the Wolfheart's cliff? Or was it the rainbow trout from the Fjords that's known for its delicious taste. No, no, no! I haven't smelled anything that bears a scent so tempting before. No matter how rare the material is, it can't make such delicious food."

"I'm suddenly hungry." Shavi shouted.

"Have you always led such a life in the western region?" Molly licked her lips and said, "What an enviable life!"

Breeze embraced Lotus and Evelyn together and then explained to Molly. "I haven't had many chances to enjoy it. It's them you should envy."

Candle explained. "This kind of dinner isn't held every day and the dessert is only served every three days."

"Only served every three days..." Molly held her forehead and said, "Why do I feel like you're showing off."

"No, I'm not."

Ashes took a glimpse of Andrea, though she could not control her saliva either, she said, "Hey, don't drool out."

If it was at an ordinary time, Andrea would have sneered back, but now her attention was completely drawn to round stumps at the side of the backyard.

They appeared to grow out of the ground at the first sight. The tree trunk was so thick and sturdy that as many as seven or eight people could encircle it. The hot air coming out its inside made it look like something was burning.

When she walked closer, she found that the tree trunk had been hollowed out. A huge iron pot was erected on top of the stumps and the thick scent was coming out from it was soup.

In addition, there were various different foods on the short table beside the trunk. They were various but common at the dining table. What made her more confused was that the food was raw.

This was the first time that Andrea had seen such a kind of dinner. There were no attendants, no white cloth, no music and no crowds of people. Each one sat around the stumps in a circle. It looked like that they had to do it by themselves.

What Andrea thought was true. After all of the witches arrived, Roland clapped his hands to indicate that the dinner had begun. He explained to all of the witches, "This is a hotpot dinner. It's very easy to eat, simply put all the food you like into the pot and enjoy it when it's cooked."

Fall was the best season to enjoy hotpots. As a very popular cooking method, it was quite easy to make a hotpot. Even the simplest vegetables could take delicious. The most important thing was that hotpots were very down-to-earth. Eaters would gather together to enjoy fine food from the same pot. Therefore, they were much easier to promote relationships among people than traditional banquets. As a farewell dinner, hotpots could reduce people's sadness and depression.

A hotpot's essence lay in its soup stock. In this age, cooking methods were largely monotonous. Usually, one ingredient had only one taste and people had to pay more attention to the quality of materials themselves. Roland had ordered chefs to mix various ingredients that had distinguished flavors and put them in a pot before to cook them. They included whole chickens, porcine bones, bird beak Mushrooms, seafood, spice and so on. So the soup stock was very rich in taste, a taste that could not be made by only cooking one or two raw materials.

It was Leaf who made the hotpot table that had a style of nature. She had cast the power of Heart of Forest to make the plants grow quickly. At her will, they had become what Roland had asked for without any extra transformations. They were covered inside with a thermal insulation coating. Even if the spirit lamps were lit, they would not set the tables on fire. Instead, the temperature of the inner walls would spread gradually over to the entire stumps. If they put their hands on a tabletop, they would feel a lukewarm heat.

As Andrea put some cooked meat into her mouth, she could not help but hum because of the strong and rich flavor.

As tens of delicious food materials assailed her tongue and the hot soup flowed down her throat into her stomach, Andrea could not stop eating, though this feeling was totally different from ice cream bread.

According to the table manner of the nobles, they should not take new food until they had finished the food upon their plates. However, they could not keep that manner with the hotpots created by His Majesty, otherwise, they would have nothing left after finishing their food.

The other witches on the table were no longer elegant. In other words, a hotpot had nothing to do with elegance. There were even several plates of delicious food in front of Lady Tilly. Even Ashes had picked up food several times from the plates in front of her.

Ashes imitated Andrea's tone and said, "'The essence of food lies in its original flavor. Without seasoning, the boiled soup can be closer to the original flavor.' Who has said these words? In my memories, someone considered salt and spices a barbaric way of cooking and said that real nobles will never use them to cook, but today, what I've seen is different from what she said."

If it was before, Andrea might argue with her. But now, she had realized what was the most important thing.

It was more important to enjoy the hotpot than play words with Ashes.

She lightly glimpsed at Ashes. Without hesitation, she pushed Ashes' spoon away and scooped a piece of floating meat into her bowl.

This time, Andrea ate contently.

Chapter 647: A Confession

Roland spent all his time copying the textbooks after Tilly bid her farewell.

He first started with the basic courses. As he had just got a chance to revisit the knowledge long forgotten, naturally, he needed to take the advantage of it and add the missing information to the textbooks previously drafted based purely on his memory.

Second, he had to improve the designs of the current equipment used in the city of Neverwinter. Roland knew there was still a big difference between an acceptable machine and a good one. A more comprehensive design could further enhance the productivity and efficiency of steam engines and machine tools.

Based on the new design, Anna had finally completed the first steam turbine.

Roland hurried to the backyard of North Slope soon after he heard the news. He and Anna both sat on the workstation, appreciating the charm of this colossal apparatus. At this moment, Roland felt his relationship with Anna was totally different from the ones he used to have with other girls in the modern world.

The machine was nearly six meters long and was connected to an external preheating boiler and a steam boiler. In main it looked like a huge metal roller tightly wrapped around by dense impellers. As its spindle was driven by high-pressure steam when the machine was heated by coal, the new turbine was much more efficient than old reciprocating steam engines, and it also produced far fewer noises and vibrations.

As a power source of a new generation, the first model of the machine turbine would be used to help with Thunder's naval exploration.

Unfortunately, in spite of its versatility, Roland did not plan to build a second turbine for the time being. For one thing, the plant did not have the capability to manufacture a similar one within a short period of time yet. For another, Anna would soon need to focus on improving machine tools.

"How do you like it?" Anna turned around and nuzzled up to Roland. "I'm good, aren't I?"

Unlike most girls, Anna could not be happier whenever she turned a paper design into a physical reality. Every time she completed a major project, she would not conceal her delight and satisfaction.

Roland could tell that Anna was contented with the life she had now.

"Of course you are, but I'm just a tad better than you." Roland wiped off the dirt on her cheeks with a smile, leaving a hint of gray streaks on her face.

Every time he gazed into her clear blue eyes, he swallowed back the words he had prepared to say, the words that he had promised Nightingale to convey to Anna. Although Roland had resolved to make his confession, he did not realize how hard it actually was until he really tried to do so.

No justifications could lift the burden off his shoulders.

For the past few days, he had occupied himself by preparing books and drafting designs to temporarily forget about the possible consequences of this inevitable talk.

However, his indecision was also hurting the people he cared for, especially Nightingale who had been eager for an answer.

Roland knew he could not keep dawdling like this.

When the boilers gradually cooled down and the steam turbine eventually came to a halt, Roland took a deep breath and whispered in Anna's ear. "Come to my bedroom tonight. We need to talk."

...

Roland sat in front of his desk after night descended. He could hear his heart throbbing frantically in his chest.

[Nobody in this era cares about how many women a noble owns as they do in the modern world.]

[I'm just following my heart.]

[Nobody will think it's something that breaks a social norm.]

Roland revolved rapidly a multitude of reasons in his mind but turned them down one by one. He felt two voices in his head debating and wrestling with each other. He wanted to add the last missing part to the book, only to find his quill suspending in the air, not a single word written down.

His anguish ended when Anna pushed the door open.

The heated argument in his head instantly stopped. Roland put down the quill and fixed his eyes on the girl.

Anna looked nothing unusual. She was cloaked in an over-sized pajama. A strand of damp fringes was clinging to her forehead. A faint, placid smile was lingering in her eyes, and she looked as serene as ever.

Roland somehow remembered that after the Months of Demons of the first year, Anna had voluntarily waited for him at the stairs.

She never whined or complained, but simply told him her thoughts and what she wanted explicitly.

Now it was his turn.

Roland pulled her to the desk and slowly confessed what had bothered him all this time.

An ensuing silence fell between them. The silence was so long that Roland thought Anna would turn away abruptly and leave the room. To his surprise, however, he did not perceive a noticeable change in her expression when he slowly looked up at her.

"That's it?"

Roland failed to come up with an answer promptly. "What?"

"I've been wondering when you'll tell me this." Anna seated herself next to him. "I don't want you to spit it out that fast, but at the same time, I wish you could talk to me as soon as you can... Now I finally don't need to worry about this matter anymore."

Roland gaped. "You've known it from the beginning..."

Anna replied bluntly, "I can tell that you have feelings for Nightingale. The more hesitant you seem to be, the more it shows that you care about me. But I also hope you can open up to me earlier because I would like to share your burden no matter what it is."

Anna let out a sigh at these words. "I never dreamed that I would win a royal family member's affections. I thought I would be very contented to just be with you. After you told me that you would one day marry me, I changed my mind—Roland, I won't share you with anybody."

"I'm sorry. I..."

"You don't need to apologize, for love knows no right or wrong. Plus... I feel glad that you've picked this moment to confess to me." Anna paused for a second and then said, "You aren't a man from this world, are you?"

Roland's heart stopped with a queer jerk.

"Nobody, whether he's a noble or a civilian, will ever feel hesitant or restless because of this kind of problem, unless he was brought up in a completely different world." Anna continued, "Likewise, people in this world may treat a witch fairly, but they'll never befriend her. Do you remember our bet? In the book, I wrote that you were a guest from another world, a world that wasn't hell or an abyss, but a more pleasant place. You brought knowledge we've never heard of. It was God that sent you to me."

At this point, Roland realized there was no need for him to continue to conceal his identity. He replied, "You're... overall right, except some little details."

Anna giggled. "I also wrote that you would tell me about Nightingale in the book. It appears I've got at least two things right."

Roland suddenly found Anna was not only good at learning. She also had terrifying perspicacity.

Before Roland could make a reply, Anna had taken his hand. She pronounced her words slowly but decisively. "I can't give my consent to your request, at least not now."

Roland was dumbfounded. What did she mean...by not now? Did Anna imply that she would agree someday later?

"I know what's bothering you. Don't worry. I'll talk her through. It's time to sleep." Anna pressed her kiss to Roland's forehead and said, "Goodnight, Your Majesty."

With a creak, the door was closed. The room became quiet and tranquil again. It took Roland quite a while to fully recover from the shock he had gone through after Anna left.

...

Chapter 648: Otto's Request

The king's city of the Kingdom of Dawn was currently undergoing extreme political turbulence. Even Yorko, who did not normally partake in politics, could easily perceive the underlying tension.

Since the new king ascended the throne, residences had been constantly broken in and searched by soldiers. Rumors about rebellions of lords at the border remained afloat in taverns. Foreign commodities on the exhibition had largely reduced, and even Yorko's caravan had suspended the slave trades.

According to Hill, Appen Moya had not only taken in slaves from the Kingdom of Wolfheart but had also liberated them from slavery. It was a good deed, but unfortunately, the act impeded Roland's plan.

Yorko did not worry the slightest about the interruption of the business, for he did not see any potential losses from it. The caravan was provided by Denise, and there was no overhead cost of trading in slaves. He did not really care about that little money he had earned from the trading. As long as he was still the

ambassador of the Kingdom of the Graycastle, sooner or later he would find the other profitable business opportunities.

On the other hand, there had been some progress in the formation of the alliance.

Three days after the coronation of Appen, Yoroko was summoned to the palace and was inquired about the details of the alliance agreement by the new king. After Appen learned that the church had suffered a serious defeat at Coldwind Ridge, he delightedly put his fingerprint on the agreement.

Yoroko was pleased that after numerous restless nights, the first task His Majesty had assigned to him had, at length, officially come to end.

His good mood, however, did not last long. All his self-complacency was blown away that very night by an airy comment of Hill's.

"It was too late. I'm afraid this alliance has lost its due efficacy," his guard said. "Besides, His Majesty may not like the way the new king treats witches. Timothy, who carried the same hostile attitude, was the best example. You may keep the parchment for yourself as a souvenir."

It was a well-known fact that Roland Wimbledon liked witches. However, Yoroko did not think Roland would be that defiant and stupid as to break the deal with the neighbor because of them.

Even if His Majesty dreaded the attitude of the King of Dawn toward witches, he could do nothing about it. After all, the Moyas had been reigning over the Kingdom of Dawn for generations, and Appen, as the ruler of the country, could manage his realm however he liked. Nobody could ever interfere in their domestic affairs.

Having said that, Yoroko still sided with his old friend. He wondered as pretty and remarkable as witches were, how they could possibly be demons' minions.

Yoroko swayed his head, trying to shake off these trifles that had been bothering him. He was merely an ambassador, whose sole duty was to take messages for His Majesty. As to political commotions and changes in the situation, they had nothing to do with him.

As he still got some time, Yoroko planned to first meet Denise and then decide his leisure activities tonight.

He was just about to set out when the eldest son of the Luoxi Family suddenly pounded the door.

Yoroko regarded this unexpected visit as evil forebodings. This man had never brought any good news to him. Otto had earlier claimed that the information he carried could determine whether the Kingdom of Graycastle would preserve or devastate. Later, he had whined about the disastrous change in the new king's character. Every piece of news he had brought had delivered Yoroko a headache. If Hill had not insisted on keeping in touch with Otto Luoxi, Yoroko would have simply chosen to ignore his presence.

He sent for Hill at once and ushered Otto into the living room.

"You've got news from the palace for His Majesty again?"

"No, not for now." Otto poured himself some tea as a matter of course and asked, "You've got plans tonight?"

"Yes." Yoriko lied. He hoped Otto would back off. Denise would bestow him a romantic evening, whereas Otto would only give him a fitful night.

"Put it off then. I want to ask you a favor." Otto handed him a black envelope.

Yoriko opened it and found an invitation card with a seal of a pitch-black dragon head on it, one identical to the pattern on a gold royal.

After reading the letter, Yoriko shook his head. "You want me to go to the exhibition with you? I don't have money to help you bid."

In fact, Denise had taken him to this kind of exhibition a few times. The commodities were indeed of extreme rarity, but their prices were also astonishingly high. A bid of 1,000 gold royals was fairly common in an auction. Yoriko wondered where these wealthy merchants had collected all their money from.

Otto drained the teacup. "You don't need to worry about money. By helping me, you're actually helping your king."

"Tell me about it." Hill, who seated himself next to Yoriko, put in.

Otto answered in a low voice, "I've heard that there'll be a witch for sale in this auction."

"Hell." Yoriko cursed within himself. He knew it was not going to be good news. Everybody knew that the new king was now hunting down witches. If it was at a normal time, he would definitely tag along with pleasure. At present, however, he would rather stay away from witches. "Aren't these people worried that they would infuriate King Appen Moya?"

Yoriko left the rest of his words unsaid. "The three families shall unite together and fully support the king. It appears that you oppose his order."

"Although City of Glow was the Moyas' domain, there are still some places his arm can't reach." Otto shrugged.

"Is the exhibition hosted by Rats?"

"They won't be Rats if they're financially capable of hosting this auction," Hill replied nonchalantly.

"You're correct." Otto gave an approving nod. "The exhibition isn't that formal but is still organized by some of the most powerful local merchants. They call them the Black Money. These people often conduct underground businesses, a big part of which is slave trading."

Yoriko asked, "There's a slave market right in the outer city. Why do they have to go underground?"

"You'll know when you get there."

"Can the Paytons join us?" Yoriko's interest was now aroused, but he did not want to blindly follow Otto's instructions.

"Are you talking about the businesswoman you usually hang out with? No, she can't," Otto said flatly.

"The Black Money has the strictest selection of their guests. She's a relatively reputable merchant, but she isn't well-known enough to be eligible for the exhibition."

"Do you want to buy the witch?" Hill turned the subject.

"Not me, but Mr. Ambassador does." Otto pointed to Yoroko. "The Luoxi Family is too close to the royal family. It'll attract unwelcome attention if I bid on her. However, it's quite understandable that the Ambassador of the Graycastle wishes to take a witch as his bed wench. I'll take care of the payment. I hope you can transport her to His Majesty Roland's domain via the trade route you've opened before. Nobody will raise suspicions if she's hidden among the delegation."

"But the slave trade has suspended." Hill spread out his hands. "We don't know when the business will restore."

"You can hide the witch in your fleet among other cargos."

"Why do you want to do that?"

"Because of... an old friend." Otto hesitated for a moment. "She's a witch. I thought she fell off the cliff and died, but I later met her in the Western Region of the Kingdom of Graycastle. His Majesty Roland Wimbledon once told me that every witch was precious and that they shouldn't die because of the church's malicious slander and false accusations. I also want her to have some companions."

"Well, with respect to this matter, I need to..." While Yoroko was still rummaging for excuses to decline the request, Hill Fawkes grasped Otto's hand.

"I see. Leave it to Mr. Ambassador."

Chapter 649: [Black Money]

"Thank you. I'll call on you again tonight."

Yoroko's jaw dropped. His eyes flitted across the two people in dismay. It appeared something was wrong here. They had just ignored him, who was the real Ambassador of Graycastle!

After Otto took his leave, Yoroko could not wait to start his questioning. All his complaining, however, caught in his throat when Hill said, "This is also what His Majesty wants."

Yoroko put his hand on his forehead. "Are you sure? I represent the Kingdom of Graycastle. If the King of Dawn knows I'm transporting a witch, the relations between the two nations will again deteriorate and all the work we've done will be in vain. What should we do then?"

"Appen Moya won't focus on these trivial matters. Even if he does notice it, witches are far more important than the alliance." Hill affirmed. "As a matter of fact, my men have already checked whether there were witches hidden among refugees when they did the screening."

"And?"

"None." Hill shook his head. "There are two possibilities. One is that there are no witches among refugees at all. The other is that they disguise themselves pretty well and have completely blended in. Anyway, if you can bring a witch to His Majesty, he will surely shower you with rewards. You know how much His Majesty treasure them."

Aware that it was his old friend's request, Yorko had no choice but to acquiesce sullenly.

He tried to sooth his resentment by convincing himself that the exhibition was just another way of exploring this country. Yorko was indeed curious about what kind of slaves would be sold on an exhibition that even Denise was not eligible to attend.

Otto arrived at the entrance of the mansion punctually in the evening.

Yorko climbed into a splendid coach bearing no emblem. Furnished with thick fur rug, the wagon was also equipped with two chains hanging down from the ceiling. Yorko did not need to ask what they were for.

"I didn't expect you have such a peculiar taste." Yorko whistled.

Otto blushed. "Ahem... it isn't my wagon. This kind of carriage comes in handy when you need to lock someone up while at the same time avoiding curious eyes."

"You don't have to explain. I understand." Yorko stroked the cuffs at the end of the chains and asked, "Can I borrow the wagon for a few days after the business is over?"

"Naturally. 50 silver royals per day and the lease includes the service of a coachman." Otto picked a comfortable spot and lay down after telling the coachman their destination. "It'll take a while. You may take a rest here."

"How long?"

"Around an hour. It's in the suburb of City of Glow."

Yorko gasped. "Then we won't be able to return to the king's city tonight! After the sun sets, the city gate will be closed, won't it?"

"'Black Money' will provide accommodations and food. In fact, they'll provide everything you can get from the city of Glow."

"Sounds like a marketplace."

"Pretty much. The only difference is it's underground." Otto explained, "I went but once, so I don't know if there have been any changes in the procedure of the auction. But I think there shouldn't be a problem as long as you follow the guide. After you win the bid, you don't need to wait until the auction ends but just directly take the witch from the backstage. A servant will lead you to your room..."

"Hang on..." Yorko stared at Otto in surprise. "Aren't you coming with me?"

"There's only one invitation card."

"What about the payment?"

Otto smiled. "The black letter represents money. It's a pass issued by the Chamber of Commerce. With the letter, you can directly place your bid."

"Without a limit?" Yorko's eye bulged.

"Of course there is... but it's way higher than what the cost of a witch is supposed to be. As far as my knowledge goes, it cost about 1,000 gold royals to purchase a witch several years ago. As King Appen has ordered to eradicate witches, the current final bidding price should be a little lower."

"1,000 gold royals!" Yorko smacked his lips. "Those upper nobles just like throwing their money away, don't they?" Yorko knew even all the brothels in the king's city altogether would not cost that much! Could he be too outdated to understand what real extravagance was?

"Also... in order to win her trust, you'd better not touch her." Otto coughed. "She isn't a real slave after all, otherwise it'll cause unwanted trouble on the way."

"I certainly comprehend." Yorko breathed out a sigh. She's His Majesty's woman, whom he would not have the guts to lay a single finger upon.

"In any event, put a mask on her when you get out. I'll meet you tomorrow."

The carriage conveyed them to the west after it passed through the city gate. It did not slow down until darkness closed in and swallowed the last drop of the sun rays. Like Otto had said, they arrived at the destination in an hour.

The venue of the exhibition looked no different from any other ordinary residences at the first glance. There was an empty yard lined with jagged fences, at the center of which stood a house made of mud and straw. Behind the yard lay bare farmlands where wheat had been harvested. The fields were dappled with piles of wheat-straw that looked like lumps of bumps bulging from the ground.

The only thing that stood out was numerous torches on the farmlands, a sign that indicated somebody was guarding this place.

Normally, nobody would guard the yard of a civilian's residence.

After the guard checked the invitation card, Otto and his men all remained in the yard, whereas Yorko entered the mud house with a guide. After going down a wooden staircase and passing through a man-made narrow tunnel, he found himself in a natural limestone cave.

The cave was about half the size of the square in the king's city. By the flickering torchlight, Yorko could see numberless small caves on either side, all pitch-dark, leading to somewhere only Gods knew.

The ground at the bottom of the cave had been polished and tiled. It was so lavishly furnished that only the stalactites overhung above his head showed what kind of place it originally was. The hall had been crowded with people waiting for the commencement of the exhibition.

Yorko now understood what Otto meant by "not that formal". Based on what he saw, the assembling was quite similar to one of the Rats' meeting.

"Sir, this way." The guide ushered him to the seat marked on the black letter and sat next to him. "I'll be at your service during the whole exhibition. Please feel free to ask me if you have any questions regarding our products." With these words, the guide placed Yorko's arm on her soft bosom. In the dismal light, Yorko could see a pointy chin and plumped lips underneath the mask.

"Is this also a part of your service?" Yorko fumbled her breasts as a matter of course. "What's your name?"

"Of course, sir. You can call me No. 76." Her breath was heavy with fragrance, but her reply was not breathless in the least.

Yorko had to admit his previous assumption had been wrong. Rats could never hire such well-trained servant girls. If every attendant was accompanied by such a guide, the cost just for hiring these girls would be tremendous.

"Is it always so dark here?" Yorko stroked the soft arm while raising his eyebrows. "I can't see the products on the stage clearly with this poor lighting."

"You'll see soon." The girl chuckled.

No. 76's words were soon verified by the metal scraping sound from above. In a second, several iron cables were dropped off the ceiling, each of which was attached to a weird stone at the end. The glow emanated from those stones was several times brighter than that the torchlight. All of sudden, Yorko could see the stage at the front perfectly.

The murmuring across the cave instantly died away.

The torchlight appeared to be even fainter compared with the soft, bright illumination of the stones. The whole cave had slipped into darkness, except the stage, upon which everybody rested their eyes.

A man in a tuxedo walked on the stage and bowed to the audience.

"Thank you for waiting. Now I announce that the 'Black Money' exhibition officially begins!"

Chapter 650: A Special Slave

"What's that?" Yorko stared at the illuminating object in surprise despite its dazzling light. "Is it also something you sell in the exhibition?"

"It has several names. For example, Sun Stone and Light Crystal... but we prefer to call it Magic Stone because it's said the stone comes from demons' lair." No. 76 explained in a low voice. "'Black Money' once sold them in an auction, and the final bidding price was around 2,000 to 3,000 gold royals. They're expensive and rare, so they won't be sold in every exhibition. At least, it's not included in the list of products for sale tonight." She paused for a second and asked, "Sir, is this your first time to come here?"

"Well... sort of." Yorko stroked his nose to conceal his uneasiness. If one stone cost that much, then all the magic stones used for illumination on the stage would be worth more than 10,000 gold royals. This was just such a lavish exhibition!

The guide seemed to perceive Yorko's uneasiness. She drew close to him and whispered in his ear like a perfect lover. "That's nothing, Sir. Every guest who attends the exhibition for the first time is shocked by the magic stones. This is also a means through which 'Black Money' showcases their power."

"You're also one of their means, aren't you?" Yorko had probably not presented himself in such a sumptuous exhibition as much as those great nobles had, but he knew how to talk to women. As his discomfort gradually faded away with the soft whisper of the guide, Yorko wrapped his arms around the girl's waist and drew her to his chest.

"Not until I get your approval."

"You've got my approval already. Well, after the exhibition..."

"I'll still be at your service, sir." She gently nodded.

Yorko started to slowly like this place.

By the time his eyes were back to the stage, he had missed two rounds of the auction. The products for sale were apparently not that appealing to the audience, for few people showed interest in them.

Just like the exhibitions he had attended with Denise, the first few rounds were nothing but the less savory aspect of the auction. The main course usually came at a later phase.

Otto reckoned the sale of the witch should not be too close to the end and estimated that the final bidding price would be no more than 700 to 800 gold royals. These merchants sought more thrills and stimulation than pure beauties.

The audience finally stirred a little bit when the first person up for auction was pushed to the stage.

It was a young woman, pretty plain overall except for her fair skin.

Yorko noticed the girl, unlike slaves sold in the slave market who were usually stark naked, were glamorously dressed in expensive garments only nobles could afford. In other words, she looked exactly like a highborn lady.

"What's that about?" Yorko pinched the waist of No. 76. "To dress up a slave as a noble so that you can sell her at a higher price?"

The guide corrected him with a smile. "Not a slave masquerading as a noble, but a noble slave."

"What's the difference... Hold on." Yorko's eyes widened. "What did you say?"

"She's a true noble." No. 76 gestured Yorko to tone down his voice. "Not a remote relative or a branch, but a noble lineage, the legal heir of a big family."

"Gentlemen, do you see this lady here?" The host announced in a loud voice. "Aphnie Tanfek, the daughter of the Earl of Rubble Woods from the Kingdom of Wolfheart. Since her father was unfortunately killed in the battle against the church, she's now legally the new Earl of Rubble Woods. The Tanfeks is a prominent family that can be dated back to 300 years ago. However, compared with their family history, I believe everybody is more impressed with the jade incident 20 years ago. This is a good chance to retaliate! The starting price is 300 gold royals. Please feel free to place your bid!"

"310!" Someone shouted immediately.

"350 gold royals!"

"400!"

"You're... crazy!" As the bid went higher, Yorko commented in disbelief. "To sell a real noble as a slave? It's a capital offense no country will tolerate!"

There was an unwritten rule among nobles, which was to place noble blood above everything. Anyone who posed a threat to that rule would be considered as a mutual enemy of all aristocracies. That was also why ransom was commonly paid for the exchange of nobles in the event of defeat. As long as their bloodlines still existed, the family would eventually rise to power again. The rule had remained unchanged for several hundred years, and it held true especially for royal families.

This auction, nonetheless, was an open confrontation with the entire aristocratic class.

No. 76 spread out her hands. "It'll be fine if you don't advertise it. Nobody will attribute the end of the noble bloodline to 'Black Money', for the church was the real culprit."

"How will these nobles end up? The host just said 'retaliate', right?"

The guide burst into laughter. "The Tanfeks tried to lower the price of jades with some evil intentions 20 years ago. Many jade traders suffered a lot back then. So their retaliation will be... certainly cruel. But these nobles lost their chance to stage a comeback from the beginning, just like witches."

The next few products were all nobles from the Kingdom of Everwinter and the Kingdom of Wolfheart, men and women. The male nobles had a wider age range and were more popular than the female ones.

Compared with the heirs, the women merchants perhaps preferred nobles who experienced in managing the operation of the family more.

Yorko now understood why Otto had said the auction had to be underground. He also came to know the reason for their strict selection criteria. Apart from wealth and backgrounds, "Black Money" probably also attached great importance to whether a guest had a genuine intention to make a purchase. In other words, they would only accept people who were their potential buyers, people who were in the same boat.

The witch Yorko intended to bid was the 10th product.

It was undeniable that although in tight bondage, the witch was considerably more beautiful than any of the noble ladies previously presented. Her disheveled brunette hair tumbled unbound down her shoulders. Underneath the thin burlap garment, a few whip marks could be detected on her bare hands and feet. Evidently, she had been tortured a great deal since being caught. Despite her emaciated frame, she had enchanted facial features and possessed an ineffable charm.

The host exclaimed. "A nameless refugee witch from the Kingdom of Wolfheart. She can heal herself with demons' power. Thanks to the report of our kind citizens, we've got a real piece of treasure here. Think about it, a witch who can heal by herself. You can use her in any way you like! If you dread petting her, 'Black Money' can help you with that as well. Start from 500 gold royals. Please feel free to bid!"

"510."

"560."

"600."

Yorko did not place his bid immediately, for he knew he had to wait until the end when the biddings started to slow down. Only in this way could he possibly win the big ticket.

To his surprise, however, the bidding price soon exceeded 800 gold royals that Otto had formerly estimated. Presently, it went over 1,000. The bidding continued and there was no sign that it would stop anytime soon.

Yorke felt his palm started to sweat.