

Witch 711

Chapter 711: Bare Heart

During the cannon's research, he had considered many possible plans.

There was a saying that there was no perfect weapon but only the most appropriate. After taking into consideration his opponents, the battlefield environment, and the manufacturing capabilities of the City of Neverwinter, he finally decided to use the mortar to replace the obsolete field artillery. The mortar could be used in both short and long range combat and had a relatively low manufacturing cost.

Its shooting range could effectively reach 200 to 3,000 meters. It could cover the blank space between the HMG (heavy machine gun) and the Longsong Cannon, while at the same time strengthening the firepower of short-range attacks

Due to the existence of defense lines, the most important function of the mortar would be to cover those blank areas. One of its advantages over other similar weapons was that it could be easily carried by soldiers across all kind of terrains. They could set up an artillery station anytime it was required. Furthermore, the gaps in the heights of the mountains were quite common and this allowed the mortar's rigging-angle to be as effective as possible

But the biggest reason that made Roland decide on creating mortars was the production level of Neverwinter.

The construction of the mortar was much simpler than that of the howitzer. The artillery shell of the mortar could be made by pig iron and since it didn't require rifling, it was much easier to produce without affecting the production of the 152 mm cannon. On the other hand, if he were to develop a smaller field artillery, no matter if it was the duplicator, the rifling cannon barrel or the artillery shell, they would all come into conflict with the Longsong Cannon that was currently being produced.

Before the new machinery tools and technology could be used, they had to pass all the required tests. Even if they failed in the attempt, Anna could still act as an emergency option and make up the key components of the Longsong Cannon with Blackfire without causing too much impact on production. But coupled with the new field artillery, the production needs would inevitably rise and the First Army would be at risk of not having enough cannons to use.

Roland also considered the development of individual grenades as a supplementary weapon and had even made a few prototypes for testing, but the performance of the prototype filled with black powder was extremely poor. It might have been useful in the city fights when unifying the Kingdom of Graycastle, but when it came to fighting against evil beasts and demons, its power was far from being enough.

Considering that the chemical industry production capabilities of Neverwinter were not sufficient to put a double based gunpowder grenade in every soldier's hands, he could only give up on this idea.

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When night fell, Roland descended to the second floor and knocked softly on Anna's door.

Upon hearing the knock, Anna opened the door, a look of surprise crossed her features when she saw it was him.

Her surprise only lasted a few moments and soon her cheeks turned red.

After Roland entered the room, he hugged her from behind and brought her to the bed before lying on their back.

"Why did you come today?"

Anna's blue eyes were shining like gemstones in the night sky.

She usually went to Roland's bedroom two to three times every week as she believed a frequency like that would not affect their work routine. Of course, if Roland insisted, she would also not turn him down. Since confessing his feelings for Nightingale to her, Roland had been feeling guilty and had been avoiding asking anything of Anna.

This was also the first time that he had visited Anna's room. She was the only witch living alone, but due to the poor insulation and the fact that Leaf and Scroll lived next door, they would usually only meet upstairs.

"I want to talk to you about the Dream World," Roland said softly in her ears, "I didn't have the time to talk in detail this afternoon. You must also want to know more... about my past experiences."

"You dreamt of a different world?" Anna quickly guessed the truth.

"You're right. The world was created in accordance with my memories, but it also contains special elements, such as the Force of Nature which resembles magic power."

The night that he told the truth to Anna, Roland found out that she was not ignorant of his feelings for Nightingale, but rather she had been waiting for him to bring it up first. Since that moment, he finally understood Anna's way of handling things. She would not normally hide her emotions or thoughts in front of him, but for some things, she would wait patiently because she did not want to embarrass him.

This caused Roland to feel a little worried as he did not know where her boundaries were. If one or two things kept accumulating, she might eventually become more close-lipped and would wait for the outcome in silence. Compared to being silent because she was afraid to hurt him, he much preferred this version of Anna. This version of Anna spoke her mind and believed in him with all her heart.

So, Roland decided never to hide anything from her, even if she didn't ask him herself, he would tell her everything.

Anna, who apparently understood his thoughts, smiled and said, "I know. Let's start from where you live. In the dream, do you also live in a castle?"

"No, it is a tube-shaped apartment, just like an apartment house where everyone owns a regular size studio. Also, guess who is living with me."

"Hmm... don't tell me it's Zero?"

"Oh—ahem, why?"

"It's simple. You said that you started having this dream after you defeated Zero in the Soul Battlefield, thus the dream's existence must be partly attributed to you and partly to her. In a world created by both of you, it's not strange that you and her appearance in one place. But...she did not attack you anymore, did she?"

"No, she didn't. She had lost all her memories before awakening and has become a ten-year-old kid. The kind that even though she knows nothing, she still acts like a know-it-all."

"10 years old plus living together... did she become your family?"

"Um, Zero has been left to me by her parents. She is more like a tenant."

"Is that so? Then you should take good care of her."

"Why? That is just a dream."

"But didn't you say that it's not different than the real world? If that's the case, why do you differentiate it?"

Roland was once again surprised by Anna's unique way of thinking. The discussion was seemingly taking a different direction, but he didn't mind as he saw Anna's radiant look and tone that were full of interest.

They talked from the Apartments of Souls to the memory fragment, and from the Force of Nature to the Martialist Association. As they were about to finish, Anna's voice began to lower and she leaned over Roland's arm, her chest moving lightly, her breathing calm. Even though she was asleep, her other hand was firmly grabbing his waist as if she didn't want him to go. This being the case, it was impossible for him to go back to his room without waking her up.

"Nevermind." He decided he would spend the night here and hope that no one would notice him leaving Anna's room the next morning.

Roland kissed Anna's forehead and closed his eyes with her in his arms.

Chapter 712: Parade Plan

On the second day, Roland got up late as usual. When he woke up, he found Anna was nowhere to be found. What was left of her was only a few flaxen hairs on his elbow, with a hint of a relaxing fragrance.

Lying on the bedside table was his breakfast which was obviously brought up by Anna from the kitchen. Beside the dish, there was a note with a short line written on, "I know that you like sleeping. I'll leave you alone for your breakfast."

"Even on this occasion, she can't forget about her work and got up on time... She is serious about her work."

Roland shook his head helplessly and got off of the bed. Even though the castle was supplied with heating, it was not easy to leave the cosy quilt in winter. The water in the wooden basin Anna used to

wash her face was still warm. Roland used it to wash his face too, then carried the breakfast and walked up to his office on the third floor.

When he pushed open the office door, he saw Barov and Edith were already waiting for him. Nightingale was at her usual place, her exclusive lounge chair by the fireplace. She was reading a picture-book about witches while chewing dried fish. The relaxing expression on her face looked no different than usual.

"Oh, you came early." Roland casually greeted them as if there was nothing out of ordinary. "Sit down before you tell me what you came for."

"Ahem." The City Hall Director cleared his throat, which looked as if he was used to Roland's reaction. "Your Majesty, the logistics preparation for attacking the Southernmost Region has been completed. The recruitment work for reserve soldiers is going smoothly. The scale of the First Army will reach 7,000 soldiers next spring, which is unparalleled in the Kingdom of Graycastle."

"It's only in the Kingdom of Graycastle," Edith interrupted unexpectedly. "The forces His Majesty has to deal with aren't those stupid knights and nobles."

Roland smiled. He opened the report on his desk and said, "Indeed, if we were to fight against the demons, neither the work of population proliferation nor army construction can be stopped. On the premise not to affect production, the First Army should have as many soldiers as possible."

Although unwilling to submit, since the king had given his order, Barov had to obey while staring at the Pearl of the Northern Region.

Normally, things like soldier recruitment and logistics for combat readiness should be done by the First Army. But Iron Axe and the few generals under his leadership were lowborn, which meant that they might be good at leading troops for military operations, but they lacked the slightest knowledge of financing and administrative management. So when it came to the issues of money and food, Barov had to offer a helping hand to get things done.

As the scale of the First Army further expanded, such staffing issues would obviously prove difficult. The simple management structure that Roland impetuously established would not meet the requirements for future development. Maybe it was time to make a new round of reform of the military system.

Roland resumed his focus on the report. According to the plan drawn up by Iron Axe, 1000 soldiers were to attack the Southernmost Region. 500 veterans set off from Neverwinter and met with 500 new recruits stationed at the Fallen Dragon Ridge. They then charged toward the Iron Sand City along the Silver Stream Oasis.

As long as they took two 152 mm Longsong Cannons with them, there should be no problem for such a force to conquer the Iron Sand City. But the key to conquering the Sand Nation did not lie in seizing the territory, but in the holy duel, so the role the First Army played was more to escort the leader and maintain order.

The City Hall could manage the logistics work of 1,000 soldiers with high proficiency, and the details involved were getting more and more sophisticated. The situation that the leader had to personally attend to everything had long gone. The preparations were so sophisticated that they were often

beyond Roland's expectation, which was obviously a result of accumulated experience after several actual battles.

"Alright, that's settled." Roland closed the report and looked at the Pearl of the Northern Region. "Do you have anything else to say?"

Roland thought that if she was only there to report about the logistic matter, Edith should not have come with Barov,

For she was never that kind of person who liked to grab credit.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Edith replied, nodding. "I heard from Iron Axe that you're planning for a cannon exercise?"

"That's right."

"I wonder... can involve the civilians of Neverwinter as spectators." Her words triggered Roland's interest. "If your subjects could witness such a spectacular scene, it might greatly increase their enthusiasm for joining the army and their confidence of fighting the demons in the future."

"How could you involve the civilians in such a matter?" Barov said, frowning, "Haven't you seen the explosion scenes? What if they're frightened and think of it as a God's Punishment?"

"It would then be a God's Punishment under His Majesty's control. As long as the propaganda work is well carried out, the fright could be minimized," Edith said bluntly, "Even a fief lord might occasionally hold public traditional martial arts competitions to decide which knight is more brave and resourceful in battle. Besides offering some entertaining activities to the nobles, it could also demonstrate military power to the subjects."

"But cannons are nothing like the wooden guns in knights' hands."

"We could mark off the viewing territories on the city wall and dispatch police to maintain order. Considering the limitation of space, selling admission tickets could be a sound choice... Two silver royals for one ticket could not only prevent the civilians swarming in but also bring in extra income." Edith talked with ease and confidence, which obviously showed that she had given thorough consideration to her proposition." Besides, even the spectators should be sifted. Those who're qualified to purchase tickets should be between the age of 15 and 30, who would be the main force in every walk of life in Neverwinter in the future. Increasing their faith is helpful in fighting the Battle of Divine Will. For people in some critical departments, such as the City Hall officers, I think watching the exercise should be mandatory for them..."

Roland was very surprised. "Isn't this exactly a parade? Such a proposal not only connects a live ammunition parade with performance activities, but could show polical sensibility and earn funds. The talent required for the military reform could be right in front of me."

At this thought, Roland nodded and said, "This sounds good. Do as you proposed."

"Indeed, Neverwinter needs some inspiring news."

When May passed through the square with a basket full of Bird Beak Mushrooms in her hand, she found that there was a crowd in the square. Although it was snowing lightly, it did not affect people's enthusiasm for surrounding the noticeboard.

She walked up out of curiosity. A publicity agent was shouting in the crowd, "His Majesty the king is going to have an open cannon drill three days later, on the west side of the city wall which is the first line for fighting against the demonic beasts. Do you wish to see with your own eyes how the newest and most advanced weapons explode the demonic beasts into pieces? Do you want to sense the shock as a heavenly rage? Go and sign up in the City Hall! As long as you're qualified, with your ID card and two silver royals, you could get yourself a chance to appreciate the heroic fighting bearings of the western region soldiers. The seats are limited. The opportunities are rare. If you miss it, you'll have to wait until next winter!"

"Is this a new idea of His Majesty? Even the propaganda wording is so unique." May twitched her mouth. "Carter probably will be very interested by it. But he doesn't need to buy a ticket in City Hall. As the Chief Knight, he surely would accompany His Majesty and attend this drill."

As to herself, she never fancied such stuff related to fighting and killing.

Chapter 713: A Better Performance

Not long after May left the square, she heard a sound of soft footsteps coming from behind her.

"Mrs Lannis, please wait, Mrs Lannis!"

It took her quite a while to realize that it was referring to herself. When she turned back, she saw a girl, aged 17 or 18, running toward her.

The girl's hair was tied up like ram's horns, and her cheeks had gone red in the freezing wind, but her cotton-padded clothes and leather boots were brand new with good quality. If it were two years ago, May would have imagined the girl as someone's daughter from a rich family. But now more and more civilians could afford new clothes, it was not such a safe bet to judge a person's status from one's appearance anymore.

The girl ran to May's side and handed May one of her two salted fishes while gasping the cold air.

"Mrs Lannis, this is a little token of my gratitude. Please do accept it."

May was stunned and then asked, "A token of gratitude?"

"I've always wanted to meet you. If my father had watched your show, he would have been very gratified!"

"But I don't know you or your father... Can you tell me exactly what this is about?"

It took the Star of the Western Region half an hour to roughly understand the whole story.

The girl's name was Jasmine. She was on her way back from the Convenience Market when she happened to recognize May from behind. Giving May fish was only a hasty decision to express her gratitude.

Jasmine's father was a former soldier of the First Army who was accidentally killed during the battle against the church and left Jasmine and her mother behind. The generous compensation from City Hall and the recruitment priority policy relieved them from worrying about their livelihood. Jasmine grieved for her father's death for quite a long time. It was not until the staging of the new play "The Hero's Life" did Jasmine pull herself together.

In the play, all those soldiers who bravely sacrificed their lives for protecting their families and the kingdom were bestowed with the title of Hero by His Majesty.

"Mother said that father used to be a common hunter. She never expected him to gain such an honor after death. She told me to thank you if I ever got the chance to meet you." Jasmine deeply bowed to May. "Now people call me the daughter of a hero, which makes me feel that father actually didn't leave me. If not for the rule that the First Army doesn't take in females, I'd have carried a flintlock and fought against those hostile enemies."

"..." May remained silent for a while, then asked lightly, "But you might be killed on a battlefield. Aren't you afraid of death?"

Jasmine nodded, then shook her head. "In former winters, every family in my area would migrate toward Longsong Stronghold. Many people died on the way there and had their bodies were cast into the Redwater River. Every sound of something dropping in the water meant a person had died. When we reached the slum, death became more frequent. After heavy snow, the streets were always filled with frozen bodies. At that time, I often shivered out of fear. I feared when I closed my eyes, I could be the next victim."

"Since I don't want to live like that again, there needs to be people to stand out and fight for a new life," she said word by word.

That was a line in the play.

Suddenly, May felt that something soft, deep in her heart was touched.

She reached out her hands to touch the girl's hair. "Even if you'll lose everything?"

When this line of narration sounded in the theater, May vaguely remembered the whole square was in silence, the audience were holding their breath and waiting for the impersonator of the hero to answer.

At this moment, Jasmine's answer was as powerful as the "Hero" in the play, "Because it is worth fighting for."

"I accept your gift."

"Mrs Lannis, please take care!" The girl waved her hand happily, turned around and then ran toward another street.

May stared at the heavy salted fish in her hand and recalled the time when she consulted the drama master Kajen Fels when she played in the grand theater in the former king's city.

"What's the best performance?"

"To firmly attract the audience's attention on you and make them think that you're the character you play. What they're watching isn't a drama, but your whole life... If you can achieve that, it'll be the best performance."

To that end, May practiced hard at acting, thought over the character's mood and manner, put herself into the story in the script whole-heartedly and tried to present every detail flawlessly. When she was 25 years old, her hard work paid off, she became an actress known to all. As a person from the western region, she gained a firm foothold in the king's city. During her prime time, even the famous actors in King's City's Grand Theater could not overshadow her.

However, her opinions changed.

When "The Hero's Life" was shown, was her performance perfect? Not at all. His Majesty's script came out so fast that the actors and actresses only had two to three weeks to rehearse before putting the show on stage, during which, remembering the lines took her one week. Very often the crew had to improve themselves during the performing process. For example, when she played the Hero's wife, she sometimes forgot her lines or used the wrong facial expressions. And it was not a love story in which she excelled in acting, so she had to conjecture many things, making the show far from perfect.

But was the response to the play not good?

Judging from the audience's applause, "The Hero's Life" was nearly as popular as "The Memoir of a Prince's Search for Love". When the leading actor said the line "because it is worth fighting for", the audience's shout of agreement almost shook off the snow covering the mountain tops.

"Maybe that was the best performance..." May thought, "In King's City's Grand Theater, such a scene would never appear. Nobles might drop tears for the characters in a play, or clap out of joy, but their focus was on her, an outsider's life. But here, the audience saw themselves through the characters, through the play... People see the future they want."

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When May returned to her residence, she coincidentally met Irene and Morning Light.

"Ah... May, you're back right on time." Irene instantly stood up from the chair and grabbed at May's shoulder. "I was just asking Lord Carter to preoccupy some good seats for us. Let's go and watch together."

"Go to where?"

"What's the problem? Why everybody is talking perplexingly?" May rolled her eyes, pushed away Irene's hand and put the Bird Beak Mushrooms and salted fish in the kitchen.

"The cannon exercise, of course," Irene followed her and said impatiently. "I heard this exercise will be the largest scale exercise since the establishment of the First Army. There is already a long line in front of the City Hall. Aren't you interested?"

"Not at all." May shrugged. "If I had that time, I'd rather read my script a few more times."

"How about just accompanying me... will you?"

This little girl was really sticky, but May could not bring herself to scold Irene, because she knew, different from others, Irene showed her affection to others out of genuine emotion. May had learnt that when they were in the Longsong Theater.

May intended to refuse the invitation, but she swallowed the words she was about to utter. Indeed, she did not like things related to fighting and killing, but fighting and killing were not always terrible and unbearable. Maybe taking a look at it would help her to experience how the soldiers truly felt and she could better put herself into the next play?

Of course, she definitely did not agree with Irene for her begging.

"Okay." After a moment's hesitation, May sighed. "If you insist."

"Haha, really? Wonderful!"

Looking at Irene full of spirit, May shook her head helplessly. "Alright. I'll just take it as a sacrifice for a better performance."

Chapter 714: A New Life

After the couple left, Carter approached her to ask, "Do you really intend to go there? You can stay at home if you don't want to."

"Why? Are you unwilling to have my company?"

"Of course not!" He shook his head wildly, completely not like a grim-faced knight, "I want to be with you all the time."

Even in those tragedies of love and death where actors and actresses expressed love to each other, their lines would not be more exaggerating than that. She had never expected to meet such a dramatic person in real life. She glanced at him and asked, "Oh, who do you want to stay with, His Majesty or me?"

"Uh... Well," Carter did not know how to respond. Probably he had never considered how to choose between responsibility and love.

May was amused and gently patted his cheek. "OK, it seems that I'm as important as the king."

The Chief Knight relieved and hugged his wife with his arms. His hands, in the meantime, started to move down.

"Stop! It's still during the daytime," she tried to stop him when she suddenly felt like throwing up, "Ugh..."

Carter immediately stopped and asked with concern, "What happened? Do you feel uncomfortable?"

May shook her head, pushed the knight away and took a deep breath. Although she knew she was not sick, she still felt nauseous as if her stomach were turning. She walked to the bathroom and retched, but nothing came out except for some saliva.

"I'll go to call Miss Lily." Seeing this, Carter became more worried. He put on his jacket and was ready to leave.

"Wait... Wait," May stopped him. "I didn't catch a cold."

"But you're so ill... His Majesty's textbook mentions that the early symptoms of a cold are vomiting and diarrhea. Miss Lily's ability can cure the disease quickly. It'll become more serious if we don't receive treatment now."

"Maybe I'm not sick..."

"Not sick?" Carter frowned. "Why do you vomit?"

"This fool doesn't have any common sense," May thought, her cheeks flushed. She heard from people that when a woman was..., she might have similar reactions. But she had no experience of it. If she was wrong, she was afraid that she might be mocked. She was delighted to see her husband behave in a funny way, but she could not make mistakes on such an important issue, otherwise she would be teased by him for the rest of her life.

"In the Witch Union... I remember there's a green-haired girl who can see through things?"

"Do you mean Miss Sylvie?" Carter nodded. "She does see hidden things that ordinary people can't see... But she can't treat illness."

"Can you ask her to come?" May slowly returned to the bedside. Though she was just guessing, she still sat down slowly as if she were scared to disturb the little life in her. "Maybe Miss Sylvie knows the reason."

"You mean..." Carter also realized it at this moment. He opened his mouth with surprise and his eyes lightened up, and then he firmly clenched his fist and said, "I'll go to find Lady Wendy. If she's in the Inner City, there should be no problem. "

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After the door was closed, May gently breathed out. This feeling was really wonderful as if the meaning of life had become different just in an hour. The possible new life warmed her whole body up. She closed her eyes, and could not help recalling the look of Jasmine when she had handed her the salted fish.

"This is probably... the taste of hope."

On that night, her guess was confirmed by Sylvie.

She was pregnant.

Roland got the news the next day and patted the shoulder of Carter Lannis who was extremely excited, "Congratulations! The baby should be born in several months, so you still can't forget about your work. When she's about to give birth, I'll give you a long holiday so that you can accompany her."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Carter saluted, one hand pressing his chest.

"By the way, how do women give birth to children?" Roland suddenly thought of a very important thing and asked, "Is there any midwife in Neverwinter?"

"Midwife?" the Chief Knight asked in confusion, "What's that?"

"It's a person who helps the delivery. When the child is born, there has to be someone... um, help to deal with it." While answering the question, Roland also searched Prince Roland's memories but found that the palace mentor did not teach any relevant knowledge. "We can't expect the mother to cut off the child's umbilical cord by herself, right?"

"Ah, it's usually done by the elders. Most of them have had similar experiences."

"What if there is no such an elder?"

"Well..." Carter was dumbfounded, "I'm not too sure."

Aristocratic families would naturally not suffer from the shortage of manpower, but civilians certainly had no such privileges. Neverwinter had been established for a year now, and most residents came through recruitment and immigration. So, not many people had babies yet. However, once the lives of residents had stabilized, the fertility rate would definitely rise sharply. It was foreseeable that a large number of new lives would come to this world every year from the following year.

The problem was that there had not been any reliable medical system in Neverwinter up to now.

Roland could not be blamed for being careless, as there were no midwives in other cities, either. Sick people could only pray to deities, or buy some weird herbs from pharmacists with several silver royals. Thanks to Nana and Lily, disease and pains were almost eliminated in Neverwinter, which was the reason he had delayed the establishment of the medical system.

He initially had thought if the science and technology advanced by leaps and bounds and that they directly entered an information age, highly advanced modern medical science would still be nothing compared with the two little girls' abilities. That was why he kept postponing the matter.

Yet Roland now found it absolutely necessary to have a medical system for a city of over 100,000 people, no matter how underdeveloped it might be.

For example, it was impossible for Nana and Lily to handle childbirth... They would be too busy, and once the war with demons started, they had to rush to the front. In that case, residents had to deal with patients in the city themselves.

After Carter left, Roland opened his notebook and recorded his idea of a primary medical institution.

Anyway, since it was a blank area, maybe he could start from childbirth.

Establishing hospitals, cultivating medical staff, democratizing health knowledge and the most basic means of treatment... Fortunately, the First Army had already had a basic understanding of these matters, so he only needed to make minor changes to the brochure used in the First Army and use it as a part of the teaching material for the public. He could also choose the first group of medical teachers from the First Army.

Though knowing nothing about modern medicine, Roland clearly remembered what an important role sterilizing medical instruments and the prevention of wound infections would play in child delivery in the future.

As for other parts of medical science, he could conduct further research in the future.

In the afternoon, he received a piece of good news.

Tilly Wimbledon was coming to the Western Region with Ashes and some other witches.

Chapter 715: The Feelings of Combat Witches

The sky was overcast as if covered with a thick layer of curtain. Numerous tiny white dots drifted down along with the wind as if they had wanted to fill the entire world. Yet the blizzard appeared insignificant before the great sea embracing the sky.

The Charming Beauty gradually approached Shallow Beach in the heavy snow and wind.

Roland had waited here for a long time. Standing in the chilling sea wind, he opened his arms to Tilly who stepped on the pier and said, "Welcome back, sister."

She took off her hood to reveal her soft gray hair, smiled and gently embraced him. Everything seemed so natural. She said, "The Months of Demons seem to have arrived earlier than I expected. I hope I'm not too late."

As their conversation continued, the pier became more bustling instantly.

"Your Majesty, there will be a welcome dinner at night, right? Can you arrange a hotpot again?" Andrea approached him to ask, her voice full of expectations.

"Ahem, mind your manners," Ashes reminded her.

Maybe she got to know him better, or she was influenced by Nightingale, her elegant noble demeanor seemed to escape her little by little. Of course, her beauty was so impressive that she still appeared graceful and pretty even when she was eagerly asking what to eat in the evening.

"Of course," said Roland, nodding. "In fact, winter is the best season for hotpots."

"That's what I'm thinking too," said Andrea, her eyes sparkling, "you're indeed a royal noble and indeed the man Nightingale is interested in..." Before she finished her words, her mouth had been firmly covered by a pair of invisible hands.

Ashes put her hand on her forehead and turned around as if she had seen nothing. Instead, she started to talk to Wendy.

Tilly seemed a bit surprised. She glanced at Roland and then looked at the where Nightingale stood thoughtfully.

Roland also blushed. Before Tilly started to ask, he coughed and said, "It's windy here. Let's go back to the castle and have a talk then."

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Along with Tilly, the witches coming to Neverwinter were the card-playing three, Iffy, Softfeathers, and Nightfall, the former members of Bloodfang Association. It was not the first time they came to the Western Region, so it saved Roland time to arrange their accommodations. After they put away the luggage, Roland summoned everyone to the living room and then told them what had recently happened in the Kingdom of Dawn.

As their partner, he believed that he should share information with the Sleeping Island witches and let them know the Taquila survivors as soon as possible.

In the end, all the witches could not help laughing. Ashes even asked him bluntly, "So you are the witch that Taquila witches are looking for... The Chosen One?"

"Or the first wizard in history," Tilly said jokingly. "My brother is always so different."

"I don't have any magic power, so you can save the title of witch or wizard," Roland said, shrugging, "The Chosen One is just what the Taquila witches refer to. We won't know what the Instrument of Divine Retribution is until we have further communication with them. Before that, I plan to hold an artillery exercise outside the city wall of the Western Region so as to help them regain their confidence."

"At the same time, it's also a kind of deterrence, right?" Ashes, though not as reckless as she appeared at first, still spoke straightforwardly, "just like the defensive battle of demonic beasts you had shown to us."

"I just don't want to have any misunderstanding between each other," Roland replied, without saying yes or no. "And the exercise is not just for the Taquila witches. It's also open to the public so that Neverwinter subjects can see the power they have. Then they'll be full of courage even when facing demons."

No misunderstanding meant to let them clearly know his strength so as to dispel some unnecessary ideas. This was also the basis for diplomacy in the new era.

"Since it's an exercise, I don't think we are going to conduct it when demonic beasts attack us, right?" Andrea suddenly said, "I have a good idea."

"What's it?"

"How about using demonic beasts as the targets of shooting?" She raised her eyebrows and said, "Compared with simple wood targets, real demonic beasts will be more impressive."

Roland was a little surprised and agreed that it was a good idea. If he wanted to organize the public to watch the exercise, naturally he could not wait until demonic beasts came and then arrange them to stand on the city wall. It might cause a lot of chaos, and the demonic beasts would have reduced to meat sauces under bombardments by the time everyone arrived. So he originally intended to use some wooden targets for accurate shooting and asked Soraya to paint some fake targets.

Andrea's proposal was obviously more enjoyable. Nothing was more exciting for the Neverwinter residents than watching evil enemies, who had troubled the Western Region for so many years, be bombarded and turn to ashes.

"Those demonic beasts as the targets..."

"Just leave it to us," said Andrea, patting her chest.

"Ah, why not stay in the room playing cards?" Shavi responded with a bitter look.

"I'm also willing to help," Iffy echoed. As long as it was related to a battle, Iffy would always like to participate willingly.

"But will it be dangerous to catch demonic beasts?" Wendy said, appearing to be quite concerned.

"If we choose to catch them in the Misty Forest controlled by Leaf, there should be no safety problem," Nightingale said eagerly. "She can monitor the movements of all witches and demonic beasts in the area and drive away powerful demonic hybrids. Even if we meet a Fearful Beast of Hell, we have the Sigil of God's Will anyway."

"Then how about a competition to warm ourselves up before the artillery exercise?" Tilly laughed. "Let's divide the sisters in Neverwinter into three groups to see which group can catch more demonic beasts."

"Divide into... three groups?"

"The witches of Sleeping Island, the Witch Union, and Taquila," she grinned and said, "The reward can be a month's Chaos Drinks. I'm really curious about how delicious it is since you said it's far better the taste of ice cream bread."

"Wait... Will Phyllis join us too?" Roland said in surprise.

"This will visualize the power of gunpowder weapons and help her have a better understanding of it, isn't it? Killing a demonic beast may be easy for a God's Punishment Warrior, but if she sees a common person can also do it easily and more efficiently, she will definitely have more confidence in the power of Neverwinter."

"Of course, if she doesn't want to participate, it's ok," said Andrea, shrugging. "Since it's a competition, it's based on her personal will."

"So that's why..." Roland looked at Ashes and the others who had an eager look, and roughly figured out why they made this proposal. Although Tilly's statement was somewhat sensible, their original intention was more to satisfy themselves. After all, they came to help them peacefully go through the Months of Demons, but they could do little since the First Army was sufficient to handle the situation. For most of the time they could only stay in the castle, playing the "Fight the Landlord" card game. Compared with busy assistant witches, they seemed to be useless.

They were combat witches after all.

In this mass production campaign, he might have indeed ignored these witches' feelings.

"Then let's do it." Roland gave a nod of approval.

Chapter 716: Seeing Annie Again

After finishing the proposal for hunting the demonic beasts, the witches went back to their rooms for a short break and waited for dinner to begin. Before Iffy wandered off, Roland pulled her aside so that he could speak to her alone.

"I have something to tell you now so you won't be too shocked later on." He spoke as softly as possible, "I remember you once said that you had a friend named Annie before you were taken to the Bloodfang Association, right?"

"Yes... Your Majesty." Iffy blinked and was unsure as to why he suddenly raised that topic.

"Among the witches who arrived at Graycastle from the Kingdom of Dawn, other than the Taquila survivor who disguised herself as a maid, the rest all came from the Kingdom of Wolfheart."

Iffy's eyes opened wide. "Your Majesty, you mean..."

Roland nodded and said, "One of them was called Annie and she had also been rejected by the Bloodfang Association."

She was stunned and only managed to mutter after a long silence. "Is this true?"

At that moment, Iffy's face portrayed joy and yet it also reflected worry and guilt. She still blamed herself for not choosing to leave with Annie back then.

This was why Roland did not intend to surprise both of them at the same time. He could not be sure how Annie felt towards Iffy and if she still had a grudge toward the girl that had deserted her, it would be very awkward if an intended happy reunion turned into a confrontation.

"3009," said Roland.

"What?"

"3009. That's her room number," he exhaled and said, "at least for the time being. She's like the one you described and if you want to know the answer, you can go by yourself to take a look."

Iffy was silent for a moment then bowed her head to thank him. "I understand, Your Majesty. Thank you!"

"Go on. Sometimes time is the best cure for everything."

"Yes!"

Roland touched his chin as he observed her running hurriedly out of the living room. "This is as far as I can help you," he thought.

"Room 3009, room 3009..." Iffy was silently chanting the room number

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while running toward the Witch building. She didn't even bother answering the questions of Softfeathers and Nightfall asked her along the way. She passed through the snow-covered castle backyard and the white-capped olive groves, went up the stairs, and quickly reached the third floor.

However, once she got closer to her destination, she began to slow down.

She began to feel more and more uneasy.

Back then, Annie took care of her throughout their journey to Archduke Island. When she learned that Annie could not join the Bloodfang Association, she did not insist on staying. The guilt had always been torturing her. It got even worse after she thought that Annie had died in the Kingdom of Wolfheart. There were many sleepless nights that followed. In the end, she vented her hatred on the nobility and presented a mask of power and fearlessness as a shell to cover up her remorse.

But now, this shell could no longer protect her.

She was instinctively fearful.

If Annie refused to forgive her, what should she do?

Iffy stood in the doorway but did not dare to reach out to knock on the door.

"I knew you would do that," a voice came out of nowhere and shocked her. She bowed down only to find out that the small figure of Softfeathers had appeared beside her and a breathless Nightfall was in the corridor.

Iffy could not help but be touched that they had caught up with her because they seemed worried about her.

"Every time you encounter something that concerns Annie, you always behave like a completely different person."

"Did you... all hear that?"

"Of course. His Majesty was speaking to you alone. How could we not eavesdrop?" The little girl curled her lips, "In the case that he wanted to coerce you, we could help to stand guard at the door, right?"

"What kind of help is that?" Iffy did not know whether to laugh or cry, and her nervousness started to diminish a little. "You actually came to see me be embarrassed!"

"Something like that." Softfeathers shrugged her shoulders. "Are you ready?"

"Ready... for what?"

Knock! Knock! Knock! Before she could react, the little girl had already struck the door a few times before running toward Nightfall. "Remember just say what your heart really feels!"

"No, wait..."

However, it was too late as the sound of footsteps could be heard behind the door. In a flash, Iffy felt herself tense up all over.

With a click, the door was pushed open, and a tall witch appeared in front of her.

It happened to be Annie who opened the door.

She will never forget this face.

Annie's eyes had a sharp gaze and her brows were slightly raised. Her compassion for her companions was hidden under her face of perseverance. Iffy had thought that she would never meet Annie again and had been afraid that she would soon forget Annie's appearance. When she saw Annie again, she realized that everything was just like before and that her memory of Annie's figure was just temporarily covered in dust and now it was brand new again.

Time seemed to stand still at this moment.

"Annie, I'm tired..."

"Annie, you should go."

"Why can't Annie stay?"

"No... I want to be with Annie..."

Fragments of memory continued to emerge in her mind and her outer shell collapsed. She seemed to have returned to the past and once again became that helpless and bewildered girl. She wanted to greet Annie, but somehow she could not make a sound. As soon as she opened her mouth, her eyes felt a stinging sourness.

Iffy could not control this herself. She embraced Annie and then sobbed softly before bursting into full on tears.

"I'm sorry... woo... Annie... I'm so sorry..."

Beasts did not cry.

From this moment on, she was no longer a beast.

Anne remained a little dumbfounded.

When she opened the door, she did not remember who the witch standing outside was and yet she felt some form of familiarity. Only when the witch clutched Annie and apologized while weeping, did she recall the journey to the Bloodfang Association.

It would be a lie to say that there was no resentment in her heart. When the Bloodfang Association tried to sell her to the nobility, a part of her anger from the betrayal also transferred onto Iffy.

However, seeing her crying so uncontrollably, Annie suddenly felt all the anger vanish. Back then, Iffy was as thin as a monkey with a muddy face and a permanent timid look. It would have been impossible for Iffy to resist the orders of Bloodfang Association and stay above of everything.

Annie gave a deep sigh, extended her hands, and gently held Iffy. "... I don't blame you anymore."

Upon hearing this, Iffy shuddered and started to cry even more loudly.

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Over the next half an hour, Iffy was able to gradually pull herself together.

Throughout this time, Annie learned the whole story of the Bloodfang Association. When she learned that Earl Morgan was dead and the other witches were out of the control of the Bloodfang Association, the twisted knot in the heart finally unraveled. And it was all due to Roland Wimbledon and his sister, Princess Tilly.

Things seemed to be moving in the right direction.

Annie made up her mind after looking at Iffy, who was sleeping in her arms after crying and a curious Amy, who was there with the other witches.

"Let's sign a contract with Wendy and serve the king."

Chapter 717: Hunting Competition

Burying the black gunpowder and detonators took more time than Roland had expected, mainly because transporting barrels of gunpowder to a preset location outside the city wall was troublesome. The snow that piled up to knee level had caused inconvenience to the movements of the carriage. Transportation had to be interrupted every time they encountered demonic beasts. Even though Lotus was there to help dig trenches and fill them, it still took nearly a week before everything was properly arranged.

All the buried gunpowder would be detonated by an electric detonator to ensure the best detonating effect—the principle was very simple. Since storage and transportation needn't be considered, the detonator would comprise of a small section within a sealed copper barrel and two wires. The copper barrel would be filled with gun cotton, and a thin copper wire would link the two wires to form a short circuit. When the electric current passed through, the thin copper wire would be burnt out, and the surrounding flaming cotton would be detonated at the same time.

The detonated wire would be buried in the ground by Lotus. Its depth was nearly five meters so that the route would not be damaged by ground artillery or demonic beasts even though it had no casing protection. In the end, all the wires would lead to the city wall's main control tower. Any area could be detonated just by turning the corresponding hand-cranked generator.

Hence, the preparation for the exercise was just missing a live target.

"Ahem, competition comes after friendship whilst hunting the demonic beasts in this exercise. Safety is the highest priority and no one is allowed to leave Leaf's surveillance area. Is that clear?"

Roland stood on the city wall and turned toward the row of "contestants" that had lined up in front of him.

In order to be fair and to reduce the burden on Leaf, the participating witches formed three groups with a total of six people. These groups were Sleeping Island's team consisting of Ashes and Andrea, Neverwinter's team with Lightning and Maggie, and Taquila's representatives, Phyllis and Agatha.

He initially wanted to make Iffy and Annie form a team to represent Wolfheart, but Annie was unwilling to participate in hunting, plus the other Wolfheart witches had no combat capability, so he had to give up his idea.

"Yes!" The crowd replied in unison, especially Andrea Quinn, who was full of energy. Ever since she tasted Chaos Drinks, Andrea who came from one of the three big noble families of Kingdom of Dawn had been obsessed with the unique taste of the Fire Dragon Wine. She even hoped to use her one month's share of Chaos Drinks in exchange for the very last barrel of the Fire Dragon Wine that was half-filled.

In response, Roland replied that everything could be allowed for the winner.

"The rules are really simple. There is a time limit of one day, and whoever catches the most demonic beasts will emerge as number one. However, only beasts that are trapped in the cage are counted.

"Roland pointed to the iron cages below the city wall. "In addition, if someone is caught out of Leaf's area of surveillance, then her team will be immediately disqualified. Well then, the hunting of demonic beasts officially starts now!"

"Oh!"

As soon as his voice faded, Lightning and Maggie took the lead in the sky and flew toward Misty Forest. The remaining two teams could only rely on their legs to trek.

"Who do you think will win?" Tilly asked with a cheerful smile after all the three teams had left the city wall.

Roland had felt there was a hidden meaning behind her smile. "Well... I guess it would be Lightning and Maggie. Their abilities aren't the strongest, but we are only counting the demonic beasts that are in cages, so speed is undoubtedly an advantage."

"Let's make a bet, brother." She curled her lips and said, "I think Sleeping Island team will win."

"Andrea and Ashes?" Roland pondered. "Andrea's a professional long-range combat witch and Ashes is an Extraordinary so they're strong without a doubt. Though annihilating the enemy is easy for them, capturing the beasts alive would be much tougher. If they want to transport the demonic beasts back smoothly, they would need to beat every beast half-dead. Far more energy would be spent when compared to just killing the target, so it could be difficult for them to win."

This seemed to be a bet that Roland would win for sure.

"Ok, what are we betting on?"

"If I win, uh... I hope that from now on, half of the revenue from the sales of Chaos Drinks can be used to reward those witches who have made outstanding contributions to urban development."

Evelyn also came from the Sleeping Island. Since this practice would help attract even more witches, it was not a bad thing. In fact, even if Tilly did not mention this, Roland also had a similar plan.

"Sure, and what if you lose?"

"I'll live in Neverwinter from now on. How about that?"

Roland was slightly startled and tilted his head to look at Tilly, but she did not seem to be joking.

"Really?"

"Of course," said Tilly whose eyes flashed a hint of slyness, "but you may not necessarily win, let's wait and see."

"I think so too," Nightingale whispered softly in his ear while she was in the Mist. "I forgot to tell you... Andrea's magic has cohered."

"There's a wild demonic boar approaching you that's 125 meters ahead from your left."

Tree trunks started to sway and a string of snow clumps fell. The rubbing sound of branches and green leaves made up Leaf's unique intonation—in this way, Leaf could talk to everyone and monitor them at the same time.

"Well... how far is 125 meters?" Andrea was still not quite used to the new unit of measure set out by Roland. She frowned thoughtfully. "One meter is two steps... then 125 meters are... "

"There's no need to count." Ashes rolled her eyes and removed her beloved sword, "Messenger of Ashes" from her back. "I can already hear its footsteps."

A moment later, a black figure appeared in the jungle. It was a demonized wild boar with roughly the size of an adult and grey tusks that were as thick as arms.

"Don't attack. We have to capture it alive," Andrea blew a whistle toward the demonic beast and shouted, "come!"

"Hiss—hiss—" The wild boar spit out clouds of white gas and stared with its bright scarlet eyes before rushing straight toward the blonde witch who provoked it. If ordinary hunters encountered this scenario, they certainly wouldn't think of confronting the boar. They would most likely climb up the nearest tree as quickly as possible, or wait for a chance to escape. As to whether they could even survive the demonic beast's tusks would be a whole other story.

But Andrea was motionless. She did not even take her beloved rifle down. She flattened her hands and opened her index finger and thumb to form a rhombus square. Through the center of the square, she saw the boar was no more than 10 steps away from her. She could almost see the dripping of saliva and the shiny bristles of its mane.

"Bang." She whispered softly.

Suddenly, a powerful airflow shot out from her palm and made an explosive roar. The demonic boar seemed to have hit an invisible wall and its whole body was lifted off. The snow at its foot was swept away by airwaves and formed a dense white fog. The demonic boar's huge body churned two rounds before it crashed to the ground. Before any screams of agony could be heard, it was already vomiting blood and had fallen with its back flat on the ground with its twitching limbs facing the sky.

This was Andrea's new ability—by observing the difference between the bow and gun on top of being forced to study by Princess Tilly, she realized her evolutionary direction: since both abilities gave energy to arrows or projectiles, why couldn't she not directly provide the magic needed to shoot energy? After more than two weeks of journey on the ship, she gradually mastered this new fighting skill.

Even if she did not have pellets in her hand, the impact alone could kill the enemy. And this type of shooting skill was related only to her magic. Its power far exceeded the previous shot and was more like a bow and flintlock. When all the magic was released in one go, the projection could hurt even her.

Chapter 718: Loyalty to Her Belief

"I've scored the first point!"

Andrea gracefully lifted her long hair to shake off the snowflakes, turned toward Ashes and said, "It's now your turn to transport it."

"Wait... Why me?" Ashes stared at Andrea.

"Because you're strong," she said flatly, "this is a team competition, and naturally we'll need to work together. Don't forget that we represent the honor of Sleeping Island. If we lose the match because you were too slow in moving the beasts, I'll report you to Princess Tilly."

"Overwhelming victory! Nightingale, did you see that?" Andrea looked proudly toward Ashes and felt an immense satisfaction. Ashes looked displeased yet had no choice but to bend over and carry the unconscious demonic boar.

After all, Andrea would not be able to move such a heavy thing.

"Stay here and don't move. I'll be right back," said the Extraordinary to Andrea, as she placed the sturdy demonic boar rack on her shoulder.

"I know. Hurry up."

After Ashes left, Andrea looked up to the forest and asked, "Leaf, could you please tell me where the next demonic beast is?"

"It's on your right about 450 meters away. It's a snowwolf." The branches swayed. "But aren't you going to wait for Ashes?"

"Of course not. That'd be way too slow." Andrea thought for a moment and said, "Hmm... that's about 900 paces away. I'm going to head off. Could you please let Ashes know my new location?"

Leaf was silent for a moment before replying, "I understand."

"Don't worry. It's only a stupid wolf. With you around to remind me, it can't touch me."

Even the gigantic demonic hybrid she met last time was defenseless in front of her new abilities—the original magic arrows were incredibly powerful but only had a range of 10 paces. Now as long as she had enough power, she could shoot to a distance of more than 100 meters. She even had a derivative skill that allowed her to hit accurately without fail. Even if the demonic beast had two pairs of wings, it would not be able to escape her attack.

This time, she was confident about winning!

"I'm sorry. I didn't think he'd get you involved in such a trifle." Phyllis looked at Agatha who was walking in front of her and said, "I only casually agreed to it at that time."

When Phyllis first heard about the proposal, she did not think too much about it because she had lost her palate and the Chaos Drinks were no longer appealing. What made her agree to it was simple curiosity—anyway it was better than being idle and she could take the opportunity to observe the Witch Union's fighting ability. She did not expect that this hunting game was actually a competition and that her teammate would be Agatha, once the youngest Senior Witch.

"It doesn't matter. This is much better than staying cooped up in the lab and researching the Magic Stone. It's good to go out and get some exercise," said Agatha, shrugging her shoulders. "If I didn't have time to spare, I wouldn't have promised His Majesty in the first place."

"Is that so? Then... shall we just grab a few demonic beasts to make up the figures?"

"How could we do that? This is a competition."

"But I thought the king of the common people said that friendship was first and that competition came second? The others also agreed to it."

"I don't think that's what they really feel. You could tell from their expressions what they were thinking. Even without the Chaos Drinks as prizes, Lightning and Andrea would still be unwilling to lose." Agatha paused and said, "If it's just a normal game, then that doesn't matter. But now we're a team that represents Taquila, right?"

"Yes..." Phyllis suddenly felt that Andrea was full of fighting spirit.

"In that case, if it's a competition then we need to win." Agatha paused in her footsteps and some crystals condensed in her hand.

Leaf's voice could be heard almost simultaneously. "A wolf-eagle demonic hybrid is 200 meters behind you and approaching quickly!"

Phyllis retreated two steps and looked behind toward the snow-white forest. A slender white-haired monster appeared in the snow with a howl. Its wings glided as if it were sliding on the ground, and the beast made almost no sound. It was no wonder Phyllis did not notice the enemy approaching from behind.

As the temperature near Agatha plummeted, the snow suddenly became hard ice. As the enemy approached, she threw the sharp ice crystals in her hand to force the hybrid to dodge and then caused it to lose its balance on the smooth ice.

The Senior Witch remained stable on the ground. She effortlessly glided to the side of the monster, placed her hands on its fur and instantly turned it into half an ice sculpture.

Phyllis admired Agatha's flowy uninhibited way of fighting and could see why she was a part of Taquila. Although Agatha was a member of the Quest Society and had never experienced a real battle, she could still see that Agatha had put in a lot of hard work in combat training. In particular, when she combined both pace and ability, she was in an advantageous position to take the initiative—any enemy fighting with her on the ice would certainly fall under her control.

"How did you manage to find it?" Phyllis asked curiously.

"I summoned a thin piece of ice at my feet that could help me to detect the enemy as soon as it entered the snow."

"I see..." She looked at the mixed species whose body had been covered with ice crystals, except for its head that was hanging out. "Should I drag it now to the city wall?"

"Just leave it here. Since it won't freeze to death that quickly, we can wait until we catch a few more." Agatha waved her hand and said, "We have to find the next demonic beast as soon as possible."

Phyllis realized that she was serious. This young Senior Witch did want to win the competition.

Is it because she represents Taquila? So in the future negotiations, will her loyalty lie with Neverwinter or the Taquila survivors?

This question left Phyllis feeling uneasy.

She only took a few steps before she could not resist saying, "Lady Agatha..."

"Don't address me like that. Just call me Agatha," she said as she turned her head. "Didn't you say that the Taquila witches were no longer ranked in terms of ability, but that everyone was equal?"

"Yes... there has been a gradual consensus since Lady Eleanor sacrificed herself and fewer and fewer companions have survived... Neither the higher ascendants at the Union nor the most common Original Witches should ever be separated by rank. It was Pasha who suggested 'Every witch is equally important'."

"And I'm no exception." Agatha nodded her head and said, "The people in the Witch Union call each other sisters, and sometimes I think they'll be the heirs of the new era."

"I see," Phyllis hesitated and said, "Can I ask you a question... What exactly do you think of the Taquila Witches and Neverwinter?"

"I guess you wish to find out which side I'm loyal to?" Agatha said as she stopped in her tracks.

Phyllis did not avoid looking at Agatha and this was very important for them.

"I'm loyal to my own belief," Agatha replied.

"Belief?"

"That's right, so I hope you'll be able to move to the Western Region of Graycastle and join hands with Neverwinter in the fight against the demons under the leadership of Roland Wimbledon."

Chapter 719: "The New Union"

Suddenly the snow forest became silent. Only the occasional wind brushing against the treetops could be heard.

Phyllis was silent for a long time. "I thought you would stand by Taquila," she said reluctantly, "you were willing to represent the Taquila Witches in the competition and willing to help..."

Her voice quickly lowered. "That's right. I shouldn't impose too much. This is just a game. Compared with the Taquila Quest Society who had ostracized her, Neverwinter that saved her life was certainly more trustworthy. And in Agatha's eyes, they might still not be legitimate successors of Taquila... After all, they have lost the possibility of exerting magic after converting to the God's Punishment Army."

However, Agatha's next sentence rekindled her hope.

"I'm a Taquila Witch and this won't change."

Agatha's voice was smooth and honest as if she were recounting a most simple statement.

"Then why do you think we should accept the leadership of a common person?" Phyllis felt sincerely puzzled.

"Taquila... Starfall City, Arrieta, or the dozens of cities on the Fertile Plains all unanimously decided to accept the leadership of the Union, simply because the Union was established by witches?" Agatha sighed softly. "Did you forget the original purpose as to why the Union was set up?"

The Union's original... purpose, whether it was the roundtable parliament at the very beginning or the Three Chiefs system that was set up later on, was just for one thing. "Overcome the demons," Phyllis said softly.

"Yes, it was to defeat the demons and it had nothing to do with whether one was a common person or not. After the first Battle of Divine Will, the witches diminished the authority of the common people and unified the Fertile Plains, only because they were too weak and their cooperation couldn't help to resist the demon in any way. Now the common people have shown their power, so if we serve the Union and Roland Wimbledon, what difference would that make? Only he can unite the secular regime and at the same time accept the witches of this era."

Agatha's words flashed like a bolt of lightning across her mind—

Phyllis realized that she had apparently misunderstood something, and the newly emerging idea astonished her.

"Do you mean... Neverwinter would be the new Union?"

"It'd be a part of the Union," Agatha corrected and said, "of course, His Majesty may not like the name. But no matter what it's called in the future, its essence is still the same—in order to win over the Gods, Taquila, Starfall City, the Witch Cooperation Association, the Sleeping Island... and the secular kingdoms will unite to fight a bloody battle against the demons. It's not a question of where my loyalty lies, but a question of being able to continue. The only reason I was able to survive the Frozen Coffin was to see the day the demons would be defeated."

That was why she replied that she was faithful to her own belief.

Phyllis finally understood Agatha's ideas.

Agatha hoped to win the competition on behalf of Taquila, yet this was not a conflict with her serving Roland Wimbledon. Just as 400 years ago, all the cities of Fertile Plains were loyal to the Union. The only difference was that the leader of the New Alliance had changed from the Three Chiefs to one common person.

"Your assessment of him is really high," she said in a rather complex mood. "If the goal was only to defeat the demons, we're also constantly working on it, and the situation will be reversed once we find the chosen one."

"But we haven't found it yet, right? Or in other words, we have found an unexpected 'chosen one'." Agatha started to chuckle. "Rest assured, if there's such a witch, His Majesty will certainly not stop you from ending the Battle of Divine Will. In fact, he'll only help you to find her. This is why I hope you'll move to the Western Region of Graycastle—the witches who choose to settle here will surely increase, and you'll have more chances to find the chosen one, won't you?"

Phyllis found herself being convinced. Even if she didn't want to admit it, Agatha did make sense. "The truth is he's really able to stop the demons... do you really have faith in the common people?"

"I think I can expect it from a common person who connects the witches and all the common people together." Agatha raised the corner of her mouth and said, "Isn't His Majesty preparing a gunfire exercise for you? After it's finished, maybe you'll be able to understand where my belief comes from."

The so-called artillery exercises should showcase the key to what she calls "art." Although it was unclear whether the two had anything to do with combatting the demons, but since the genius Senior Witch already said so, she decided to look forward to it as well.

Just then, a string of loud roars came through the forest, causing the branches to tremble—"Ow—Ow—"

Phyllis's expression changed suddenly.

She was familiar with this sound. It was obviously the hissing of the flying Devilbeast. "Why are there demons here?"

"It's Maggie," said Agatha, curling her lips. "Her evolved ability is becoming anything that can fly, and the demon is no exception."

Phyllis let out a sigh of relief when she realized it was caused by magic ability. But soon she frowned again. "In this case, it's too easy for her to seize the demonic beasts, isn't it?"

Lower breed demonic beasts were senseless, so it was easy for them to surrender to more powerful creatures. In the face of the flying Devilbeast, they would only be scared motionless on the spot and be easy prey. Not to mention that transporting prey from the air was much faster than dragging it from the snow. So how could Phyllis and Agatha win?

"Don't worry." Agatha seemed to have looked through her thoughts. "We're not without a chance. Maggie's ability is really convenient. But neither she nor Lightning, nor all the witches here, have ever withstood the rigors of combat training. In other words, they can't use their magic power to its fullest ability."

Whilst Agatha was talking, a black shadow flew over her head, grabbing a wild demonic toward the direction of the city wall—we can see that her stature was staggering, even the adult Devilbeast would be much smaller than her.

"Are you saying... Maggie won't be able to last until sunset?"

"The Devilbeast's breath is too strong, and will expel in advance all the prey in the area of activity. In that case, she will most likely change into the pigeon and join Lightning together to search for targets, and then suddenly evolve into Devilbeast to capture the demonic beasts. Change is a very exhausting process of magic and once her magic power is depleted, it's difficult to rely on Lightning alone to maintain the efficiency of capturing." Agatha smiled and said, "So the next demonic beast will be attacked by you and I'll only be responsible for holding it down."

Phyllis's eyes brightened. For them, learning how to squeeze their potential was a required strategy of combat. At this point, the newly promoted Senior Witches were indeed no different from the fledgling newcomers.

"Yes, leave it to me!"

...

Chapter 720: The Competition Results and Admission Ceremony

Just as Agatha had anticipated, it was uncommon to hear Maggie's carefree roar in the afternoon.

When a witch was engaged in fighting, their highly tense mind would consume not only their magic power but also their physical strength. So, the Union concentrated on the key points needed to make the best use of the fighter's time. Allowing her to relax her mind and restore her physical strength during combat training. After all, when the demons came and swarmed them, only by relying on reasonable shifts and cooperation would they be able to survive on the battlefield.

This meant that while Phyllis was urging and luring the demonic beasts, Agatha would take the opportunity to rest some until several beasts had been gathered together... They took a quick break at noon, only eating dry food with snow for lunch. After Agatha managed to freeze three or four beasts, she would then shape the snow into a smooth ice track that would slide their captures to the Western Region's city wall.

As the sky dimmed and became grey, Leaf informed them that the competition had ended.

When they returned to the starting line, they were surprised to find that there were dozens of demonic beasts trapped in wooden cages. The number of caged demonic hybrid beasts had increased to around 30. The biggest one among them was a wolf-bear demonic hybrid. It was almost as tall as the wall, with limbs as thick as stone pillars, and it was so strong that even a God's Punishment soldier and Devilbeast were unlikely to defeat it.

[Which team caught that one?]

Phyllis's face barely changed, even as feelings of loss flooded her. After all, they had done their best—22 small-sized and medium-sized demonic beasts, a score that she had thought would be high enough to stand out, but now it seemed that their score might be at the bottom.

How were the other two teams able to catch so many demonic beasts?

Wendy walked in front of them, relieved to see everyone safe, "You've all worked hard." Then she pulled out a notebook and began to announce the results.

"Neverwinter, seven points, well done."

[Wait... seven points?] Phyllis thought in shock. [Neverwinter isn't first? Could it be that the remaining 80 beasts were caught by the two members from the Sleeping Island?]

"It's all Maggie's fault," Lightning said, touching her forehead, "If she didn't leave halfway through, to steal eggs from the nest of a winter hawk and then spend two hours roasting them, we would have caught a few more."

"It was you who let me go coo..." the Pigeon perched on Lightning's head grumbled her grievance, "Not to mention, you ate more roasted eggs than me, what's more, you even wanted some Bird Beak Mushrooms, saying that eggs would taste better with mushrooms coo..."

"Nevermind, it's Okay as long as all of you come back safely... well, next is Sleeping Island, fifteen points. Ashes, you really are a fighter," Wendy continued.

"She just ran the captures for us," Andrea griped, "I was the one who knocked down the beasts. Too bad that we came across so few monsters on our way. Besides, she didn't run fast enough."

Ashes shot her a petulant look. "Why don't you try carrying those demonic boars back and forth, 15 times, in the snow?"

"Muscular barbarians are more suitable for this kind of job."

"They are better than someone so delicate and fragile."

"You—"

"Ahem," Wendy quickly interrupted the growing dispute, "the last is Taquila's team with a total of 22 points! Congratulations, the month's share of Chaos Drinks reward is now yours!"

"Ah, so enviable!" Andrea said begrudgingly.

"I want to drink that too coo..." Maggie eagerly looked at Agatha.

However, Phyllis was very startled, "There are clearly hundreds of cages containing demonic beasts..."

"Oh, Leaf caught them along the way," Wendy said waving her hand while smiling.

As the person in charge of the Witch Union said this, every participant automatically turned their eyes to the green-haired witch standing beside them.

Leaf touched the back of her head bashfully as she said, "I was afraid that there would be too many demonic beasts entering the hunting area, so I set a 3,000-foot radius trap on the outer-ring, only

allowing some beasts to pass through specific passages. After that, I thought that since the beasts were already trapped in a vine trap, I could simply drag all of them to the edge of the forest and add more targets for His Majesty."

Suddenly, everyone fell silent.

Alone she had caught more beasts than the three competing teams combined. Moreover, she had done it while keeping watch over the competition. No one had ever considered that there would be a combat witch that powerful hiding among the higher ascendants in the Witch Union.

Even a Transcendent wouldn't be capable of catching so many demonic beasts within a day.

[Why do I feel unutterably depressed and overwhelmed...?] Phyllis wondered to herself.

Suddenly, she felt that winning the competition wasn't as important.

The following day, Neverwinter finally finished all of the preparation necessary for the artillery exercise.

When Roland arrived at the West Wall, the top of the wall was packed with 2,000 citizens, in their sold-out seats, eagerly waiting to watch the exercise. According to Edith, 80% of the seat holders were former residents of Border Town. This clearly showed that spending two silver royals to participate in an activity, where the king was present, no longer posed a financial burden for the locals.

The Western Region's weather seemed to accommodate the exercise. After a long night of heavy snowfall, it had stopped at the break of dawn and the howling northern wind had eased as well. The vast field to the west of the city wall seemed to be covered with a layer of silver-white carpet. The rutted track marks and footprints left behind from carrying the demonic beasts had been covered by the snow, making the ground appear clean and untouched.

The Demonic beasts, being the targets, had undoubtedly caught the attention of the audience. The numerous captures had been divided into three rows, each aligned with one of the three firing distances; 1,000, 1,600, and 3,300 feet. The more brutal demonic hybrid beasts had been lined in the rows closest to the attendees. It was obvious that that being able to witness these mighty monsters being turned into a bloody pulp under the heavy artillery fire would bring them unparalleled enjoyment. A sweet revenge for the residents of Neverwinter who had suffered so much during the Months of Demons.

The smaller beasts were meant to be fodder for the embedded gunpowder. It was too far to see any details so it was just for embellishment. However, in Roland's opinion, the number of beasts was more important. In the last row, the cages that trapped demonic beasts lined up with a length up to 330 feet, waiting for the most resplendent blaze.

Iron Axe climbed up the wall and reported loudly, "Your Majesty, the artillery battalion for the First Army is ready."

Roland exhaled a white breath and turned around to look at Echo, who was standing beside him, "Play the Parade March Song."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

As the magic power spread from Echo's fingers, the familiar resonance instantly rang out across the wall. Even though Roland had heard this song before, since it was practiced over and over on the school's sports days, his heart still skipped a beat once the melody echoed in the air of Neverwinter. It was as if the song had the power to bolster him as he waited for the soldiers' arrival.

The people who had been chatting were hushed and they all turned their eyes towards the end of the long street that was near the city wall. There they saw a team of soldiers, in uniform, marching up the street towards their positions in an orderly manner.

Roland remembered the first time he experienced the Months of Demons two years ago when the city had been like a palm-sized land. People with less than two months training had to fight against demonic beasts on the rubble-built cement wall with lances and spears. At that time, even a common demonic hybrid could put the Militia into a frenzy. However, now, they would remain calm and composed while faced with a higher level challenge. The seemingly powerful demonic beasts had now become the targets that will help to declare the strength of Neverwinter. The apparent contrast made Roland extremely excited.

As the soldiers slowly climbed up the wall through the gentle slopes, a euphoric applause broke out among the crowd, wave after wave, almost as if it would never stop. He knew that there was no need for him to make a speech at the moment, everyone was waiting expectantly for the melodious roar of artillery.

So, Roland just loudly announced, "Let the artillery exercise begin!"