

Witch 801

Chapter 801: Endless City

"Is this... really OK?" Through the commanding post's window, Echo saw those Sand Nation civilians being whipped and tumbling on the ground. She could not help but feel sorry for them.

"They never knew what discipline was. They lived by the rule that 'the Weak are Prey to the Strong'. If we're to put these people into use sooner, other than sending them to war, this is the only way." Iron Axe replied in respect. "You hadn't been in the Southernmost Region for long and during that period, the chief was very concerned about you, so you might not be familiar with the small clans' natures. Such a kind of discipline isn't severe. One can even say it's necessary, otherwise they would consider Osha a clan with no authority, weak and easy to bully."

At this, he showed a rare hint of hesitation. "I think the reason that you're not used to it is probably that... His Majesty is sometimes too benevolent."

"Completely agreed." Andrea, resting her upper body on the window sill, shrugged. "There is a saying among the nobles 'carrots combined with sticks make the best way of ruling the subjects'. The bigger the carrots are, the more benevolent the Lord will be."

"What are carrots?" Hummingbird asked in curiosity.

"They're kind of food, similar to His Majesty's corn, a sort of specialty of the Kingdom of Dawn," Andrea explained. "But no matter how big the carrots are, they should always be much smaller than the sticks, which indicates that punishment should be more severe than awards so that the subjects would appreciate the favor. A Lord such as Roland would be considered a black sheep in the City of Glow."

"Rare as it is, truthfully, I agree with you," Ashes said while pouting.

"His Majesty is especially eloquent?" With her chin resting on her hands, Hummingbird thought for a while and said, "The words he taught Thuram to speak sound very reasonable... The collective power is definitely stronger than an individual's power."

"But Thuram merely repeated what Roland told him to say." Iron Axe shook his head, smiling. "Without seeing Neverwinter personally, one can never imagine what an inconceivable new order His Majesty has established. I believe that one day in the future, Graycastle will become another Neverwinter, but that day is definitely not today... To make them remember the rules in the Southern Territory, whips are more powerful than words."

Echo slightly sighed without saying a word.

"Commander-in-chief." A soldier suddenly walked into the commanding post and said, "There is a riot breaking out in the Fallingstone Clan and the Spring Clan. Some people are confronting the Defending Army."

"For boarding the ship?" Iron Axe asked solemnly.

"Yes. Those who were squeezed into the water called for their families. They asked for the same amount of food and reward. They argued that it's not that they didn't want to go to the Blackwater Valley, but that the Osha had turned them down."

"Alright. Who is guarding the camp?"

"The Second Battalion of Flintlock."

"Call up two squads and those young Osha lads who wanted to join the First Army. Tell them to gather at the riot spot. I'll be there right away."

"Yes, Sir!"

Seeing that Iron Axe was about to leave, Echo could not help but call him and said, "Please don't be too harsh on them."

Iron Axe stood in the doorway quietly for a moment, bowed to her and then said, "I understand, Miss Silvermoon. I'll do it in moderation."

After Iron Axe left, Echo returned to the desk, feeling melancholy. The process of the Sand Nation's relocation at the north did not go as smoothly as she expected. Although they could lead a well-off life as long as they follow His Majesty's instructions, some people still took the message that Roland asked her to deliver as a lie. Even those who had gained a piece of fertile land did not completely trust her nor His Majesty.

Now she was sort of missing her life in Neverwinter.

Compared with leading the strongest clan, she preferred the time when she stood on the top of the castle, overlooked the mountains and the city, and sung the songs composed by His Majesty. When the melody that she had never heard of sounded, she could feel genuine freedom and happiness.

She had not sung for a long time since coming here... She wondered whether Roland had written any new songs.

"When can I sing out aloud again?"

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"Oh!" Simbady felt as though everything in his stomach was overturned. Along with the rise and fall of the Concrete Boat, some gastric acid welled up from his stomach again. Regardless of the vomit along the side of the boat from other people, he directly bent over the handrail and began to throw up.

"Hi, are you okay?" Molly patted him on his back. His face was slightly pale. The Concrete Boat, steady as the ground while in the bay, became a swaying leaf when upon the sea. Bobbing in waves, it nearly hit the offshore beach several times. The horizontal waving never stopped. It was a total torture for the Sand Nation civilians that were experiencing the sea for the first time.

"Ahem... Almost fine." After throwing up, he laid on the deck lifelessly. "Do you know how long we've been on the sea?"

"Today is the fifth day."

"This isn't right..." Simbady gasped and said in a low voice, "Do you remember what the Clearspring Clan said? They... live in the oasis by the sea. We passed the Iron Sand City at first dusk, which means the Concrete Boat travels really fast. Yet why haven't we arrived at the Blackwater Valley?"

"You mean..." Molly asked.

"The destination of Osha isn't the Blackwater Valley. Thuram lied. The place he's taking us is further south than the Choke Swamp!"

"Further south?" Molly started to worry. "But there is nothing there. Could they be lost?"

"The boat has been travelling along the coastline, which means it is highly unlikely for them to get lost." Simbady pressed at his forehead. "If we're going somewhere closer to the south point than the Choke Swamp, it'll only be..."

"Everybody, cheer up!" Before Simbady finished talking, Thuram suddenly appeared on the center of the deck and his words interrupted Simbady's, "I've some good news. We're arriving at our destination. Pack your luggage, line up, and prepare to disembark. Remember, be careful not to fall into the sea anymore, because no one will rescue you this time!"

Simbady propped up his upper body and peered beyond the shore. On shore it was still barren, no oasis to be seen. His speculation was confirmed by the rolling water vapor and gusted smoke columns on the sea in distance.

There was only one place that could give such an inconceivable view,
the Endless Cape. The exile place of the Mojins.

More and more Sand Nation people civilians noticed the anomaly and became quite on edge on the deck.

"This is not the Blackwater Valley! You lied to us!"

"Why did you bring us to the Endless Cape? Do you want to abandon us here?"

"I want to go back. Please, let us leave!"

"Shut up!" At this moment, Thuram felt there was no need to conceal anything anymore. "Have I said that we were going to the middle area of the Blackwater Valley? The valley tributaries run through the entire southern region, of course it includes the cape area. Any underground Styx's River is extended from the valley, am I right?"

"This is sophistry!" Simbady thought angrily. If they had been told to work in the exile place, he was afraid that not many would apply for it.

"Nobody is going to be abandoned here. People from Osha and Graycastle will join you in developing this area!" Thuram raised his arm and spoke loudly, "Listen carefully. From now on, Endless Cape is no longer an exile area. It'll be a newly born town! This is the order from the chief!"

Chapter 802: Ironwhip Discipline

"To build a new city... in this place?"

Simbady found it hard to believe his own ears. The Silver Stream got slimmer as it went south, finally it was entirely devoured by sand until it reached the Blackwater Valley. Hence came the name "the Land of Exile".

Without water and an oasis, how could they survive in the vast desert?

All the Sand Nation civilians on board were shocked by Thuram's speech, several of them stated their doubts like the one that Simbady had.

"We can create water by ourselves." Thuram spoke loudly. "But before that, the vanguard troop has found a usable water source. You'll see it when you get off the boat."

This aroused even more severe discussion.

"Create?" some people shouted. "How do we do that?"

"Silver Stream is a gift from Mother Earth. How could we create it?"

"By the name of Three Gods, only deities' emissaries could turn the desert into an oasis..."

"If we can't succeed, can we return the Southern Territory?"

"Right, you won't leave us here and go back alone, will you?"

Confronted by these questions, Thuram hesitated for the first time. Simbady noticed that Thuram peeked at the Graycastle civilians before he thundered, "The chief is capable of anything. As as he said we can, we can definitely create water. What you need to do however, is to follow instructions. Besides, Lady Silvermoon has promised, if we can't succeed, you'll be sent back to the Port of Clearwater in advance and paid with three months salary!" At this, he patted at the whip upon his waist. "Of course, I won't return without you. If anyone loafes on the job, be prepared to taste my Ironwhip!"

"That explains it..." Simbady realized that the leader of the team was not Thuram, but those poker-faced people from Graycastle who were standing behind Thuram.

During the holy duel, he had heard of the mightiness of these people more than once. Different from the Queen of Clearwater, they did not appear short of strength even when confronted by the warriors of big clans. But at this Endless Cape, even though they could defeat the watchdogs overnight, they still meant nothing in front of this endless sea of sand.

Both the northerners and the chief might have far underestimated the power of the desert.

Unfortunately, for them, there were not many options left.

About an hour later, the Concrete Boat slowly pulled in to shore. Dragging his sore and exhausted body, Simbady slowly walked off the boat. The moment when his feet touched the soft beach, he felt a long-lost relaxation.

Finally, his world stopped shaking.

"Look, what's that?" Molly pointed somewhere remote on the inland. "A Watch Tower?"

Simbady looked in the direction that Molly was pointing at and saw a black iron tower standing in the sand not far from the beach. At the top of the tower were two flags, one of which was scarlet, the other was with a complex embroidery pattern.

Ordinarily, Simbady would wonder why the girl who he only had an occasional conversation with would stay with him all the time, but now he was too weak to consider things in this aspect. "Has someone... arrived ahead of us?"

"Let's go and take a look."

"Later." He shook his head. "We'd better wait for Sir Thuram's instructions."

Those Sand Nation civilians who had fallen into the water previously left a vivid memory in Simbady's mind. He did not wish for the girl that he had a crush on to be whipped in front of everybody.

"Molly, finally I've found you!" Molly's clansmen gradually came to her. "Simbady, what a surprise to see you here."

"I thought you had passed out on the boat from seasickness."

"Haha..." The crowd smirked.

Simbady lowered his head in embarrassment. Indeed, he was the weakest among his clansmen, be it in strength or guts. Usually, he would not mind being ridiculed, but today, in Molly's presence, he felt especially shameful. In fact, his performance in this voyage was even poorer than Molly's.

"Look, there is an iron tower!"

"How did people transport something so heavy to this place?"

"Probably by boat? I heard there is a direct shipping lane from Graycastle to the Endless Cape."

"Will we camp there tonight?"

"I guess so. Endless Cape is way more dangerous than an oasis. It must be guarded at night."

There were only just over 20 men were from the Fishbone Clan, which made them a fairly small group, but they were all of the young and strong members of the clan. One of them was called Carlone. Carlone was a strong performer among his peers, he was tall, handsome and skillful, which won him the favor of his clan chief. The moment he opened his mouth, he drew everybody's attention, "I once escorted the exiled for Iron Sand City. According to my observation, the sizes of sandworms and scorpions in this area are much larger than those in an oasis. There's even a rumor that a Giant Scorpion with Armor that dominates Earth also moves around here. We must stay alert at all times and set our tents as close to those from Graycastle as possible."

"Do you think Sir Thuram is telling the truth? Can the chief really create an oasis out of this desert?" somebody asked.

"Most unlikely," Carlone smacked his lips and said. "If he were really capable of that, he could have been the ruler of the desert without going through the holy duel. Why bother developing this area then?"

"What should we do next?" The crowd began to stir.

"Relax. The chief doesn't have to go through all of this trouble, only to exile us here." Carlone's voice was full of calmness and confidence. "The chief might have decided on this action on the spur of the moment. When the people from Graycastle find that their goals can't be realized, our work will end. As to three months of salary, Osha can't get away with it!"

"That's right, or no one will ever trust them again!"

"That's reassuring. I'm Ok as long as we can go back."

The clansmen nodded, indicating their agreement, except for Simbady. He did not entirely agree with what Carlone had said. It was true that Graycastle had undervalued the desert and their plan of turning Endless Cape into a town was destined to fail. But looking at those soldiers in uniforms whose facial expression was nothing but solemn, he faintly felt the chief did not decide on this action on the spur of the moment.

By then, the crowd began scattering and some people began to move toward the iron tower. Thuram was still talking with the people from Graycastle, totally indifferent to what was happening around him.

"Shall we go there too?" some clansmen proposed.

"I think so," Carlone said, nodding. "If we're really going to camp around the iron tower, we can get a better place if we go earlier. Everybody, follow me." He took a look at Molly especially and asked, "Do you want my help with your luggage?"

Molly hesitated, shook her head and then said, "Simbady said we'd better wait for Sir Thuram's instruction... Didn't he always emphasize the importance of following the discipline?"

"It's not like we refused to get off the boat. Why does he care about this?"

"Simbady, you're not intimidated by the Endless Cape, are you?"

"Perhaps he's still sick." The clansman who ridiculed him previously, did so again.

"I'm just worried." Simbady raised his head. Just when he was about to justify himself, a burst of a hasty whistle interrupted him.

"Everybody, gather now!" Thuram, who previously ignored those who left, quietly walked in front of the clansmen, stuck out three fingers and grimly said, "I give you three breaths of time, after that, every breath means one whip. This is the second lesson I'm teaching you. Do remember that!"

Chapter 803: "Festivity"

Simbady had thought it was just a bluff. He had never expected Osha clan was serious.

When the warriors from Osha clan were about to execute the order, a clash broke out between the two groups. Over 50 people, who regarded the punishment as unreasonable and attempted to escape the discipline, started to tussle with the ones who tried to catch them.

Unarmed, the wrongdoers soon lost their battle to Osha clan equipped with clubs and shields. They were, as a result, stripped naked and prostrated to the sandy ground.

Thuram whipped them himself.

The whipping scene inflamed some of the spectators, who were on the verge of starting a virulent altercation but were eventually deterred by the flintlocks carried by Graycastle men.

Everybody had learned the miserable defeat of the watchdog in the oasis that night.

Even cavalymen swift like winds had failed to penetrate Graycastle's defensive line.

What had crushed them was exactly the same shiny iron weapons in those soldiers' hands.

In a second, screams and shrieks filled the bank.

Osha did not plan to flog those clansmen to death. After he showed their bleeding backs to the whole group, he instructed them to treat the wounds with herbs and bandage them with gauze. Normally, there was rarely any plague in the freezing Months of Demons. As long as they were physically strong, they should survive the whipping.

Carlone and most of the clansmen were outraged, except Molly, who rejoiced over the punishment.

After the fearsome whipping was over, the group formed two lines and headed to the depth of the desert under the guidance of the whistle.

Thuram did not utter a word, but everybody became automatically self-disciplined. The procession was in an exceptional order.

When they were close to an iron tower, Simbady discovered a drying oasis, or rather a pond. This was probably what Thuram referred to as the water fountain for the vanguard. No shades of trees overhung the pond, except a few dying bushes around it. The pond was very shallow, the depth of which was no more than a man's height. Perhaps, it had been a verdant oasis a few decades ago. However, as the water vein of Silver Stream gradually diminished, the oasis, in the end, reduced to a cup of sand.

The pond would not even suffice to provide drinking water for the few hundred labors working here, let alone to nurture a tribe. That water could still be seen was because of the remnant of underground streams. Once summer came, those meager water would soon evaporate under the scorching sun. Even if no one drank the water, the pond would become completely dry in no time.

Simbady had seen a lot of ruins of oasis like this.

In other words, if those Graycastle men failed to find a new water source within two or three months, they would have no choice but to leave this land, not to mention establishing a new town.

Thuram did not pretend that he was not aware of the scarcity of the water. He hollered at the team, "Do you see this pond here? This is going to be the only drinking water for us in the next couple of months. So, make your water elsewhere. Are you all clear?"

"What about... food?" someone asked.

"Somebody will deliver food to us. If there isn't enough, we can go fishing," Thuram replied.

Hearing they would at least have food and water, all the clans relieved a little bit. The group thus dispersed and pitched their tents based on the instructions of the supervisor from Osha clan.

How to quickly set up and take down a tent was a must-have life skill for every sand nation. A tent made of sheepskin could shelter three to six people, and usually, one person was responsible to carry all the required tools and equipment. There were only four women from Fishbone clan who had applied for the job, so they erected three tents which arrayed in a triangle shape, each of which was fastened by a rope. The door of each tent was flung open facing outward, as a way to alert each other in case of danger. This was the simplest tent arrangement among all.

In the afternoon, Thuram whistled again and summoned everybody. He then took them to a place close to the beach.

Simbady was surprised to find out that northerners had conducted a thorough search here.

On the flat sandy ground stood numerous short wooden poles, each pole tied to a white rope. Like dividing domains, these ropes and poles segmented the land into many huge rectangles. Each rectangle was 60 meters in length at least.

The most incredible thing was that all the rectangles were of the same size, every edge and corner of which was precisely marked and measured. Simbady wondered how they did that within a distance of 60 meters.

There were 50 or 60 rectangles marked out by white ropes by a rough count. Simbady also saw some Graycastle men keep marking the land with wooden poles, with strange tools in their hands. It seemed they planned to continue to do so until all the land in their sights was covered.

"You're finally here." A tall man came up to Thuram. "My name is Kencury. I'm a former member of the Mason Guild in the old king's city... Well, you've probably never heard of this organization. Even in Graycastle, few people remember the Mason Guild these days. Thanks to the benevolent king who's willing to hire us, we're able to settle down. Otherwise, we probably don't know where we'll end up ... Um, that's not quite right. Let's leave this matter at a later date." The man coughed and patted Thuram on his shoulder. "Anyway, I'll be responsible for the construction of Endless Cape. I assume you're the supervisor appointed by Miss Echo, right?"

Echo? Isn't it Lady Drow Silvermoon's nickname? Simbady was shocked by the fact that the Graycastle men named Kencury sat as equal with the chief at the same table!

Not custom to the small talks and Kencury's overelaborate formalities, Thuram made a stiff smile. He stepped back and bowed. "Please call me Thuram. As to those lads, just let me know what they should do. If anyone slacks off, I'll punish them severely."

Apparently, Thuram had received instructions from the chief of Osha clan, for he paid great respects to Kencury. But Simbady knew it was those Graycastle soldiers guarding this area that Thuram was truly afraid of.

Kencury stretched out his arms. "Very well. Guys, there's no tavern or woman here. Ahem, I mean that kind of woman. So, concentrate on the construction! The first task for you is very simple, which is digging holes. See those white rectangles? Dig a hole in each rectangle until the sand has reached your knees!"

For a moment, nobody responded. There was an embarrassing silence.

Thuram's brows went up. He bellowed, "Are you guys all deaf? Get your ass moving!" He sounded quite ill-tempered, but a hint of triumph in his eyes betrayed his complacency.

But Kencury raised his hand and stopped Thuram. "Hang on... No need to rush. I haven't explained to them why we have to dig those holes."

"Sir, you don't have to explain to them..."

"No, no, no. His Majesty once said something that I can't agree more. He calls it pro... proactivity. Right, that's the word!" Kencury clapped his hand. "It roughly means that once a person knows the reason behind his labor, he'll become more productive. So, listen carefully... These holes will determine whether we can live here in the future! These holes..." He paused for a second and then continued, "are the key to converting seawater to drinking water!"

The group immediately stirred up at these words.

"The mechanism behind this is very simple, but only King Roland thought of it. It's just like boiling water—we are going to first feed these holes with seawater. Once the water is heated up by the sun and turns into water vapor, we collect them to get pure drinking water." Kencury even used his hands to further explain the matter, "It's OK you don't understand. You just view the ocean as a giant pool of bitter water saturated with salt. If we can separate the salt from the water, the whole Swirl Sea will become our drinking water source!"

Simbady was rooted to the ground. He doubted if this project was realistic. Put aside the validity of the theory in the latter half of his speech. He wondered how they were going to collect such intangible things as water vapor.

Kencury clenched his fist. "The production will naturally be very limited. One rectangle can only provide water for a dozen people. Therefore, we have to build a large number of conversion sheds to supply water for hundreds of workers here! You should all feel lucky, for His Majesty pays special attention to the construction plan of Endless Cape. This is also the second town named by the king other than Neverwinter. To celebrate the unification of the Southernmost Region, His Majesty endowed the town with the name 'Festivity', and you guys are not only the builders of Festive Harbor but also the first residents who settled down here!"

Chapter 804: An Accident at the Snow Mountain

As soon as Lightning returned to her tent at the campsite, she took off her goggles, peeled off her gloves, and put her frozen, numb hands above the brazier.

Her fingers soon started to tingle.

Although it had been almost half a month since winter had ended, flurries of snow persisted without any sign of turning lighter. On the contrary, it grew increasingly heavy. Every time Lightning returned from an investigation, her hair was drenched with melted snow, and it always took a while before sensations came back into her skins.

After her hands were a bit warmer, Lightning placed a stool next to the brazier, took off her soggy leather boots, and cocked her feet above the blazes. She could clearly see a wisp of white steam stream out of the tip of her socks. A tinge of warmth went through her cold toes. She was a little abashed by the smell of her feet. Having worn the same boots for such a long time, it was natural that the feet gave off some odor.

Now she understood why her father always stressed that a great explorer should be supported by a great team. Had the First Army not set up the brazier or made hot water aforetime, she would not have been able to fully dedicate herself to the exploration. Her burning enthusiasm for exploration would definitely be quenched by the frustrating thought that she had to lit a fire and boil water herself after returning to the campground, all soaked and exhausted.

Lightning thought perhaps, only King Roland's team had the capability to supply hot water 24 hours a day. Her father had once told her in one of his adventure stories that it was indeed very difficult to have a hot water bath in midwinter. The obstacles lay in dampened wood, rotted leaves covered by snows, and the time and effort to collect those materials. As such, most of the time his crew members would thoroughly cleanse their bodies only after they fulfilled their undertaking.

But the machines invented by His Majesty completely solved these problems. As the campsite was not far away from the riverbank, the boilers on the three concrete boats, which had been in operation since the first day of their arrival, were able to continuously provide the camp with hot water. If she required hot water, she just needed to take a bucket to fetch some.

The same applied to food.

A peculiar concrete boat was responsible for food supplies for the whole team. The upper floor of the boat constituted a mobile kitchen, where a large amount of oatmeal was cooked every day with the steam produced by the boiler. They ate the oatmeal with some dried meat and salted fish, so much better than tasteless solid food.

It was probably the best logistics team in the world by her father's standard.

After her hands and feet became warm again, Lightning took out her notebook and began to write journal entries.

"Spring, 16th, we were still digging. The mountain greatly impeded Sylvie's and Margie's abilities, especially Margie's. They had to consume a lot of magic power in order to penetrate thick rocks. Out of safety concerns, we must reserve sufficient magic power to head back to the camp for each operation. As a result, we didn't gain much progress."

"Due to a limitation in the distance, Sylvie could just roughly pick a few directions for Miss Fran to dig. By the way, Miss Fran is a very nice lady despite her misshapen figure. She looks even scarier than Maggie when eating. I really hope that I can, one day, see what she originally looked like."

It had been 13 days since they had arrived at the foot of the snow mountain. The only thing they were positive for now was the existence of a big hollow space, which appeared to be connected by multiple caves, in the mountain. It was hard to successfully find the main cave where the ruin was located, let alone to open a tunnel wide enough for the First Army.

Both she and Maggie could not help much in this respect. They could only put sentries outside the mountain or sneak into those strange caves to investigate the ruptures and crevices that the Magic Ark failed to reach.

Compared with the exploration of the ruin itself, finding a correct path leading to the destination was always the most time-consuming part that often required the most efforts and work.

Just as what her father frequently said, an explorer was always on his way.

Lightning cupped her mouth and exhaled a breath which soon turned into a cluster of white steam in the cold air. She continued to write the followings:

"Last came the latest finding of Lightning, the greatest explorer in Graycastle."

"We spied a long, dark figure underneath the ice at the peak of the Great Snow Mountain. It looked like a huge fish. I had no idea how long it took the creature to grow so big, but it must taste good. It was a pity that Anna didn't come with us. We couldn't break the ice to catch it. Maggie could only leave some scratching marks on the ice with her claws, for it was forbidden to employ explosives at the top of the mountain. We probably have to wait until summer when the snow melts."

At these words, Lightning licked her lips. Because of the exploration, she had not tasted barbecued fish for a long time. Perchance she could fly to Misty Forest with Maggie to get some food before nightfall. She probably also needed to get food for Wendy so that she would not blame her for her roguishness.

Lightning continued to write, "Further, there was another significant finding. We had noticed some demonic beasts group up to the east of Misty Forest, but His Majesty's city wall should be able to block them."

After writing all these down, Lightning put the sheepskin notebook into a watertight bag and slipped it back into her knapsack. As an explorer, she must record everything she saw on a daily basis. Like a captain's logbook, the journal was not only an explorer's badge of honor but also important references for future explorers. When the owner of the logbook was unfortunately killed in an accident, other explorers would be able to analyze his journal and avoid trodding the same path.

Just at that moment, Lightning heard running footsteps outside the door.

It was Wendy outside her tent.

"Agatha and the others are back." Wendy sounded a little anxious. "We've had an accident. Fran's missing!"

"What?" Lightning rose in surprise. "Missing?"

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By the time the witches stationed at the campground arrived at the end of the tunnel created by the devouring worm, the soldiers from the First Army had lit a fire and put sentries. They found Agatha and the Taquila witches arguing over something.

Lightning poked her head and gasped. She saw a fathomless hole in front of her, its ceiling and bottom indiscernible. She could only hear the sound of running water coming from above.

A part of the tunnel's edge had collapsed. Lightning took out the Stone of Lighting and bent over. The crack was covered with slimy liquid.

"Did Miss Fran fall from here?"

Edith answered, "Looks like so for now... Sylvie picked the right direction, but Fran was just unlucky. She opened the path leading to the big cave but did not notice the precipice at the front. Then she fell to the bottom."

"Looks like?" Lightning noticed her particular wording.

Edith shrugged. "At that time Sylvie and Margie were searching on the other side, a location where they could exactly see what Fran was doing. According to Sylvie, Fran's magic reaction suddenly disappeared from her sight. I don't really know how your magic power works, but Miss Sylvie's Eye of Magic should be able to see very distant objects, right? Yet when they got here, they couldn't see anything at the bottom."

"Couldn't... see?" The little girl was stunned.

Edith spread out her hands. "They couldn't see the bottom or the devouring worm. There're two possible explanations: one is that the hole is so deep that it goes beyond the visual field of the Eye of Magic. The other is that something has blocked her vision. Either of them omens ill." Edith paused for a moment and looked at the arguing Ice Witch and the others. "What they're arguing about is whether they should dive into the hole to rescue Fran immediately."

Chapter 805: Down the Abyss

Lightning was silent.

She knew Edith was right. If the hole was indeed extremely deep as Edith had described, she could almost predicate the fatality of the fall. If it was because of some intervention of Fran's magic power, the situation would then be even more complicated. There could be a gigantic God's Stone of Retaliation at the bottom, in which case, she foresaw no great treachery. If there was, however, a trap set up by some unknown enemies, it would then be too dangerous for the rescue team.

There was a big chance that those swift sickle monsters and the worm carrier that had once devoured the demon's Blackstone Pagoda were still lurking around the Great Snow Mountain. Without any alerts from Nightingale and Sylvie or the protection of the First Army, even the God's Punishment Witches found it hard to bring Fran back safe and sound.

The little girl took a deep breath.

Exploration was essentially a risky business.

A good explorer should save his companion no matter under what circumstances.

She thus came up to the arguing witches and said, "Let me take a look down there. However we're going to do that, we have to first know what's going on before taking the next step."

A blond man turned around and asked, "Your ability is..." Lightning remembered he was called Elena. Although she looked like a man by her appearance, the soul beneath the shell was literally an ancient witch from Taquila.

Lightning tapped her goggles on the head. "Flying. Judging from the current situation, I believe I'm better at scouting than you."

Agatha frowned. "This isn't a matter of convenience. How are you going to head back if you can't apply your ability at the bottom of the cave? His Majesty said nobody should act alone in this operation, whether she's a witch from the Witch Union or Taquila. Everybody should work together and cooperate with the First Army."

"Tie a rope around my waist then." Lightning disclosed all her plan. "Even if there's really an anti-magic zone created by a God's Stone of Retaliation, as long as you pull me up after I reach the bottom, there shouldn't be a problem."

To save a companion did not mean acting recklessly. Her father had told her numerous stories regarding horrible emergencies when she had been little. Lightning believed that most accidents would end up well as long as they took proper measures.

Because she was the greatest explorer even without her magic power!

Nightingale intercepted, "Let me go with her. I can walk along the precipice easily, for there's no upside or downside in the misty world. Even if an enemy does emerge, I can come to her aid immediately."

Wendy shook her head vigorously. "That would be as dangerous as acting alone. If there's a trap down there, you two guys won't be able to save yourselves. Don't forget that there're formidable enemies like Senior Demons in this world."

"We'll never abandon Fran. If you don't go, I'll go myself!" Elena blurted out in a low voice.

"Have you forgotten to obey orders after 400 years?" There's a faint starchiness in Agatha's voice. "In the name of the Taquila senior witches, I forbid you to act alone!"

"..." Hearing this, all the God's Punishment Witches fell silent. Elena bit her lip. At length, she stepped a few paces back and made an apology by placing her hand on the chest.

"You don't need to argue about it." Edith ventured. "His Majesty instructed that we three parties must work together. Therefore, we just need to send the First Army down there, don't we?"

"Did you find the way there?" Brian, the superintendent of the First Army, asked in surprise.

"No, but I found this." Edith pointed to the cliff closed to the entrance. In the torchlight, the reflective light specks on the river splintered up into flickering glimmers as the water ran. "There should be some lifting equipment on the concrete boat used to make oatmeal, for I often see the soldiers transport food from the supply boat through a crane. They don't do it manually."

"Ah... that's the gondola." Brian nodded. "It can transport a lot of goods at a time, but it requires a steam engine."

"So, we just need to move the machine here from the boat and send two machine gun squads down there along with the witches," Edith stressed each syllable with a stroke. "The length of the rope can be adjusted through a connector; the God's Punishment Witches shall have no problem in handling heavy machines. The water here can guarantee a constant operation as well as a retreat route required by His Majesty. The only question is how to take it down. I believe the First Army shall know how to do it, right?"

Brian replied hesitatively, "We definitely can take it down, but it's hard to put it back..."

Edith raised her brows. "Then you'll only lose a boat and a steam engine, which totals no more than 500 or 600 gold royals. What choice do you think His Majesty would make if he were you?"

Lightning twitched her lips. 500 or 600 gold royals was absolutely not a small number.

It did not take long for Brian to make his decision. He soon gave a nod of approval and said, "I see. You'll soon find a steam engine ready to go."

...

An hour later, a roaring machine appeared at the entrance to the hole. As they found it hard to fix the arm of the gondola to the rocks, they abandoned this part of the device in the end but only used a capstan as the lifting apparatus. The capstan rotated swiftly as the flywheel of the steam engine moved. It thus dropped the rope down the hole little by little. In order to prevent chafe, Agatha summoned her power and wrapped the mouth of the hole with solid ice so that the rope could move up and down without rubbing against the cliff.

A huge iron basket, which could at least carry six to eight people and two Mark I type HMGs, was attached to the end of the rope. In that case, the witches would be still well protected by the powerful machine gun squads even if they lost fighting capacities.

Agatha, Elena, and six soldiers from the First Army crawled into the basket first, followed by Lightning and Nightingale.

After testing out the lifting equipment, everybody slowly sank into the deep hole. The torchlight above became increasingly dismal.

Lightning hovered somewhere a little below the center of the hole to lead the way, with a rope around her waist. She felt a little uneasy without Maggie flying beside her, but she knew someone must be stationed outside the snow mountain. In comparison to monitoring demonic beasts, she preferred to uncover the mystery of the underground ruin.

Every time she dropped 10 meters lower, she would turn around to see if everybody was still there.

Darkness swallowed up the meager light of fires lit by the sentries. The only source of light now was the two Stones of Lighting in the basket. In the steady, soft light of the stones, Lightning detected two pale golden "ribbons" running along the cliff. They were the ice created by Agatha. The solid ice smoothed out the protruding rocks, making them as reflective as a mirror, and thus ensured them a safe ride down to the bottom.

Lightning's heart gradually sank after she flew for a few hundred meters.

An ordinary man would hardly survive such a long drop. She now only hoped that the devouring worm could be stronger than that.

Just at that moment, Lightning noticed a strange reflection underneath.

The light was hardly perceptible. It was merely a thin thread of flickers like an eye that suddenly opened in the darkness. Lightning signaled the rest of the party with the Stone of Lighting. She plunged into the hole while holding her breath, after which, she stepped on a solid, smooth rock.

Lightning bent over and gently touched the "ground". The gleamy black rock was as polished and glassy as a crystal. Its dark reflection was mixed with a thick cluster of a bright red color...

She had seen this.

It was the giant Blackstone Pagoda in the Devil's Town.

Chapter 806: An "Egg"

"It looks like that the worm found its lair." As soon as the basket reached the ground, Agatha glanced about the surroundings while holding the Stone of Lighting. The furrow between her brows deepened. She asked, "Did you see Fran?"

"Miss Fran isn't here." Lightning had inspected every corner of the cave. "The Blackstone Pagoda seems to be stuck in here. There're some empty spaces on either side of the tower. Could she fall off the top and roll over to the side?"

The diamond-shaped stone tower spanned across the deep hole like a bridge, with its two ends rooted in the rocks. Nobody knew how it ended up like that. The tentacle demon and the Multi-eyed Demon could not be found anywhere either.

"The tower doesn't affect my magic power," Nightingale revealed herself from the mist.

"But you can't walk through it like you walk through a wall, can you?" Agatha squatted down and produced an ice piton. She threw it toward the Blackstone Pagoda. The ice piton immediately broke to pieces, whereas the stone tower remained intact. "There's a rumor saying that this tower is made of God's Stones of Retaliation. Although it won't affect magic power on a mass scale like the prism of magic stone, it can block it."

Elena corrected Agatha in a low tone, "It's not made of God's Stones of Retaliation but it creates them. Corrosive magic power can change the mineral vein of the magic stones and thereby shapes them into a rectangle stone tablet. Only the mineral vein born under the Bloody Moon, however, has the capability to create Red Mist. The others simply help slow down the dissipation of the Red Mist. This was a top secret in the Union age. We learned it from Lady Eleanor after the fall of Taquila."

Nightingale was displeased at the delay of the information. "Why didn't you tell us earlier?"

Elena snapped, "You didn't tell me there's going to be a demon spire. There're so many things that can possibly affect magic power. How am I supposed to know which one it is?"

Lightning flew in between them and intercepted their confrontational conversation. "We have to keep going down, as we haven't got to the bottom yet. I just managed to dive a little bit more and heard distant running water. It's very likely that there's an underground river down there. If Miss Fran did fall down from the side of the stone tower, she might still be alive."

Elena's voice brightened. "Really? Is it possible that Sylvie didn't find Fran because of this underground river?"

Agatha nodded. "Very likely. As the stone tower has blocked most of the vision of the Eye of Magic, Sylvie couldn't see the bottom. If Fran was flushed down by the water, naturally she couldn't detect her magic beam." She then turned to Lightning and said, "You fly up to tell Wendy first. Ask her to instruct Margie to send some God's Punishment Witches down here... as well as the soldiers from the First Army. Advise them to also put sentries here. We'll continue with our search."

The little girl nodded. "Alright, leave it to me."

...

With the help of the gondola and the Magic Ark, they soon had enough people to rescue Fran.

Lightning took advantage of this interval and thoroughly investigated the area below the Blackstone Pagoda. As she had expected, the vertical cave wall soon moved into a sloping position. The air also dampened. After she descended for another 30 to 40 meters, she saw a wide underground river.

Snow water trickled down the cave wall and pooled before cascading into a thundering waterfall that poured down in torrents from the mouth of the cave. When the little girl drew close, she could feel a crisp chill play upon her cheeks.

As a result of the moist air in the cave, at the bottom of the hole grew various mosses and mushrooms, one of which gleamed a ghostly blue light that lit up the surrounding area. Even without a Stone of Lighting, Lightning could clearly spy the outline of the cave. With the fireflies floating about, the underground area looked like an entirely different world.

When the ark took the witches and the Taquila survivors to the bottom, they were all fascinated by what they saw.

Nightingale exclaimed, "If only we can grow those glowing fruit in Neverwinter. In that case, everybody can clearly see the road at night."

"Let's bring some back and grow them!" Lightning rubbed her hands in excitement. To discover and grow some new species was one of the most common enterprises for explorers. Sugar canes and corns, for instance, were brought to the Fjords from other small islands by explorers and later flourished. Lightning was not sure if these giant mushrooms and illuminating cattail fruits would be as sweet and delicious as bird beak mushrooms.

Agatha started a head count. "Let's finish our business here first. Margie, you stay here to help the First Army to establish a sentry post. We'll continue with the procession along the underground river. If Fran is more than two miles away from us, we'll pitch some temporary tents."

Nobody made an objection. Lightning, Nightingale and Agatha all knew how to escape and protect themselves. The 10 God's Punishment Witches led by Elena were all exceptional combatants as strong as Extraordinaries. They did not constitute a huge group, but it was actually the most powerful combination in the united front.

Once in the limestone cave, the roar of the rushing water rang off the rocks and down the underground river, producing thunderous reverberation. Lightning had to keep a close distance with the group so as to hear everybody.

Agatha asked, "Can the devouring worm swim?"

Elena shook her head. "Nobody has seen it swim. But the worm is colossal, so I think it shouldn't be far away from the deep hole even if it was flushed downstream."

"Are you able to tell where this river comes from and head?" Another God's Punishment Witch put in. Lightning vaguely remembered that her name was Zooey.

Nightingale answered, "If I remember correctly, it comes toward us and heads to the snow mountain. In other words, it's a water vein from the Western Region heading to the hilly area in the south."

It was a known fact that there was plenty of underground water in His Majesty's domain, but Lightning wondered why those rivers ran toward the south, for there was not a single river there. She was curious where all those water went.

Suddenly, she saw something flutter on the rock not far away.

"Hang on, I saw something move there!"

Hearing her warning, everybody halted and drew out their weapons.

Nightingale immediately gave an affirmative answer. "No magic reaction is detected, but there's indeed something over there..." She then paused and slowly approached the object. "It looks like a semi-spherical... egg?"

"What?" Agatha was a bit surprised.

"Since it doesn't have magic power, it poses no threat to us." Elena waved at the God's Punishment Witches coming with her and said, "Follow me."

They soon successfully surrounded the egg. When Lightning made a close study of the tremulous egg, however, she knitted her brows.

A layer of gray skin was clinging to the rock, completely blending with the surrounding environment. When she held up the Stone of Lightning and gradually approached the skin, she spied many stomas opening and shutting as if it were breathing.

Elena coughed out a spittle. "What the hell... is this? It's gross."

"If it's really an egg, how big should its parent be?" Lightning roughly measured the area of the skin with her fingers and concluded that it was about three meters in length and width. The swollen part in the middle could almost house a full-grown dairy cow.

"The shape... No, it can't be..." Zoey took a sharp intake of breath. She drew out her longsword and gave the skin a fierce stab, after which she pulled the steel upwards.

A large amount of slimy liquid gushed out of the "egg" as a piercing shriek rang off the cave wall. Then they saw a black shadow come out of the swell and collapsed to the ground.

To Lightning's dismay, it was a Mad Demon.

Chapter 807: Inside the Ruins

Almost at the same time, the entire "skin" shrunk and rolled, and a worm climbed out of the stone wall. With runny mucus pouring out of its skin, it then quickly climbed towards the top of the cave.

But Nightingale was much faster.

She suddenly appeared from the Mist and hung upside down on the cave ceiling as agilely as she was on flat ground and blocked the worm's way ahead. Before falling to the ground, she stabbed a shining dagger into the worm's head and nailed it firmly to the stone wall.

The worm struggled for a while, and then all of its six legs drooped. It was dead.

At that moment, Lightning finally noticed that the "egg" was merely the worm's torso. With its head and legs buried in stones and blocked by its giant belly, its torso did look like an egg.

The worm's figure was out of proportion. Its front part resembled an enlarged ant, with the length of no more than half a meter. Its rear part, namely the "skin" part that enveloped the Mad Demon, was big enough to hold three large barrels inside. Although over a half of the mucus had spilled out and the swollen "skin" had shrunken, its area was still astonishing.

"Is the demon born out of its belly?" the little girl asked in surprise.

"I've never heard of something like that." Agatha crouched and carefully studied the demon under the light of a Magic Stone. "This Mad Demon... is completely mature. Look at its arm. The scar here is caused by the inlay of a Magic Stone. Its girth is larger than the other arm, meaning the demon had constantly thrown pikes with magic power."

"Then where is the Magic Stone?"

"No idea. It's probably been taken away."

"So was it taken by this worm?" Elena asked impatiently. "It swallowed the demon and digested it while hanging itself on the wall. Unfortunately, it came across us. Its Magic Stone was either digested by itself or lost during a war. Does this make sense? Don't worry about this disgusting worm, looking for Fran is more urgent."

"It swallowed the demon?" Lightning questioned in her heart. "Its mouth is not big enough for an adult human being to go through, not to mention for a strong Mad Demon of nearly three meters tall."

"That's weird..." Nightingale's voice came from the void. "Obviously it's dead, but why didn't its magic power dissipate until now?"

"What?" Agatha was surprised. "Do you mean this is a demon?"

"Yes, its magic power is as thin as mist. I didn't notice it until it rolled out of the worm's belly. But it's surely dead. Judging from the decomposition level of its skin, it died one or two days ago." Nightingale then asked with bewilderment, "I thought that it was impossible for magic power to gather on a dead body?"

"If you saw it right, it is indeed weird..." Zooney nodded. Inserting the sword deep into the stone wall, she then said, "Perhaps we should take these two bodies back for further investigation. Let's leave a mark here and collect them when we finish camping."

As they walked forward, they ran across more "egg worms", and again, though not all were buried under the stone wall, some were standing right beside the river bank or were in a cluster like mushrooms.

Being experienced, the witches could now make sure their strikes hit right at the worms' crucial points or cut their heads off, which were buried under the dirt, one after another. Cutting open the worms' bellies, they found that there were not only Mad Demons inside, but also Fearsome Demons and human bodies.

That startled the witches.

Beyond the Border Area, there was no human residence. How did the worms hunt humans?

Could it be that the worms had stretched their legs into the domain of Neverwinter without a trace?

At that moment, Nightingale suddenly alerted, "There is a magic reaction ahead. Wait, no... is that, Fran?"

"Where?" Elena did not rush forward, but fanned out with the other God's Punishment Witches, holding their swords and guarding all around.

Lighting understood that in the misty world, everything was black and white, and most of the objects she saw were constituted by visualized and twisted silhouette lines, except the magic power, which was in bright colors. That was why the dark underground environment had no influence on Nightingale.

"Front-left, 200 meters... about 400 steps. She seems to be entangled by something." Nightingale's voice went further and further and was blurred under the noise of water sprays. "I can't see... I'll go first... Wait!"

A moment later, two gunshots sounded.

"Bang! Bang!"

The firing of the flintlock sounded particularly loud under the ground. The God's Punishment Witches took a look at one another and walked forward while maintaining their formation. Lightning was faster. She flew over them and toward the gunshots while firmly holding the revolver in her hand.

Luckily, what she had worried about did not happen. Soon, Nightingale held up the Stone of Lighting to guide the way.

Lying under the witches feet were two monsters with sickle-like forepaws. The flintlock shots made two holes on the worms heads and blue blood flew on the ground.

"Are these the demonic beasts that you mentioned which can hide their figures?" Floating in midair, Lightning asked.

"Yes, but no matter how skillful they are, they can't hide from my eyes." Nightingale put away her revolver and patted at Fran who was tightly stuck, she asked, "Am I right?"

Fran struggled a bit and groaned something, but it seemed that her mouth was sealed.

Nightingale noticed that both sides of the worm carrier were wined with white jelly which firmly fixed Fran on the ground. Her giant mouth was blocked too. Other than that, her strong body was full of wounds. Apparently, when she fell out of the deep hole, it hurt her badly.

Furthermore, to Nightingale's surprise, there was more than one such giant worm. Another two devouring worms quietly lay on the ground, as if they were in deep sleep.

"Is this..." An idea flashed into Lightning's mind. She quickly landed and pushed aside the moss on the ground. A mottled slate appeared in sight.

"Oh?" Nightingale whistled. "Nice, it seems that we've found..."

"The legendary snow mountain ruin!" she said with excitement.

"What happened?" The others arrived one after another. In order not to stretch their formation too loosely, the God's Punishment Witches had moved at a fixed speed. Walking in the front had always been Elena, which slightly changed Lightning's opinion on her.

"I've found Fran, and two monsters who seemed to want to make a meal out of her," Nightingale explained briefly. "Fran is alright, but stuck on the ground. This is already part of the underground ruins, which means enemies could be around. Let's take Fran out of here as soon as possible and call the First Army to set up sentry posts."

Elena nodded, pulled out the heavy sword on her back, and neatly and quickly cut open those resilient jelly things. When Fran's giant mouth regained its freedom, everybody heard her low growling.

"Don't look up!"

When Lightning heard it, she had subconsciously raised her head.

It was pitch-black overhead, nothing could be seen at first sight. At this spot, the cave extended upward, creating an enormous dome-like space. The Stone of Lightning could only illuminate a very limited space on the ground, offering no detailed vision atop. The next moment, Nightingale felt that the fine hairs on her body rose up.

In the darkness, appeared one scarlet eye, then two eyes, three eyes...

She did not know how many eyes were staring at her at that moment. She saw those tens of thousands of eyes, like tens of thousands of stars, cohere into a gigantic red plate... which looked like a "Bloody Moon".

Chapter 808: Close Quarter Combat

"Did you hear any sound?" Edith looked at Brian who was instructing the soldiers to arrange an underground defense line.

"Any sound?" Brian stopped what he was doing, looked around in puzzlement, and said, "No, Miss Edith, I haven't heard anything except the sound of running water."

"Really?" Edith frowned. "Am I mistaken?"

"What kind of sound was that?"

"Like the sound of a horn, very muffled... similar to the sound of water," Edith paused. "It seemed to come from the south."

That was the direction where the witches went for a deep exploration. The turbulent underground river went from north to south, and disappeared in the pitch-black underground cave. Although there were weird illuminating plants on both sides of the river, they could not provide light for far away places. The entire waterway was like an entrance to an abyss which devoured everything she saw.

"That... I think probably because we're deep in the mountain, which deprives us the vision of the sky, plus the lack of the light of a fire, you might be hallucinating." Brian smiled thoughtfully. "For the soldiers who have been to a battlefield, this isn't a big problem. It's no wonder that you might feel nervous. If you feel uneasy, Miss Margie can accompany you to return to the aisle exit."

A familiar look, familiar words... Edith was not surprised by the speech of the Gun Battalion commander. Although she was in light leather armor and a helmet, with a walking sword hanging on her waist, most of the people there still took her as an observer from the City Hall, or... as a pearl-like girl, just like her title, pretty and fragile. That was also the reason why people cared and pleased her all the way.

What those people did not understand was that the pearls produced by the giant clams in the Northern Region had been soaked in blood.

The blood of fish, of water beasts... or even of the fishermen.

That was why they could grow so big, into the size of a fist.

Roland Wimbledon was probably the only one who ignored her appearance in the beginning and even took her as an opponent.

"Thanks, but I'm better off here. If I run back, doesn't it mean I'll humiliate His Majesty's City Hall?" Although Edith did not tell Brian what was in her mind, she rejected his suggestion with a smile. For a moment, Brian was lost in her smile. After a long while, he shunned away in embarrassment.

"I don't think His Majesty or Barov would mind it..." Brian coughed twice. "I just don't understand why you came with the First Army to such a dangerous place?"

"For only in this way could you trust me," Edith said frankly.

"W... What?"

"You must have heard of the Battle of Divine Will," she said calmly. "When such a battle that determines human's lives comes, it'd be hard for His Majesty to consider every aspect of the war situation. He'll need many officers to assist him to command the army, and the army will depend on the City Hall for logistics. By that time, will you trust an officer who has fought with you shoulder by shoulder or one who sits in the office every day dealing with paperwork?"

Brian was startled. After a moment, he said, "You're really brave to make such a speech."

Edith understood what he was referring to. Even an indigenous former Patrol Leader understood what she meant. At best, what she wanted to do was called assistant commanding... or it could be called power interference, which was totally unbearable in the eyes of other lords who claimed total control of their knights.

But now, the number of soldiers of the First Army had exceeded 5000, so the knightage's management method was obviously outdated. As a matter of fact, the Adviser Department assembled by His Majesty was an organization between the army and the City Hall, which was eventually under Roland's control but the commanding right underneath would further spread. Because Edith understood Roland's ideas, she dared to make that speech. It was not that she intended to join the Adviser Department, but she wanted to extend her influence as much as possible.

"If it was any other kings, I'd definitely not do that, but His Majesty is different..." Edith said, smiling, "You know that it was me who proposed that anyone who wants to be promoted in City Hall needs to go to a battlefield first. This being said, it's better that I set an example for the others."

"Has His Majesty... agreed?"

"Not really, but he didn't object to it."

"Um, doesn't it mean that he agreed?" Brian asked confusedly.

"In politics, you can't interpret things this way," Edith said with her hands laid out. "Even an oral commitment may change anytime before it gets written down, let alone the silence the king gave me for my asking."

"I see..." The Gun Battalion commander said with mixed feelings, "Politics is really complicated."

"That's true."

Apart from that, she also planned to get closer to the witches, to understand their abilities and characters, and to spend more time with them.

Undoubtedly, His Majesty had exerted big efforts on the witches, and the construction of Neverwinter could not carry on without the witches. To reach the peak of power, she would need their support.

So far, her plan had gone very smoothly. Probably because they were the same gender, her contact with the witches did not draw their rejection, yet Barov was not that lucky.

"Are the God's Punishment Witches the next batch to come?" Edith changed the subject.

"Yeah, I think so. Miss Margie can only deliver five to six people per time. To set a sentry post, she would have to run about 10 times," Brian replied accordingly. "Where do you think the second machine gun should be positioned?"

"Somewhere high... Um, I remember there is a suitable location near the rock behind..." Right when she turned around to observe the cave behind her, an illuminating plant seemed to distort in a certain way, as if something broke the stability of the air, making everything look blurry.

"What's that?" she asked.

Before she could alert the First Army soldiers, the air was again acutely distorted. This time the air behind the machine gun squad members rippled.

A light sound came, then a soldier's head fell off his neck, with a smile frozen on his face.

"Enemy attack!" Edith shouted out, "It's invisible!"

Almost at the same time, two more soldiers' chests were pierced through. When their blood spurted, the ripple was dyed red.

"There is more than one!"

Edith thought swiftly. Throwing a dagger with one hand toward the place where the first soldier fell, she pulled out her sword and raced to the enemy. When her dagger was knocked away by the invisible thing, she pricked her sword to the root of the ripple from another angle.

Edith clearly knew that if they chose to retreat, they would end up being attacked from front and back. There was a bonfire at this place, which was their only source of light to find the enemies' whereabouts. Without light, they could find no way to resist these nearly invisible monsters, so escaping should be their last choice!

While they could roughly locate the enemies, offense was their only chance to win!

Through the sword-tip came a sense of softness, as if it was pricked into some skin and flesh, which thrilled Edith.

If she was not wrong, whether humans or beasts, the contacting point of a weapon and a body was definitely a weakpoint—such as a hand holding a sword or a tip of a claw, which if hurt, would not regain its attacking ability in anytime soon.

Just as Edith was about to draw back her sword, a chilly wind swept towards her from another direction, coming at a speed that was so fast that she felt coldness hitting right on her face.

"Damn it! This thing has two weapons?"

Years of experience in fighting and killing made her subconsciously loosen the sword-holding righthand and roll on the ground. At that moment, she felt something touching the back of her head and then her long hair flew about like fallen petals scattering everywhere.

Having no time to get up, she shouted at Brian, "Now, shoot in my direction."

Chapter 809: The Moment of Crisis

By the time that the soldiers realized what was happening, it was too late for them to adjust another machine gun in order to take aim, so they directly pulled out the revolving rifles tied on their backs to fire at the enemy.

The long sword shoved in the invisible monster's body was now giving away its trail, making it an easy target for it to aim at. At such a short distance, Brian and all the other men fire all their bullets at once. The hail of bullets swept over Edith's head and she could even hear the whoosh sounds as the bullets tore through the air.

She turned back and saw the distorted air had solidified as a monster emerged out of the void. It was bloodcurdling. The monster wore a taupe shell all over and was nearly two meters tall while standing. A height that would allow it to tower over most ordinary men. Apart from a pair of forelegs as sharp as sickles, it also had seven or eight pairs of supportive legs sticking out of its abdomen. Luckily, the bullets were fierce enough to pierce through its shell, and they finally cracked open the monster's thin, long and locust-like head. It twitched a little and fell to the ground, bathed in blood.

"Get out of my way!" Suddenly, someone roared behind Edith.

A heavy sword proceeded the voice, piercing through the air with a strong power that caused the blade to buzz. It smashed right in the space before the first machine gun squad, blowing away the other two monsters and dispelling the invisible rippling air.

Hard on the heels of Ashes' strike, several God's Punishment Witches moved forward to slash the enemies, tearing their bodies into halves before they managed to get to their feet.

"The reinforcements finally arrived." Edith let out a sigh of relief as she realized it.

The enemies had lost their advantage of invisibility, plus with their small numbers, it had not taken long before the Transcendent Warriors dismembered all of them.

Edith noted that as the monsters inched nearer to the God's Punishment Witches, their form turned weird, half of their body invisible in the void while the other half was revealed in the light as if their hiding skills had been abated.

"Are you alright?" Margie pulled Edith to her feet. "We spotted these enemies on the cliff and moved as fast as we could, but we're still a little too late."

"You spotted them with the colorful Magic Stone?"

"Yes." Another tall man came up to her. "Weapons of common people don't work well in this kind of situation. You'd better inform the people above to bring more God's Punishment Witches down here."

Edith remembered her name was Betty. She asked, "You're capable of destroying their camouflage?"

"It's a trick that works the same way as the God's Stone of Retaliation." The man shrugged. "So far, it can only deactivate their invisibility skill for a short period of time."

"But they also wear God's Stone of Retaliation. How could they not see the enemy?" Brian asked with his teeth gnashed, as he looked at the three dead men on the ground.

"It's not surprising," Betty answered calmly. "For light, distance, and attention will all affect our sights. A general God's Stone works only within the area of one or two paces. Since the enemies only exposed in our visions for less than a second, it was reasonable that they couldn't see the targets, not to mention in such a dim place."

Edith could not help sighing. Betty was right. They had not noticed the sickle monsters until they showed their half bodies during the fight. The beasts' long forelegs and invisibility skills had given them a great advantage. It was undoubtedly too late for ordinary people to react, even though they had sensed something wrong. There would have been no way for the First Army to defeat them unless they had buried God's Stones beforehand to give them a clearer view to see through the enemies' disguises.

"Damn it!" Brian wielded his fist fiercely. "I should have sent down the wire netting first!"

"I think we should go back. I have a feeling that something unpleasant is going to happen in the hole," Betty urged again. "The weird shriek almost startled the entire snow mountain."

"Did you hear that too?" Edith asked in surprise.

"Losing most of our sense of touch has made our eyes and ears extraordinarily sharp..." Betty studied Edith for a little while before replying. "I didn't expect that a common person would be capable of hearing the sound too."

Sure enough, it was not her illusion to hear the sound. Edith nodded as she removed her God's Stone of Retaliation and threw it next to the machine gun. She and the other men gathered around Margie who weaved the Magic Ark. Together they descended to the bottom and then ascended along the steep wall. Brian, the leader of the Gun Battalion, was slightly reluctant to hand over the frontline to the Taquila witches, but had to follow the trend. After all, once the God's Punishment witches were involved in the fight, they could not ignore the witches and fire at the enemies recklessly.

The men who were stationed at the Blackstone Pagoda were unclear of the details of the battle at the bottom of the hole, so they kept sending down equipment such as tents, God's Stones, guns and ammunition etc. After Brian commanded the soldiers to stop transporting, they did not transfer to the vacant steam-engine-powered elevator but continued to ride the Ark to ascend.

Just as they were approaching the worm passage, a hail of gunfire broke out above them, causing a sound as if a mighty storm were striking. That meant that the First Army which was guarding at the sentry post, had opened fire without leaving themselves a loop-hole.

Their faces changed. Margie pumped up all of her power to accelerate the Ark.

As the Magic Ark dashed out of the hole, Edith could not help widening her eyes.

Body parts were showering down from the upper cave. Three machine gun squads that were lined up in one formation were firing at the pitch-dark ceiling of the cave under Sylvie's command. The revolvers and precision shooting squad concentrated on handling the blind corners above them, firing at the cave wall without taking aim.

"What are you fighting against?" Brian caught one man and asked.

"Demonic beasts, my lord!" the man reported as he was loading ammunition. "A pack of demonic beasts charged down from snow mountain!"

"Damn it! Why do they bother us at this time?"

A thought suddenly flashed through Edith's mind.

"Could the muffled buzz be the sound of it summoning its own kind?"

It was something she had read from His Majesty's book, a unique sound in this world that was inaudible to the human ear but was particularly clear to some creatures. Some species were even able to make such sounds to help them communicate with each other in their own way. Was it possible that the sound they had heard was a kind of signal between the same species?

However, Misfortunes did not come alone. When Brian was watching the battle, one man ran in and reported to him, "My lord, Lady Maggie spotted the abnormal trail of demonic beasts in the east to Misty Forest. They seemed to be marching on the snow mountain, moving towards Neverwinter as we expected."

"What? This..." The leader of Gun Battalion was stunned for a moment.

"My lord?" the man asked urgently. "What do we do?"

"How can this... How can this be..." Brian muttered repeatedly, his face grim, his forehead sweaty.

Edith frowned at Brian's inexperienced behavior. In her view, a leader should never wear a bewildered look openly, especially in front of his men.

"Ahem," she interrupted, "things are simpler than you think. First, if we summon back the First Army deployed outside the snow mountain and gather them to guard the cave, the battlefield will be much smaller and only a few machine guns will be needed to stifle the attack of the demonic beasts."

Brian turned to look at her. It took him a long while, but he managed to compose himself. "Exa-Exactly," he stuttered.

"Second, tell Lady Maggie to contact His Majesty and ask for reinforcements, just in case. After all, our ammunition and food are supplied through Redwater River. Once we give up the entrenched passage, our battle couldn't last long because of the lack of replenishment." Edith said calmly and clearly. "The beasts can't swim, so we should keep the cement ships and deploy a dozen of men who will help to pin down the enemy as well as guide the reinforcements."

"Lady Sylvie'll be responsible for annihilating the demonic beasts on the ceiling of the cave. Temporarily, we should collect everyone's God's Stones and bury them at the sentry post in case of sneak attack from the enemy. Lastly, remember to send the Taquila witches to the bottom of the hole to support Betty so that she'll have enough men to march on the south of the riverway to look for Agatha and the other witches." Edith's composed voice eased the tension and discomposure among the crowd. "We must send the witches to Betty as soon as possible. If I'm not wrong, the source of the weird sound will be the key to solving our problem."

Brian inhaled deeply and said, "I see. Let's do as you suggested."

Chapter 810: A Dilemma

"Uh... I feel so... disgusting."

Agatha covered her mouth and retched as she crept along the worm carrier's narrow esophagus to get out. "I feel like I was in some kind of mucus-filled bag that was flung onto the wall dozens of times."

"You couldn't find any words better than that?" Nightingale asked as she walked out of her Mist leisurely. She stared at the others who were bathed in mucus. "If Fran hadn't collapsed the cave's mouth, we'd be in great danger." The advantage of walking in the Mist, that enabled her to travel seamlessly between spaces, had saved her from needing to hide in the carrier's stomach. Ultimately saving her from being bathed in the foul and corrupted mucus.

"Sorry... did I act impulsively?" Fran asked warily, however, Agatha was too busy retching from the stench to reply.

"For me, it was okay." Lightning said as she wiped mucus from her hair before smelling it. "Being swallowed by a giant worm and then crawling out safely is an unparalleled experience, an adventure that no other explorers have gotten to taste."

"Don't be too greedy." Elena rolled her eyes and said to Agatha, "For us, who have no senses, even smelling the reek and feeling the clammy touch is enviable."

Other God's Punishment Witches echoed her sentiment.

"Fine... let us say no more." Agatha coughed and interrupted in a hoarse voice, "On to the next problem, what should we do?"

There was fear lingering in every witch's heart as they recalled the accident from minutes ago. Despite Fran's quick warning, in that moment, the instinct to turn their eyes towards the source of the weird buzzing was faster than their minds could process the warning. As a result, more than one of them failed to keep their head down as the sound rang out.

No one had been able to see the actual visage of the monster, all they could see was its ten thousand scarlet eyes.

They believed that the cluster of eyes belonged to the watchful Multi-eyed Demon that had coiled on the top of the tower. The only image they could associate it with was the black stone tower that had been swallowed by the worm. However, unlike the ordinary Multi-eyed Demon, the scope of this one's eyes had been much wider, as if the demon's body had been flattened and considerably stretched.

After the buzzing had subsided a large number of hybrid demonic beasts emerged from the deep ruins and charged towards them. All Nightingale had been able to see while she was in the Mist was the sudden appearance of numerous magic power light spots. They had abruptly appeared out of the void and from every corner of the cave. They had come from the stone walls, the streaming water, and the dark dome. The monsters had gathered together, creating bright streams, and their noisy, raspy roars drowned out the tinkling of the running water. It had been as if the entire mountain had come alive to chase off the intruders.

In that moment of peril, it had been Fran who made the executive decision.

She swallowed everyone, except for Nightingale, and turned so she could bore into the cave wall. Once her whole body had been submerged in the stone wall, the demonic beasts approached and started to snap at her tail fiercely. Even with Nightingale providing cover, she had been able to drive away so many enemies.

Although she had been in pain, Fran persisted and tunneling about 30 feet into the rock formation before she rolled back onto her rear and smashed the demonic beasts with her giant body. Subsequently, she gathered all of her strength into her tail and whipped it hard against the ceiling of the tunnel, knocking down the stones. By blocking the mouth of the tunnel, she finally eliminated some enemies.

During the struggle, the witches hiding in Fran's stomach had had an unforgettable experience. They tumbled and rocked inside the worm while she was fighting and they nearly threw up. As if the rolling and whipping wasn't enough, they had also been confined next to the rotting meat that was in the digestive cavity and it had reeked.

Ultimately, at least, all of them were safe.

"First we have to figure out what's going on." Elena looked at Fran, "How did you get stuck down here?"

"I think the rock formation must have been eroded by years of water washing so it collapsed abruptly as I twirled in the passage. It all happened so fast that I was already falling by the time I realized what had happened. Then I knocked into something and blacked out," Fran said limply. "When I woke up, I found myself being transported by dozens of invisible worms and then they left me in this place."

"I see... They've taken you as a vacant carrier." Elena raised her eyebrows, "At least, we're lucky."

"We're indeed, very lucky, especially since we were not eaten on the spot," Fran muttered. "It's a pity that I accidentally glanced up at the ceiling of the cave when I was about to escape."

"Is it really a watchful Magic Eye?" Agatha asked in a deep voice.

"I don't know. The moment I saw it, it spotted me as well, but I'm not sure what it really was. This monster was much bigger than the Multi-eyed Demon." Fran sighed, exhaling a nasty wind that assaulted the people around her. "Ah, sorry... since Elena and the other God's Punishment witches lost their smell a long time ago, I stopped paying it any attention..."

"Ahem, it's fine." Ice Witch Agatha held her breath for a long time before saying, "Did you happen to get an overall view of the monster?"

"After I had been bound, it landed and took its time as it bathed in the lake..." Fran paused for a moment as she looked for the words. "I don't know how to describe it. The monster looked like a failed experiment, it's like a lump of flattened guts that has been laid over the body of the Multi-eyed Demon. The two parts don't mesh naturally and they look more like a forceful patchwork. I also noticed that it had tentacles writhing in the gaps between the parts. I am not sure if they were living worms or a physical part of the monster. Regardless, that lump of the guts was much larger than the Multi-eyed Demon, even bigger than the Fearful Beast of Hell."

"Is it possible that the monster is consuming demons?" Nightingale frowned, "I believe it can't be considered a simple hybrid demonic beast."

"I think we should figure out how to get out of here before we try to figure out what it is." Elena patted Fran's huge mouth. "Next time, remember to alert us before telling us the details. Do you understand?"

"Um..." Fran answered gloomily.

"Can you move now?"

"I can't. I've run myself out..." Fran shook her head. "I consumed all the food in my stomach during the time we have been trapped here, so I need food for fuel."

"What if we give you the last of our food?" Lightning suggested.

"That's barely enough for her to tunnel 100 steps." Elena took a deep breath, "All we can do is wait or risk it and break out."

"Waiting isn't safe either," Agatha said calmly. "The space in here is too small and we'll all suffocate in less than a day if we don't find a way out." "Even if Sylvie manages to locate us, they will have to destroy the beasts before they can try to save us." She paused, "Don't forget the enemy also possesses devouring worm carriers."

"Unfortunately, if we charge out now, it's unlikely we won't be devoured by the numerous beasts." The God's Punishment Witches hesitated. "Besides... what do we do about Fran? She can't escape and there's no way for her to defend herself from so many enemies."

"Anyway... let me check the situation outside first." Nightingale turned, unwilling to be involved in this dilemma.

"If you guys figure out a way to escape, don't worry about me," Fran said suddenly. "Taquila witches don't fear death. I'll always belong to them no matter what I've become. By the way, I've got something else in my stomach that may be of some help." She wriggled her body, slowly spitting out several sticky iron boxes.

"What's..."

"The garrison supplies that the First Army asked me to carry," Fran said, coughing. "They said these things were too heavy to carry and asked me for help, so I swallowed all of them."

Agatha opened the boxes one by one—there were building tools and materials in them, such as shovels, spades, wire nettings, etc. As the things in the last box were revealed, Agatha froze for a moment.

The iron box was not very large but it was especially heavy. Apart from the shockproof wheat-straw stuffing, there were a dozen wooden boxes labeled "the second chemistry plant, sample 64, qualified".

If she remembered correctly, most of the nitrogen generated during decomposition had been sent to this factory.

This box actually held explosives.