

Witch 841

Chapter 841: The Application of Blackwater

However, the "underground Styx's River" that where Blackwater converged in the Southernmost Region was very unusual. According to Iron Axe's report, along the way from Choke Swamp to Endless Cape, Styx's River became less thick and the stagnant fog turned thin. Several Styx's Rivers intersected at Blackwater Valley where men could even hear the roar of the water splattering onto the rocks beneath them when they were standing at a higher spot.

Roland speculated that the composition of the Styx's River water changed as it flowed. For example, the stagnant fog Iron Axe had described in his report might be a kind of toxic gas emitted by Blackwater, or a product of the reaction between some subterranean materials. That might explain the reason why during centuries of evolution, the natural lightning or man-made fire did not set the Blackwater Valley ablaze, and why no one could survive in Choke Swamp.

The stagnant fog shrouding the Styx's River not only stopped the Sand Nation people but also blocked fresh air, and thus guaranteed a steady flow of Blackwater toward the south. But as the underground river drew close to the Cape, it became thinner and finally disappeared. Only some part of the underground river would escape from the ground under pressure. Among them, some would set aflame, while some would turn into tiny streams and shallow puddles on the ground. Additionally, the stagnant fog dispersed at that point, providing a perfect environment for them to develop mines.

Roland had no idea about how many components could be separated out of that unique crude oil, so he just asked the Chief Alchemist to have some experiments first before making a further plan.

Luckily, the distilled components so far showed a very inspiring prospect.

"No doubt that Blackwater can be used to make dreadful weapons, but it can do far more than that," Roland answered as he picked up the beaker and studied it carefully. "There's much we can benefit from it, even only from its high combustion heat. I'll let you know one day."

The best way to motivate a straightforward man like the Chief Alchemist would be raising his interest with new knowledge.

Roland laughed in silence as he saw the old man's desire was apparently not satisfied. He continued, "As to the experiment, it's not enough to just use several retorts and condenser pipes if we mean to put Blackwater into use. You have to figure out some plans, like the way we produce dioic acids, that will enable mass production"

The principle of oil separation was very simple, which could be regarded as the most basic chemical knowledge. Upon being heated, the raw oil would turn into steam that would later enter the connected distillation tower, where the steam of different components would successively condense due to their different boiling points. During this procedure, the finished oils such as gasoline, kerosene, diesel, heavy oil, etc. could be collected. The process was a complete physical transformation, so it would be very easy to achieve those materials under the current experiment condition.

Although the utilization rate of the raw oil of the modern world had been significantly improved as the technology of refinement was diversifying, the traditional distillation was still useful. As such, distillation was still the first choice when they did not take the cost factor into account.

Kyle Sichi was too well aware of the difficulty they would face if they wanted to upscale any lab experiments to a more complicated mass industrial production. He had to take lots of details into account if they were going to put the distillation into practical production.

The old alchemist stroked his beard and said, "Um... I need a few days to plan it out, and I want the Witch Union's assistance."

That was a good sign that he asked for assistance from the witch voluntarily. Roland nodded. "Just let me know if you want anything. I'll see to it."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Kyle said, weighing his words. "Apart from this, I have one more small request."

"Oh? Go ahead."

"May I have the honor to see the new invention made from them when it's ready?" His voice was full of curiosity.

Theoretically speaking, the old alchemist had gone a little overboard since the project was meant to remain confidential. It was just like an engineer responsible for extracting uranium ore wanted to know the entire Manhattan plan. But Roland agreed after a short contemplation. After all, a little incentive could raise his passion for work, and Roland was confident that there was nobody who could compete with Neverwinter in terms of science and technology level in this era.

"You have to work hard." Roland pointed at the separated liquids and said, "The sooner you get the finished product, the earlier you will know the answer to your question."

"Pardon me, Your Majesty... Do you mean all of them?" Kyle asked in amazement. "They were indeed all combustible, but the liquid distilled in the lower tower was no better than snow powder. It produces thick smokes and doesn't burn well, not even good for lights. "

"This guy, whose mind was still clinging to the explosive, takes any products that are less active as wastes," Roland thought. It was true that the light distillates in the upper tower were more inflammable and its flame was more vigorous, but their usages were unexpectedly limited in practice. Without additives, even the slightest mistake would set them off, so they were barely helpful under the current condition. Instead, he favored the diesel and heavy oil distilled in the lower tower.

No doubt diesel would be a perfect fuel for the internal combustion engine. Even those mixed with impurities resulting from the inferior process were usable in practice. Their only problem was creating thick black smoke and thereby caused pollution when they burned, but that barely troubled Roland at this moment.

Heavy oil would play an essential role in navigation and was the optimal fuel for steam-powered boats. The current coal-powered boat might work well in inland rivers, but it was not powerful enough to sail on the sea, where the boat required huge power that coal failed to provide. To be honest, it had already been a laborious task for the boat to travel from Fjords to Shallow Beach of the Western Region.

Therefore, Roland wanted to build Festive Harbor at the Endless Cape where he could supply oil to the steam-powered boat that was planning to cross the Sealine and enter the open ocean.

Furthermore, the requirement of producing heavy oil was the lowest. The roughly distilled heavy oil, even those mixed with asphaltic residue, was usable, so it might be one that could be most easily obtained in the oil family.

Of course, Roland would not tell Kyle about that. He could not guarantee anything before he got the finished oil. If the final result ran counter to his original deduction, it would taint his reputation for being omniscient. So he just shrugged and said, "All the oil components, including the residues and scraps, must be collected and categorized. They'll be useful for me."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the Chief Alchemist said with his hand across his chest.

"By the way." As Roland walked out of the room, he suddenly stopped at the lab doorway. He turned to look at Kyle and added, "Set up a tutorial session."

That took Kyle by surprise. He blurted out, "What?"

"I thought I've made my idea clear in the last agriculture meeting. We need to add an agriculture class to our secondary education curriculum. That will help us to train enough qualified men to handle the situation even if when we are going to spread Golden Twos to the entire kingdom," Roland elaborated. "And new plants will require more skilled people. As far as I can see, there're many people who intend to join the chemistry industry after finishing their universal education. You'd better have them trained before using them in case they mess everything up in the plant due to the lack of experience."

Letting people choose courses they were interested in was the same as college students select their own majors. Here in Neverwinter, the process took place earlier in middle school. Roland had thought on this matter for a long time, and he believed that since there was no time to train people with various skills currently, he had better start with training professional workers as soon as possible.

"Your Majesty, wasn't Lady Scroll supposed to... be responsible for that?"

"She handles the sections of recruitment, class composition, evaluation, and payroll, but the teacher must be from Ministry of Chemical Industry, so you have to see to it."

Kyle let out a sigh of relief as if he would have obeyed everything as long as Roland did not push him to teach students. His miserable memory was as fresh as yesterday. He had suffered enough during the process of recruiting and training some alchemy apprentices in order to earn "Intermediate Chemistry" from Roland. Kyle replied, "I see, Your Majesty." "I think the alchemists from the king's city, who were adept at public speaking and advertising, are quite qualified for the teaching position. Do you think so?"

Chapter 842: Chicken-and-duck Knight

Prius Dessau's life had been going quite smoothly recently.

Like a dream, his service at the Elk Family had faded into oblivion over time. His skill and training as a knight had been long forgotten. His big belly could not fit in his old clothes. Instead, he bought baggy

fabric pants and short silk robes, which not only were easy to manage but also enabled him to act like a gentleman—although he was aware that in His Majesty’s domain there were no real nobles anymore.

Of course, his knighthood, which was not truly a dream, could still be evidenced by the shining armors displayed in his living room. Oddly enough, when he had been a knight of the Elk Family, he had disliked those armors so much that he had even considered selling them to a blacksmith at an unusually low rate. But after starting serving His Majesty, he began to feel these things pleasing to the eye. One of his hobbies now was holding his toddler and rambling about his ‘valiant and heroic’ fighting stories.

But in those stories, Prius had completely avoided mentioning Duke Ryan, as if he had always been an impeccable loyal minister to Roland Wimbledon.

After joining the City Hall, he had been continuously moving up in his career. Seizing the opportunity when the population of Neverwinter was rapidly growing, he expanded the chicken and duck aquaculture zone several times, and it now eventually turned it into a huge poultry factory. That was right, the poultry factory he created on his own was not by any means worse than the machine-manufacturing factories. After learning the term ‘factory’ from His Majesty, he immediately hung the board for his factory over the yard gate.

Nowadays factories sprang out in Neverwinter like mushrooms after rain. It was currently the most popular word in the City Hall. Naturally, he did not want to be left behind.

After all, he had more than 100 employees; in his factory, there were almost 10,000 chickens and ducks which needed several baskets of fodders and earthworms each day, a scale he had never dreamed of. As to being called ‘Chicken-and-duck Knight’, he did not mind it; instead, he rather enjoyed it.

Now that his career was on track, Prius became idle. The first batch of apprentices had gained the skill of distinguishing poultry genders, feeding, filtering baby chickens, etc. Furthermore, they could even train newbies, which gave Prius much free time. Fowl plague, the most dreadful thing for raising poultries, could be easily dispelled by that witch Lily, so the scale of his factory could actually expand as large as he wished. Now, he only had to do planning and statistics work, and then the Minister of Agriculture would do the rest.

In fact, most of the other knights who had been captured with him were doing pretty well, except a few who were too stubborn to cooperate. His superior Sirius Daly, for instance, a former knight of the Wolf Family, had now become a minister, and he had the highest rank among all of them.

Morning Light, who had been promoted to an intermediate teacher, earned about the same as Prius. While doing small talk, Ferlin Eltek seemed to have mentioned that he had plans other than keep on teaching. It was hard to speculate where this former star knight would work, but it must be somewhere not too bad.

The other knights like Halon, Valsa, Kazan.... were either teaching or operating a business. Prius often met these old acquaintances when he had time, to chat about their daily lives, their work, and their expectations for the future. But not everybody was sincerely convinced by His Majesty. For example, Halon was not satisfied with the policy that forbade captured knights to join the army. As such, during their meetings, he was often in state of despondence because of his unfulfilled dream. Prius did not

agree with him. Everyone knew that flintlocks were very powerful weapons. If he were in charge, he would be unwilling to entrust these weapons to a defeated army.

As to himself, he laid eyes on the annual Award and Honor Ceremony—judging from His Majesty's emphasis on agriculture, he felt sooner or later he would stand on the platform in the square, being admired and respected by audiences. Not only would he accept the medal bestowed by His Majesty personally, but he would also get a prize of 100 gold royals, which was a much promising future than joining the army.

While he was on the way to City Hall, humming, and was about to greet Sirius Daly before going to the poultry factory, the minister stopped him.

"Ah, here you are. His Majesty is waiting for you."

Prius slowed down. "What's the matter?"

"The guard didn't tell. He only told me to tell you to go to the castle when you're here."

"I see." Prius pretended to be calm and self-collected, although his heart beat faster. "It's not long after the conference of the agriculture mobilization movement. Is His Majesty thinking the same as I do, to promote me as an honorary example?"

Full of expectations, he entered the castle. Under the guidance of a guard, he came to His Majesty's office door on the third floor.

"Come in," after introducing himself, a familiar voice came from the other side of the door. "I've been waiting for you for quite a while."

"Officer of the Ministry of Agriculture, Prius Dessau sends his best regards," as soon as he entered the room, he got to his knee and held a fist over his chest as a knight greeted a king. But due to the extra fat on his belly, the gestures he made were far less handsome than before, and he almost trapped himself while kneeling down.

"Please rise." The king was sitting behind a long desk, smiling at him, and said, "You've been doing such a good job recently that even Barov can't stop praising you, which is rather rare. Therefore, I have a new task for you."

"I'm at your command." Prius stood up respectfully.

"Listen carefully... This is a top secret. Even in the City Hall, not many people know it," Roland said in a serious tone, "and it's so significant that it concerns the future development of Neverwinter. As soon as you accept it, you can't tell anyone what you see and hear without my permission. The reason I chose you is that you're the most suitable candidate considering there's nobody else has done it before, although you're not indispensable. If you can do it well, the compensation won't be an issue. I want your answer now."

Prius was startled. He did not expect His Majesty to make such a proposal at all. It had nothing to do with the medal, but His Majesty actually planned to give him a really tough task.

"Ah, forget about the significance, the competitive compensation... They mean nothing but trouble. To be involved in the king's secret is like a suicide." Subconsciously, he wanted to decline it, but he

swallowed the words on the tip of his tongue. "Wait a minute. Who do you think the person is? He is the Lord of Neverwinter, the King of Graycastle!"

"When the King wants an officer to do something, does he need to consult the officer in advance? Unless the officer has planned to rebel and hide in his territory. Otherwise, he should take the order no matter what it is so as to not suffer a king's wrath. His Majesty doesn't order me directly is to care for my feelings, not to give me the chance to refuse."

Prius swallowed a mouthful of saliva. "Even though this king Wimbleton is different from most other lords, and he means every word he says, didn't I just tell him 'I'm at your command?'"

"I just expressed my loyalty, then I directly tell him that I don't want to or I'm unable to do it? If I were the king, I guess I would hold a grudge if not flying into a rage on the spot. In that case, not only won't I get promoted, but I might not even be able to be a common official either, not to mention the Award and Honor Ceremony and the abundant prize."

At this thought, Prius really wanted to slap himself.

After hesitating for quite a while, he eventually blurted out, "I'd like to take this task."

He could not afford to lose his position. He had lost his identity as a knight, and if he went on losing his official position as the superintendent of the poultry factory, he would really have nothing left at all.

At this moment, the only thing that comforted him was His Majesty's words 'you're the most suitable candidate considering there is no precedent'. "At least, this means a sort of confirmation of my capability?"

"Alright." Roland smiled and whispered something to the empty space beside him, and then looked at Prius and said, "Now follow me to a place."

"Where?" Prius asked immediately, anxious and a little panic.

"The Third Border City," the King said while raising his eyebrow. "Have you heard of it?"

Chapter 843: The Conduct of A Loyal Official

Prius had never heard of this city. Border Town had become a place of residence because it was to serve the mine, and it had nothing to do with a 'city', let alone to prefix the city with 'the third'. Before His Majesty arrived in the Western Region, only the Longsong Stronghold deserved to be called a city.

When they arrived at the cave at the foot of North Slope Mountain, Prius understood what His Majesty had meant.

He had always been curious as to why the Ministry of Construction established a fortress-like building in Neverwinter. The location of a strategic point being guarded by the First Army was a bit strange. At its back was the North Slope Mountains, and to the left and right, there was too great a distance from the borders to defend against army invasions, let alone allow them to properly guard His Majesty's castle.

He asked some of his colleagues in City Hall, but none of them gave him a satisfactory answer. Some said the construction team there was under the direct management of Minister Carl, and others had no authority to inquire into it. Such being the case, Prius stopped asking. After all, he was only curious. There was no need to go so far as to get himself into trouble.

However, he never thought he would personally step into this military position.

When Prius saw the manmade underground aisle and a large cluster of caves, his jaw almost dropped.

"How did they make this?"

"One year ago, there was nothing in this area. Now, it's like the interior of the whole mountain has been connected. It's not exaggerating to call such a spacious underground area a city... but, could this have been done by men?"

Prius cast a furtive glance at His Majesty, to whom his awe deepened.

Duke Ryan had indeed picked the wrong opponent.

The Lion overwhelmed the other big families and had ruled the Western Region for over a decade and they made the once barren land as solid as a piece of iron. This was a manifestation of his perfect methods and capability, but... after all, he was just a human being.

What happened next shocked the Elk knight even more.

As he arrived at a flat and open hall, by the trailer, Prius saw two men dressed like warriors walk over to them—since the popularization of flintlocks in the First Army, guards dressed in this attire were rarely seen.

One of them looked Prius up and down before he turned to ask His Majesty, "Are you sure it's going to be alright?"

"Sooner or later, my subjects will know about it. Instead of concealing it, I think it's better to give them some time to accept it," Roland replied. "Let's start with the City Hall officials."

"Alright then..." The guard sighed helplessly. He then waved towards the dome above the hall. A flash of black shadow descended and quietly fell in front of the crowd.

Prius' heart pounded in his chest and he almost cried out!

"Oh my god, what the hell is that?"

Looking at the blob monster, full of tentacles, in front of him, he felt a chill as it crept up his spine "Even a demon from hell wouldn't look as horrible as that." The knight wanted to retreat but found that his feet had gone numb. The only reason he didn't fall to the ground was the calmness His Majesty exuded.

Then he "heard" a voice.

However, the soft female voice did not come from next to his ear, but from directly within his head, "Your Majesty, nice to see you."

"Nice to see you too, Pasha," Roland said with a smile. "How are the worms?"

"Their number has increased. As long as there are mushrooms, it seems they'll just keep on eating."

"They do seem easy to feed."

"Yes, you can totally count on us."

"When the war starts, you won't have many hands to spare. Besides, I want to raise more than a thousand worms, so it's better to let them get familiar with it sooner."

Prius was startled—His Majesty talked so freely with the monster, just like he was talking with a common official. Not to mention the respect the monster showed towards His Majesty was totally different from the intimidating demons. "If ghosts and monsters in books talked like this, perhaps they wouldn't be as scary."

He took two deep breaths and he felt his racing heart slow down.

"What does His Majesty want me to raise? Worms?"

"Besides... is this the big secret he warned me about? At the foot of the North Slope Mine is a concealed horrible nonhuman entity?"

His Majesty seemed to read his mind. Patting Prius on the shoulder he said, "This is... Miss Pasha. She used to be a well-renowned lady. Although she's been cursed by demons, which is why she looks the way she does now, deep in her heart she's still human. There's no need to be afraid."

"La... Lady?" Prius was startled and took a moment to come to himself.

"Exactly." The King sighed. "Come, walk with me and I'll tell you the details."

That's when Prius heard an unbelievable story. There were more monsters like Pasha. 400 years ago, they lived in the Barbarian Land and even built their own towns, but they failed to resist the combined invasion of demonic beasts and demons. Most of them died in the wilderness, only very few escaped to the Western Region. The demons' curse turned them into monsters and made them immortal, which meant they had to live forever with that pain. Now, Roland took in those survivors. They would become Roland's ally for fighting against demons, as well as the subjects of Graycastle.

"I... understand," Prius murmured.

"But, as you can see, their looks can easily give people a negative first-impression, so I have to keep it top secret and only very few have been told." Roland stopped for a while, his eyesight freezing. "If you speak of this, you know the consequence."

"I'll keep my mouth shut, Your Majesty!" Prius hurriedly swore. Although this odd news was more inconceivable than the horror stories from grannies' mouths, he did not intend to dispute how much was truthful. He would believe whatever His Majesty told him. That was the fundamental conduct of a loyal official.

"Glad to hear that." His Majesty nodded.

With the blob monster... no, the ancient Lord Pasha as their guide, the party passed through a long aisle. She then turned back and said, "Here we are."

In front of Prius, there was another huge cave. The bleak underground space was suddenly full of movement. Despite the unprecedented plants and cavernous view, the huge worms crawling among the mushrooms alone were enough to keep his attention.

Prius found that much stimulation, over a short period of time, had desensitized him.

"Is this... what I need to raise?"

His Majesty seemed to have been observing Prius the entire time. Finally, he nodded with satisfaction before saying, "That's right. It's called a rubber worm. Its secretion is a widely used industrial material, which is as important as meat and eggs. The expedition team found it in the Great Snow Mountain and brought it back. Unfortunately, it could only live underground, which is why it has been left to the survivors from the Third Border City to take care of." At this point, Roland suddenly changed the subject. "I heard in order to feed the chickens and ducks, you raised earthworms?"

"Essentially... yes." After quite some time, Prius finally caught up with His Majesty's thought. "I can reduce the poultry's foraging area, which will subsequently enable them to grow faster."

"These worms are no different than earthworms, I don't mean the breeding method, but the nature of the two." Roland kicked a rubber worm resting on a mushroom. The worm didn't move until it hit the ground, then, dragging its huge belly, it crawled off into the thick grass. "They're not aggressive; their favorite food is mushrooms. They are massive, but they are passive, so you won't be bitten. The only thing you need to do is regularly collect the mucus in their bellies."

"Mu...cus?"

"Have you seen a milk cow? The point isn't the cow, but what the cow produces."

"By collect, do you mean, squeeze it out?"

"It'd be best if you could find a way to harvest it." Roland smiled gently, "However, like I just said, the worm itself isn't important. Sometimes it's faster to kill the worm to collect the mucus. Afterall, their reproductive speed is much faster than a chicken or a cow."

Prius suddenly shivered, for no clear reason he got the impression that His Majesty did not like the vital worms.

As this thought flashed through his mind, in the blink of an eye, Roland returned to his usual tone, "Written in this notebook are some of the habits of these worms." He handed Prius a booklet, with a cowhide hardcover. "You can read it for reference and compare it to your knowledge. Then see if you can find ways to make them grow faster and collect mucus easier. I wish to see what you accomplish by next month."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Prius swallowed hard and took the booklet, as he inquired, "How am I to do this on my own..."

"The First Army stationed here will assist you," Roland said with a smile. "Work hard and there will be a place for you in this year's Award and Honor Ceremony."

Chapter 844: Messages Arriving at the Same Time

The decision to have the Ministry of Agriculture farm rubber worms was not Roland's latest flight of fancy. In his opinion, farming rubber worms was as important as exploiting oil, so he naturally wanted to have that industry under his control. If it was not for the potential threats the worms might bring to people, he would not have any intention to place the feedlot in the Third Border City.

After discussing with Barov, Edith and other people, he decided to adopt the explanation of "her ladyship and the fallen city", which would be more acceptable to people than the saying of "the witch empire". As now, only the City Hall's senior officials and the main force of the First Army knew the truth of the Battle of Divine Will and Taquila, so it was very difficult to make the upcoming war known to the world. However, they worried about a blunt announcement would make people panic, so they had to rephrase their proclamation before unveiling the truth to the public. A good way to do so was to slowly send the reworded information out to minimize subsequent shock created among the public.

Roland would rather keep the dark history of the witch empire covered forever for the sake of the stability of the united front. If humans were fortunate to win the Battle of Divine Will, it would be easier to make them accept that unique period of history by the time archaeologists unearthed the lost record.

Knight Elk was left alone in the wormhole to do the research on his own, while Roland, invited by Pasha, entered the subterranean hall.

"They're back, Your Majesty."

"Who?" Confused by the random words, Roland could not help raising his eyebrow,

Pasha did not reply. She raised her tentacles and pointed at the deep, secluded passage on the other side of the hall, looking enigmatic.

He looked over his shoulder at the dark passage where there was a flash of white shadow swinging by. Moments later, two giant devouring worms crept out and crawled towards him, wriggling, their mouths wide open, revealing tusks and fangs.

"Your Majesty, do you remember us?"

One of them greeted Roland merrily.

Roland, slightly surprised, asked, "Are you Jasmine... and Lyra?"

How could Roland forget them? He could still remember the moment they had bade farewell and the calm look when they had said that they harbored no regrets before boarding the concrete boat heading to Great Snow Mountain. Even now, Roland could still feel their unfailing determination in their tones.

"Yes, we are. You do remember us!"

"Mind your manner!" Another worm poked her companion with its tail. "Whatever we looked like, do remember we are the Taquila..."

"Worm?" Jasmine finished the sentence for Lyra deliberately.

"Witch!" Lyra cried.

"They just arrived at Neverwinter. They persist in seeing you before their dormancy, so I have to keep them waiting beside the hall. I hope I didn't frighten you." Pasha drooped her main tentacles. "Thanks again for your assistance."

"No, you didn't frighten me. Honestly, I've been waiting for the good news of the successful transfer too." Roland waved one hand and did not take it seriously. "Why... do they have to go dormant?"

"For we couldn't afford to sustain the worm carrier, Your Majesty," Lyra said solemnly. "Fran alone is capable of handling the daily tunneling and transportation. There's no need to keep all three carriers awake. Even Fran was dormant for the most of her time before coming here."

Roland remembered that Lyra had the same bright and bubbly personality as Jasmine's before her transfer. But now she gave him an impression of maturity as if she really grew up instantly after the Soul Transfer.

After staying with Phyllis and the other witches for a long time, Roland learned that not all Taquila witches had lived a long life. At the very beginning, due to the lack of carriers and God's Punishment Warriors' shells, they were forced to either to merge with Eleanor, one of the Three Chiefs, or to be transferred to a soul container and enter a state of dormancy.

In other words, only a few witches had lived for centuries. Most witches waited for a long time until the church was established in the Starfall City that could provide shells for them. Phyllis had changed two shells so far and had stayed awake for merely 150 years. The actual time when she was conscious was indeed shorter as there was a period of time at the very beginning when she felt bewildered and had to adjust herself to the new environment. Still, she was regarded as "the elder" among the Taquila survivors.

Jasmine and Lyra were among the youngest transferer. Apart from the time they spent in getting familiar with their shells, they were often asleep. So, their mental age was close to their real age. Roland was really impressed with the change in their mentality.

Moreover, the most estimable thing was that they still kept their spirits up even in the shells of devouring worms, which, as far as Roland could see, exceeded many people.

Now it seemed that there was a good reason for the Union to unify the continent. Apart from its absolute power, they had many other merits worth noting as well.

"If I intend to turn the Impassable Mountain Range into a defensive barrier, three worm carriers aren't a lot," Roland said while looking at Pasha. "Keep them awake. They'll be very helpful to the upcoming new project. In addition, there're also many places in Neverwinter that need reconstruction. No need to worry about food. The City Hall will take care of it."

"Really?" Jasmine yelled excitedly.

No one liked to spend most of their time sleeping, especially the Taquila witches. They had slept too long.

"As long as you don't ask for meat for every meal." Roland spread out his hands. "If they have Fran's stomach, I estimate they would just need the same amount of food as those for 100 people."

"Now that you've got a plan, I will leave them to you." Pasha, who seemed to have already known the answer, said with a smile.

...

Roland felt more relaxed after the encounter with Jasmine and Lyra. As he returned to the castle, he received a message from the First Army.

They had successfully accomplished the task to blow up the snow mountain. The passage that connected the underground river and the sea had been blocked completely by the explosion, and the rising water would head to the west after the ruins submerged. Most of the men would return to Neverwinter shortly except the Gun Battalion, who would stay at the snow mountain and monitor the change of the watercourse.

Things had turned out as Roland had expected. As the Taquila witches finished searching the underground ruins and gained the devouring worms, their exploration was approaching an end.

Thus, there was nothing Roland needed to worry about as far as the Western Region was concerned for the time being.

When Roland unsealed the other letter, the content surprised him.

It was from the Northern Region, not sent by a carrier pigeon but by a rider under Duke Kant's order entrusted by the garrison. With full four pages, it detailed what had happened in the Holy City of Hermes and the collapse of the Tower of Babel. Eagle Face, the commander of the garrison believed it was the perfect time to launch an attack. After taking the thick wall around the city and the huge mangonel into account, he asked for an reinforcement from one or two cannon teams. He wished to gain the first victory in the new year for his King.

After Roland finished reading the letter, he could not believe that the church jointly built by the Union and Starfall City had come to its end like this.

Roland could not help wondering whether this information was true or false.

Doubtlessly, the church still had a number of God's Punishment soldiers, and it might make a desperate attempt to save itself by involving the First Army in a street battle. Roland had planned to let the God's Punishment Witches participate in the battle to provide close-range attacks that the First Army was in lack of. In the meantime, the new mortar would be put into use as well to further drive enemies into a corner. Although it was advertised that the goal of the war was to unify the whole kingdom, the real purpose was actually to exterminate the church.

But now came the signs that the Holy City was fraying at the edges from inside.

Just as he was about to summon people to have a discussion, he heard a tapping sound from the French window behind him.

He turned around and saw Nightingale pull the bird directly through the glass into the room.

Roland took the letter off the carrier pigeon's leg. The bird was apparently at a loss. When he spread the letter out and glanced at the content, he immediately stood up.

"How dare he?"

There was only one sentence on the paper.

"Appen, the King of Dawn, schemes to disturb the Eastern Region of Graycastle. The situation in the Holy City is volatile. Otto Luoxi has been imprisoned."

Chapter 845: Eye of the Branch Nest

"It hurts!"

"It hurts a lot!"

"I can't bear it!"

The monster beat its tentacles against the seawater in vexation. The "blade" and "foot" hiding inside its body were shivering, apparently frightened by the overwhelming anger.

For the monster, pains were not unfamiliar.

From the moment of its birth to the life as an Eye of Sectional Nest, the monster had fought numerous battles against enemies. All that it had experienced—injuries, annexations, evolutions, and pains—enhanced and sharpened its senses. They were necessary sacrifices for absorbing magic power.

But it was not the pain that annoyed the monster. It was... a feeling that the monster had never had before.

The monster tried to match the emotion with other reactions of life but soon found it unnecessary—the feeling lay in the instincts of most species. No matter how considerably the species varied, they all had, without an exception, this kind of feeling.

Fear.

A kind of feeling the monster had experienced for the first time of its life.

The feeling somehow bewildered the monster, and the anger rose before it noticed it.

"kill!"

"Kill her!"

"How very much I want to kill her!"

"How dare her, a tiny bug, to break into my body and challenge me with the speck of magic power? One day I'll tear her to pieces and put her head on her skeleton, in a way red mist insects have done."

Yet, neither anger nor fear was a necessary emotion that the monster had to experience in order to grow up. The monster had never been scared of pain, nor had it been upset by a momentary defeat. To be honest, it had never thought of such kind of thing before.

The monster had thought of nothing except the evolution.

Evolution was more important than mere survival, for the former represented the sublimation of the species, whereas the latter only stood for the interest of individuals.

The monster realized that there was something wrong with its body.

But what was it?

Even thinking about the question gave it a serious headache. The hot flames had not only taken away one-third of its body but also made its head swimming.

"I need time."

"Time to regenerate a new body."

"And time to find the answer."

The monster suppressed the fear, anger, and all sorts of various subtle feelings that it had never experienced before and sank to the bottom of the ocean.

...

Over 10 days later, the monster crept out of the hiding place and released all the "blades" and "feet" locked within its body.

The monster had suffered great losses in the battle, but it did not care much, for as long as it recovered completely, it would regenerate new parts of its body.

Now the food was more urgent for the hungry monster.

Meanwhile, it had come up with some conclusions to the problems.

Firstly, the monster found that it had lost many pheromones that it had taken from various types of bugs before. The pheromones could help to indicate the evolution direction of its group, so collecting them was the chief task for every eye of the branch nest. The monster's loss was understandable—with a huge blast, the monster lost the control of its body in the hot flames and heat waves, its body parts twisted and broken, and among them, some were the brains that stored pheromones. Even though most parts of its body were healed, the pheromones in these brains were gone. This was like when you popped water bags. Repairing them would not help with the matter.

"That's not a big deal. There're bugs everywhere for me to recollect."

"And I've succeeded in keeping the most important red mist multi-eyed insect, so the loss is acceptable."

"But the problem is I've lost the connection with the mother of the nest."

"I can't believe it!"

Since the monster was born, its connection with its own kind was so close and inextricable that as long as they were in the same water area, it could always sense the central nest, no matter how far distance was laid between them. Through the water waves, it could deliver the collected pheromones, as well as share the evolution instructions among its kind.

But now all of them were gone.

The monster had scarcely concerned about this kind of problem since it got wounded. By the time its mind was clear enough to smoothly deliver the pheromone of the multi-eyed insect, it suddenly realized that where the indescribable feeling came from.

It could not catch the voice of the central nest even when the tide fell and waters became one.

At first, the monster wonder if the problem lay in its incomplete regenerated body. Then it thought of the fact that any individuals separated from the central nest would never lose the connection as long as they were not utterly dead. The monster checked its body over and over again and finally noticed a part of its brain had blended with the red mist multi-eyed insect, rather than engulfed it

"That tiny insect must have taken advantage of my fragile moment and had a desperate struggle."

Aware of the truth, the monster was scared and angry at first but soon calmed down.

In its eyes, a less evolved insect was merely a lesser creature, nothing more.

The insect did not benefit much from its behavior even though it indeed made some difference.

Now the monster could not sense even a little bit of the multi-eyed insect inside its body. Instead, it had taken over all its queer eyes, through which the monster could "see" many primal creatures looking at it.

After a long thought, the monster finally found the answer to its problem.

The reason why it could not reach the central nest lay in the merging, which involuntarily made it have some of the weird feelings of the insect.

For example, fear.

And anger.

And... egoism.

Under the circumstances, the monster should have returned to Zenith Sea first and informed Mother of the Nest what had happened here. After that, it should hand itself over to the Mother of the Nest, for when the message could not be passed through water waves, annexation would be a perfect way for the group to retain all the pheromones and thereby obtain useful evolutionary instructions.

Of course, the monster knew that evolution was more important than survival, a very basic understanding among the whole group.

But now it hesitated.

The monster found that it had pondered over more things in recent 10-odd days than what it had done in the past 100 years altogether. Back then, fighting, annexing, collecting, and growing were like its instincts, yet now it seemed to lose such instincts...

In addition, the monster was aware that the restrictions on using pheromones were lifted.

Every step of evolution was a choice made out of an abundance of caution. The pheromones collected by every nest eye must be passed to the central nest, where it would analyze them and then sort out the

valuable parts that would be reconstructed and turned into evolution instructions. Evolution did not only involve the change in nest eyes but also involved every part of the group, from the central nest to "blade" and "foot". All of them grew up in this way little by little.

Therefore, there were not many differences between each eye of the branch nest.

But during the time of recovery, the monster had accidentally used a pheromone coming from a primal creature with a self-healing ability. That was why its serious wound, which would have taken months to heal up, faded away so quickly within merely a dozen days. The monster also noticed something unusual about itself.

It was no longer a usual nest eye.

Its "foot" quickly hauled plenty of food—the primal aquatic creatures nearby, or what insects normally referred to as fish. The "blade" neatly cut off their heads, which then gave off a fishy smell that would soon attract more fish. In this way, it would not be long before the monster filled itself up.

The monster did not know why those primal aquatic creatures, which enjoyed the same resource as them, still lived as the weakest among all. Somehow, as the monster watched the foolish fish gathered, it thought of itself.

Since the monster had developed an emotion called "fear", it no longer wanted to go back to Zenith Sea. The red mist insect's feelings had influenced the monster. It now realized that survival was more important than anything.

The monster was afraid of being swallowed up by Mother of the Nest and being disturbed again by the erratic little bug.

It also wanted a revenge. The anger was still there, but it hid it temporarily.

As the monster continuously felt both anger and fear, it found itself yearn for more. This was something it had never considered before.

Evolution would be the only way to get what it wanted.

The monster hastily engulfs a pack of fish and then started to take action.

The monster had never been so impatient before. Back then, every nest eye did the same job, and it did not matter whether the monster was quick or slow.

But things had changed now.

The pheromones the monster was going to collect and the evolution it would make had nothing to do with the group.

This time, those tasks would be done for its own sake.

Chapter 846: Factional Conflicts

"Otto Luoxi is our ally and he deserves better. They've harassed the Eastern Region this time, next time they may dare to cross the boundary and invade the kingdom!" Brian said loudly. "Your Majesty, please give the order! No matter how far the enemy is, the First Army will crush them for you!"

"Invading us?" Barov raised his eyebrow. "If the army of the Kingdom of Dawn could enter Graycastle so brazenly, why on earth would you be here?"

"My lord, it's just an example—"

"A baseless example won't convince anybody," Barov interrupted. "More importantly, why do we need to involve the army in a problem that could be solved by diplomacy? Do you remember His Majesty's primary goal for this year? Do you think the eldest son of a noble family from the City of Glow would be more significant than our king's enthronement?"

For a moment, Brian was speechless.

"Alright... let's take a break." Roland clapped his hands. "Eat something before we continue."

As the clapping sounded, a servant waiting at the doorway entered wheeling a trolley. Some officials in the hall started to help themselves to snacks while others went to the bathroom. Thus, the tension within the room subsided.

This scene had come up repeatedly in their discussions during the three-day meeting. After Roland had received the intelligence reports from the spy, Hill Fawkes, and the garrison in the Northern Region, he had summoned all of the relevant officials to the castle to plan out a solution to the current situation.

Roland could clearly see two different factions forming among his men. The City Hall faction, headed by Barov, was more conservative. They preferred to concentrate on the development of the kingdom and were more focused on the Western Region, and they planned to gradually expand the population and increase the strength of Graycastle until the unification of the kingdom. To make the King of Dawn, Appen Moya, pay the price for his action was in their plan, but it was not considered urgent.

The other faction consisting of the First Army under the leadership of Brian, favored by the Adviser Department, was more aggressive. But they were not as united and as close as the City Hall faction. The men of the First Army were influenced by Brian, who boasted of new concepts like "defending against the enemy abroad", "acting before the enemy even notices," and "striking the enemy unprepared", so they insisted on taking immediate action, delivering retribution upon the Kingdom of Dawn and saving the detained Otto Luoxi. As for the members of the Adviser Department, they probably chose to stand with the First Army for their own benefit as they had no way to earn themselves rewards unless there was a war to fight.

Additionally, some members of the Adviser Department were from Longsong Stronghold, so they were not as familiar with Neverwinter as the men of City Hall. More often than not, their ideas were refuted and unappreciated, making their voice seem even less important.

Hence, there were several times that Brian's speech was countered by Barov easily. Honestly, in terms of eloquence, Brian was far behind Barov, so he had already done a great job of expressing his ideas in front of the ministers in the meeting so far. After all, Brian, the leader of the Gun Battalion, was young.

He grew up as an ordinary villager of Border Town, less tested and inexperienced, which was something that could be seen from his report of the defensive battle in the snow mountain.

Roland had kept silent during the discussions. For the moment, the aggressive side was at a disadvantage and was losing control of the debate. To Roland's surprise, Barov's ability had grown greatly in the past three years. He might have been well trained while serving the previous Treasurer and all he needed was a chance to take off.

The only thing that surprised Roland was that Edith had made no speech and kept silent over the three days of the meeting.

Among the officials, she, the Pearl of the Northern Region, might be the only one qualified to argue with Barov.

To prevent internal conflict between Edith and Barov, who both liked to compete against each other, Roland had deliberately set up a new department in City Hall, the Ministry of Defense, specializing in external military affairs. This new department included the Adviser Department as one of its subordinate organizations. The Ministry of Defense would be responsible for the external military affairs and the Security Bureau. In this way, the framework of Graycastle's brute strength was roughly finalized.

As expected, Roland was the minister of this new department, just like he was for the other departments. Edith used to be Barov's assistant, learning to deal with affairs in the City Hall. She had done her job very well, but it was not until now that she got her formal approval and became a member of the new department. To be given a such an honor so easily would be so great that no other reward would be a match in the future and other newcomers would take her as an example, believing that they were also qualified to get such a title easily.

After all, times had changed. Roland was no longer in a shortage of people and would not appoint anyone of little competence to a major position again.

So, Edith now worked as a clerk in the Ministry of Defense, playing the role of an adviser to serve Roland.

Roland believed that a person like the Pearl of the Northern Region would never feel frustrated at such an arrangement which could give an impression that she had to start all over again to gain power and that she would surely understand his intentions. Although she left the chief's office, she earned a chance to be promoted without interference. So, it was very unusual for her to keep quiet on an occasion that fit her skills and interests, and let Barov control the topic.

...

Roland glanced at Edith, who looked relaxed as she enjoyed her Chaos Drink. It was as if Barov's imposing manner held no interest to her.

"What a strange woman," he thought to himself.

He shrugged and said to Scroll beside him, "Show me today's meeting records."

"Okay," Scroll said as she put down the quill and handed a notebook over. "Here's all the records."

After three days of discussion, they had come up with a mutual conclusion to the information Roland had received.

Hill Fawkes, who had sent back the secret messages, had placed the three pieces of news in order according to their importance. That meant the enemy harassing the Eastern Region required the most concern and the thing about Otto in custody was less important. Given that, the meeting members believed that the eldest son of Luoxi Family was not, for the moment, in mortal danger. Appen Moya, who was new to his throne, still needed the support of the three big families.

Even though Appen Moya wanted to replace the Luoxi Family, he needed time, and they thought he would need at least a year or two. Otto might suffer in the prison, but he would survive.

The news Roland got about the volatile situation in the Holy City was confirmed by the report from the garrison in the Northern Region, so the meeting members thought it must have been true. Now even the City of Glow started to stir, they thought that Moya family might also be aiming at the church. The Moya hated the church, and they were eager for the large amount of wealth in Hermes that the church had collected and saved for centuries.

As for the harassment, the meeting members thought it might refer to secretly provoking and supporting the rebels. Other than that, the things the enemy could do, that was practical, was very little. No one believed that Appen would dare to march his army upon Graycastle, for defeat was nearly guaranteed. But the rebellion truly happened within the domain of Graycastle, which meant it could not be ignored. No matter how weak the rebels were, their action would cause damage to the kingdom, so it was reasonable for Hill to regard this piece of news as the most important.

Chapter 847: Now Is the Time

Both factions agreed to recover the Eastern Region and destroy the church, which had been incorporated into the plan in the previous meetings.

The only thing still in dispute was when to retaliate against the Kingdom of Dawn.

Roland had made his diplomatic posture very clear to his men, so this time no one tried to compromise on this matter or sweep the problem under the rug. But the officials of the City Hall still wished to negotiate with the Dawn Crown after Roland's enthronement, for they believed that at that time King Roland would be more rightful to stand out for Greycastle, and meanwhile they kept the choice of using force when it was needed. Apparently, they had been persuaded and tempted by the meeting held in the Months of Demons aiming at the future, so they were so eager to support Prince Roland to take the throne officially and become the veritable King of Graycastle. They also wanted to ascend from the local officials to the ministers of a real kingdom.

Lots of men and resources would be required to invade deep into the Kingdom of Dawn, which would doubtlessly affect the enthronement. No king would send out his elite men and hastily hold the ceremony of coronation at the same time. That was disgraceful either to the king or his people.

Of course, it was Roland who had the final say.

In the past three days, he had been watching the discussion without showing any obvious preference which was a sharp contrast to the unyielding attitude he had shown in the letter he had sent to Appen. But thanks to his silence, the attendants finally got a chance to have as many arguments as they wanted.

Roland did not change his original intention but was biding his time.

He was waiting for an opportunity to profit the most while paying the smallest price.

By nightfall, there came someone who knocked on Roland's door.

He let out a slight sigh of relief as he saw the visitor was Andrea.

Finally, she came.

Had she not taken the initiative, Roland would have gone to visit her sooner or later though he was sure that it was not a good choice and he might not be able to achieve anything by doing so.

"Here, have a dried fish," Nightingale said as she showed up and gave a piece of honey fish to Andrea, who might be the only witch who could get a share of snacks from Nightingale with the exception of Wendy.

Was it because of the bond among nobles?

"Thank you," Andrea, who did not seem in the mood for snacks, said as she took the snack and pocketed it. She put her hand on her chest and saluted Roland, "Your Majesty, I..."

She paused, finding the words.

"You want me to save your childhood friend, Otto Luoxi, don't you?" Roland spoke out Andrea's thoughts. He could not allow Andrea to hesitate any longer. If she changed her mind, the three days Roland had spent waiting would be in vain.

Roland also roughly guessed why Andrea could not make up her mind. He was certain that Otto was the one who fell in love with Andrea, who, on the contrary, only just took him as her friend. That was why she did not know how to make her request. To save Otto because he was her childhood playmate? After so many years, Andrea no longer missed her life in the Kingdom of Dawn because of what her father, Earl Quinn, had done to her. Her father did not protect her after he knew she was a witch. Instead, he used an accident to create a fake death for her. Of course, that was not something pleasant to remember.

When Otto visited Neverwinter last winter, Andrea had clearly made known her attitude that she wished not to be involved in her life in the Kingdom of Dawn. She now came to Roland just because of her kindness and her wish to offer some help.

"Yes..." She drew a deep breath and nodded slowly.

"But as you've heard in the meeting. At least over 3,000 men are needed to make Appen yield plus the men that were required to attack the Holy City. The total number will reach about 5,000, which accounts for 80 percent of the First Army."

Regardless of the argument, the City Hall and Adviser Departments finalized a rough plan. There was no river connecting Graycastle and the other two pieces of land, Hermes Plateau and the Kingdom of Dawn. Under such circumstances, they had to rely on carts and men to transport supplies which significantly increased the number of the men engaged in the logistics team. In addition, 20 percent of the First Army must be left to garrison every region of the kingdom so they had to leave for the next battlefield right after they won the first battle. The First Army did not even have extra men to take care of the land they had just conquered. By taking every aspect into account, it turned out that they would be busy all around without making a profit or even worse.

"I just counted the manpower. If you put in the materials... all kinds of cost, like the money for horses, carts, food..." Watching Andrea becoming more embarrassed, Roland attempted to illustrate more facts to make her suffer, but all of a sudden, he paused.

"Your Majesty?" The blonde witch in front of him was slightly surprised.

Roland's abrupt stop was not because he noticed something wrong, but because Nightingale had pinched him hard on his back and then whispered to him in a voice that no one else could hear, "Stop pushing her. Can't you just say what you mean."

"Ahem... I'm alright." Roland coughed. "That's the situation now, but we can turn the tables with some effort. It just depends on the three families and to what extent, they are willing to cooperate."

"The three... families?"

"It's obvious that the new king no longer trusts them. Our action may succeed in saving Otto, but our direct interference will break the relationship between the Moya royalties and Luoxi Family. Even if Appen is overthrown, how could the next king forget this?" Roland touched his chin and went on, "Now I've got strong demons to fight against, so I can't put too much concentration and men into our neighbor country. The future of the Kingdom of Dawn depends on the three families."

Andrea seemed to realize something. She said, "Please go on."

"We need someone to replace the Moya royalty," Roland said word by word.

Andrea was quiet for a moment, and then she said, "I see. Do you have a plan?"

She was a true highborn girl, who could keep calm even in the face of scheming to overthrow a regime. That made the next talk so much easier. Roland went straight to the point and asked, "Are you interested in being the Queen of the Kingdom of Dawn?"

"Your Majesty?" Andrea's face finally changed. The question indeed took her by surprise, "No... I don't want to leave..."

"Why not?"

She bit her lip and said, "No reason...I'm just not interested."

That was something Roland had not expected, not her answer of not wanting to be the Queen of Dawn, but her expression. She was clearly swayed by the considerations of gain and loss, which was something rarely seen with Andrea, whose manner was usually so elegant.

Was there something more precious to her than being a queen?

Roland sipped his tea, his face emotionless. Luckily, he had a second plan.

"How about your father? Is he interested? Will he stand out?"

The Quinn Family was his best choice. In addition to its superior strength among the three families, Andrea, who was loved by Otto and Oro, also played a key role. To some extent, she could speak for the three families.

The people that graduated from Neverwinter's current education system were not enough to run Graycastle, so there was no way for Roland to put men in place to fully control the Kingdom of Dawn. It would be easier to support a regime that was friendly to Graycastle and if Andrea gave her approval of the plan, he would be able to get the neighbor's resources at a low price.

"Of course, the other two families will also benefit. In fact, the coup will make every participant win, and more than that, the threat that hangs over your heads will be completely lifted," Roland said slowly. "In this way, Neverwinter will save the trouble of marching army and investing coins, and all I need to do was to assist the Quinn Family in taking the throne."

Andrea did not hesitate for long this time. After a moment of thought, she gave her promise. "I think... my father will agree."

She paused and corrected herself, "No, he'll definitely agree."

When Andrea gave those words, Roland knew that she had fully understood what he meant.

Now was the time.

"Neverwinter will soon take action. Don't worry... Otto Luoxi won't be detained for too long."

Chapter 848: Mission Pure Witch

"I'd thought you wanted to be the King of Dawn yourself." Nightingale twisted her lips and spoke after Andrea had departed. "Turns out you weren't joking about making her the monarch."

"I knew you would figure it out soon." Roland shrugged. "As for myself..." Several explanations had run through his head, including the lack of able personnel, Andrea's communicative abilities, as well as the constraints on time and resource. Instead, he settled for a simple line. "I'm just not capable enough."

"Really..." Nightingale patted him on the shoulder. "I'm sure you can count on Andrea. You can't go wrong with the Quinn family."

"These two certainly appreciate each other a lot." Roland began to laugh within. However, as Nightingale had been a dependant of a family in the past, her political foresight was a level below his own. He personally believed that family background was not a factor, as long as Andrea was not blindly devoted to it. He was certain that she, like most people, would gladly accept and cherish a glorious opportunity like this which did not come at much cost.

But he kept these thoughts to himself, for it was much too adorable to see Nightingale speak nonsense in the most serious of manners.

Just at this moment, someone knocked on the office door.

"Come in."

The door creaked open, and the person standing outside turned out to be Isabella.

Roland had not expected this. The latter was not a member of the Witch Union and hence could not access the Castle District under normal circumstances. However, once he saw Agatha's figure behind her, he understood how she was able to get through.

"Your Majesty." The Pure Witch, formerly of the Church, bowed and quickly got to the point. "I've heard from Agatha that the Church of Hermes is on the brink of collapse, is that so?"

If it was not for the mildly grim look on her face, Roland might even have mistaken that she was here to plead on behalf of her former overseers.

"That's what the intelligence says, but we're still finding out the specific details." Roland was puzzled as to why the Ice Witch had revealed this information to the latter, but instead of denying the matter outright, he replied as vaguely as he could. "Refugees from the Church have begun to appear in Coldwind Ridge and the western part of Kingdom of Dawn. They've testified that the most popular cathedral in the Holy City has collapsed overnight."

"Your Majesty, I hope that you can send troops to Hermes as quickly as possible."

"Why?"

"Don't you remember what I'd mentioned? The millions of Berserk Pills there." Isabella replied in a disgruntled voice. "There's bound to be some people who now know where they're stored... if word gets out, your plans will be disrupted." She paused before continuing, "This stuff will be highly useful for the Battle of Divine Will. Best if you can collect and transport all of it back to Neverwinter."

It was only now that Roland remembered the latter had mentioned this in the intelligence she had provided. It seemed that Zero's plan was to unite all of Mankind in a life-and-death battle against the Army of Demons, and her trump card was indeed to be these Berserk Pills. As he was personally contemptuous of these drugs, he had almost forgotten about the matter.

However, the situation had changed greatly. Isabella was right; if someone distributed the pills, such that they fell into the hands of nobles from Graycastle, the Kingdom of Dawn, or worse, the rats of Black Street, there would be considerable trouble. Perhaps, they would still not be able to take on a fully-equipped army, but individual officials and regional governments would certainly be under threat.

"Where are the pills stored?" He glanced at Isabella.

"They're separately stored in hidden warehouses all over the Hermes Plateau. It's hard to explain where they are exactly." The latter hesitated for a moment before she continued, "If Your Majesty trusts me, allow me to follow the army there. I was once the Pope's ordained executor, and with this identity, I may be able to slow down the internal collapse. Otherwise, the army will find it difficult to stem the flow of refugees."

"But who'll know if you use your identity to do other things?" Nightingale interjected. "Perhaps you'll secretly release those believers... you have friends among them, haven't you?"

"I wouldn't lie to His Majesty," Isabella refuted. "Zero has already shown up who's the real God's pet. I've no need to do such useless things. If necessary, the army can lay a trap for me to lead the believers into and kill them off. That's another way of maintaining order, aside from making use of my identity, as I mentioned."

"Ugh..." Nightingale rasped and spat out a mouthful. "I guess that's something a Pure Witch would think of."

Roland felt somewhat disconcerted. It was not often that Nightingale would be at a loss for words, which was a sign that the latter was being serious about her suggestion. Though she had committed her full allegiance to him the other day, this was done on the basis of fighting the demons. Unlike most other witches, she had been educated and trained as a Pure Witch, which meant she had long been taught that the lives of normal people were unimportant as long as she could accomplish her objectives.

After pondering for a short while, Roland slowly opened his mouth and spoke. "I'll allow you to travel with the First Army, but you shan't intervene in any battle. All you have to do is to find the pills and destroy them on the spot."

"Your Majesty." Her brows visibly furrowed. "These drugs may overwork the body, but when it comes to a life-and-death battle..."

"Say no more." Roland cut her short. "And speaking of maintaining order, I've another task for you."

Isabella immediately lowered her head and responded, "As Your Majesty commands."

"There should still be a few cloisters left in the old Holy City, right?"

"Yes, but there are no witches left." After some contemplation, she amended her words. "Perhaps a few Awakened Witches may have appeared during the last Months of Demons, but there's only a slim chance that they're still alive."

"That doesn't matter. Free the orphans, take care of them, and bring them back to Western Region."

Isabella was taken aback. "All of them?"

"Yes. You shall be in charge." Roland nodded.

Supposing that Pure Witches truly disregarded the lives of others in order to complete their missions, Roland wanted to see what Isabella would do when her task was to save lives. Though he might not be able to change what she had done in the past, he hoped that she would be able to rectify her ways.

"This task has its purpose, which I must thank you very much for reminding me about. That is, if the upper hierarchy loses the ability to maintain order, the cloisters are likely to turn into living hells. Right now, Neverwinter requires a large amount of labor, and there'll also be jobs for women. I'd heard that the church had started basic education for the orphans, no? I'm sure they're all of excellent potential, and shouldn't be left to starve to death behind those high walls. I want you to bring all of them here without exception."

Isabella remained silent for a long while before she noted, "That'll require a lot of food."

"I'll have people to prepare all the food that's required."

An intricate expression appeared in her eyes. Roland had seen it before on the day she was pardoned, her chains were removed, and she was granted "limited freedom" status.

If her thoughts could be heard, they would certainly comprise of a loud "Why?".

She slowly bent her waist and bowed.

"As Your Majesty commands."

Chapter 849: The King's Orders

When Edith returned to her abode, she took off her coat and casually tossed it on the hanger at the door.

She could not help taking in a deep breath of the rich fragrance which pervaded from the living room, and her dry mouth welled up with saliva at once.

She had not felt any hungry during the meeting at the Ministry of Defense, but she now realized that her stomach was growling terribly.

"Why so late today?" Cole's voice was heard before he stuck his head out from behind a doorframe, visibly holding a spoon in his hand.

"The war will start anytime now, and naturally, the Ministry of Defense has more work to do. In particular, the circumstances of the Kingdom of Dawn are making things more complicated." She took off her leather boots and replaced them with a soft pair of socks before she entered the living room. "If I return late next time, you should go ahead with dinner."

"Nah, I'm fine with this." Cole twitched his lips. "But, isn't it that His Majesty has yet to decide what to do regarding the King of Dawn? If he employs the strategy offered by Barov's side, won't the plans you're making now be a complete waste?"

"Do you really think he doesn't have his own ideas?" Edith patted her younger brother on the head as she walked past him. "Roland Wimbledon isn't the sort of king who blindly goes by his subordinates' ideas."

"What've you found out this time?" Cole put on a curious look.

"I can tell you, but then I may have to kill you." She swept a glance at him which caused him to quiver and not speak another word.

On the dining table were placed two dishes and a soup, all of which the main ingredient was Neverwinter's specialty - Bird Beak Mushrooms. Recently, either because there was a growing number of hunters who gathered these mushrooms, or because a new source had been discovered, a large supply of mushrooms which were exceptionally fresh, delicious and juicy was being sold in the

Convenience Market, and at a lower price than before. As such, the sale of these mushrooms was on the verge of surpassing that of meat products.

It was a pity that the plump feature of the mushrooms was difficult to preserve for long, or otherwise they would sell excellently outside of the Western Region as well.

Edith placed a grilled mushroom in her mouth. The slightly burnt flavor of the mushroom cap blended together perfectly with the melted butter, and after a satisfying crisp sound, she felt her entire mouth filled with mushroom juice, causing her to croon in delight.

She realized she had belittled her dear younger brother all this time.

Although he was not good with the sword and possessed an indecisive character, his talent for learning was far greater than what she had expected. Take cooking for instance - he had learned how to prepare these mushrooms simply by eating them once or twice at banquets organized by His Majesty, yet the taste was almost identical. This would not be possible without an ingenious mind. It also applied to his clerical work at the City Hall. He had been on the job for merely a few months, but had already served as the official scribe at important meetings held at the Lord's castle. This speed of promotion far exceeded that of people of the same age group as him. Even the bunch of young nobles from the Northern Region, who considered themselves to be peerless in their excellence, might not have been able to do better than him.

Of course, what Edith appreciated most was that he always listened to and obeyed what she said.

As she thought about this, she felt the dinner taste more delicious than ever.

After all, the greater the ability of the people under her charge, the easier it would be for her to get certain things done.

"Sis..." Halfway through the meal, Cole could not resist speaking up once again. "Why have you stayed silent for the past few meetings?"

"Uh?" She placed her spoon down and visibly raised her eyebrows.

"The questions which His Majesty asked were all within the realm of your expertise, no? Since you were able to read his intentions, why didn't you speak up for him?" Cole groused. "Did you not see the way Barov was looking at you... he was nearly bursting with delight."

"This is also a secret. According to conventional practice..."

"Ugh..." He lowered his head and revealed a distressed look. After much hesitation, he shook his head abjectly as if to suppress his inner curiosity.

"But, on account of this delicious dinner, I'll take it that you've paid up." Edith began to smile slightly. "How much do you know about Andrea of the Witch Union?"

"Andrea?" Cole thought for a short while. "Her name has never appeared on any scheduled plan, and her ability is meh..."

"Her ability is irrelevant." The Pearl of the Northern Region snapped. "It's normal that you don't know much about her. She's a combat witch, and rarely shows up in public. Only a few people know of her

background. From what I've gathered, she's a noble from the Kingdom of Dawn, and her family's a highly honorable one. She's also an old friend of Otto Luoxi. You can more or less infer the rest of the secret from these details." Subsequently, she provided a simple outline of her own speculation. "Do you now understand why I didn't speak up during the meetings? Had I revealed the favoritism involved, some things that could be achieved would no longer be possible. His Majesty might even have held me responsible!"

Cole's eyes widened. "How did you know all this?"

"Did you really believe I offered to go to the Great Snow Mountain simply to back up what I'd said, that 'only people who've served on the front line should be eligible to become key officials?' That's only one of several reasons." She shrugged her shoulders and continued, "Had I not made this trip, it would be difficult to make close contact with the witches."

Cole strained his brows and contemplated for a long while. "No, that's not right... granted that the news you'd heard was accurate, how could you be so certain that His Majesty would choose Andrea as a quick fix for the problems in the Kingdom of Dawn? There's absolutely no relation between these points! Couldn't he have made it a priority to recapture the kingdom and organize an ascension ceremony?"

"There's certainly no necessary relation. However, His Majesty's behavior during the meetings makes it hard for me to believe otherwise..." Edith responded assertively. "During three days of meetings, he'd glanced at Andrea a total of 17 times. She's neither a City Hall official, nor a key decision-maker, and as such, unless they're having an affair, this should be the secret plot."

"You... even noted this?"

She raised her bowl of soup and reenacted her posture during the meetings. "By sitting like this, I can observe His Majesty with the corners of my eyes. He certainly wouldn't expect that while he was watching Andrea, someone else was constantly observing him."

"..."The younger brother puckered his lips into a peculiar expression and muttered something inaudible.

"What did you say?" Edith questioned icily.

"No, erm... nothing much." Cole hastily waved his hands in denial. "But I would like to ask - when you spoke to Andrea after one of the meetings, was it also because of this? What if your guess was wrong?"

"Oh?" She arched an eyebrow in amusement. "You saw that?"

"I wanted to ask you what time you would return home that day. But... you seemed to remain in front of her for only a very short while..."

"I didn't need to divulge all of the conjectures in my head. Because it's a matter of favoritism, all I had to do was to give her a gentle nudge on the back," Edith calmly replied. "I simply said to her, 'His Majesty is a very benevolent king, and besides, he has met Sir Otto briefly before. As long as you speak up, he'll almost certainly agree to save the latter.' This way, if my guess was correct, I would have served to help His Majesty, while if I was wrong..." she paused briefly before finishing her sentence, "Who actually cares if the Kingdom of Dawn's nobles are dead or alive?"

...

The next day, the routine meeting lasted for only half its usual duration.

Roland Wimbledon, who had been quiet for the past three days, figured that he had heard enough of the ministers' discussion, and therefore announced his decision at the start of the meeting - in Neverwinter, the First Army would split up into two routes; the first route would be to enter Hermes Plateau through Coldwind Ridge, while the second would be to cut through the Eastern Region directly towards the border of the Kingdom of Dawn. The aim was for these two offensives to link up in the City of Glow by early autumn.

After Roland had issued his decree, everyone at the meeting discontinued their arguments and acknowledged his orders in unison. Even Barov, who was the leader of a group which held a more conservative opinion, bowed in agreement as though he had not said what he did previously.

The entire Western Region became busy in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 850: A Lone Wolf

"One, two, three, four..."

Lorgar dumped the gold royals out from her bag on the table and carefully counted them twice, her brows tightly knitted together.

There were only 21 of them.

In less than half a month, she had used up three-quarter of her savings. She was certain that if she continued to live this way, she would have to flee back to her home in disgrace, dumping all her pride and lofty aspirations into quicksand.

The prices in a big city are so high, particularly in Evelyn's Complex Wine House!

The drinks are outrageously expensive. It's like an open robbery.

"No..." Lorgar whimpered as she lowered her head in dejection, her ears dropping as well. She had to admit that the wine shop had never robbed her and she had willingly taken out her gold royals to buy the drinks. In fact, the shop owner had even expressed worries for her many times when she had spent lots of money there. The owner had also told her that after joining the Witch Union, she would have been able to get one bottle for free each month. However, what the owner said failed to register in her brain.

I was defeated by my own desire.

Or by my curiosity.

But...

It's not my fault. Those Chaos Drinks are so enchanting. Even the morning dew of Arturo Oasis doesn't taste that good. Their amazing flavors are beyond description and each one of the colorful drinks is unique and tasty. Complex Wine House does deserve its reputation.

If all the wine house' drinks had the same flavor, even if they were as tasty as the Three Gods' brew, Lorgar was confident that she could control herself. After all, she knew that drinking a proper amount of wine would do good to a warrior, but drinking too much would be destructive. However, Chaos Drinks were too unpredictable. She just couldn't wait to try another flavor and had unconsciously spent her money like running water.

Feeling frustrated, Logar moved her head from side to side, rubbing her forehead against the cold table, trying to clear her head.

No, I must stop indulging myself.

She had been intrigued by the wine house in the city. She found that the place that sold horrendously expensive drinks also turned out to be a really good spot to broaden her horizon and collect information. Sitting anywhere inside the wine house, she could overhear conversations of merchants coming from all over the northern kingdoms. Unlike the traveling traders in the Southernmost Region, most merchants here were wealthy and able to give insightful comments on the things that the Wolf Girl had never heard before. She had benefited a lot from hearing these talks. She could also meet some of the witches here, through whom she could also learn some inside information about the Witch Union.

Unfortunately, her remaining money could hardly support her plan to stay in the city to wait for those kinds of opportunities.

She had to take action now.

To overcome her desire for the drinks, she was going to find someone to fight and she had better leave the city to do so. This way, she would be able to stay away from Neverwinter's Complex Wine House and forget everything during combat.

When the Wolf Girl closed her eyes, the sand road arose in her mind.

Yes, that's it. This must be a challenge the Three Gods give me.

She cheered up at the thought.

She patted her own cheeks to refresh herself, put all the gold royals back in her bag, and started to pack her belongings.

She had not wasted the entire half month in the Complex Wine House. Ashes had introduced her to her lifesaver, Miss Nana Pine, and now she knew that Nana, Lily and Leaf were the three witches who had a curing ability in Neverwinter. She was happy to find that they did not just serve the great chief. These three witches ran a hospital in the city and all the residents here could pay to get their treatments which were much cheaper than Chaos Drinks.

Under such circumstances, the Wolf Girl was able to get medical care whenever she needed, even if she did not work for the great chief. This was better than what she had expected.

Among the three witches, Ms. Nana had the strongest healing power, but it only worked directly on the patient. Fortunately, Lily and Leaf could create magic medicines, such as this bottle of gray powder in Lorgar's hand, which was called "special medicine for metal-infected wounds". It was made by Miss Leaf and could rapidly stop bleeding.

Another bottle of liquid medicine named "Cleansing Water" was produced by Lily. It looked like ordinary water from wells but was able to resist infections. Lorgar thought its effect did match its name. When a warrior's wound was exposed, infection was even more fatal than blood loss and pain. This common knowledge made Lorgar quickly recognize the value of this potion. If it did not have a shelf life, she would definitely buy all the purification potion she could find.

She could buy both of these medicines at the hospital. Given their effects, she thought their prices were not high at all. They were undoubtedly the best safeguard for any warrior who wanted to challenge their limits and fight strong opponents. She was confident that she could defeat any strong enemy as long as she could use these medicines properly.

The other things in her plan had not gone as smooth. Firstly, all the tricks she had prepared to explore the northern kingdom had turned out to be useless since Neverwinter had no "Rats Association" that the traveling traders had mentioned to her. Secondly, the residents here seemed to know nothing about demons. She had asked several dozens of people but had still failed to get any clue. Instead, she had aroused suspicion and even been followed by some men in black.

By now, she had only known demons from Ashes' descriptions and a conversation she had overheard in Complex Wine House. They had once appeared in an abandoned city in the wilderness to the north of Neverwinter.

According to her past experiences, she should not take initiative to attack an opponent whom she knew so a little about. However, she still urged herself to action, since she was eager to get rid of the Chaos Drinks' temptation and prove herself to the great chief.

She thought that since this journey was a challenge, it would inevitably be filled with obstacles and setbacks.

She was well prepared in her heart.

...

Outside the City of Neverwinter, she found an uninhabited dense forest. She took off her clothes and transformed into the big wolf, darting toward the north with her pack held in her mouth.

She did not know the specific location of the abandoned city or when she would be able to meet a demon, but she had enough patience. As a Desert Wolf who had acute hearing and smell, she believed that she could easily live for a long time in this wilderness which was a dangerous place for an ordinary person. This ability had enabled her to discover and kill hidden enemies again and again back in the Southernmost Region.

She was confident that she would be able to copy her success again.

Stepping on the soil mixed with melting snow, she somehow felt that the Three Gods would lead her to meet the real enemy.

She did not run very far before she heard a sudden whistling sound in the air. It sounded as if something was rapidly crackling through the air.

She knew that someone was swooping down toward her!

This familiar sound alerted the Wolf Girl.

In the holy duel on the Burning Stage, the Four-winged Eagle had launched a surprise attack at her with this method. She had not been able to dodge such a quick blow at the time, but now she had enough experience to deal with it.

As an excellent Mojin warrior, she would never allow herself to be hit twice by the same kind of attack.

Lorgar balanced on one leg while turning her whole body to the side, planning to meet the coming attacker head on. She held the ground tightly with her sturdy hind legs, tensed her muscles, and opened her claws, ready to ferociously counterattack when the enemy landed.

In the next moment, she saw a big monster hit the ground where she had been, splashing a lot of snow water into the air. Its wings were even broader than those of the Four-winged Eagle. When it landed, the ground seemed to tremble.

Meanwhile, she heard it whine as if it was greatly surprised by the fact that it missed its target.

"Coo?"