

Witch 951

Chapter 951: Red and White (Part 1)

After closing the door, Wendy swept a glance across everyone and finally stopped at Azima.

"Speak what you have to say." The latter opened in a harsh voice. "If you're here for today's recruitment, you may as well save it. We aren't going to change our minds."

"Azima..." Doris murmured involuntarily.

Azima raised her hand to stop Doris from speaking further. "I'll firmly remember your care for us in the past half a month, but these two matters aren't quite the same. As was said when we first arrived in Neverwinter, now that the Church has been destroyed, I'll have to leave Western Region sooner or later."

"I have some better news for you first." Wendy maintained her gentle expression and replied. "The city hall has received a report stating that a large group of Eastern Region refugees shall arrive in Neverwinter within a week. The numbers shall be as many as 12,000 people. There's a high likelihood that your relatives are among them."

The room seethed with excitement at once.

"Is... what you said true?"

"Certainly. The Sea Transport Department is really stepping it up to fetch them over." Wendy replied smilingly. "The Redwater River is currently teeming with concrete boats headed towards the Eastern Region. These boats are loaded with dry stock and winter supplies, as it's after all already winter."

"I used to live in Archbridge Town. Are there any refugees from there?"

"How's the situation in Valencia?"

"It's certainly a mess."

"Uh... I hope my family isn't among them... it was my father who chased me out in the first place."

"He was bewitched by the Church. Maybe he has now repented."

The commotion in the room went into overdrive.

"Relax, there're 12,000 people." Wendy clapped her hands together. "That should cover most of the cities and towns from Valencia to Seawindshire. It'll be more difficult not to find any of your townsmen. Once Scroll has compiled the census, we'll be able to screen out people with similar backgrounds as yours. And it'll be okay even if we can't find any among this batch as this is only the beginning of a long flow of people to Neverwinter. As long as you remain here, I'm sure you'll get to meet them someday."

She then turned her attention to the witch who appeared anxious. "There's no harm even if you don't want to recognize him. But isn't it better to have some news rather than none at all, Whitepear? If they've repented, at least there's a chance for them to redeem themselves."

"That's... true." The girl by the name of Whitepear lowered her head embarrassedly.

"Are you intent on shifting the entire Eastern Region to Neverwinter?" Azima suddenly questioned.

"Not just the Eastern Region." Wendy laughed. "The Northern and Southern Territories, as well as the Central Region, are also part of the migration plan. These places will eventually be left with only a few large cities, where the residents from the towns and villages will be shifted into."

"Why... is the king going to such trouble for this?"

"This is very difficult to explain. It's called... an urbanization process or something like that. In the past, it was because of food issues that large plots of farmland were necessary to feed a city, and hence the population was very diffuse. But now that food is no longer a problem, the prevalent concern is that most of the people in the towns and villages are settled in non-administrated zones, where they cannot be effectively organized and utilized. Moving them to the cities will allow the city halls to exercise better control." Wendy patiently explained. "Because of this, the Western Region of today is no longer 'the region of the west' per se. If you decide to leave, what will your sisters do? Do you really want them to also forsake their kin and wander the wastelands of your hometown with you?"

"..." Azima frowned and did not reply for some time.

"Frankly, this is just a show of cowardice." A chilly voice was heard from behind the witches' backs.

The witches' faces changed color as they hurriedly turned to see who it was. A woman shrouded in a black robe had stealthily sat herself on the square table, with her body bent slightly forward, her legs raised, and one hand under her chin. She watched the crowd with amusement, as if she took no heed of their uneasiness.

"Who are you?" Azima asked huskily.

"Nightingale! What are you talking about?" Wendy fretfully yelled. "Relax everyone, she has no malice. She's the Union witch who's responsible for protecting me in secret."

"Did I say anything wrong?" She took off her hood to reveal her beautiful blonde curls. "What do you think these people are hesitant about? It's simply because of their relationship with Bloodfang Association that they're unwilling to serve Her Highness. Yet in reality, they continue to depend on Sleeping Spell, and have no intention of changing."

"What a bunch of nonsense!" Azima clenched her fists angrily. "If it wasn't for Doris, we would have left long ago! Besides, what do you even know about the matter between Bloodfang Association and Sleeping Island!"

"Is that so?" Nightingale raised her brows. "Then why aren't you working?"

"What..."

"Let's do a quick calculation. The cost of transportation and food from Neverwinter to Eastern Region is around 20 silver royals per person. Once there, 10 to 12 bronze royals will be needed per day to purchase food. But don't forget that, because of war and migration, most of the villages have turned into wastelands. So, to live over there, expenses will be a few dozen times higher than in the past. This is also why the refugees are moving to Neverwinter." She explained with great composure. "In other

words, it won't be easy to leave Sleeping Spell without a sackful of gold royals. If it were me, I would grab this opportunity to apply for work everywhere so that I can accrue as much money as possible. This is the basis for the group to be able to survive independently. Yet, what have you people done in this half a month? After enjoying the food distributed by Sleeping Spell, you still hope that Her Highness will provide you with your travel expenses?"

"I..." Azima was momentarily stumped. She wanted to refute the accusation but did not know where to begin.

"To me, this is simply cowardice. That's why you sided with the Bloodfang Association under pressure from the Church, and further on, it was because of this sketchy relationship that you felt outraged by the destruction of Heidi Morgan. Yet you have no guts to stand up against an Extraordinary." Nightingale shrugged. "It's indeed true that I'm unclear about the matter between Bloodfang Association and Sleeping Island, but the members of Bloodfang Association, who are in Neverwinter now, certainly know better. Do you really think Heidi regarded you as sisters?"

"Nightingale! Enough!" Wendy hollered.

"When I travel to a foreign land, I'll also seek to draw support from the locals. Your abilities were of great help to them. If they didn't destroy the ears and eyes of the Church, more and more people would track and encircle them. You just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Let me just ask, if Heidi was really friendly to you, did she inform you about her plotting in Sleeping Island to overthrow Tilly?"

Azima bit her lips tightly.

"If you truly want to prove your resolve, then you should get started with the most basic things. You can find a pack of excuses if you were living on your own deserted island, but over here, Sleeping Spell may be unable to restrain you any further."

Nightingale gave Wendy a blithe smirk before disappearing in front of everyone.

Chapter 952: Red and White (Part 2)

"I'm sorry. She's always this straightforward, but like I said, she has no malice." Wendy hastily apologized. "You don't have to take her words to heart. If you break off from the Sleeping Spell, your situation will be much tougher than now..."

However, none of the witches could speak a word, especially Azima, whose expression seemed exceptionally unpleasant. The heaving of her chest revealed that she was in a highly intense state of mind.

Had it been a regular mockery, she might have been able to laugh it off, or perhaps even protested and argued against it. Unfortunately, Nightingale's words left her completely speechless. Aside from the accusation of cowardice, the other words were like nails that pierced into her heart.

When they were still wandering about the Eastern Region, all of them worked very hard for survival. Holding a copper sheet in one hand, she would tirelessly search, like a dirty little rat, for dropped bronze

royals and exchange them for bread and other food products. This would be sufficient for her to live in any city or town had she been on her own. The problem was that she had a large number of companions to take care of.

On days when the yield was insufficient, they would be forced to bear the hunger.

Azima was adamant that she was not a coward, or else she would never have had the courage to leave home and venture into unknown territories on her own. Similarly, it wouldn't have been possible for her to acquaint with so many companions and become their leader.

But Nightingale was absolutely right. Ever since her group met the Bloodfang Association, they began to gradually lose their independent spirit. After all, compared to picking up scraps to sustain a living, it was much faster for these combat witches to act directly against the rats. If luck was good, they could snag in one day as much money as she did in half a month of toil. And it was only when passing through wild and uninhabited areas that her guidance was needed.

The immense fighting capacity of the Bloodfang Association provided them with a guarantee of safety. She no longer needed to worry whether she had enough bronze royals to purchase the necessary food, or to afford the escort of a caravan. This situation did not change even after they joined the large forces.

After a long time, Azima finally gritted her teeth and spoke. "How tough will it be?"

"I don't know the precise amount of money that Sleeping Spell will distribute for living expenses, but it shouldn't be any lower than that of the Witch Union. That means at least one gold royal per month, which is four to five times that given to a normal person." Wendy replied with an anxious look. "This money can be used for food and accommodation, but there won't be much for luxury."

"Most importantly, even if you leave Sleeping Spell, the Witch Union will temporarily be unable to take you in. The reason is simple. His Majesty doesn't want there to be a rift between the Witch Union and Sleeping Spell, and this sort of thing will easily lead to misunderstandings..."

"Is that it?" Azima snapped indignantly. "20 silver royals per month for each person, that means 120 silver royals in total. Does she really think I can't manage that on my own? That's not funny! I'm not a girl of noble birth. I've rummaged sewers and garbage dumps all for a little bit of food. How can I be fazed by a little hardship like this? This is absolutely nothing. I'll show you, Nightingale! I know you're still here!"

"Miss Azima..." Wendy was about to attempt another round of persuasion but was held back by Doris.

"I know that you mean well for us, but I also feel that what we've done has been a lil' too much. I feel red-faced after that telling-off from Miss Nightingale." She embarrassedly touched her reddish cheeks and spoke in a soft voice. "Perhaps Heidi Morgan was like what she said and never took us seriously, but we cannot continue on like this. I support Azima's decision this time."

"Me too. If Azima's a coward, then what are we?"

"Me too!"

Everyone nodded their heads in unison.

"I've decided that I want to leave Sleeping Spell. And I won't just make enough for survival. I'll eventually return all that I owe to them!" Azima bellowed at all corners of the room. "I'll make you eat your words, Nightingale!"

Wendy sighed and remained silent for some time before replying, "Since you've decided, I'll explain it to Her Highness Tilly. I'll also try my best to get His Majesty to maintain your special allowance. This way, when you accept the witches' recruitment, you'll also receive an extra portion of money which will make life a lot easier."

Azima turned her curtly. "Do as you like."

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Wendy let out an uncontrollable sigh as she walked out of the residential area.

"What's the problem?" Nightingale's voice was heard from behind her.

"Nothing, I just feel a little... ashamed suddenly," she muttered. "I'm not what they think. My desired outcome is for them to work for His Majesty Roland."

"But you still did it this way, didn't you? Because you know that this would be better for everyone. If things remain in the present state, their defiance may affect Her Highness Tilly and thus bring harm upon Sleeping Spell." Nightingale revealed her figure. "I've seen too many people like this. Instead of using reason, it's much more effective to hit them hard until they wake up. There're some even more stubborn people who only repent when death stares them in the face."

Wendy laughed involuntarily. "I guess enlisting your help was indeed the right decision. You completely silenced a person who dared to express her discontent directly to Tilly. Truly the Shadow Killer who awed King's City."

"I simply followed your plan." Nightingale puckered her lips. "All I did was make my tone a little meaner."

"Well, your tone was the key," Wendy exclaimed. "I probably sweated a little on her behalf. I wasn't just acting when I shouted 'Enough!' If I were her, I probably would have come to the same decision."

"Wait... why don't I see this to be a compliment?" Nightingale grumbled.

"Of course it's a compliment. A few Chaos Drinks shall prove that." Wendy laughed and held Nightingale's hand. "Let's exchange 10 dollars for some drinks tonight, shall we?"

"Alright, I believe you."

After reading through Wendy's report, Roland could finally feel assured.

Most of the Sleeping Island witches had accepted recruitment, and the minority groups did not cause too much trouble - everything was shaping up like he had hoped. If the progress in this matter was smooth, there would soon be witches in each and every production industry. Everywhere that people

went, they would be able to see the figures of these young and beautiful women, which could be said to form the unique and unparalleled landscape of Neverwinter.

More importantly, the addition of more than 70 new witches would be a significant boost to the overall industry of Neverwinter. Just thinking about it filled him with hope.

Right at this moment, the telephone on his desk rang.

The signal was from the city hall.

He picked up the phone, and heard Barov's voice on the other end.

"Your Majesty, the Fjords' explorer, Sander Flyingbird's, fleet has arrived in the Shallow Port."

Chapter 953: The Invited Explorer

Two three-masted ships with black and white flags were unloading their cargo when Roland walked into the harbor surrounded by his personal guards. The City Hall officials were circling around the stacked wooden boxes while occasionally making sounds of excitement.

"Long time no see, Your Majesty!" Margaret quickly came forward and bowed with a smile. "Please forgive my appearance... It's not suitable to wear long skirts while sailing at sea, so I hope you don't mind."

The man next to her also bowed. "Your Majesty, Sander Flyingbird of Twin Dragon Island pays his respects to you—are you satisfied with what I'm wearing?" He then winked at him as he asked, "Don't you think this quite matches the words 'High-flying seabirds'?"

In fact, even before he spoke, Roland had already noticed his distinguishing dress. To be honest, it would have been impossible to remain unnoticed when there were so many feathers on one's body. His clothes were those of an ordinary sea merchant from the Fjords, but they were covered with bird-feathered tassels everywhere, from the bandana on his head to the soft leather shoes on his feet. However, after the long sea journey, most of the feathers had become stiff and, though still attached to his clothes, they had now lost most of their luster. Looking at such a scene, one could only be reminded of a bird that had been shot out of the sky.

"No... you've misunderstood," Roland said. As far as he was concerned, "Sander Flyingbird" was just a well-known blue icon, and every male of his age, as well as every female, would experience the same impatience before opening a package with this mark. "Though you want to avoid being recognized by Lightning, I can promise you that if you were to enter the castle looking like this, you would definitely attract her close friend Maggie's attention, Mr. Thunder. In that case, you wouldn't be able to disguise yourself even if you had a fake beard on your face."

"Hahaha... Is that so?" Thunder laughed with his clear voice. "That's a pity. I was quite proud of this disguise. Did you know that ever since I found a tailor to make this dress, it has become the new trend in many islands?"

"Is this the power of a model?" Roland thought and rolled his eyes silently. On the other hand, it was no wonder he was the most prominent explorer of the Fjords if he could maintain such a young mentality

despite being at least forty years old. Nobody else would bother to put in so much effort for just a temporary made up name.

Everything began with that letter before the expedition.

Now that the steel ship was completed, it was time to finally test it. Roland's feelings towards the unpredictable sea were full of awe. He was clearly aware of the actual level of his first steel ship—there was no doubt that even with all the equipment and other gimmicks installed on it, it was still far from sea-worthy.

It required more than a pile of iron pieces which could float and move back and forth to make a qualified sea ship. Due to the violent waves, the ship's mechanisms would have to be completely different from the versions on the inland riverboats. In addition, considering that it was the first time they were using the steam turbine, the reliability of its power system was also still questionable.

However, the most troubling aspect for him was that he was not familiar with the operational procedures of a ship or the human-engine interaction aspects. Whenever he had trouble with the principles of machinery, he could just go to the Dream World to find a solution, but this could not work for the sailing of a ship. Before the development of electronic control systems, each ship would have to be calibrated and handled separately. Hence, there was no other solution left other than to keep researching by himself.

Thus, inviting Thunder to test it out was the best option he could think of.

Not only he was an experienced navigator but also the leader of an Exploration Group, with hundreds of excellent sailors at his command. His feedback would be invaluable.

Roland was planning to use this chance to both test and adjust the ship while recording all its sailing data. That would undoubtedly be helpful in his preparations to build the next ship. Furthermore, this data would bring Neverwinter lots of wealth.

Since this part of the whole process would take two to three months, Thunder would have to stay in Neverwinter City for a while. In order to conceal his identity, Roland created a fake identity for him in the letter—that of Sander Flyingbird. Surprisingly, not only did he accept it, he even added in a bunch of customizations. His enthusiasm and playful spirit really left the King of Graycastle feeling amazed.

"Oh, Your Majesty, were you really able to finish the construction of the steam-powered boat this fast?" Thunder changed the subject. "At the Fjords, even with the most suitable materials available, the best craftsmen would still need a couple of years."

"That's far too slow. After all, the processing of steel is easier than that of wood as it doesn't need to be soaked in preservatives, and there is no need to wait until it's dry. It only requires ample heat." Roland shrugged his shoulders. "It is currently in the shipyard of the harbor. If you are interested, we can go see it right now."

"I can't wait!" Thunder's eyes instantly lit up. "I just couldn't stop thinking about it on my way here!"

"But what are all those crates of gold royals for?" Roland pointed at the boxes that were being unloaded continuously whilst their number was being counted by the City Hall. "As I said before, you'll only be charged the cost of production of this boat, nothing more."

"Of course, we wouldn't dare to refuse your generosity," Margaret replied, "These are the profits from the perfumes and the Chaos Drinks."

"That much?" He was a bit surprised. "It's not yet the delivery date stated in the contract, right?"

"Well, since we were on our way here anyway, we could reduce some of the burden from the next delivery like this." Margaret smiled. "But Your Majesty, your guess was correct, those two products have become very popular in the Fjords, especially the Chaos Drinks. The sales volume is incredible. The value of the most delicious ones sometimes rises up to ten times the original value even if they are second-hand. People are willing to collect even the ones that don't taste as good. In short, Chaos Drinks have now become a symbol of strength in the feasts of all the Chambers of Commerce."

Roland couldn't help but raise his eyebrows. It seemed like he made the right choice in letting a professional merchant handle this business.

"Your Majesty, there is a magic reaction within the crowd." Suddenly Nightingale's voice sounded next to his ear. "Is there a witch in their group?"

That's when he realized that not far behind Margaret was a peculiar woman looking towards them. Half of her body was hidden behind a maid and she was showing only half of her face. When their eyes met, she quickly hid her face as if she was a scared rabbit.

Roland vaguely remembered the female merchant mentioning her in their letter. "Is that person your previous witch friend?"

Following his gaze, Margaret nodded softly. "Yes, Your Majesty, she is Joan."

Chapter 954: New Great Wheel

"Oh, she's already able to come ashore..." Roland said with much interest, "I remember you said that after she chose to settle in the sea, she didn't come into contact with humans for a long time."

"It's thanks to Her Highness Tilly and Miss Camilla's help." Margaret sighed. "Without the ability to communicate directly through the consciousness, she probably still wouldn't have been able to adapt to a normal human life. Also, Joan has completely forgotten how to speak. Even though Lord Thunder introduced many scholars to her, the results have not been very positive. Right now, she can't speak more than a few words, and she isn't even able to hold a simple conversation."

At this moment, the female merchant paused as if she didn't know whether or not to continue.

"What's the matter?" Roland asked.

"I don't know whether or not it's because of her long-term transformation, but some of her body parts are no longer the same as those of humans." Margaret bit her lips. "As far as I'm aware, as long as they don't utilize magic power, witches should be no different from humans. But Joan can no longer change to her previous appearance. Her cheeks, neck, arms, and legs are covered by cyan scales, just like those... Sea Ghosts."

Roland immediately thought of Lorgar's long ears and tail. Well... a skin covered with scales was quite the style—ahem, no, now wasn't the time to think about that. Considering that the Sand Nation people even feared the cute ears of Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan, it was only to be expected that the reaction to Joan's situation would probably only be worse.

"Did anyone harm her?"

"We tried our best to prevent it, but it was still inevitable that someone would spread the news." Margaret sighed.

"If we want to teach her how to adapt to human life again, then it is inevitable that she will come into contact with other people," Thunder said helplessly, "Her appearance is not well received even at the Fjords—since taking her in, three maids and two scholars have already been scared away from her. There are even rumors that I am raising a Sea Ghost. Maybe the sea is most suitable for her after all."

"If my friend truly disliked life on land, I wouldn't force her to stay on the island against her will." The female merchant continued. "But Joan didn't really mind the process of coming into contact with other people. Even though she has to stay for many hours in the sea each week, she still likes to hang out with those maids that accept her. Furthermore, compared to the raw fish meat she used to eat previously, she now prefers it well-cooked."

Still, this kind of environment was only limited to Thunder's premises—Roland understood what she meant, but he couldn't think of a good solution. Changing one's point of view required lots of time, not to mention, her situation was much more serious than that of the other witches. Throughout history, animalization, deformation, or in general inhuman appearances would always be faced with discrimination and social exclusion.

"It will get better eventually," he reassured her. "May I take a closer look at her?"

If the problem was indeed that serious, the only thing to do for now was to conceal her appearance—just like Lorgar's ears, who would look like a normal person as long as she wore a hat.

"Of course." Margaret waved at Joan and said, "Come here, dear."

But the latter only took a quick look at them and then hid again.

"Uhm... Your Majesty, I'm sorry but she probably isn't used to such a big crowd." Margaret bowed apologetically.

"It seems like you scared her." Nightingale gloated next to his ear.

Roland glared at the space next to him, coughed twice and said, "It doesn't matter. She has to stay in Neverwinter for a while anyway. She will get used to it eventually. Let's head over to the shipyard for now."

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In order to build the steel ship, Roland specifically cleared an empty space of nearly a hundred acres south-west of Shallow Beach and asked Lotus to build a wall around it, forming a barrier which prevented anyone from peeking in from the outside. Apart from setting up sentry towers at its four corners, he also arranged the First Army to guard it. Therefore, apart from the onsite workers, not many

people knew how this massive ship, which required the agglomeration of all the top industrial production lines within Neverwinter City to be built, looked like in the end.

As they entered through the wall and arrived at the bottom of the zigzagging staircase, an exclamation of uncontrollable amazement erupted within the group.

Everyone's attention was drawn by the huge structure displayed in front of them.

That was definitely not an exaggeration.

When admiring the ship from below, the first thing one would see was the towering ship hull—different from the round hulls of the three-masted sailing ships, the side of its hull was perpendicular to the ground while the base was so flat that there was no sign of any extruded keel. Since their view was limited, everyone felt as if they were standing under a towering steel wall, and one could only succumb to the feeling of pressure that it gave off.

"In the name of the Three Gods... am I dreaming?"

"How heavy it is? Must be more than 20 thousand tonnes."

"Even the biggest sailing ship wouldn't be able to withstand an impact from it!"

"Don't even mention sailing ships. I'd bet that even deep-sea monsters would flee in its presence!"

"Thunder... no, Lord Flyingbird, you didn't tell us that we were going to sail on such a monster!"

The order within the group was instantly scrambled as the sailors ran towards the ship. They started touching and knocking its hull, unable to contain their enthusiasm.

All of them were the most experienced sailors of the Fjords, and even though they had never seen something like this before, they still understood its uniqueness.

As for Thunder, his shock on his face was no lesser than the rest. In fact, it was even more.

When Roland had mentioned in his letter that the ship was made entirely of steel from top to bottom, he had assumed that he was exaggerating—after all, even in normal wooden ships, the best wood and materials would only be used in the key parts of the ship. Therefore, when recruiting his men, he had only described the ship as an ocean-going vessel without sails, which contained a steel skeleton strong enough to withstand the huge waves of the Sealine.

But what his eyes saw now proved that was not the case.

Even though he knew that Neverwinter was very adept at ship construction, yet he had never imagined it would be to such a level. The amount of materials alone were so terrifying that it would be impossible to gather all them in the Fjord Islands, not to mention the technique that was used to join the hard steel together.

How valuable is steel?

Among the various commodities, iron ore was not considered luxurious as a palm-sized crude iron ingot could be sold for about 30-40 silver royals. But if it was forged into steel, then its price would multiply by

over tenfold. It would be so valuable that knights would usually treat their steel armor as family heirlooms and pass them on from generation to generation.

The reason for the high price of steel was how time-consuming its processing was. In an entire lifetime, a blacksmith could only make about seven or eight sets of qualified steel armors. In other words, even if all the blacksmiths of the Fjords were gathered, they would not be able to make so much steel even over a dozen years.

What he first ordered from Roland was just a steam paddle steamer, which, according to the Fjords' Chamber of Commerce, cost around three to four thousand gold royals. So when the other side said they would only charge the production fee, he did not really consider it as a large favor. That was because the worth of a new Sealine was far more than the cost of the ship itself. Since the King of Graycastle only wanted to exchange intelligence, this trade could not be considered as him taking advantage of the other side.

He had even planned to pay Roland the full cost of the ship after the exploration of the Sealine, as a reward for him taking care of his daughter and because he wished for Lightning to have a better life in Neverwinter in the future.

But now Thunder finally realized that, even by considering only the cost of the materials alone, the price of this ship would still be an astronomical figure.

He could not help but feel sorry for his purse.

Chapter 955: An Unexpected Reunion

When Thunder brought up his question, Roland could not help curling his lips into a smile.

He had to admit that the explorer was very good at grasping the nature of problems. By the standards of this era where everything was handcrafted, the price of any massive industrial product would be an astronomic number. However, Roland would definitely not charge Thunder based on the actual overhead cost of shipbuilding. It would just sound too businesslike and would definitely not help foster a healthy and sustainable relationship between them.

As a matter of fact, the immediate launch of the two concurrent projects, the steel ship and the railway train, was largely attributed to the newly built steelmaking facilities after the success of the converter experiment in Neverwinter. The steel mill, which had now become completely independent of the witches, had created a virtuous cycle for efficient production. The whole steelmaking process, which included ironmaking in the Blast Furnace Zone, charcoal production in the coker unit, obtaining liquid steel, and forming ingots had become mechanized.

Other than a few workers, there were only auxiliary machinery powered by steam engines in the entire plant. The steamy water vapor mingled with the ashes formed a unique phenomenon at North Slope Mountain known as grey fog. People would notice the mountainside was overcast by a layer of "smoky clouds" when they looked up at the Impassable Mountain Range from somewhere high in the city.

As the steel mill was currently in full swing, the average daily output these days exceeded the annual output of a city in the past. The astonishing production rate thus lay a solid foundation for all the

industrial projects in Neverwinter. With the introduction of automatization, everything would experience a drastic change, although few people understood what it actually represented.

"We can talk about money later, but I assure you that it would be much cheaper than you think." Roland smiled faintly. "Because money isn't an issue, I've said that the exploitation of unknown seas means a great deal to the entire human race. As the King of Graycastle, I would love to be part of that project."

Thunder's expression changed. He said, "I'm very impressed with your foresight... Few people are willing to spend money on something intangible. Even the Chamber of Commerce at the Fjords is more inclined toward investigating new routes that would bring potential benefits. Although you can't participate in the exploration yourself, you have a much larger ambition than many explorers."

"So, you were just speaking civilities back in the old king's city?" Roland thought indifferently. He believed nobody had a stronger desire than him to explore the world, for it concerned the origin of the Battle of Divine Will and the big secret behind it.

"Anyway, let's board the ship first." Roland smiled and changed the subject. "Since you're here, I'll show you around."

"That would be great, Your Majesty!" Thunder grinned.

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Since Roland had no reference or precedent, the steel ship was a "nondescript" as it adopted different features of various classic ship models. Its front end resembled an ironclad, the bow of which slightly leaned outward, with an embolon underneath the waterline. The middle part of the ship was broadened to help the vessel maintain stability in severe sea conditions. The rear was flat like a modern ship. The total weight of the vessel was about 2,500 tons.

Roland had once attempted to incorporate some new and unusual technologies, such as a bulbous bow and a fin stabilizer, into its design to optimize its performance. However, a bulbous bow should be crafted separately based on the design and the speed of the ship, whereas a fin stabilizer required complex mechanical linkage to adjust its angle. In consideration of the time limit and the practicality of the project, he had abandoned these pursuits that apparently exceeded the abilities of the current technologies.

Nevertheless, it did not mean that this was an enlarged version of "the Roland", the shallow water gunboats. The steam turbine assembled by Anna alone was beyond the scope of Thunder and his party's understanding. Apart from that, it was the first time that a wind-up telephone was used for communication. Several telephone lines connected the command room, the machinery room, and the watchtower together. Compared to an on-and-off acoustic tube, the telephone worked much better. The captain could hear reports from various parts of the ship clearly with the telephone despite the loud noises of the sea.

It was also worth mentioning that the wind-up telephone was equipped with a bewitched Mini Dawn battery that could last long enough to complete a prolonged trip.

"This is... incredible." After the tour, Thunder exclaimed in the bright, spacious tower bridge. "It doesn't look like a ship to me but a moving castle above water."

Roland was amused at how fast Thunder had changed his thoughts of the ship. He said, "How about it? I didn't let you down, did I?"

"No, Your Majesty. I'm flattered." The explorer did not conceal his contentment at all. "She's the most beautiful ship I've ever laid my eyes upon. It exceeds my expectation from every aspect. I feel I can rule the whole Swirling Sea with her."

"Don't rush to a conclusion yet." Roland waved his hand. "To be completely honest, I know nothing about shipbuilding. Therefore, it's just a very complicated machine at the moment and not a real ship yet. It all depends on how she performs in the upcoming test. You have to provide me with a series of statistics, including her speed, stability, your crew number, the quantity of your food, etc. If things go well, you'll be able to set out for Shadow Sea after the Months of Demons this year."

"Know... nothing?" Thunder clucked his tongue. "If the old craftsmen at Fjords hear you say this, they would plunge into the sea out of mortification. By the way, if you can build such an amazing steel ship while knowing nothing about shipbuilding, what would you build if you did know something?"

"You'll get the answer to that question tomorrow." Roland left Thunder in suspense. "Enjoy the feast tonight first."

The castle hall was alive with flickering lights as night descended.

Stones of Light that emanated a soft and steady glow replaced candles. The old long wooden table was replaced with a round one covered with white cloth. Wine glasses were replaced with a champagne tower. The band started to play violins. Ever since the treasure of the city hall had been filled with golds, the whole city had been freshened up and taken on an entirely new look. Even banquets had started to adopt the extravagant style of those in the old king's city. Most guests were prominent figures in Neverwinter and other cities of the alliance. The Witch Union was, of course, invited like they were every time.

"The man next to His Majesty is an explorer from your native town?" Lorgar cast a glance at the man with some interest and then turned to Lightning. "Aren't you going to talk to him?"

"His name is Sander Flyingbird, right?" The little girl shrugged and fed the pigeon hovering above her a slice of grilled mushroom. "I've never heard of him, so he must be a nobody. I have nothing to say to him. You don't know that there are numberless explorers at Fjords, most of whom are captains who only had a couple of long voyages. They didn't even experience hurricanes or huge waves." Lightning paused for a second and then asked, "By the way, why do I not see Mystery Moon yet? Didn't she say that she wanted to have a competition with us, the Exploration Group?"

"But a person that the chief receives shouldn't be a man of normality," "Like me..." Lorgar thought to herself while wagging her tail, "Perhaps he's got some information about your father."

After Lorgar joined the Neverwinter Exploration Group, she learned more about the other two members' backgrounds.

"I agree, coo!" Maggie chimed in. "It doesn't hurt to ask, coo!"

Lightning twitched her lips indifferently. "Since you insist, I'll go and say hello to him."

Chapter 956: Thunder and Lightning

Although Lightning promised to go talk to the explorer, she did not have high hopes.

Roland also knew that she was seeking Thunder. If he had heard anything, he would have told her. Since he had not, it was most likely that the explorer knew nothing about it.

But anyway, she would do what Maggie and Lorgar had suggested so she could put their minds at ease.

Lightning walked up to the explorer but frowned immediately when she got a close look at the person. She was shocked by his florid fashion style.

The explorer from the Fjords named Sander Flyingbird appeared to be around 30. His right eye was masked. The eye mask was embroidered with a fresh rose. More than half of his face, however, was covered by the tattoo of rose twigs and leaves. Apparently, he had a horrible fashion taste.

Although an outstanding explorer should not judge a book by its cover, she was not impressed with his act of demeanor either.

It appeared that Sander Flyingbird was boasting about one of his thrilling adventures to other guests. It turned out he was just talking about Searing Flame Islands, but the words and expressions he used to describe his experience made people believe that he had reached the end of the ocean or the edge of Hell. It was true that Searing Flame Island was a perilous place, where lava constantly ejected from the bottom of the ocean and formed huge columns of steam that tended to block the view and burn crew members... Nevertheless, after generations of exploration, a full map of that area had been drafted. Adventurers simply needed to follow the correct route and enter the Island at a right time in order to avoid the dangers.

She had visited the main island of Searing Flame Islands, Flaming Mountain, with her father when she had not even reached the age of ten.

For the people of the Fjords, they only considered those who discovered new sailing routes, islands or relics as explorers. Since there were thousands of islands scattered around the Swirling Sea, a lot of people called themselves explorers, there were huge differences among them in terms of skills, experience, and abilities.

There were very few people who, in Lightning's opinion, could sit equal with her father, and Sander Flyingbird was obviously not one of them.

She instantly lost interest in him. While Lightning was hesitating, someone suddenly held her hand.

She looked up and found it was Aunt Margaret.

"Good timing, little girl." The female merchant beamed at Lightning. "Let me present Mr. Sander to you. He's an explorer from Twin Dragon Island and also the chairman of Dragonhead's Chamber of Commerce. He's also one of your father's admirers."

"I've already known his title." Lightning grumbled under her breath. However, since Aunt Margaret had already started the conversation, she had no choice but to manage a smile and say, "Hello, my name is Lightning. I am also from the Fjords, although I wasn't born on the Fjord Islands."

"Ah, so you're Sir Thunder's daughter?" Sander replied gleefully, "Ms. Margaret told me that the daughter of the greatest explorer is currently in Graycastle. We have finally met. Hmm... you do sort of look like Sir Thunder!"

"He's lying. Dad has never said I look like him. I look more like my mother whom I've never met." Lightning twitched her lips. "Thank you. Do you have any news about him?"

"I've only heard rumors. Some say he's ended up on an unknown island while others maintain that he's actually returned to Fjords. Because he encountered something unusual after the shipwreck, he keeps a low profile and is now recruiting new crew members for his next undertaking. I don't give a damn about other theories... especially those groundless rumors that harbor ill designs." Sander rambled on. "Of course, I'm personally inclined to the second theory. There're quite a few reefs around where the storm took place. Sir Thunder could definitely get himself out of trouble. In fact, many of his crew members survived the catastrophe."

This speculation was quite close to her own. Lightning felt the man was less distasteful.

She didn't really care if her father was looking for her or not.

As long as she stuck to her path as an explorer, she believed that they would meet again at some point in the future.

"By the way, can I ask which island you discovered?"

"Um..." There was a tinge of embarrassment in Sander's voice. "Well, I can't lie to His Majesty, but I became an explorer largely because of your father. The discovery of Shadow Islands has tempted many people, including the Chamber of Commerce, to further explore the area. We planned to deliver some supplies to a transfer island. Unfortunately, my fleet deviated from the original route due to an unexpected attack from a Sea Monster halfway, which later led us to the discovery of an island not yet marked on the map."

As Lightning had expected, Sander Flyingbird was that type of really lucky explorer who had just had a few expeditions.

"I see, but this is also the beauty of exploration, isn't it?" Lightning put on a serious look. "I'll let you and His Majesty talk." She then turned to Roland and performed a curtsy. "Your Majesty, please excuse me."

Roland seemed to be a little absent-minded because it took him a while to reply. "Ah... off you go," he said blankly.

Although she noticed that His Majesty looked a bit weird, Lightning did not take it seriously as she thought Roland was subject to Nightingale's protection. Instead of worrying about Roland, she should get prepared for the upcoming competition. It was literally the first contest after the foundation of the Exploration Group, so she must not allow a defeat!

...

Watching the little girl scuttle away, Roland was dumbstruck.

Thunder is a born actor!

His acting was so seamless that even his own daughter was not suspicious!

"No, that isn't technically right." If he had not known that the person in front of him was Thunder, he would have never associated with the "Sander Flyingbird" currently standing right next to him with the person who had gotten off the ship.

The primary reason to hold this particular feast was to give an appropriate explanation for Thunder's presence. Therefore, Roland had intended to arrange two separate reception halls, one big and the other small, where the small one would be used for receiving guests of honor. It was also a common practice among nobles. However, Thunder thought it was unnecessary for such formalities and insisted that one hall would do.

Roland had no issue with it either way. After all, Thunder was the person who did not want to meet his daughter. Yet to Roland's great dismay, Thunder had completely turned into a different person when he had shown up at the party with his fur coat off. Thunder told Roland that the change of his appearance was actually the joint effort of a gel substance and pearl powder. The dramatic tattoo and eye mask were also for the purpose of diverting people's attention to prevent them noticing the difference between the gel substance and his naked skin.

As for the change in his voice, it was a skill Thunder had developed over years of exploration.

But Roland did not buy his explanation.

He believed that everyone had his own distinctive character. Even if he could change his voice and appearance, it was still not that easy to escape the scrutiny of his own daughter who had lived with him for over 10 years.

Nonetheless, Thunder's acting made Roland believe that there were people who possessed this extraordinary talent. In an instant, the original 40-year-old explorer had been replaced by a dandy, boastful young leader of Dragonhead Chamber of Commerce.

Roland only knew one other person who had the same level of acting skills and that was May.

Chapter 957: A Challenge from Mystery Moon

"Thank you." When there were just Margaret and Nightingale around, Thunder dropped his fake smile and said to Roland sincerely, "I'm very happy about her current status. Now I know that I made the right decision back then. I'll leave her in your care."

"She's grown up..." Margaret remarked impressively. "The way she mimicked the tone of adults made you just want to press the poor little thing to your bosom."

"Hey, that's what you're really thinking, isn't it," Roland said within himself. Then he said, "But Lightning hasn't given up on her undertaking. Although she lives here, she formed her own exploration group, despite that there are only three members. She would eventually catch up unless you lock her up now."

"If that's unavoidable, then it's her destiny." Thunder forced a smile. "But not now at least. I hope she can live a happy and safe life before that day comes."

Having said that, the Battle of Divine Will was right around the corner. Even Lightning stayed away from the ocean, she was not safe there. Once Neverwinter, which was at the very front of the battle, fell, the entire human race would be doomed. Roland did not tell Lightning about this greatest crisis that human beings would ever encounter, for he knew the war itself was the most magnificent adventure Lightning would ever run into. She would definitely not miss the opportunity to personally participate in it. Since he could not persuade her to withdraw from the upcoming battle, he did not want to burden her with such an unnecessary premonition of imminent disaster.

"Rest assured, I'll take good care of her." At length, Roland patted Thunder on his shoulder and said slowly.

...

"What did he say?" Lorgar put Maggie, who was perched in her arms, back onto Lightning's head and asked, "Did you hear anything about your father?"

The little girl shook her head and replied, "As I expected, there's nothing about his whereabouts. But don't worry, I prefer to find him myself with my team. That would be more interesting!"

"I agree, coo!" Maggie flapped her wings.

"By the way, is Mystery Moon here yet?"

"Nope."

"What the heck." Lightning twitched her lips. "Is she just going to bail on us? She promised us with such confidence before."

"By the way... what's the challenge she issued to us?" Lorgar was curious.

"I have no idea, coo!"

"Huh?"

"We, the Exploration Group, are ready to accept any challenge, no matter what they are," Lightning said triumphantly.

"That's right, coo!" Maggie chimed in while craning her neck.

"Ugh..." The Princess of the Wildflame Clan clapped her hand over her forehead, totally speechless. She started to wonder what a chaotic group she had joined.

"Sorry, I'm late..." Just then, they heard Mystery Moon's voice coming from behind them. Lorgar turned around and saw Mystery Moon and Lily trotting toward them, followed by Summer and Sharon.

"I thought you weren't coming." Lightning folded her arms.

"Why wouldn't I?" Mystery Moon cried. "I was just tied up with some investigation work. This is also a necessary step for the contest to run smoothly."

"Alright then." Lightning shrugged indifferently. "Now can you tell us what the contest is?"

"Of course I will. However, before that, I'd like to introduce my team first." Mystery Moon opened her arms and pushed the other three girls forward. "I announce that this is the date for the official establishment of Neverwinter Detective Group. These are the new members I just recruited!"

"Huh?"

"Detective... Group?"

"What's that, coo?"

"No, I'm not a member!"

The witches reacted differently to the remark. Lorgar and Maggie both stood stupefied, having no clue as to what was exactly going on, whereas Summer and Sharon were clearly confused. Lily, on the other hand, yelled in annoyance.

"It was His Majesty! His Majesty!" Mystery Moon explained hastily. "Wendy told me that His Majesty knows that we went to the academy to investigate the arson. He then taught me this word, which means uncovering the unknown and searching for truth. In addition, he gave me a special title as well."

"Really?" Lightning looked incredulous.

"You can ask Wendy. I remember it's called front-load... front-load washing machine." Mystery Moon scratched the back of her head. "But Wendy doesn't know the exact meaning either."

"Searching for the truth of a crime..." Sharon muttered ponderously. "If it helps with the security of Neverwinter, I'd like to be a part of it."

"Would there be any problems if I join?" Summer pointed to herself. "Miss Nightingale said I'm already a member of Security Bureau."

"It would be fine." Mystery Moon gave a thumbs-up. "Lightning also needs to scout for the First Army from time to time, doesn't she? As long as we put priority on His Majesty's orders, there shouldn't be a problem."

"Sorry, but please don't count me in." Lily rolled her eyes. "There are tons of samples I need to record in the laboratory, and the size of the mushroom plant has to be doubled again. I really don't have time for your game. Call me a traitor if you like, but it won't change anything!"

"Traitor!"

"You..."

"Wait, my bad. Let me finish." Mystery Moon nagged. "I'm serious this time. You should all know that His Majesty received some guests from Fjords, right?"

"That's quite obvious." Lily snapped impatiently. "What do you think this feast is about?"

"But my point is that there's a witch among them." Mystery Moon continued, "I was inspecting the illumination at the port when they arrived..."

"You were just idling about, weren't you? Nobody would turn on lights during the daytime."

"Ahem, and then I noticed her." Mystery Moon ignored the blatant flaw that Lily had just pointed out in her story and said, "I've heard that the Fjord people will be staying at Neverwinter for quite a few months, and this includes the witch. So, she'll be the very subject of our contest."

"Oh, really?" Lightning was intrigued, "Tell me about it."

"The first team that successfully persuades her to join their group wins the game!" Mystery Moon proclaimed. "The Detective Group is considered the biggest organization under the Witch Union because we have four members. However, since the Exploration Group was founded earlier, I would say we're tied for now. The winner of this competition will thus decide which team is the stronger of the two!"

"Haha." Lorgar almost bit her tongue. She could barely suppress her laughter. "To team up with a stranger witch?" Although she knew the contest did not have to be as formal as a holy duel, she was both amused and astonished at the playful manner in which they set up the competition.

To Lorgar's surprise, however, both Lightning and Maggie looked grave, particularly Maggie. She was apparently in a state of alert, as her tail was high up in the air.

Princess Lorgar cried in silence. She wondered if she could still withdraw from the competition.

"Although I don't think you can judge a team by the number of its members, I accept the challenge!" Lightning patted her chest.

"Coo, coo!"

"Don't ever take it lightly." Mystery stuck out one finger. "First, the witch named Joan can barely talk, so it's hard for her to communicate with others. Second, she's so frightened that the poor thing senses danger from any invitations from strangers, just like us back then when we were wanted by the church. So, it's going to be a time-consuming project. As for the rules of the game, whichever team that first wins her over wins the game. How does that sound?"

"I have no issue with it." Lightning nodded.

"Hang on... I have a question." Lorgar made the last attempt to get herself out of the contest. "If what you said is true, she would only be here for a few months. In that case, there's no point to argue which group she would join eventually. Whether it's the Detective Group or the Exploration Group, it'll make no difference to her."

"That isn't true." Mystery Moon refuted gravely. "If we can help her walk out of the shadows and open up to us, everything would be worthwhile. Perhaps, it means nothing to an ordinary person, but to her, it will be the sunshine that lightens up her life, and this was also what His Majesty did for us in the first place."

In an instant, Lorgar's heart missed a beat. It suddenly occurred to her that these girls were probably not as juvenile as she had thought them to be.

"Hold on, who told you all this?" Lily drew her brows together.

"Well..." Mystery Moon was at a loss for words.

"Did you—" She cast a suspicious glance at Mystery Moon and then at Summer before she uttered an exclamation of surprise. "Did you ask Summer to use her ability to eavesdrop on His Majesty?"

"No, no!" Mystery Moon explained quickly. "We simply went back to the time when they visited the dock. It was nothing confidential, as His Majesty made a speech in front of everybody!" With these words, she stole an embarrassed glance at Lightning. "I swear in the name of electromagnetic power!"

"You were way over the line this time. I'm going to report to Wendy!"

"Trai — no, I swear I'll never do it again!"

"I don't trust you!"

"I'm serious!"

"You always lie to me!"

"If I lie to you again, I won't have any more Chaos Drinks. Hey, don't go!"

While the Detective Group was experiencing an internal conflict, Maggie leaped into flight abruptly and flew to the other side of the hall.

Only Lightning and Lorgar saw her leave.

Lorgar saw the pigeon flit across the hall and descend on a round table. It picked up a piece of barbeque meat with its beak and landed on Joan's shoulder.

The girl seemed to be startled at first, but she was soon attracted to the bird. Afterward, she even took the barbeque meat the bird offered her.

The wolf girl turned to Maggie and lifted up her ears.

Shortly afterward, she captured the conversation between them.

However, she could barely understand it.

"Coo."

"Ya."

"Coo, coo—coo!"

"Ya Ya."

"..."

Around seven or eight minutes later, Maggie rose in the air and landed on Lightning's head again.

"She agreed to join the Exploration Group, coo!" Maggie announced triumphantly.

Chapter 958: A Heartbreaking Friendship

"What happened there?" As Roland and Margaret were talking, Margaret uttered an exclamation of surprise. "What's Joan... doing?"

Roland also noticed the commotion on the other side of the hall. He saw Margaret's witch friend leave her spot and, escorted by her maid, slowly walk toward Lightning and the other witches.

Maggie, on the other hand, was flying back and forth, seemingly delivering messages for her.

At first, Joan was so nervous that she clung to her maid the whole time. She only poked her head out when Maggie was around. However, when she and Maggie gradually got to know each other, the situation soon changed.

She not only started to talk to the witches but even reached out her hands to touch Lorgar's ears and tail in a gentle manner.

"Now I see." Roland could not help smiling. "Lightning is indeed quick at making friends."

"That's... unbelievable." Margaret clapped her hand over her mouth. "You know how long it took me to persuade Joan to come ashore? It took me a good two months, and I had to ask Ms. Camilla to help me."

"How did she do that?" Thunder was also surprised.

"She doesn't have to do anything, but just take Maggie and Lorgar with her," Roland explained with a smile. "What Joan truly fears is the abhorrence with which people treat foreign races or people of different appearances. Perhaps, Joan views both the pigeon and the wolf girl as people of her kind."

"Her... kind?" Margaret echoed.

"Yes. You've met Maggie before, but Lorgar bears more similarities to Joan than Maggie." Roland then told Margaret about some of the animal features of Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan. "Anyway, you don't need to worry whether she would be able to blend in."

"Has the witch called Lorgar... never been rejected by anyone?"

"If she wasn't, she wouldn't have come to Neverwinter. Even in the Southernmost Region where witches are generally treated as Divine Ladies by every clan, one with a mishappened figure would still be regarded with evil forebodings." Roland shook his head. "Of course, not everyone in Neverwinter accepts them, but the discrimination would be a lot more subtle than in other places. As for the Witch Union, nobody would ever discriminate another because of her look. Everyone has gone through the same pain and fully knows the nature of their abilities. They would be more than happy to have a new member."

"People fear the unknown." Thunder sighed. "What first motivated me to become an explorer was purely money, but now I want to cover as much untrodden land as possible before I die. There are so many mysteries in this world that await us. If people are just satisfied with the place where they were brought up, they would probably be bound by fear for the rest of their life."

"This is also the reason I support you." Roland raised his glass. "There's an old saying: a person will eventually become as great as his thought. You'll go down in history if you can think that way."

"Thank you," Thunder replied with a smile and clunk his glass. "I'll try my best to not disappoint your expectations. You can count on me."

Margaret gazed at Joan for a long time, as if she were lost in thought. After quite a while, she turned around and bowed to Roland, with her hand on her chest. "Your Majesty, I have a bold request."

"Say it."

"I planned to take Joan back to the Fjords and persuade her to settle down where she was born after this exploration is over," Margaret said in a soft voice. "The life on the sea is too lonely and I don't want to see her continue this way. But now I changed my mind..." Margaret paused for a second and then asked, "Your Majesty, can I entrust her to you?"

"You want her... to stay in Neverwinter?"

"If Joan stays at the Fjords, she would probably ground herself and speak to very few people. But she can make some true friends here." Margaret nodded. "She left the ocean, which she is so used to, and followed me here. I don't want to fail her trust. I truly feel nowhere is more suitable for her than Neverwinter."

"That's not a problem." Roland smiled faintly. "This is exactly what the Witch Union was founded for."

"Now that I have your promise. I'll fully trust you on the matter." Margaret dipped in a curtsy, relieved.

Lily returned to her bedroom, yawning, and hung her wet towel on the rail. When she was about to read the biology book before going to bed, she heard Mystery Moon mutter behind her.

"We lost... we lost... we lost..."

Lily rolled her eyes, pretending she did not hear the repetitive mumble, and opened the book indifferently.

The murmur, as she had expected, grew louder immediately.

"The Detective Group lost... the Detective Group lost... the Detective Group lost..."

"Are you done or not?" Lily felt her temples throbbing. She sat upright and yelled, "Can't you just go to sleep?"

"But we lost." Mystery Moon buried her face in the pillow and grumbled resentfully. "Aren't you sad at all? I already had a plan on how to make her side with us. I was so close! Look at the way they communicate. It doesn't seem that they understand each other. How did they do that? Did they know each other from before? Now the Exploration Group is equal to the Detective Group in number, and we're no longer the biggest organization..."

Lily had no comment. Mystery Moon was not, evidently, very close to winning because the Exploration Group had literally defeated them before they had even started. "Why do I have to feel sad about it? I have nothing to do with you." Lily interrupted her never-ending whining. "I reiterate. There were just

three people in the Detective Group at the beginning and now you have lost the game and are outnumbered. You are flattened. You'd better dissolve the group before it isn't too late."

With these words, she returned to her book and was determined not to talk to her roommate anymore, no matter how hard she tried to get her into a conversation.

To her surprise, however, Mystery Moon stopped bothering her. For a moment, the room was unusually quiet.

This isn't right.

Lily was a little worried and wondered if she had been too harsh on Mystery Moon. Although Mystery Moon could be a bit annoying sometimes, she meant well. If there had not been such a ridiculous competition, Joan would probably have never opened up to them so quickly. Although Mystery Moon should not have eavesdropped on His Majesty, it was, essentially, not a mistake with serious consequences... Maybe she had been a little too serious over the matter.

Suddenly, an idea formed in her mind.

Unlike her, Mystery Moon used to be very reserved and timid. Due to her ability, she had constantly been scolded by Cara back in the Witch Cooperation Association and everybody had treated her as an invisible person. Thanks to the Witch Union, she had finally become more outgoing and sociable. Lily wondered whether her reproach would make Mystery Moon slip back to her old ways and sink into a state of dejection again.

At this thought, Lily regretted yelling at her so severely.

She swallowed hard and slowly turned around, about to apologize.

But she was met with a ten dollar note in her face.

Mystery Moon was standing behind the bed, arms out. She thrust the note right under Lily's nose.

"Wh-what're you doing?" Lily was frightened.

"I beg you not to leave the Detective Group. I'm willing to offer you a bottle of Chaos Drink in exchange!" Mystery Moon screwed up her face. "If you leave, there's not a single chance for the Detective Group to turn the situation around!"

"I already said I'm not one of you. Can't you listen?" Lily clapped her hand over her forehead, speechless but at the same time relieved. She was happy that Mystery Moon was not as fragile as she had thought.

After a long silence, Lily took the ten dollar bill from Mystery Moon.

"You agreed?" Mystery Moon's face lightened up.

"No." Lily tapped the desk. "I have many things to deal with and have absolutely no time to play games with you. But I can give you a hint as a return for your 10-dollar note. I can also give you my counsel provided that it won't take up my work hours. At least, my advice would be much more practical than befriending some random witch."

"What hint?"

"I'm not the right person to help you expand your team. Not everyone in the Witch Union is as busy as Soraya. You can turn to those idlers." Lily felt guilty for selling out those witches and muttered an inaudible "sorry" under her breath. "Think about it. Who else helped you find the clues in the arson of the Academy?"

"Um... do you mean Evelyn? No, I can't ask her. Although the group activities won't take a lot of time, she still needs to manage her own tavern."

"Not her."

"Um... then Amy?" Mystery Moon looked hesitant. "But she isn't from Graycastle and she has her own companions as well..."

"Isn't that even better? Once she joins the Detective Group, all the other witches from the Kingdom of Wolfheart would follow." Lily counted on her fingers. "Annie can be busy, but neither Hero nor Broken Sword is. Plus, you have a joint project with Broken Sword... Does it really matter to you where they come from? Joan's from the Fjords. Why don't you have a problem with that?"

"I see!"

"And then there are the combat witches who previously belonged to the Bloodfang Association. They have a lot of free time and shouldn't refuse if you ask. Now the Detective Group will have a lot more members than the Exploration Group. At least, you outnumber them. But remember not to bother His Majesty, nor should you challenge the Exploration Group at random." Lily advised. "I just feel that it's impossible for you to beat them, although I don't know why."

"Because you favor them." Mystery Moon pouted.

"No, I don't! Anyway, that's all that I want to say. Now go to bed and don't bother me again." Lily waved.

"Alright..." But Mystery Moon soon turned around again.

"What's the matter?" After experiencing some mood swings, Lily found herself be more patient than before.

"Well, it would be better to get things straightened out now than have a problem later," thought Lily.

"That ten dollar note is your reward if you join the Detective Group..." Mystery Moon said hesitantly. "Since you've decided not to, can I have it back?"

At that moment, Lily heard something break in her heart.

" NO WAY! GET OUT OF HERE!"

Chapter 959: Witnessing History

The next day was Neverwinter's fourth holiday in autumn and the first weekend in mid-autumn.

As there weren't any stories such as Genesis told in this world, most people were busy all year around looking for food. Since Roland implemented the rule of "one day off every seven days", his subjects owed their gratitude to him. No one would complain about such a kind lord who let them take a day off without deducting their pay.

In particular, all the refugees, who moved in from other cities, were so determined to settle in Neverwinter after they had experienced the life here, that even the demons that City Hall had announced all over Neverwinter could not scare them off. Compared to hunger and poverty, even the demons had become insignificant to them.

According to Barov's report, the rest day system scarcely impacted the production of Neverwinter and after it was officially popularized, workers could take rests of their own free will. Many people chose to work on the holiday to get paid more. Moreover, the trade of the city grew substantially, largely thanks to the booming business in the square where people visited every weekend. The square had attracted not only local merchants but also the traders from other cities, who would set up their stalls on weekends and then replenished their stock with the specialties of the Western Region during the weekdays before they went back their homes and made a fat profit by selling them.

With more concrete boats put into use, the goods circulated much faster in the market with a cycle time shortened to just weeks, which was something beyond imagination a year ago. In the past, the nobles and dealers in the inland cities, such as Redwater City, could only eat pickled fish, yet now refrigerated fresh fish shipped from Shallow Port was able to be served at their dinner table.

In light of that, Roland decided to set the activities, like important speeches, demonstrations, and all kinds of commendation ceremonies, on rest days, trying to take advantage of people's shopping habits to further boost trade. As the goods were sold and the deals were made, he could collect more taxes, which would certainly make up for the wages he paid to his people on rest days. In summary, it was a move that served multiple purposes.

This weekend was no different. Under the cloudless sky, the last hint of the warmth of summer mingling with the cool breeze of autumn had created another perfect day for people to go out. From the dock of the inland river to the northern city wall, the streets were packed with people who were waiting in anticipation.

Yet, this time, they were not on their way to the Convenience Market, where they could buy some good meat, but were here to witness their king's new invention.

An unprecedented transport, "the train", was about to make its first trial run.

Victor, the jeweler, was among the crowd.

After hearing the news of the trial from the City Hall's propaganda, he immediately handed over the big deal he was negotiating to his men and embarked on the concrete boat traveling from the old king's city to Neverwinter that very night.

Victor was definitely among those who were highly impressed by the changes in the Western Region over the past few years. He had visited the lord of the land when it was merely an isolated, small town and only had a hazy memory of the lord, who was a fat middle-aged noble and always complained about

how barren his land was. If it was not for the fine gemstones that he could get from the town, Victor would never have traveled beyond Longsong Stronghold.

Victor used to only visit the Western Region once a year, and whenever he came, the small border town was as dilapidated and decayed as it had been before. But in the last three years, he had visited here much more often, and the frequency had grown to once per month, particularly after Roland Wimbledon announced that he was building a city here.

It was as if the Western Region of Graycastle had become different world.

Time must run quickly here as a single day turned into the equivalent of months of progress and those months turned into years as he could not see how Neverwinter had changed so fast.

As Victor entered a tavern by the street, the owner immediately came over and welcomed him, "I knew you would come. The table by the window on the third floor has been specially reserved for you."

He quickly pulled out a silver royal and tossed it to the owner. "Lead the way."

"Alright. Please follow me."

Victor, who had been a regular of the tavern, naturally did not have to stay with the crowd on the street. There were also many people on the third floor, but at least he could have a better view.

People around him had been in heated discussions about the demonstration today.

"The train is going to run on that narrow street? That's too far from the square and residential areas."

"Street? Ignorance! That's called a railway, the thing used in the mining area," someone said, laughing.

"Since it's not built for people to ride, it's better to be placed somewhere less crowded. Do you take it as a wagon?"

"You mean the thing in the Silver City's mine?"

"Yes, it was manufactured here and needs a steam engine to work."

Victor could not help joining the discussion. "I've seen the cart driven by the steam engine. Its great advantage is that it is immune to different terrains. But if it's put on flat ground, even mules are able to replace it. So I don't think it works as simply as you said, or the City Hall wouldn't call it 'an era-defining transport'."

"Perhaps it's only a stunt," a man murmured.

"Go away," the people around the man cried immediately. "Is this your first time in Neverwinter? King Roland never boasts."

The man looked unconvinced and wanted to argue but was abruptly interrupted by a loud whistle from far away.

"Woo————"

"It's coming!" The atmosphere of the room went wild. Everyone looked out of the windows and stared unblinkingly at a small street near the Castle District. Some of them even took out telescopes.

Victor also looked at where the sound came from.

A long and black beast appeared behind the houses, coming slowly in sight. It was huge, and above its two wheels was its head that looked like a metal pail, on top of which there was gray smoke pumping out, just like a working steam engine.

A wagon ran alongside the head of the train, drawn by two horses, moving as fast as the train, as if the two were competing. However, since the wagon was laden with ore, the driver of the cart must keep whipping to drive the horses forward, and every step the horses took was strenuous. If the hub of the wheel was not iron-forged, the wagon would have collapsed already.

As the full exterior of the train was revealed, Victor, despite himself, felt the hairs on his back stand up.

Carriages, one after another, followed the head of the train. Each was four or five times larger than the wagon and laden with ore. In terms of volume, one carriage was almost on a par with a cargo sailing ship on the inland river.

The point was that the train contained more than one carriage.

For a moment, all the audience exclaimed with admiration.

"Four...the fourth!"

"The fifth!"

"There can't be more!"

"My God! The sixth!"

"There's more, the seventh!"

The monster-like head trailed a total of seven carriages, moving steadily across the clearing before the castle.

Now Victor found the answer to his question.

There was a big difference between a steam engine that was fixed in the entrance to the mine to power the carts and a steam engine that could move independently and freely.

The latter could carry goods to wherever the railway stretched. The weight would no longer be the bottleneck of land transportation. On the contrary, the capability of the train would outstrip that of the river transportation. His Majesty could even empty a city in a short time by carrying everything away on the train if he wanted.

Being born as the son of a merchant, Victor naturally knew the importance of transportation, which was often the reason why most cities were built near rivers. Obviously, such kind of transport would bring limitless possibilities for the circulation of the resources, so the word "era-defining" was far from being over dramatic.

An unspeakable feeling came over him, he could feel content and lost and... It was like he had witnessed history yet meanwhile he had been forsaken by history. The lords in other kingdoms were still drowning

themselves in pleasures and traveling by horses and mules on the road that was paved with bricks and full of mud.

They, however, were entirely unaware of what had happened here and still felt good about themselves.

Somehow, an idea emerged in Victor's head.

The future had already come, yet it did not arrive at all places equally.

Chapter 960: New Enemies Spotted

In the days following the train's demonstration, there was an air of enthusiasm in Neverwinter.

Even Roland could feel it in the castle. It was not his opinion but a conclusion based on the data in a report sent from City Hall.

Barov held the report and said, filled with joy. "The applications for citizenship we've received in the past three days are 60% more than that of normal times, and half of the applicants, about 725 people, have just moved in less than two months ago. In other words, it only took us three and a half months to get the number of applications that should have taken us five months to collect! The number of applicants decreased slightly after the demons' attack, but now it not only offsets the difference, but also shows a surge, which means that we don't need to worry about people's concern over the demons anymore. Your Majesty, the demonstration is a huge success."

Since Roland introduced the Data Statistics and Comprehensive Analysis to the management, the City Hall Director started to put numbers in his report. As time went on, more numbers were adopted and went into detail. It seemed to Barov that no conclusion could be brought forth without comparing data. Besides, he also invented some formulas for analysis, and one of them was called "period between the Arrived and the Settled".

Barov explained that the formula showed how determined the migrants were to become the citizens of Neverwinter. After the identity card was added in the city's rules, any refugees who wanted to be an official citizen had to come to the City Hall and submitted their application. Generally, one who had any specialties or a permanent residence would be eligible. In addition, the applications from people who had passed the examination of City Hall and had no bad records would be accepted by City Hall as well.

The newcomers, in spite of themselves, started to look forward to the card. In addition, because they made livings in different industries, it took them different periods of time to be able to afford a downpayment. Hence, Barov tried to calculate the average period of time those people spent, and in his opinion, the shorter the period was, the more loyal the people were to their king and the more faith they had in the new king's city.

However, Roland took a different view of that conclusion. He never trusted the loyalty of strangers. They might have real faith, but ultimately, they cared more about whether their own welfare was secured.

At any time, it was reasonable for anyone to side with the stronger, so showing the strength at the right time could significantly increase the cohesiveness of the people. The train was a good choice. Even

though most people did not know what it really was, the overwhelming feeling that the huge size, the hundreds of tons of weight, and the roar of the cylinder had brought to them was unmistakable.

Even Thunder was awestruck by the train when it ran through the railway near the Castle District in an unstoppable way. Unlike ocean transportation, the weight of goods had always limited the land transportation, yet the train would apparently break that barrier. Thunder even joked that when he was too old to have any more adventures, he would move his whole family to Neverwinter, where the life was also a kind of adventure, for there were so many new things emerging all the time.

If the train could amaze the most famous explorer in Fjords, then its shock to the common people was beyond expression.

Where else could they find a place so promising?

Barov continued, "Also, we've received invitations from many merchants, some of which come from the Chambers of Commerce in Redwater and Silverlight. They've eagerly begged an audience. I think they want to know more about the train."

"Refuse them all," Roland said, smiling. "The train is not for sale at present, and they can't afford it even if I was willing to sell it. But you can promote other goods to them, like the first and the second generations of steam engines retiring from the mining area."

Neverwinter was not the poor border town any longer, and not all Chambers of Commerce were eligible to be received by Roland. For those who did not have a special association with him, the City Hall Director would be enough to handle them.

"I see." Barov touched his beard and said.

"Since the people were in high spirits, how about carrying out the new reserve force system?" Roland changed the subject.

Barov nodded. "No problem, I think. But... Your Majesty, do you really think the war would go that badly?"

"It's just in case. In a war that determines the fate of all human beings, shouldn't we take it more seriously?"

After Roland returned from the war, he had ordered the General Staff to draft the new reserve force system. It mainly contained two parts: Military education and training, and expanding the reserve force. Military education and training would be introduced into the primary education in order to train the students' basic awareness of discipline and knowledge of fighting. Expanding the reserve force would be carried out without interfering with the production. During the progress, the people would be trained in batches with all kinds of fighting skills. It could be regarded as a sort of militia.

Since the new military system was mandatory, it would not be more appropriate to carry it out at the moment when the people were enormously enthusiastic. Once the system began, Graycastle's military would become an organism that would be able to heal itself. That meant when the front line lacked men, the rear was able to send back up soldiers without any delay, while in the past, every batch of recruits had to run through two or three months' training all over again before they were qualified.

Roland planned to recall the Second Army, which had been turned into reserve troops, to Neverwinter, because the threat from the Timothy and the church had been lifted in the Longsong District. In addition, the previous two-pronged attack had reminded him of the necessity to set up a second army. When the Battle of Divine Will broke out, he did not need to personally march an army on the front line.

"Meanwhile, you can start preparing for the next military conscription," Roland commanded. "When the Months of Demons end, I want to see the soldiers in the official troops exceed 10,000 men, whose equipment was also well matched. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Barov promised without hesitation.

"Good, you can leave now... Wait!" Roland suddenly frowned.

"What else can I do for you?" Barov stopped and asked at once.

Roland's attention, however, was completely caught by Nightingale's words right now. She said, "News from Sylvie has just arrived. It's reported that she had spotted new movements from the demons. It seems that the Devilbeasts have expanded their patrol area and are building a new camp."

"Call them back immediately," Roland commanded her under his breath and then turned to Barov and said, "Convene a meeting of the officials from all departments. Something happened in the north."

...

Soon, the meeting room was full of people.

Sylvie, who had never been in a such a meeting, looked nervous when she was stating the details. Fortunately, Lightning quickly joined her and helped her tell the whole story.

It had been a routine investigation.

Due to the threat from the flying Devilbeasts, Roland had banned Lightning, Maggie, and Lorgar from going to the relic area of Taquila alone for safety reasons. Yet in order to keep an eye out for a sign of the demons, Maggie would carry Sylvie to investigate the edge of the area every four days. The phantom instrument had failed to locate the target precisely so that they had to rely on the witches to make up for its failings.

Thanks to the Eye of Magic, that could see far beyond the demons' range, they only needed to frequently fly out and watch the area from a safe distance.

But this time, the investigation team had spotted a trail of Devilbeasts within the distance that they thought was perfectly safe.