

Witch 961

Chapter 961: Two Plans

"What do you think?" Roland asked, looking at the light curtain on the wall. There was no doubt that Taquila survivors were the most qualified to analyze the demons' intention.

"It's an old trick of them," Alethea snorted coldly. "Due to intimidation failing to work, they will do it the hard way. As I've said before, they're great at combining intimidation with force to deal with the human lords. If it were a city of witches they confronted, they'd slaughter all the citizens once and for all."

"But last time you estimated that it would take them about half a year before they pushed towards us."

"Ahem, that's a result calculated from the average time they need to build a large camp. Maybe they're hasty this time." Alethea's voice sounded a little awkward. "The war situation is always changing. One would be foolish to stick in the mud. I didn't tell you to let down your guard."

"What? Are you kidding?" Roland knew it was necessary to keep watch on the enemies. But when and how to fight back was planned according to the time she had calculated. If the enemies had to spend half a year taking hold, his railway would've been able to stretch before them. By then, with an armored train and railguns, Roland was confident that the demons would have no energy to build any outposts.

"Alethea didn't mean to hide that on purpose. I agreed with her before," Agatha said, seeming to read Roland's doubt. "The Union had paid a high price for the timetable regarding the expanding of the red mist supply line. It remained right even before the Holy City fell. Half a year is the shortest period the demons need before their next move."

"You mean the demons need less time now and that the timetable that had cost so many lives is useless?" Edith shrugged. "Of course, it's understandable to see 400-year-old intelligence become invalid."

Roland felt his eyebrow twitching. The Pearl of the Northern Region, without any doubt, was among the ordinary people on the scene who dared to confront the blob monster. Considering that he was not a typical virtual person in this world, Edith would be the only one here who had the guts.

As expected, Alethea howled, "Common person, how dare you!"

Pasha chimed in before Alethea lost her temper. "Perhaps, it's the giant skeleton that makes the red mist supply line expand faster or the demons are planning something else. If they don't aim at attacking, they surely can set up an outpost earlier. After all, the supply of the red mist will determine how big the outpost will be. Hence, there is no need to quarrel with each other about it. It's his Majesty who gets the final say on how to tackle this problem."

Pasha lived up to the title of the real leader of the Taquila survivors, Roland nodded to himself. What she had said not only put down the possible quarrel but also took his feeling into account. Conversating was indeed an art.

The problem was still there. Whether the demons were plotting something else in the dark or they wanted to march toward Neverwinter soon, the result was that due to this change, Roland could not

watch the relic of the Holy City anymore. In fact, Neverwinter did not have many choices. If phantom instrument could locate the target precisely, he might have more time to observe the enemy and see what they planned to do, but now he had to root out this obstacle before him as soon as possible.

"Get the First Army ready to march." Roland drew a deep breath and commanded Iron Axe.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Iron Axe answered briskly as he always did.

"A bold choice," Alethea praised. "Turning a blind eye to the coming war is no better than suicide. Only by keeping a close eye on the enemies' movement could we be better prepared."

"General Staff, come up with, at least, a plan before tomorrow nightfall." Roland cast a glance at Edith on purpose. "I also want to see how you deduce the plan."

"Your Majesty," Ferlin Eltek, Knight Morning Light, who had formally changed his career, said grimly. "According to Lady Sylvie, the flying Devilbeasts have taken over the place. It's almost impossible for the First Army to march on while staying unnoticed. Once we give ourselves away, we'll get stuck."

Roland knew that too. That was why he wanted to know the exact inference of the plan before they acted. He who designed the weapons for the army certainly knew that Ferlin had made his meaning clear in a tactful way. The anti-aircraft machine gun would lose most of its power if the soldiers could not set it up and take aim in advance. Moreover, unlike the defensive battle on the city wall, the enemies would come from all directions, which made it hard to preset the suitable barrage.

Besides, the construction of the railway was not finished yet, so they had to travel by foot to carry the war materials, and if the enemies intercepted the transport corps, it would be a significant loss.

There were about 400 kilometers between Neverwinter and the suspected outpost. Even though they subtracted the journey in the Misty Forest, they still had 170 kilometers to go, which could not be traveled in one day. Besides, the army would need to set up a camp, and according to the number of soldiers, there will be many tents to pitch. As a result of this, all the steps to make the camp would increase the risk of being spotted by the flying demons and that would become his army's Achilles heel.

Roland did not have as many men as Sylvie who could keep every transport corp away from the enemies during their journey. Nor did he depend on those recruits to fight back hard when they were attacked. If the army's supply line was destroyed, it might not be able to pull out, let alone push forward.

But he could not let anyone see his irresolution at this crucial moment. "I need to see the plan before we work out anything else."

"As you command, Your Majesty," Ferlin said with a hand on his chest.

...

A night slipped away unnoticed. The General Staff handed over the plan in the afternoon the next day.

There were two of them.

Edith Kant would be the reporter.

"You've stayed up all night?" Roland asked, noticing some slight puffiness under her eyes.

"Everyone was working so hard. How could I take a rest alone?" Edith shrugged. "Just take it as compensation for the mistake I made last time."

"Is she complaining?" Roland could not help asking inwardly. He then waved his hand and did not take it seriously. "Tell me the conclusion."

"Okay." She pointed at the left sheet of paper and said, "If we march on, as usual, the Devilbeasts will surely spot the main body of our troops. By then, the commander's ability will determine how the battle will turn out. Because the General Staff doesn't have the corresponding information, we just assume the worst. Our conclusion is that the First Army can accomplish the mission. However, they'll be routed by the demons and only half of the army, about 2500 men, can retreat to Neverwinter. The witches won't be in great danger, and all of them can safely escape if they don't make any rash moves."

"The result doesn't seem good." Roland rubbed his forehead. "Is there anything wrong with the logistics?"

"Yes," Edith said bluntly. "Once the demons attack the supply line, the First Army has to send reinforcements. However, it's impossible to stifle the enemies completely. As time goes the casualties get heavier, men's morale lower and the soldiers at the front get disheartened too. A week later, the attack from the enemies will become harder to track, and meanwhile, the main army starts to attack the enemies' camp, which can be regarded as the simplest part of the whole war. Your army will succeed in destroying the enemies' outpost, but the rear will be on fire."

"You mean Neverwinter?"

"No, it's a fire in the Misty Forest set by the demons, who have noticed something wrong in the forest. The fire will burn down the safe passage opened by Lady Leaf so that the transport corps have to take a detour, which is three times longer. That means the supply for the First Army will be cut off completely. As a result, the army starts to lose its advantage and has no choice but to withdraw." Edith cleared her throat and continued, "Of course, the number of the demons might be assumed a little high, but there is no certainty about that. Judging from the enemies' urgent action, I'm afraid they won't give up the outpost so easily."

Roland was amused. "The assumption of the high number of the enemies seems tolerable. But who the hell bring up the idea of a fire in the forest?"

"It's Knight Morning Light," Edith said imperturbably. "But after the analysis, we believe it's possible if the war lasts long enough for the demons to notice something wrong in the Misty Forest."

Roland had been ready to see any result, but he was still depressed by such an adverse inference. "What about the second plan? Don't tell me you came to the same conclusion. Are you busy all night for a negative answer?"

Roland also knew that if he wanted to rival the demons on the Fertile Plains, he needed to face the limit of the land transportation sooner or later. He would not bother to build a railway so hastily if he could quickly send the ammunition and the food to the soldiers at the front.

"No, Your Majesty." The Pearl of the Northern Region chuckled. "The second plan is different. Since we can't guarantee the safety of the supply line, we just let it disappear."

Chapter 962: The Invisible Supply Line

"Oh?" Roland asked, raising his eyebrows. "Go ahead."

"Since the Taquila devouring worm can tunnel through the mountains of the Impassable Mountain Range, they can also be used to open up a passage under the Barbarian Lands," Edith said, as she held up two fingers. "Two worms working in parallel will be able to create a passage wide enough to allow a wagon to pass through it. I've already asked Minister Karl about it. The result he arrived at is that the unstable structure of the mud lands may make it impossible for us to open up a space that can accommodate an underground palace, like the one in the Third Border Town, but if we go deep enough, we should be able to open up a passable tunnel."

"How do we go about it?"

"The construction work should start within the main camp of the First Army. The entrance to the passage can be a shaft heading underground from the center of the camp, covered by a tent and disguised as an ordinary structure."

"What are we going to do with the passage after we retreat?"

"We seal the shaft and cover it with soil, leaving behind only a vent to maintain air circulation."

"How long the construction will take us?"

"It's expected to take two weeks more than the time needed to march the army to the combat zone. In fact, considering possible harassment from the demons, it's reasonable to assume we'll march slower. In this way, the greatest disadvantage of the First Army can be bypassed as well, as the army will appear in the shape of a fist, while the logistics tail behind it will be hidden. This 'fist' would instantly attract all their attention."

Roland could not help curling his mouth into a smile. It seemed that after a long night of consideration, this plan had already matured quite well.

"Were you the one who proposed this idea?"

"Kind of," Edith admitted honestly. "But it was a result of the cooperation between many departments. In addition to the Ministry of Construction, the Arithmetic Academy also joined in, though they weren't aware of the details of the second plan."

Roland wanted to praise Edith as being well-deserved of her reputation as the Pearl of the Northern Region. The most valuable point of this plan was not thinking the novelty of the idea itself but how she had exploited all the resources and tools available to refine the idea.

Ordinary people would never have taken the monster-like worm into account.

Also, the Arithmetic Academy had just been established for less than a year and, apart from the star observation, it had only been working on the tasks given by Roland. But she had already been trying to use the more professional personnel from this new department to perform the calculations and statistics for the underground passage.

It was gratifying to find someone had such accommodating views and extraordinary foresight.

In addition, somehow he had a faint illusion that the Edith in front of him seemed more remarkable than before, as if he had uncovered a deeper layer of her talents.

"Nice work," Roland encouraged. "Just follow this plan."

"Yes," Edith paused. "But there's one more thing I need to point out. Even if we adopt the second plan, casualties will still be unavoidable. Moreover, it won't be an easier battle than the one against the church at Coldwind Ridge. After all, the demons have the initiative this time, so before the First Army reaches the destination, they won't be able to set up stations and blockhouses to defend themselves as they did before."

"So, are you inclined to halt the troops and bide our time?"

"No, I intend to crack this nut, no matter how hard it is," she said slowly. "If the Battle of Divine Will is as cruel as the Taquila witches have said, it's absolutely necessary for the First Army to experience a trial of blood and fire before that war. It's only you who, I always think, cares so much about the soldiers' lives that you have to think twice before taking every step. Now that our new enemies, the demons, are unknown to all of us, and also possess inhuman abilities, so please be prepared for some casualties."

"This feels a little weird..." Roland thought. In the past, Edith was unlikely to say such words to her superiors, for her words would definitely have been viewed as an insult. Edith was too clever to make such a simple mistake at this level.

"Is it a backlash triggered by my reprimanding her last time?"

"But who cares?"

"As long as she serves me well, the rest is irrelevant."

"I see. You may take your leave," Roland said.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

When Edith withdrew, Nightingale showed up looking discontent. "How could a lord be wrong to care about his men? She obviously crossed the line!"

"I don't think she's wrong." Roland smiled. "Everyone has the right to their own beliefs. A wise leader must listen to all the different points of view in order to make a right decision." However, Roland disagreed in his heart. He had to think twice and take all aspects into consideration because he could not bear any losses at present. His soldiers were not a rabble of mercenaries and serfs. Almost all of them were literate. Some officers even understood charts and were able to make reports. He would take any action to reduce casualties.

Just as Nightingale was about to say more, the Sigil of Listening hanging across her chest suddenly glowed.

Roland's heart skipped a beat. He asked, "Is there some new movement from the demons?"

The communication was short. Almost right after Roland asked out loud, Nightingale gave her answer, her hand still pressed onto the sigil on her chest, "No, it's good news. The third batch of the witches from Sleeping Island, led by Lady Camilla Dary, will arrive at Neverwinter tomorrow evening."

"It was Tilly who sent the news..." Roland felt relieved. "Go and tell Wendy to welcome them in the same way did the last two batches."

These witches would be the last batch to move in, which accounted for almost half of the total witches of Sleeping Island. Now that Neverwinter had built the framework of Sleeping Spell, Roland could rest assured that Wendy would be able to take care of everything, including counting all the witches' abilities and recruiting them. For the rest of the witches, he believed that they would sooner or later accept the fact that the Kingdom of Graycastle was different from the one they remembered.

"No problem." Nightingale seemed to have already forgotten Edith's words. As she was about to enter the misty world, Roland suddenly stopped her.

"Hang on... Did you say that it was Camilla Dary leading the witches? The one who is preparing to go to the Sealine with Joan?"

"Yes, what's wrong?"

"Let me see..." Roland pondered for a moment. "The scenario Edith presented assumed that the demons always had the initiative. But maybe I can reduce their range of vision."

"Ugh, are these two things correlated?" Nightingale asked in a state of confusion.

"I'm not sure, but I have to try," Roland said with great interest. "I need to talk to Camilla personally when she arrives."

As the boat sailed along the Redwater River into the Western Region, the fields on both sides of the river turned yellowish-brown, a color of harvested straw mixed with soil.

Judging from the high piles of straw, this year must have been another bumper year.

Standing at the bow of the ship, Andrea gulped the refreshing air of autumn. It mingled with a unique smell of the sun-baked farmland, giving her an inexplicable feeling of relaxation and contentment.

She did not know whether it was the lingering charm of the harvest or her anticipation of finally coming home.

Maybe both.

"Don't... they collect the straw?" A curious voice suddenly came from behind. "They make good kindling."

Andrea turned around and saw that it was a God's Punishment Witch who was speaking. Her name was Carol, if she remembered correctly.

"You know about it?" Andrea had asked her father about the straw when she had been a little girl. She had wondered why the farmers collected, baled, and piled the straw up after cropping the wheat. Her father told her that they had done it for the sake of living.

He had said, "They don't have enough money to buy firewood, so they have to collect anything that can be burnt to keep them warm against the cold winter winds. The straw is a very good fuel, flammable and accessible, which is also preferred by many nobles who often use it to start a fire. When the people are short of clothes, they often use the straw as quilts. Although it produces thick smoke when it burns and pricks your skin when you sleep on it, it keeps the people from freezing to death. You may think the straw is useless, but for those who need it, it's as integral to their lives as the ear of wheat."

Chapter 963: The Ultimate Form of a Gun

At that time, she did not understand the question. It was only after she was exiled from the City of Glow and experienced those days without shelter and food during the escape that she began to realize the heavy burden of "life".

However, Andrea did not expect to hear this question again from a Taquila survivor.

"Why shouldn't I know about it?" Carol asked, winking and smiling at her.

"No, I didn't mean that..." Andrea was a bit embarrassed and answered, "I thought you ancient witches never had to pay any attention to these matters."

"Because the common people took care of everything?" Carol asked, leaning on the railing, "In fact, I was never very different from those common people."

Andrea was a little surprised and asked, "How could that be true?"

"Although there is a fundamental difference between a witch and a common person, how could the Union spare too much energy for a weak non-combat witch? Unlike Phyllis, my ability and magic power were of the lowest rank after awakening, so I was almost forgotten by the Union during the latter part of the war." She looked at the waves as if she was recalling the past days. "During the days when I lost the allowance, I lived with a group of common people. After the city was invaded, I also relied on them to persist right up till the very last moment."

"But in the battle in the Kingdom of Dawn, your abilities were completely unlike those of a non-combat witch..."

Even Ashes the Extraordinary would not have been able to defeat her.

"Training for hundreds of years is enough to change everything," said Carol, opening her hand and clenching it slowly. "In fact, when compared to those previous companions, I even feel a little fortunate that I've become a God's Punishment Witch. At least I've become stronger now. I'm no longer ignored, and I'm able to do something for everyone. Since we met His Majesty, it's also been a new kind of reward."

Andrea suddenly realized that she might not have started talking to her for no reason. She asked, "Why... do you tell me these things?"

Carol looked up and answered, "Because I envy you."

Andrea was stunned and stared blankly at her.

"With your ability, even in the days of the Union, you would have been an excellent combat witch. Since you were able to have a High Awakening at such a young age, you could have become one of Taquila's superiors.", The God's Punishment Witch said lightly, "Did you know? At that time, my greatest wish was to join the Blessed Army and get a blessing from Lady Natalia before a battle. You could achieve it easily. Now I've lost the possibility to become stronger. On the contrary, you're still far from your limits."

Carol paused and said, "The stronger you are, the more challenges you'll meet and the more setbacks you'll encounter. But don't forget, no matter how much hardship you experience, you're already enviable."

Hearing that, Andrea suddenly understood.

She was comforting her.

After her father's belated apology and the farewell to her childhood playmates, she had been feeling down for quite some time. It was only as she was getting closer and closer to Her Royal Highness that her mood gradually improved. Apparently, the God's Punishment Witch had noticed this and chose to share her past experiences with her at this time.

That was right. These kinds of twists and turns were nothing to a Taquila survivor. As a witch, what she blessings she still had were far more than what she had lost.

"Thanks," whispered Andrea, after being silent for a moment.

Carol shook her head and replied, "I just told the truth." Then she stood up and walked back toward the cabin.

"By the way, about what you just asked," Andrea said loudly towards her back, "They bury the straw as fertilizer. After all, they don't need it for a fire in Neverwinter now."

The God's Punishment Witch did not look back, but made a gesture of "I understand".

Andrea also could not help raising her lips. She turned back to face the direction of Neverwinter, her heart full of expectation.

I wonder what Her Highness is doing right now? Ashes must make sure she stays next to her.

Needless to say, Shavi must be missing me. When I go back, I'll absolutely play cards overnight with her.

And when I traveled with Lorgar last time, Maggie helped to inform us of our journey in advance. At this moment she must be in the wastelands with Lightning, watching the demons' every move.

"Coo!"

A chirp came in the sky.

"Uh... Is this an illusion?" She seemed to have heard Maggie's cry.

As soon as Andrea looked up, she saw a fat pigeon descend from the sky and head straight for her face.

It's her indeed!

She could not find another pigeon heavier than Maggie.

"Ahem, you've become heavier!" Andrea pulled the pigeon down and spat the feather out of her mouth, "What about the demons in the northwest? Don't tell me that you're slacking off again!"

"Definitely not, coo!" Maggie argued, "It was His Majesty that told me to pick you up, coo!"

"But I'm coming soon..."

"I don't know either, but I'm absolutely not in the middle of nowhere, coo," said Maggie as she landed on the deck and turned into a Devilbeast. The ship immediately sank by a meter. "Hurry up. They're waiting for you, coo!"

For fear that the ship would soon turn upside down, Andrea immediately climbed onto her back and asked, "Wait... who... are 'they'?"

"Countess Spear and Miss Camilla, coo!" Maggie spread her wings and carried her toward Neverwinter.

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They were not waiting for her in the Witch Building or Roland's castle.

An hour later, Andrea was directly brought to the outside of the boundary wall by Maggie. Besides Spear Passi and Camilla Dary, Anna, Sylvie, Lightning, Summer, and some other witches were also waiting for her on the grassland.

Roland was naturally there, as well.

"So you let her pick me up just to test a new weapon?" Andrea could not help holding her forehead after listening to the explanation. "Even if she hadn't come, I would have arrived at the inland river pier by tonight."

"But we can't afford to be delayed for a day," said Roland, simply telling her the news about the demons' strange move. "The First Army will start off tomorrow. Before it arrives at the entrance to the tunnel, the weapon specially made for you must be adjusted to a usable state."

"Is that so..." Andrea slightly frowned. The demons' actions always gave her a feeling of unease. There was still a while before the appearance of the Bloody Moon, so the demons seemed to be far too active right now. Anyway, they would have to attach great importance to any movement of the demons. The overnight card playing plans had to be temporarily postponed. She replied, "Got it."

She turned to look at a peculiar "gun" among the crowd. It was strange to describe it as a gun, as it was far too large. The barrel was as long as an adult. It did not seem to be the type of weapon which could be carried by an individual while marching and fighting.

It was only possible for Ashes to move around with it.

"What kind of weapon is this?"

"Anti-armor... No, you can call it an anti-Devilbeast sniper rifle," Roland replied.

Chapter 964: Birth

According to Sylvie's observations, the reconnaissance team of the demons was usually made up of two Mad Demons and three Devilbeasts. They would patrol a set region back and forth at fixed intervals to cover a broad surveillance area with overlapping regions between the teams. It was like the "Wall of Eagles" in modern times.

Owing to the excellent field of vision of the flying demons, if the First Army were to enter the detection area, they would instantly be discovered. Roland intended to create a no-fly zone in the air, a blind zone of vision for the demons.

It was certain that there was neither any kind of radar system nor any instantaneous long-distance communication technology for the Mad Demons. As long as they did not blow the horn, the disappearance of a patrol team would not draw any attention. The Devilbeasts that were responsible for delivering the Red Mist cans could enhance the patrol range of the team, but this increased range would also delay the feedback of information. It was possible that the enemies would not notice the death of the Devilbeasts until the time they were supposed to return to their nests in the evening.

Even then, it would not be easy for the demons to locate the attacker immediately as the sniper team would attack from outside of their range of vision, not to mention that the patrol teams could not act at night, while the First Army could. As long as the blind zone in their surveillance network was reasonably arranged, it would gain time for the First Army and weaken the opponents' mobility.

Roland did not expect this strategy to completely block the opponents, but even a delay of two or three days would be a great help to the army. After all, the sooner they arrived at the shelling site, the greater the chance they would have.

The anti-Devilbeast sniper rifle was the product which would realize this hope.

In fact, it could barely still be called a gun. To ensure the long-range lethality and ballistic stability, its caliber was set at 20 millimeters, which was the demarcation point between a gun and a cannon.

As for why it was not designed to be larger, it was because Andrea's ability had a distinctive feature—it needed to be held and fired by hand. This point had been tested during the artillery training. Once she let go of the barrel, even if she gave oral instructions, the soldiers could still not adjust to operating the weapon.

What about opening fire in spite of the recoil of the cannon?

Tilly would be furious!

It was too awkward to call it a sniper cannon, so Roland decided to keep calling it a gun.

The new weapon itself did not employ much new technology. Its structure was much simpler than the Mark I type HMG, with an air guide backseat, semi-automatic shooting, bullet clip... The only extra part

was a muzzle brake that was used to reduce the recoil, which had already been applied in the main artillery of the shallow water gunboats.

It only took two days to make it.

One and a half days were spent just on selecting the materials and post-processing.

Lucia created the alloy, Anna shaped it, Candle consolidated the shape and then Doris demonified it... This weapon was created together by several witches and could be regarded as a legendary product. In addition to its materials and processing technique, the gun barrel would not be deformed even under high-temperature gas and enormous pressure, which was also a key factor to ensure continuous and accurate shooting.

"Is this a sniper rifle?" Andrea looked at it for a moment and noticed something unusual. "Where is its aiming scope?"

"It doesn't have one," Roland shrugged and said.

"Doesn't have one?" She was stunned, "I can't hit a target I can't see."

"An ordinary scope wouldn't help with the range we want, so three more people are here to help you," said Roland, looking at Sylvie, Spear, and Camilla who were standing by his side.

"Do you mean... to let Ms. Camilla connect me with Sylvie to aim, and have Countess Spear take charge of replenishing our magic power?" Andrea finally understood what Maggie's words "They're waiting for you" meant.

"Although I don't want to leave Fallen Dragon Ridge at all... ah, a-choo... Since Your Majesty was so kind to send an invitation to me, I can't say no." Countess Spear said with pretend reluctance, "But next time I wish to be informed earlier rather than let Miss Maggie bring me here by flight. I'm old and not strong enough. I'm still sick because of the cold wind."

Roland silently rolled his eyes. She had already drunk Lily's Cleansing Water and asked for the next batch of students trained by City Hall, but she behaved as if it was unpaid labor. After all, she had been an experienced politician for many years, and she was used to complaining about being hard up.

Camilla's response was much simpler, "Her Highness hopes for me to do my best."

"But I'm not sure if my ability will still be effective under the Eye of Magic." Andrea had never considered a similar issue before because the range of stones and bows was much lower than the limit of her visual range.

"So it's necessary to test it," said Roland. "Then... let's start."

Carter Lannis nervously paced back and forth outside the bedroom.

There were few days in his life where he had felt so disturbed.

In retrospect, except for that moment when His Majesty approached the witch Anna without any defenses, he had never been as nervous as he was now.

May, his wife, was about to give birth.

"As she said, 'Her status is as high as His Majesty's'," Carter joked at himself. "Have some courage. Be a man. Look what you have become. She's just giving birth to a child. Miss Nana and Lily are both here, and several nurses have also come from the hospital. Everything will be okay. Even if she has difficulty, they can cut her belly open to take the child out and keep both of their lives."

But this idea had just come out for a moment when he began to doubt it. "Can they really cut someone's belly to help her give birth to a child? No, no, no, that's too horrible. I hope it's the normal way."

Bastard, how dare you doubt the knowledge of His Majesty!

But... I've never heard of anyone being born like that.

These two voices were arguing in the chief knight's mind and made him feel like his head was splitting into two.

"Rest assured, Sir," said Irene, "Sister May will surely be okay, because... she's the toughest person I've ever seen."

The other members of Star Flower Troupe who had come to visit also nodded.

"Thank you," Carter said, but his worries were not abated at all. He felt sweat flow down his forehead.

All of a sudden, he heard a storm of cheers outside the window.

He went to the window and saw numerous people cheering for a troop who were dressed in the new style of military uniforms and were walking slowly over the street toward the frontier wall. The brown and green fabrics seemed disorganized but presented a sense of solidness, like a rock. The whole army was like a flowing chunk of land.

"Does the army start off today?" Carter could not help asking.

"Yes, my husband is there, too," said Irene, smiling with some reluctance but full of pride. "He's been looking forward to this battle for vengeance for a long time."

"Vengeance?" He echoed unconsciously.

"Yes! To comfort those who were killed by the demons! He told me so."

The once famous knight was now fighting for those ordinary people; the ideal country that His Majesty mentioned in the past was now becoming reality bit by bit. He was supposed to be one of them and should have been the first one to fight for His Majesty. Somehow, he was getting farther and farther away from them.

For a moment, the annoyance replaced the dispute in his mind, and his attention temporarily wandered.

Until a tender cry came from the bedroom.

Suddenly, all thoughts faded away.

The body responded faster than the brain. Before he knew it, he had already pushed open the door and rushed to the bed.

A baby with wrinkled skin was crying over the pillow next to May, while nurses were cleaning up in an orderly manner.

"Congratulations, my lord. It's a very healthy boy," someone laughed.

"Is... is it?" Carter moved to the bed step by step and knelt on one knee, staring at May who had sweat all over her head in the candlelight. For a moment, he forgot what he wanted to say.

The long-lasting cheers from outside mixed with the child's cries, like a chorus to celebrate the new life.

May opened her mouth and tried to say something, but she was too weak to utter any words.

But Carter still understood what she wanted to say.

In that moment, tears poured out of his eyes.

"Now, you're a father," she had said.

Chapter 965: Secret in the Forest

It was in the hinterland of the Misty Forest, northwest of Neverwinter.

Snaketooth felt that ever since he had joined the railway construction team one and a half months ago, these days had become the most incredible period of his life.

"No..." He thought, "It's not appropriate to describe it as the most incredible. From time to time, I can always see something incredible. It seems that I have never really had a chance to know about the real Neverwinter."

He finally understood why the workers had to sign a confidentiality agreement.

The agreement required them not to share what they saw with anyone. Any kind of oral or written record would be regarded as a crime against the laws of the kingdom, and the punishment ranged from fines and confiscation of income to forced labor in the North Slope Mine. The agreement also stressed that they could quit from the construction team if they were unwilling to comply with the requirements. However, if they dared to violate it, the Security Bureau of the kingdom was responsible for checking them, and no one could escape from the ubiquitous supervision.

Snaketooth had once thought with disapproval, "It's possible to check all written records, but how could they police oral records as well? If they arrest anyone who is reported, then the project won't have enough people to be implemented anymore." However, he had a completely different view now. It was beyond his imagination how many secrets there were in Neverwinter. Maybe in some place which most people did not know about, there was a surging and amazing power.

What he was most impressed by were the witches.

Though Paper was also a witch, in his eyes she was just a little girl who needed his protection. The church claimed that the witches were evil as they inherited the power of the devil, but he did not care about that. If the witches were really so powerful, why would they be chased by the church and not dare to show up in public?

But this idea was changed by a witch called Lady Leaf.

Snaketooth never imagined that anyone could control the entire forest on her own.

The Misty Forest which the construction team entered was like the belly of a huge beast. This was especially obvious when they were paving the railway. The vines formed an endless network at the top of the roadbed. The iron tracks were wrapped and dragged forward to the appointed place by the vines and then fell to the ground like grapes in a vineyard. Wherever the railway was being laid, the trees on both sides would separate themselves, which even saved them the effort of cutting down the trees. At the same time, the surrounding trees would grow especially densely, covering the entire sky so as not to attract the demons' attention.

In addition, the forest could take the initiative to attack the beasts approaching the construction team. If they got a bowl of fresh meat soup someday, that meant an unfortunate beast ran into the domain of Lady Leaf.

Snaketooth had once seen her, but he could not be sure whether Lady Leaf was still human. Her body glowed with a strange green radiance which resembled a gem. When she moved, she could walk freely among the branches as if she had no real body.

If it had been the him from the past, he would surely have screamed loudly. With such ghostly deeds and an incredible appearance, it was not surprising that she would be regarded as one of the Devil's minions. His only thought was that Paper was lucky to not look like that.

However, Snaketooth did not hate her, and instead even had sincere respect for her, as His Majesty had mentioned at the Awards and Honor Ceremony that he was able to feed everyone in Neverwinter thanks to Leaf's help. Anyone freed from hunger and suffering was a beneficiary of her ability. By this merit alone, Leaf should forever be remembered.

Snaketooth was naturally one of the beneficiaries.

Apart from the witch, another discovery probably was his own personal secret.

It was after the First Army entered the Misty Forest.

Ever since the demons had attacked Neverwinter, the voices demanding a counterattack had become more and more fierce. Even in the Wild, the workers were also discussing this issue. He was not surprised that this day had come.

Every day a large number of soldiers marched to the front. Apparently, His Majesty intended to wage a war against the demons. Unlike the knights he had seen before, the soldiers were mostly acquaintances and neighbors of the workers. Whenever the army passed by, the workers would always greet them with enthusiasm. He had thought paving the railway away from the border would be dangerous and lonely hard labor, but it turned out to be the opposite.

Snaketooth did not have too many acquaintances, so he preferred to go and observe the train alone, and he even climbed up and touched it when it stopped.

However, what he had experienced two weeks ago was horrifying.

It was a locomotive dragging six carriages, which stopped in the section where he was participating in the construction, the latest section of the railway. There were two gigantic objects piled on the topless flatcar. Each of them was over 20 meters in length and covered with a layer of canvas. He had no idea what they were.

This was originally normal. If the goods delivered had nothing to do with the construction team, it must have been military supplies, and he did not want to find out what it was. However, he had an upset stomach that night and had to run out of his tent at midnight. While he was looking for somewhere to empty the bowels, he was shocked to see the canvas creeping up by itself!

After several warriors who dressed distinctively different from the First Army soldiers untied the ropes fixing the canvas, a huge mollusk monster crept out of it! What was more horrifying, the monster could speak, and its voice was quite pretty! Its first words were: "I'm hungry! Do you have any food?"

At that moment, Snaketooth felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck. He could almost imagine the cold reply of the warriors, "Ah, yes, all the workers in this camp are your food. Enjoy yourself."

But this did not happen. The warriors embraced it affectionately and then moved ham, vegetables, and bread from the last carriage... They were all packed in barrels as tall as a man. The two worms gobbled up the food in a hurry and then disappeared into the depths of the forest with the warriors.

Snaketooth did not dare to breathe. He hid behind the trees until the footsteps faded away. Once he confirmed that they had left, he looked down to find that he had wet his pants...

Within two days, a strange station was built next to the track. It was an arched building made of cement and bricks, and inside it was a deep and bottomless hole. Though the workers walked in and out of it, no one knew where it led to. There were several steam engines beside the hole, constantly blowing wind inside. It was really weird.

He also firmly hid this secret in his heart.

Snaketooth had thought that he would be afraid and want to quit from the railway construction team. In reality though, he recovered faster than he had imagined. "This is an exciting life! This is the real image of Neverwinter!"

When he had just left his friends and arrived in the forest, he always felt that he was like a rootless piece of duckweed, not attached to anyone. Especially when the workers received letters from their families and happily shared them with him, loneliness haunted him. But he was gradually attracted by various novel things, such as the perfectly connected tracks, the beautiful songs in the forest, the huge desert wolf which appeared and disappeared secretly but would not be attacked by Lady Leaf, and the mysterious man who came here and whispered to himself on certain days...

This made him feel that he was a little closer to the unknown side of Neverwinter, and also gradually integrating with the city.

Snaketooth wanted to keep all these things in mind and wait for the day that he could tell his friends. There was no better proof of being a citizen than knowing the depths of a city. Even if he did not have so many familiar neighbors, no one could deny this.

The duration of the confidentiality agreement was five years.

He was looking forward to that day.

Chapter 966: Operation Summit

Two weeks after the counterattack plan, named "Operation Summit", was launched Roland received a report from Lightning, who was scouting on the front line. The battalions of the First Army had successfully completed the first step of the program and joined forces at "Forest No. 2+1.76" of the Misty Forest.

He borrowed the naming system of the turning points from the railway mileage identification method. The first half was the planned sectional station and the second half was the revised distance. That was to say, the turning point was located 1.76 kilometers ahead of Station No. 2 of the Forest Railway. The advantage of this method was that Roland could accurately see the military's route on the big map.

It was also the end of the current tracks. From here, the First Army would begin the second step of the plan—to leave the Misty Forest and march toward the northeastern direction of the Barbarian Lands without cover from Leaf.

Whether they could destroy the demons' outpost depended on this step.

As long as the Longsong Cannons and machine guns were set up, they could return to their tried and tested battle tactics from their training and previous encounters.

"I got it," Roland said, making a mark on the map. "How about the demons? Is there any sign of a response from them?"

Lightning's reply rustled through the Sigil of Listening, "Sylvie said that they haven't made any kind of response. They're still concentrating on building their own outposts, and have set up several black stone pillars. In addition, the red mist supply line has appeared behind the outposts. The Adviser Department's judgment is that the number of those long-legged monsters is limited."

This was good news, as Agatha had once stated that the only thing that limited the demons from overthrowing the humans was the Red Mist. If they had found a way around this restriction by the third Battle of Divine Will, it would spell bad news for everyone. For example, the mobility of the flying Devilbeasts and the horrifying fighting capacity of the Senior Demons would make the long border of the four kingdoms impossible to defend.

Roland now knew that the stone pillars at the outpost were different from the legendary Blackstone Pagoda, though they had much in common. The former could only store Red Mist and slowly release it to form a special mist environment for the demons to absorb. Within this environment, the demons' strength and self-healing abilities would be enhanced. In other words, it assisted the demons in battle.

The stone pillar could double the effect of the Red Mist; however, it could only consume reserves of it. On the other hand, the original Blackstone Pagoda could generate the Red Mist and also had much broader coverage, so it basically formed the core of the demons' main cities.

In addition, the stone pillar could not begin working as soon as it was planted. It had to be cultivated for about a month after being planted before it could release Red Mist. Until then it could only be used as an enlarged Red Mist can.

Sylvie's observations made him more confident about his judgment. No one wanted to see their enemies come back again after being driven away for a few days. It would be worse if they could recover and bring a bunch of reinforcements. At the current rate of railway construction, the First Army should be able to launch an attack on any new outpost before the stone pillars begin functioning at full capacity.

"In that case, keep up the scouting and let me know if you find something new. Remember that safety should always be the first priority."

"Roger that. Lightning out."

Then the light of the Sigil of Listening went out.

Roland picked up a ruler and measured the distance on the map. The First Army was supposed to enter the demons' reconnaissance perimeter in six days, by the beginning of late autumn.

Even for the army that was accustomed to fighting on the ground, this would be a tough challenge.

"Why are you worried?" Nightingale put away the Sigil and asked, "Weren't the results of the new weapon's tests pretty good?"

"In the end, that was just a test. No one can know what will happen in a war before it has even begun," Roland shrugged and said, "Not to mention that Sylvie will be occupied with the fight in the air, so the First Army has to depend on themselves to set up and maintain the defensive line."

"It's already pretty incredible that Andrea could consistently hit a balloon five kilometers away. She won't let us down as long as she has that weapon," Nightingale smiled and said, "Though Sylvie won't be available to keep a lookout for the army, Lightning and Maggie are still there. Hasn't the First Army experienced a scenario like this before?"

Roland raised his eyebrows in surprise and asked, "When did you learn to comfort others?"

"I'm just being honest," Nightingale whistled and said, "Of course, I'm also good at persuading people. I remember that every single noble I ever visited agreed with what I had to say."

Uh... that's just because of direct intimidation.

"Ahem, I guess you're right," Roland said, twitching his lips, "I'm going to have a nap in my office. Don't wake me up unless there's some urgent news."

Nightingale seemed to realize that something was unusual and asked, "Right here? Should I inform the Taquila witches?"

"No," said Roland, "Don't even allow them to be near the castle."

"I see," she understood and said, "Don't worry. I'll make sure no one walks into the range of the light beam."

...

Roland rarely napped, unless he was particularly tired or for a special reason.

For example, this time was a special reason.

It had been a month since the last time he talked with Garcia in the Dream World. Now she had returned from her Headquarters. She had promised that she would bring back the book that was written half a century ago which first mentioned the Battle of Divine Will. For some reason, Roland felt it better to not let the Taquila survivors know about it for the moment.

He had considered it for a long time. No matter what he found in the book, he would probably be able to remain calm, while those witches who regarded the Divine Will as their ultimate fate could not. There was a battle looming on the horizon, so it would be better to not bother them with this.

Entering the Dream World was more like flipping a switch in his mind now. As long as he concentrated on it, he could fall asleep within a few seconds, which saved him the trouble of tossing and turning for hours.

After Zero went to school, Roland could not wait to pick up the phone.

"Hey? Did you get the book?"

"If I say no, would you be so disappointed that you'd throw your cell phone?" He soon heard Garcia's familiar sarcasm, "Relax, you reminded me three days ago. I'm not so forgetful that I'd eat my words, unlike a certain someone."

Roland was relieved and replied, "I won't. I still need to feed my family. I can't afford to throw it."

"Feed your family? Isn't the salary of martialist enough for you? Hey... Have you gone down the wrong path somewhere?"

"What are you imagining?" He whispered in his heart, "I'm trying to feed a group of people who haven't eaten for hundreds of years." He said, "I have to say, even if we are acquaintances—"

"Now you're going to accuse me of slander? It's a new era. Stop using this cliché, okay?" Garcia interrupted him.

Roland almost choked on hearing her words. It felt terrible being mocked about clichés by a woman from the middle ages...

He simply asked, "All right, so where's the book?"

"Of course, it's in my apartment. Come and get it." She replied.

Chapter 967: The Dreamland Book

Garcia walked into the main hall of room No. 0827, looking as if she had just taken a bath. Her morning tracksuit was now replaced by a red and white martial arts robe. Her cheeks were still flushed from the

heat of the hot water; her beauty due to the Wimbledon family genes and her silky wet shoulder length hair made her a real sight to behold.

"Would you like something to drink?" She swayed the glass in her hand.

The first time that he had come to her house, there had been a cold and distant expression on her face... Well, she still hadn't changed much even after all this time.

"No, that's alright, thank you." Roland was curious and asked, "Do you have a competition today?"

"Have you ever seen an athlete who had to change and get ready at home? Staying warm right before a competition is one of the most important preparations for any sport." Garcia poured herself a glass of milk and sat opposite him. "Even the worst sports stadiums would still have a changing room—sometimes I really wonder if your common sense was also swallowed by the Erosion."

"Haha..." Roland tried to laugh off his embarrassment and said, "I thought martialists might have their own unique preparations before a match."

"In the eyes of the public, it's no different from any other sport. The only difference might be that it's generally more exciting and the prizes are better," she shrugged her shoulders and said, "I'm wearing this uniform because we need to take advantage of the influence of the martialists later."

"Huh? Are you going to shoot an ad?"

"It's a protest!" Garcia cried out in frustration, "Don't you ever read the papers? The Clover Association is going to tear down the walls around North Tube Street. If we don't do anything, that their next demolition target will end up being this tube-shaped apartment. Your home will soon be in ruins!"

"Uh..." Roland had almost forgotten that there was such an event going on today. "Well... I wish you all the best."

"You—!"

"I've never competed before and no one's ever heard of me. I'm a complete newbie. I don't even own a martialist uniform." Roland feigned a regretful expression and said, "Even if I go, I won't be of much use."

"We can achieve anything through our combined efforts. Don't you know that?" Garcia picked up a list from the coffee table and shoved it in front of Roland. "Look at the people on that list. How many of them are martialists? They're all the lower-floor occupants of the tube-shaped apartment, yet they're all willing to go and protest with me! If we choose to be silent just because we're not well-known, then everyone will ignore our existence!"

Looking at the determination in Garcia's eyes, Roland felt his motivation rise along with her words. Whether it was facing the Erosion or her daily life, this seemingly cold and indifferent girl was far more enthusiastic than most people.

Is this the only place she can stay? No, with her background and abilities, she should easily be able to buy a new residence in the center of the city. She's doing this only for the sake of the other residents of this building. They're mostly ordinary people with meager salaries, there's no way they could afford to find a new apartment that has half the facilities and connectivity of this locality.

He was aware that they were all just phantoms of the Dream World, and that these occupants of the tube-shaped apartment were the defeated souls captured by Zero. However, with the world progressing toward an unknown future on its own, he became doubtful about his original ideas. He could no longer distinguish between the phantom and real people. For example, he found it really hard to treat this vibrant and shining girl in front of him as an imaginary and empty shell. The longer he stayed in the Dream World, the more intense the feeling became.

Anyway, she did bring back the book for him. The least he could do was accompany her as a sign of gratitude.

Just as Roland was about to agree, he suddenly saw a familiar name on that list.

"Barolotsim".

That was the name of the tenant staying in apartment No. 0510. That was also the name of the only resident that was a demon.

This long name was particularly eye-catching among the information of the residents that had been collected by the Taquila witches. Hence just a glance was enough to leave a deep impression on him.

Roland was startled to see the name of the demon on that list, as it meant that 'he' would leave the tube-shaped apartment and join the residents in their protest—this could be a perfect chance to peep into his memory fragment.

"Ahem, I'm afraid that I already have an appointment for the afternoon... so I can only give you moral support." He glanced away, and pretended he had not seen that name.

Anyone else would have used the rights to the book as a bargaining chip.

But Garcia was different. She just stood up in a fury and said, "I should've known that saying all these words to you would be a waste of my breath." Then she walked into the bedroom in a huff, and soon she walked back out with an old leather red book.

At first, she looked like she was going to slam the book down in front of him, but she quickly became softhearted and changed her mind. "This is the book that Master often mentioned to us. Since you have it now, you may leave!"

Roland casually opened a page and realized that there was no name of the author, but just the word "Unknown" in its place.

"Doesn't anyone know who the author is?"

"Why would it be marked as unknown if the author were known?" Garcia replied firmly, "Amongst the many books that are a part of the Association's library, this book wasn't famous due to its content, but rather because of its author. Apparently, the author died before he could finish writing the book, and the Association couldn't find any records of who he really was."

"He died when he was writing the book?" Roland was stunned for a moment and wondered if it was a sudden death. He had originally wanted to sit down for a private chat with the author—half a century was not considered long. If he was lucky, the author could still be alive. Even if he was dead, there would

still be some news of him. At that time, recording cases was already part of the judicial system, and the author was even a martialist that had awakened the Force of Nature.

There was something fishy going on here.

"What's wrong? Are you afraid?" Garcia laughed and said, "Did it bring to mind those stories about being cursed and chased by ghosts? Don't worry, there's no evidence to prove that anyone who has read the book will die. Otherwise, I would never have recommended this book to you. But if you still don't want to read it, I won't make fun of you or tell anyone."

No, I'm sure you will...

Roland grabbed the book and nodded at her. "Thank you."

"Hmm." Garcia turned her head and did not say any more.

Roland went back as quickly as he could to apartment No. 0825 and locked the door. The protest would only start in the afternoon, so he still had a few hours to satisfy his curiosity.

Just like Garcia had mentioned, the title of the book was called "Raison d'être".

The cover was made of a type of red leather that could no longer be found in this era. The cover was backed by a thin layer of wood, hence it looked quite sturdy. Roland had thought that since it was related to the deities, the content would be full of spiritual stuff that he might not understand. However, once he turned the first page, he was immediately captured by the exquisite handwriting.

The text was on the left while the pictures or the excerpts were on the right. At the bottom, there was numbering that matched the content accurately. It did not look like a book of premonition, but more like a rigorous derivative thesis.

Those pictures had already faded and turned yellow, while the excerpts came from newspapers and magazines. In this day and age of the internet, it was already very difficult to see handwritten text and pictures made by using scissors and glue. The whole book felt old and antique, but the content was unexpectedly smooth and easy to understand. He had no problem reading it.

The first sentence was, "We have been deceived by the deities."

Chapter 968: A Piece of the Mystery Unravels

Roland's heart sank.

This style of opening resembled the eulogies of the Union survivors—that common people would never be able to defeat the demons. Through the handwriting, he could even imagine the pessimism and despair of the writer.

"The world is so distorted, yet we are totally unaware of it."

"Though we know that the Force of Nature comes from the Erosion loopholes, yet we still treat it as a gift from the deities simply because of the vast powers it gives us."

"This granting of power lets us feel lucky to be a part of it, yet it has also blinded our eyes."

"It is time for us to awaken."

"Though I don't know if it is already too late."

A single short paragraph had already caused Roland to become quite agitated. As the creator of the Dream World, he felt that these words were implying something. Could it be that someone had realized this world was just a made-up dream and wanted to warn everyone to wake up from it? Roland could return to reality upon awakening, but where would these people end up?

Regarding that paragraph about the Force of Nature, he strongly empathized with the author's thoughts.

The feeling of empowerment derived from transforming into an Extraordinary was far greater than that of being a political leader. No one would want to attribute all their power to a catastrophe. Even if they knew the truth, they would not bear to lose their power and hence would not even entertain the thought of stopping the apocalypse.

In the next dozens of pages, the book did not delve further into the conclusion made in the opening but changed directions—questioning why only mankind was capable of exerting the Force of Nature.

The photos and extracts were all from different modern scientific experiments and archaeological findings. Their descriptions and contents were all related to the main theme of the book.

"There is already enough evidence to show that intelligence is not the key to awakening the Force of Nature. Throughout history, there have been Fallen Evil that were mentally retarded, as well as martialists who had their powers from the moment of their birth. Without human intelligence, we are fundamentally the same as other animals, and in fact, we are highly similar. Our genes are the same, and so are our origins, as well as our behaviors and instincts. Whether it is a frog, a snake or a lizard, the warm sunshine will treat everyone equally, so why doesn't the Force of Nature behave in the same manner?"

"Is it because humans are the lucky ones on the evolutionary path?" Roland suddenly came up with this idea and found that the writer seemed to have read his mind. "Most people use luck as an excuse, just like the geocentric theory of the past—but in fact, the Earth is not the center of the universe. Humans are not the only species that can use the Force of Nature."

"Through observing history, we can see that records of civilization sometimes shown a fission-like split in development that occurs in sporadic bursts. For example, in the myths that have spread to the present, the descriptions of extraordinary abilities are mostly focused on a period around 2000 years ago—this was much earlier than the anthropological records of man. It seemed as if we had a sudden awakening, and from that, we derived unbelievable strength. The number of descriptions of the enemies also increased accordingly. Whether it was demons, beasts, monsters, or aliens, they all had different shapes and forms, but they also had a common point: a common person could not defeat them, and only the awakened heroes were capable of being their worthy opponents."

"Although there is no direct evidence, I have always believed that those alien species were not figments of the imagination that the ancients conjured up out of thin air but rather real living species. Their abilities were like ours, and that was why the mythology of that period was so vivid."

"At this moment, the reader might think of excuses such as the ancient mosquitoes who could preserve their remains in amber, yet these alien species did not leave any remains. This excuse might sound a little far-fetched. On the other hand, it is because they disappeared without a trace despite so many mentions of them that they grab our attention, right? There are so many incredible relics in the world, many of which are buildings and monuments that were completely different from the construction styles of the people of that era. Some of these buildings were even far too advanced to be built by the people of that era. However, we have still stubbornly classified them as divergent branches of our own civilization and credited the works to the local indigenous leaders. This is a gross overestimation of the capabilities of humans."

"In order to find more answers, I have visited each of those monuments one by one. Throughout this journey, I made some surprising discoveries—although the aliens did not leave any bones or hair, the markings engraved on the stones have not disappeared. In a secret chamber inside a volcano's ruins, I saw the record of an alien civilization written through the various carvings on the walls."

As he turned to this page, Roland was convinced that this was indeed a book created in the Dream World—he had never seen the black and white photos of the ancient buildings before his transmigration, and what was even more conspicuous was that the volcanic remains that the martialist mentioned at the end looked eerily similar to the demons' Blackstone Pagoda!

"It was not a coincidence that they acquired the Force of Nature and then fought against humankind. This was like a meeting arranged by the deities, and they regarded defeating the adversaries as a repayment of the power bestowed upon them by the deities."

"I know that it is hard to describe the carving with words alone, but I could feel it—if humans could learn their language, then I think the most appropriate term would probably be the Battle of Divine Will."

What Lan was referring to... came from here?

Roland licked his slightly dry lips and continued reading.

"But this is not what I meant to focus on—if this power was granted just for a single war alone, then it would have ended a long time ago. No matter what the deities were, they would have no longer have had anything to do with mankind after that war. However, some things are worse than we thought. According to the writing on the sculptures... this was not the first time that they had done something like this."

The handwriting slowly became less tidy, as the number of ink dots and emotional words increased. It seemed as if the writer was hesitant about whether or not he should continue writing.

"These aliens did not live on the same planet as us from the very beginning. The outbreak of the war had brought about a drastic change in their home environment, though they were well-prepared for that change. It was not as simple as a forest degenerating into a desert, or a nomadic tribe progressing into a farming civilization step by step. Dammit, I don't know how to express this part of the concept. I can provide a less appropriate example. Such a change is like electrons jumping between energy levels in an

atomic transition. Before the change, it was at a certain stable level of energy. But then, the change happened, and it immediately gained energy, directly transitioning to a higher level, with no process or intermediate stage. It was like their civilization jumped to a higher level in the blink of an eye."

"Frankly speaking, I do not even want to imagine how many such changes they have already gone through. But now that they no longer exist, why does the Erosion and the Awakening still continue? Or does this mean that... the Battle of Divine Will had never ended in the first place?"

"The more I wonder about this question, the more I feel terrified. What kind of world are we living in? Are the Fallen Evil really martialists that have been tempted by power? I feel like I have been caught up in a vortex."

"If the answer is no, then what exactly are we facing?"

"The so-called gifts and rewards are all lies."

"The only difference has been the change in—"

The writing stopped abruptly and left only a long line of scratches behind. It seemed as if the author had suddenly lost all his strength and let the pen fall down.

"—Doesn't anyone know who the author is?"

"Why would it be written as unknown if the author were known? Apparently, the author died before he could finish writing the book, and the Association couldn't find any records regarding him."

As he recalled the previous conversation, Roland could not help but feel a chill rise from the soles of his feet.

It would be unnecessary to elaborate as the book had too many parts that were filled with a strange atmosphere—it was clearly recounting the Dream World, yet there was always a feeling of *deja vu*.

He could not wait to pull out the phone and call Garcia.

In any case, there were just too many questions in his mind that he needed Garcia to answer.

Just then, his elbow knocked aside the book, and a red note slipped out of it.

Roland was surprised for a second, after which he bent to pick it up.

He saw two rows of small print.

"When the divine meaning appears, meet at the appointed time."

"Rose Café, No. 302."

Chapter 969: Into the Abyss

"Ring... ring."

The phone got connected while he was still in a daze.

"Hello? Why are you calling again?" The voice on the other line seemed impatient. "If you have something to say, do it quickly. I'm going out soon."

Roland shook his head and forced himself to concentrate. "Ah, so... I've just read the book and its content is quite..."

"It's quite horrifying, right?" Garcia seemed to have guessed his reaction. "This is usually how most people behave when they see it for the first time. But since it's fictional, you will forget all about it after you've slept."

"Fictional?" Roland frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Literally." Laughter could be heard on the other end of the earpiece. "The Martialist Association investigated the volcanic ruins mentioned by the author, and discovered that it was engulfed by magma 200 years ago—that's an active volcano. Although it has never had a big eruption, it hasn't been completely dormant for thousands of years either. So unless he can replay the past or live for two centuries, while also being able to tolerate the high temperature and thick smoke, that author has been making stuff up."

Her reply really surprised him, and so he hesitated for a long time before saying, "In that case... he made up all the content in the book?"

"It could be true or false. Anyway, I've never had much interest in archeology. Master once said that if wasn't for the fact that the author was wearing the martialist robes and died in the Association's library, the book wouldn't even have been kept and recorded."

"But the association didn't know his identity..."

"So the author himself became more famous than the book for that reason. This could be considered an unsolved mystery of the Association. But I doubt you'll be able to solve it. According to my master, the management went through every nook and cranny of the records department, and still weren't able to discover anything." Garcia said, "Anyway, there're so many rumors about the book. Have you finished? I'm going to hang up now."

"Hang on, wait—" Roland said hurriedly, "After you brought the book this time... did you read it again?"

He actually wanted to ask about the note, but eventually changed his mind.

"I flipped through a few pages on the way back. What happened?"

"No, nothing... I just wanted to ask."

"Click." The line got cut off on the other end—apparently, this teasing question made Garcia lose her patience.

He could even hear the door closing over at apartment No. 0827, even though they were separated by two walls.

Roland could not help but sigh. If he was not direct, then this sort of question that he asked would only cause annoyance and nothing else.

Firstly, only half of the book "Raison d'être" was written, and the red note was most likely caught in the last few blank pages. There would be no guarantee that it would be noticed even if you were to read the entire book.

She had also taken the shuttle when she came back from the Association. He could easily imagine that she would not have had much time to go through the book seriously during her journey back.

Regardless of how Garcia answered, he would still not have been able to judge whether she had seen this note.

No—it was a definite no.

According to Garcia's character, if she had seen it, she would certainly not be indifferent to it.

So it would seem that these two sentences were either a prank of some sort or a hidden message.

Roland could not help but wish that it was just a prank.

The other alternative was just... too absurd.

Who was the note for? Was it meant for anyone who discovered it, or did it have a specific target?

Rationally speaking, he was more inclined toward the latter—the book was not top-secret, and most of the martialists had already read it due to its fame. It would not be surprising if there was a reader who did not discover it, but it was very unlikely that it remained undiscovered even after so many people had read the book. So it was probable that the note was not placed in the book from the beginning, but rather it was put in there fairly recently.

But it was this logic that made him feel creeped out about the whole thing.

What did that imply?

It meant the Dream World, this fantasy world that was envisioned by him, had been discovered by someone. This was similar to being in a dream when a person in the dream suddenly turned around and smiled slyly at you.

Roland patted his cheek and tried to suppress the chill in his heart. He tried to repeatedly convince himself that there was nothing to be scared of. Although this was just speculation at the moment, even if it was true, as long as he left, this world's time would stop. Who could be in a position to threaten him?

Moreover, the message on the note only implied that they would wait to be contacted instead of taking the initiative. This could help to explain some of the problems.

As for the location of the Rose Café and what the "divine meaning" meant, that would be best left to the Taquila witches to investigate.

He did not forget that he still had other things to do next.

He looked up at the wall clock and confirmed the time before taking the key that he had already prepared from his bedroom. He then locked up and went downstairs.

In order to explore the memory fragments of the tube-shaped apartment, Roland had already completed a lot of preparations ever since the arrival of the Taquila witches. For example, he made duplicates of the keys to every apartment and even bought an unlocking tool online—since he was the only person who could see this "non-existent" Gate of Memory, if he did encounter one that was locked, he would have no choice but to roll up his sleeves and do the work himself.

If it hadn't been for the expedition for the unification of Graycastle, this part of the investigation would have been completed a long time ago.

Roland went down to the fifth floor and found room No. 0510 quite quickly.

Most people would be taking a nap at this time. The late autumn sunshine made everyone feel lazy. The whole corridor looked quiet and serene, which was a stark contrast to the rush of traffic outside in the streets.

He inserted the key into the lock and turned it gently.

The door opened.

A weird aroma suddenly poured into his nose and made him involuntarily hold his breath.

Although the Dream World changed itself to accommodate the demon, it did not amend some of the details, such as body odor. In order to cover up their smell, the extensive use of perfume had become the last resort.

Roland spent two minutes thoroughly searching the room again. Once he confirmed that there was no one, he locked the door, remove the hydraulic bolt-cutter from his backpack, and walked straight to the storage room at the end of the walkway.

This iron door was one of the few that were locked.

Evidence had already proven that although the world connected behind the door was mysterious, the lock of the door still couldn't withstand the forces from a tool that utilized the laws of physics. A few seconds later, the lock was silently broken into two pieces.

He swallowed hard and pushed open the heavy door—

Roland was immediately attracted to the marvelous sight in front of his eyes.

He seemed to be standing on top of a bottomless cliff. The top of the cliff was circular. It was more than 10 km in length and he almost could not see the opposite side. This peculiar terrain was encircled by an extremely magnificent lake. However, the lake was not formed of water, but dazzling Red Mist!

The mist and the peak were hundreds of meters apart. If he looked down, it would look like a shining red crystal, like a thick and rich substance. If it was not for the occasional mist that rose from the bottom and ran straight up the gust of wind to form a "mist pillar" that stood over the horizon, it would be very hard to relate that to the dirty and dark "bloody fog".

Roland felt like he was standing on the surface of the sun and admiring the torrential solar flares, while he watched the haze that was thicker than the castle, appearing continuously and shining more

brilliantly than molten steel. However, it did not radiate a hot, unforgiving heat. As the height increased, the color of the fog quickly faded, and it finally diffused into the air to form a Red Mist layer.

And this was not all that he saw.

Towering black stone buildings surrounded the circular cliff—most of them were tower-shaped and differed only in some minor details. As the sun was shrouded in red mist, the whole world seemed particularly dim. Only when there were gushes of red mist at the bottom of the Red Mist Lake could these black towers be faintly seen reflected in the lake.

Like a dense stone forest.

Chapter 970: Demon City

"Is this... the city of the demons?"

Roland could not help but feel amazed. He thought the memory fragments would be connected to a certain decisive battlefield. He did not expect to have the opportunity to face the enemy's lair.

However, the scene in front of him had many differences from the mirage that was seen by the Witch Cooperation Association.

At least, he had taken a good look around but did not find that most prominent main tower which was the core—the giant Obelisk that was made using the mineral vein of the God's Stone and that could grow and create red Mist.

After all, there were too many towers here.

Some were even standing above the cliffs. Most of the towers leaned outward, just like apartments floating in the sky.

How did they manage to build such a magnificent complex?

And this was not the city complex that Leaf had seen, so where could that be?

Or could it have been located in a more distant place... for example, the rumored birthplace of the demons?

Just then, Roland noticed that there was a flash of light at the sinkhole near the Red Mist Lake.

Unlike the glittering mist, that seemed to be a natural burning flame.

He was a bit surprised to find that the Red Mist could burn since an open fire should have been banned in the city of the demons.

He decided to go down to the bottom of the pit to satisfy his curiosity—judging by the architectural style of the opening, he should be able to find the stairs leading down or a hanging basket nearby.

However, Roland suddenly stopped before even walking a hundred steps as all the muscles in his body started to tense up!

A team of demons actually walked out from around the corner!

Judging by their appearance, they should all be Mad Demons. They had bone armors and held short spears. The two in front even wore gloves, and their burly figures almost blocked half of his path.

The distance from the two of them was less than ten steps away!

"Wait a minute... How could there be living creatures in the memory fragments?"

He had never seen a knight from the Judgement Army nor a priest of the church when he was wandering in the Hermes Cathedral at home!

This accidental encounter left Roland a bit shocked, and unsure of how to react.

"Should I escape?"

He had seen the strength and precision of the Mad Demon's spear throwing skills, so running away from the enemy was undoubtedly a dead end.

Charge and overthrow them?

The Dream World's power was still running in his body, so his skills at the moment were stronger than those of ordinary people. However, compared with these bloodthirsty monsters, his fighting skills still remained at the level of street fighting. He could probably deal with an opponent one on one, but dealing with six Mad Demons? He felt that the odds of winning were very slim, especially against the leading Ironhand demon, as its powerful electric shock ability was definitely the nemesis of close combat.

However, before he could make a decision, something astonishing happened again.

The demons did not seem to realize the existence of the uninvited guest, and they walked straight past him without pausing.

Roland was stunned, then subconsciously turned around to touch one of the Mad Demon's arms.

His finger passed through its skin, but his fingertips did not feel anything as if he was touching a phantom.

"So... it's like this?"

He thoughtfully recovered his hand and bent over to touch the ground.

His palm could clearly feel the dampness of the black soil eroded by the Red Mist.

Roland had a faint idea of the answer.

It appeared that the devoured person's resistance would determine the extent of the memory fragments, and it could also affect what would be displayed in the scene—the content saved in this memory was obviously much more than that left by Zero.

If he thought along these lines, his mind naturally came up with two new doubts.

One was the question of the church warrior who deliberately sacrificed himself to save Zero. To what extent could his memory be enriched? Was it impossible to talk to the dead after entering the memory fragment?

And the next was Zero's level of resistance—how much hate and unwillingness did she have after being defeated by him? It was even stronger than that of the demon.

Suddenly, he had an urge to go back to the house and lift the little girl up to smack her butt.

Roland took a deep breath, put away his distracting thoughts and hastened his steps back to the destination.

...

Just as he expected, there were many ramps and stone steps leading to the pit at the edge of the circular cliff. Some of them were very spacious and did not lose to the main roads at Neverwinter.

The more he walked down, the more he was impressed about the size of the Red Mist Lake.

Even if the upper half of the Western Region's Great Snow Mountain was flattened, it would not be that wide. Standing on the cliff, he could not help but feel how small he was. He felt as if the whole world was far away from him, leaving only the turbulent red mist and the looming stone towers that could be seen on and off.

It was hard to imagine how this sinkhole could form naturally.

What was more incredible was that the demons had transformed this place to become their permanent residence.

How many hundreds of years would it take to dig this deep and even leave roads for carriage access as well as coat these roads with a hard black stone layer?

If this was a measure of the demon's technical level and social organizational skills, this meant they could be regarded as an extremely difficult enemy.

The humans today would not be able to win by chance. If they want to win the Battle of Divine Will, the Four Kingdoms will have to give it their all.

As he got closer to the flames, Roland noticed that there were more demons showing up on the roads.

Not all of them were armed. Most of them wore skins or robes, and their appearance and sizes were more varied. It was hard to imagine they were all of the same species.

As mentioned in Pasha's report, the Union had once captured some demons that had no magic power and were not combat trained. But it was still not certain whether they were a part of the demons or a slave tribe enslaved by the demons.

However, Roland did not find any superior demons of a supervisory level around him. Their actions seemed completely spontaneous, which meant that the answer should be the former.

This division seemed to be more thorough than the division between witches and normal humans. They were not only differentiated by ability, but even their form had a complete change.

It was still not clear whether they were born from the same origin, or were born with different methods or parents, without a possibility of changing between the forms.

"Do the demons have masculine and feminine forms?"

"Or, was their reproduction completely different from that of mankind and therefore could not be generalized?"

Armed with these thoughts, Roland finally arrived at the bottom of the sinkhole.

He discovered that the source of the fire came from a bonfire—he could see a stone bridge hanging on the side of the cliff, that was connected to a circular island.

Although it was an island, there was no support below, and it seemed like it was supported directly by the slender stone bridge. It looked so unstable that you would worry that it might fall at any time. The bonfire was set up around the island. When the mist soared, the top of the flame would burn brightly, as if it were echoing the roar of the mist lake. Sometimes the flame would rise up to 10 meters in height, and that was why Roland noticed the blinking below.

It seemed that although the Red Mist could burn, it was not something that would burn instantly.

In the vicinity, there were at least tens of thousands of demons. They densely occupied all the ramps on the rock walls, platforms, and caves. Colored pennants were flying up and down in the wild wind, and the unidentified howls almost covered the roar of the air flow in the hole.

Roland blinked his eyes in shock.

"Were the demons... carrying out a ceremony?"