

Witch 981

Chapter 981: Unexpected Start

Morning Light climbed to the top of the slope and his heart raced as he watched the busy but well-organized battlefield in front of him.

This was not the first time he has been on the battlefield. At the age of 15, he was already an excellent knight squire, following the Lord during the charges. When he became an adult, he even won the reputation of the first knight of the Western Region.

He was no stranger to war.

However, the atmosphere here was completely different.

Before the battle, nobles would motivate, promise rewards, eat and drink in order to improve the army's morale. That is why the freemen and mercenary camps would often immerse themselves with wild cheers, similar to an open market with the only difference being the absence of wine. At such occasions, knights would always laugh at their men for being so oblivious of a few breadcrumbs, not knowing they would have to sacrifice themselves for it.

At that time, Ferlin Eltek also believed that only nobles knew the art of war. Without a noble leading them, freemen would lack cohesion, just like scattered sand.

Only when Duke Ryan was defeated at Border Town by a bunch of miners did he realize that the reality was different from what he imagined.

However, since he was satisfied with achieving his revenge, he did not think about it further and instead devoted his energy to his wife Irene.

Two years later, thanks to his father, Morning Light joined the Adviser Department only to find out that the war has completely changed.

The First Army's discipline during the last month's march has already astonished him and yet, the professionalism they displayed right now would make most of the nobility feel ashamed.

Without any agitation, everyone was familiar with their tasks: at the bottom of the slope, several trenches had been excavated, while the excavated soil was put into sacks and piled up to form rows of simple walls in front of the machine gun area. In the middle of the trenches, there were wired iron nets and chevaux de frise which were assembled on spot. Achieving a frontal breakthrough would be almost as hard as breaching through a city wall.

Many cushion areas had also been set up behind the defensive line so that even if the machine guns were breached, they would not lose the battle. The Taquila witches could both protect the Artillery Battalion and provide support for the front line at any time as back up troops.

The slope that was the furthest behind was the core of the First Army's attack— 6 Longsong Cannons, pointing straight at the demon's outpost. The cannon soldiers were reviewing the shooting parameters, making the final preparations for the upcoming assault.

All of this did not need to be arranged by a commander but instead, in just one day, the First Army turned this area into an adequate battlefield.

Ferlin had seen the power of the new firearms during the cannon demonstration, but still, they were only machines—the operators of the weapons had to be humans.

Moreover, it was exactly those freemen soldiers who really surprised him.

A platoon with such strict discipline and clear division of labor was hard to be assembled even by the knightages of the great nobles.

Even though he had previously seen the change in the people of Neverwinter, that was still nothing compared to his shock right now.

"Do you understand now?" Suddenly, Morning Light heard a familiar voice behind him. "The answer to that question before."

Ferlin turned around and nodded at Sir Eltek. "Yes. father."

When His Majesty announced that he wanted to unify Graycastle within a month and attack Hermes and the Kingdom of Dawn simultaneously, the Adviser Department did not have any objections but Instead devised a number of seemingly incomprehensible plans.

The reason behind that was these weapons and soldiers. Thanks to them, no one in the mainland was his enemy, or rather... the strength of the enemies could no longer be compared with his.

"Unfortunately, His Majesty forbade nobles to join the army," Ferlin said regretfully, "compared to sitting in an office, I would rather experience fighting alongside those people—"

"Individual braveness is no longer so important. The Adviser Department suits you more," his father smiled. "Besides, it's a battle with unknown enemies such as demons so what if something happened? I am still waiting for a grandson. Irene's friend recently gave birth, I think. You should try harder too."

"Father!" Ferlin could not help but hold his forehead.

"Fine, fine, I won't talk about it," said Eltek while stroking his beard. "The sun is about to set, let's go back to the camp. The Artillery Battalion will start firing soon—can't stand that noise."

"Yes," Morning Light looked at the camp one last time and then went down the hill with his father.

He also had another battlefield to attend to and finish his duties.

...

At five in the evening, the cannons started firing.

According to the previously adjusted shooting angles, the 6 cannons started firing one by one, breaking the silence of the Fertile Plains.

400 hundred years later, humans have once again stepped into these plains, launching an assault at the demons.

The first two rounds were to test and fix any discrepancies that might occur and after they received Sylvie's feedback, the cannon sounds became synchronized.

The improved 152millimeter Longsong Cannon was a bit closer to its historical predecessor. In order to increase the shooting range, the ammunition chamber was doubled and the shells had to be filled part by part. So, the shooting time was also increased by half. However, driven by the higher pressure, these cannons could cause a fatal threat to fixed targets even ten kilometers away.

Because of the increase in length, the weight was also affected thus bringing more trouble for the logistics. The final solution was to dismantle the cannons into four pieces and carry them with the Taquila worm carrier.

Nobody could hear the sounds or see the flames that occurred when a shell landed. This was an entirely new form of war. If not for the several cannon battles that they had already fought, the soldiers would never believe that they could destroy the enemy's strongholds and cities just by a few repetitive moves, even without the need to face the enemy.

There were mainly two reasons for choosing to launch an attack at sunset. Firstly, the effect of the Eye of Magic did not rely on sunlight and could also be used at night to guide the artillery team's shooting. Secondly, the Devilbeasts could not move at night. The demons had no choice but to bear their attacks all night.

The Longsong Cannon would shoot every two minutes but other than the sounds made beyond the skyline, it seemed as if there were no changes at the battlefield in the middle of the night. On the other hand, in Sylvie's eyes, the landscape ten kilometers away had completely changed—

Due to the explosive waves, the landscape was turned over and dozens of Blackstone Pagodas were mostly destroyed. In particular, when the shells went through the mist storage tower, the explosion that followed made the black stones look like an eruptive volcano.

Yet, she still has not discovered the whereabouts of the demons.

Until the early morning of the next day, when everyone assumed that the enemy had abandoned their outpost, the situation suddenly changed.

A large group of demons appeared in the north of the First Army's camp, eight kilometers away from the Northbound Slope!

At the same time, Sylvie also saw dozens of Devilbeasts moving—the enemy, that had gone missing for several days, was now coming towards them.

Chapter 982: Unplanned War

"What is going on?"

In the central tent, the atmosphere in the air was rather heavy. The commander-in-chief Iron Axe was staring at the map on the long table, frowning. "There is neither a red mist supply line nor a warning sign. It is as if all these demons appeared out of thin air!"

They raised the alarm as quickly as possible and the platoons of the First Army were already in position but still, there was a feeling of confusion and insecurity within everyone's mind.

And this happened during Sylvie's surveillance. How would they fight this war without the witches? If the enemy was capable of suddenly appearing eight kilometers away then what would happen if they suddenly appeared in their camp next time?

If this question was not answered, nobody would be able to calm down.

Outside the tent, the Longsong Cannon started firing again after going quiet for half of the night. Additionally, the rate of firing was increased to maximum—it was no longer necessary to save shells since the most important thing now was to reduce the enemy's strength as soon as possible.

"It's impossible that they appeared out of nowhere," Agatha said firmly. "The Red Mist is essential for the survival of the demons, this hasn't changed. If that wasn't the case, they would have already taken over the world. The enemy's number is now close to ten thousand and without the red mist supply line, just by running towards here would result in their death, let alone fighting.

"According to previous intelligence, the outpost here can sustain at most few thousand demons," Iron Axe said after a while. "So what you are saying is that there is another supply line near us which was not discovered by the Eye of Magic?"

"This is the only possible answer—"

"No, there is one more possibility," Edith interrupted. "Since we are able to make the supply line disappear from the surface, the demons may have also been able to think of that."

"Digging an underground tunnel from Taquila to here?" Agatha shook her head. "Without taking into consideration whether or not they have acquired a worm carrier, the construction of a tunnel that would enable the demons to move around is no small task and it conflicts with the time of their first appearance at Taquila. Furthermore, such a huge activity should have been spotted by Sylvie."

"I am not saying that they started from your hometown," Edith stretched and pointed on an x mark on the map. "What if they only started from the outpost?"

"What do you mean," Iron Axe asked with a deep voice.

"Don't you think that the location of the demons' appearance is a bit awkward? She pulled up her dangling hair and continued, "Think about it, if we were a traditional army—without regard to if we were human nobles or union witches, what would be the situation?"

Following the question of the Pearl of the Northern Region, everyone turned their eyes on the map.

From those who could enter the central big tent, some were members of the Adviser Department, some were commanders of the army and some were representatives of the allied forces but none of them showed slow reactions—soon, everyone thought of a possibility.

In an instant, there was a sound of astonishment in the big tent.

The sound of their sighs was soon covered by the cannon firing outside of the tent—but under the shaking of the ground, everyone could see the surprise in each other's eyes.

Only when the firing stopped, Morning Light finally broke the silence and said, "Are you saying... that the outpost is a trap set by the demons?"

If they were a traditional army, they would have to start a siege in order to destroy the outpost and that would mean exposing their back to the demons. So, if the demons appeared at that time, they would form a natural surrounding with the ruins of Taquila. So, under the attack from both sides, the first army's fate would be easy to imagine.

The two opposite sides would just manage to fit in the two-kilometer battlefield and looking at the map, it looked exactly like a huge pocket.

"So they were certain that we would come?" Iron Axe asked.

Edith did not answer but looked at the ancient witches' representative—Zooey.

Compared to the most of them, Zooey's expression did not really change and her face was emotionless as always. "If it was the Union then we would definitely come. Letting the demons build an outpost would result in an expansion of the red line which is suicide—the destruction of a city would always begin from the inability to stop the enemy's expansion." She paused and then said, "But they have never done this before."

"Well, the times have changed," the Pearl of the Northern Region waved her hands. "If that's the case, this explains a lot. The demons don't think that humans can pose a threat to a Devilbeast team and Neverwinter is a witch city essentially, so they set up this trap. If they were lucky, they would manage to defeat all the combat witches at once. So, to make us come, not only did they not attack us en route but also decreased their surveillance area on purpose, all of it leading up to this moment now—what do you all think of this assumption?"

"Even if this is true, how were the demons able to hide from Miss Sylvie's observation?" Sir Eltek asked confused.

"You may not know this but her ability is not omniscient," Edith replied. "If I remember correctly, there is a considerable gap between her observation distance and her perspective distance. Hence, taking into consideration the Devilbeast, she is usually only able to observe at a limited distance—under these circumstances, the Eye of Magic has probably omitted a large area."

Hearing this, everyone could already guess the answer.

"Of course, I'm not blaming Miss Sylvie," Edith sighed, "it's just that we relied too much on her."

Magic power, it was a problem that could not be neglected by the witches. In order to observe what the enemies were doing, Sylvie had to stay alert all the time and carefully plan the usage of her magic power. But the observation of the deep layers of the ground required a huge amount of magic power, just like a bird watching from the sky far above. That is why it was impossible to check every place on the Fertile Plains in detail.

Assuming the demons can only hide near the Red Mist area, she must have checked only the area near the outpost—and limited by the observation distance, the depth of observation would not have been too deep either.

Agatha frowned. "We can verify this point right now." She then activated the Sigil of Listening, "Sylvie, can you check what's happening underneath the Army of Demons?"

"Underground?" Sylvie, who was guiding the cannons at that time, was a little startled, "I can try but my magic power..."

"It's alright."

"Got it." The voice on the other side of the Sigil stopped for a moment and then everyone heard her surprised voice, "This is strange... the Magic Eye's line of sight has been blocked, I can't see anything. There is only darkness underground!"

Everyone remained silent. This result had indirectly proved Edith's assumption.

Being tricked by the enemy was definitely not a good feeling.

For a moment, the only sound in the tent was the firing of the cannons.

"Pow, pow, pow."

At this time, Iron Axe suddenly clapped his hands.

"Lord?" Morning Light asked.

"If this is the case, then I can rest assured." He said slowly. "In the end, the following tough battle will decide who the prey is."

"You are right, lord commander-in-chief," Edith smiled. "Though they did not guess their opponent correctly, the result is still the same. Both sides can be considered lucky. Or maybe, we are luckier—to confront the enemy head to head in a carefully planned battlefield is exactly what we want, isn't it? They didn't have a chance to react to the bombing last night and now not only have they lost their bait but also have to face our fully prepared soldiers. No matter how you look at it, the situation isn't too bad."

The Pearl of the Northern Region paused for a moment, "Actually, just like what I said at the beginning, we don't need to concern ourselves with the intentions of our enemy. No matter what they want to do, we just need to kill off anyone who dares to come in front of us—that's exactly what the First Army is good at, isn't it?"

At this time, the alarm sounded once again in the camp in a much more urgent manner.

"Air-attack warning."

Everyone understood—they were here.

The Devilbeast, being the front line platoon, had already entered the shooting range of the First Army.

Chapter 983: A Fierce Attack

"Well then, I'm taking off," Agatha announced solemnly.

"Off you go." A cold sneer broke across Zooney's face. "We've been waiting for this day for too long."

Unlike the First Army, the commanders of the ancient witches were also powerful combatants. They would be the last to retreat when demons were approaching.

"Ms. Agatha, Ms. Zooney..." Iron Axe suddenly stopped them.

"Is there anything else?"

"Although I shouldn't say this, I think this must be what His Majesty wanted to convey to you," he said thoughtfully. "Please stay safe. Your being alive is the heaviest blow we can inflict on the demons."

"Haha, I won't die so easily before reclaiming Taquila." Zooney turned around and cast Iron Axe a glance. "Thanks for your kind words. I do appreciate it, mortal."

"Don't worry. We know what to do." Smiling, Agatha walked out of the tent.

The sky had darkened. Compared to the defensive battle in Neverwinter last time, the number of the enemies this time increased by several times, and they flew a lot faster as well.

They soon reached the very front of the battlement.

The anti-aircraft guns at the front fired in succession, and in a short moment, the air was heavy with the oppressive sound of anti-aircraft fire. However, the attack was far from effective. Out of over 60 Devilbeasts, only four or five were shot down. The other demons, on the other hand, climbed even higher.

"Those freaking bastards, they're so annoying." Zooney was distraught. "I could crush them with my hands the moment they dare to land."

In the Union age, the best way to counterattack these monsters was to send out combat witches and Extraordinaries who carried a Stone of Flight. This was also the reason the ancient witches took armies of mortal men so lightly. Without the witches' help, a few Devilbeasts would be more than enough to disperse an army.

"Why aren't they throwing their spears?" Watching the enemies hovering above, Agatha frowned.

But the next moment she immediately knew the demons' real intention. The mounted demons dived for the rear of the defensive line, exactly where the artillery battalion was located.

Agatha and Zooney exchanged a look before instantly to the artilleries' position.

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Fish Ball was responsible for the central area of the battlement. Because of his meritorious performance in the battle against the demons last time, he had been promoted to unit leader. Although it was not his first time seeing these monsters, the scene of hordes of Devilbeasts attacking him still sent a chill down his spine.

"U-unit leader, shouldn't we fire?" The team member with an ammunition sack in his hand stammered out.

"They're within 900 meters!" The lookout went livid in terror, his Adam's apple quivering.

Fish Ball realized that everyone was scared. Even the most courageous of people would be truly terrified in the presence of such an unimaginable onslaught of enemies. Because of the permeating fear, Fish Ball knew he had to stay cool. Otherwise, they would collapse before the enemy attack even arrived.

At this thought, Fish Ball swallowed hard and tried to speak slower. "Just hang in there. Fire when they're within 300 meters."

Although the machinery instructor told them that the shooting range of Mark I type HMG exceeded 1,500 meters and that its scope range was around 1,000, Fish Ball learned from his personal experience that they could only hit targets within said range when Devilbeasts were flying steady and straight.

The best shooting method was to directly use a concentric ring to noose the enemy based on instincts, rather than taking aim with the scope perched on top.

A poor firing accuracy would undoubtedly affect the soldiers' morale.

He preferred to shoot when the result was guaranteed.

Nevertheless, the short distance between the battlement and the enemies also meant that the latter could launch a counterattack anytime.

Fish Ball sincerely hoped that the additional baffle plate in front of the machine gun was durable enough to stop the demons.

"They dived!" The lookout screamed.

"Now!"

Fish Ball pulled the trigger. He could see a stream of bullets whoosh through the air and crumble the gigantic figure that dashed forward.

The Devilbeast at the very front, who had been hit by at least a dozen bullets from various directions, instantly turned into a cloud of bloody mist. The Mad Demon mounting on its back was no better, its skull cracked open, and legs slashed in half. Its figure was almost indiscernible as it plummeted to the ground.

The death of the enemy exhilarated the soldiers who cheered at their first victory, which injected courage into Fish Ball. He immediately aimed at another Devilbeast that died in the same way as the previous one a few seconds later.

When Fish Ball was about to redouble his efforts, the surroundings suddenly darkened.

The sun seemed to be overspread by a grayish curtain, specking the battlement here and there with flickers of light. When Fish Ball realized what the "curtain" really was, his heart stopped with a horror-filled jerk.

"They're spearing!" He yelled at the top of his lung. "Watch out!"

However, numerous spears pelted down and they had nowhere to hide. The only thing they could do was duck behind their shields, leaving their exposed hands and feet to fate.

Fish Ball held his companion tight, whilst bracing himself to be penetrated by a bone spear.

But the clash he had been anticipating did not come. With a gust of wind, the light was restored.

"U-unit leader, behind!"

Someone exclaimed in surprise.

Fish Ball looked over his shoulder, his heart pounding in his chest, and saw the battlement behind him was a mess. The air was permeated with dust created by the spearing attack. Some were lying on the ground, unconscious, whereas some wounded soldiers were moaning and calling for help in the midst of the smog. The six Longsong Cannons had all stopped firing.

Everybody swallowed hard.

"What're you waiting for?" Fish Ball gnawed his teeth and snarled. "Get back to your position and continue to fire!"

There would be someone else responsible for the provision of first aid and sending reinforcements. What he needed to do now was to shoot down as many Devilbeasts as possible, before the enemies launched their second attack.

The bellow jerked the soldiers out of their trance. The two anti-aircraft machine guns thundered once more.

Meanwhile, the demons also realized that spearing alone would not completely stop their opponents. Therefore, they divided the Devilbeasts into two groups, one climbing higher to wait for the next round of attacks, while the other dealt directly with the soldiers on the ground through hand-to-hand combat, taking advantage of their superior physical strength.

One Mad Demon dismounted and encountered a man with black hair.

Apparently, it did not take male human being very seriously, for it casually drew the iron ax from around its waist and flailed it at him blankly.

However, the man stopped his blow with only one hand!

Eyes wide open, the Mad Demon did not even have time to think about what had happened before he saw his enemy aiming an iron tube at him.

"WHAM!"

"His Majesty's new weapon is good indeed." Zooley released the demon who collapsed instantly, a big hole in the latter's chest. "If we had this 400 years ago, Taquila probably wouldn't have fallen, and the Three Chiefs wouldn't have turned against each other because of disagreements on the continuity of the human race."

She walked to the unconscious demon and crushed its skull beneath her foot before casting it a cold glance. "But we're still alive and have returned with vengeance. Now, it's time for you to pay for what you've done."

Chapter 984: A Furious Roar

"Ugh..." Van'er scrambled to his feet. After confirming that his body and limbs were still in one piece, he breathed a sigh of relief.

But his heart soon sank the next moment.

Many people close to the Longsong Cannons had been penetrated by bone spears. It was hard to tell whether they were still alive. He saw some soldiers, who had been maimed by bones spears, searching for their broken limbs in the mud. Van'er managed to fight back tears. The artillery battalion was one of the very first squads built and trained by His Majesty. From the beginning when they had fought against the Duke of the Western Region, all the way to the attack at Hermes, they had seldom suffered defeats. Looking at the astonishing casualties, Van'er was heartbroken.

But, Van'er knew this was not the time for him to lament the loss. The angel of the First Army Miss Nana was currently at the battalion shelter. As long as the soldier sent to her was still breathing, Miss Angel would be able to heal him!

"Hello, anybody out there?" Van'er shouted as he crawled to one of the wounded soldiers in a critical condition who got his stomach stabbed. "Anybody help me?"

"Sir, we're here!" Two soldiers came out of the smog, trotting to him.

"Send him to the field hospital." Van'er stuffed the intestines spilling out of the soldier's stomach back in, together with the torn pieces of flesh. "Make sure not to leave anything behind."

"S-sir," The soldier grimaced in pain. "I..."

"Stop talking. If you have the strength to talk, save it to kill demons." Van'er patted his cheek. "Hope you'll get better and be back soon, I'm relying on you to fire. Do you understand?"

After the wounded soldier was sent away, he ran to another field medic and asked, "Did you come from the camp?"

The man glanced at the badge on Van'er's shoulder and saluted. "Yes, sir! Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Continue with your business. Taking care of the wounded is the top priority." Van'er waved his hand. "What's it like at the front?"

After the artillery suffered the attack, the battlements within 500 meters were enveloped by thick smoke. Except for the closest cannon, Van'er didn't know anything about the other squads. He could only hear the patterings of running footsteps in distance, and the occasional roars of cannons and guns. He was a little surprised that there were no reinforcements at this point, even though the field medics had been called to the scene.

"The demons are coming from above!" The field medic answered hastily while bandaging a wounded soldier. "I just came from the central camp and saw those winged monsters land and engage the heavy infantry."

The demons landed after spearing?

In other words, the present chaos was caused by the infiltration of enemies at the rear. That was why the reserves, who were usually positioned in the central zone, were not able to approach and reinforce the Longsong Cannons at the moment. It also explained why the front was still intact.

Realizing this, Van'er immediately understood what he should do.

He must put the Longsong Cannons back into operation.

The enemy wanted to prevent them from firing at the approaching demons, so he must stop them.

As long as the front line was not penetrated, the enemies would sooner or later be exterminated by the heavy infantry.

Although Van'er didn't know where His Majesty had found those warriors with such monstrous strength, who could carry weapons comparable in weight to field artillery with ease, one thing was certain — their capacity for battle was only paralleled by the ferocious demons'.

"I'll leave the wounded to you!"

Van'er ran to the ammunition case that had fallen to the ground and used all his strength to pick up a shell. He then staggered to the muzzle and pushed the shell into the bore.

Then he loaded the cannon.

It was actually two people's work, but Van'er finished by himself. He was out of breath by the time the cannon was loaded. Van'er took a deep breath and started to adjust the firing angle based on the enemies' previous marching speed.

At that moment, the field medic dashed toward him, shrieking.

"Sir, behind!"

In that second, Van'er felt his blood freeze. Immediately, he rolled to the ground before even turning around.

His instinct had saved him.

With a loud clink, an ax pelted past him, ruffling his hair, and hitting the breechblock, creating a series of sparks.

Van'er looked up and saw a mad demon glaring at him!

"GRAAAA—!" The Mad Demon raised its ax and stomped towards him, howling.

"I'm done," Van'er thought to himself in despair. Although he had a sword around his waist, he could not draw it when he was on the ground. Even if he did have it in hand, it was impossible for him to block the blow, as demons were far stronger and faster than humans.

As the ax got closer, Van'er reached out his hand, attempting to block the strike...

"Crack!"

A wall of ice suddenly manifested between them. The ax smashed into the wall, sending ice crystals flying from its surface.

Was I... saved?

Van'er turned around in shock and saw a blue-haired witch performing a grabbing motion while watching the demon with a cool stare. She said to Van'er, "Come here, behind me."

Van'er clenched his teeth. Although his legs were too shaky to support his weight, he somehow managed to get to his feet and walked to the witch.

"Gah, Vaaaakaaaa..."

Van'er had no knowledge of the demon's language, but he could tell that it looked murderous and furious.

The demon dashed around the wall and crouched, the right arm with which it held its ax swelling rapidly.

The witch, surprisingly, drew closer to the demon, while ice slowly spread beneath her feet. She looked like the Goddess of Winter.

Just when the demon was about to strike, an icicle burst from the ground and sent the ax flying. In the meantime, the demon's arm was bent at a strange angle. A fraction of its grayish white bone was exposed to the air, hardly covered by any flesh. It was a gruesome scene to behold.

Before the demon could even give a yelp of pain, the ice crystals proliferated rapidly from its ankles and turned it into an ice statue.

"Th-thank you." Van'er let out a sigh of relief.

"It's not over yet. There's going to be a second round of spearing." The witch looked up at the sky, which was currently filled with ash and smoke, and called out. "Miss Molly!"

Van'er suddenly remembered that there was actually a time gap between each spearing attack. As the demon had just bulked up his arm, it meant that the sky was dangerous once again.

Van'er wondered who Miss Molly was and was puzzled why she didn't seek shelter.

"Leave it to me."

While Van'er was in bewilderment, a young, slightly childish voice came from the distance.

Then Van'er saw an incredible scene!

Above him suddenly appeared a half-transparent blue ball which gradually grew bigger in size. Soon, it covered the area within a radius of 10 meters. Two tentacles at both ends of the ball dragged the remaining soldiers with minor injuries into a covered area while swaying from side to side.

Right after all the wounded soldiers were transferred, the enemies launched their second attack.

Five or six bone spears pelted down at tremendous, lightning-like speed, and shot at the ball. Van'er could clearly see the spot where the head of the spear landed ripple as if the surface of the ball were a

thick body of water. As the ripples split, overlapped and rushed forward, the ball started to tremble as though it would burst at any moment. However, the bone spears were stopped several meters above the ground.

"Good job." The blue-haired witch withdrew her ice and looked at Van'er. "It's safe here for now. You can retreat with your people."

"No, there's something I haven't done yet." Van'er grounded his teeth, forcing himself to get up. "I have to make these damn monsters suffer before I go."

There was only one last step left.

Van'er shambled to the Longsong Cannon, limping. He picked up the matchlock and pulled toward him with all his strength!

The scorching air around the muzzle soon cleared sky. The battlement, after 15 minutes of silence, was once again filled with thunderous roars!

Chapter 985: The Shadow of the Dragon

As more and more Mad Demons and Devilbeasts were eradicated, they gradually recovered control over the chaotic situation.

Agatha walked around the artillery battalion and found the ground littered with the broken limbs of giant monsters. She had to admit that in a close-range hand-to-hand battle, nobody could ever parallel the God's Punishment Witches. Their fighting capacity was absolutely phenomenal, and it was even greater when they were equipped with the new firearms invented by His Majesty. Had the Witch Union not received their support, they would probably have struggled to fight off these 30 Devilbeasts and certainly would not have had time to watch out for the Mad Demons flanking from behind.

Nevertheless, it appeared that the God's Punishment Witches still preferred traditional combat methods over the large-caliber grapeshot guns to enact their vengeance. On more than one occasion, Agatha had witnessed an ancient witch give her opponent a final blow with a sword or even her fist after the latter was left sprawling on the ground under the bombardment of the firearms, as though they could only find solace in being bathed in the blood of the demons.

It seemed that 400 years of waiting had changed many things.

Perhaps the demons also had a difficult time understanding why they were being flattened by a group of ordinary men, who apparently possessed far greater physical strength and speed than them. Horrified by the unexpected circumstances, the last two Mad Demons, who were caught off guard by Breeze, pretty much stopped resisting in the end. Meanwhile, Breeze also impaled another demon who came to rescue his peers.

Presently, the substitute artillery battalion joined the battle. Four more cannons that had previously been tipped over by the Devilbeasts were once again erected upright on the battlefield and were soon back to normal operation. At the same time, the first Longsong Cannon that had restored its service thundered continuously, further raising the morale of the soldiers.

"How many enemies left?" After everybody gathered around, Agatha asked Zooley.

"16 if they have no further reinforcements." Zooley cast a glance at the sky. "The flying Devilbeasts suffered a loss of about 70% of their numbers. Whatever their original intention was, they've lost. But they still refuse to leave, which signals that they must be preparing for a final attack."

"A final attack?" Agatha knitted her brows.

In order to stay away from the storm of machine gun bullets, the rest of the demons all rose somewhere higher, even beyond the range of their spears. It would definitely be trickier and more dangerous for them to approach the fortifications on the ground a second time. More importantly, the army on the ground was now fully prepared for any upcoming strike. Even if there was another round of a spearing attack, the soldiers were confident in minimizing the losses. Since a defeat was certain, the demons should have been thinking about how to retreat rather than putting up a desperate struggle.

"You used to be a member of the Quest Society and rarely participated personally in open combat, so you might not know much about their operational style and behaviors," Zooley explained heavily. "A fully grown flying Devilbeast is very precious to the demons. Only a commander-level demon is entitled to so many flying Devilbeasts at a time. For this type of demon, completing missions is their top priority. They would rather be killed in a battle than retreat upon failure."

"If so, why didn't this commander come down in the first place?" Breeze couldn't help asking.

"Because he didn't find a rival worthy of his attention." A strange smile fluttered over Zooley's face. "If there was an Extraordinary among us, he would have come down to challenge her long ago."

"Why?"

"It's probably in their nature." Zooley rested her eyes back again on the sky. "They're ferocious and barbarous creatures who enjoy slaughter. Although they've been gradually bearing an increasing physical resemblance to mankind, they're still nothing but animals... It was thanks to this violent nature that Lady Natalia and the Queen of Starfall City got so many opportunities to fight against senior Magic Slayers and finally elevated themselves to Transcendents."

In other words, the enemy was too proud to launch an attack at an opportune moment, yet had too much honor to desert his post when faced with defeat. Agatha was not sure whether Zooley's assumption was correct. However, she was certain that the latter was not any ordinary witch since she even knew details of how two of the Three Chiefs had been promoted.

Agatha asked, "Who were you... in the Union Age?"

"Miss Pasha didn't tell you?" Zooley smiled faintly. "I was one of Lady Natalia's personal guards, and I was also known as the 'Red Lotus' amongst the Blessed Army."

The Ice Witch instantly remembered the title. If Agatha had been the youngest senior witch, the most widely recognized genius researcher in Taquila, then Red Lotus could have been regarded as the most promising and powerful Extraordinary, and was the most likely to succeed Natalia.

Unfortunately, the Union had fallen apart before that time could come.

If Agatha remembered correctly, she and Red Lotus should have been of the same age.

However, Zooley was currently not in any way similar to the person she remembered.

Time had reshaped her character and turned her into a completely different person.

"They're coming." Agatha was still lost in thought when Zooley reminded her. "You go protect those fragile mortals. We'll take care of these enemies."

As if corroborating Zooley's statement, Sylvie's voice suddenly popped up from the Sigil of Listening. "Oh heavens, what's that? Agatha, watch out! There're multiple magic reactions among the enemies!"

Theoretically, each witch could only have one Magic Cyclone, whereas demons utilized embedded Magic Stones to apply their power. Therefore, demons could have more than one cyclone. The Union referred those demons with more than one cyclone as Senior Demons. They might vary a lot in terms of strength and fighting capacity, but all of them were, unequivocally, hard nuts to crack.

"Any problems there?" Breeze asked apprehensively.

"Oh, no need to worry," Zooley replied slowly. "The Queen of Starfall City might have selected the wrong path, but there was something that she was right about. The God's Punishment Witches are designed to battle Senior Demons."

Just at that moment, a shadow suddenly leaped out of the clouds and dashed toward the artillery!

Following the shadow, the other hovering Mad Demons all started to dive to the ground. Although the machine guns directly below them could not really aim at the descending demons due to the restrictions on the shooting angles, the anti-air emplacements placed around them did not have any such difficulties in shooting down the enemies. Several demons were shot down on their way, despite their attempts to dodge the projectiles by zigzagging through the bullet rain.

This time, the opponents aimed their spears at the anti-aircraft machine guns next to the Longsong Cannons.

Beyond a doubt, their intention was to clear the way for the shadow figure so that it could reach the core of the artillery battalion.

While Agatha was assisting the soldiers in defending against the pelted bone spears, she also noticed in surprise that the object that was plummeting like a meteorite was a colossal Devilbeast even bigger than Maggie. Its wings and abdomen, all armored in black, gleamed like a lusterless crystal. Even its head and horns were sharper than those of normal Devilbeasts, making it resemble the "dragons" of legends at the first glance.

When the "dragon" landed, the earth trembled. The air was saturated with ashes and dust that blinded people's eyes.

Immediately after landing, the Devilbeast opened its huge crimson mouth, producing a long, loud belch...

A burly black-armored demon crept out of the Devilbeast's wet throat and presented himself in front of everybody.

Chapter 986: Fiery Red Lotus

Although there were ominous magic reactions appearing at the rear of the encampment, Sylvie could not afford to dawdle.

After giving the witches stationed there a hasty warning, she diverted her attention back to the Army of Demons a few miles away to the north while monitoring the battlements around her at the same time.

There loomed something she had never seen before, so menacing and wicked that she didn't know whether it should be classified as a living being or an inanimate object.

It was as big as a two-story building, its appearance resembling a reptile in the shape of a crab or a spider, although its torso and limbs were constituted of gleaming black stones. There was a twinge of stiffness in its movement. While its fellow demons were being blasted to smithereens under the heavy musket fire, this monster moved forward while being completely indifferent to them, almost like the machines invented by Roland.

But it was not a machine in a real sense.

Sylvie could spy some wriggling living tissue underneath its sturdy, thick shell, where a magic glow infiltrated the whole organism through numerous intertwined veins.

She could only associate it with the word "parasite".

A living being nestled inside a mass of stone and metal.

Suddenly, the horrid "Siege Beast" no longer seemed so fearsome when compared to this crawling monstrosity.

Fortunately, the monstrosity was not invulnerable.

The First Army could still cause it harm without directly hitting it. A cannon shell that landed in the vicinity of the monster would still be sufficient to damage its legs and thereby paralyze its movement.

Yet there were just too many demons around the monster. Although Sylvie had been continuously giving firing instructions to the artillery, it was hard for them to accurately direct the shells. Each shell had to travel several miles before it landed at the targeted spot. By the time the Devilbeasts had broken through and raided the artillery battlements, only one out of the five crawling monsters had been stopped.

While a bitter battle was going on at the rear, Sylvie was concerned about the front.

The artillery battalion had probably not realized how big a threat they had become for the demons.

In fact, among all the people who were participating in this war, Sylvie was the only person who witnessed the great damage caused by the Longsong Cannons. When a pack of demons swarmed in, that terrain eight miles away instantly became a slaughterhouse where the hordes of demons were mercilessly butchered.

Every time a shell landed, pillars of earth rose 10 meters high and broken limbs were scattered into the air. Metal shrapnel and sharp stone fragments flew in the air, penetrating the enemies' armors made of

animal skins and bones. The thick body of the Mad Demons thus became ragdolls filled with shrapnel. Dozens of demon corpses lay sprawled on the ground in the vicinity of the crater after each bombardment, their magic blood blossoming and soaking the soil underneath.

Not all the shells successfully hit the demons, but it only took the artillery three rounds of firing to break their formations. Although the demons were dispersed, from the stiff manner with which they ran, one could tell they were stressed out by these unprecedented, lethal weapons.

Had the Devilbeasts not interrupted their firing, the artillery would have annihilated all the demons already.

Even though the artillery team had later restored the cannons, their firing accuracy and speed were greatly compromised. The demons had taken this opportunity to advance. By the time Sylvie spotted the multiple magic reactions at the rear, the main force of the enemies was only two miles away from the defensive line.

Now, the soldiers at the front should have been able to see swarms of demons coming up over the horizon with their naked eyes.

Sylvie alerted Shavi at the front as planned.

"The enemies are within the shooting range of the mortars."

"Got it. I'll let the commander know," Shavi soon replied. "By the way, how are things going at the rear? Have they not finished those flying demons yet?"

"Something... unexpected happened," Sylvie answered hesitantly. "But I gather it should be all right now."

"If Andrea was here, we would have finished them already, wouldn't we?"

"Well... perhaps." Sylvie decided to hold back on mentioning what she had seen so as not to let Shavi worry too much. While they were talking, Sylvie suddenly noticed that the four crawling monsters among the Army of Demon had stopped advancing.

They all threw themselves to the ground.

What're they planning on doing?

Sylvie immediately found out the answer. She saw the back shell of the monster fly open, ejecting a cylinder that looked like a black crystal. The cylinder was as wide as a man, its surface slimy as if it had been grown out of living tissue. Like the crawling monster, the cylinder was also filled with tons of veins and blood vessels. It contracted and expanded as the magic power within moved about.

The next moment, the magic cyclone inside the monster started to spin and emanate a dazzling glow.

In an instant, the black crystal cylinder was thrust forward by a great force. It whistled above the demons and bolted toward the Northbound Slope like a magnified arrow!

At the same time, the mortars of the First Army produced a tumultuous roar...

Over 100 shells soared, tracing parabolic curves in the air. Pulled by gravity, the shells zoomed toward the scuttling demons.

For a split second, the shells and the cylinder brushed passed each other. The two powers, human and demon, had once again clashed after 400 years of peace.

"Shavi, shield!" Sylvie cried at the top of her lungs.

At these words, the bulky cylinder reached the defensive line.

With a flash, the whole cylinder exploded. The crystal burst into numberless needles glinting in blue blood, and they rained down upon the soldiers waiting below.

...

The battlement was deadly silent at that moment.

Agatha and the other witches immediately drove the artillery team away from the giant monster, leaving behind only the anti-aircraft machine gun squad to battle the last few Devilbeasts. Soon, there were only a dozen God's Punishment Witches and the armored Senior Demon on the battlefield.

The Senior Demon surveyed everybody coldly and suddenly let out a long wail even louder than the distant thunder of the machine guns. Everybody could perceive the extreme anger in his voice.

He then reached out his right hand and threw it up in the air. Soon, a flash of light escaped from his palm. Instantly, a crackling long sword appeared in his hand!

The Senior Demon then swung the sword at the Longsong Cannon. With an earth-shattering crack, the iron cannon split in half. The cut surface was a bright red color as though it had been heated to a high temperature.

The Ice Witch held her breath, realizing that the sword was powered by magic!

But Zooley remained undisturbed. "So what? Are you not happy about your enemies? You came down to have a final battle against your enemies only to find that your opponents are a group of mortals, and so now you're disappointed?" A thin jeer played about her lips. Zooley's tone was indifferent and even a bit derisive, but her eyes were on fire. "You made the biggest mistake of your life in coming down here. If you had stayed above, you would have probably gotten to live a bit longer. Now, you'll understand how furious we have been over the past 400 years. Compared to us, your rage is frivolous!"

Although they could not communicate, both parties were able to discern the attitude of the other. The demon threw the sword of magic at Zooley while howling, and the sword cut through the air like a dazzling thunderbolt!

Meanwhile, the two God's Punishment Witches beside Zooley drew close, and all three of them spread their God's Punishment Areas!

A strange force suddenly distorted the space around the witches. The blinding flash of the sword was engulfed by a fathomless darkness and vanished into the thin air as if the thunderbolt had hit nothing!

The Senior Demon stood there blankly gaping.

While he was in a daze, the other two God's Punishment Witches raised the large-caliber grapeshot guns.

The battlefield was immediately saturated with the crackling sounds of gunshots. The demon shielded himself with a cloud of blue light, but the light was extinguished in a second.

Even the gleaming black armor could barely protect the demon.

As the shots continuously hammered the Senior Demon, his body twisted like a rag. By the time the firing had finished, the demon's inner organs and bones had turned into a bloody pulp.

Chapter 987: A Duel

Watching its master prostrate to the ground, the giant Devilbeast flapped its wings, attempting to escape. It had realized that the circumstances have changed in a direction it did not foresee.

There were few Devilbeasts left on the battlement that it could use as a diversion to help it escape. As the Devilbeast climbed up, its gigantic body had weighed it down, slowing its ascent. Its decision to take flight was actually incorrect because if it continued to remain on the ground, the machine gun squad would hesitate to fire, fearing they would hit their peers by mistake. However, if it rose to the air, they would not have such scruples.

For a second, most of the anti-aircraft machine guns on the campground were aimed at the giant creature.

Bullets lashed at the Devilbeast, submerging it. The sparks flickered off its armor, its flesh was exposed and torn to pieces. It plunged to the ground and gave a desperate screech. Putrid blood streamed from the numerous bullet holes and pooled under its body.

Pasha let out a long sigh.

Zoey was right. The God's Punishment Witches were truly a great threat to Senior Demons. No wonder so many people in the Union had taken the side of the Queen of Starfall City.

A God's Punishment Witch could block magic power and reduce the strength of enemies who carried multiple magic stones to their level. At the same time, their power rivaled an Extraordinary's. Thus, the creation of God's Punishment Witches could not only steady the fluctuating magic power within a witch but could also make them unrivaled when outnumbered by demons. Back then, this strategy was undoubtedly a ray of hope to the routed Union.

Based on Lady Alice's initial plan, thousands of witches would have become first-class warriors if half of the non-combat witches were converted to God's Punishment Witches. The overall tactic of the Empire's final battle was to allow the combat witches to deal with the Army of Demons, the God's Punishment Witches to deal with the Senior Demons, and the Transcendents were left with the most difficult enemies.

Since the God's Punishment Witches were primarily designed to exterminate demons, it was not surprising that they could kill a Senior Demon in such a swift manner. In other words, if God's

Punishment Witches were so weak that it cost 10 of them to take out one Senior Demon, the Queen of Starfall City would have never bet on this plan.

However, everything was just a little too late.

Glancing at Zoey who looked content and delighted, Agatha had mixed feelings.

Had the Union implemented that plan at the very beginning, the outcome of the second Battle of Divine Will would probably have been very different. Although the humans had been forced to retreat to the Land of Dawn, there were thousands of cities and towns still erected on the Fertile Plains with a total of nearly 10 million people living. The Union could have definitely built an army as powerful as the demons' from this huge population.

But when they lost the Battle of Divine Will, the Queen of Starfall City had barely held any lands. All she had left was less than a million barbarians. This plan was thus considered her last attempt to survive the war.

"Did you kill it?" asked Agatha as she walked up to Zoey.

The seriously injured Senior Demon was not completely dead yet. These grisly enemies were sometimes even more resilient than Transcendents. Even without a Stone of Measuring, Agatha could still observe the little remains of magic power in the demon run wild. Apparently, the latter was trying to fix its deteriorating body.

Nonetheless, this did not mean that demons were immortal. They had a self-repairing limit. Even if Zoey did not give it a final blow, the demon would eventually die when it exhausted its magic power.

It would also die when the Red Mist ran out.

Perhaps Zoey preferred to give her enemy an excruciatingly painful death rather than a quick one.

"I want to let him live for a bit longer." Zoey's answer surprised Agatha. "There are many demons this time. We should be able to obtain a lot of mist storage tanks from them. Treat his wounds and provide him with some Red Mist. He should be able to live for another few days."

"What are you going to do?" asked the Ice Witch with as she scowled.

"Rest assured. Although I really do want him to suffer eternal torment, I'm aware that this isn't the time to take personal revenge," said Zoey solemnly. "If I remember correctly, there's a witch in another unit who can link two individuals?"

"Do you want her to link the demon?" asked Agatha in surprise.

Zoey nodded. "I know its certainly risky, but if we succeed, we'll have an opportunity to confront the demons directly. Since he's a commander, it's worth taking a little bit of risk to pry into his mind!"

If it were in the age of the Union, the executives would have found it hard to resist such a tempting suggestion. However, the Union had fallen apart a long time ago. She believed neither Roland nor Tilly Wimbledon would agree to force a witch to venture for something so dangerous.

Unless Camilla Dary volunteered herself.

While Agatha was hesitating, she heard several loud bangs at the other end of the battlement.

From where she stood, Agatha could see clouds of ashes spring up in from the northern front. It was as if something had just swept over the field.

But she did not hear any intense gunshots.

"Is there another group of Devilbeasts? Or has the demons broken through the defensive line?" Agatha wondered.

She immediately activated the Sigil of Listening and inquired about the situation. "What's going on at the front line Sylvie?"

"A monster we've never seen is attacking us." Sylvie's voice from the other end of the line sounded pretty anxious. "We require the assistance of the Longsong Cannons!"

...

The moment the cylinder blasted, shells from the mortars landed among the Army of Demons.

Since the Mad Demons were all wearing animal bones and leather jackets, both the mortars and the 152-caliber howitzers could seriously injure them. In fact, the mortars were more lethal as they were faster and greater in number.

Flying bullets and shells streaked across the air on the battlefield, killing the demons as they sprinted without cover. The explosions created blood mist clouds, as the soldiers continuously fired. Finally, the enemies stopped their advance.

Sylvie did not really pay attention to the outcome of the battle.

Apart from occasionally monitoring the enemies in the air, her full attention was mainly on the four sinister crawling monsters.

Unfortunately, the mortars were not much of help against these monsters made of black stones and metals.

Bullets could barely penetrate their shells unless they were hit directly in the face.

Suddenly, the crawling monsters ejected a black stone pillar. To her dismay, Sylvie noticed that the pillar was actually a part of these monsters. The stones and its veins gradually peeled off and combined, forming a new cylinder.

Sylvie knew that they had to eliminate these enemies who were capable of launching long-distance attacks as soon as possible.

Its first attack had caught everyone off guard, resulting in a significant loss among the First Army. More than 100 people at the front were injured. Furthermore, some of the soldiers in the trench were shot in their shoulders and chests. More importantly, the failure to develop any effective countermeasures to this unheard-of attack had greatly impacted the morale of the soldiers.

Luckily, the monster "grew" much slower than soldiers loading their cannons.

"The Artillery Battalion are currently trying their best to re-set the Longsong Cannons." Agatha's voice calmed Sylvie down. "I'll connect you to the battalion commander."

"H-hello... Miss Sylvie." The commander sounded a bit nervous. "I'm Van'er, the commander... It'll take a while for us to fully restore the operation of the Longsong Cannons. Fortunately, one cannon wasn't affected. If you could tell me the shooting parameters, I can arrange people to support you right away."

Sylvie clenched her fist, trying to suppress her excitement. She cast a glance at the compass in front of her and slowly pronounced her position. "10' 17" to the north, 2,310 meters away, please fire!"

"Copy that. 10' 17" to the north, 2,310 meters away." Van'er repeated. "Sixth squad, fire!"

Chapter 988: The First Victory on the Plain

The No. 6 Longsong Cannon was the one Van'er inspected prior to the attack. It was located at the far end of the battlement. Although it had received two rounds of spears, it was practically unscathed compared to the cannons the Devilbeasts tipped over. Once the soldiers were back in action, it could resume its function.

A minute after Van'er received the parameters, the Longsong Cannon ejected flames in the given direction!

As the target was two kilometers away, the trajectory of the shell was quite low. Both the soldiers and demons had heard the bullet's whooshing as it whistled pass.

The only difference was that the demons heard an earsplitting thunder right after!

The formidable lord of war had been revived!

Due to the short distance between the large-caliber cannon and the enemy, its firing accuracy had significantly improved. The first shell had landed right beside the crawling monster. It generated a shockwave which flipped the monster's colossal body over, blowing away its shell and exposing the flesh underneath.

The group of Mad Demons which happened to be beside the crawling monster were killed along with it.

From the Mad Demons' positions, one could tell that they were deployed at that location to prevent a raid from the witches. Unfortunately though, they were deterred by the mortars. Left with no choice, they hid beneath the "giant spider", taking refuge from the flying shells behind its stone limbs.

Nonetheless, this act was pointless. They had still suffered from blast waves which transmitted through the crawling monster.

The shockwaves completely crushed the Mad Demons' inner organs and bones as it rippled through their bodies. By the time the scene became tranquil, the explosions were replaced with littered demon bodies.

"We made it!" Sylvie exclaimed as she swung her fist. "The next target is... 12' 6", 2,480 meters from here!"

"No problem. Will be ready in a minute!"

Meanwhile, the demons who endured the pain of constantly being blasted by the mortars were finally within one kilometer of the battlement.

Just when everyone thought it was time to battle, the enemies had suddenly stopped.

The whole process was less than 10 minutes.

The Mad Demon at the very front had approached within 500 meters of the Northbound Slope where the first line of barbed wire stood.

But he moved no further.

Without the interference of the Devilbeasts, all the machine gun squads, including the anti-aircraft machine gun squad, aimed at the enemies who swarmed in.

The whole battlefield stirred up.

The First Army's equipment was currently much better than when they had fought at Coldwind Ridge. Back then, HMGs were deployed in the blockhouse with great caution due to its limited number. They were used exclusively for attacking targets that posed the biggest threat. Now, the First Army no longer had any restrictions on their access to firearms and were allowed to shoot enemies at any distance. However, such an "unscrupulous" usage of ammunition was very likely to be a one time offer only.

The area within 500 meters of the trench became the hunting ground of the sniper team.

Usually, the demons would not have any difficulties getting through the barbed wire as they could easily jump over the fence or uproot the wooden poles.

But since their opponents were a group of top-notch snipers, these actions would be very bold and stupid to do.

When the demons found out that they could not close-in to the spearing range, they went wild. This action was not a form of military discipline or a display of soldiers' morale, it was more like the desperate struggle cornered beasts.

After thousands of demons died around the defensive line, the enemies started receding quickly. During the whole process, the First Army's machine guns had never stopped firing. The barrels had turned completely red hot.

Compared to the intense fight at the rear, the front seemed to be relatively placid.

Sylvie finally felt relieved. She was perhaps the only person who understood the graveness of the situation when the "duel" between the two parties started. The last two crawling monsters had their magic spirals filled with magic power and were just about to strike. At the same time, the No. 1 and No. 3 Longsong Cannons were just fixed and had thus saved everybody.

Had it been two or three seconds later, the stone pillar would have caused more substantial injuries to the First Army.

Nevertheless, human beings had won the battle. Mankind were once again setting foot on this long-forgotten land. They had finally defeated the demons for the first time in 400 years.

...

Roland received the detailed report four days later.

Due to the large number of the dead bodies, it took the First Army a considerable amount of time to clean the battlefield. Based on the instructions from the Taquila witches, they had to first burn the demons' bodies before taking away their magic stones.

Collecting magic stones was particularly important. The battle did not technically end until they had stripped the demons of the magic stones. If demons, by some means or another, retrieved these magic stones, they would soon recycle it by using it on new demons.

The final result was astonishing. There were around 6,000 demons killed in action, more than the total number of the First Army who had participated in the war.

Less than half of the demons were directly killed by machine guns or cannons. Most of them had died on their way as they ran out of Red Mist.

However, this did not mean that the demons were not fully prepared for this war. During the post-war clean-up, the First Army had found dozens of Siege Beasts that had been transformed into transportation tools. This number had not even included those blasted to pieces. The demons could have slowly recharged the mist tanks if the human beings had been in a disadvantageous position. However, their swift defeat had completely sabotaged this plan. It was impossible for the demons to retreat to the Taquila ruins from their outpost by relying on the meager amount of Red Mist they carried on hand.

"If I remember correctly, witches can also control those Siege Beasts, right?" Roland asked through the Sigil of Listening.

"That's right. Those beasts are essentially magic stones. With just a little bit of training, witches can also handle them." Zooey cut in. "Although they're a bit slow, they can carry lots of things. The Union used to use them for long-distance transportation instead of regular mules and horses."

Roland thought it would be a good idea to have them managed by the Ministry of Construction as the construction team was currently in need of some transportation tools. For city transportation, the slow speed was actually preferred.

Although there were tons of Magic Stones of Tossing, it was a shame they were of little use. These stones were exclusive to demons because they could only exert their power when connected to a magic being. Thus, the First Army could only collect these stones together and destroy them.

"By the way, how did the enemies escape Sylvie's surveillance?"

"Let me answer that for you," said Agatha as she cleared her throat. "After the battle ended, we searched the entire outpost and found an underground tunnel connecting to a cave two kilometers away. In the cave, we discovered an underground campsite built by the demons where not only was

there a mist storage tower but also a God's Stone of Retaliation Pillar. The campsite was even larger than the outpost itself. This was their real stronghold. We were indeed all deceived."

Roland drew his brows together and asked, "A God's Stone of Retaliation that covers the whole campsite?"

"Correct," Agatha said slowly. "It's nearly five meters in diameter and 10 meters high. The surface is as smooth as a clean-cut icicle. I've never seen something like that before, not even back in the Union age. If I didn't see it myself, I would have never believed it."

Chapter 989: After the War

Roland certainly did not think that the demons had possessed such incredible power 400 years ago. Otherwise, the Witch Empire would have been eradicated from the Earth within a year or two. The truth was, however, that they had ruled the world for a short decade.

After all, it was impossible to compete against the demons with only a few Extraordinaries. Once every outpost was protected by a similar God's Stone of Retaliation, the witches would have no chance of survival.

Roland knew how hard it was to carve out such a giant God's Stone of Punishment Pillar. The better the condition of the original stone was, the greater durability it had. They had tried to dig out the Natural God's Stone from the bottom of the North Slope Mine by shooting at it at close range but had only ended up leaving a few white marks on its surface. The only way to recover the stone was to corrode its surface with magic blood before processing it. Due to the great difficulty in obtaining them, large God's Stones were particularly expensive.

Nevertheless, even the God's stone in the main hall of the Hermes Cathedral was not that enormous. According to the Ice Witch, it seemed that the pillar had been directly cut out of a Natural God's Stone by some sharp weapon. There were only two explanations for this: Either the demons had acquired some astonishing carving skills or they had developed a more profound understanding of their magic power.

For mankind, neither of them was good news.

"We can tell from the demons' new weapon that they have also been busy over the past 400 years..." Roland tapped the desk. "The third Battle of Divine Will is probably going to be tougher than we anticipated."

Roland's worst fear had come true. Compared to the demons back in the age of the Union, the demons nowadays were not only more cunning but also more advanced in terms of their technology. For example, they had created a hybrid life form such as that crawling monster, which was seemingly used to kill regular combat witches. As the crawling monster can shoot the witches from two kilometers away, the witch army would have no time to use their power to fight back when they realized they were under attack.

Even a scout like Sylvie would find it hard to protect her peers when the enemies started mass shooting because her ability was only effective within a radius of five meters.

"As much as I hate to admit it, the demons do evolve faster than us." Zoey broke the silence. "If this happened in the Union Age, we would have probably been squashed already."

Roland could easily imagine how slim the witches' chances of survival would be in this situation. They would be double teamed and outnumbered by the Mad Demons on the ground, threatened by the Senior Demons lurking in midair, and also attacked by the destructive new monsters, the witches would be doomed to fail.

The current problem was whether the five crawling monsters were the only ones in possession of the demons or just a very small part of their advance force. Had demons developed any war weapons other than those crawling monsters? If they had, what would they look like and how were they going to deal with them?

Roland needed all of this information right away.

Next came the casualties of the First Army.

Roland already had a rough estimate of the number after the war. There were indeed few discrepancies between his number and the actual statistics obtained four days later. Without a doubt, the low casualty rate was largely attributed to Nana and Lily.

There were 190 people injured and 75 killed in action, and most of the casualties were directly caused by the crawling monsters. It was impossible for the soldiers down in the trench to dodge the stone needles raining down from the sky. Once the needles had penetrated human bodies, they had, pretty much, nailed the people to the trench. In order to transfer the wounded to the shelter, the field medic must have had to pull the one-meter long needles out first. This operation had, consequently, resulted in a large amount of blood loss. Due to the mishandling, many soldiers had died within a few minutes.

Roland would certainly not blame the rescue team. In fact, it was the first time for the field medic to provide assistance to the war effort, and they had actually bought a lot of time for the wounded soldiers. As Nana was not able to treat so many people at a time, she had had to treat those who had suffered fatal injuries first, leaving those who had sustained minor injuries to the rescue team.

Roland could envision that as the war became increasingly intense, what Nana could do in the future would be increasingly limited. At the end of the day, the First Army would have to solve the medical problem themselves.

"Please bring the ashes of the soldiers killed in action back," Roland said in a low voice. "Graycastle won't forget them."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Iron Axe replied solemnly.

"So... do you have any plans for the First Army in the near future?" the Pearl of the Northern Region asked. "The enemies definitely did not anticipate such a great loss. According to Miss Lightning, the patrolling Devilbeasts near the Taquila ruins have reduced significantly. She only found demons more than 100 kilometers away from the ruins. Further, Miss Sylvie has also confirmed that except for the towering iron monsters, there are less than 1,000 specks of magic glow. In other words, the demons now have very few footholds on the Fertile Plains."

After a long pause, Roland made his decision. "Head back to Neverwinter when all of the wounded recover."

"Are you concerned about the supplies?"

"If we can't seize the ruins, there's no point advancing to the north." Roland sipped the tea. "Plus... winter is coming."

Although the Months of Demons did not necessarily arrive during winter time, for people living around the Barbarian Land, winter meant endless snow and an overcast sky.

During the Months of Demons, the First Army not only had to deal with the harsh weather but also watch out for the demonic beasts that lurked everywhere. There was neither any guarantee that both food and winter supplies would be sufficient in Neverwinter, nor was there ample ammunition for the army to wage a multi-faceted war.

Hence, the winter in the Barbarian Land was always perilous.

By the time the ground was covered by thick snow, it would not be that easy to retreat.

"I see," Edith said. "The General Staff will collaborate with Mr. Commander-in-chief and work out a retreating plan."

"Safety is our top priority," said Roland. After he finished the "conference call", Agatha suddenly cut in.

"Your Majesty, there's another thing that you need to know."

"Really? What is it?"

"Well, the thing is that the Senior Demon defeated by the God's Punishment Witches is still alive..."

After hearing the full account, Roland was astonished.

"Is it fine to connect the demon with Camilla?"

The channeling would enable the channeling witch and the demon to share their minds and be fused into one. In other words, the witch would be able to learn what it felt like to be a demon once the two were connected. It was definitely not going to be a pleasant feeling. The soul transfer of the Taquila witches had shown that any transfer would create confusion and that the process was irreversible. As such, it was certain that the clash of the two entirely different living beings would be a disaster.

This reminded Roland of the word "spiritual contamination".

"It's dangerous, so Zoey and I had a thorough discussion and came up with a relatively feasible way to do this."

Chapter 990: Behind the Soul

"What way?"

After a short pause, Agatha went on, "Since it's very dangerous to channel a demon, we're thinking of transforming the demon into a man."

"Are you suggesting... a soul transfer?" Roland asked as he realized the hint.

"You once said that there are demons in the Dream World. This shows that the successor of Starfall City has extracted a soul out of a demon before. At least, this tells us that demons would be affected by a soul device as well." Zooley explained. "We simply need to transfer the soul of the Senior Demon to a God's Punishment Warrior. This way, it would bear all the risks that occur during the transfer, such as sensory loss and disorientation."

"I see." Roland nodded. In other words, the demon would be perplexed by the spinning sensations while being forced to adapt to the foreign human body. During this time, the channeling witch could easily read its mind. Furthermore, the witch would be more familiar with the sensations of a human's body than a demon's one. The method sounded very promising, but Roland was concerned about another problem. He asked, "Has it occurred to you that you would lose a vacant God's Punishment Warrior if you carry out this plan?"

After the church fell apart, they could no longer receive new God's Punishment Warriors.

"Compared to a senseless life, we prefer to stay in your dream... So, that's fine with us," said Zooley.

"Ahem..." Roland almost choked on the tea. Although he knew Zooley was a woman, he felt goosebumps crawl up his bare skins when the actual words came from a man's body.

"Just joking." Zooley summoned up a rare smile. "In fact, there are quite a few defective bodies in our warehouse that we can use for this project. Plus, compared to the potential gain from this experiment, losing a God's Punishment Warrior is really nothing. We would like to make the small sacrifice."

"Defective bodies?" asked Roland after clearing his throat.

"It isn't actually easy to travel from Hermes to our hiding place, especially during the Months of Demons, because you have to climb over the Impassable Mountain Range. Some God's Punishment Warriors had indeed crawled there because their feet were eaten by demonic beasts. We surely can't use them to fight. Initially, we planned to offer them to nobles so that they could enjoy a life of immortality."

Roland twitched his lips, doubting if such a life would be truly an enjoyment.

"But even if they're defective, they should contain some power similar to a God's Stone of Retaliation. If the body releases its power during the experiment, wouldn't it cause problems?"

"That, you don't need to worry about. It took us decades to learn how to fully control a new body," Zooley replied, "and it took us even longer to successfully activate our God's Punishment Realm. A lot of people couldn't get the hang of it until they completed their second transfer. Even if the demon has some unusual talent in adapting to a new vessel, it isn't likely that it could do that during the interrogation."

Agatha added, "The worst scenario is the channeling being interrupted, but we've confirmed from Sylvie that the pain caused by such an interruption is just temporary."

"By the way, have you told Ms. Camilla about your plan?" asked Roland as he suddenly thought of a crucial problem.

"We have. She refused to do that at first, for this is something she's never done before. No matter who the interrogator is, she has to take some risks, but Zooley persuaded her."

"Really...?" Roland was suspicious. Zooley was definitely not an eloquent person.

"It was actually very simple Your Majesty," Zooley explained. "I just told her that I'd be the person who would channel the demon."

Roland was a little surprised.

"I'm an Extraordinary and also the first awakened God's Punishment Witch... So, I'm the best person to channel the demon," she said nonchalantly. "After all, I proposed conducting this experiment, so I should be the person who bears all the risks."

Roland realized that this was probably the reason why he did not hate the ancient witches despite their astounding arrogance and haughtiness. They had greater courage than many people and were always the first ones to stand up to their enemies.

"I see, then do what you said." Roland gave his approval after a moment of silence. "Make sure that you keep an eye on the Senior Demon on the way back."

"Ah, I'll take 'very good care' of it Your Majesty," said Zooley with a smile.

Perhaps, Zooley was more interested in escorting the demon than interrogating it.

After the call, Roland sank into his thoughts.

Do men and demons really have souls?

If they don't, how did the Taquila Witches switch bodies freely? What is the mechanism of the soul device?

If they do, why can their souls be extracted and assigned arbitrarily to any vessels, but can't be completely independent of their bodies? Why aren't souls immortal?

Also the Dream World... Why does such a world which is essentially a virtual space, look so real? How did it come into existence? According to the ancient book down in the ruins, the so-called light beams would lead to the Divine Domain. So, what would this Divine Domain look like?

Roland believed that he would not know the answers to these questions until he figured out the nature of both magic power and the Battle of Divine Will.

Regardless, he now had a chance to witness a soul transfer.

...

Time seemed to travel a lot faster compared to when they had left for the war.

Since City Hall was rapidly expanding and had gradually developed a mature and experienced workforce, there were fewer things that required Roland's attention. Therefore, he allotted most of his free time to several major industrial projects.

The pilot project for the glider was still in progress. The Aircraft Operation Manual drafted by Tilly, which initially contained only a few pages, soon turned into a big book as thick as "Intermediate Chemistry". When Roland added the cover to it, he had chosen gold as the font color.

Thunder had slowly gotten the hang of the steel ship. Although he had experienced quite a few mechanical breakdowns at the beginning, after several upgrades, the ship was finally ready to sail.

Furthermore, the construction of the Spellcaster Tower built specifically for Agatha had been completed in the last month of fall. This five-story concrete building had instantly become the new landmark of Neverwinter due to its peculiar architectural style and its extraordinary height. It was even taller than the lord's castle. Beyond a doubt, it would be the most conspicuous building in the city until the completion of the Miracle Building.

Apart from those mentioned above, the construction of the oil fractionator and the new power engine assembling plant was also close to completion. Normally in the past, the whole Western Region would become quieter as winter drew closer, as if all the cities and towns had entered dormancy. However, ever since the establishment of Neverwinter, this was no longer the case. The city was particularly busy this year. There were crowds and newly-erected houses everywhere, from the North Slope Mining area all the way to the harbor at Shallow Beach. The hustle and bustle of the city impressed all the merchants who visited here.

A month and a half later, the First Army finally returned after a prolonged absence.

The residents in Neverwinter all greeted them at the meadow in the suburb. The cheers of the crowd were deafening.

On that very day, flurries of snows drifted down from the sky.

A long winter... was coming.