

Witch 1051

Chapter 1051: Azima's Discovery

Cage Mountain area, northeastern border of the Kingdom of Dawn.

The path became rougher as they climbed. Tangled vines and giant trees were seen everywhere. The thick trees formed such a dense canopy that they could only catch a glimpse of the grey sky between the leaves.

The only thing that comforted Azima was that at least they did not have to walk through the knee-deep snow. With less influence of Months of Demons, the mountain was not covered by heavy snow like the Impassable Mountain Range; otherwise, they would have to wait until the beginning of spring and summer.

This did not mean that walking through the mountains was an easy task.

When they stood at the foot of the mountain, Cage Mountain was just a smooth slope, not steep at all. After they actually entered, they realized that there was no path inside and that it was not suitable for troops to march. On the first day, three people were injured before they climbed for less than two kilometers. In desperation, Sean, the king's guard, had to order the troop to be stationed in the small town at the foot of the mountain and selected several elites to go with Azima.

Knaff, a local guide; Rother, a God's Punishment Witch; Marl, a contact from the Tokat family, Sean, and Azima, formed this weird exploration team.

—Of course, it was weird!

The God's Punishment Witch was said to be sent by His Majesty to look after her. After all, she had to work with men all day, and there would be some inconvenience. Nevertheless, Azima was sure that as long as she tried to run away, the witch would definitely break her legs without hesitation.

Although Marl Tokat was a contact sent by the King of Dawn, what could he do in the mountain? He did not stay in the town but insisted on climbing the mountain together. Obviously, he had other purposes. He was on behalf of the Tokat family, and indeed helped others a lot; otherwise, he would have been thrown away with a sack by Sean long ago.

Not to mention the exploration team, this "not hostile" team could be even said to be armed to the teeth. Even their shovels could be used as weapons. When they were followed by knights of some lords, they behaved as if they were prepared to destroy the opponents at any time. They had nothing in common with ordinary miners at the bottom of society.

Nobody in the team knew exactly what they were looking for, including Azima. It was not gold or silver, or copper and iron. The only guide was nothing but a small piece of coin in her hands.

"Wait... wait," said the guide, who was walking in front of the team, raising his hand to indicate them to stop. "Be careful, there are traps!"

Azima immediately heard clicks behind her. She knew they were the sound of firearms loading. For the past month, Sean frequently talked to her about the legendary records of the king, and she had a basic understanding of the combat capabilities of this troop. In fact, she came to understand that she preferred staying with these common people like Rother, who was once a witch.

Rother was much calmer. Without even pulling out her sword, she walked steadily to the guide and asked, "Oh, is this... a spear tripwire?"

"Yeah," said Knaff, pointing to the top of a trunk. "Look, the spear is hidden there. Once we accidentally touch the trigger, that stuff will shoot holes all over us!"

Azima looked in the direction of his finger and saw several sharpened wooden sticks between the branches and leaves, which were coldly overlooking them. If the sticks fell on them, their heads and necks would inevitably be severely hurt. This was definitely not a hunter's trap for animals, but more like for human beings.

"Where's the trigger?" Sean asked in a low voice.

"You can't find them," Knaff shook his head. "Every vine under our feet and every branch may be part of the tripwire. Unless we burn it with a torch, it's hard to completely destroy it."

"What should we do?" Marl muttered.

"We have to make a detour, my lord."

"No, step back, all of you." Rother said suddenly, "Let me have a try."

"What... did you say?" Knaff looked at the God's Punishment Witch in surprise. "Hey, it's not a joke—"

Before he finished, she had already strolled into the danger zone.

With the dense weeds, they could not see what was under their foot unless they cut them. After Rother walked for a few steps, Azima heard a slamming sound as if something had been snapped. Then there was a squeaking friction on the top of the tree, just like a viper flicking out its forked tongue.

The tripwire which was hidden somewhere was straightened and ejected the sticks from the top of a tree! At the same time, Rother pulled out her sword!

"No..." The guide immediately closed his eyes as he could not bear to watch the woman dying in front of him.

Still, Azima witnessed everything that followed—

The God's Punishment Witch held the sword with both hands and bounced the sticks shooting toward hers as if she was swatting flies. Under the giant force, most of the sticks were broken and shattered. She did it easily as if it did not take much effort!

When she stopped, the grassland around her became a mess.

"The trap is removed," Rother withdrew the sword and shrugged. "Let's go ahead."

After realizing what happened, Knaff fell to the ground in astonishment.

...

"Aha... I knew my lords are superb and have extraordinary skills. No wonder you're great men from the king's city!" The guide finally recovered from the scare and immediately spoke with another tone, "Especially this warrior, your art of fencing is legendary!"

"Save your breath." Rother interrupted, "You'd better explain why there are such traps in the mountains. The wooden spears aren't meant for the beasts, are they?"

This was also what Azima wanted to ask.

"It's indeed used to deal with people," Knaff replied honestly. "The higher you go into the mountains, the more traps you'll encounter, so Cage Mountain is also called Trap Mountain. These things were set by the past lords. The only purpose is to guard against the Kingdom of Wolfheart."

"Wolfheart?" Sean echoed.

"Yes, this mountain range extends almost from the seashore to the old Holy City and is regarded as the natural dividing line between the two countries. Since the Kingdom of Dawn is lower in terrain, the mountain is like a cage which surrounds the country. That's why it's called Cage Mountain." Knaff explained, "But the problem lies in the shape of the mountain. You should have noticed when you were at the foot of the mountain. The south side of Cage Mountain is like a smooth slope. High as it is, it's very easy to go down. Therefore, the robbers, hunters, and refugees from neighboring countries often invaded the border domain of Dawn through Cage Mountain. At first, they only plundered resources in the mountain, but later ran into the villages to steal and rob, and caused a panic among the local subjects. The lord was also annoyed, so he figured out a solution once and for all and that was, to give up Cage Mountain."

"Oh, I see..." Marl Tokat said as he seemed to suddenly understand, "I never knew such things happened on the border."

"The lord naturally did not want it to be known by the king," Knaff said. "What's more, unlike those poor people over the mountain who could not live without the mountain, we could earn a living in other ways. After the mountain pass was sealed, the lord sent people to plant fast-growing weeds and vines, and also set up lots of traps. This practice was handed down from generation to generation. Then Cage Mountain became what it looks like today."

"So you turn it into a real cage. Although you block the opponents, you also confine yourself," Azima thought. "If it were Roland Wimbledon, he would not choose to do so. That man always looks into the distance. Even when explaining the task to me, his focus did not always fall on me."

No, why should I think of him at this time?

Azima shook her head.

His Majesty is merely my employer.

What I should do is to quickly complete the task and get back to Doris and other sisters.

...

As the guide said, they encountered several traps afterward, which basically did not have any effect in front of the God's Punishment Witch. As the night fell, Azima suddenly saw the green light on the coin brighten!

A dazzling light source also appeared behind a dense forest. Between them were countless light spots traveling back and forth to form a bright bridge of light.

This was the reaction of the source material!

She finally managed to find another source!

When the exploration team went through the forest following Azima's instruction, they were shocked by what they saw.

It was an abandoned building halfway up the mountainside. The dilapidated stone gate led to the mysterious depth. The pillars on both sides were marked with weird signs. They were obviously not naturally created.

Azima's eyes widened in surprise.

Did His Majesty not tell her to look for a strange ore?

Why did the source appear in a relic that seemed to have been abandoned for a long time?

Chapter 1052: Protective Measures

"Ha, interesting..." Rother said under her breath.

"What?" Sean looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"I'll let you know, common people." Rother grinned. "The ruins of the underground civilization can be seen in many places of the mainland, and Taquila certainly spent a lot of time studying them," she said, walking up to the mottled column, and then swept the dust off it. "These symbols are not their characters and they have nothing to do with the magic characters the Union once made, either. Keeping in mind the history of the four kingdoms, isn't that interesting?"

Azima was still confused. Although she understood every word Rother had said, she could not comprehend what the words exactly meant when she put them together. However, she felt relieved as she saw the same confusion on both Marl's and Knaff's faces.

Sean revealed a thoughtful look.

"His Majesty once said that in the past, the four kingdoms were only a collection of scattered villages and small towns, located in a small corner of the mainland, and had no real history. If this ruin wasn't left by the civilizations during the Battle of Divine Will, then it means..."

Sean paused suddenly.

"There were people who used to live here and were unknown to us?"

"We're not sure about that," Rother said with great spirit. "No one knows whether the underground civilization could breed any new tribes and create new tongues. We have to enter the ruin to find more information."

"Lord Sean, there seems to be a stone tablet here," the soldier, who was examining the stone gate, suddenly shouted. "The words on it are written in our characters."

Everyone immediately approached the tablet.

A block of granite rested in the weeds. The moss had grown all over it and only one side of the tablet had been sanded by men so that it was easy to be ignored. It took the soldiers a long time to clear it up before the engraved words could be easily made out.

"This is a place cursed by Gods. You'll die if you enter."

Knaff gasped as he saw the warning on the tablet.

"Is this the rumored... Temple of the Cursed?" He stepped back and stammered.

Sean and the God's Punishment Witch glanced at each other. "You know what it is?"

"I just heard it from other people. It happened more than a century ago..." Knaff stared at the black hole and swallowed. "The lord of this area had ordered his men to set up a lot of traps in the Cage Mountain to prevent the Wolfheart people from crossing the mountain. It was said that a team led by a knight came across a heavy rain when they were performing a mission. The rain in the mountain was variable and transient. The knight commanded his men to find shelters and they discovered a strange temple by accident."

"Oh?" Rother said, raising her eyebrow. "Did they find any treasures in the temple? And the greedy people who stole the treasures were cursed by deities and died a terrible death in the end."

"You've heard that too?" Knaff was surprised.

Rother laughed out. "The nature of common people seems to have stagnated. They've played this kind of trick centuries ago and it still worked. I bet it was the lord who started the rumor. He must have wanted the treasures for himself. The poor villagers were just used to prove the existence of the curse and were slaughtered secretly."

"But... they didn't die right away."

"What...?" Rother frowned.

The guide cringed and said warily, "They died one by one ten years after the incident, even the knight. It was said they all died painfully. The skin on their faces was peeled off, leaving the rotten flesh exposed. They looked hideous and horrifying. That's what the curse stems from. The lord had to forbid everyone to enter that place to stop the spread of misfortune in his land, so no one knows its actual location."

"Are you sure?" Rother walked over to Knaff and put her arm on the guide's shoulder.

Knaff paled as he looked at the arm that was thicker than his thigh. "I heard all of them in the tavern. I swear I tell no lies. My lord, you can ask someone else if you don't believe me. If there's anything wrong, then the rumors must be wrong."

In Azima's opinion, if the people died so long after the incident, it was unlikely they were killed by the lord. Moreover, it would make sense if the knight and the lord plotted together to murder the villagers, but it was unreasonable to see the knight killed as well. The nobles could not be executed without trial, no matter how insignificant their families were.

Could it really be... the deities' curse?

"Ugh, why don't we... return to the town first and then decide what we're going to do after we collect more information?" the liaison Marl Tokat suggested.

"Decide what we're going to do next?" Knaff looked at Sean in disbelief. "Was the Temple of the Cursed your aim from the very beginning?"

"No, they happen to overlap." Rother let go of Knaff. "What about you? Since you're King Roland's trusted guard, I believe you won't chicken out, will you?"

"Of course not," Sean replied calmly. "Our priority is to finish the task given by His Majesty. Now the target is just before us. Certainly, we won't retreat."

"Good. Let's enter and meet the so-called 'deities'," Rother said with a hideous smile.

"But we can't enter with no precaution." Sean shook his head. "In fact, His Majesty warned us to be careful of the danger we would possibly encounter in the source."

"Did he... even foresee this?"

"Yes." Sean looked over his shoulder at Azima and said, "That night, after you left, His Majesty told me something in private. He said there might be two possibilities we would run into. One is that the source is exposed on the surface, and in that case, we don't have to do anything but seal the place and return to Neverwinter where we can directly report it to him. The other is that the source is located in an underground cave. The deeper the cave is, the more dangerous it will be. So we need to take protective measures beforehand. It may be inappropriate to call this place a cave, but the temple is in line with all its characteristics."

With that said, he snapped his fingers at the soldier. "Bring up the thing."

Two soldiers unloaded their packages and pulled out five white coats.

Rother squatted down and spread the clothes out curiously. "These're just plain leather coats."

"They won't be if used with the masks." Sean picked up one and slipped himself into it. Azima could only use the word "slip" to describe Sean's movement, for the coat was one-piece designed without even a button and was more like a sack that was cut in human shape than a garment. Now Sean only had his face exposed and all of his limbs were hidden in the coat, which made him look very weird.

Subsequently, he put on a transparent mask to protect his face. A fist-sized can was fixed on the mask, shaped like a pig's nose.

"Five in and the rest stays," Sean said through the mask. "In addition to Miss Azima and Lady Rother, who else wants to come?"

Chapter 1053: The Source of Light

The guide and the liaison turned down the offer immediately, especially the guide, who had already unknowingly moved away from the entrance and would have run away if there were no soldiers keeping an eye on him.

Rother did not put on the weird coat. "I don't need it. Keep it as a backup."

"Are you sure?" Sean frowned.

"The God's Punishment Warriors have a much stronger resistance and self-healing ability than common people and are immune to general plagues and poisons. I don't think a disease that allowed common people to survive ten more years is a threat to our bodies. This is the most common thing we could find in ruins." She shrugged. "The one-piece coat, on the contrary, would slow me down and dull my keenness, especially in an uncertain place such as this. Moreover, if we encounter a situation that is too difficult to escape, the soldiers outside would have a spare coat to rescue us, though such a thing can scarcely happen."

This was a convincing argument. The God's Punishment Witch could only perceive the outside world by her sight and hearing, so they heavily relied on them. After having been through centuries of training, they could even estimate the humidity and flexibility of the soil by the sound of their footsteps. Azima had already seen this skill during the journey.

For this reason, the protective coat had a larger influence on the God's Punishment Witch than ordinary people, who would just take it as a coat that could cover their eyes and ears.

"But what if... the temple was really cursed by the Gods?" Azima was worried.

Rother let loose the same hideous laugh as she did before. "Let's put aside the doubt whether a leather coat can resist the Gods' curse. I have no fear in facing them even if there really are Gods inside. I'd like to see how the curse by the Gods could be any worse than the millions of people who perished on the Fertile Plains.

"I see." Sean nodded after a moment of silence. "Let's move now."

Azima took a deep breath and followed the guard entering the stone gate.

Unexpectedly, it was not damp inside the ruin. The sand that had been brought through the entrance had almost blocked the passage so they had to bend over to move forward. However, as they went deeper, the downward passage became less congested and less steep.

With the light of the torch, they could see the wall on both sides of the passage had been severely damaged and the tree roots and vines had dug out of the paved bricks and crawled all over. Rother, who was leading the way, used an ax to open the way. The downward incline would have taken them half a day to pass through if they did not have the God's Punishment Witch to clear the way for them.

"This place has indeed been deserted for a long time, but what Knaff said isn't entirely true. It wasn't sealed off because of the curse," Sean said suddenly. "There must have been people coming and going at least for a period of time."

"What did you find out?" Rother put on a curious look.

"There are torch slots on the wall," he said, pointing toward the wall. "The chiseled lines are much clearer than that of the walls, indicating that they must have formed at very different times. If this is just a place that they used to take shelter from the rain, they didn't need to set up torches at intervals of about ten paces."

There was no doubt that torch slots were only made when people had to walk in and out of this place frequently for a long time.

"Ha, how could the lord not be interested in the treasures inside of this ruin?" Rother sneered. "It's not the guide who lies but the rumor itself has been polished."

"I'm concerned whether the treasures are the thing we are searching for..." Sean said soberly. "If there are many sources, how many have been carried away in the past century and where? His Majesty said that the thing is crucial to the creation of the Glory of the Sun, and we must, by no means, let it fall into the hands of other people."

"These problems can't be solved until Miss Azima leads us to the first source." Rother's body suddenly tensed. "I think we're close."

Finally, there was no more soil covering the stairs and the stone steps were exposed.

They moved much more quickly after that.

30 minutes later, they stopped in front of a sea of darkness. The light shining from their torches could not illumine the way ahead any longer. It was as if the torchlight was being absorbed by the darkness. It looked as though a dark wall was standing there, separating the two worlds.

"That's..." Azima blurted out in amazement.

"A big hole." Rother lifted the torch, entered the darkness, and totally disappeared.

Sean followed her.

"Mind your step." The soldiers guarding the rear warned.

"I will," Azima took a deep breath and stepped into the darkness. Prior to her promise to accept King Roland's task, she had always thought that she was a brave girl. However, she now found herself far behind Sean and Rother in terms of bravery. Perhaps, this was the reason why she could not make the final decision of leaving the Sleeping Island.

"To be frank, you're a coward."

Nightingale's voice once again echoed in her ears.

But this time, it was no longer sarcasm, but a different kind of meaning altogether.

The darkness enveloped her.

It took a few seconds for her eyes to adapt to the dense darkness. She could make out Sean's and Rother's torches. Their lights seemed to have shrunk by a lot and looked small and dim.

"Are we at the bottom of the ruin?" Rother said as she looked around, her voice echoing from the unseen ceiling. "It's smaller than I thought. No more than 200 paces in any direction."

"You can see the edges of the room?" Sean asked.

"It's not that impressive. You don't have many choices when living under the ground for hundreds of years. You either adapt or remain blind."

It wasn't until now did Azima realize why Rother said it was "a big hole". As she entered, the space suddenly extended by a lot so that the firelight could not reflect on the walls and looked much dimmer. The hole was not at the same level with the passage they had just passed through, so those entering first looked as if they had suddenly disappeared.

"How far do we have to go?" Rother looked back over her shoulder at Azima.

She hurriedly took out the coin. Suddenly the green light filled her vision. There were countless bright green spots floating in the air, from the ceiling to her feet, outlining the whole place. It was as though she was in a fictional world, and the endless darkness now had clear boundaries. Under the luminous spots, she could even see the shape of every tile on the floor.

The wall around them was engraved with psychedelic paintings that were beyond description. What the paintings showed were all mad and chaotic. No human beings could create anything like that. There were rows of iron cages under the paintings in which numerous bones were piled up. She did not know how many people had been imprisoned here and died.

About a hundred paces away from them, the ground sank down and formed a large pit from which a splendid beam of light rose. The beam matched the light of the coin, but the beam was much brighter.

It was her first time seeing such a sight!

"Azima?" asked Sean. Upon not hearing an answer, he turned around and asked, "Are you alright?"

Azima felt the dryness in her throat. She licked her lips and said slowly, "I think... we've arrived."

"Ah? Do you mean we've found the source?" Rother spread out her hands and asked, "Where is it then?"

"We are... inside it now."

The witch answered in low murmurs.

Chapter 1054: Sacrificial Ground

"Your Majesty, there's an urgent report from the Kingdom of Dawn!" The guard entered the office and placed a thick sheepskin bag on Roland's mahogany table. "The messenger said that this was sent by Sean."

"Oh?" Roland suddenly became energetic. He put down his biplane design and stood up. "Let's open it and see."

It had been almost two months since the exploration team left Neverwinter. The most recent news from them was when they crossed Graycastle's border. When he learned that the source was not in Graycastle, Roland had been little worried. After all, the mining and transportation of ore was a long-term process. The First Army had limited mobility and the farther away they were from Graycastle, the harder it was to carry out a mission.

Now that he'd finally received some news after such a long time, he was very interested in what was in the package.

But he was also curious as to why the package was so big. This reminded him of mail order packages. Whether or not they were able to find the source, a letter would have been sufficient to convey the message. What did the exploration team encounter that would cause Sean send over such a big package?

"It's full of paper," Nightingale whispered in his ear as she probably saw the doubts in his eyes.

"Paper?" Roland tilted his head and whispered, "Are your capabilities so evolved that you can see through things?"

"I'd love it if that was the case, but unfortunately no." Nightingale said lazily, "I just slipped my hand into the sack when the guard came in."

"I see, so her level of alertness was still quite... Hang on." It suddenly dawned on Roland that when Evelyn came in with a new Chaos Drink, or when the chef came in with a snack cart, could she have also pinched a bit of the food and drink?

On the other hand, the amount delivered for afternoon tea had decreased a little.

"Your Majesty, it's all paper inside." The guard's words interrupted his thoughts. "And most of them are covered with ink."

"Is this a new reporting method?" Roland took a look in the bag and said, "Isn't there a letter that I could read?"

"Please wait..." After the guard had dumped out all the contents of the sheepskin bag, there was a new discovery. "There's a letter with a wax seal underneath."

"Bring it over."

"And those papers stained with ink—"

"Just spread them out on the floor," Roland ordered, "Sean couldn't have possibly spent so much energy to send a bunch of useless things."

"Yes!"

Roland sat back on his chair and opened the envelope.

Judging from the date, it should have been sent about a week and a half ago. Like the bag, the letter was also surprisingly large, with at least a dozen pages—it was hard to imagine why an exploration report would be such a lengthy document. This might also be the reason why Sean marked the report as urgent, but decided against using the usual animal messenger system.

"Your Majesty, Miss Azima has found the source that you want—It's located at the northeastern junction of the Kingdom of Dawn, near the Kingdom of Wolfheart. The locals call it Cage Mountain."

Sean's first sentence was enough to reassure Roland.

Fortunately, this trip was not a waste. The fact that the mining area was still within the Kingdom of Dawn meant that he could control the entire mining process through the Quinn family. Although the cost would be a lot more, it was still better than having to deal with the Kingdom of Wolfheart and the Kingdom of Everwinter.

Moreover, Sean's choice of words did not seem tedious, which made him even more curious about the package's contents.

"But the source wasn't in a cave, but a very old ruin. What's even more incredible was that it wasn't built by the underground civilization nor did it have anything to do with the Taquila survivors. We initially suspected that it might have come from the undersea monsters, but a discovery by the witches proved otherwise."

"Your Majesty, this ruin was left behind by a group previously unknown to us."

Roland immediately knitted his brows.

Did an unknown group of new aliens appear in the Four Kingdoms?

This was intelligence that had never been mentioned by the Witch Union.

Although this area was barren and backwards in the past, that did not mean that they would ignore their own territory. If there was alien activity, it would be impossible to escape the witches' investigation.

In other words, if Sean's conclusion was correct, then they most likely existed even before the underground civilization.

The key question was, why was this alien group interested in uranium ore?

He continued reading.

"They left behind a large number of murals on the walls at the bottom of the ruin. The various monsters displayed in the paintings were inconsistent with the images of the other races known to us. Through investigation of their contents, Ms. Rother and I think that the building was very likely used as a place of execution."

"It was not only located on the source of the vein, but they also shaped the uranium ore into bricks for the walls and floor—Azima saw the same element in every corner of the ruins and even on the murals. At the bottom, we found a lot of cages and bones, which was also reflected in the murals."

"They seem to have imprisoned a large number of enemies here—not just other races, but also their own kind. They were tortured using the power of the ore, and it seems as if doing so would please their gods."

"I've already tried to copy as much of the murals as possible and sent Tokat's messenger back to Neverwinter. Due to the limited number of protective suits and the size of the murals, the progress was slow. The murals you have copies of are only of a portion of them. It will likely take another month or two to send copies of the rest."

"In addition, I'm very worried about Ms. Rother who did not wear protective clothing when entering the ruins. I'm not sure if she would encounter the dangers you mentioned. The locals that initially discovered the ruins were infected with something. Many people became sick with strange diseases and many died from unknown causes. So the ruins also are called a cursed temple. Judging from the ruin's execution ground, this danger likely still exists."

"That's bad." Roland could not help but whisper.

"What's wrong?" Nightingale asked from the mist. "If the God's Punishment Witch is cursed, she could just change her body, so I don't think we have to worry about them."

"I wasn't worried about the Taquila witches, but about Sean and Azima." He shook his head solemnly. "According to the plan, they shouldn't have stayed in the mining area for so long."

Whether it was unrefined ore or highly compressed uranium, its radioactive decay mainly consisted of alpha particles, so it would be difficult to penetrate the skin or cause harm to the human body. But this didn't mean that it would be the same in the ruins. Given that these radioactive elements had existed for hundreds of millions of years and some of them had likely decayed into more dangerous elements such as radon, the situation had become different.

The half-life of radon was only 3.8 days, and it was a gas which could be easily inhaled into the body to cause radiation poisoning. The protective suits he prepared for the exploration team were designed for going into deep mining areas—The fully-sealed suit could effectively block out many kinds of highly toxic elements that could be found in a uranium mine. The gas mask could filter out radon and other toxic gases. As long as you didn't stay in the mining area for extended periods of time, you could basically guarantee your safety.

But once too much time had passed, the endurance and effectiveness of the suits would be limited. This meant that those who participated in copying the murals might have exceeded the safety limits and thus been exposed to harmful amounts of radiation.

"They must immediately withdraw from the ruins," said Roland, taking a pen and paper from the table. "Call Honey. This letter must be sent to them as soon as possible."

Chapter 1055: Shocking Scene

In addition to recalling Azima and Rother, Roland also wrote down the follow-up arrangements.

It was a time-consuming and laborious task to mine uranium mines safely. Not only was it necessary to formulate a detailed operational procedure and set up monitoring nodes, workers also needed to have a certain understanding of the work they were engaged in. They would then have to act meticulously according to the rules.

In the face of imminent war threats, he naturally did not intend to follow the normal protocols.

The North Slope mine was a good example.

He bought the prisoners on death penalty directly from the Duke of Quinn. He then threw them into the ruins without compensation and holidays, and he did not need to prepare protective measures for them. They would be released after working for a decade. He believed that those people would make the right choice if they had to choose between the gallows or a chance of survival.

Furthermore, local lords would probably be quite happy to use the lives of these scums in exchange for an additional income.

In this way, the 100 soldiers of the exploration team only needed to be responsible for supervision and security work, thus greatly reducing the requirements of defense.

Sean was undoubtedly the best candidate to be in charge of management.

Finally, at the end of the confidential letter, Roland also made sure to order the guards to look for the whereabouts of the "treasures" that the people had brought out of the ruins a century ago.

After all, there were a few doubts about the rumor that bothered him a little.

This clan, which had not been recorded by history, seemed to have an inexplicable sense of worship for radioactive elements. It used brick ore to build a temple for sacrifices and even used it to torture the enemy. Some were even made to swallow the ore. Those bodies that were filled with green fluorescence, as seen through Azima's eyes, were proof that it happened. Although it was unclear whether their demise had a direct connection with this kind of worship, it was appropriate to call them a radioactive clan.

Since the world was so big, it was not surprising that all kinds of civilization could exist. What was truly strange was that no matter how deep you went into the mining area or took ore to make bricks, it would not be possible to cause "flesh rotting" effects. Even if you lived in mines, the long-term internal and external exposure to various types of decay radiation would only result in a mere increase in the probability of getting cancer. If you were meant to live to the age of 80, you might have lived to the age of 66 only.

After all, natural nuclides' release efficiency is really too low.

Several unlucky people that died in the rumor did not seem to have died from cancer or mutation complications. They seemed to have been affected by strong radiation.

In order to satisfy the latter condition, only the high-purity nuclear material could reach criticality, and a large number of neutron fluxes and hard γ -rays have to be generated in an instant. However, this situation did not seem to be something that the radioactive clan could achieve.

Roland did not rule out the possibility that the rumor itself had distorted the facts. However, the villagers' misery at that time should have been known by more than one person. If it was true, the problem would most likely be those "treasures".

Only in this way would the ruin take over the function of the altar of execution—Otherwise, every detainee would live for dozens of years before dying. If this altar was not built into a high-rise apartment building, it would not be able to hold so many people.

It was a pity that a century exceeded Summer's retrospective period. It was almost impossible to completely understand what was happening at that time and Sean could only try his best.

He felt that the truth behind the rumors might not be so simple.

...

After Honey took the letter, Roland walked to the desk and examined the paintings that were spread out.

Although the distorted ink images were filled with strange and absurd things, he could still recognize the general subject and object—The subject was mostly located in the center of the scrolls. The outline was large and delicate, representing the ruler of the ruins; the object was much smaller. They were in all of the corners, and from their hideous expressions, you could feel their pain and fear.

This was probably the universal nature of all intelligent life—Always make yourself the protagonist in historical records.

Just like Sean said, neither the subject nor the object was related to the known civilizations such as the demons, the demonic beasts, or the undersea civilization. Their shapes were quite weird, some were like matchsticks with limbs that were indistinguishable from head and tail; while the others were like crawling protozoa with all of their organs located in the brain.

The contents of the murals were not all related to the execution. There were some that depicted the scenes in which the subject and the object were fighting. They seemed to be able to fly by inflating the body and following the direction of the wind. They seemed to take advantage of the high-altitude to maneuver and land behind the enemy and successfully attack from both sides. The towering defense line was not of any use. The city was a sea of fire and the object was defeated.

As long as the roles were clearly identified, it would also be possible to roughly understand the events described in these seemingly crazy records.

"Huh?" Roland's glance suddenly settled on a picture.

"What's wrong?" Nightingale quickly noticed his strange look.

"Do you feel like you've seen these scenes depicted in the murals before?" He walked to the scroll and bent down to look at a mural describing exactly the last part of the war: countless matchsticks were united as if they were trying to fight to their last breath, but they were still knocked to the ground by the subject. The blood flowed and gathered into huge lakes. The surviving enemies fled to the sea. They were chased by the subject and killed. Their corpses even formed a small bag of a mountain in the sea.

"Oh..." Nightingale observed him for a long time and said, "In addition to using more ink, it doesn't seem to be different from other drawings."

"Well, combat ability and artistic appreciation are inherently opposite." Roland held his forehead and said, "Help me get a map of the Southernmost Region."

"Yes, I will." The latter did it quickly and placed a thick stack of maps in front of Roland. At the same time, she also handed him some dried fish.

Roland bit the dried fish while his hands kept moving. He soon found a partial bird's-eye view of the Endless Cape

At that time, in order to determine the location of Festive Harbor, he asked Lightning and Maggie to make detailed maps of it, so he still had a deep impression. When the two were put together, he suddenly felt a layer of goose bumps on his back. His body felt like a current had run through him and his fingers were numb.

"The outlines of the two maps overlapped!"

"Although the details were different, the boundary between the mainland and the Swirling Sea was basically the same, and similarity was above 80%!"

"Was this... a coincidence?"

"Hey, is this the Southernmost Region on the map?" Nightingale also realized that something was wrong and asked, "Isn't that where the Sand Nation people live?"

Roland did not answer but quickly scanned the remaining painting scrolls.

When he saw the penultimate one, all the blood in his body seemed to freeze.

He saw only a dozen of the subjects gathered on a high platform, forming a large circle. An irregular polyhedron floated in the circle. There were countless strange tentacles on its surface. It was like the snake demon Medusa's hair.

Sean did not see this scene with his own eyes, so he naturally did not know what was shown in the painting.

However, Roland knew very well what it was.

That was clearly "the relic of gods".

Chapter 1056: The Captive

In the dark dungeon, a dim light cast a shadow on the wall as the captive dangled from the ceiling. The shadow flickered and swayed like a forked tree branch.

The prisoner did not struggle, nor did she utter a yelp or beg for mercy. She only produced an almost inaudible moan when the whip landed on her skin.

But that was soon drowned out by the following lashes.

"Crack!"

"Crack!"

The candlelight wavered and flickered as it played with the swaying shadow as it moved across the ceiling. The dull sound of a whipcrack cut through the gruesome silence of the dungeon.

After around ten lashes, Earl Lorenzo said, "Enough. Take a break!"

"Yes, my lord." The executioner withdrew.

Blood trickled down the female prisoner's back. There were new and old whipmarks all over her body. Apparently, this was not her first time being tortured. Beads of sweat stood out from the tip of her nose and arms. Obviously, she was suffering great pain, but she forced herself not to cry out.

"So, are you still not going to tell me where the Holy Book is?" The earl walked up to the woman and grabbed her by the chin, forcing her to look at him. It was a pretty face, despite the constant torture the woman had been going through. As a matter of fact, her damp skin and bright eyes made her even more attractive. "The church is over, Farrina. Do you still want to plot against me? You should at least think about your companions if not about yourself."

"Those damn church dregs!" Lorenzo thought savagely. "There are many places they could have chosen to live in the Kingdom of Wolfheart. Why did they have to pick Archduke Island? I made it very clear when I executed the messengers that I want them to leave me alone. Plus, they have a group of God's Punishment Warriors and could have picked anywhere to settle down as long as they stay as far away from Graycastle as possible. Why did they attempt to murder me? If I didn't ask Pope Mayne to give me some guards to protect me as a precaution, they would have mounted my head on the city wall by now."

At this thought, Lorenzo felt the side of his missing left ear throb again.

When the two groups of God's Punishment Army had fought that day, Farrina had nearly killed him. Fortunately, his guard had blocked her strike. He survived but had also lost his left ear.

Lorenzo was actually more upset about the loss of the God's Punishment Warriors than his missing ear. Out of the 20 God's Punishment Warriors, only two to three were capable of fighting now. The others had either died during the battle or had lost limbs. It was impossible for them to fight again.

Yet he relied on those God's Punishment Warriors to secure his position on Archduke Island!

The nobles in the Kingdom of Wolfheart did not come back to him not because of the change in his status from a bishop to a noble, but because of their fear of the God's Punishment Warriors. If they knew he had only a few capable God's Punishment Warriors left, they would probably strip him of his earl title immediately.

Lorenzo was so tempted to cut Farrina into pieces.

But he could not do that.

Not before he knew where the Holy Book was.

"I'm not sure whether the church is over, but I know you are... Earl Lorenzo, no, I should call you a traitor," After a moment of silence, Farrina said quietly. "My biggest mistake was that I underestimated your God's Punishment Warriors, but there are few you can use now, right? Otherwise, you wouldn't need the Holy Book so badly. You want to know the secret passing down among the popes, which is how to create the God's Punishment Army, so that you can keep your pitiable position..."

"Smack!"

The earl boxed her ears.

"You'd better tell me what I want!" Lorenzo threatened through his teeth. "Tell me, where is the Holy Book?"

Blood dripped down from the corner of the prisoner's mouth. Farrina said, "I don't know..."

"That's really a pity." The earl eyed the executioner. "Chop off a leg. Pick anyone you like. I want her companions..."

"Stop acting." Farrina interrupted Lorenzo feebly in a derisive tone. "You remember the finger you sent me last time? The blood had darkened. Do you still want to play the same trick? It seems that the comfortable life here has made our bishop forget the difference between a living man and a dead one. You chopped it off from a body, right? You killed them a long time ago, traitor!"

Lorenzo's face clouded over.

"I'm not even an acting pope. How would I know where the Holy Book is? Pope Tucker Thor might know it, but he never told me. Nobody in this world would ever know how to create a God's Punishment Army now."

"You're lying!" Lorenzo went livid. "Tucker Thor asked you to come to rebuild the church in the Kingdom of Wolfheart and revenge Hermes! Without the Holy Book, how can the church compete against Graycastle?"

"Haha..." To Lorenzo's surprise, Farrina laughed. "With a God's Punishment Army, the church can't compete against Graycastle either. The acting pope simply wanted to save us and for everybody to spend the rest of their lives peacefully."

"This is absurd! Do you think I'll believe you?" The earl roared. "If you planned to settle down, why did you attack Archduke Island? Didn't you attempt to steal the wealth, the food, the armors and the weapons here? Tucker entrusted the God's Punishment Warriors to you, and he just wanted you to live a happy life? Nonsense!"

"Believe it or not, but this is the truth," Farrina said indifferently. "I also want to tell you something else. If you didn't kill the messengers but treated them fairly, we would have probably chosen somewhere else to settle down. But you made the worst decision. You know what kind of people I despise? Those double crossers like you!"

"You—"

"You failed Pope O'Brien, so you don't deserve the life Pope Tucker Thor earned for us." There was a faint starchiness in Farrina's voice. "It's a shame that I didn't kill you, but the nobles in the Kingdom of

Wolfheart would eventually know who you are. Even if you have washed your hands off the whole matter and have nothing to do with the church, you'll never become a true noble! You're just a traitor living on borrowed time!"

Lorenzo took a deep breath, trying to suppress his anger. He growled, "I know exactly what your little scheme is. You just attempted to provoke me into killing you so that the whereabouts of the Holy Book would remain as a secret forever. But I can make you spit it out. There are not only supplies in here but also a lot of instruments of torture which we normally use on witches. I wonder if you would hold up better than those Fallens."

He cast a glance at Farrina's feet and said, "Let's start with your toenails... I hope you could still play tough when I rip them off."

...

After returning to the castle hall, Lorenzo could not contain himself any longer. He smashed the tea set onto the floor.

"Damn, damn, damn Farrina !"

He had armed himself with a mask of cruelty to conceal his inner uncertainty. In fact, Lorenzo had no idea how long it would take Farrina to yield. As a member of the Judgement Army, she had an exceptionally strong willpower. Perhaps, it would not be that easy to get something out of her.

He could not just close the port and announce a trade ban all of a sudden, for that would immediately raise suspicions among the nobles. If he, however, left Archduke Island as it was, there was a big chance that the nobles would appoint merchants to spy on him. Therefore, he needed more God's Punishment Warriors to protect him before it was too late!

But Farrina, a person he loathed so much, refused to tell him that key information.

"This is so frustrating!"

Just then, his butler came in. "Your lordship, I've heard something interesting recently..."

"Get out of here. I'm not in the mood for some trivial gossip!"

The butler looked at the broken crockery and said patiently, "It may be helpful in solving your problem."

"What?" Lorenzo looked up instantly. "What is it?"

After he became an earl and the lord of Archduke Island, his followers also became his "family members". Hagrid, the butler, was one of his henchmen. As a former priest, he sometimes provided Lorenzo with counsels. "The border of the Kingdom of Dawn has been a little unstable lately. It seems that they plan to head to Cage Mountain."

"What does it have to do with us?" Lorenzo scowled. "Archduke Island won't gain anything from it, no matter who takes Cage Mountain."

"I'm not talking about the operation itself, but the person behind this..." Hagrid paused for a second and continued, "Your lordship, I've heard that the King of Graycastle is behind this."

Chapter 1057: An Ancient Treasure

"The King of... Graycastle!"

Lorenzo shuddered at this name.

Everybody in the church had heard of him. Within merely a few years, this man had elevated himself from the lord of an insignificant border town to the sovereign of the state. Nothing could explain his sudden rise. He had even defeated the Holy City of Hermes which had once dominated the entire continent.

In fact, Roland Wimbledon was the main reason Lorenzo had made such a quick decision to sever his relationship with the church. Realizing that the conflict between the church and Graycastle could never be settled, he had quickly resigned his bishop position to escape from the trouble.

But Lorenzo did not understand why Roland suddenly extended his power to the borders of the Kingdom of Dawn and the Kingdom of Wolfheart. As a new king, he should have focused on domestic affairs instead of creating a new commotion. He wondered what Roland was up to this time.

"Are you sure?" asked the earl as he looked at Hagrid. "Fill me in!"

"I got the news from various reliable sources," Hagrid said positively. "The troop stationed at the foot of Cage Mountain is from Graycastle. Their outfits and weapons fit the description. Further, death row prisoners from all parts of the Kingdom of Dawn are heading to Cage Mountain as well. Some of them proclaimed that they work for the King of Graycastle!"

"Cage Mountain... death row prisoners..." Lorenzo paced the room when a sudden thought struck him. "Is he coming for that..."

"Very likely, your lordship." Hagrid nodded before correcting himself, "No... he must be coming for that."

"How did he know?" asked the earl.

"It isn't surprising that he knew. The discovery of the ruin was simply pure luck. I always thought that there must be a connection between those ruins, and Roland happens to be the first person who noticed this connection."

Although the church did not know the exact reason behind Prince Roland's swift rise, there were quite a few theories. Apart from ridiculous rumors such as the incarnation of God and the spokesman for the demons, many people believed that Prince Roland had obtained some mysterious power from a ruin.

Even though the three Archbishops had dismissed this theory as another groundless rumor, many believers had insisted that this was the truth. Lorenzo had also been one of them.

"Otherwise, how did Roland defeat the Holy City?"

The most incredible ruin in Cage Mountain was the Cursing Temple.

A few years ago, when the God's Punishment Army had invaded the Kingdom of Wolfheart, many nobles had either been killed in action or surrendered. Even the Queen of Clearwater had failed to stop the church. As the former bishop in Archduke Island, Lorenzo had assisted in the logistics and the post-war clean-up. He had been responsible for sending some of the looted military supplies to the front and storing away the rest. During an operation at Cliff Ridge, he had accidentally learnt about an ancient legend that had been circulated for 100 years.

It was rumored that a group of villagers had stolen some treasures from the Cursing Temple but died shortly afterwards. The local nobles had later taken possession of these treasures which the ancestors of Cliff Ridge's Earl had been very interested in. He believed that the deaths had nothing to do with the curse on the temple but with the treasures taken out from the temple. Thus, he had put a lot of effort and time searching for them and had finally retrieved a part of these treasures from the Kingdom of Dawn.

The research had cost a dozen lives. In the end, the old earl had finally found something unusual. It was a lethal weapon that produced a deadly ray, working just like a curse!

But the weapon had lost its power after several uses as if its power had been exhausted. Although the old earl had sent many people to the border to search for a similar one whilst even risking his life to explore the temple himself, he had not found a way to recover it. Therefore, he had recorded the incident in his family book, hoping his descendents would one day find an answer. The miraculous "weapon" had thus been passed down through generations until the church had seized Cliff Ridge a century later.

Lorenzo had been very interested in the item in the beginning. However, after he had played around with it for a few times, nothing had happened. He had thus lost his interest and put it away with the other treasures in the warehouse, planning to deal with it after he had returned to the Holy City.

After all, he could not take a family book too seriously. Many nobles boasted about their long family history, their aristocratic origin, and their accumulated wealth. If the church was so gullible as to believe all of them, they would not have wiped out the Kingdom of Wolfheart and the Kingdom of Everwinter that easily. Rather, it would have been the other way around.

After the church had suffered a miserable defeat in Coldwind Ridge, the situation had taken a turn for the worse. Nobody had cared about the looted items any longer, and Lorenzo had also put the matter out of his mind. He had almost forgotten about it until Hagrid reminded him.

It was very likely that the King of Graycastle was coming for the treasures in the Cursing Temple.

Getting excited, the earl urged Hagrid. "Go on!"

"Yes, your lordship." Hagrid inclined his head. "Suppose Roland Wimbledon learned about the treasures in the ruins from other sources, he would probably know how this thing works. According to what I know, this powerful thing can probably replace the God's Punishment Warriors."

"Right, this is a cursed weapon! It can definitely deter the nobles in the Kingdom of Wolfheart from challenging my authority. Meanwhile, it'll earn me some time to search for the Holy Book," thought Lorenzo.

Lorenzo stomped in excitement. "Come with me to the warehouse, now!"

"Your lordship?"

"I have to make sure that it's still on Archduke Island. Since it's so important, I have to guard it well."

...

To prevent an information leak, Lorenzo took no one but his butler and searched the whole warehouse for half a day. After hours of strenuous work, he finally found the "treasure" in a corner.

Lorenzo was happy that he did not include a third person in this search.

As he opened the pouch, he immediately noticed its difference compared to the other treasures.

Compared to all the other looted treasures such as luminous pearls and beautiful sculptures, the thing in the pouch was nothing but a stone. It was square, much coarser than polished granites, and was not even bigger than his palm. Nobody would have ever spared it a glance if there were no decorative sapphire stripes on it.

The Earl of Cliff Ridge had also mentioned in his family book that the item had cost him the least out of all the treasures he had owned.

But now, the stripes on the stone were emanating a soft blue glow. The light pointed from one end to the other as if it was giving a direction.

Lorenzo exchanged a look with the butler. Both of them were exhilarated by their discovery!

It was unbelievable that the stone, which had been unresponsive over the past 100 years, would show signs of activity just when Roland sent his people to the Cursing Temple.

Now, Lorenzo was almost certain about Roland's motive!

He was sure that Roland knew how to recover the stone!

"I want you to go to Cage Mountain," said Lorenzo as he slipped the stone into his pocket cautiously. "I trust no one but you. Try to get the information on how to use the stone. Don't worry about money."

"Rest assured. I'll do my best," replied Hagrid while placing his hand on his chest.

"Another thing," The earl said slowly. "Make sure that the King of Graycastle doesn't notice you. He could destroy the church and certainly could destroy you effortlessly. You have to keep a low profile unless the stone exerts its power... I place the future of Archduke Island in your hands."

Chapter 1058: No More Regret

In a tavern at the dock of Archduke Island.

Joe fumbled a wineglass restlessly as he glanced towards the door from time to time.

He had never been so fidgety before.

Although his mind was crowded with a multitude of feelings, he could do nothing but wait miserably in regret whilst feeling afraid and lost.

Joe felt a little relieved when a hooded man came and sat down next to him, but he soon felt even more nervous.

"How... is she doing?" asked Joe.

Joe fixed his eyes on the man's lips, dreading for the worst scenario.

"She's still alive," replied the man.

Hearing this answer, Joe let out a sigh of relief.

"But Ms. Farrina isn't in a good condition," said the man as he took off his hood. "It appears that the bishop wanted to get something out of her, so he tortured her every day. Sometimes, I've even heard her screams reach the hall. If things go on like this, she won't be alive for long."

Joe tried to convince himself that this was inevitable. After their plan had failed, he had foreseen the fierce retaliation from their enemy. As the traitor wanted to know the whereabouts of the Holy Book, he would definitely use every possible means to get Farrina, the leader of the operation, to open up.

"At least, she's still alive," Joe muttered under his breath.

He slowly made his hand into a fist with his nails sinking into his flesh. He did not want to picture what would happen to Farrina if he failed to rescue her. Perhaps at the end of the day, death may actually give her relief.

"Damn it! Why did I agree to her plan?" Joe thought savagely. He should not have let Farrina act as the diversion. He would rather fight to his last breath and die with her in the castle than retreat alone.

"Sir..." The man hesitated for a moment and asked, "Do you know what the bishop is asking for? Maybe you should just let him have it. That will at least free Ms. Farrina from..."

"He's not a bishop, only a traitor!" Joe said within himself. He replied through his teeth, "I don't have what he wants. It was destroyed when Hermes Cathedral fell."

There was a hint of melancholy in his look when the man heard the word "Hermes". He murmured, "May God bless us..."

Joe thought it pretty ironic. Back in the old days before the fall of the new and old Holy Cities, as one of the most outstanding Judgement Warriors, he had always been surrounded by the most prominent figures in the church. At that time, he would have never taken an ordinary believer seriously. But now, with the betrayal of the bishop and the priest, he could trust no one but this believer who came from the bottom of the pyramid. It appeared that this man had a deeper love for the church than many of the executives. He had come to him when he had sunk to his lowest dejection.

The man also felt bitter about Lorenzo's betrayal, but with little power, he could not openly defy him. The night the castle had been attacked, he had caught a glimpse of the invaders. From then on, he had started to look for Joe around the castle, and this was how they had met.

Joe did not care whether this man was a spy sent by Lorenzo or not, for he practically had nothing else to lose. If this man was indeed a spy, he should have noticed that he had nothing to offer by now and thus killed him.

Unfortunately, this man was just a servant of the lowest rank in the castle. The information he could provide was very limited.

"I've got to go." After a long silence, the man pulled his hood on. "The butler would suspect me if I lingered too long. Are we still meeting here in three days?"

"Ah..." Joe suddenly came back to reality from his reminiscence. "Sounds good to me. If anything changes, I'll let you know."

"I see." The man paused for a few seconds and then said, "Sir, you must pull yourself together. You are now the only person that can save Ms. Farrina."

"Me? No... I can do nothing." Joe left his words unsaid.

He was walking in the dark, hapless and hopeless. God had turned a deaf ear to his prayers.

Joe nodded blankly.

"Right," The man turned around again, "Something happened in the castle lately. One of the bishop's henchmen, Priest Hagrid, went to the southwest. The coachman said they were heading to Cage Mountain. I thought you might... want to know about it."

His voice trailed off towards the end. It was a very unconfident consolation.

It was perfectly normal for a lord to send his men to some other domains, even though Cage Mountain had nothing to do with Archduke Island. As long as the God's Punishment Warriors were still there, it was impossible for him to get Farrina out of the dungeon.

"Noted. Thank you."

"Anytime, sir..." The man dipped in a bow before he said, "This is all I can do for you."

"Cage Mountain... It looks like everybody is talking about it lately," Joe thought as he drained the glass. His mouth was soon saturated with the bitter taste of ale. The next moment, however, he stood transfixed.

"Hang on... Cage Mountain?"

An idea suddenly flashed across Joe's mind.

"Perhaps there's a chance of saving Farrina after all!"

...

After returning to his abode in the suburb, Joe rested his eyes on a black book on the desk.

It was the "last will" of the acting pope Tucker Thor before he had jumped off the city wall.

It was not the Holy Book that contained the method of creating the God's Punishment Army but a request from Tucker. The book talked about the history of human beings and demons, as well as the origin of the Battle of Divine Will. Joe was agape as he read the story and suddenly understood the reason why Tucker had asked them to leave Hermes.

"Everything is over."

"Worry no more about the battle. Live your own lives."

Farrina did not want the church to fall apart probably because she did not want to see Tucker's sacrifice to be for nothing. She wanted Roland Wimbledon and his Kingdom of Graycastle to fall before the church.

But now, Joe saw a ray of hope in the very king who had destroyed the church.

He did not expect Graycastle to help him.

They would never save the remaining church members.

However, he could direct them to attack the traitor.

He had not given much thought to Cage Mountain until the believer had reminded him. At first, he had thought this was just another groundless rumor and he did not want to deal with Graycastle anymore. But now, he remembered that Lorenzo had indeed found a treasure at Cage Mountain and had even reported to the church when he had been the caretaker for the items looted from the Kingdom of Wolfheart. He did not know whether the treasure had been shipped to Hermes, but it did not matter. What mattered was whether the King of Graycastle was also looking for it.

The nobles in the Kingdom of Wolfheart might fear its cursing power, but Roland would not.

Nobody could stop his impregnable army.

As long as Roland could help him weed out the traitor, he would have a chance to save Farrina.

Even if Farrina was, unfortunate to be captured by Roland, it would be still better than the endless tortures here.

Joe took a deep breath.

If in the end, Farrina fell into Roland's hand, he would come forward.

He wanted to be there for her until her final moments.

Because... he loved her...

He had been in love with her ever since the first day he had joined the Judgement Army with Farrina.

This time, he did not want to leave any regrets.

Chapter 1059: Puzzle And Battles

Two weeks after receiving the emergency report from Sean, the sun once again appeared in the Western Region of Graycastle.

The Months of Demons ended without any problems.

This was probably the most peaceful Months of Demons that has happened in hundreds of years. There were no evil beasts harassing or roaring. The snowy plains outside the walls were empty and flat. The thick snow reflected the dazzling golden light of the sun. It looked like a piece of flawless mirror.

Thus, this year's Victory Day was exceptionally lively.

Many residents walked into the wilderness without waiting for the snow to melt. They plucked a pile of snow from the knee-deep snow and brought it home to boil and drink. It was both a celebration and a memorial.

Only a very small number of people knew about the undercurrent beneath the calm.

The Third Border City, Library Cave.

Roland received an expected response.

"None of the documents ever mentioned this record. Not even the literature left by the underground civilization." Celine leaned tiredly against the corner and ancient books that she had flipped open were piled up around her. "And for the first record about the Southernmost Region, that was about 860 years ago. It was a travel note, probably written by a certain witch. The description was only a few words, but it confirmed that the Endless Cape was a desert."

This was the first time that he saw "Blob" looking so tired—the three senior witches rarely sat down and usually relied on the main tentacles that were hanging on the dome, the fine whiskers on their bodies were always dancing. However, at this moment, all of her tentacles drooped down and looked like fur on the surface. At the first glance, it looked a bit like a radish that was just pulled out of the earth.

"You should probably take a break."

"I'd also like to do that. But I can't stop my body at all," said Celine with a bitter laugh. "Your discovery's too shocking. It can be said to be a subversion of the Union—no, that's not right. It's disrupted the entire recorded history of mankind!"

This was also why Roland had long anticipated the answer—if there were related discoveries in the era of the Union, it would certainly have been recorded in some way. After all, it involved the Battle of Divine Will. Even if it needed to be kept secret, at least the entire senior management would not be ignorant about it.

The ethnic groups in the murals might be even older than what he had imagined. For the last 860 years, they only had a single well-documented testimony and it did not mean that the Southernmost Region was full of vigor before this. From this point of view, the myths of the "Three Gods Emissary" and the "Millennium War" circulated by the Mojins were somewhat more reliable.

At that time, the first Battle of Divine Will had not yet begun.

"Your Majesty, I have to admit," she said with a long sigh, "we have clearly taken a big step forward in our research, but why do I still feel so confused? It's like I've lost something."

"This is all normal," Roland comforted her by saying, "the more you know, the more you will feel like you actually know nothing. In the end, all doubts can be attributed to three problems."

"Oh? Which three?" Pasha asked curiously.

"Where am I, who am I hitting, who is hitting me?"

"..." She silently immersed herself in thinking.

"Oh, well, I just wanted you all to relax a little," Roland coughed twice. "The real answer should be who am I, where do I come from, and where am I going."

"Where did I come from... where am I going?" Pasha murmured again. "These three questions seem very simple, but when you think about it, the answer is not that easy. You only have to change the perspective slightly and you will be faced with different answers."

"Oh, have you gone in a daze after reading too many books?" El could not resist interrupting. "What's wrong with this? I'm El from Taquila and I'm going back to Taquila—won't it be fine like this? I think you've been deceived by him."

"This is the reason why I envy you occasionally," said Celine, unable to put the main tentacles on top of her head. "Being simple-minded can be a form of happiness sometimes."

Pasha shook her head whilst laughing. "Thank you very much. It did relax us a bit. But your response really surprised me. Not only were you calm, but you also took our thoughts into consideration. It was as if you were not the least bit surprised about this."

"Because in my opinion, the world itself is full of uncertainty..." Roland smiled arbitrarily and changed the subject. "Since we have confirmed the unknown Battle of Divine Will and the existence of new ethnic groups so we should hold a meeting—such important news should be conveyed to everyone, the sooner the better."

"As you wish, Your Majesty." Pasha bent her main tentacles and replied.

...

The internal meeting was soon held in the castle's main hall. The degree of secrecy was classified as top secret. Participants were all representatives of the forces of the united front. Even the ministers of the administrative department were invited too.

When Roland announced this accidental discovery, everyone was in disbelief. He also gave a rare ten-minute buffer to allow everyone to whisper among themselves.

The Battle of Divine Will was not bounded to the fate of mankind. It was most likely a "special" normality. This was simply beyond the imagination of everyone. If Roland was not the messenger, few people would believe it.

As the hall gradually fell silent, Tilly stood up and said, "If this was really a Battle of Divine Will, where are the winners? They are neither the demons, the sea monsters, the underground civilization nor the humans... Where are they now?"

This was also the question that most people came up with.

Roland looked at Pasha behind the light curtain. The latter nodded. "I wonder if you still remember that there are two sentences in the records of the underground civilization—that magic has made us extraordinary and that the mastery of magic was a step to getting close to the divine meaning. We might as well assume that all participants in the Battle of Divine Will could use magic, which means the winner could have raised the power of magic to a new level, thus going somewhere we can't see? For example... the celestial world."

This was also the conjecture that the three senior witches came up with after racking their brains. Although Roland felt that there were many loopholes, it was still better than a simple "I don't know."

Not knowing meant nothingness—according to common sense, the stronger a civilization was, the longer its footprint would remain. The ancient people built houses with hay and mud masonry. A millennium was enough to turn them into dust. On the other hand, Neverwinter had concrete buildings, that even after a millennium, would still leave their outlines. A civilization that may have won the Battle of Divine Will, disappeared without a trace after the war and that could only be identified from the scattered relics, undoubtedly made it quite easy for people to imagine the worst.

If winning could not reverse the fate of extinction, then this would greatly impair everyone's determination toward the war.

This speculation by Taquila would at least help to set a goal.

"So what was written on the murals was written at least a thousand and four hundred years ago?" Edith then said, "And what the humans experienced cannot be called the first Battle of Divine Will."

"Though that's the case, changing the name would be confusing," Roland replied. "So I tentatively called it a "lost battle." As to whether it was the first battle, that was not important."

"Your Majesty," Barov said hesitantly, "the expedition plan that was scheduled to be carried out after the start of the spring—"

"Let's follow the previously formulated plan," he said without hesitation. "Even if there are a lot of unsolved mysteries in the Battle of Divine Will, we must move forward! Maybe war itself was a way to get us closer to the mystery. If we are defeated by the demons, then there will be no hope left."

Roland paused, looked across the hall and said clearly, "This time, we must sweep the demons completely out of the Fertile Plains. This is not only to secure the space needed for Neverwinter's development, but also to lay the foundation for the final victory!"

Chapter 1060: Bidding Farewell

After nearly a year of preparation, Neverwinter was now operating at full speed like a war machine.

The Months of Demons could not stop this new king's city from madly absorbing neighboring resources. The Administrative Office once thought that the population of 100,000 was an unattainable goal, but after just one year, the urban population had doubled. The infusion of a large number of fresh labor forces has led to the rapid expansion of various industries, and four new chemical plants were even added. Machine-related processing and assembly plants have also exceeded double digits.

According to statistics, the monthly salary paid by the Administrative Office was close to 10,000 gold royals. When Roland first arrived here, the highest income was only 24,000 gold royals—this was after plundering Longsong Stronghold. In other words, the fortune amassed by the Duke of the Western Region after half a lifetime would only be enough for two and a half month worth of wages.

Steam engines, paddle steamers, perfumes and Chaos Drinks constitute the main sources of revenue—these goods were sold through the Joint Chamber of Commerce to the Fjords and the Four Kingdoms. In addition to the reward that had to be paid, the rest of the money went to a large number of raw materials and handicraft products. The coming and going of money now formed a delicate balance, and savings in the Treasury have started to diminish.

This was a very uneven development model, but in the face of the threat of the Battle of Divine Will, Roland did not have much of a choice.

If resources were not devoted to heavy industry, machine guns would not be able to shoot at will, and artillery would always lack cannonballs.

Only in this way could he arm the entire army.

Expanding the First Army from 8,000 to 10,000 people was only the foundation. The Air Force under the command of Tilly Wimbledon was also in active preparation. In addition, the "Conscription Act" and "National Mobilization Act" have entered the drafting stages. These two policies were aimed at improving the war potential of Neverwinter by mobilizing the ordinary students, workers, and farmers to perform the most basic discipline training. This was similar to the college military training of the later years. Although they could not be allowed to use guns directly on the battlefield, the training time could be shortened when there was an urgent need to replenish the manpower.

Since the specific time for the upcoming Bloody Moon already had some discrepancy, no one could determine when the Battle of Divine Will would start. It could be four to five years if they were optimistic and in the worst case scenario, it might be within one or two years. For Roland, the biggest strategic goal at the moment was to turn defense into offensive so that the war would be in the enemy's territory.

Therefore, the demon who invaded the ruins of Taquila was the nail he had to pull out.

In fact, the transportation of materials and the mobilization of personnel began gradually during the late winter and early spring.

This was where the advantages of rail transportation came in. Even if heavy snow filled the entire Fertile Plains, as long as the rails were cleared, the essential war supplies could still be continuously transported to the front lines.

Most of the steel produced in Neverwinter had become single steel rails. The route hidden in the Misty Forest had also been laid. Once Roland made the order, the new Northern Expedition would be officially launched.

Both the corps and the city were ready to go.

However, before this, he had two more things to handle.

...

On the second day after the Months of Demons ended, Roland received a request for a meeting with Thunder.

"What's wrong, leaving so soon?" He set up a relaxed afternoon tea in the parlor. While fetching Anna, he also sent an invitation to Margaret—with regards to this businesswoman who had a certain chemistry with Lightning, he could only help this much. "Are you impatient to explore the Shadow Sea City?"

"I knew I couldn't hide it from you," laughed Thunder cheerfully. "Every moment that I controlled the steel ship, I was imagining it facing the scene of the sea breeze. If I could, I even hoped to sail straight to the sealine."

"In that case, we will probably face the risk of water shortages halfway through the journey." Margaret shook her head reluctantly. "The other Chamber of Commerce that have invested heavily in you would not be happy to see you leave their fleet behind. Unless you plan never to return to Fjord Islands."

"Haha, I just wanted to express my excitement to His Majesty," he said, touching his chin. "As Margaret said, this adventure is no longer just about me. After all, for the Fjords, the development of new sea areas means opportunities and wealth, and no Chamber of Commerce would be untempted. This is probably the biggest expedition in the history of the Fjord Islands. I need to return as soon as possible to make adequate preparations."

It seemed that after Thunder's propaganda and recruitment, the team has now become a group. Roland smiled and sipped a mouthful of his tea. Thunder was without a doubt the greatest explorer in the Fjords. He was able to attract huge investments just by expressing his interest. "It seems that in a few short months, you have already mastered the steel ship."

"This was thanks to Her Majesty Anna," said Thunder, saluting Anna by pressing his chest, "the subsequent improvements that she made to the hull was of great help. You have to see it in person, otherwise, it would be difficult to imagine that such a large iron vessel could be nimbler than the three-masted ships."

"I'd also like to make a request." Anna nodded and said, "This ship was only active in the Shallow Beach near the sea during the trial. If it's possible, I hope to get a navigation report about the deep sea area. All the problems encountered should be recorded there. It is best to use Neverwinter's new waterproof ink and a sealant bag. So even if it falls into the sea, it can be completely preserved."

He probably did not expect her to make such a serious request so Thunder hesitated for a while before saying, "I understand. You can count on me, Your Highness."

Roland touched Anna's head lovingly and then looked at Thunder. "There's also something that I would like to entrust to you."

"I await your instruction."

"I'd like to recruit a group of explorers."

"Unrelated to this expedition?" Thunder quickly realized.

"Yes," Roland put down his teacup. "I would like them to go to the Endless Cape."

"I remember there was nothing except yellow sand and black water," Margaret said surprisedly.

"That's what I thought as well..." Roland shrugged. "The Endless Cape was low-risk, so there would be no need for experienced experts. So quantity would be more important than the ability."

Seeing that he did not elaborate on the reasons, Thunder did not persist in his questioning. "There're many people like these in the Fjords. I wonder what the rules of eligibility are..."

"None," Roland replied. "Although we specified for an explorer, in fact, anyone can do it—whoever finds any relics in the Endless Cape will be rewarded."

"Even if it's only a brick of the ruin that remains?"

"Naturally, but only if it comes from the Endless Cape." He confirmed by saying, "The more information a relic contains, the bigger the reward. The news will be valid for a long time. As long as I'm the king of Greycastle, it'll be honored."

"With your words as a guarantee, I'm afraid that area will be crowded in the future." Margaret smiled and said, "I wonder if I should take the opportunity to open a tavern in Festive Harbor?"

"You would be most welcome." Promoting the economy of the oil port was indeed one of Roland's goals. After all, the civilization in the painting had a history of at least 1,400 years. It was still unknown if anything was left behind at all. Undoubtedly reward was a good way of recruiting explorers, and killing two birds with one stone.

"By the way, Your Majesty," said Thunder, "since the steel ship has passed the sea test and is officially put into use, does it have a name yet?"

"Of course, I intend to call it the Snow Breeze."

"The Snow Breeze...?" The explorer pondered for a moment. "Surely it's a good name, but wouldn't that be too soft, and not fit for its steel body?"

"Both rigid and soft combined is the best way," Roland could not help raising his lips. "More importantly, this name implies auspiciousness and will surely bring you good luck this time."