

Witch 1101

Chapter 1101: The Controller of the Forest

It did not make sense that the forest would catch fire in spring and summer when the soil was fertilized and moist, and it was even more bizarre that more than one place was ablaze!

"Leaf?" Wendy asked.

"I don't know," Leaf replied, suddenly back to the present. "That area is beyond my control. I can't see what's exactly happening there."

"If it's really a fire, we must put it out as soon as possible to prevent it from spreading."

"I... I know," Leaf said, with a strange look on her face. She bit her lip and then answered with a nod. "Anyway, you go and look for the others. Once the emergency alarm goes off, the campsite will turn into chaos. It won't be that easy to get out of here by then."

There were not only workers on vacation at the terminus station but also their family members who had never fought at the front. It would thus be hard to evacuate the station and direct those people to shelters in an orderly manner. Leaf knew Wendy was also thinking the same thing.

"Can you... handle it by yourself?"

"Don't worry. I know what to do," Leaf assured her as she descended from the balcony. She cast Wendy one last backward glance and disappeared into the thick forest.

In a moment, the shrill, piercing alarm cracked like a whip through the air above the Misty Forest.

...

"OK, yes, I got it." Ferlin Eltek hung up the telephone at the headquarters of the General Staff at Tower Station No. 2 and reported to Edith, "Your ladyship, there has been an accident at the western front..."

"What did you say? The northern forest is on fire?" The Pearl of the Northern Region said while knitting her brows. "Did Miss Leaf notice it first?"

"Yes, they've started to evacuate the station. The First Army stationed there is now on Alert Level 2."

"Inform the Commander-in-Chief and the other executives," Edith immediately gave her instruction after a moment of reflection. "Tell them that I'm calling a pre-war meeting."

"Pre-war meeting..." Ferlin echoed hesitantly. "Are you saying..."

"That's right," Edith confirmed Ferlin's suspicion in a grave tone. "I suspect this is the demons' new scheme."

In less than 15 minutes, all the generals of the First Army and the representatives of the Witch Union were congregated in the underground boardroom.

The Pearl of the Northern Region briefly relayed the news and then said, "The sentries at the forest terminus station have confirmed that the dark smoke did result from a fire, which is now spreading rapidly under the influence of the wind."

"Just a forest fire, no demons?" Iron Axes asked heavily.

"Not that I know of," Ferlin said while shaking his head. "The smoke blocks our view, and nobody knows what's going on there."

"Miss Sylvie, can you see anything?"

"The Misty Forest is too far away," Sylvie answered. "I have to go there personally to check out..."

"Damn it... Such bad timing," Iron Axe grumbled as he peered down at the map. "Where's the queen at the moment?"

Their original plan was that Anna and the witches would meet with the air force at the airport near the forest station and return to Neverwinter by the "Seagull".

"They should be now on their way back on the "Black River I". After I learned that the forest was on fire, Miss Kant instructed me to tell them to change their route over the Sigil of Listening," answered Morning Light.

"Well done," Iron Axe said, a little relieved. "So only Princess Tilly and her party are there now, right?"

After Morning Light gave an affirmative answer, Iron Axe instructed him, "Tell them to take off immediately. We don't have time."

"As you command."

Iron Axe surveyed the General Staff after everything regarding the retreat was settled and then said, "Now, let me hear your opinions on this matter."

...

Leaf was perched on the top of a giant cedar, watching the thick, churning smoke in the distance.

Within an hour, the fire had gotten worse. The air was saturated with ashes and crumbs, and she could see red flickers peeping through the smog.

For a moment, she could hear the trees sob as they were being burned. Although the area on fire was beyond her control, she could sense the tremor of the Heart of Forest.

Because the Heart of Forest was a part of her.

Leaf did not tell Wendy that she was afraid.

After merging with the forest for over a year, Leaf had gradually understood the nature of her ability.

In a way, she could become immortal when every plant encompassed by the Heart of Forest became a part of her. In other words, the bigger the area she had control over, the harder it was to wipe her off the face of the earth.

It was easy to remove a patch of grass, but it would be a lot more difficult to wipe out an entire forest or meadow.

It would be almost impossible to kill all vegetation on this planet.

Leaf remembered His Majesty had once said that plants were the foundation of nature. They would always be the earliest and the most resilient lifeform that appeared on the earth after an utter destruction of the world.

However, the problem was, the reborn Leaf would never be the same old Leaf again.

To merge with the forest, she had to memorize tons of information, including underground streams, wriggly worms beneath the ground, beehives hiding in tree trunks, and twittering birds. If this information swarmed into her head all at once, she would lose her sanity, which was exactly the reason why she had to take things slow.

Yet she knew that she could not take in so much information just on her own.

The reason she had yet to go crazy was that the Heart of Forest screened information for her. Numerous vines and roots intertwined with each other and wove themselves into a massive organic system that integrated both her magic power and memories into the forest.

This meant once the forest was destroyed, she would lose a part of her memories. Even if she did regenerate new plants, she would never be able to retrieve what had been lost.

Those could be the memory of her first acquaintance with Wendy and Scroll, of her experience at the Witch Cooperation Association with Nightingale, Mystery Moon and Lily, of her initial epic meeting with Roland, or even of the mundane routine of her everyday life in Neverwinter... She did not want to abandon any of her memories, not even the bad ones, such as the temerity and prejudice of Cara, and the haunting search and persecution of the church.

Because this was the experience that only belonged to her. They were the evidence of her existence in this world.

She was afraid of losing them.

Her heart ached uncontrollably when she thought that the fire might spread to the fused Misty Forest.

But she could not retreat.

Because everything they had done so far was to defeat the demons and win the Battle of Divine Will.

She could not abandon her companions out of selfishness, because everybody was doing their part. She would not allow herself to fail the other fellow witches.

At these thoughts, Leaf took a deep breath. She looked up at the sky awash with sheets of pink and orange light, her arms outstretched.

In a split second, a jet of dazzling green light erupted from her chest.

"Please respond to my summon!"

At that moment, the whole forest, like an awakened giant, rose tremulously.

Numberless trees bent backward and prostrated to the ground. The earth and patches of grass underneath curled up like a carpet, producing an earth-shattering roar!

As the ground continued to shake violently, the whole Misty Forest split in half. The part controlled by the Heart of Forest gradually shrank, separating itself from the forest in the north and thereby creating a forest fire belt that stretched several hundred meters.

Chapter 1102: The Demons' Blade (I)

"Based on the current information, the General Staff concludes..." Edith broke off as she tapped the desk. "The fire is very likely a diversion."

"A diversion?" Iron Axe echoed thoughtfully. "Are you saying that the enemy wasn't intending to sabotage our supply?"

"They wanted to but couldn't." Edith pointed to the map and explained, "The distance between the Taquila ruins and the north of the terminus station is over 500 miles, which is even longer than the railway on the plain. How much Red Mist do you think they would have to carry if they planned to walk to the forest, set the fire and set up an ambush? I think the Taquila witches should know that answer better than anyone else."

"They can't have such a long expedition without a continuous supply of Red Mist or outposts," Phyllis, the representative of the Taquila witches, replied. "Based on my past experience, 500 is their maximum."

"The terminus station is also a well-equipped fortress, a small stronghold, so to speak," Edith continued. "His Majesty foresaw this kind of situation a long time ago. If the demons set the forest aflame, Miss Leaf would create a fire belt to stop the fire from spreading to the station. This fire belt forms a perfect gun range, with a clear view. It would be almost suicidal if the demons attempt to pass the fortress against crossfire."

"Even if they do manage to send their army to the Misty Forest, the fire would expose their tracks," Morning Light put in. "It would be better for them to launch an attack at midnight when they can better hide their traces in the forest uncontrolled by Ms. Leaf."

"Fair enough..." Iron Axe said, nodding. "But for Sylvie, Lightning and Maggie, none of them found signs of the demons. If they have decided to attack Tower Station No. 1 again, it would probably be too late to take actions now."

"That's another mystery we're yet to solve. Perhaps, the demons have developed a new strategy or a new weapon we've never seen to counter our scouts," Edith said flatly. "Having said that, there isn't just Tower Station No. 1. They can totally attack somewhere else as a diversion."

"Do you mean... they'll attack Tower Station No.0?"

"We're currently focused solely on the front end of the railway, so that's a possibility."

"But Station No. 0 is very far from the front. I don't think the demons have enough forces to go that far."

"Exactly," Edith affirmed.

"I see." The commander-in-chief delivered his order after a moment of contemplation. "Once the queen comes back safe and sound, the 'Blackwater River I' will travel to Tower Station No. 0, whereas the 'Blackwater River II' shall patrol the area between the Station No. 0 and the forest. The other units stay put while raising the state of alert to Alert Level 1 until the alarm is disabled. Although we reckon the demons aren't likely to attack the northern forest, it would be better to extinguish the fire as soon as possible." He then turned to Agatha and said, "Can I entrust this task to you?"

"No problem. We'll do our best," the Ice Witch replied.

"Very well. Keep patrolling the front and watching out for the Taquila front. Miss Sylvie..."

"I'll take care of it," Sylvie said with a nod.

Iron Axe clapped his hands and said, "Based on how fast the fire is currently spreading, it will reach the edge of the forest around nightfall. If the demons didn't know that Miss Leaf could actually block the fire, they should be launching an attack at sunset. We have an hour or so to remedy the situation. Let's do it!"

...

A chilly breeze played around Sylvie's cheek as she stood on the top of the watchtower at the campsite.

A swollen red sun hung low against the western mountains, diffusing a perpetual splendor. The vast meadow below was basking in a slanting beam of sunshine, gold at the far end, red interspersed with green in the middle, which actually looked like a dusky purple color under the sky, and a deep navy, the color of night, at the near end.

This was probably a scene that she could only see on the boundless Barbarian Land.

It was also a final countdown to the war.

The demons were approaching them at this very moment as the sun gradually sank behind the forest.

The beautiful scene thus appeared to be a little bleak and desolate.

Sylvie turned around and gazed upon the southwestern sky. Although she could not see the Misty Forest from here with her Eye of Magic, she still, from time to time, cast a glance in that direction. Dimly, she apprehended that something would happen there.

The General Staff's decision and Iron Axe's order were at least carefully contemplated if not impeccable. The demons could not stretch too thin without a constant supply of Red Mist. If they did aim at the terminus station near the forest and Tower Station No. 0, the garrison there would have enough time before the reinforcements arrived. Beyond a doubt, the demons would still send most of their forces to the railway.

However, why was she still worried so much?

Sylvie shook her head, trying to put these thoughts out of her mind. She was about to take another look at the frontline when suddenly, a speck of light came into her sight.

"Light?"

"How come..."

Eyes widened, she looked in the direction of the light — it was a cluster of bright red flames streaking toward the south.

Sylvie wondered if this was her illusion.

As far as she knew, the Eye of Magic could not see things so far away.

Sylvie took another look, and her theory was confirmed by a black vision field. The Eye of Magic would fail to see through solid matters if the object was beyond its vision scope. As the lighting was poor, she could hardly discern the edge of the forest. All she saw was a pitch-dark blackness, against which gleamed the flashy fleck.

Sylvie wondered what that thing was.

Suddenly, she sensed a chill running down her spine and shuddered uncontrollably.

She knew what she had been worried about now.

It was something everybody had overlooked.

She saw magic power!

And it was enormous!

The Magic Eye could not see things very far away. However, when it encountered a powerful magic source, it would sense external vibrations and thus "saw" what it could not normally see, just as people sensed sunlight through closed eyelids.

How incredible that magic power must be if she could sense it from here!

The Cursing Demon.

This was the name that flashed across Sylvie's mind.

It was the manlike demon in Taquila, the commander of the demons. Usually, a commander of an army rarely participated in a battle himself, as his main duty was supervision.

Nevertheless, this commander was also a powerful Senior Demon with an extraordinary fighting capacity.

Now, the red dot was accelerating, almost as fast as Maggie in the form of a Devilbeast.

Their target had been Leaf from the beginning!

"Run... now..." Sylvie could not help yelling. "Run, Leaf!"

Chapter 1103: The Demons' Blade (II)

But Leaf could not hear her from so far away.

The red dot zoomed even faster and became brighter as well.

What should she do?

"Right, right... telephone! I can call Leaf!"

Sylvie slid down the pole into the underground boardroom and yelled at Morning Light, "Call Leaf, now, and tell her to run!"

Realizing something serious had happened, Ferlin immediately picked up the receiver without further questions. He asked, "Run... where?"

"Anywhere! Neverwinter, the south of the forest... as far away as possible from the terminus station!"

All the people in the boardroom rested their eyes on Sylvie.

"Have you found anything?" Edith asked.

"We were all wrong. The demons' real target is Leaf, Leaf only!" Sylvie looked toward the southwest restlessly and said, "Leaf needs to concentrate to control the forest. When she does so, she turns into a physical entity, and the demons would be able to see the flow of her magic power and thus locate her! They burned the forest just to flush her out!"

"What?" Edith asked, her brows furrowed. "Can you actually see the demons from here?"

"Yes, because they're... too powerful," she muttered.

"But Ms. Leaf is powerful too," Ferlin cut in. "If the forest wasn't on fire, she could have rivaled an army of Mad Demons."

"There must be something else we haven't anticipated..." Sylvie said as she made her hand into a fist. She saw the red dot rise rapidly like a provoked serpent. "Has it got through yet?"

"No... nobody is picking up the phone."

It appeared that Leaf had been completely diverted by the fire. If they did not do anything right now, the red dot would reach the forest in one or two minutes!

"Call the terminus station," Edith ordered. "Let the First Army stationed there notify Leaf and also tell them to support her."

"OK." Ferlin thus turned to another telephone.

While they were waiting in agitation, Sylvie saw the red light pass the treetops and plummet like a sinister shooting star.

"Is it planning to break through the defense directly from above?"

Sylvie somehow thought of the worst scenario.

It was probably — a Magic Slayer!

...

Leaf clapped her hands and heaved a sigh of relief. "It should be fine now," thought she.

The trees at the edge of the campsite were now completely separated from the north. The fire would no longer pose a threat to the terminus station by any means.

Nevertheless, she still felt sorrowful for the burned, smoldered trees.

How many memories would she lose if the forest under her control was ablaze? How much precious, important experience would thus sink into oblivion?

Leaf could not bear the prospective loss.

"Cheer up, Leaf!" she encouraged herself in silence.

"You need to help quench the fire later!"

She was about to look around the campsite to see if there was anything she could help when suddenly, a whistling sound in the sky caught her attention.

Leaf gazed up. It was almost nighttime. The sky was a bruised purple, and it was hard for her to discern what that thing was.

"Watch out! Run!" someone shouted behind her.

Having no time to see who that was, Leaf disappeared into the trees immediately. At the same time, a shadow dived to the ground and brushed past her. The leaves and twigs around it were instantly pulverized into dust.

Instead of producing a loud noise, the shadow landed quietly. Leaf felt a lurch of fear. Before she could react to the attack, the air rippled around the shadow.

Her flowing magic power froze in a second.

Then it cracked like a mirror!

"Ah———"

Leaf was pushed out of the tree trunk by an immense force and sped backward in a swirling color.

She fell heavily on the ground and coughed out blood.

Then she saw what the shadow really was.

It was a tall demon with pretty sharp facial features. Other than its deep blue skin and strange clothing, it looked no different than a normal human being. However, its mere presence made Leaf's chest constrict.

The air seemed to become thick and unbreathable.

Leaf straightened up breathlessly. She mustered all her strength to summon the forest, but the forest was unresponsive.

It was not her first time to be forced out of the Heart of Forest.

"Magic Slayer..." she murmured, her heart sinking to the bottom.

The Magic Slayer did not sneer or howl. It simply stretched out its sharp-clawed hands and lunged at her.

Leaf closed her eyes in despair.

But she did not feel the anticipated pain.

"Clink!"

A huge, strange-looking sword appeared and blocked the blow. Leaf could never forget the signature giant blade and the golden sun mark on the sword.

"Envoy Ashes."

"I'm your rival, monster!" Ashes yelled as she escaped the clutch of the Magic Slayer and stood magnificently before Leaf.

"A-Ashes?" Leaf exclaimed in surprise and stared at her. "Didn't you return to Neverwinter with Princess Tilly? I saw you board the 'Seagull' —"

"Yeah, that was our original plan," Ashes replied without giving her a backward glance. "but I feel there's something out of character in this fire, so I requested to stay here, just in case something happens."

"So it was her that warned me earlier."

"This is the Magic Slayer you encountered the other day?"

"Yes, but you have to be careful. It's much stronger than that Senior Demon!"

"I've noticed that," Ashes said, with the giant sword in front of her. "Don't worry. I may not win, but I can earn us some time before reinforcements arrives."

The Magic Slayer swept over the encampment with a contemptuous glance and stared at the two witches coolly. "Are you... an Extraordinary?"

To their great astonishment, it was speaking the human language, although its pronunciation was a bit off. This was even more incredible than the appearance of the Magic Slayer itself!

During the previous Battles of Divine Will, demons and witches had never communicated with each other!

"Can you... speak our language?" Leaf could not help asking.

"Learning is the first step of evolution. Only you guys will be surprised at our progress," the Senior Demon replied as it spread out its hand. "Thousands of things changed in the past hundreds of years,

but you still live in the old way. Demons, Extraordinaries, even these titles remain the same. That's really... pathetic."

"What did you say?" Ashes snarled.

But the demon did not respond to her. Instead, it conjured a gust of wind.

Ashes took a few steps forward and flailed the giant sword in her hand. The magic cyclone dissipated under the influence of the God's Stone of Retaliation, but the Magic Slayer was already gone.

Chapter 1104: The Demons' Blade (III)

"Ah — " Leaf's scream suddenly came from behind.

Ashes turned around and found the wind did not disappear but only weakened. It sent Leaf flying into the air.

At the same time, the Magic Slayer materialized behind her.

"How... is that possible?"

The cyclone should be a form of magic power, and it did not make sense that the God's Stone of Retaliation had failed to block it.

Ashes could not afford to give it much thought. She aimed the sword at her opponent's neck.

However, the demon blocked her strike with one single hand. At this point, Ashes clearly saw its arm emanate blue light.

The Magic Slayer did not spare her another glance before he conjured another wisp of wind that made Leaf drift even farther.

"It's... picking on Leaf only!"

Ashes followed at its heels, but the Magic Slayer managed to keep her at a distance. Leaf attempted to fight back, but the Magic Slayer pinned her down with a wave. Not able to concentrate her mind and summon her power, Leaf became utterly defenseless under the firm clutch of her enemy.

"Is this how a Senior Demon controls its power?" thought Ashes, her palms starting to sweat. It not only subdued Leaf but also deflected her attack effortlessly. If she could not keep pace with the demon, the demon would probably kill Leaf in the end.

Ashes had never been so strained before.

"Faster, just a little faster!"

For the past two years, Ashes had been following Taquila witches' training routine and noticed a drastic change in her physique. Her magic power increased and her body was well nourished by the magic. Sometimes, she even had a feeling that her magic power was gradually taking place of her flesh and blood.

Yet this was not enough.

She must move faster to save Leaf.

And protect the people she wanted to protect.

Ashes concentrated her mind to summon her power. During the holy duel with Lorgar, she had discovered a unique combat technique, which was to direct all her power to a specific body part to strengthen and enhance it. This was also the reason why the wolf girl could transform her each limb separately.

Since the Magic Slayer was not paying particular attention to Ashes, Ashes could focus her mind. As the surrounding magic power was in disarray, she could sense the flow of the magic power in her body more acutely.

After the demon distanced itself from Ashes for the fourth time, Ashes was around 20 meters behind. The demon brushed away the vines conjured by Leaf and attempted to snatch her by the chest.

It seemed that Leaf was doomed.

However, at this very moment, Ashes mustered all her strength and kicked at a big tree!

For a split second, her hand touched something.

She streaked at the Magic Slayer like a bolt of lightning. Time appeared to have stopped. She could almost "see" the crushed tree crumple underneath her kick, its twigs and branches flying in midair and slumping heavily on the grass.

The Magic Slayer, for the first time, stopped and used its arms to block her strike.

"WHAM! BANG!"

The Magic Slayer was thrown into the air. It flew through the air several meters and performed a double somersault before it landed on the ground.

In the meantime, Ashes caught falling Leaf and blocked further attacks from the demon.

"Hmm..." The Magic Slayer raised its brows and, for the first time, showed some interest.

"Fire!"

Just then, the reinforcement Ashes had been waiting for finally arrived. The God's Punishment Witches stationed at the terminus station jumped out of the bushes and aimed their grapeshot guns at the demon. Thunderous roars pierced the air above the forest. As bullets hailed down, the demon flitted from tree to tree like a fleeting ghost to dodge shells. In the midst of flying tree bark and crumbs, its blue light flickered.

A short way farther on, there came a ruffling of footsteps. Apparently, the First Army had surrounded the forest.

The demon cast Ashes one last glance and leaped off. With a surge of magic power, it soared into the sky and vanished into the darkness.

"Damn it," the leading God's Punishment Witch spat. She crouched down in front of Ashes and asked, "I'm Elena. Are you OK?"

"I'm fine." Ashes answered while looking at half-unconscious Leaf. She wiped the blood off Leaf's face and said, "But she needs treatment."

"Rest assured," Elena said. "Miss Nana and Miss Nightfall are on their way."

...

As soon as the Upgraded descended to the ground, a junior guard greeted him.

"Sir Ursrook, your air tank."

Before the guard finished, Ursrook snatched the tank from him and inhaled deeply.

"Awh—"

After a long silence, Ursrook handed the tank to the guard and said, "Get a new one for me."

"Yes, sir."

The guard took out the old tank and implanted a new one in his spine. This was a more convenient and faster way to breathe as it did not require armor for transporation.

"How about your trip..."

"Had a little problem, but I anticipated that earlier," Ursrook replied expressionlessly. "That's men's territory. If I couldn't even deal with that, I would doubt about Kabradhabi's loyalty."

"No, that wasn't your real power," the guard defended his master hotly. "The air tank limited your power. If you were around the Birth Tower, those low lives would have been no match for you, sir!"

Summoning magic power would significantly reduce a Senior Demon's health points. To maintain a certain number of health points for a safe return, he had to reserve some of his power when combatting with the witches.

"I was just planning to bait the hook this time. Next time, I'll pick a place more favorable to us for a fair duel," Ursrook looked in the direction of the southern forest and mumbled, "A place for their perpetual rest..."

"If only the Sky Lord could give you more support," the guard complained indignantly. "In that case, you don't have to risk yourself, and the Birth Tower in Taquila..."

"Risk myself?" Ursrook interjected, "I actually feel it quite interesting. I prefer to go check myself rather than simply relying on others' reports." He dug a deformed steel bead out of his armor and studied it attentively. "The awakened females haven't improved a bit, but the males, who used to have no magic power, are now somewhat different. It turns out that human beings aren't completely useless... If only I could get to know more about them."

The guard did not reply but looked apparently disapproving.

Ursrook put the steel bead in his inner pocket airily and continued, "As for the lord... I believe he must have done his best. It's just that the king has his own problems and considerations. We don't need to be too frustrated about it. After all, our ultimate goal is to reach a higher realm, and that's the reason we fight, isn't it?"

"Yes... you're right," the guard muttered while bowing his head.

"Let's retreat, and take the 'tombstone'. It's a long journey to Taquila," Ursrook instructed as he slowly rose into the air and turned in the direction of the ruins. "Now, we've set the hook. We're just going to wait for the fish."

"Until it's time to haul in our net."

"We'll surely meet again one day."

Chapter 1105: Leaf's Heart

Two days later.

In Neverwinter, Graycastle.

"That was about the situation at that time..." Ashes shared the details of her encounter with the demon. "After the fire was extinguished, Lightning found the enemy's traces around 100 kilometers away in the north. Those traces should be left by the Spider Demons when they crossed the forest. I fancy there were just three or four of them."

Because of the interruption of the signals, Roland did not know that Leaf had been under attack until evening. The early next morning, he immediately instructed Tilly and Wendy to fly to the terminus station and bring her back to Neverwinter.

Ashes only suffered minor injuries but Leaf had been helped off the plane.

Fortunately, Nightfall had grown the Seed of Symbiosis in Leaf's body. While Leaf remained unconscious, her symbiont seemed to be fine. This meant the impact on her was more mental than physical.

Roland, in the meantime, turned to a big map on his desk.

He had already formed a vivid picture of the incident in his mind.

The demon commander had noticed something unusual about the Misty Forest. It noticed that the railway took a turn at the forest and stretched on toward Taquila. Instead of forcing through the trench and the barbed wire at the terminus station, it had directly attacked the witch who controlled the forest.

Meanwhile, a group of demons had traveled nearly 500 kilometers from the Taquila ruins to the northern forest. The Spider Demons had not only set the forest on fire but had also been supplying the Red Mist to their army. This was, therefore, in a sense, the demons' first guerrilla operation.

The fire was just a diversion. The demons had probably foreseen that the forest controller would stay in the forest, watching the unfolding of the event. They did not really care about whether the First Army would put out the fire or not.

Perhaps, they had come to realize that Leaf was the supply hub for the First Army.

The demons were obviously under the impression that once the forest controller was killed, human beings would immediately retreat from the front.

Although their speculation was not completely accurate, it did demonstrate how proficient the demons were in using magic power. They had not only figured out the form of Leaf's magic power but also made a specific plan to eliminate her. Everything was carefully calculated, from their traveling distance to the time required to retreat. Only with a profound comprehension of magic power could they successfully carry out this operation.

Roland even suspected that the demons had seen something similar to Leaf's ability.

It would take at least a week for the demons to backtrack, so it was not very hard to trace them down. Nevertheless, there was no point in doing so, because the Magic Slayer could fly away anytime. If with luck, they could probably kill a few Spider Demons or some lower demons during this pursuit. If worse, they would probably suffer an even greater loss.

There was no effective measure to counter the demons in this case due to the secrecy of their operation. Although most of the witches were under the protection of the God's Punishment Witches, the situation did not apply to the witches who moved around like Leaf, Maggie and Lightning. Fortunately, very few Senior Demons were as powerful as the Magic Slayer, so Leaf, Maggie and Lightning would notice any change in magic power if a regular Senior Demon was about to attack. In that case, they simply needed to retreat immediately to avoid a direct confrontation.

Another thing that concerned Roland was the conversation between the Magic Slayer and Ashes.

He did not anticipate that the demons could speak the human language.

Being a Senior Demon, Kabradhabi did not have the ability to directly communicate with human beings. Camilla had to channel it to build effective communication.

"Learning is the first step of evolution."

"Thousands of things have changed in the past hundreds of years, but you still live in the old way."

"It's rumored that long before the beginning of the first Battle of Divine Will, a man taught the demons his knowledge."

Ashes' and Pasha's words reverberated in Roland's mind.

For some reason, Roland had the impression that the Magic Slayer took pride in the past hundreds of years, as though he had witnessed those numerous changes himself.

Could he be a demon who had lived back in the Union Age?

That was why he had learned the human language?

But this was too unbelievable!

While Roland was absorbed in his thoughts, Wendy's voice came from outside the office.

"Your Majesty," she said as she pushed the door open, "Leaf just woke up."

"I'm coming," Roland replied as he stood up abruptly and turned to Ashes. "Do you want to come along?"

The Extraordinary nodded.

"By the way," He stopped when he had almost reached the door, "I forgot to 'thank you'."

Although Ashes seemed uninjured, it did not mean she was totally fine. Roland did notice several shallow cuts on her face and knuckles.

The wind that had blown Leaf away was definitely not a gentle breeze. Normally, Extraordinaries could heal themselves within one day, but apparently, these cuts were not easy to heal.

In other words, the injury could have been fatal had she made a single mistake during the fight.

The battle was obviously not as simple as Ashes had described.

Ashes remained expressionless. She simply gave Roland a downcast glance with her golden eyes and said, "Take care of Tilly."

"Naturally..." Roland said, pursing his lips. He knew Ashes had just done what a reasonable person would normally do in that situation. He was surprised that a blunt person like Ashes would one day also become quite sensitive. Roland returned her a smile and said, "Let's go."

...

By the time they arrived at Leaf's bedroom, the room was packed with visitors.

Almost all the witches who had joined the Witch Union at the same time as Leaf, including Anna, Nightingale, Tilly, Scroll, Mystery Moon, etc., were there. The group instantly parted to let Roland through.

Over the heads of the group of the witches, he saw Leaf sitting up in her bed.

She looked wan, her bright green hair disheveled, but she did not look particularly distraught.

Her eyes were still bright and sparkly.

"Your Majesty," Leaf spoke in a low voice, "Sorry to have you come down here."

"I'm glad you're OK..." Roland said in relief, realizing that her coma was mainly due to fatigue. Nonetheless, deep down inside, Roland knew Leaf sustained more serious injuries than what could be seen. She was hexed with the same "curse" put on Lightning. Her connection with the Heart of Forest had been forcibly interrupted, and she had barely survived the attack. Roland said, "Ashes told me everything. Take a good rest and leave the forest to us. As for your injuries, we'll manage..."

Leaf shook her head and replied, "No, Your Majesty, please let me return to the front."

"Leaf!" Nightingale exclaimed.

"I know everybody is concerned about me, but staying in bed won't be of much help, will it?" Leaf pronounced each syllable clearly and slowly. "The curse would not disappear anyway, no matter whether I'm in the Misty Forest or Neverwinter. So, there's no reason for me to stay here."

"But..." Wendy protested in a hushed voice.

"If I return to the forest, I can keep the communication between the front and Neverwinter going. The testing field would be also able to continue its operation. I can also help with the delivery of supplies to the front. Although not much, I can at least do something to help defeat the demons. You all know which one is a better choice, right?" Leaf broke off, a little breathless, before forcing a smile. "Don't worry. Next time when I see something unusual, I'll run as fast as I can."

Nobody spoke for a short moment.

Roland took a deep breath. He had foreseen this would happen. If Leaf could be that easily persuaded, she would not have been able to successfully bring her fellow witches from the Impassable Mountain Range to the Border Town barefoot.

Like the forest, she was gentle on the outside but tough on the inside.

"I see," Roland spoke at long last. "But you have to promise me that nobody will act alone under any circumstances before the Magic Slayer with the evil cursing power is killed."

With these words, he turned to Ashes and asked, "Can you take care of her for the time being?"

Ashes exchanged a look with Tilly and then replied curtly, "Sure, leave her to me."

Chapter 1106: A Universal Strategy

After returning to the residential area of the Sleeping Spell, Ashes heard Tilly cough behind her when she attempted to shut the door.

"Ahem, do you understand what Roland meant by 'taking care of her'?"

A smile curling her lips, Ashes pretended she did not understand the implied meaning and asked, "Don't I just need to be with Leaf and attend to her needs like people would normally do to take care of a patient? Leaf's hurt, so she'll need a lot of help..."

"Oj!"

Ashes could not hold her face any longer.

"Oh, you were teasing me..."

"Don't worry. I know what I should do," Ashes answered as she turned around and blinked at Tilly. "His Majesty wants me to stay alert for any fluctuations of magic power so as to warn Leaf beforehand when something happens — just like how you and I met."

"If I didn't have this ability, you probably would never have noticed me, who was so wretched and lost back then," Ashes thought.

"I'm not a demon," Tilly protested a little defiantly while folding her arms.

"Just an example," Ashes said, waving her hand airily. "Because I'm the only person who has fought the Magic Slayer."

"What about after?"

"Find reinforcements of course, and repel the enemy together."

"Really?"

"Unlike Princess Lorgar, I'm not keen on duels," Ashes said with a smile. "As long as her magic power isn't interrupted, Leaf could cross the forest in a second, so there's no point for me to remain at my post."

Tilly breathed out a sigh and said, "Don't forget what you just said."

"Of course not," Ashes said as she walked to Tilly and looked straight into her eyes. "I'm going to stay with you for a very long time. Andrea is a lady who has never taken care of people. She only cares about how to fight. How can I entrust you to her?"

"O-Oi, shut up!" Tilly snapped, shooting Ashes a cool stare, and stormed into the room, a little irritated.

When Tilly almost gained the room, she suddenly stopped and muttered, "I'm glad... that you saved Leaf."

Ashes was mildly surprised.

"It would be such a waste if you just protect me." Tilly turned around and said, "Although you always say the best for me is to return to Sleeping Island, you actually do like it here, right? Now, you smile more often than you used to."

"R-really?" Ashes wondered, her hands uncontrollably rubbing on her cheeks.

"To be honest, you rarely smiled on Sleeping Island either. You always had a long face like you were ready to leave for a battle," Tilly continued. "Perhaps, you haven't realized that the new witches are all afraid of you. Only a girl like Maggie who's slow at guessing what people are thinking isn't scared to befriend you.

"But now, you not only get along well with the Witch Union but have also got an admirer, if I'm correct?"

"Are you referring to... Lorgar? No, we're just friends, probably because we often train together..."

"Alright then," Tilly interjected. "Compared to the 'avenger' you, I prefer the current you, but..." she paused for a second and said, "this doesn't mean you're allowed to pick on an individual fight rashly with the demons without thinking about the possible consequences. Do you understand?"

After a moment of silence, Ashes replied, "Yes."

"Very good." Tilly nodded in satisfaction and said, "Perhaps in the near future, I'll fight with you on the battlefield together."

"Oh, any progress on the plan of the Aerial Knight?"

"Roland says he's trying to use a brand new engine on the glider. If successful, he might be able to create a new type of plane that doesn't require Wendy's ability," Tilly said in excitement. "However, he has to first create a plane tailored to my need. It's probably going to fly even faster and higher than the Devilbeasts!"

"His Majesty would never allow you to partake in the war in person. Plus... he already made a promise to me," Ashes smiled, leaving her words unsaid. "I'll watch you test it out."

"Sounds good. I'm going to take a shower. I'm all sweaty after flying the 'Seagull' all day. See you later."

"Not together?"

"Absolutely not!" With these words, Tilly slammed the door.

Ashes sat down on the recliner in the living room, looking attentively at her palm.

She still remembered the feeling when she had swung the sword at the demon.

At that time, she had suddenly entered a new realm. Although it was just for a split second, the lingering memory persisted.

She felt everything, including her vision, thoughts and movements, had temporarily deserted the world around her, except for her magic power. The intense magic power seared through her body, making her feel invincible.

Ashes even had a feeling that her power was speaking to her invitingly, tempting her to go even further.

"Magic power doesn't only affect our physique but also our character. If we plan to use our magic power to achieve something, it would guide us in the desired direction."

"So what exactly... are you fighting for?"

Ashes remembered what Phyllis, the God's Punishment Witch, had said to her the first time they had marched for the war.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you're an Extraordinary. You were born with incredible potential. However, you have to have an achievable goal and a strong will in order to go beyond your limit."

"As far as I know, all the Transcendents in the Union upgraded in battles, and those who couldn't successfully become Transcendents were all eventually killed by the demons. I hope you won't become one of them."

"Did the Transcendents... as well as the Three Chiefs of the Union also face the same decision at one point?" Ashes asked herself.

She clenched her fist.

At that moment, she dimly understood what she should do.

...

Roland returned to the office and called the headquarters of the Administrative Office.

"Please connect me to Barov."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

Immediately, he heard Barov's voice on the other end of the line. Barov asked, "How can I help you, Your Majesty?"

"When is the upcoming exam for elementary school?"

"Let me see... Based on the schedule, it'll be next week, and there will be roughly 2,650 students sitting the exam."

The schedule seemed to fit Roland's plan. Roland thought for a while and instructed Barov, "Draft a recruitment proposal for me. I need someone to help with my new project. For now, I probably need about 500 people."

"As you command."

The current Neverwinter was like a giant melting pot where people from all over the country came to receive primary education before being assigned to different posts. Experienced production line workers took in new workers and taught them techniques and knowledge. As workshops gradually diminished, those personal techniques transformed into public knowledge and further became a part of the system. It was thus natural for experienced workers to train newbies. Once the newbies became experienced, they were able to take in more trainees, and the industry expanded.

Neverwinter had currently created a virtuous cycle after years of development. When the population of the city reached a certain number and when resources were abundant, people would see the amazing power brought about by the rapid industrialization.

After hanging up the telephone, Roland took out a stack of paper from a drawer.

Ever since the night attack at Tower Station No. 1, he had been working on a "universal strategy". Most of the research materials were collected from the Dream World. Now what he needed to do was to localize his plan based on the situation in Neverwinter. Roland found there was one type of weapon that would suit Neverwinter's current need.

"Do you have a new idea again?" Nightingale asked as she revealed herself from the Mist.

"Ah, yes..." Roland quickly went over the stash, stopped at one certain page and said, "Yes, that's it."

Chapter 1107: Yes! RPG

"Hmm... It looks like a large bamboo stick," Nightingale commented as she drew closer. "What's that called?"

"RPG's..." Roland broke off while curling his lips, "ancestor."

"R—P—G..." Nightingale repeated the mouthful word strenuously and said, "Such a weird name. Is it a code name or something? In memory of the person who invented this weapon?"

Roland shook his head in amusement and explained, "It has many names and various forms in the Dream World, but this is the most popular one. It's getting so popular that a religion has formed around it, which is called the RPG Religion."

"Like the legendary double swords that saved and destroyed the world?" Nightingale asked, her voice alive with curiosity. "Is it that powerful?"

The double swords that had saved and destroyed the world was a hallow recorded in an epic poem passed down among the ancient witches. There had been an organization prior to the first Battle of Divine Will who had looked for this hallow fervently. Although it was just a distant legend, RPGs and the double swords shared some similarities.

"You can say that about modern RPGs, but not its ancestor," Roland said. As a type of rocket launcher, modern RPGs definitely contributed a lot to the peace of the world.

"But you can't just skip RPGs and go directly to modern RPGs. You have to create its ancestor first and slowly work on it, right?" Nightingale asked, with a look of dawning comprehension in her eyes.

"Exactly." Roland was pleased with her quick response. After staying with Roland for so many years, Nightingale could finally keep up with him. Roland complimented, "You grasp the nature of the problem quite fast."

"Of course. I do improve, don't you think so?" Nightingale thrust a piece of dried fish with an air of triumph and said, "Sometimes you'll talk about terms like the Black Ribbon and Madames. Aren't they the evolved forms of 'glider' and 'concrete ship'? I've actually learned a lot from you over the past few years."

"Ahem..." Roland coughed. "Forget about them."

Roland noticed that both the battle at Northbound Slope and the night attack at Tower Station No. 1 had the same problem, that was, regular soldiers were too weak to confront the Senior Demons. According to the information collected by the Union, there were various types of Senior Demons with different abilities. Those abilities were pretty random with no specific pattern. However, it appeared all the Senior Demons could shield themselves from external harm with their magic power.

Perhaps, this universal shielding ability was just a coincidence, or simply a result of the natural evolution after decades of fighting and upgrading. Demons who did not possess such a shielding ability were naturally obliterated over the course of time. Nevertheless, Roland would still need to make a plan based on the worst scenario.

The demons' shielding ability was very similar to Shavi's. However, it could only protect the demons from physical injuries and it had a limit. If the demons stood right in front of a shooting unit and were shot multiple times, they would die in a few seconds.

Nevertheless, the demons would never let the soldiers to shoot them unscrupulously in a real battle.

Suppose the infantry of the First Army attacked a Senior Demon, the latter would immediately hide or fight back. In neither case would the First Army gain advantages.

The God's Punishment Witches were designed to repel the Senior Demons, since they were not only as powerful as Extraordinaries but could also block attacks. Unfortunately, the Senior Demons appeared to have lost their superior status over the past hundred years and participated in battles more often. If that was the case, the 300 God's Punishment Witches would probably not be enough to kill all the Senior Demons.

Therefore, Roland had to improve their weapons.

RPG, also known as Rocket Propelled Grenade, sounded like a very promising idea, but it was impossible to create such a legendary weapon in a short period of time in Neverwinter. Even its simplest model, a rocket launcher, was quite technologically demanding, which required a power system consisting of fuels and a combustor, and Roland did not want Anna to produce and test the weapon.

He thus decided to invent a grenade without a launcher instead.

That was the prototype of an RPG, a recoilless grenade.

The most famous model was the Panzerfaust.

Although most people generally referred to these types of weapons as rocket launchers, they actually belonged to two separate categories. A rocket launcher was a weapon ejecting projectiles. It was normally equipped with a power source and could operate on its own without a barrel. For example, the well-known 107mm rocket launcher could be easily ignited by dry batteries and had a fairly decent firing rate as well.

The Panzerfaust and RPG were recoilless guns that required a barrel to provide a thrusting force. If they were ignited without a barrel, they would only spin around on the ground. An RPG, particularly, relied on a rocket to increase its shooting range and accuracy. Its thrusting force would mainly be fueled by gunpowder.

The Panzerfaust, on the other hand, was famous for its extremely simple structure compared to its various successors. Its barrel was a cylinder, its head made of iron shards. The gunpowder was black powder great for mass production.

Nevertheless, Roland was not planning to completely copy the Panzerfaust. The biggest drawbacks of the Panfauster were its short shooting range, low accuracy rate and limited impact. These drawbacks were unacceptable in a mass warfare like this. As Roland constantly learned from history, he knew that some small adjustments must be made to improve the weapons.

For instance, he had to install a gourd-shaped CD nozzle at the rear of the barrel and thus transformed the subsonic ammunition into a supersonic one. In this way, he would be able to increase the counter-recoil force and thereby the shooting range of the weapon.

The barrel needed to be equipped with a handle, a scope and a wooden casing to further improve the accuracy rate and make it more user-friendly.

The missile could be further stabilized with an empennage made of mild steel, which would spread open and spin with the missile when it was in the air.

Roland was also thinking about shaping the front part of the missile into an inverted hollow cone to direct the energy to one point, making it highly explosive and armor-piercing. In this way, he could maximize the impact of the grenade on the Magic Barrier.

These upgrades were all doable with the current technologies available in Neverwinter.

Roland folded the drawing sheet and walked to the French Window.

He knew the First Army would still not stand a chance at repulsing the Senior Demons when equipped with grenades, but they would at least have something to compete against them. Even though the demons were fast, high-explosive anti-tank warheads could still be fatal. Once the demons were hit, the outcome of this war might be very different.

This would mean that any regular soldier would have the capability to kill a Senior Demon with just a bit of training. With such advanced weapons, the infantry unit would also be able to tackle armored demons such as the Spider Demons and the Giant Skeleton. To make this weapon, he only needed some gunpowder and a half slice of an ingot.

Roland thought this was a really good deal.

Chapter 1108: More than Enough

...

Joe sat crossed legged on the floor, staring at the seven crooked lines next to him in a daze.

This was how he enumerated the number of days he had been here.

For every day that had passed, he would dig a line in the ground.

It had now been seven days.

Joe did not want to think about whether Farrina was still alive or whether Lorenzo was still torturing her. His heart ached every time these questions came floating into his mind.

Joe started to wonder if he had made the wrong choice.

Sean had indeed promised him to send the message to the King of Graycastle. He also treated Joe fairly well. However, Graycastle was, after all, too far away from the Kingdom of Wolfheart. It would take at least a month for the King of Graycastle to receive the message, make a decision and send his troops to the Kingdom Wolfheart, and probably even longer if he was to discuss the matter with his ministers before taking actions.

Joe was not sure whether Roland Wimbleton would take this matter as seriously as Graycastle's domestic affairs.

There was also a fat chance that he would refuse to help him outright.

If that was the case, all of his efforts would go in vain.

Joe lowered his head and looked at his manacled ankles.

He was tied to the foot of his bed by a chain almost in a man's length.

"Perhaps, I could use this chain..." thought Joe.

"Hey, are you awake?" The curtain of his tent was suddenly pulled back. Joe shielded his eyes against the dazzling rays of sunlight that streaked across his confinement. "Ah, you're awake. Come with us then."

"Wh-where?" Joe asked blankly. For a moment, he was so bemused that all his wild thoughts deserted him.

"To the Kingdom of Wolfheart of course. Didn't you want to save your girl?"

Slowly, he felt more comfortable with the lighting in the room. The next moment, he realized that the man who had been talking to him was none other than Sean.

Sean tossed him a key.

As the message slowly sank in, Joe snatched up the key tremulously and said, "Did, did the king..."

"His Majesty approved our rescue plan. We've decided to transfer you to Neverwinter for a hearing," Sean replied to him nonchalantly. "The unit carrying out this operation has arrived at the Coral Bay. We'll be meeting them there and heading to the Archduke Island straight away."

"They've already arrived?" Joe wondered.

"How come they're so fast?"

He could not believe his ears.

But he had no time to waste on these trivial matters!

Joe scrambled to unlock the shackles. Since he had been sitting in the same position for a considerably long time, he stumbled when he tried to straighten up.

"If you don't feel well..."

"No, please take me with you!"

He implored exasperatedly.

"Then come," said Sean, smiling.

Joe cast a backward glance at the marks on the ground. The sunlight blazed off the crooked lines, silvering the strokes.

He wondered what was waiting for him.

Finally, he saw a ray of hope.

Joe took a deep breath and followed the guard out of the tent.

...

The following day.

At the Coral Bay.

This was a harbor in the far east of the Kingdom of Dawn. Compared to the ports near Graycastle and the Fjords, it looked quite deserted. After the church had invaded the Kingdom of Wolfheart and the Kingdom of Everwinter, the royal families fell and the local nobles started to fight for the thrones. As the city was still in a chaos, business activities reduced significantly in this area. Most sailing ships at the dock were from the Chambers of Commerce at the Fjords. There were very few boats from the Kingdom of Wolfheart or the Kingdom of Everwinter.

One of the ships had a pretty conspicuous appearance among all the others.

This particular ship was made of stone, with no sail but two giant wooden wheels on either side of the ship. Black smoke billowed from the top of it.

"This is the famous Graycastle stone ship," thought Joe.

He had heard about those ships before, but this was his first time actually seeing one.

Joe and Sean boarded the ship and soon, two people greeted them.

A man and a woman.

Joe's eyes flitted between the two people, feeling a little surprised.

For some reason, the woman looked familiar to him.

"Ah, Ms. Zooney and Ms. Betty," Sean greeted them in a cordial tone. "So His Majesty asked you to come here?"

"I was at Neverwinter at that time and have been to the Kingdom of Dawn before," the woman said with a shrug. "If it wasn't an order from the king, I really didn't want to come all the way here... We're now having a fight against the demons at the front. I should have stayed there."

"Also, I prefer Lady Betty to Ms. Betty," the man said, grinning. "Unlike Zooney, I was awakened pretty late, just over 100 years ago."

"Don't you think 100 years is old enough?" the woman retorted, giving him a sideways glance.

"It's strange in the Dream World though. Those people called me Miss. Of course... I don't mind them calling me 'Your Majesty' either."

"Better be Lady Betty," Sean said resignedly, "if that pleases your ladyship."

"Hang on... what are they talking about?" Joe gazed at them blankly, confused about the way they addressed each other. He wondered why the man wanted Sean to regard her as a lady. However Joe saw it, he was a man. Joe did not remotely understand why the demons were at the front either. The Bloody Moon had not appeared yet. What "demons" were they indeed referring to?

"So this man is the last Priest of the church?" The woman called Zooley asked while studying Joe up and down. "The dream of the Queen of Starfall City was finally reduced to a tool that foolish men used to win their political game. That's pathetic. Although she was our enemy, I feel sad for her."

"So, let us finish what she started. I believe it's a sort of retribution," Betty agreed, nodding. "Now everybody's here. Let's go."

"Everybody's... here?"

Having no time to question them, Joe looked around in confusion. The concrete ship was definitely not large enough to accommodate an army. He did not see any other Graycastle ships either.

"Sir..." Joe could not contain himself anymore. He asked gingerly.

Zooley replied to him, "The rescue team you are referring to is here already."

"Here?"

As if seeing through his mind, Zooley pointed at herself, then at Betty and said, "She and I are going to rescue her."

Horror-stricken, Joe looked at Sean and said hysterically, "Sir, Lorenzo has a God's Punishment Army..."

"Five, no more than ten of them, right?" Sean interrupted him.

Joe stared at Sean, dumbfounded. All of a sudden, he lost his strength to speak. "Why, why do they look so relaxed? The God's Punishment Warriors are monsters much more powerful than ordinary men!"

Was it because they knew nothing about the God's Punishment Army's power? No, Graycastle's soldiers had personally fought the God's Punishment Army at Coldwind Ridge. Like the church, they should have known how ferocious those monsters were.

Although the Graycastle soldiers possessed advanced firearms, firearms would be of no use in conquering a fortified castle, because bullets would not be able to travel very far. If the soldiers ran into an unavoidable confrontation with a God's Punishment Warrior, they would find it hard to repel the God's Punishment Warrior, because the latter did not feel pain. The Warriors would continue to fight until he lost his fighting capacity completely.

Joe expected to see at least one or two hundred soldiers come to rescue. They should gradually infiltrate the castle and remove the hidden enemy one by one at a minimal cost. If the number of soldiers was below 100, this battle might cost them dearly.

But... two?

"How's that possible?"

"You must be wondering how this is possible, right?" Zooley sneered. "That's because you have no idea of Lady Alice's plan. The God's Punishment Warriors you know are just a bunch of useless shells. Two of us is more than enough to take care of them."

Chapter 1109: The Past

"More than enough..."

Joe should have persuaded them to abandon such a ridiculous and even amusing plan. However, words rested on the tip of his tongue when he saw the confident look on their faces.

There was something even more incredible coming next.

Joe expected to give full cooperation to the rescue team and share all the information he knew. The King of Graycastle had promised to save Farrina, so he must need detailed information about the Archduke Island first, and Joe would be the best person to consult with.

He also anticipated that they would pry into the church's secret and the Holy Book, and he had made up his mind to divulge this information if that could save Farrina.

However, after Joe entered the cabin, he realized how ignorant he was about his old enemy, Roland Wimbledon, who had fought against the church for so many years and eventually uprooted the Holy City of Hermes.

He greeted neither an interrogation nor a pre-operation meeting.

The person sitting at the other end of the long table was, on the contrary, the famous dramatist, Kajen Fels.

"Answer all the questions he asks." With these words, Sean withdrew, leaving Joe staring at Kajen blankly.

He had watched Kajen's performances back in the New Holy City.

Although this was something nearly ten years ago, Joe remembered what Kajen looked like.

"What's the King of Graycastle thinking about?" he wondered.

Instead of an army, he met a troupe. Were they really planning to save Farrina?

"Please take a seat, boy," Kajen beckoned him to sit down and asked, "Want some tea or wine?"

"Tea... please."

A pretty young girl soon delivered him a cup of hot tea.

"This is my student, Miss Roentgen."

"Ah... thank you," Joe said distractedly. This was all like a dream in spite of his manacled hands and feet.

"Why are you here?"

"Because I made a promise to His Majesty." Kajen said smilingly, "We should have talked in a more comfortable manner, but they insisted on keeping you chained."

"That's fine..." Joe muttered. "What do you want to know?"

"Farrina's story and yours as well."

Joe stared at him in disbelief. "Me... and her?"

"Yes. I want to know when you joined the church, how you met and also how she was captured by Lorenzo," Kajen replied slowly.

"Farrina... Farrina..." The mere sound of her name made his heart quaver in pain. He tried to refrain himself from thinking of her, but their past kept floating out of his memories. Words abandoned him, and his vision blurred.

Farrina had just been a common civilian when she had joined the church.

At that time, she was wearing a patched, coarse and filthy robe, her hands and feet swollen and red due to exposure to crisp, cold air.

She could have died had Joe not taken her in on his way to the Hermes Plateau.

Joe was a member of a diminished noble family with nothing but a reputable family name, so he had decided to try his luck at the church.

The Holy City would not discriminate against a person based on his background.

Since he could read and write, he became a priest clerk.

Farrina, on the other hand, became a warrior trainee.

Joe was not happy with this arrangement.

Priests and warriors were equal in the Holy City. Joe was a little irritated that a civilian girl saved by him could suddenly meet him on equal terms. In his opinion, Farrina should have been assigned to the kitchen or some servant job.

What made him even more upset was that Farrina actually looked quite pretty.

He began to suspect the real reason she had been chosen as a warrior.

Farrina should have been his girl, and his girl only.

Harboring a bitter resentment and virulent jealousy, Joe started to tamper with Farrina's work by taking advantage of his office and even humiliated her in public. However, she never dared stand up for herself, which further inflated his anger.

In the next few years, the young woman gradually revealed her talent. Like a polished gemstone, she dazzled the church.

Farrina was soon promoted from warrior trainee to Judgement Army reserve. Then, she officially joined the Judgement Army and later became a unit leader.

Joe always saw her pace up and down on the stronghold city wall during the Months of Demons.

At that time, he had just been promoted from clerk to assistant priest.

His status was now much lower than Farrina's.

He had, at one time, been afraid of Farrina's retaliation, but Farrina had not done anything of such sort. Gradually, he had developed a secretive, burning passion as he constantly peered at her behind the wall.

Slowly, Joe came to the realization that Farrina was not as ordinary as he had thought.

Then, Prince Roland of Graycastle arrived.

The pope died and the God's Punishment Army was annihilated. The entire Church of Hermes fell apart overnight.

Numerous believers fled the Holy City. Farrina shouldered the burden to save the rest of the Judgement Army. If she had not reached out her hand to him at the time of the riot, he might have been stamped to death by the swarm of refugees.

At that moment, he had somehow grasped something.

Farrina was not the most eminent figure in the church. There were still the Priest, the Chief Justice and the Senior Commander in the Holy City after the defeat at Coldwind Ridge. They simply abandoned the Holy City to her and the acting pope, Tucker Thor. Everybody knew the Holy City was doomed, but nobody wanted to take their responsibilities. Therefore, they needed someone to hold the Holy City up a little bit longer so that they would have time to escape from the city.

So, this was how a woman in her 20s became the General Commander of the Judgement Army at Hermes. Ironically, she did her best to stabilize the new and old Holy Cities, but fewer and fewer church executives chose to stay. Very often, a building was emptied overnight. By the end of the Months of Demons, there were only around 500 Judgement Warriors left in the church.

She was offered to Roland Wimbledon as a sacrifice.

Did Farrina know nothing about it?

Of course she did. She knew it when she assumed the post.

But she took the job without the slightest hesitation.

Simply because the church had once sheltered and trained her.

Just as she had never revenged on Joe, she did not blame the church either.

She was grateful for the ride Joe had given her.

Joe was deeply touched when he saw Farrina walk up and down at the city wall, drenched in sweat. Her back became a tiny little spot against the white snow. The bead of sweat on the tip of her nose reflected off sunlights.

Joe had never put much faith in the church. He should have left the Holy City a long time ago, but he chose to stay.

Not for God.

He had pledged allegiance to Farrina from the bottom of his heart.

It was not an oath a believer made to the commander of the Judgement Army.

It was one that a knight made to the girl he wanted to protect.

He had fallen in love with her.

Chapter 1110: A Complete Version of the God's Punishment Warriors

Two days later.

Joe was escorted out of his room and onto the deck.

"That's the territory of Earl Lorenzo?" Sean asked.

A greyish white shadow silhouetted against the golden horizon in dawn light.

Joe grabbed on the railing nervously and leaned forward, fearing that he would miss something important.

"That's right. That's the Archduke Island!"

He finally brought the rescue team here.

"Farrina, please hang in there just a little bit longer!"

"There are two ports on the island, one in the east and one west," Joe took a deep breath and said in a rush. "Lorenzo put sentries around the dock area after he became a noble, but he did so mainly to defend against the nobles in the Kingdom of Wolfheart. He doesn't really check merchants' ships. The problem lies in the Castle District. It's heavily guarded, and nobody can sneak in without permission."

He had been longing to tell them the information over the past few days.

Too occupied with answering various questions put by Kajen Fels, Joe had not got a chance to discuss the rescue plan in detail. None of Kajen's questions, obviously, was relevant to this operation or the church's secret.

Kajen asked him in great detail about how he had humiliated Farrina and how they had later worked together to escape from the church. When words failed him, Kajen would ask his student Roentgen to play Farrina's part to refresh his memories.

Sean only showed up during the dinner time.

He did not seem to care about this operation at all.

That was the reason Joe quickly disclosed what he knew. Whether they listened to him or not, the more information they had, the bigger chance they would have to successfully save Farrina.

"You don't need to worry about that. We have our own way," Sean interrupted him. "I want you to meet someone to let you guys get familiar with each other."

"Who?" Joe asked.

"Our guide."

Sean then blew a whistle and soon, two sailors brought a middle-aged man.

Joe immediately recognized him.

"Hagrid, you traitor — "

As the assistant to Bishop Lorenzo, Hagrid had been Joe's superior back in the church.

Hagrid said scornfully, "Like you really care about the church. If Farrina knows that you've given yourself up to Graycastle, who will be the traitor then?"

"I..." For a moment, Joe was speechless.

"No need to argue here," Sean said as he walked steadily toward them and stood in between. "Mr. Hagrid, you know your task, right?"

Hagrid's voice instantly dropped when he saw the king's guard. He muttered, "Yes, sir. I'm going to take the two soldiers into the castle."

"This is your only chance to get things right. It's all up to you."

"No problem, sir, but are you sure two is enough?"

Joe was surprised that Hagrid was worried about Graycastle.

Then he realized that no matter how many people Hagrid brought into the castle, it would be a solid betrayal anyway. If Graycastle failed, he would face severe punishment; so, he'd better give his full support to Graycastle.

"Rest assured. You'll soon find out..." Sean broke off, his face splitting into a sneer as they slowly approached the Archduke Island, "what a complete version of God's Punishment Warriors was."

...

The rescue team did not leave the dock for the castle until midnight.

Zooey, Betty and two soldiers from the First Army set off for the castle.

The two soldiers were responsible for keeping an eye on Joe and Hagrid.

Since Hagrid was the earl's henchman, nobody was suspicious. Hagrid soon dismissed the patrol team who came to question them.

The guards at the entrance of the castle did not stop them either.

Even though the other five men following Hagrid were all hooded, the guards did not bother raising a single question.

It appeared that Lorenzo did trust Hagrid very much.

The lord's castle was right across the yard.

Hagrid disclosed that all the capable God's Punishment Warriors were now guarding in Earl Lorenzo's bedroom, who was apparently too frightened to sleep alone at the moment, and that there were no more than six of the God's Punishment Warriors in total.

Apart from that, Lorenzo had also replaced his bedroom door with a solid copper door that could not be easily broken by common people but the God's Punishment Warriors.

"I can get Lorenzo out of his room. I'll just say that I know the secret of the treasure," Hagrid said as he headed to the castle. "But then he'll take his God's Punishment Warriors with him, and his sudden appearance will alarm his other guards, so I have to find a way to stop him from doing that —"

"That's fine. You just need to tell us where his bedroom is," Zooley said with a shrug. "Then you'll take Joe to the dungeon and get that girl out of there. You don't have to worry about us."

Hagrid was momentarily stunned and then said, "Well... OK."

He straightened his bow tie, climbed up a flight of steps and knocked on a side door gently.

An old guard poked out his head and said, "Ah, Sir Hagrid. I didn't know it was you..."

"Shut up. I have important matters to report to his lordship. Get out of my way!"

"Y-yes, sir..." the old man stammered and shuffled over. "But what about these people..."

"My spies at the Cage Mountain. Why? Are you prying into his lordship's personal business?"

"No, no, sir!" the old man said gingerly while bowing his head.

The group of people went inside, passed two walls and entered the inner castle.

The guards at the hall were all armored.

Noticing that someone was coming, two guards rested their hands on the hilts of their swords and approached them.

"Lorenzo's bedroom is on the fourth floor... I can't take you up there..." Hagrid said in a hushed voice.

"Hey, isn't it Sir Hagrid? The earl has been talking about you lately. Are these your guests?" The guards saluted to him and turned to Zooley. "Please wait outside the hall, unless you have the earl's permission — Hang on, ma'am —"

Zooley pulled off her hoodie and slowly walked to the guard. Before the guard could finish, a hand had closed in around his neck.

"Sir Hagrid, what — " No sooner had the other guard drawn out his sword than Betty's hand had reached his throat too.

CRUNCH.

The guard's head bent at a weird angle.

Hagrid and Joe sucked in their breath.

"Can a normal person snap one's neck single-handed?"

But Betty and Zooley did not just stop there.

The two witches lifted the two guards off the ground and held their bodies like shields. For a moment, the rest of the guards were all goggling at them, flabbergasted. "Oi, what do you think you're doing?" someone yelled.

"No... something's wrong here. Look, their feet are off the ground!"

"What?"

The guards could not see clearly in the dim light. When they realized what had happened, it was too late.

Zooley and Betty lunged at the confused guards like shadows and reached for their exposed necks.

It was easy to slack off during a long night vigil. Very unfortunately, their attackers happened to be the most powerful human combatants — Extraordinaries.

Joe clapped his hand over his mouth.

Within a few seconds, the other four guards fell to the floor, their necks all broken.

"They have the power and speed of the God's Punishment Army!"

However, the God's Punishment Warriors were unconscious monsters who did not have such brains!

Hagrid was shocked as well.

"They're real God's Punishment Warriors."

Joe remembered Sean's words.

"Is this... also Roland Wimbledon's work?" Joe wondered.

Now, Joe was not sure whether the Supreme Pontiff understood the true nature of the God's Punishment Army.

"Now, do what we told you," Zooley said as she glanced at Joe. "No matter she's alive or not, you mustn't linger. Do you understand?"

"Yes... I do."

Without a word, the two witches went off upstairs.

The stairs were not guarded. Zooley and Betty climbed up to the fourth landing and turned around on a narrow corridor lined with doors, behind which were maids' and servants' room. At the end of the corridor was a giant dark red metal door that glinted in the guttered candlelight.

"So it's really a copper door," Zooley commented, her brows raised.

"What are you going to do?" Betty asked while twitching her lips. "If he locked it, we can't break in."

"We'll find another way if this way is blocked, of course."

"That's what I thought."

Betty kicked open a door beside the lord's bedroom and strode in.

"Aah — " There was a piercing scream. A barely-clothed maid sat bolt upright, drawing her blanket up to her neck. She gaped at them and asked, "Who, who are you?"

"Too bad I'm not interested in girls," Betty said as she untied her robe and revealed a giant firearm on her back. "If this was a pretty boy..."

"You are scaring her," Zoey said on a sigh as she reached for her grapeshot gun. "One, two..."

"Three!"

The two aimed their guns at the wall and pulled the triggers.

With an earsplitting roar, the inner brick wall soon collapsed under fire, spilling crumbs everywhere, leaving a crooked line of bullet holes in it.

Zoey strode over to the wall and into the master bedroom.