

Witch 1181

Chapter 1181: The Best Team Combination

Roland twitched his lips. The term "annihilation" seemed a little barbarous for a society governed by law. Roland commented airily, "Sounds like something extraordinary."

"It isn't as complicated as you think," Garcia retorted as if having seen through Roland's mind. "There are precedents. Normally, the Association intends to gain more information about Fallen Evils through this kind of mission and kill them all at one shot. It'll actually be much safer to have some preparation in advance than fighting an unexpected Fallen Evil alone."

"Have you participated in any joint missions before?"

"Er..." Garcia faltered. "I only heard about those missions from my master because I wasn't qualified to participate in any before. This is my first time." She paused for a second, her eyes fixed on the coffee cup in her hand, and said, "Perhaps you don't really mind that, but I have to make it clear first. When you got that hunting license, you surpassed me. The Association asked me to inform you because you're relatively new, so you might not be very familiar with the transition. If you feel it improper, that's fine. I'll let the Association know — "

"No, that's OK," Roland interrupted her. "Since it was you who asked me to join the Association in the first place, naturally you should take on a leadership role, shouldn't you?" Roland had no intention whatsoever to glorify the Martialist Association or become a leader. His main purpose of joining this organization was to simply probe into the mystery around the Erosion and the Force of Nature while at the same time earning some extra incomes.

Garcia stared up into Roland's eyes for quite a while, a little bemused, and then burst into a laugh. "A leadership role — you're so strange... I know you don't want to take the responsibility, so you make it sound like you offer the position to me," Garcia said, apparently looking a lot more relieved.

"Yup, I just don't want to say it out loud," Roland said indifferently with a shrug. "Back to the business. So, anyone else joining us this time? Who's our target?"

"To avoid unnecessary information leak, we'll disclose the plan once everyone has arrived," Garcia said as she gulped down the coffee. "But I've heard that some modern martialists will also join in this mission."

Roland nodded understandably and asked, "When and where are we going to meet up?"

"Tomorrow evening, 6:00, in the southern suburb. I'll text you the details. You could go by yourself or I could give you a ride."

"I'll go by myself," Roland said quickly. It would be impossible to take witches with him if he went with Garcia.

Garcia replied while twitching her lips, "Up to you." Then she waved at Phyllis and passed her a note. "I'm Roland's neighbor. I'm just living next door in Room 0827. If you encounter any problems in this

city, feel free to contact me. I mean if you're under duress or coercion, call me at this number. I'm happy to help."

Phyllis winked and said, "Th-thank you."

"You're welcome," Garcia said while patting Phyllis on the shoulder with a smile. She waved at Roland at the doorstep and said, "Well, see you tomorrow then."

With another silvery clink and clatter, Garcia vanished from behind the door.

"She's nice," Phyllis remarked. "Your Majesty, are you going?"

"Since the Association appointed me, I don't think I could turn it down. I guess this is the price I have to pay for the hunting license," Roland said indifferently. "There are other people working with me as well, so it shouldn't be very dangerous as long as we proceed with caution. It's actually not too bad to partake in such an event once in a while." With a group of witches around him, Roland could almost guarantee the victory. Killing was also an effective way to alleviate stress.

"Then I'll inform Lady Pasha and bring some combat witches to assist you," Phyllis said on a bow.

...

Roland selected four witches to come with him for this mission, who were Phyllis, Faldi, Ling and Dawnen. They could track enemies while at the same time covering up their traces, which was exactly what Roland needed to carry out this mission.

The next day, Roland drove his mini van to the designated spot.

They were meeting up at a remote but accessible rest area in the suburb, from where they would change vehicles to avoid unwelcome attention.

Roland thought the Martialist Association was indeed quite thoughtful.

However, when he reached the rest area, he realized that he had been seriously wrong.

The parking lot was lined with luxurious cars, attracting a lot of onlookers. A knot of people was congregated there, shrilling in excitement. It was evident that they had spotted some celebrated martialists.

"Luo Luo, look over here!"

"Can I take a photo with you?"

"Are you coming here to film a commercial?"

"Is that the runner-up last year, Mr. Youlong?"

"Wow, he smiled at me! He's so hot!"

Roland rolled his eyes, wondering if these guys were really here for the mission. As soon as he parked his car, Garcia came up to him.

"Get under your veil."

"Got it," Dawnen muttered as she summoned the Veil of Invisibility and threw it over the three witches.

Roland got off the vehicle and waved at Garcia. "You're fast."

"You have a hunting license now. Why are you still driving such a... battered vehicle?" Garcia asked in confusion. "I understand that you like to keep a low profile, but... this is a little too much. This is shabby."

"Really?" Roland said while spreading out his hands. "I actually feel it quite convenient. You can use it for grocery shopping, and it's large enough to store a large quantity of food. I don't think other vehicles can do that." Roland left the other reason unsaid, which was that you would never know how many witches you could hide in this van.

"Alright then," Garcia said quite resignedly, "if you really don't mind how people look at you."

"I don't care it at all," Roland said while smiling indifferently. "Are those profligates also martialists?"

"Yes, but don't say that to anyone else," Garcia said while darting Roland a cold glance. "They joined the Association earlier than you. So, technically, they're all your seniors."

"What about their titles in the Association?"

"That would be even worse because they know you represent traditional martialists," Garcia sighed. "They won't miss any opportunity to embarrass you."

"I thought martialists were all selfless heroes like you," Roland mumbled. "By the way, you're also a modern martialist, right? Is that OK to stay so close to me?"

"Not everyone cares about the conflicts between modern and traditional martialists," Garcia grunted. "Plus, you asked me to take on a leadership role, didn't you?"

"I did," Roland said with a smile. "Then I'll follow your instructions."

"Well, as your senior, let me briefly introduce them to you. You probably saw some of them at my father's party, so I'll just go over the three main figures," Garcia said as she raised her eyebrows at several people at the center of the crowd. "Luo Hua, a well-established martialist, with excellent combat techniques. He has a lot of fans and was ranked No. 10 last year, which was the best in this city. He's only 22 but has already gained a lot of experience. That's pretty impressive."

"Mr. Youlong, not sure about his exact age but possibly between 30 and 35, was one of the representatives of modern martialists. His whole family is dedicated to martial arts, and that's how he got his nickname. Mr. Youlong is an all-rounder. People say that he's powerful enough to be a 'guard'. He was the runner-up last year, and I'm pretty sure he's aiming for championship this year. I believe he'll be the captain for this mission."

Garcia broke off and looked around as if searching for something. Then she pointed to a pavilion outside the parking lot and said, "The last one is probably the person that you have to approach with extra caution."

Roland looked in the direction Garcia pointed.

"Fei Yuhan, one of the most gifted martialists in recent years, who entered the final match within only five years," Garcia remarked half admiringly and half enviously. "I didn't expect to see her here. With her joining the team, this will probably be the best team combination."

"So, what do I have to take extra caution for? Is she going to mess up with me?"

"Rubbish," Garcia said while rolling her eyes. "You and she are not even in the same league. I just want to remind you that you should be careful not to crush on her!"

Chapter 1182: Infiltration

"That's not what you said when you handed me the hunting license," Roland said to himself indignantly. He said, "Why are you introducing modern martialists only? Normally, they should send more old-school martialists to kill Fallen Evils. Don't you think so?"

"There are indeed more old-school martialists, but..." Garcia broke off and pointed at a knot of people whom, Roland had mistakenly regarded as irrelevant onlookers. "I don't have any detailed information about them. They work alone. Few Association members know where they normally go except for their agents. So, I practically have nothing to tell you."

Abashed, Roland mopped his forehead involuntarily. He had thought those homely, disheveled middle-aged men were just assistants or chauffeurs to the celebrated martialists. Their unkempt image, which formed a glaring contrast with the refined, cultivated modern martialists, made Roland suddenly have an urge to convert to the opposing party. He really did not want to be the representative of a group of bedraggled, lulling middle-aged men.

Could he still register for the trials of the Martial Arts Contest?

Just then, a black bus pulled into the parking lot.

"That's the bus from Prism City," Garcia said. "Let's go."

"OK," Roland said as he patted his right shoulder, gesturing for the witches to follow him. As long as Faldi's bug was attached to him, the witches would always be able to locate him.

Garcia and Roland went straight to the back of the bus.

"I like this seat best," Roland said as he stretched his legs and leaned back in the chair unceremoniously. "I feel like a king in this seat, as I can see everything that happens in the bus from here."

"You just want to be a loner. I get it," Garcia snapped.

"I didn't beg you to sit with me," Roland retorted, a little frustrated to notice that he and Garcia were always bickering.

"It's your first time to participate in a mission. I, as your senior, obviously have to keep an eye on you."

While they were glaring at each other, a rush of loud chatter caught their attention.

"Miss Fei Yuhan, over here."

"Yuhan, come sit with me!"

As that genius girl got on the bus, everyone stood up and offered the seat beside them.

"It appears that even for famous martialists, they're treated differently," Roland commented.

"That's right," Garcia assented quite surprisingly.

However, to everyone's dismay, Fei Yuhan did not accept any of the offers but walked straight to the back.

"Is there anyone sitting here?"

Fei Yuhan asked placidly while pointing at the seat next to Roland.

Garcia shifted her eyes between Fei Yuhan and Roland, trying to figure out what had happened between the two.

Having no idea what Fei Yuhan was up to, Roland coughed uncomfortably, realizing that all the eyes on the bus were locked on him. Finally, he said, "No."

"Thanks," Fei Yuhan muttered, nodding, and took the seat matter-of-factly. "Nice to meet you. Well, actually, we already met. Hello, I'm Fei Yuhan. I'm looking forward to working with you."

"Er, me too. I'm Roland. This is... Miss Garcia."

There was an awkward silence after this brief introduction.

Garcia fell silent and started to play with her phone. Fei Yuhan, on the other hand, sat upright in her seat, looking as aloof and frosty as ever. Roland, who was sitting between the two girls, suddenly found himself in the spotlight, under the curious scrutiny of all the passengers on the bus.

The bus slowly picked up the speed.

While he was planning to switch seats with Garcia, Fei Yuhan suddenly turned around and whispered tentatively, "Your Majesty?"

Bang.

Garcia's dropped her phone.

Momentarily stunned, Roland stared at Fei Yuhan in a daze before a proper response took shape in his mouth. "You —"

However, before he could organize his words, a booming voice cut across him, "Good afternoon, everyone. I'm the liaison officer C02 for this mission. I'll be responsible for intelligence and logistic support. You can call me O2. In the next few hours, I'll tell you about the details of this mission, including our target and operation plan. Please feel free to ask me if you have any questions." A man in a suit at the front was holding a microphone.

Roland fought down the words that were threatening to come out and averted his eyes to the liaison officer.

"According to my intelligence, Fallen Evils have become increasingly active recently and started to act in groups, which, according to our historical records, means that the Erosion is around the corner. The Association learned from reliable sources that some Fallen Evils are going to congregate in an abandoned factory in the southern suburb. We still don't know their motive, but we're sure they're up to no good."

"Perhaps they just want to make some friends."

Luo Hua's comment caused a roar of laughter.

"I wish it was true," O2 replied good-naturedly. "Unfortunately, Fallen Evils are our biggest enemy. I would rather see them all die. There's an underground highway leading straight to the factory. After it was shut down, the road was abandoned. The Association created a secret passageway two days ago that could take us directly to the headquarters of our enemies. To make sure that we don't wake the sleeping dog, we are going to take action at 9:00 PM and distribute the necessary equipment when you get off the bus."

"Also, the army will also assist us to prevent any Fallen Evils from escaping. However, only people with the Force of Nature can inflict an injury on those monsters. Therefore, we have to divide into two teams. One to attack the Fallen Evils while the other cuts off their retreat. There's a list underneath your chair telling you which team you are in. If you don't have any more questions, we'll carry out the operation as planned..."

...

Fei Yuhan fumbled with the list expressionlessly. Her thoughts, however, had strayed away from the upcoming operation to Roland's interesting reaction when she had called him "Your Majesty".

Normally, a person would feel abashed, furious and mortified in this kind of situation when he realized that someone had seen through his scheme. He might not necessarily reveal these feelings, but Fei Yuhan was confident that she could discern every single change in his emotion as well as his subsequent disguise, unless he had predicted that this would happen.

Nevertheless, what she had just seen was a look that contained a multitude of feelings.

There were surprise, alert, confusion, and even a little bit of delight. For a second, Roland's lips had taken shape of a silent "yes", which he had quickly forced down his throat.

Fei Yuhan could not find a satisfying explanation to this reaction. Apparently, it was Roland's first time meeting her, and there was no reason for him to give such a response.

She did not notice the faintest trace of embarrassment. Was he actually used to being called "Your Majesty"?

Suddenly, she remembered the conversation between Roland and the three little girls at the party. She had thought it was just a juvenile game they played, but now she was not so sure.

Was he really... the king of two worlds?

Her initial interest in competing against Roland now transformed into an overwhelming curiosity about Roland himself.

Fei Yuhan thought she had made the right choice to join in this operation. Her master had once told her that the history of the Martialist Association was even longer than she had thought. The Association knew numerous secrets known by only a few people, some of which were even related to the origin of this world.

Was that the real reason that Roland had been granted the hunting license?

Seeing Roland looked anxious, Fei Yuhan suppressed her questions. She did not wish to create any hostility with Roland before knowing the answer.

She was certain that there would be plenty of time for her to get to know Roland in the future.

...

Two hours and a half later, the bus came to a halt at the end of the underground highway.

The martialists divided into two groups and moved into position according to the instructions on their map.

Roland and Fei Yuhan were both on the team responsible for attacking the Fallen Evils, while Garcia was on the other. She soon vanished from their sight into the night after reminding Roland to stay safe.

As Garcia had expected, Mr. Youlong, who was rumored to be almost as powerful as a "guard", had been elected as the captain of the assault team. "Follow me, all of you," he said while eyeing the rest of the team members encouragingly, and crawled into a ventilation duct.

The operation appeared to be more organized than Roland had thought. After they got off the bus, everyone received a pair of head-mounted, panoramic night vision goggles, a watch that could show their current location on the map, a vest equipped with identification and enemy recognition devices, and a headset for communication. Roland wished that the First Army could also have such advanced equipment, in which case, they would not have to fight so bitterly during a night battle.

He made a rough head count and noticed that there were 15 people in total in the assault team. Apart from Mr. Youlong, Luo Hua and Fei Yuhan, all the other members were old-school martialists. It seemed that the Association still trusted traditional martialists more than modern ones for this kind of mission. However, if the result of this operation turned out that modern martialists actually performed better, their confidence in traditional martialists might be shaken.

Roland had no intention of meddling in the affairs of traditional and modern martialists. In fact, he was simply curious how those celebrated martialists would cope with relentless Fallen Evils, wondering if they could still defeat them as effortlessly as they had done to their opponents during a match.

Through the night vision goggles, Roland could see everything clearly. They moved through the night soundlessly like ghosts and soon reached their destination.

Chapter 1183: Sacrifice

"Here it is," Sir Youlong said in a hushed voice.

The party observed the surroundings cautiously by looking through the ventilation duct. They found themselves in a large plant, where a few overhead bridge cranes were hanging on either side of the wall. Below lay nothing but some dilapidated machine tools and rusty conveyor belts covered in dust. Apparently, the plant owner had removed every piece of usable equipment before he had shut the plant down.

The empty factory, however, was now lit by several torches, with their dazzling, greenish-white flames dancing around in the darkness. These torches were set in a circle, and there were around twenty distorted shadows in the middle.

"Are those shadows our targets?" asked Luo Hua.

"Most likely," one of the traditional martialists replied. "I can sense their fluctuating power, which tells me that these people are at the last stage of transitioning."

The last stage referred to a stage where the humans would completely lose their humanity and consciousness, thus becoming corrupted puppet. Fallen Evils at this stage only acted on their instincts like animals, as they lost all the communication ability they once had.

"They used to be... martialists?"

"Not necessarily. Although there were some fallen martialists according to the Association's records, generally speaking, amateurs are more prone to corruption."

"It's my first time seeing a living Fallen Evil, but regardless, a martialist lack of self-discipline and proactivity is, in every aspect, useless," Luo Hua snorted with utmost contempt. "Pathetic... they don't deserve the Force of Nature. Captain, let's do this."

"Wait a minute," Sir Youlong stopped Luo Hua calmly. "It appears that more Fallen Evils are coming here. Wait until they've all gathered so that we can kill them all in one go. But, don't you feel that this is strange? These Fallen Evils are all in their last stages. Why didn't they go kill the amateurs? Why did they come here? I have a feeling that things aren't as simple as we thought. Perhaps, we should first find out their intentions rather than killing them all outright."

While everyone was exchanging opinions, Roland stole a glance at Fei Yuhan.

That unexpected "Your Majesty" seemed to be still ringing in his ears.

Within a few seconds, turbulent emotions had flooded through Roland. He had not been so perturbed by someone over the past few years since his ascendance to the throne.

At first, Roland had thought it was Elena calling him and he had almost responded, but he had swallowed his words at the last minute. If Fei Yuhan was really Elena's incarnation, she would not have introduced herself in the first place and taken the seat beside him so carefreely.

The abrupt change from joy to disappointment was almost as painful as the grief itself. As he recollected himself in the next few minutes, he soon figured out why Fei Yuhan had addressed him like this. Garcia had told him that martialists were usually acute observers, particularly for those gifted ones. As Fei Yuhan had attended the party held by the Clover Group, she must have overheard his conversation with the witches.

The next question was — how much did Fei Yuhan know about him?

Roland judged that she probably did not know much at this stage, considering how she was still testing him. At least, she didn't know anything about the other world yet. However, this was alarming to Roland, since no one would want to know that he was only fictional and only existed in dreams. Once the secret about this Dream World was known to someone, the consequences would be disastrous.

Garcia was right. He needed to be extra cautious when dealing with Fei Yuhan.

"Mhm? Look, the new Fallen Evil... looks a little different than the others." At that moment, a voice from the headset interrupted Roland's train of thought. "It seems that it's commanding the other Fallen Evils."

Roland took off his goggles and looked toward the center of the plant through the ventilation. He saw a group of Fallen Evils slowly walk in while carrying three cargo containers, all the while at the command of a man in a suit.

"Are they the Fallen Evils who have yet to completely lose their minds?" Sir Youlong mumbled in bewilderment. "What are they playing at?"

Several traditional martialists frowned. Compared with transformed Fallen Evils, those still in transitioning period were normally more difficult to deal with. At that stage, compassion and empathy had escaped them, but the dark side of human nature, such as subterfuge and shrewdness, remained. Typically, these Fallen Evils used to be well-established martialists.

"Shh — " Fei Yuhan suddenly spoke. "Be quiet. Something's in those containers."

Everyone held their breath immediately.

After a while, Fei Yuhan said heavily, "There are people... inside."

"What?"

"I heard someone crying and pleading. It seems like they're gagged."

"You're saying that there are civilians in those containers?" Sir Youlong asked in surprise. "I've never seen anything like this before in the Association's records. Fallen Evils do kill often, but they don't really pick on common people."

They looked at each other in confusion when suddenly, the commander of the Fallen Evils yelled, "It's time, children! The divine will is approaching, and God is waiting for the sacrifices!"

"Grrrrr — " all the other Fallen Evils growled.

"Come. Let the power return to its source and let the Oracle grace continent with his presence once more!"

"Grrrr—"

"We'll be reborn with the destruction of this world! Surrender everything to God. Let's offer our sacrifice!"

The Fallen Evils produced an ear-splitting roar.

"Damn it, we have to act. Now," Sir Youlong said through clenched teeth. Although he had never heard Fallen Evils would perform human sacrifice or please the so-called God like some cults, they could not let innocent civilians die. In fact, as the mission of the Martialist Association was protecting the world, it was more important to save lives than annihilating the Fallen Evils. "Let's stay as close to the containers as possible to prevent these monsters from approaching them. It's OK to let one or two go. I believe the other team will finish them off!"

Fei Yuhan nodded expressionlessly and darted out first.

The others followed at her heels and dashed toward the enemies.

The deserted plant was instantly stirred!

Caught unprepared, the Fallen Evils collapsed under the impact of the Force of Nature and paralyzed when their cores were detached from their bodies.

Roland was the last to act. He followed his team members while at the same time hiding his ability carefully. This was not his first time fighting Fallen Evils, so he was much more experienced than the others. Unlike those awakened martialists possessed of the Force of Nature, Roland did not need to throw himself into a fierce battle. Fallen Evils would immediately lose their power upon touching him and be at his mercy. Roland did not wish to touch those detached red cyclones either, otherwise everyone would see numerous cores rise into the air of their own accord.

Meanwhile, the bug on Roland's shoulder trembled slightly, which indicated that Phyllis and the other witches had arrived. Supported by his witches, Roland felt more and more confident. He did not employ specific combat techniques, but he killed more Fallen Evils than anyone else except Fei Yuhan.

As the other team members were all focused on the containers, and Roland had been super cautious, nobody discovered his secret ability.

They soon reached the containers. Only a few of them were injured.

By that time, half of the Fallen Evils had been killed.

"Well, that's easier than I thought," Luo Hua said as he shook off the blood on his hands, snatched the lock, and broke it in half. "The Association should have issued me a hunting license as well. Hey, don't be afraid. The Martialist Association is here to help — "

Luo Hua stopped dead.

The other members all took a step back.

There were dozens of people tied to several metal posts, their eyes blinded and mouths sealed, who groaned with fear in one of the containers. A cyclone suspended in midair above each of them.

Roland felt all the hair at the back of his neck stood up.

He suddenly remembered what Garcia had told him several months ago.

"These cyclones are where Fallen Evils gain their power. They're signs of corruption. Once a person is corrupted, he loses his Force of Nature. If we don't store away these cyclones, they'll infect other people. Ordinary people will instantly lose their minds upon a single touch."

"Are you saying... that they can be transferred to multiple people?"

"That's why some people are collecting them. That's exactly what they're thinking. Are they not afraid that they'll destroy this world?"

"So... the Fallen Evils have been preparing over the past half a year just for this moment?"

Roland whipped his head around and stared at the leader of the Fallen Evils.

He dressed like a butler, wearing a pair of monocled spectacles, with his hair combed all the way to the back of his head. His suit crisp and his white gloves spotless. However, his face was now contorted with rage.

"We don't necessarily need you to complete this human sacrifice. However, the more victims, the better. Don't you think so?" With these words, he snapped his fingers.

The cyclones above the containers instantly dropped.

"No—!"

Luo Hua attempted to untie the prisoners. However, as they were so tightly packed in the container that it was impossible to rescue them without touching the suspending cyclone.

"Kill them, now!" a traditional martialist shouted.

"But... these are all civilians..." Luo Hua muttered.

Within a few seconds, those ordinary people had completed their transition to new Fallen Evils. Although they were not as strong as Fallen Evils that transformed from martialists, with so many of them, it was still quite dangerous.

The Fallen Evils then swarmed out of their container, and Luo Hua was soon drowned by the wave of the enemies.

Chapter 1184: Corruption

The situation suddenly turned for the worse.

Both Sir Youlong and Fei Yuhan looked startled and lost at the abrupt change in the unfolding of the event. Fortunately, a traditional martialist turned around just in time and stopped the Fallen Evils.

"Get out of here!" a flustered middle-aged martialist yelled. "We must find a way out!"

The other two containers also started to wobble ominously as the people inside banged frantically against the container. Numerous lumps and bumps started to emerge on the surface of the iron containers. A lock was definitely not enough to hold them back, and the prisoners would soon break out.

If there were also dozens of prisoners in each of these two boxes, let alone killing the Fallen Evils, there was a chance that the whole team would be wiped out.

The last thing they wanted was being trapped by the enemies, so they must use all their efforts to avoid that situation!

Fei Yuhan immediately pulled herself together and darted toward the entrance of the plant. The only way to get themselves out of this dilemma was to find an open space and scatter.

This was the right plan.

Roland decided to wait until everyone had left the scene. He was putting all his efforts dealing with those new Fallen Evils who lunged at him like zombies. They were not necessarily dangerous, but Roland would still get injured if he got bitten.

"This is Team One. We're outnumbered and under attack. We request immediate assistance!" Sir Youlong yelled over the speaker phone while fighting.

A moment later, another two martialists fell down before a pack of crazy Fallen Evils who soon ripped their bodies apart.

Sir Youlong's moves significantly slowed down as he watched his fellow martialists torn into pieces. Even Roland, a layman, noticed that his action had become seemingly sluggish. After knocking down a few more Fallen Evils, Sir Youlong got a scratch for the first time.

BANG!

The containers were finally burst open and crashed to the ground as the raging Fallen Evils rushed out.

However, there were fewer Fallen Evils than they had thought.

Roland raised his eyebrows. A dozen tethered Fallen Evils, who had completed their transitioning, lay dead in the containers. Their blood oozing profusely from the several holes in their bodies, as though being penetrated by something.

He could clearly see a line of holes on the walls of the containers.

"Nicely done," Roland praised in his heart.

Without a doubt, it was Phyllis's work. Roland could even see in his mind's eye that Phyllis had sneaked around the containers under Dawnen's Invisibility Veil and dived her Blade Claws into the boxes.

"What... what happened?" the leader of the Fallen Evils bellowed. "What did you do to my children, you filthy scoundrels!"

Nobody responded to him. Although everybody was as confused as the leader, they could not afford to give the incident any thought. As the number of their enemies reduced remarkably, the martialists felt, once again, encouraged and saw the ray of hope and survival.

"Fine, whatever," the leader grunted while stamping his feet. "Nothing shall thwart my plan. You'll all end up dying here!"

With these words, he took out a square box that reminded Roland of a remote and pressed the button on it decisively.

With a deafening roar, the plant exploded, and the ground cracked and sank rapidly. The torches went flying into the air and extinguished as gusts of wind swept over the plant. Within a second, they found themselves groping in an impenetrable darkness.

"Son of a b*tch!" Roland swore, unable to help himself. He had never anticipated that the Fallen Evils would bury explosives underneath the ground. Although Roland had special abilities, he could not fly like Lightning.

"Your Majesty!" Just at that critical moment, a little hand had reached Roland.

Roland staggered until someone steadied him with a firm clutch. They finally landed safely after wallowing in the aftermath of the explosion.

"Aargh... Ling?" Roland asked in a low tone while coughing in the dust.

"Yes, it's me. Are you okay?" Ling replied immediately. "The light was out, so I was able to spot you in the dark."

Ling specialized in moving about in darkness. As the torchlight was extinguished and darkness fell upon the entire plant, she could glide through shadows as Nightingale fly through the Mist.

"I'm fine. How about the other witches?"

"Don't worry. Phyllis is with us. The explosion won't hurt Dawnen either. Faldi is keeping an eye outside the plant, so she's fine too."

"That's great," Roland said as he pulled on the goggles mounted on his head and started to look around.

"Your Majesty, what's this? It looks like that Eye Demon..." Ling asked curiously.

"It's a night vision device that helps you see things at night," Roland explained. "So you ought to be careful even in the darkness. Remember, you shouldn't be seen."

"Okay..." Ling promised as she disappeared into the darkness again while only poking out half of her head. Some bubbles escaped from her nose as if she were submerged in water.

Under the dismal moonlight that spilled across the ground, Roland soon understood the current situation.

The group was dispersed. The plant was littered with concrete slabs. Roland could not see where his other team members were. However, he assumed that such an explosion would not be fatal to martialists who were normally protected by the Force of Nature. As the Fallen Evils were also well aware this fact, they must have other plans. What he needed to do was to hold out until the second group came to their rescue. By that time, they would be able to interrupt the Fallen Evils' sacrifice ceremony.

What bothered Roland, however, was the hole created by the explosion.

According to C02, there was no basement underneath the plant. Moreover, judging from the map, the plant should have been built on a flat surface.

The bumpy walls around them were apparently not a part of the plant.

In other words, the Fallen Evils had excavated the ground underneath the plant and buried the explosives in advance.

Why did they do that?

Roland noticed that the area close to the rim of the hole was relatively flat, but it soon steepened with a sheer drop, as if it was a huge whirlpool. The bodies of the dead Fallen Evils slid into the whirlpool and piled up.

"Is this... also a part of the sacrifice ceremony?"

Roland's suspicion was soon confirmed. He saw the leader of the Fallen Evils reappear. At his command, the rest of the Fallen Evils stopped searching for the martialists. Instead, they all jumped into the hole along with their cyclones. Not only did they carry the dead Fallen Evils with them but they also snatched up the bodies of the martialists. Within a blink of an eye, the hole had almost been filled up.

Roland's heart stopped with a queer jerk. Suddenly, a warmth spread through him as though something was summoning upon him.

"Dear God, please accept our offering!" the butler exclaimed with his hands outstretched and fell forward into the hole.

Just at that moment, a jet of dazzling light erupted from all the cyclones!

Roland pulled off his goggles, standing agape. The crimson cyclones slowly rose, clustered then spread out, gradually forming a large, irregular-shaped "corrupted" area!

Then, something crept out of the corrupted area and took the form of a faceless man, but it only possessed a head and two hands. The shape was simply an inky silhouette strewn with numerous swirling stars, which reminded Roland of the black, unfathomed universe.

As the human-shaped shadow materialized, scarlet blood started to exude from its body and immediately spread through the entire hole on the ground, distorting the underground into a twisted space with red and black.

The bug on Roland's shoulder began to buzz, indicating that Faldi had sensed danger.

Roland had seen a similar scene before. He had once encountered a magic creature during a fight with a Fallen Evil. However, this one was much larger. It was almost two or three stories tall when it reared with only upper half of its body!

That was the real purpose of this human sacrifice. The Fallen Evils intended to create corruption and summon the monster that was not belonging to this Dream World!

But Roland did not understand why they chose to do this today and while luring the Martialist Association. They could summon the creature anytime.

He soon got the answer.

Dozens of black tentacles soaked in blood suddenly sprouted from the ground, dragged a martialist from underneath a concrete slab, and handed him over to the magic creature.

"M-monster..." the captured martialist stammered, making every effort to break away from the clutch but failed miserably.

"You stole something that doesn't belong to you, and you attempt to keep it to yourself. Now, it's time to return it to its owner." The magic creature snatched up the martialist, tossed him into the hole and said, "I'll correct this mistake and restore order upon the world. Now, accept your fate and return to the origin of the world!"

Its ringing proclamation reverberated across the deserted plain. With the corrupted area expanding rapidly, the monster grew larger as well, as though it was soon going to leap out of the ground.

Chapter 1185: A Warning of Destruction

The martialists were out of the pan and into the fire.

They could not approach the corrupted area controlled by the Fallen Evils. If they wanted to escape, they would have to crawl out of the hole that stood ten meters tall in front of them while avoiding those black tentacles. Once being caught by those tentacles, it would be impossible to wrench away from their grip. They knew they were now facing an unbeatable enemy, and not everyone had the courage to step forward and walk into the arena of death with their head held high.

The only person who chose to fight was Fei Yuhan.

"You guys go first!"

She hollered over the speaker phone. A flash of white shadow streaked out from the darkness and zoomed toward the magic creature. Fei Yuhan's body emanated a soft, bright glow, which was the manifestation of the release of her Force of Nature. Before this, she could only cover her arms.

The twisting tentacles instantly lunged at her like serpents. Fei Yuhan brushed past them, barely dodging their attacks. When she foresaw a confrontation that was unavoidable, she struck them with her palm and cut those tentacles with a knife-hand. White light congregated at the tip of her fingers and formed a shape of a sharp sword.

The other martialists all fled, attempting to get out of the hole.

Sir Youlong was the first to reach the edge of the wall.

"Ludicrous. Do you think you could escape from me?"

The magic creature swung his arms down towards Sir Youlong. The arms that was not long enough to reach the wall suddenly expanded rapidly, becoming thicker and longer.

Sir Youlong wheeled around at the last second and tried to block the strike, exploding his arms with piercing light, but in an instant, the giant hand had smashed him into the ground!

The thunderous crash left a deep ditch at the bottom of the hole, and the concrete slabs were pulverized.

Sir Youlong was reduced to a bloody sack of meat.

The magic creature then scooped up that bloody, muddy body, along with some mud, and tossed it into the "crack" it stood astride. Instantly, the corrupted area expanded again.

Roland realized that it was using the martialists' Forces of Nature to expand the corruption. For some reason, he felt indignity, as though someone had robbed him of his possessions. Those Forces should have belonged to this world, belonged to him.

It was intolerable.

"Your Majesty, what do we do now?" Phyllis and Dawnen asked together behind him. "The tentacles almost filled the hole."

"We have to kill the monster before the other group arrive here, but you cannot be seen," Roland said as he patted Ling's head. "Go knock out those materialists caught by the tentacles. Be fast, and wait for further instructions."

"That's easy. I'll do that right away..." Ling replied sprightly as she submerged herself into the shadow.

"Then we'll confront that monster," Roland said as he gazed at the enemy who stood ten meters tall. Although he had dealt with similar monsters before and knew that the key to the victory was to wrench the astrolabe out of its body, it was extremely hard to approach the magic creature. After a moment of contemplation, Roland whispered instructions to Phyllis.

"Your Majesty, that's — " Phyllis exclaimed in surprise.

"Do what I say. We must kill it," Roland cut across Phyllis decisively. "This is an order!"

"Yes..." Phyllis conceded after a moment of hesitation. "As you command."

"So, the last problem is her," Roland mumbled. He looked toward Fei Yuhan as his eyebrows contracted. She was still struggling to stand up, attempting to launch an attack although she had suffered two blows from the monster and was covered in blood.

Despite the injuries, her movement was less agile, yet she was still fighting with incredible obstinacy.

More tentacles reached out to her from different directions, which made it even harder for Fei Yuhan to approach the monster. The magic creature was too busy dealing with the fleeing martialists, or else she wouldn't still be standing at this point.

In the meantime, Ling had approached to the center of the corrupted area soundlessly.

"Your Majesty, everyone was knocked out," Ling reported over the speaker phone.

"Good job — " Roland's words rested on the tip of his tongue when he suddenly realized that the speaker phone channel was on for all the team members. Fei Yuhan apparently had heard Ling's voice, for she stumbled and, for the third time, got thrown out by the giant hand. The white light enveloping her had, by that time, completely faded out, and Fei Yuhan lost her consciousness.

"Now!" Roland yelled. The plan did not go as smoothly as expected, but this was a chance they need.

"Excuse my impertinence, Your Majesty," Phyllis said as she spread open her claws, clutched Roland's ankles and started to spin. Roland was thrown into a whirl of color, feeling his inside churning. When the spinning speed reached its maximum, Phyllis suddenly released him, and, like an arrow that cracked through space, Roland darted toward the magic creature under the momentum.

The moment Roland left the protection of the Veil of Invisibility, the monster saw an "unidentifiable object" streak towards it. It immediately turned away from the unconscious martialists to Roland, ready to swing its huge hand down as a giant swatted a fly.

They bumped into each other.

Roland went through its black arm and ran into its chest. Its colossal body was not as sturdy and robust as it appeared. Instead, it was simply an illusion covering emptiness.

The magic creature growled in terror and suddenly yelled with a look of dawning comprehension, "It was you! You didn't listen to my advice!"

Roland grasped the spinning astrolabe in its body and wrenched it. The scarlet interface gradually turned into a blueish white, and Roland felt his power inside him whoop in exuberance as if his expectation had been fulfilled. Roland asked, "Was the monster I killed last time your brother? Sorry, he didn't say it clearly, so I didn't hear his kind advice."

"We are one, we are united — " the magic creature's voice trailed off. "Stop your foolish act. This is my last warning, otherwise you'll be regretted for what you did. Everything will be reduced to nothingness, and our endeavor's workover the past thousands of years will be wasted. You can't... bear the heavy guilt brought about by such an... horrific atrocity..."

When its astrolabe was completely separated from its body, the monster stopped talking.

Blinding white light flooded over the hole, and Roland felt deeply content as if he had attained what he desired.

He could hear the throb of the ground underneath him clearly.

For a moment, Roland had a delusion that he and this world became one.

In the chaotic Realm of Mind, the Nightmare opened its eyes abruptly!

It just sensed a rhythmic beat it had never heard before that contrasted with the disordered surroundings.

The Nightmare had had similar experiences when it had tracked down the legacy shard, but its previous attempts were all fruitless. Due to the extreme complexity of minds, any mistake would make her lose a sense of direction.

Nevertheless, this time, everything seemed to be clearer.

This indicated that the origin of this beat was very close.

Valkries grinned.

It had found the traces of that mysterious man.

Chapter 1186: Reconstructing the Final Battle

The other team did not appear until the battle was over.

Roland smeared his face with mud, made a few cuts in his clothes, and lay on a heap on the ground as if he was injured like everyone else, waiting for the rescue from the Martialist Association.

Although Ling had pressed the "speaking" button on the walkie talkie by accident, fortunately, the communication was not open to all the teams. Therefore, only Fei Yuhan had heard their conversation. As she had lost her consciousness, Roland could totally attribute this bizarre communication to Fei Yuhan's perturbed mind and convince her that it was simply her illusion due to her injuries.

As to why the monster vanished in thin air without leaving the slightest trace behind, Roland could simply claim that he had well passed out before this incident had occurred. But by doing so, he could only ascribe the victory entirely to the genius girl, Fei Yuhan, and washed his hands off the whole matter.

As he expected, the liaison officer did not take his statement very seriously considering that he had not witnessed the entire battle. Instead, the Association paid close attention to the corruption. The discovery of the new, man-made corruption obviously overshadowed the six deaths, including the death of two celebrated martialists, out of the twelve martialists who participated in the mission.

The only thing that astonished Roland was that Garcia jumped into the hole before anyone else when her team arrived at the scene. Roland felt a warmth flooded over him when he saw Garcia tried to search for him among the casualties frantically while calling out his name, and when her smile showed after she found out that Roland was alive. However, Garcia's expression had returned to her normal state of indifference quickly. She mumbled, "Wow, you're still alive. Good for you." as she threw Roland into the ambulance.

That was how this alliance mission ended.

After Roland returned to the apartment, Phyllis regarded the warning of the magic creature with apprehension. The monster had apparently noticed that Roland was different from all the other martialists, which meant that there was a possibility that what it said was true.

Roland would have contemplated the warning if this incident had occurred a year ago when he had been resisting the Dream World. At that time, the world had become increasingly complicated and foreign to him, as though it was gradually getting out of his control.

But now, he had made his decision.

The Dream World was not only a world where he obtained knowledge, but more importantly, a place that afforded the God's Punishment Witches mundane pleasures. This virtual world might not necessarily remain in existence forever. However, before that day came, he would like these witches to have as many happy memories as possible.

Another reason that he dismissed the warning was that Roland trusted his own instincts.

The change of the Dream World might start from the moment he had released the first cyclone.

Despite that Roland had yet to understand the exact relationship between the release of cyclones and the subtle change of the surroundings, he did feel satisfaction when he had defeated the magic monster by pulling out its astrolabe.

He had a vague feeling that as long as he kept fighting the Fallen Evils, the answer would come up to him.

Furthermore, the whole event had not completely come to an end yet. Roland could imagine that the man-made corruption would spark panic among the Association and outrage in the martialist community. Once the other martialists regained their consciousness, the Association would definitely further investigate this matter and uncover the whole story of the battle. Accordingly, modern martialists would continue to criticize him and even feel animosity toward him.

Yet anyhow, Roland decided not to worry about them too much at this moment.

Three days later, the Detective Group returned to Neverwinter.

Summer had not only reconstructed the final battle but also recorded several important scenes with the Sigil of Recording. Roland thus immediately called a meeting in the hall of the Third Border City to invite all the executives to watch the show.

When they saw Ashes summon the divine power and die together with Ursrook, Roland felt a tremulous hand clasp on his arm. Roland held that hand until the magic movie ended. When he turned around, he noticed Tilly's red-rimmed eyes. Despite being distraught, Tilly managed to finish the whole movie.

Now, they had the full picture of what had happened.

"This is my first time seeing a hybrid of an Eye Demon and a regular demon," Pasha sighed at long last. "How did they do that?"

The most confusing part was how the demons had managed to arrive at the scene right after the Special Unit had reached their designated ambush area, for Roland did not believe an Eye Demon had the intelligence to develop such a clever strategy. After he watched the movie, however, he found the answer. Usrook had cut open a Mad Demon's face and deposit a box of frozen eyeballs into its wound. The eyeballs that smelled the blood instantly burst into life and anchored its roots to the Mad Demon, who screamed in great agony. It took nearly a week for the Eye Demon to completely possess the Mad Demon.

Moreover, instead of a God's Stone of Toss, the Mad Demon had carried a very rare Stone of Flight that a regular demon was not normally entitled to.

This meant that Ursrook had prepared resources for his plan at least half a year ago.

The moment the transformed Mad Demon had left Taquila, Sylvie had been under the scrutiny of the Magic Slayer. To earn more time for his army, the Magic Slayer first flew toward the First Army and then turned around halfway to feign his defeat. While the Special Unit's attention were drawn entirely on the decoy, the demons took this opening to set up their ambush. Therefore, unless they abandoned their

mission and retreated to the west, by no means could the Special Unit escape from the awaiting demons.

"As far as I can tell, this is more like a type of manipulation than a hybrid. The transformed Mad Demon works like a host," Agatha said thoughtfully. "The decoy was not the Mad Demon but the miniscule Eye Demon that mounted on its head."

"Why do you think so?" Roland asked.

"If the demons could create such a powerful hybrid, they should have used this technology in the second Battle of Divine Will. They could send a few hybrids to monitor and harass the army while dispatching a pack of Devilbeasts to attack us. If they did that, the Union would have been finished in less than five years," Agatha explained slowly. "I think it's not an ability but a technology, just like those newly-developed Spider Demons."

Chapter 1187: The So-called Upgrade

"Technology..." Roland muttered while knitting his brows. He had probed into the demons' memories once and seen how they upgraded. Basically, the demons upgraded through merging with various magic stones. Failure to merge with magic stones would result in a miserable death. In a way, their upgrade method was pretty similar to witches', and probably even more cruel.

Although the demons used different technologies, once they learned the principles, they would further develop and expand the technologies based on their needs. This was definitely not a good sign for the mankind.

"Are you sure?" asked Anna, who immediately understood what that meant.

"We need to conduct further research on the remains, but..." Agatha broke off and turned to Celine.

Celine tapped her main tentacle and led everyone to a giant black stone covered in scratch marks. "This is a part of the Giant Skeleton. From the initial autopsy, we judge it's very likely a living being."

"Fair enough. This is pretty much like the armor of a deformed demon, isn't it?" Roland commented while stroking his chin. In the report, the military officer mentioned that the Giant Skeletons had produced a bloodcurdling howl after being hit by the cannon shells.

"No, Your Majesty," Celine denied, a little embarrassed. "What I was trying to say is that... the stone itself is alive."

"What?"

Dumbstruck, everybody took a step backward involuntarily.

"Hang on. You mean the stone is alive?"

"Is the stone also a type of demon?"

"I don't quite... follow you. Could you tell me more about it?"

The hall exploded with a rush of inquiries.

"To put it short, this stone is an independent system that operates on its own," Celine said as she scooped up an iron hammer and gave the stone an almighty strike. With a clank, the stone trembled, and Roland could spy, through its numerous cracks, something wriggle with pain. The stone did not stop quivering until half a minute later, and Roland was positive that the quaver was not the offspring of the blow.

"At the scene, we found a huge organ hung below the Giant Skeleton's abdomen. We thought it was the main body of the deformed demon, but the autopsy showed otherwise," Agatha continued. "This finding puzzled me and Celine. As the Skeleton could move by itself, then why is there a separate deformed demon attached to its abdomen? We didn't find out the reason until we saw the transformed Mad Demon created by the Magic Slayer."

Anna, who was the first to realize the true nature of this peculiar Skeleton, blurted out, "Is it a host?"

"Correct," Celine said approvingly. "Both the original carriers and the devouring worms could live on their own." She then turned to Roland and asked, "Your Majesty, do you still remember what Kabradhabi said? It asked us whether we also upgraded through a legacy shard."

"And it also said another thing," Roland assented with a nod. "I remember that it almost blustered 'I'm Tadalín'. It asked whether our weapons were made out of the legacy shards."

Tilly responded meditatively, "It appears that the demons learned how to create hosts from the legacy shards. That was why Kabradhabi asked such questions. In other words, both the Spider Demons and the Giant Skeletons were demon hybrids comprised of a host and a operator."

"Very likely. They share many similarities, such as the extreme long lifespan of a carrier, the ability to remain in activity even in the state of dormancy, the ability to survive upon serious injuries, etc."

"But I don't think the underground civilization used what the demons called 'legacy shards' to complete their upgrade, because they controlled carriers by soul transfer. That's quite different..."

"Perhaps, the demons don't know how to create a magic core exactly, and that's why they can't transfer soul like the underground civilization," Agatha returned. "Or perhaps they found a more suitable way for their kind, just as the Union found a way to create the God's Punishment Army. The God's Punishment Warriors, in a sense, are hosts as well."

"Hold on, that doesn't sound right," Nightingale interposed in confusion. "Although I don't quite follow your deduction, but I'm quite sure that human beings didn't get any legacy shards whatsoever. The First Army's weapons are solely His Majesty's ideas, and the God's Punishment Army is the Union's achievement. Without the so-called legacy shards, we still learned how to create a magic core and inherited the ruin of the underground civilization."

"That's the key to the problem," Agatha replied in a serious tone. "I think obtaining the ruin is only one of the many ways to inherit a civilization, which is exactly why we call it technology rather than an ability."

Roland felt his chest suddenly constrict, and the truth seemed to come to him in one shining piece. He said, "Are you referring to... learning?"

"Yes," the Ice Witch replied on a sigh. "We could upgrade through teaching and learning, even if we don't have what Kabradhabi describes as legacy shards."

There was a brief silence in the hall.

At length, Celine spoke, "The demons have developed so many new weapons over the past 400 years. The legacy shards are probably something that helps them learn faster, or even something that enables them to comprehend new knowledge within a second. This is how their civilization evolves and 'upgrades'."

Hearing Celine's explanation, Roland suddenly understood what Kabradhabi had meant. Human beings did upgrade, but it was not through an artifact of an old civilization but through teaching and learning, the most traditional means of communication. As a time traveler, Roland connected the two worlds.

"If that's really the case, doesn't it mean the legacy shard is continuously recording every arena of our life?" Wendy said as she glanced at the secret chamber on the other side of the hall apprehensively, where the demon was.

"We have to obtain a legacy shard to know if this is really the case," Agatha replied while shaking her head. "If the demons did learn how to create hosts, we'll face a lot of new challenges." She then turned Roland apologetically and said, "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I'm afraid the years of war experience that the Union gained probably won't help you much now."

"Don't mention it. The third Battle of Divine Will will be an entirely new experience for the demons," comforted Roland. Although the future remained uncertain, he must stay resolute and continue to take the lead. "If technologies could be upgraded, we could also learn from those civilizations who lost their legacy shards, right?"

"Exactly," Celine responded heartily. "This is we members of the Quest Society are obligated to do."

Chapter 1188: Post-war Analysis

In the next couple of days, Roland received various reports from the General Staff that re-examined and concluded the entire investigation on Torch Action based on Summer's reconstruction and the search of Taquila. These reports arrived at Roland's desk like a fierce blizzard, which piled up as high as his waist.

Truth gradually resurfaced.

Roland learned that the giant God's Stone, discovered during the Battle of the Northbound Slope and the Battle of Taquila, was from the God's stone mine at the Taquila ruin. At the bottom of the mine, the Detective Group had found the missing part of the stone, which were two medium-sized God's Stone pillars that was chopped in half. The surface and edge of the cuts were smooth and even, as though the pillars were sliced by a sharp weapon.

Summer could not use her ability in the vicinity of the God's stones, but Roland deduced that the stones might have something to do with the Giant Skeletons. In fact, the Giant Skeletons were not only the transportation tool but also the small Obelisk that could regenerate the Red Mist. His theory was also supported by the corrupted soil around the ruin. Nevertheless, compared to an Obelisk of a normal size

that could spread Red Mist up to hundreds of kilometers, the Skeletons could only cover an area within the radius of a hundred to two hundred meters. Moreover, they also required the Red Mist supply line to sustain themselves and spread the Red Mist.

In other words, the Giant Skeletons were the mobile sentry posts for the demons that had significant strategic implementation. The General Staff had reached to the conclusion that these Giant Skeletons, like the Spider Demons, were a rare species; otherwise, the demons would have used them as their sentries and taken the entire Fertile Plains before human beings could take any action.

Furthermore, the passages at the rear of Taquila were mostly the masterpiece of the Spider Demons. Although the Spider Demons were not as efficient as the devouring worms in excavation, they were much more proficient than the Mad Demons. These passages branched out from the God's mine underneath the ground, and the measurement between the surface and the passages clearly showed the Spider Demons consideration of the threshold that an observer type can see. Therefore, it would be difficult for anyone to spot the passages from above.

Since Celine and Agatha both preferred to view the Giant Skeletons and the Spider Demons as one particular type of demon, Roland came up with a new name. He called them Monstrous Beast to distinguish carrier demons from regular demons. A prefix was used to quickly classify an undiscovered type of demon in the same category.

The Giant Skeleton was thus given the name "Fortress-like Monstrous Beast", and the Spider Demons got the name "Spidery Monstrous Beast". The latter was further classified into two subcategories, which the ones that tossed stone needles was the first type and the ones that ejected demons was the second type. The naming system not only facilitated military operation but also simplified post-war data collection and statistical reports.

Apart from a post-war analysis, Roland was also concerned about the weaknesses of the First Army that had been pointed out by the General Staff.

Among other weaknesses, the biggest problem, as Edith had reported, was intelligence collection.

Based on the war history of the mankind, tunnel warfare was never a regular military tactic due to the limitation in technologies and the considerable amount of time and resources it usually cost. However, with the application of the devouring worms and the Spidery Monstrous Beast, military strategies using large-scale tunnels became possible. The demons could create an underground passage wide enough for their army to pass through within a short period of time. Therefore, the space below also became a treacherous area that the First Army must remain vigilant about.

Beyond a doubt, they needed someone other than Sylvie as a lookout. The Eye of Magic required a considerable amount of magic power to look through solid objects. The area it could cover was no larger than the size of two football pitches, and it could only see through three to four meters below the surface. However, if it was monitoring the area above the ground, the Eye of Magic could see anywhere within ten kilometers and stay vigilant for the entire day.

All the witches, except Extraordinaries, had a limit in their power. When they exceeded their own limit, their power would drop significantly. Therefore, witches rarely went over limits unless it was an absolute emergency.

Considering this factor, the First Army must develop their own intelligence collection system.

Roland remembered there had been a war in the history where both parties had listened closely underground to gather information on the location of the tunnels and camps of their opponents. The devices they used in that battle were pretty similar to a doctor's stethophone, which detected movements through the transmission of sound through solid materials.

However, this method only worked for tunnels in progress. For completed tunnels, one would not be able to hear anything.

After much deliberation, Roland finally found a practical way to infiltrate the enemy: a standard penetration test.

Penetration test was a standard procedure to test soil strength. As a former engineering student, Roland had often heard his roommates discussing this method. Basically, the procedure of this test was to drive steel rods arrayed in quincuncial piles into the ground, with each piles several meters apart. With a sounding machine, a few people could complete the test over a large area. If the rod sank, then it provided an indication of a hollow beneath the ground.

If the army mastered these two detection methods, they could monitor the demons' movement underground without the help from the witches.

In order for the army to conduct scouting mission in the sky without relying on Lightning and Maggie, the only way was to build an air force.

To that, Tilly was the key.

In addition, Edith's report pointed out that "the army lacks a contingency plan to provide immediate assistance". Roland was impressed with the remarkable progress of the ability of the General Staff, yet at the same time, Edith's comment left him a little helpless. He knew exactly what their problems were, but it was hard to overcome these drawbacks at this stage due to the limited population in Neverwinter.

Finally, Roland's attention was drawn to a report from a logistics officer. In the report, the officer wrote that the performance of Mark I machine gun was not satisfactory during intense battles. Many soldiers from the machine gun squad complained that they spent more time loading than firing, and at the same time, it created quite a burden on the logistics team. The officer expressed his wish that the Department of Engineering could make improvements accordingly.

This was indeed Roland's first time receiving feedback from soldiers at the front after the implementation of the feedback system. As they were the ones who actually used the weapons, they knew the strengths and weaknesses of each weapon better than anyone else.

In fact, Roland had noticed an unusual increase in broken guns after the night attack at Tower Station No. 1. However, since they easily replace the gun parts, Roland had not taken this issue seriously. He believed that the increase in disabled firearms was largely due to soldiers' inexperience and increasing attacks from the enemy. As soldiers were usually more stressed in a night battle as they could not see the firing results, they might experience difficulty in pulling triggers. Moreover, as air-cooled barrels were inherently less durable than water-cooled ones, the guns got overheated more easily.

This problem alarmed Roland. Initially, he had intended to create a recoil-operated machine gun that employed an air-cooled barrel so that one gun can do it all. He also believed this multi-purpose gun would be more efficient than Maxim gun. However, it appeared that his invention did not work out. Although with the help of tracers and the experience soldiers would gain from night battles, they would encounter much more demons in the upcoming war. Roland could not bear the consequence of broken machine guns during the official Battle of Divine Will when thousands of demons charged at them.

This report made him realize his mistake.

The remedy of this problem was to abandon the idea of multitasking machine guns by separating HMGs and general machine guns. The barrel of the HMG should be lengthened and equipped with a radiator. As for the general machine gun that could be carried by hand or vehicle, it should be lightweight and portable so as to meet the needs of future warfares, and it can be done so by improving the current model of Mark I.

Chapter 1189: The Radiation Project

In addition to a post-war analysis, the General Staff also drafted a preliminary plan for the third Battle of Divine Will.

Although the demons' intention remained unknown, one thing was certain — they would not abandon Taquila under any circumstances. Taquila was the important barrier that could stop the demons from flooding over the Fertile Plains, and it was also the foundation for Neverwinter's army to advance. As long as mankind had control over Taquila, the Red Mist could not easily approach the northwest of Graycastle.

Therefore, it was very necessary to rebuild the Holy City that had been deserted for hundreds of years.

If the demons still planned to breach Graycastle from the Fertile Plains, the First Army would need to strengthen the defense of the railway, protect the railway, and cut their Red Mist supply. The general strategy should be similar to the Torch Campaign. It would be extremely difficult, but if they succeeded, humanity would be one step closer to the final victory.

In short, they had to put all their blood and sweat into this battle.

The problem lay in the Kingdom of Wolfheart and the Kingdom of Everwinter in the northeast.

If the demons, on the contrary, planned to invade the Four Kingdoms from the ridge of the continent, they would then face an extremely difficult war. The Kingdom of Wolfheart was located in mountainous areas, whereas the Kingdom of Everwinter did not have a single river. In addition, the Kingdom of Dawn and two mountain ranges rest right between them. It was impossible to extend the railway to the north of the continent under such a tight timeline, for there were two major technical difficulties that Roland found impossible to overcome: digging tunnel and building bridge.

It was also out of the question to rely on local nobles to assist with logistics. The implementation of the immigration policy would definitely deteriorate the relationship between Graycastle and the two countries. Roland could only hope that the two kingdoms will not stab him in the back. As such, the First Army had to figure out a way to maintain logistics by themselves.

It appeared they had no choice but to use ships as the means of transportation. The problem of this method, however, was that most port cities were located on the east coastline which was very far from the defensive line. There would be where to run if the enemies attacked. It would be fine if they could fight off the enemies, but if they don't, the consequences would be devastating.

Apart from logistics, the First Army also had to ward off the demons and evacuate the civilians. Unlike the boundless, bleak Fertile Plains, there would be so many unknown variables fighting in a foreign country. In consideration of these factors, the General Staff only mentioned that there was a possibility to carry out the battle in the north but did not draft any specific plans. Roland noticed dark circles underneath Edith's eyes as she entered the meeting room.

It seemed that Edith became even more determined to gain the victory after being deceived by Usrook.

Roland put down the report and sighed deeply.

He hoped that the demons could start the war in the Fertile Plains, but before receiving confirmations from Lightning and Maggie, he could not make judgements based on his personal preference. There was no point in guessing what choice the demons would make. He would rather spend more time thinking about how to win the battle more efficiently from his side than dwelling on something he currently had no clue of.

With this thought, Roland rose to his feet.

"Your Majesty?" Nightingale asked with dried fish between her teeth.

"Let's go to the new laboratory," Roland said slowly. "We need to check out how the Radiation Project goes."

...

In the laboratory at the North Slope in Neverwinter.

"Lady Anna — "

Anna immediately interrupted Lucia White, "I told you. Please don't call me Lady Anna."

"Yes... but I can't help. You're the queen," Lucia said while sticking out her tongue and put down the metal piece in her hand. "Here is the material you asked for. If there's nothing for me to do, then I'll..."

"Even though I'm the queen, you are still my partner," Anna said as she walked up to Lucia with a smile. "Are you going to the new laboratory?"

Lucia nodded and said, "Yes, it's about time."

"Then off you go. Take care," Anna said while walking Lucia to the door. "Please come to see me if you exhaust your power or anytime you are free."

"I will!" Lucia promised as she waved and headed down the hill.

Lucia assisted with all kinds of work. She had to visit the chemistry laboratory, the Furnace Area at the mine, and the laboratory at the North Slope. Before the new laboratory was built, she had not got assigned a fixed workplace. Most of the time, she stayed at the North Slope with Anna to help her

produce high-quality alloys and slice metal ingots into delicate parts according to Anna's instructions. This process made Lucia very contented with what she was doing.

It was probably because she was making a contribution to make this world a better place.

Lucia had come to Neverwinter to cure her sister's demonic plague. She had never expected to settle down in this city. At first, Lucia had felt guilty to receive so much help from others with nothing to return. But now, she could also do something to assist Lady Anna and the Chief Alchemist in improving this booming city. Gradually, she felt more confident and had more pride.

The more Lucia knew about Anna, the more she admired her. It was inconceivable that a witch could make such great changes to a city. Lucia was impressed with Anna's breadth of knowledge, her talent, and her dedication to the work. Nightingale was the person she trusted most, and Anna was the witch she wanted to become.

And now, Lucia found an opportunity.

After His Majesty built a brand new laboratory on the southern bank of Redwater River, she had her own workplace. According to His Majesty, her project could possibly change the fate of the entire human race. If the project was successful, she would become the most crucial person in the Battle of Divine Will.

Lucia couldn't help but skipped her way to the laboratory as she thought of her career prospect that would potentially lead her to fulfill her ambition.

She crossed the Redriver bridge and paved down toward the south for another several hundred meters until she reached a lofty wall. Unlike those busy plants located between the industrial zone and farmlands, this laboratory was quiet. The trees next to the pavement cast shades on the ground. It was already fall, but the canopy of leaves above her was still verdant green. Occasionally, the tweets of birds, with which silence teemed, pass through the foliage, highlighting the serendipity of the laboratory.

Overall, it looked more like a residential area than a laboratory.

However, the fully equipped sentries who stood beside the gate indicated that this was not an ordinary residence.

When Lucia came into the front yard, the soldiers saluted and opened the door.

This was only the first security checkpoint.

The building was more heavily guarded as Lucia passed through different section of the yards that was being separated by walls. Everyone had to show their identification before entering the building under the escort of guards. There were few exceptions.

Lucia was one of the exceptions.

She smiled at the soldiers, passed through numerous security checkpoints, and finally stopped before a white brick edifice.

The building was very similar to an ordinary residential building, its external walls smothered in creepers. There was a golden plate hung next to the door, which read —

"Research Institute of High Energy Physics of Neverwinter".

Chapter 1190: " An Important Task"

Lucia neither understood what high energy physics meant, nor did she know what her work will be, but she noticed that His Majesty would always pace up and down in front of this plate, as though the words on it contained some miraculous power.

Because of this, Lucia became even more enthusiastic about her work.

What she was doing in the laboratory was actually not much different from what she used to do in the Furnace Area. However, she had an instinctive feeling that this must be something extraordinary.

"Hey, you're here," Azima, who had been resting in her chair with her eyes shut, sat up and greeted Lucia as she entered the inner yard.

"Good, good afternoon," Lucia replied politely.

"It's so warm and comfortable in here that it makes you easily fall asleep," Azima yawned as she stretched her body. "So, shall we begin?"

"Sure. Thank you for your help."

Azima waved her hands and said, "Don't mention it. I'm your assistant, so I'm obligated to follow your instructions. We've worked together for a while, so we don't need to be so formal. Plus..."

Azima's voice tailed away, her mumble voice carried to Lucia by the warm wind. "There's nothing to complain about when you could earn two gold royals every month just by sitting here."

Lucia stifled her laughter. Truth be told, she was a little afraid of Azima, as she had also heard from Wendy about the internal conflict on the Sleeping Island. This red-haired witch with sharp facial features was the leader of her clique, and she did talk and act in a trenchant manner with the air of haughtiness. Therefore, when King Roland had appointed Azima as her assistant, Lucia had been quite unnerved, doubting if she was competent to be the superintendent of this new research institute.

Nevertheless, after working with Azima for several months, Lucia found Azima was not as scary as she had thought. Although she did occasionally complain about Princess Tilly, and sometimes even about His Majesty, overall, Azima was a dutiful and hard-working assistant. She was also very sensitive about her salaries and often blurted out some random comments such as "I'll prove myself", "Just you wait, Nightingale", and "I can support myself perfectly", which Lucia found quite amusing.

"Alright then. Let's begin," Lucia said as she opened her closet and handed Azima a white protection clothing."

The first step was to create a barrier between themselves and the external environment. Not only were they forbidden to touch the subject of their research, but they also had to breathe through a special filter as well. Roland had specifically stressed that the purified research material was highly toxic. A tiny little amount would be sufficient to kill anyone who touched or inhaled it. To prevent such unfortunate

events, Roland required the researchers to check each other's clothing, especially the parts they could not check by themselves, before proceeding with the research.

After they pulled on the radiation suit, Azima gave a thumbs-up.

Then, the pair went into an open yard.

The ground was neatly lined up with tons of green slabs. Except that they have a darker color, they looked almost the same as the bricks produced at the Furnace Area.

However, these bricks were exceptionally heavy as though they were out of metal instead of stone.

Lucia picked up one slab and applied her magic power to it. The slab was a bit hot after basking in the sunlight for a long time, but the high temperature did not affect her use of power. She could see the slab in her hand turn into a mixture of colorful compounds, some of which were glinting. However, the material required by Roland only took up a very small portion of the mixture, which sprinkled on the surface of the slab like specks of ink.

Nevertheless, this was much better than extracting the material directly from ores at the North Slope.

Slowly, those color blocks began to move, reassembled, and finally converted into four separate larger blocks. The largest color block was disposed of. The other three blocks were all in different sizes. The smallest of them, which was only the size of an individual salt particle, was the silver, toxic material that Roland required.

Lucia put the material into a glass jar gently and set it aside.

The other two metal blocks were much larger, one of them was the size of an almond, and the other one was the size of a half of a nail. They were also silver, so the only way to separate them was through magic. The bigger of the two was sent to Anna in a basket for further processing, which was later used to test the new machine she was working on. The smaller one was placed in a lead box, and a new box would be used once the first one reached five kilograms.

It would take Lucia two to three days to extract so many metal blocks if she didn't have other schedule. As these slabs were all building materials used by the radiation clan, they had already been purified earlier. Compared to raw ores, these slabs were much easier to work with.

Lucia rose and opened up her hands to Azima after she finished one slab.

This was also one of the rules set out by Roland. Azima had to confirm that there was no particle residue at the scene or on Lucia's clothes before Lucia could work on a new slab. Azima could detect even the slightest trace of the material with her ability.

Around two hours later, Lucia exhausted her power.

"Let's call it a day," Azima said as she helped Lucia to stand. "We have to study in the evening. If you shut down now, we'll have to carry you back to the castle."

"Yeah," Lucia assented with a nod. "You're... right."

Not only did Lucia feel tired, but she also felt stuffy in her radiation suit. There was no point in continuing to work in such an uncomfortable condition.

The two girls took off their clothes and had a shower. It was around dusk, and they could hear the creepers outside the window rustling as a cool breeze blew upon their cheeks. Lucia heaved a deep sigh, feeling refreshed.

Just then, a familiar voice came from behind, "You did a great job."

Lucia turned around and saw Roland walked into the yard with a smile, followed by Nightingale who had two blue bottles of Chaos Drinks in her hand.

"This is — " Azima stammered, a little surprised.

"This is a reward only for you. Don't tell anyone," Roland said secretly while spreading out his hands.

"Th-thank you," Azima said as she stiffly took the bottle.

Lucia had couldn't wait but pried open the lid.

As the refreshing beverage traveled through her throat, she had forgotten all about the work and her great ambition.

After both of them drained the bottles, Roland asked, "So how's it going?"

"I've separated them as you instructed," Lucia replied as she led Roland into a room and opened a cabinet. There were dozens of neatly arranged lead boxes in there.