

Witch 341

Chapter 341: Transport route

Upon Vader's departure, Carter leaned towards the king and asked, "Your Highness, do you have any idea who sent those people here?"

"If we exclude the church, the person who possessed the pills would be Timothy. Garcia already keeps her distance from Greycastle and it is highly unlikely she would still care about me." Roland heaved a sigh. "Comparing them, it is much more likely to be Timothy. While he is more cautious about sending a large army away from the capital, that does not mean that he would not retaliate against me."

It was lucky that the attackers hidden among the crowd had carried pills instead of covering their bodies with gunpowder. Had they blown up in the crowd, two months' effort would have been wasted.

Roland was not worried that any so-called "suicide squad" his brother dispatched would have harmed him. On days the Nightingale was out, he had an escort of at least ten bodyguards with him at all times, and for additional protection wore a God's Punishment stone. When faced with the suppression of ten revolving firearms, even a witch extraordinaire would have difficulty approaching him, let alone a group of people with berserker pills.

In the short time since he had assumed the role of a Feudal Lord, less than a year, he found that his mentality had undergone tremendous changes. When he had begun this role, an incident such as this would have left him very afraid, to the point where his legs would have given way and he would have been at a complete loss. However, now, although he felt somewhat anxious earlier, he was still able to assume a calm expression and a composed demeanor.

The reason for this change was because he had faith that his guards would put themselves in harm's way for him and trusted them to protect him from enemies, regardless of the peril they faced. Furthermore, it was forbidden for him to lose any self control, as he was the focus of the masses. Contemplating this, it shocked him that he would think so far...

"Round up the people from the missionary mission and ask them the specifics of the recruitment process." Roland turned towards Barov and said, "I need to know where those people boarded the sailboats."

"Yes, Your Highness." said the city hall's Prime Minister, with a somewhat gloomy expression on his face. He probably hadn't expected his subordinates, whom he was so proud of, to commit such a large blunder. He felt that his dignity had been completely besmirched by this.

"You shouldn't criticize them too harshly either. You can decide what to do with them after you straighten everything out."

After all the refugees made it through the checkpoint, Roland returned to his office in the castle. This time, the news brought back by the missionary group was a particularly nice surprise—On the southern border were a large number of the destitute and homeless. The flames of war ravaged Eagle City and Clearwater Port, while the fields around the city had been abandoned. On top of that, the fluctuating weather this year had caused the temperatures in various areas of Greycastle to plummet. Because of this, the price of grains surged, increasing day by day, and the price of slaves had reduced by half.

As long as he could establish a reliable passageway for transport, he would be able to draw an unending number of people through the western border—In actuality, when the refugees heard how developed Border Town was, and that it was actively trying to recruit them, a sizable number decided to set off towards the town on their own. That was the report given to him by the missionary group.

However, the greatest difficulty would be establishing a passageway for it

During the month of the demon, all land traffic was halted by the sheer volume of snow, leaving the Redwater River as the only method of transport. The only boat that could travel the river was Little Town, which wouldn't budge without the help of a witch. Just this boat would be vastly incapable of transporting everyone. If he wanted ships sailing the waterway at all times, he would have to invest in the construction of at least 20 sailboats capable of sailing inland.

An apt example of the situation he faced would be the difficulties the missionary group had encountered. With all of the gold royals they had brought with them, only a small portion went towards roping in the refugees; the rest was used to hire boats and pay for housing arrangements for personnel. At the moment, less than 400 people had arrived in Border Town, while the other 3,000 or more remained waiting in Willow Town, Silver City, and Fallen Dragon Ridge for ships to transport them inland.

Because they were aware of the conditions in the western region, various captains had raised their prices to insanely high levels. The fees for the 3,000 plus people would be already as high as that of the large-scale rescue operation they had previously held in the capital. Roland, after giving the situation a moment's contemplation, decided that it would be wise to send a letter requesting assistance to Margaret's Chamber of Commerce. He hoped that the latter would not go so far as to give him a quote several times higher, on account of Lightning.

However, if he was truly dedicated to cutting down his expenses, he knew that he would have to build his own ship. As of now, the quality of reinforced steel and cement had greatly improved, it was wholly viable to build larger, sturdier inland ships with those materials. With a steam engine for propulsion, the ship would serve as the groundwork of the transportation industry within the Redwater River.

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After he finished dinner in his office, Barov knocked on the door, opened it, and said, "Your Highness, I have more or less ascertained the situation."

"Speak."

"There's an apprentice of mine called Salem who is in charge of enticing the refugees in the northern lands. As he was faced with a lack of boats in the midst of returning, he contacted some friends he had met in the capital in hopes that they could help him make some inquiries or employ a couple of merchant ships that were willing to head towards the western border." Barov sighed and continued, "The news must have leaked from there... He had arranged some places for the refugees in Silver City, a little less than half a day away from the capital. I imagine it wouldn't be difficult at all if Timothy wished to tamper with it."

"As of this moment, how many people are still being retained in Silver City?"

“Roughly 800 of them.” Barov began to speak in a low voice. “It takes about half month for the merchant ships to do a round trip. We will still be unaware on how the situation unfolds when the next batch of refugees arrive. How about... we immediately recall the small group of First Army soldiers in that area and abandon the refugees?”

“No, no. We will just have to get rid of the people Theodore planted within the group, no matter how many of them there are. So long as the audit checkpoints were properly managed by that time, we can simply get them to pass through it individually.” Roland shook his head and continued, “What would we do if the refugees, who we abandoned and left to their own devices, went back to the northern lands and proclaimed their fate to others? If that happened, we would not be able to recruit refugees from the Northern Islands any more.”

Under the interrogation of Sylvie’s x-ray vision, as well as Nightingale’s lie detection, any spy or assassin would have no way to conceal themselves. Thus, he wasn’t that worried about it. As long as they didn’t hurt the other refugees, he was fine with it.

“Yes, your highness.” Barov coughed twice before he opened his mouth and asked, “In that case... for Salem’s punishment, what do you...”

“What do you have in mind?”

He hesitated for a moment and said, “As the birth of this incident was a result of his excessive carelessness, I suggest stripping him of his post in the city hall and a fine amounting 2 months his salary. As his mistake wasn’t intended, and didn’t cause too much damage either, I believe it’d be excessive if we sent him into the northern mines.”

Roland couldn’t hold back his loud laughter. Barov’s heartache was written all over his face. “Calm down, I have already made my decision. Seeing the reason he committed this mistake was, subjectively, not a dereliction of duty, I can give him a lighter punishment. After all, it can be considered as his first time undertaking such a post... As I recall, he is only in his twenties, right? Since that’s the case, it is certain he will mature rapidly after this lesson. Giving him a two months fine will do.”

“Understood.” Barov immediately bowed and said, “Everything shall be handled as you said.”

While shaking his head, the prince smiled. Although Barov had started in an unbelievable harsh manner, when it came time to truly punish Salem, he displayed an obvious reluctance. After all, Salem had always been by his side when he was in the capital and was also from the first batch of disciples who had come to Border Town.

“You may leave.”

Roland stretched his back after dealing with this matter. Taking a few sheets of white paper from his drawers, he planned to sketch out the plans of the steam engine powered cement boat when Leaves suddenly ran into his room.

“Your Highness!” She excitedly said, “The Hawk Eye is back!”

“Really?” Roland slowly got up to his feet. Following behind her, they quickly reached the back garden, only to see a massive hot air balloon slowly descending to the ground. The shadow cast by its air sac caused the sunlight in the courtyard to darken somewhat.

The moment the basket touched the ground, Anna jumped out. With both hands outstretched, Roland began to walk towards her while the former mirrored him while wearing a light smile.

"I have returned."

Chapter 342: Countermeasures

"Don't forget about me." Lighting rushed over.

"I want one too," Nana exclaimed.

"Guu!" Maggie called out soon after.

Roland simply stood in place, letting each member of the Witch Union hug him in turn. When Tilly saw, she couldn't help laugh, "You really have a harmonious relationship with them."

"You want to hug your big brother too?"

"No thanks," she said, smiling as she shook her head. "I can still clearly remember that time you lifted me up and then dropped me on the ground."

Roland only shrugged his shoulders to express his innocence, then shifted his gaze over to the woman Ashes was holding—she had a head of ocean-blue hair, looked fairly young, with a figure similar to Anna's. Her eyes were tightly shut and her slender eyebrows were slightly upturned. She had fair skin, and the teardrop mole at the corner of her eye appeared particularly eye-catching.

Based on external appearances, she didn't look like someone who had been imprisoned in the basement of a stone tower at all. Instead, she gave off a bit of a sleeping beauty vibe.

However, her physical appearance led to Roland paying more attention to her outfit—In this age, clothing with such a diverse and intricate design was scarcely seen. Because there was such a small assortment of dyes, the violet colour of the robe itself was extremely rare. With the addition of those interlacing white stripes and talisman prints, it resembled one of those gorgeous gowns that could only be seen in movies.

This was definitely a piece of orange1 equipment.

"Is she still alive?"

"Yeah," Nightingale replied, "but the magic in her body has been depleted. It seems similar to Anna's condition back when she reached adulthood. But unlike Anna, the recovery speed of her magic is unusually slow. At this rate, she might need three to four days before she returns to normal."

"In that case, we'll let her sleep properly," Roland nodded, "I will tidy up a room on the third floor of the castle for her to rest. The others should return to the hall first." He paused. "I want to hear the tales of your travels."

...

After listening to Tilly and Nightingale's accounts, Roland couldn't help but feel nervous for them.

Although Sylvie provided a full picture, going deep underground in pursuit of a huge demonic beast they had never seen before was a very dangerous affair. If it were him, he may have still been hesitant. He never expected that Tilly would be so decisive. She picked out suitable members for the task in a short amount of time and even led the team herself... Her appointment as the leader of so many witches wasn't just due to her identity as a princess.

"At the time, did you think that this earth-drilling worm had something to do with the devils?"

"I don't know, but it's not impossible," Tilly replied leisurely. "A witch from the Cooperation Association once encountered devils who were riding some kind of hybrid demonic beast in the wild. The beasts' fleshy wings were cut off and they heeded the devils' orders, sort of like tamed livestock. And behind the snowy mountains, you can also see creatures that are capable of flight—Those look completely different to devils, perhaps they're another kind of demonic beast."

"So isn't it possible to surmise that devils and demonic beasts have a subordinate relationship, just like that of humans and hounds? They may have some method of making these monsters obey their orders, and compel them to complete a few fairly problematic tasks."

"I feel... like it really does seem like it." Roland nodded, but his mind was clouded in incomprehensible uncertainty throughout her explanation. Demonic beasts would only take the initiative to attack human dwellings during the Months of Demons, but that did not mean they only lived during the Months of Demons—the moss and weeds growing on the carapaces of the sieging beasts were proof that these creatures had survived for tens of years. Assuming that the reason those devils were unable to rapidly occupy the entire wilderness and completely expel humans from the continent was due to being confined within the red mist, then they are free to constantly send demonic beasts to harass the four great kingdoms instead of waiting until winter to take action again.

Furthermore... It was hard to forget the intelligence of that wolf-lion demonic beast hybrid that once fought Iron Axe during the Months of Demons in the first year—it differed from the "clever" animals that followed their instincts. It was able to learn, analyse, and choose the best target and course of action. This already at a level that the vast majority of living creatures could never hope to reach. If long-lived demonic beast hybrids could possess such intellect, it would be impossible for them to be tamed by another race.

"But compared to the subterranean demonic beasts, I think that the enemy Miss Nightingale encountered outside the stone tower is more concerning." Tilly sighed. "It was able to conceal itself in broad daylight and moved so silently. It's practically impossible to defend against. It's a pity we know too little about demonic beasts, I have no idea how to handle such a terrifying enemy."

"If Nightingale had not witnessed it with her own eyes, I would not believe that such demonic beasts really exist." Roland shrugged as he spoke. "But it seems they have never appeared at the western border... Otherwise, if just a few of them came every winter, Longsong Stronghold would have long turned to ruins."

"But as the Months of Demons grow longer, the demonic beasts grow stronger; this is the conclusion reached by the history books. This time, the first snowfall began in Autumn, so the enemy we face may be very formidable."

Tilly's use of the word "we" made Roland's heart grow warm. Whether she treated him as a brother or not, she already considered him and this small town as one of her own allies at least—This was probably done for the sake of the witches.

"Then we can only leave the surveillance of the perimeters to Nightingale."

"No, let Sylvie stand guard this winter," Tilly said, "The city walls are divided into two sections, East and West. To do a single circuit of the place would take almost a quarter of an hour, Miss Nightingale's workload would be too great. Sylvie only needs to stay inside the castle and she would be able to observe the entire region of the city walls. She would also be able to inform the other witches immediately upon discovering a demonic beast."

"That's fine too." Roland nodded.

"That witch..." Scroll hesitated for a moment. "I still have the same opinion as before. As long as her identity has yet to be confirmed, she could very well be an enemy."

"I know, which is why I will have her wear a God's Stone of Retaliation for the time being." He exhaled a breath of air. "Hopefully this won't cause her to misunderstand us."

...

Roland entered the bedroom of the unconscious witch. Anna was the only one left inside the room, looking after her alone.

"How is she?"

Anna shook her head. "Still no response."

"Is that so," Roland walked over to the bedside, the woman lying still under the blankets. Although her eyes remained tightly shut, the wrinkles between her brows seemed to have reduced. Nana and Lily had already used their abilities on her, so the only thing they could do now was to wait quietly.

"She was frozen for so long, yet not a single trace of that remains. It's really incredible." He lamented.

"It's similar to how I don't fear any flames," Anna chuckled, "Her ability definitely plays a part."

"I heard that you were the one who opened the ice coffin." Roland pat her on the head. "You're amazing, Anna."

"I can't take all the credit," Anna said earnestly. "This witch made use of her ability in a very ingenious way. She first used cold ice at an extremely low temperature to completely stop all circulation in her body, then used ice crystals that were close to room temperature to fully seal the cold ice inside to prevent it from thawing. She has surely reached a very high level of control over her abilities."

Ice that approached room temperature... This phrase sounded very contradicting, but Roland understood that the abilities of summon-type witches were unique manifestations of magic, similar to the black flames that were capable of casually taking up different forms and temperatures.

Anna paused for a moment before continuing, “I had only just cut through the outer layer of ice crystals when the whole ice coffin immediately fell apart, like it was an opening she deliberately left behind. So, I think she had been anticipating this day for a while now.”

“By that you mean...”

“She is certain to wake up.”

1. Orange represents one of the highest tier of items in many MMOs and RPGs.

Chapter 343: Reestablishing Order

“Master, the city walls have been breached! I’m afraid the allied armies won’t be able to endure for much longer. Let’s leave quickly!”

She could already hear the sounds of combat coming from outside. When she left the tower, she saw the gloomy clouds in the sky emitting a dim red light, resembling a clump of viscous blood.

“But my younger sister still hasn’t returned yet.”

“She’s a soldier of the garrison, she can’t leave her post on the perimeter without permission.” Kraft’s voice grew more anxious. “If you die here, you’ll be throwing away her good intentions!”

After hesitating for a while, she finally nodded in acquiescence. “I understand.”

The streets were filled with people fleeing while the guards maintained order within this impending doom. Amidst the stream of people, she was forced to follow everyone towards the south gate. Kraft closely followed beside her the whole time, and even used his sturdy body to protect her from being crushed by the frantic crowd.

It was a crushing defeat.

Is this where we fall? She cast her gaze towards the Tower of Babel behind them. It was the highest point in the city, as well as the core of the Federation. Flying Devils had carried Mad Demons over to attack the top of the tower. Lightning would occasionally flash, striking the devils down. Nevertheless, everything was to no avail—there were simply too many enemies.

After several hundred years of construction and development, this city had become the most flourishing of fertile lands, the Holy City. But today, it seemed like it would soon fall to ruin and the efforts of several generations of people would inevitably be lost—like children spending a whole afternoon building a sandcastle, only for it to be instantly reduced to sand once again in the wake of chaos and disorder.

...

When they passed through the south gate, the Devils had already rushed over to intercept them. Those who were still able to fight readily stepped up to fight them alongside the guards. But not only did the other side have Mad Demons, there were also Dreadheart Demons and Infernal Lords. The disparity between the strengths of both sides was too extreme.

Dozens of people lay in a pool of blood after the first wave of spears were thrown. Some had iron spears piercing through their abdomen, their warm intestines spilling out onto the ice-cold snowy ground. Some had their limbs cut off and were crying out in anguish while clutching their wounds.

“Master, what are you trying to do?” Kraft grabbed onto her.

“I can fight too,” She took a deep breath of air, “Let me go.”

“No, your importance far outstrips them. You can’t—”

“Let go!” Her magic bubbled forth, filling the surroundings with cold air as she shook off the other’s grip. She then strode forward without looking back. She felt her heart gradually tighten when she saw the enemies a mere hundred paces away, wearing ferocious-looking battle masks and holding weapons that were dripping with blood. But even so, she wasn’t willing to continue hiding behind everyone—as a witch of the Holy City, even if she were to die, she should die on the battlefield!

“Everyone, step aside!”

At this moment, a clear command resounded from one side of the battlefield as a person fell from the sky, just like a god descending.

With her back to everyone, she raised the longsword in her hand up high. Her long auburn hair resembled a flame, igniting hope in everyone in a flash.

“A Holy Warrior of the Federation!”

“She is... a witch extraordinaire!”

Amidst the voices of astonishment, the edge of her sword started glowing with a brilliant radiance, quickly transforming the sword into a dazzling gold—like the dawning sun, each ray of brilliance shining over the earth. Even the dark red clouds that dominated the skies did not dare obstruct the light, reflecting countless golden tassels below the layer of clouds. As the rays of light ascended towards the summit, she leaped forward and brandished her longsword against the Devils that came to attack.

The silence was deafening.

At that moment, time seemed to have stopped as a bright incandescence engulfed the world and the figures of the enemy mirrored the final hints of darkness at daybreak.

Whether it were the Mad Demons or the Infernal Lords, they all crumbled before this ray of light.

When she opened her eyes once again, the snowy ground before her eyes had already turned into scorched earth, and the approaching enemies seemed to never have existed.

The other Devils witnessing this scene all retreated in conjunction as more Holy Warriors arrived, joining the battlefield to pursue those fleeing enemies and breaking the encirclement.

“You guys go quickly.” The sword-wielding witch seemed to have exhausted all of her strength as she kneeled down on the ground with one knee and gasped for breath. “Take advantage of the moment and quickly leave this place.”

“But... Milady, where can we go?” Someone in the crowd asked.

Right, where can we go? She thought bitterly. Even their final stronghold, the Holy City, had fallen to the assault of the Devils, with tens of thousands of lives lost and no more tricks up their sleeve. They could no longer recover from this losing battle.

“Do not give up, we still have hope!” The red-haired witch said resolutely, “We’ll head over the mountain and across the river, to the desolate lands.”

“But... There are only a few backward-village peasants there.”

“We can always reestablish the order. Let’s go. As long as we can survive, there will surely come a day where we triumph!”

...

“Master, why didn’t you go with them?”

She had separated from the crowd with a group of people and rushed towards the west. Apart from Kraft and her family bodyguards, the majority of the others did not possess any fighting strength. They were all her retainers and servants from the tower.

“I left some important documents and magic stones inside the experimental lab in the Concealing Forest. Since we need to reestablish order, these things are essential to the witches. I want to bring them over to the other side of the mountains.”

“The Devils have caught up to us!”

“Hammer, Stone, you go obstruct them!” Kraft commanded.

“Yes!”

She gritted her teeth, proceeding forward with her head lowered. These mortals would only be able to slow down the Devils; they were simply unable to defeat these adversaries. Once they went, they would have no further chance to live. However, she had no choice but to abandon them as she needed to reach her destination as soon as possible.

For some reason, overlapping black and white spots appeared in the sky... And then her vision blurred.

...

Kraft panted as he followed behind her. Even someone as robust as him would feel very weary after trudging through snowy ground for three days.

She glanced behind her. The procession of thirty or so people had now dwindled to a mere six people. Some people had fled en-route, and some seriously injured people had taken the initiative to break away from the group. If the Devils were to chase up to them again...

“Rest assured, Master, you still have me.” Kraft appeared to have seen through her thoughts as he comforted her, “I will stall them as best I can.”

“Why?”

He was a little stunned.

“Why are you so persistent until the end? If you escaped now, maybe you would be able to survive.” She asked in bewilderment, “We are witches and have always been aloof and distant, while you are just an ordinary person. Under normal circumstances, you wouldn’t be thinking of accompanying me to death.”

“But you have never mistreated us. Although I don’t have any magic, I still have principles—protecting you is my duty.”

As an uproar sounded behind them, everyone understood that their final moments had arrived.

“Master, go quickly. You mustn’t look back.”

The black and white spots were increasing.

...

She staggered into the basement, and organised the data and magic stones that were on the table.

Kraft’s words gave rise to some confusion for her.

Since a long time ago, one belief was spread throughout the Holy City: witches were people chosen by the gods, and the people unable to condense magic were both uneducated and powerless, only cultivating their soil. But from this captain of the Imperial Bodyguards, she could see valour and tenacity, nothing like the powerlessness people spoke of throughout the population. In fact, they had qualities that witches were unable to achieve. Cooperation between both sides was much better than unilateral command—at least this was the case within her stone tower.

That being the case, how did the people from over 400 years ago suffer such a crushing defeat?

Suddenly, the bellows of the Devils resounded from outside the door.

Damnit, they arrived faster than expected.

Her vision was blurry and countless spots fluttered before her eyes, practically filling her entire field of view... But she couldn’t die here, she had to bring her research results out— past the mountain and across the river, over to the desolate lands to rebuild their social order!

She groped around for a magic stone of reverberation and imbued her magic into it, causing it to produce constant cries for help.

There was a loud noise and the wooden door split apart; the Devils had already broken in.

Hoping that someone might hear her cries for help, she circulated all of the magic power in her body and converted it into cold frost which was then discharged. A Mad Demon raised its spear, its arms rapidly swelling up. In the next moment, the spearhead flew at her with a cold ray of light.

She couldn’t help but close her eyes as the black and white spots covered everything and her vision turned pitch-black. All the sounds faded as well. Her body no longer felt cold, as though she was wrapped in soft velvet. It seemed like she wasn’t in a gloomy basement, but instead lying in a warm meadow. Even the feeling of impalement did not come for a long, long time.

Did I die?

After some time, a fine slit appeared within the darkness which subsequently grew brighter and brighter. She attempted to open her eyes slowly, and a hazy grey ceiling projected itself in her eyes little by little.

She heard someone say, "Your Highness, she has awoken."

Chapter 344: Past Events (Part 1)

Your Highness?

What a queer form of address... It's something you'd only hear in the tales of old.

Attempting to move her eyes was a struggle. She tried casting her gaze to the side only to see a gray-haired man enter her field of view, several women standing by his side.

"How do you feel?" he asked softly.

"..." she didn't reply, asking a question instead, "Where am I?"

"Border Town, Kingdom of Greycastle's western territory."

Great, she thought. Things currently looked to be developing in the direction she least wanted them to: an unknown location, an unknown time period, and unknown people. She wanted to get up out of bed, but she discovered that she couldn't muster a single iota of strength.

"I am Roland Wimbledon, the fourth prince of the Kingdom of Greycastle as well as the feudal lord of Border Town," he continued after a short pause, "These girls are members of the Witch Union. You... Do you not remember anything?"

Witch Union? she frowned, So they're witches? I don't know what kind of newfangled organisation this is, but at least we're alike. Still... Why do they look like this man's subordinates?

Wait, a prince?

She thought back for a moment and couldn't help feeling stunned. Wasn't this one of the titles used in the secular regime during the First War of God's Will over four hundred years ago? Could it be... Did I return to a time before the start of the great war? Could the gods have possibly given me another chance to start over, to make preparations, to rescue the Holy City and its people?

No, calm down, she told herself, This kind of completely illogical affair would only occur in a fictional tavern story. That's right, she thought while trying to recall the scene at the end. There was a horde of Mad Demons that had charged into the experimental lab's basement and she had discharged all the magic in her body to construct the sturdiest possible ice barrier. A magic stone of reverberation had been set to release distress signals non-stop, awaiting the day they restored their fertile fields and could locate her again.

"Were you the ones who saved me?" There was no mistake, she had already escaped from the ice barrier so the only possibility was that the witch's army had returned! "Have the Devils withdrawn already? Have we won!? The Holy City... What happened to the Holy City of Taqila?"

Having blurted out this series of questions, she saw the faces of the other party change. They looked at one another with expressions of joy and excitement. “We really did find you in the basement of a stone tower,” said a witch with a mature looking face and auburn hair. She clearly couldn’t stop herself from asking, “Are you truly someone from four hundred and fifty years ago?”

That person reminded her of the miraculous Holy Warrior who had fought against impossible odds. That woman’s hair had also been like this, like a flame igniting everyone’s spirit. She was more willing to answer the witch’s question than the one the grey-haired man asked. She did not usually care much for social hierarchies, but she nevertheless found being interrogated by someone beneath her somewhat offensive.

Had it been her petty master in her place, this man would most likely be severely punished.

“My name is Agatha, a witch of the Taqila Exploration Society,” she paused, “What do you mean by four hundred and fifty years ago? Don’t tell me... Have you been fighting with the Devils for over four hundred years? That’s impossible.”

“You’ve slept for a very long time, things might be a little different from what you imagine,” said the man who called himself Roland, “If you think it won’t be a burden to your body, we can fill you in slowly.”

“Go ahead.”

Agatha closed her eyes and took a deep breath. This prince behaved very rudely, but she did not have the energy to argue about such matters.

As the other party began to detail the history relating to Greycastle and the development of the Four Great Kingdoms of the continent, she felt shivers creep down her spine. She soon discovered a few familiar features in his tale—the Concealing Forest and the Impassable Mountain Range for example... But when she compared these points with her memories, the conclusion was absolutely shocking.

If those places corresponded to the ones in her memories, then those so-called Four Great Kingdoms were part of the desolate lands of the past—a long, narrow area situated between the mountains and the sea that was, in her contemporaries’ opinion, a barren place with no development value whatsoever. And the forbidden wastelands he spoke of laid where she remembered the fertile plains to be. Finally, when it came to the Holy City of Taqila, it had long become a region no one knew of, buried in the depths of the fertile plains after many, many years.

How ridiculous was this?

However, there was something to top even that.

The status of witches in society had been lost along with Taqila. According to the prince, witches had unexpectedly become the target of opprobrium in the wider society and the regular people had a firm grip on power in the Four Great Kingdoms. All those obsolete playthings from before the First War of God’s Will now called themselves kings and lords.

Yet it was precisely these antediluvian beings who had become the rulers that dominated the witches.

How could this be?

“Preposterous!” She couldn’t stop herself objecting, “To have witches actually be killed by regular people? Who would be courageous enough to dare do such a thing?”

Full of indignation, Agatha extended her arm, intending to teach this drivelling man a lesson, but to her surprise the magic failed to transform into frost and was not discharged.

It was only at this moment that she noticed a metal cuff fastened around her ankle. When she lifted up the quilt she saw there was a stone embedded in the shackle – a God’s Stone of Retaliation.

“Are you guys insane!?” She looked at the group of witches in disbelief, “You would go so far as to help a regular person suppress a high-ranked witch, violating the Federation’s prohibition on unauthorized use of a God’s Stone of Retaliation!?”

Only the Federation’s law enforcement team was allowed to use the God Stones. Anybody apart from them who dared to carry, sell, modify or destroy the God Stones would receive the most severe of punishments, up to the death penalty.

The prince sighed, “This was what I was worried about.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll go and talk to her,” the auburn-haired witch sat at the bedside, covering Agatha’s body with the quilt once again, “My name is Wendy. You see, things aren’t really as you believe them to be. Not only is all he said true... Taqila no longer exists and I have never heard about the federation you spoke of either. I don’t know what the Holy City you lived in four hundred and fifty years ago was like, but nowadays we witches are always spending our days in hiding. As we have been until we met Prince Roland.”

“He gave us a safe place to stay, encouraged us to use our powers, and at the same time researched ways on how to make use of our abilities to transform the world. Here, we can live completely free, just like a normal person, without the need to hide. Neither do we have to worry about suffering persecution from the church or the masses. You must know that nowadays God’s Stones of Retaliation are everywhere. A witch that loses her powers is no stronger than a normal person.”

After listening to Wendy’s story, Agatha was completely silent.

The Federation was a large organisation established jointly by several witch kingdoms. It possessed many high-ranked witches and witch extraordinaires. They concentrated their forces in order to win the War of God’s Will and the Federation formed a colossal army while incorporating every Holy City into the fold at the same time. It was responsible for training and dispatching witches, resolving disputes, and maintaining the stability and public order of the city. Only it had the power to capture and try a witch... Yet somehow an organisation that powerful had declined so much that no one knew of its reputation nowadays...

Those refugees who wanted to re-establish order, she mused, Where are they now?

Chapter 345: Bygones (Part II)

Translator: Meh/TransN Editor: - -

Elsa was perplexed by the immense changes. She told herself not to believe them, but their stories sounded so real that she thought no witch could have made it up out of blue.

Putting herself in their shoes, she could never imagine she was slaved, hunted or even slaughtered.

Even ordinary people with the lowest status in the Holy City were treated by witches as human beings instead of animals.

She started to feel extremely exhausted. Wendy sensed it and brought her a cup of hot milk and tried to console her, "Oh, dear, drink this milk, and you'll feel better."

Though the lady with reddish brown hair didn't have the godlike power and strength, she affected Elsa with her good temperament and manner.... Elsa drank the milk in one gulp. A warm and sweet current flew into her gut, which helped her recover a little. Elsa rested for a long period before she continued their conversation.

Although she couldn't understand why these witches were wary of her, she knew that she must win their trust first, or they wouldn't help take the fetters off.

As for the credibility of what the prince and Wendy said, she had to find out by her own eyes.

She wouldn't believe the words that the holy Union had vanished before she saw the cramped and underdeveloped Barbarian Land with her own eyes.

"As I said, my name is Elsa, and I was a member of Taquila Quest Society. In the 30th year of the Battle of Divine Will, Taquila, the last Holy City, fell down in the war. Most people went into exile, while I went to the Misty Forest to fetch things we left there. "

"Wait. Were you fighting against the demons?" asked the Prince.

"Who else could be fighting against them other than us?" Elsa frowned. "Should we rely on vulnerable humans like you?"

"Were you a witch raised by the Church?"

"I never heard of anything about the Church. What's it?" she said impatiently. "Taquila... no, all the Holy Cities which hosted tens of thousands of people were created by witches. Apart from witches, most of the citizens were ordinary people... like you. They were responsible for reproducing and raising children until their magic power was awakened. And then these young witches would be handed over to another special department to receive education and training. Of course, the witches who were good at fighting would join the Union and participate in battles with demons."

The prince pondered for a moment, and then took out a book and asked, "Can you read it?"

Elsa skimmed several lines and was attracted by the content at once. "This is a diary from a witch."

"Did you also write in this way?" a witch with light gray hair asked.

"This writing system was created by the Union and exclusive to witches. In this way, the ordinary human beings would be prevented from participating in important affairs at upper level. But in my opinion, I didn't think this sort of exclusion was a good idea."

"How could you prevent ordinary people?" she asked with a great curiosity. "Even if witches created another language system, ordinary people could also grasp it through learning, right?"

"It takes magic power to read it," explained Elsa. "It isn't very difficult. I can teach you since you're a witch."

"Language is a tool for communication." The prince commented. "The more popular it is the better. So what the Union did was very stupid. The exclusion of ordinary people would only limit the resources available to you. In fact, after training and education, ordinary people are capable of many jobs. Except that they cannot use magic power, they are as good as witches."

Although Elsa agreed with him, yet she could hardly accept that an ordinary person criticized the Union. She would collaborate with them when necessary, but she couldn't tolerate their finger pointing.

She began to miss Kaff, her chief guard.

Even though he was only a subordinate to her family, she thought he was more gentle than the so-called prince.

"My name is Scroll, Miss Elsa," another witch who looked pretty mature, suddenly asked, "Have you ever heard of the name of Alice?"

"How come you know this name?" Else suffered a jolt. "Wasn't it said that all the records about 450 years ago had been lost?"

"I found an ancient book in the ruins located in the forest on East Border of King City in Graycastle," said Scroll. "It's the one on your hand. Her name is on the last page written in ordinary people's language."

Elsa quickly turned to the last page. After reading the illegible diary, she deeply sighed and fell into silence. A female statue started emerging in Elsa's mind. The lady raised her long sword, with light radiating from her body shining and dazzling all the people's eyes. But finally her figure was fading away, step by step, little by little. In the end it totally dissolved in the darkness.

After a long while, she said slowly, "Right, Alice was the Queen of the Meteor City as well as one of the three chiefs in the Union. She was an Extraordinary, or a Transcendent. Even among amounts of Blessed Ones in the Union, she was also the strongest."

"A Transcendent!" The crowd murmured.

"Since these records have been lost, it's natural for you all knowing nothing about it," Elsa said in a serious voice. "The abilities of witches will be enhanced continuously since they awoke and become stable since the Day of Adulthood. But it isn't the ceiling of their ability growth. Some lucky dogs can step forward and get unbelievable achievements... We often call it the High Awakening. In fact, there's no limit for their awakenings, or growth rate. But obvious changes could be observed on the performance of their magic power."

"Hum, is this ability evolution?" The prince touched the back of his head and muttered. "In total, four witches have evolved in the Witch Union."

"Four?" Elsa was almost choked by that. She asked surprisingly, "How many witches are there in your Witch Union exactly?"

The prince counted with the help of fingers and said, "More than ten."

" Stop talking nonsense!" Elsa obviously seemed to be enraged by his rash words. "Do you mean four out of ten have undergone the High Awakening? You have no idea what evolution means for witches. It's totally different from the consolidation or derivative skills on the Day of Adulthood. Only the luckiest ones can be promoted, which takes both perspiration and inspiration!"

The prince looked rather innocent and gestured to Anna.

"What a pretty and elegant girl!" Elsa said to herself as she watched the girl walk towards her bed. She was extraordinarily good-looking even among all the witches. Her beautiful blue eyes seemed like a lucid lake, where Elsa could see her own reflections. But she was too young and maybe just had her adulthood. It was impossible for her to accumulate enough experience in training, meditation and enlightening. Elsa evolved at 26 years old. At that time, she was treated as the most promising genius in the Union for her achievement. She knew how difficult the evolution was since she went through that.

"They probably take derivative skills a young witch developed on her Day of Adulthood as a High Awakening," Elsa said to herself .

A ball of orange fire appeared in Anna's palm.

"It's the ability to control the flame, a common type of the summoning capabilities, which can be ranked by the maximum temperature and the heating rate," she gave her comments quickly. "The one who can eject the flame are regarded as a combat witch."

Just after Elsa's words, the blaze dimmed away, and then turned into a tongue of fluorescent green flame. It began to change its color, from dark green to light green. It seemed that the green flame tried to absorb all the lights around so that it could become stronger and stronger.

"This is the consolidated skill she mastered on the Day of Adulthood, and you'll see her most important skill soon," the prince explained.

"Is it? No, it can't be a consolidated skill! If it were, the flame should be hotter and the heart of the flame should be bigger and brighter." Elsa was astonished with her mouth wide open. "Besides, what's her most important skill?"

Soon something incredible happened. The green flame suddenly disappeared, and a black solid cube emerged in Anna's palm, which looked like a piece of rigid metal with smooth facets and angular sides.

Chapter 346: Bygones (Part III)

Translator: Meh/TransN Editor: - -

"Well ... does this count as High Awakening?" asked the prince.

Elsa didn't know what to say for a moment. What was left in her brain was - how could this be?

The Holy City had been forgotten, and the Union had been destroyed. There was nowhere for the witches to receive training and guidance, so it was only logical that the witches' abilities declined. But what did she just see? A newly matured witch had received two promotions. This couldn't be explained by luck. After all, even in the Union, the home of geniuses, a witch like this was still very rare.

Furthermore, if she heard correctly (serve her right is only for memory, not for eyes or ears), there were three more of them who were equally talented as Anna?

Elsa stared at the man with gray hair motionlessly. It was some time before she could recover, "This... should count as High Awakening, but I don't have the Stone of Measuring, so I can't measure her change in skill." She paused, her throat feeling dry. "I want to ask, if I may, what did Anna experience during her awakening? She seemed to have come of age not long ago. Could these two awakenings have happened in only the past one or two years?"

It was not until she finished talking that she realized she had used honorifics. The status of a witch couldn't be inherited. Even if a great number of common people were put together, there was no guarantee a capable witch would come out of them. Thus, a witch's level was usually decided based on capability instead of origin. According to Anna's ability, she was already qualified to be a high-level member of the Union. Compared to herself, Elsa felt that Anna was at least her equal, if not her superior.

Any awakened senior was worthy of respect.

"My first awakening happened after I exhausted my magic power while fighting against demonic beasts. As to the second awakening, I think it was caused by my learning of knowledge."

"Knowledge ..." she was startled, "what kind of knowledge?"

"Ahem, this can be discussed later," the Prince cleared his throat. "Now let's get back to the topic we were discussing earlier. What do Alice and Experiment of God's Punishment Army exactly mean?"

"Indeed, if he wasn't lying to me, this knowledge must contain something extraordinary in itself. That was why Anna could awaken a new ability through epiphany. So it's understandable that he didn't want to elaborate on it before he could trust me." Elsa could not help but feel excited. Enhancing the chance of evolution had extraordinary significance toward witches. If she could figure out its mechanism, reviving the Union wouldn't be impossible.

Then again, where did he acquire this knowledge from? This place is but a barbarian land. How could a bunch of peasants like him understand the secrets of magic power?" She was full of confusion. What had the world become in these 400 years?

Elsa put those intractable problems aside for the time being. "Alice was very powerful. With the help of God's Stone of Retaliation, she wouldn't be defeated even faced with several Lords of Hell. However, there were too few Transcendents. Put differently... the lack of diversity in our ability led to our defeat."

"Diversity?"

"That's right. A witch wouldn't know what kind of ability she would have before awakening. But according to the Union's calculation, only ten percent of all the witches were fit for combat - the same ratio could be applied to Extraordinary Witches. As to what the ratio was of combat witches that were actually promoted, no one knew. There was a period of time when not a single witch was promoted within 50 years. Thus, actually the fighting ability of the Union was very unstable."

"So mortals may necessarily awaken, the awakened may not be good at combat, and combat experience doesn't necessarily lead to capability. Is this what you mean?" the prince said with one hand fumbling his chin.

"That's about right," Elsa sighed. "We formed a guard platoon composed of mortals to compensate for the witches' number shortage, but ... mortals could not defeat demons." Even equipped with God's Stones of Retaliation, they were still far from being able to fight against the mighty Mad Demon. Under this unfavorable situation, Alice ordered the Quest Society to research warriors that could break through the limits of the human body. Judging from this scrawled note, it seemed that she had succeeded ..."

"Seemed?" the prince said in curiosity. "Didn't you say that you were a member of the Quest Society?"

"Indeed. But ever since the order was issued, I left the Taquila Quest Society and began to build my own lab in the Misty Forest." She bit her lips and hesitated for a moment before proceeding. "They quickly found the solution, which was to unite witches and mortals by force with the help of God's Stone of Retaliation, but... this process required them to consume the witches' lives. I couldn't accept this approach. I believed that the Quest Society should focus on exploring the use of God's Stone of Retaliation, rather than using witches as consumable resources. What's written on the note is right. This behavior would only bring destruction to witches."

The prince looked a bit shocked, "Using witches as consumable resources?"

"Alice did this out of helplessness. At that time Taquila was on the verge of destruction," Elsa felt the prince somehow looked a bit pleasing to the eye when she saw that he showed an expression of sympathy. "But now the Union has vanished into thin air, it proves that this approach wasn't able to proceed, and probably won't ever appear again."

After she finished talking, she bowed her head and fumbled the book with her hands, 'climb over the mountains, wade through the waters...' how familiar the slogans were. "Yet where are you now? How could I possibly revive the order all by myself?"

"But God's Punishment Army is still there."

Upon hearing this, Elsa's fumbling fingers suddenly froze. She looked at the prince with disbelief, "What... did you just say?"

"I am not sure whether this is a mere coincidence," the other said very slowly, as if he was looking for the appropriate wording. "The Church... the organization you've never heard of, established two cities at the grand opening in the middle of the Impassable Mountain Range. Those cities were named Holy Cities. The hunting of witches was also initiated by them. What's more, they also searched for orphans and street urchins, and brought them back to the monastery of the Holy City. Wendy was one of them who had escaped."

"The church had its own army and territory. Its most powerful warriors were from the God's Punishment Army. Those monsters who had lost their sanity had infinite strength and were almost as mighty as Extraordinary Witches. And their numbers were absolutely not few. Apart from that, they might even have owned a number of powerful witches, which is why I temporarily sealed your ability with the God's Locket of Retribution." The prince laid out his hands, "Prior to what you told us... we had always thought

that it was the church who established the Holy City of Taquila, fought against the demons, and left the ruins."

Elsa opened her mouth but was unable to utter a word. How could it be that an organization composed of mortals took away the most important secrets of the Union, hunted witches in return, and built God's Punishment Army to consolidate its rule? She suddenly had a splitting headache. So God's Punishment Army didn't vanish, but fell into the hands of an organization that hates witches! What on earth did the members of the Union do?

Wendy must have sensed her exhaustion and discomfort, because she gently pushed Elsa down onto the bed, and said in a low voice, "Let's call it a day. Have a good night's sleep. Rest assured that we will find out the reason."

Then, she felt something loosened from her ankle-the God's Locket of Retribution was taken off by Anna. The crowd left the room one by one, and the gray-haired prince was the last.

As the door being closed behind him, Elsa heard some calm steady words.

Chapter 347: Confusions

Translator: Meh/TransN Editor: - -

...

"How is she?" Roland asked. Roland put down the pen, looking up at Nightingale who had just quietly appeared in his office.

"She's fallen asleep. Before that, she had a bowl of oatmeal. It seems that she had a good appetite." Nightingale went to the table and sat back in her old place. "Now it's Silvio's turn to guard her."

"Well, that's not bad."

"Do you believe what she said?" Nightingale asked.

"With the God's Stone of Retaliation being removed, you can easily judge if she is lying when you question her tomorrow, but..." Roland paused for a moment, "I think most of what she said is true."

"Why do you think so?" she asked curiously.

"Have you noticed that as a person from 400 years ago, she's using the same diction and language as us?" the prince said with his hands propping up his chin. "Theoretically, such a situation would be almost impossible for two territories separated by the Impassable Mountain Range, unless these two territories were of the same origin and had frequent contact."

"But she called the Four Kingdoms the Barbarian Land."

"That's the point ... I don't know what the scene was like 400 years ago. Perhaps all this used to be was just a few scattered villages and some criminals exiled by the world of witches. The Kingdom's history book also records that the age of the major cities was generally between 200 and 300 years, and astrologers also came into existence during that era," he said with great interest. "It had always bewildered me that the astrologers, who generally had no achievements nor research findings, were

also called 'sages', the same as alchemists. Now I think I've got my answer—the Union fled to this borderland, and brought with them the survivors, their language and civilization. These people mingled with the locals, and helped the latter build the regime, fortress and city."

"You speak as if you'd seen it happening." Nightingale shook her head, smiling.

"This is the only way we can explain why we're using the same language as her," Roland said earnestly, "because we're of the same origin. And during these 400 years, civilization was constantly in the process of rebuilding without the slightest opportunity of advancing past where it used to be. "Alright," she said with her hands laid out, "anyway, you'll know the answer by tomorrow, and if your guess is wrong... then you'll have to give me a 'luxury lunch'."

The so-called luxury lunch was composed of corn soup, roast chicken drumstick and ice cream bread and was usually only served once a week.

"What if you're wrong?"

"Whatever you want," said Nightingale, tilting her head and squinting. The perfect curve formed by her cheek and smooth neck was exceptionally beautiful. "Regardless of what kind of movement an attractive person makes, it will always look seductive." Roland finally believed this saying.

"I will bear that in mind," he said with two coughs, turning his attention back to his notebook.

Since Elsa had only recently awakened after four decades of sleep, Roland didn't want to press her to give accurate and detailed answers to all his questions. For the most part, his questions followed her train of thought, and the information he gained was quite disordered as a result. What he was doing at the moment was to rearrange the information he gleaned from Elsa, and to find out the key points he had to know next.

Undoubtedly, the most pressing problem was about the demons.

What was the cause of the war with the demons, and why did the demons cease fighting? This information was essential to Border Town. No war could have been started without a reason, but the demons' behavior didn't seem like an attack motivated by resources or expansion. They didn't occupy the Barbarian Land, nor did they pillage mankind. What they did seemed like an act purely for the joy of slaughter.

Roland also noticed that Elsa mentioned the term Battle of Divine Will. Could it be that the two sides waged the dreadful war under the will of God? But at that time, the Church hadn't come into being, so there wasn't the one and only God that the Church declared. Without this explained, his mind remained unsettled.

Meanwhile, he needed to figure out the basic necessities of life in the Holy City's civilization as soon as possible, or in other words, assess its degree of economic and civil development. He needed this information to measure the level of this civilization and deduce the demons' capabilities.

As for the Union, Roland wasn't too concerned about it. Its witches were scarce and their abilities were unstable. This organization's capability for organized combat wouldn't be very high. Historical experience had repeatedly stressed that before the formation of a generation gap, a comprehensive war was all about attrition. A few sophisticated weapons wouldn't reverse the overall disadvantage.

The second question was about the Magic Stone.

Considering what Tilly said, the magical nature of such stones could greatly compensate for the witches' unstable ability, enabling the witches to exert powers that didn't belong to them. In this way, even auxiliary witches could be sent to war. However, in Roland's point of view, that was like putting the cart before the horse. He'd rather turn all the combat witches into auxiliary witches and put them all to work in production roles.

Oddly enough, the Union, which had large numbers of witches, didn't make use of Magic Stones to fight against the demons. Instead, it chose to produce God's Punishment Army, which in Roland's view was beyond comprehension. Maybe the Magic Stone had some unknown shortcomings, or its production was extremely difficult?

Fortunately, Elsa was a member of the Quest Society, an organization similar to the current Alchemy Workshop, which gathered a group of highly talented witches specializing in the research of Magic Stones and magic power. Roland faintly felt that there must be a wealth of potential information to be exploited.

The last question was about the Church.

He drew a circle on this column. Obviously, he couldn't count on getting details from Elsa about the organization's foundation and development. What he could infer from the scattered information at hand was that the Church was founded after the witches' defeat. After obtaining the Union's secret, the Church concealed everything about the witches and declared them as incarnations of demons. If the people of the Four Kingdoms were seen as descendants of aborigines, the Church would be a veritable outsider. Since the aborigines didn't have their own civilization, they could be easily fooled by fabricated history and prophecies.

"Was it only because the witches used to suppress ordinary people that the refugees took the witches as their enemy and went on to hunt the witches on this continent?" Roland frowned. "All these deductions did sound reasonable, yet... he felt that there was something wrong."

The Union had a great number of Bliss Warriors, Extraordinary Witches, and even Transcendents. Even if the Church managed to get a hold of God's Stones of Retaliation, was it possible for them to defeat an opponent like the Union?

To wipe out a much stronger force, you couldn't purely rely on hatred. Clearly there was some key information missing.

"That witch seems to dislike you," Nightingale suddenly said.

"After all, she used to live in a world where the witches were considered superior to the human being." Roland laughed. "I'm afraid I'm just no different from the roadside weeds in her eyes."

"Don't you hate her?"

"Why would I? She is nothing but a poor woman abandoned by her own time." He shook his head.

"She'd been sleeping in the frozen coffin for 400 years, and woke up to find the world had completely changed. The strangeness brought by the new world would bring her fear, so it was no surprise that she

would build a defensive wall in her heart. After she accepts all this, she will probably gradually change her point of view."

"What a typical response of yours," said Nightingale with a smile. "But rest assured, I won't allow her to offend you in any way."

Chapter 348: Mortals and Extraordinaries

Translator: Meh/TransN Editor: - -

When Elsa woke up again, she was alone in the room. The thick curtains were tightly closed, making the room extremely quiet.

Probably considering the fact that she wasn't familiar with the environment, someone put a candle beside the front of the bed, which was quietly burning with orange flames.

Elsa turned her head and watched it for a long time, only to find that there wasn't a single drop of wax overflowing. The candle seemed to be burning forever without any change in the length.

"It may be caused by magic," she thought.

The quilt was so soft that it was probably made of high-quality cotton and filled with light and warm fluff. The treatment was as good as that in the Holy City of Taquila, which made it hard for Elsa to believe that there could be such comfortable beds and bedrooms in Barbarian Land.

She moved her fingers and found that she had recovered most of her physical strength. Elsa rolled out of bed. She drove her power, and chill overflowed from her fingers immediately— "It seems that the prince didn't play any tricks. He had God's Stone of Retaliation removed to give me a certain degree of freedom." She went to the window and opened a bit of the curtains. It was totally dark outside. Stars couldn't be seen, so did the moon. The whole earth seemed to be swallowed by darkness with only a few hazy flare shaking so far away. She could hear the wind roaring outside next to the window, and could occasionally see some snow falling on the glass.

It seemed to be winter now which was a good season for the awakening of witches. In Taquila, this kind of evening didn't even exist since the whole city would celebrate every day of winter. Bonfires burned throughout the night on the street. When she overlooked the city on the tower, it seemed to be lit by flares shining like stars, which symbolized hope and a promising future. People prayed around the campfires, eager to gather magic power and surmount the mortal world. Whenever a witch awakened, the fate of her family changed as well. They don't need to worry about food or clothing anymore.

Elsa pulled up the bolt and opened the window. The cold wind suddenly swept into the room and blew the curtains away. The candles in the house were snuffed out as well. The room suddenly was plunged into darkness. When her eyes became adapted to the changes of light, she could see the faint white light reflected by the accumulated snow on the roof of the town. "Judging from the silhouette of the buildings, this place isn't very big indeed, and is identical with the 'Border Town' mentioned by the prince."

Ordinary people would be frozen after a few hours if they stayed outside in such cold weather. But Elsa wasn't afraid of the cold since her body would automatically expel the slightest chill that made her

uncomfortable. The last time she felt cold was before her awakening. But now, she had almost forgotten the feeling.

The earlier conversation was lingering in Elsa's mind as long as she closed her eyes.

The Union died and the witch became the devil's minions. Hence mortals were recklessly hunting witches with the help of God's Stones of Retaliation... According to the diary, Alice and Natalia successfully fled from the Fertile Plains. But if they failed to stop everything, the Union was doomed.

What on earth happened at that time? Why were the two Transcendents defeated by mortals?

She was reluctant to think about that anymore.

"Aren't you cold?" someone behind her suddenly asked .

Elsa was shocked. She turned back and saw a girl sitting by the bed in the dark. Her face was completely hidden in the night. She was like a ghost that appeared quietly. The door was closed at that time, but Elsa didn't hear any footsteps before she came in.

"If you can close the window, I don't mind re-lighting the candle," she said again.

There was no doubt that the girl was a witch.

But it's late in the midnight. What's she up to?

Elsa nodded without any word. She closed the window and secretly let the thin yet hard ice cover her skin. The girl didn't do anything dangerous; instead, she opened the first drawer of the night table from which she took out a flint to light the candle. In the candlelight, Elsa saw the her. She had beautiful golden curls and slender eyebrows which made her eyes look very sharp. Elsa hadn't see her before.

"Nice to meet you... Oops. It's the second time that we meet," she raised her lips and said, "My name is Nightingale."

Did she mean that... she also hid in the crowd before? "Is this your ability?" Elsa frowned and asked, "Are you also the High Awakened?"

Even if she was one of the honorable High Awakened, it was still impolite of her to break in without knocking at the door.

"Ah, you are talking about evolution..." Nightingale shook her head. "I'm not that smart like Anna. She finished the book called 'The Theory of Natural Balabala' in a short time. My head is going to explode once I see those formulas and theorems. Maybe I don't have the luck to evolve in this life."

Elsa was absent-minded for a short period because she couldn't understand half of what the girl said. Honestly, she didn't expect that "an Original Witch" could say something like that. Besides, according to her facial expressions, the girl didn't seem to deliberately tease herself. "Is that what the prince called... knowledge?"

"As for the book you mentioned, can I read it?"

"Of course. You may read it as long as you join the Witch Union and be loyal to His Highness." She shrugged her shoulders.

"To serve a mortal?" Elsa stared at her and said in a low voice after a while, "I thought I was weird enough, but you are crazier than me."

"Weird? Crazy?" Nightingale tilted her head and asked, "Why would you say that?"

"In the Holy City of Taquila, most of the Awakened Witches only treat ordinary people who couldn't gather magic as humble servants, inferior people, or ... fertility tools." She said slowly, "but I didn't think so. Even though they were stupid, they weren't hopeless. Those people were no different from witches in many aspects as long as they were taught to learn and think. Because of that, many people thought that I was so weird that I had allocated part of the business in the tower to mortals. However, I didn't expect that you are crazier than me since you are loyal to a mortal and take orders from him."

"His Highness Roland didn't consider us as servants," Nightingale twitched her mouth and said, "I don't know what kind of strange idea you have on the word of loyalty, but the fact is that he took in the witches oppressed by the Church, gave us new power, and let us live together with his subjects in Western Region. We are united to fight against the Church and demonic beasts, as well as against the demons in the future

"But this model was proved to be a failure!" Elsa couldn't help raising her voice. "400 years ago... for you, it might be 800 or 900 years ago, the world was ruled by both mortals and witches. At that time, human beings lived almost throughout the entire Dawn Region. However, when demons attacked, we suffered such a big defeat that we only managed to keep the Fertile Plains."

"Oh?" She raised her eyebrows. "Was that true?"

"You said the history had been buried for 400 or 500 years," Elsa continued, "According to the Union's records, the third Battle of Divine Will is about to break out very soon, yet you have no idea of demons! The east of Barbarian Land is Swirling Sea. So where else can you retreat? Only by rebuilding the Union, uniting witches and improving the probability of High Awakening with knowledge can we seize the final chance to stop demons' attack!"

"Why do you have to say that?"

"What do you mean?"

"400 years have passed, right?" A lot of things could be changed in such a long time. But why are you still restrained by those old ideas? " Nightingale sighed. "His Highness said that mortals could defeat demons when he left. You heard that as well. He is also uniting all the people, including witches. He wants to unite every ordinary person on the continent, because he told me that people across the land are the most powerful group. "

"Wasteland—" Elsa was about to refute this nonsense when she suddenly paused. "The girl is so certain that she seems to know the result in advance. Could 400 years really change everything? Does that prince with gray hair really have such incredible ability to let mortals have the same power as witches?"

"You seem to have realized that," Nightingale smiled and said, "We still have a lot of time, so why not open your heart and to see with your own eyes?"

This time, Elsa was silent for a long time. "... I can see that you don't like me."

Nightingale didn't retort.

"The witches of the Quest Association used to see me like that as well— after they knew that I had appointed a group of mortals as experimental assistants in the tower," she said. "Obviously, you don't like me, but why do you tell me these?"

"I don't hate you as long as you stop being so arrogant and treat His Highness normally. As for your question... " she paused and continued, "because the prince said he didn't want to see you abandoned by the times."

Chapter 349: Passing On (Part I)

Translator: Meh/TransN Editor: - -

Standing on the top floor of the Tower of Babel, Mayne peered through the window towards the snow-covered city of Hermes.

Since the last attack by a large group of demonic beasts on New Holy City, peace temporarily returned to the icy plains, and the fall of snow weakened. The citizens of Hermes were able to enjoy an unlikely, but timely respite.

Even though this was supposed to be a time of happiness and celebration, Mayne continued to feel nothing but emptiness in his heart. During the attack, in order to kill the terrifyingly-large, hybrid, demonic beasts, a platoon of warriors from God's Punishment Army dashed out from the side entrance of the city wall and fought them head-on. In total, 19 warriors were wounded and two were killed. As for the two beasts, they laid on the ground, growling for a long time after the warriors hacked off their limbs. Eventually, the city wall's guards killed them with spears. Rather than the loss of the warriors, it was the timing of the demonic beasts' attack that terrified Mayne.

After remaining silent for some time, he let out a long sigh and returned to his seat beside the table. He wanted to flip open the Canon and read through it carefully one more time.

"Even if you flip the book until it breaks, the result isn't going to change." Tayfun said as he walked into the circular room holding two hot drinks, and placed one in front of Mayne. "His Holiness O'Brien hasn't agreed to meet you?"

"I've sent my request to the Pivotal Secret Area three times already, but there's still no reply." Mayne said anxiously. "And I have no idea what His Holiness is up to at such an important time..."

"Don't worry," Tayfun interjected, "as you've said yourself, the Canon was written by the first Pope, and hence there are bound to be mistakes. After more than four hundred years, who can guarantee that everything in the book is accurate?"

"But this time it's different." The Archbishop shook his head. "If the time is miscalculated, it'll be a serious catastrophe for us! We're investing a lot of strength and energy in unifying the kingdom to gather all the power of the mainland against the demons. But, if the time is shortened by half, we have no way to build up God's Punishment Army sufficiently after the war!"

"Quiet, Lord Mayne." The old bishop laughed and slowly sipped on his hot drink. "What's done cannot be undone. We can't change the fact that Fang of Hell appeared before us. But there might be two reasons for this."

"What reasons?"

"Drink first and I'll speak," Tayfun said, stroking his beard.

Mayne picked up his cup. It looked like goat milk at first, but when he brought it closer, a spicy smell rushed into his nose. "What did you put in it?"

"Coltsfoot." Tayfun tilted his mouth. "Although you aren't able to directly drink Dreamland Water, drinking a bit of this will be beneficial for you. It'll help you to release your tensions, soothe your nerves, and sleep easier."

With one gulp, Mayne emptied the cup and soon felt a fierce burning sensation in his throat. Although the savory taste of the goat milk was supposed to dilute the coltsfoot juice, it was still extremely uncomfortable for someone who did not consume such drinks often. He coughed twice, wiped his mouth, and said, "Even a cup of Dreamland Water wouldn't make me fall asleep. Can you speak now?"

"One possibility is that the Pope made a mistake in writing. Old men get dizzy spells and moments of amnesia very often, as I know very well." Tayfun shrugged.

"That's unlikely." Mayne frowned. "This concerns the layout and arrangement of the Church, and more importantly, determines the destiny of Man. I'm sure he took great care in writing this down. What's the second reason?"

"The second possibility is that there are circumstances we don't know about that have changed everything."

The Archbishop waited for a moment, and upon realizing that the old bishop had no intention to continue speaking, he questioned, "That's it?"

"Well, that's it." Tayfun repeated.

"Is this... a joke? Everything changed? For this simple reason, all of our efforts will go down the drain! How can you be so cursory..."

"Lord Mayne!" Tayfun raised his voice a few notches. "What exactly do you insist on getting? Is it a sure-fire way to defeat the demons? Or do you think that you're the only person who wants to defend Hermes and prevent the demons from entering the icy plains?"

"..." Mayne froze.

"In any battle, everyone wants to win. But so far, we can't even assure victory in every battle against the Four Kingdoms, not to mention the demons from hell." Speaking in a louder voice, he said, "Have you forgotten the Supreme Pontiff's teachings? The consequences of over-insistence and fear aren't too different. What you should do is accept reality and take things step by step till the end - the eventual result isn't for us to control."

Fear of... the result. Mayne's heart palpitated. "He's right, I'm indeed afraid. Afraid that after becoming the Pope, I'll be unable to fend off the demons, and watch the death of Mankind under my charge."

"I used to be like you," Tayfun suddenly lowered his voice, "but Heather's death made me understand that the result is often unpredictable. The Months of Demons came earlier than usual without warning, yet we were still able to capture Wolfheart City before the big snowfall, as planned... but Heather died and the nature of the war changed. Even so, we still have to carry on." He stood up and let out a long sigh, then patted Mayne on the shoulder and walked out of the room. "So... whether for five or ten years, you must be unrelenting in your mission, not for the path of certain victory, but to fulfil your duty even if the result turns out to be not what you desired."

After hearing the door closing, Mayne gazed at the empty cup in front of him and remained silent.

He had to admit that Tayfun's words were reasonable, but now that he was about to shoulder this heavy responsibility, how could he not feel afraid?

Suddenly, a Presiding Judge walked into the room. "Lord Mayne, the Supreme Pontiff wishes to see you."

Finally!

He stood up immediately, and said eagerly, "Take me quickly to the Pivotal Secret Area."

...

Hidden deep beneath a plateau, the Pivotal Secret Area was a cold and quiet place.

Walking into the hall of the Pivotal Secret Temple, Mayne seemed slightly dazed. Although there was no incarnation ceremony arranged for the day, all of the candles in the hall were lit up and the resultant candlelight sketched out an orange-yellow silhouette for the hall. The overhead chandelier seemed like a gathering of stars in the Kingdom of God.

His Holiness O'Brien was sat on the throne, silently gazing at Mayne.

Mayne felt something was not right, but suppressed his suspicions, and walked up to the throne. He knelt prostrate with his forehead touching the floor.

"Rise, child." The Pope's voice was very delicate, and without paying attention it would be difficult to hear what he was saying.

Mayne straightened his body, and saw that the Pope's face was ridden with age and fatigue, as if he had not had a rest for a long time. "Your Holiness, please take care of your body."

"No need." He laughed, and deep wrinkle lines covered his face at once. "I'm going to die soon."

"Your Holiness, you aren't..."

"No, listen to me, child." O'Brien labored to interrupt the Bishop. "I understand the condition of my own body, and without question, my time is soon up." He paused for a moment and took a deep breath. "The purpose of calling you here today... is to pass on the Pope's position to you."

Chapter 350: Passing On (Part II)

Translator: Meh/TransN Editor: - -

Mayne froze and stared at the old man in front of him, hoping to see something in his eyes.

But he saw nothing other than lifelessness.

The Pope's eyes were no longer as penetrating and authoritative as they used to be. Perhaps, he still possessed the wisdom passed down from previous Popes, as well as the knowledge obtained from the Canon, but... nothing escaped time.

"His Holiness wasn't kidding," Mayne realized. His journey was reaching its end.

Mayne's eyes started to blur.

He knelt once again, with his forehead touching the floor. This time, His Holiness did not ask him to stand up, but instead waited until he completed the entire action before saying, "Follow me."

The attending guards helped the Pope on to a cart and wheeled him towards the gate of the Pivotal Secret Area. Mayne followed closely behind, and the party left the Pivotal Secret Temple, turning into a long and narrow tunnel. On the smooth stone walls of the tunnel was embedded a luminous crystal at every ten steps' distance. Looking down the tunnel, one couldn't see the end.

After walking for a long time, Mayne finally left the tunnel and entered a well-lit room. Beneath his feet, the floor had turned into flat slabs, and he was able to see the edges and corners of the walls, as well as the chandelier that hung from the ceiling. Apparently, the tunnel had led into an underground chamber.

"We're underneath the cathedral of the old Holy City." Perceiving Mayne's bewilderment, the Pope clarified. "The design of this place is identical to the cathedral, except that it is built upside down. I call it the Reflection Church."

"Underneath the cathedral?" Mayne exclaimed. "I never expected there to be a basement."

"It's not a basement indeed, because the two aren't mutually accessible." O'Brien smiled. "This place is only accessible through the underground tunnel of the Pivotal Secret Area. The roof is made of an extremely thick mixture of slab and clay, which is impossible to break through using conventional methods."

"Why... is such a design necessary?"

"To guard a secret, without completely burying it." He replied. "Before a Pope ascends the throne, he must come to the Reflection Church to witness the establishment, development and expansion of the Church, and at the same time, learn by heart the goals of the Church."

"To defeat the demons," Mayne said solemnly.

O'Brien did not nod in agreement, but instead said softly, "No, child. To win the smile of God."

The Archbishop was briefly at a loss. "What?"

This time, the Pope did not respond, but instead commanded the guards to continue moving forward. According to the direction of the stairway and the ramp, they were moving upwards. Soon, the party

arrived in front of a grand hall. By recognizing the designs in the surroundings that he was familiar with, Mayne identified the place as the Prayer Room of the Reflection Church.

The thick wooden door of the room was pushed open with a creaking sound. Although it seemed that the Pope had not visited this hall for a long time, there wasn't a smell of dust... Evidently, someone had been keeping this place clean at all times.

"They're only allowed to send me thus far. From here on, you'll have to push me into the room." O'Brien said.

"Yes, Your Holiness." Mayne took the cart handles and pushed the Pope into the Prayer Room. Closing the wooden door behind him, the room no longer received light from the torches outside. Now, the only light remaining in the room was the soft radiance of the yellow crystals - similar to the arrangement in the tunnel, the crystals were embedded evenly on the walls of two sides of the room. However, a notable difference was that above each crystal hung a large portrait. Mayne vaguely remembered that the positions of the portrait frames were where the windows of the Prayer Room above ground went.

The portraits' contents were much the same. They were half-body portraits of people wearing magnificent gowns, looking full of energy, with their eyes seemingly fixed upon anyone who entered the Prayer Room. Mayne was astonished when he found His Holiness O'Brien's portrait among them - the drawing looked exactly like the real person, and stared at Mayne with a smile on his face. A strange feeling caused Mayne to shudder uncontrollably, and goose bumps covered his back.

"Ah, you found me." The Pope seemed to sense the Bishop's change of emotion. "This portrait was completed half a year ago. At that time, I didn't look quite as old as I do now, and hence it's relatively good-looking. By right, the portrait should only be hung up after my death." He observed the portrait carefully. "Blame it on my impatience, for I wanted to see how I looked on the portrait earlier than I should."

"Your Holiness, these are..." Mayne felt his throat turn dry.

"Yes, they're the noble pioneers, the Supreme Pontiffs of old." O'Brien said softly. "Let's continue moving forward, and I'll introduce them to you."

The Archbishop listened to His Highness' descriptions, while at the same time studied the portraits - even though he understood that they were the former leaders of the Church, but an inexplicable strange feeling continued to linger in his mind. The persons in the portraits were simply too lifelike, and Mayne was unable to imagine what techniques and dyes were used by the artist to produce these half-body portraits. Under the dim yellow light, the top half of the portraits gradually faded into the darkness as Mayne walked further, leaving visible only the lower section of the faces which continued to grin at him.

Halfway through the grand hall, Mayne unexpectedly noticed the portraits of women.

Their looks were dissimilar and they were dressed differently, but each of them could be said to be movingly beautiful - it was rare for mortals to have such remarkable appearances, as the Bishop well knew, and it was for this reason that he felt extremely puzzled and astounded. However, His Highness seemed unconcerned, and continued to calmly introduce their names, terms of service, and contributions.

Each of these people was a former Pope of the Church.

The two men soon reached the end of the Prayer Room.

Facing the central aisle of the grand hall was a full-body portrait which occupied an entire wall on its own. It was hung behind the sanctuary, and its four sides were decorated with shiny crystals, which made the picture look even more vivid.

Mayne swallowed hard and walked up to the portrait.

At the very instant he managed to get a full view of the painting, he felt his heart leap up. "O holy, a woman of peerless beauty!" Aside from these words, there was no other way for him to describe what he saw. From her looks, she possessed both feminine beauty and masculine fortitude, which blended naturally and did not conflict with each other. Her red hair seemed like streaks of burning flame, while she wielded a large sword which looked wanton and capable of extinguishing all fires and evil desires. She stood erect holding the sword, with her eyebrows slightly raised, both eyes glancing forward, her slender lips firmly closed, and looked naturally powerful and imposing. Under the gaze of her sharp and penetrating pupils, Mayne felt an immense and overwhelming pressure which almost coerced him to kneel in front of this magnificent lady.

"Your Holiness, this is..."

He struggled to turn his head, only to find that O'Brien had already knelt down.

"She's Alice, the First Pope and a Transcendent. She also has a nickname - the Queen of Witches."

Mayne felt his heart jump violently. His earlier speculations had turned out to be absolutely correct - the first Popes of the Church were witches!

"Why was the founder of the Church a witch?"

"Kneel and pay respect, child. I'll let you see everything that you wish to know later."