

## Witch 481

### Chapter 481: The City of Neverwinter

On the designated Groundbreaking Day, Roland got up very early.

He shaved the stubble on his face, tied up his long gray hair with a simple band, and used a small pair of scissors to trim his brows. After a year of living in this world, he was very experienced in grooming himself and did not need a maid's help.

Looking at his blurry reflection in the silver mirror, he felt that he somehow had the divine manner of a reclusive Taoist priest, if he put on a wide robe.

Roland nodded in satisfaction and left for his office.

There was Barov waiting for him in the room.

"Your Highness," he said with a bow, "a flying messenger has already been sent to Longsong Stronghold and will probably arrive at the Stronghold castle in half an hour."

"Uh-huh, is the venue set up?"

"It was all completed by yesterday afternoon, and right now it seems enough to hold the entire population of the town," replied the City Hall Director.

"Great job." praised Roland, and he slowly walked to the window.

The Impassable Mountain Range and the Misty Forest in the distance were still blanketed in white, and the rising sun scattered rays of golden light onto the snow. He saw moving figures on nearby town streets heading for the rubble city wall area in the West of the town.

As a defense line against demonic beasts last year, this rubble city wall that was hastily constructed with concrete played a principal role in the fight. However, it had now become a border between the inner and outer areas of the town. Roland didn't like this kind of clear separation between the rich and the poor, so he decided to tear it down sooner or later, except the symbolic gap area and gate tower. However, before that, he could still utilize it. He chose the middle section of the rubble city wall as the site for the Groundbreaking event since it could hold far more people than the square.

According to his plan, in order to strengthen the impact of the Groundbreaking event on citizens of both cities, Longsong Stronghold would hold a Groundbreaking announcement at the same time, which would be synchronized by flying messengers. When the first messenger reached Petrov, Roland would step on to the stage to give a speech.

"Right now, the gray falcon carrying the news must be soaring among the mountains and over the Redwater River, with a paper slip fastened to its claw as usual," thought Roland, "but it doesn't know the significance of the news it's carrying. From the moment it lands, Border Town and Longsong Stronghold will become history."

"Let's go." He collected his thoughts and turned around.

"Yes, Your Highness," Barov said with a smile.

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Petrov Hull walked slowly onto the constructed wooden stage and looked around.

There were not that many people on the square, at least not as many as during the oatmeal distribution last week.

This was not surprising, since people were mainly only concerned with food and clothes. Compared to the free oatmeal, a Groundbreaking ceremony would not matter that much.

It even seemed rather unnecessary to Even Petrov himself.

The Months of Demons had ended, but the City Hall still did not receive as many applications for job as they had expected. The notice calling for handymen and construction workers was put up a week ago, but the number of recruits hadn't even reached half of the target amount. Meanwhile, Rats seemed to rise back from the ashes, as the police department received more and more reports every day and only verifying these reports was a painstaking amount of work. His friend Rene Medde complained to him that the arresting team needed twice the men to handle its workload.

This actually met Petrov's expectations.

The people were just like that, lazy, greedy, and unintelligent... His Highness spent so much time and efforts on them, but what could he get in return? The thing confused him the most was that Roland Wimbledon was clearly a member of the royal family, so where did that strange confidence in the people come from?

No matter what, he was firmly tied to the prince's chariot, so all he could do was to follow him faithfully.

An eagle cawed in the distance, and a gray figure appeared in the sky.

Petrov opened his prepared speech draft.

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"Your Highness, it's almost the time." Barov reminded.

The sun had risen halfway into the sky, and the sundial's shadow pointed to nine o'clock. Roland nodded and walked to the tower railing. As soon as the people saw the prince, their chatter turned into warm cheers, and they all raised their hands to create waves throughout the crowd.

Area on both sides of the city wall was packed by a dense crowd of over 20,000 people, which meant that most of the town's residents were gathered here. Roland was glad that he was not holding this Groundbreaking ceremony in the central square, since it obviously could not offer enough space for such a huge, excited crowd.

He waved his hands to silence the cheers. "Greetings, my subjects."

Echo's magnifying ability allowed his voice to reverberate over the entire town.

"I believe you already know what's about to happen today. This small town, which was built for the North Slope Mine, is soon about to become a real city."

"In the past, the Months of Demons was a nightmare for Border Town, and everyone had to escape to Stronghold for shelter. Now, we have built a strong base here. Osmond Ryan, who wanted to ruin the Western Region, has fallen; the church, which wanted to harm witches and enslave the people, has been banished from this land; even Timothy Wimbledon, who dared to attempt to destroy me, failed—even if he set the entire Southern and Eastern Regions on fire, the town would still be safe and sound. I'm sure the refugees who fled here know this best."

Roland's words were quickly met with the crowd's responses.

"That's right. He burned down the Eagle City and plundered the Port of Clearwater!"

"The new king cleaned out Valencia. His knights acted no differently from burglars, sometimes even worse!"

"He took away my son, saying he needed to join the King's City guards. Heavens... he's only fifteen!"

The prince reached out his hand to quiet them. "And these tragedies will never happen again. This is why the new city is being built! Only by uniting more people, can we face our evil enemies and show them the consequences of their recklessness." He paused. "And this is my city, too. I vow that Roland Wimbledon will never leave any of his people behind, and even if the Kingdom of Graycastle is united, he'll never leave this place!"

A wave of cheers erupted at the foot of the city wall.

"Your Highness, you..." Barov exclaimed from behind him.

Roland waved his hand to silence him. "That's right. This will become the new capital of the Kingdom of Graycastle, and the kingdom will be reborn! I believe that even if an endless winter arrived, this city would still be as warm as spring!" He paused for a while and raised his right hand. "From this day on, Border Town and Longsong Stronghold will become one, and its name will be..."

"Long live the City of Neverwinter!"

"Long live, long live the City of Neverwinter!"

Everyone became excited, and the deafening chants rang through the sky. A mist of snow erupted on the mountainside, and the echoes rolled endlessly through the peaks...

Roland looked at the cheering subjects and felt a great anticipation growing inside him. The sparks of revolution had been ignited, and one day, he would see these sparks turn into a giant flame that would engulf the entire land.

Chapter 482: Zero's Will

The upper level of the Pivotal Secret Temple was brightly lit up with dozens of Magic Stones that made the circular library as bright as day. When one was in this room, it was difficult to believe that it was underground.

This area was equivalent to the Tower of Babel of the Hermes Cathedral above ground, and it was Zero's favorite place. She could easily see all of the Pivotal Secret Area through the window. Watching over the figures bustling around the God's Stone of Punishment Pillar like ants, she felt a great joy in having control over all of these lives. It was as if she was the Lord of the Kingdom of God, and the people walking slowly in the dark were the believers that built the kingdom.

When she had free time, she would take a book containing the history and secrets of the Union from a shelf and read it by the window. Of course, she also had to have a cup of black tea with coltsfoot in it next to her.

After she became the Pope, Zero was actually more relaxed. She did not worry about the impending Battle of Divine Will, but looked forward to it. After more than 200 years, her life had become quite dull, and the Senior Demons that were recorded to be unbeatable seemed like exciting opponents. "I wonder if I take them into the Soul Battlefield, will they still be as fearless and terrifying as they appear?"

However, this battle was still years away, so she needed to set a new goal for herself to pass the time.

There were few people Zero concerned, and Roland Wimbledon happened to be one of them... he was the only mortal to interest her so far.

He was belittled by everyone, but he came out on top after the Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince, fighting extremely well with his tiny territory against two strong contenders for the throne. This was undoubtedly very rare. Also, she discovered some interesting clues in Garcia's memories.

The Queen of Clearwater once placed a maid next to Prince Roland to feed him a deadly poison, but it completely failed, and then the furious queen executed the unlucky alchemist who made the poison. However, Zero had a member of the Secret Pivotal Area replicate the poison according to the recipe in her memories, and the product turned out to be just as the alchemist had promised. It was odorless, colorless, soluble in water, deadly upon intake and incurable.

"So, did the maid deceive Garcia, or is the current Roland Wimbledon not the same Prince Roland as before?" According to the information she had gathered, Zero was more inclined to the second guess. "The question is... if he isn't Prince Roland, who is he? Why no one doubted his identity before?" The more she pondered on this issue, the more intrigued she became. He was able to change his ways to earn the love of all his subjects, single-handedly redistribute the power in the Western Region, and make both the church's emissary delegation and crazed army disappear... If such a man was simply the lord of a small territory, it would really be a pity.

Thus, Roland Wimbledon had to be included as a member of the church, or in other words, become part of her. Zero could not help but lick her lips. It was also why she changed the sequence of attack. If her guesses were correct, then conquering the Kingdom of Graycastle would bring in more benefits than she could imagine.

Of course, as a lord with great authority, he would stay behind the lines during battles, so it was important to figure out how to force him out.

Just as Zero was contemplating how to avoid the direct battle and go straight to Roland, Isabella pushed open the library door and walked in.

"Is the meeting over?"

"Yes." She rubbed her neck. "Lucky you, sitting here reading and sipping tea all day, while I have to lie to those old men... no, it's actually one old man and two madmen."

"It's not simply lying. It concerns the operations of the church's lower level," Zero said with a shrug. "Although witches are the actual core of the church, without these men, we wouldn't be able to collect so many resources to achieve our ultimate goal."

"Whatever." Isabella yawned. "Anyways, they said that we have to wait until the second month of this summer for the resources to attack the Kingdom of Dawn to be relocated to the battle against the Kingdom of Graycastle, and even this is an optimistic estimate."

"This amount of time isn't too long, but it isn't short either," thought Zero, "so the wait will both be torturous and make the reward even more enjoyable." "How's the pill production going?"

"I think there are about 300,000 to 400,000 pills in storage right now," replied Isabella. "But do you really plan to send all the civilians to battle against the demons? Millions of people would completely exhaust all of Hermes's resources. Also..."

"Also what?"

"Also we might not win." She shook her head. "There are so many people that they'll cause trouble no matter where we place them. Not to mention, their days are numbered after they eat the first pill, so what if the demons don't attack us in time? If we feed too few, then they're useless; if we feed too many, we might waste them. Even if the demons all attack at once and are defeated by the crazed army, these people won't be able to fight anymore."

"You don't understand." Zero stood up, walked over to a large table, and lifted the cover off of it, revealing a map of the Wild Places. "I never planned to use the crazed army to protect Hermes, and the location for the final battle should be somewhere on the Fertile Plains... I think it'll probably take place at the ruins of the Holy City of Taquila, since it's closest to us." She pointed at a spot on the map.

"Do you want to... initiate an attack?" Isabella froze in shock.

"We're desperately lacking time," said Zero calmly. "I've never dreamed of completely wiping out the demons. The Holy Book says that only when the Bloody Moon arrives and the Gates of Hell open can the demons build a black spire. Actually, the spire isn't built... it grows."

"Are you saying that those stones are actually alive?" Isabella asked in disbelief.

"This information can only be found in the personal notes of the Union's Three Chiefs... the demons' expansion depends on the black spire's ability to produce Red Mist, and currently spires are founded in areas with many God's Stone mineral veins, so their range of influence will continue to grow. In the beginning of the Second Battle of Divine Will, an Extraordinary once led a division of soldiers to approach the Red Mist area underground, and they found a startling sight—an enormous monster was writhing under the spire, and its body was even larger than the Taquila tower itself," Zero said slowly.

"That enormous monster was decomposing God's Stone and turning it into black crystals, which gave off Red Mist. Considering the demons had Chaos Beasts that turned God's Stones into Magic Stones, it wasn't difficult to comprehend that they also had this kind of ability."

"..." Isabella opened her mouth and finally spat. "That's disgusting."

"Unfortunately, once the spire is formed, small surprise attacks will be ineffective, so our best bet is to attack them directly. I don't know how long it takes for the decomposed God's Stone to grow out of the ground, but it probably doesn't happen overnight. During this time, demons can only transport Red Mist from their backup resources, so they'll have very limited strength. We need to use a crazed army that is large enough to defeat the demons to create a path, so the God's Punishment Army can kill the underground monster," said Zero with great conviction. "If we're lucky enough, we'll buy ourselves another 400 years."

Chapter 483: The Distance to God (Part I)

Isabella stared at the map in silence for a while. "But the crazed soldiers aren't God's Punishment Warriors. Although the pills can affect their resolve, it won't give them unbreakable resolve. In front of truly terrifying enemies, they'll still be afraid and may even run away—millions of defecting soldiers are enough to run us all over into dust."

"Obviously it won't be that simple. It would be best if the crazed army mostly consists of the church's lower level believers, and if the Judgment Army was the core." Zero returned to the window. "And if we want these many believers, we must unite the Four Kingdoms."

"What are our chances of winning?"

"30%? 50%?" she replied nonchalantly. "How can I know what our chances of winning are? After all, we've never fought against them and can only get the information through ancient books from 400 years ago. Don't forget what I said before... if we're lucky enough."

This was exactly why it was so exciting—she was putting the fate of all mankind at stake and placing the few bargaining chips she had all in one basket by fighting the strong with the weak... in a battle where the odds were against them, an unexpected triumph would be all the more sweeter.

"The continuation of mankind will depend on their courage, wisdom, faith, and sacrifice in this battle," she thought. "This is probably what God hopes to see... cowards can't earn his smile."

"I hope you're right." Isabella frowned. "I'm feeling more curious now."

"Curious about what?"

"If Prince Roland of the Kingdom of Graycastle was standing here, what would he do?"

Zero furrowed her brows. "Why? Do you think he can beat me?"

"Bishop Tayfun said that he hasn't heard from the Pure Witch he sent to the Kingdom of Graycastle yet, as if she simply disappeared. She was the one you assigned on the mission to check out the Western Region. Besides her, we also lost Aphra from King's City, the Bishop candidate Mira, and the church in

Longsong Stronghold..." Isabella paused for a bit. "Don't you think since the church began targeting the Four Kingdoms, we've never suffered so many losses before? It's as if after we got involved with the Western Region, we have been losing. It's like... God is protecting him."

"Enough!" Zero slammed her fist on the table. "You know nothing about God!"

Isabella was slightly shocked. "I was only kidding... since when did you care so much about God?"

Zero tried to repress her anger. "He's merely a mortal! Mortals can only rely on calculations and knowledge, and this will all become part of me. Even though he has ways to fight the demons, the Union will definitely do better!" Zero turned around and stared at Isabella. "When the church's troops march into the Kingdom of Graycastle, you'll know who really has God's blessing."

As Isabella left the library, she sighed and said, "You're becoming more and more like a... Pope."

Zero sat silently next to the table, her emotions in tumult for a long time, which was uncommon throughout her 200 years of life.

She knew what Isabella meant, but she could not explain herself to her... no matter who was Pope, no matter what ideas they had before, as soon as they stepped into the Prayer Room, they would all undergo unpredictable changes.

God... really exists.

Zero realized that her thoughts had been completely disturbed, so she closed her book and walked to the top floor of the library.

It was the highest point of the Pivotal Secret Temple where the Prayer Room was.

Zero pushed open a secret door made out of bookshelves, walked up a narrow stone staircase, and entered a windowless room. The room was only a few square feet, not even enough for someone to lie down in. The roof was cone-shaped and encrusted with Magic Stones that gave off a faint blue light. Under the dim lighting, Zero could vaguely see the four walls and hard ground. Besides these, there was nothing in the room, and it was hard to believe that this stuffy and cramped place was the closest location to God.

Zero closed her eyes to feel his summoning.

Her dark world slowly began to change, as if something entered her mind and displayed a scene in her consciousness—she knew that this wasn't a figment of her imagination. Even her soul, which had absorbed hundreds of people, could not see or even imagine such a sight.

When the twisting lines slowed down, five large paintings appeared in the expansive world... one floated above her head in a giant ring, and the other four lined up symmetrically in a cross next to her.

This was a sign from God.

Watching something in her mind was an incredible feeling. Zero knew that this entire scene would disappear as soon as she opened her eyes, so she could only use her consciousness to view every painting—when she was focused on the paintings, she felt being brought into them.

The large ring-shaped painting on top of her was undoubtedly God himself.

It was a dark world with no visible boundaries, and a giant red sphere was suspended in the middle. The sphere was made of magic power, and she could feel its infinite power from simply looking at it. Half of it seemed to be cut off by a knife or hidden in darkness, so only half could be seen.

The more closely Zero looked at it, the surer she was of her judgment.

It was just too majestic.

She was nothing compared to this ball of magic power. She could not even find the words to describe how giant it was, only that even the world under her was dwarfed by this red sphere. The swirls of magic power on its surface were even wider than the ocean, and the light of the shining magic power was even brighter than the sun—besides God, who else could have such vast powers?

This was probably the Bloody Moon recorded in the Holy Book—from the side, the half-sphere truly did not look like a full moon.

Zero once tried to pray to it, but it did not respond and only floated calmly in the darkness as if it was waiting for the results of the Battle of Divine Will.

This was why she was extremely enraged by Isabella's words. This thing did not give anyone its blessing... she realized after witnessing it in person that humans were insignificant in God's eyes.

After she separated from her thoughts, Zero looked towards the four paintings at the bottom.

She believed that the reason the battles that occurred every 400 years were called Battle of Divine Will had something to do with the content of these paintings.

The church's secret history recorded past Union leaders' and popes' interpretations of the paintings, and most of them came to the same conclusion—the location of the ending of the war was in these four paintings.

#### Chapter 484: The Distance to God (Part II)

The first painting had the richest contents.

It depicted a throne constructed with swords and bones, and blood red long windows and tall black columns were behind it. It seemed to be a part of a palace. If she completely submerged her consciousness into it, she could even see the city outside the window with endless spires. What caught her attention the most was the Stone Gate that peeked through the city—if the spires around it were the buildings of Hermes residents, then the Stone Gates at least five times as tall as the church's Tower of Babel, which completely went against common sense.

What was more unbelievable was that the inside of the gates was black, as if a large and smooth cloth was covering its middle. However, as she looked closely, there seemed to be an immeasurable depth to the darkness... The more she stared at it, the more uneasy she felt.

Zero only focused her attention on the window for a while and soon turned it to the throne.



She did not see the lord of the throne today.

The things she saw in her mind would sometimes change. For example, she could occasionally see an armored warrior sitting on the throne, his head covered with a frightening black helmet, only revealing a faint red light through his eye sockets. However, this was not very common, and the throne was usually empty.

According to the records of secret history, this painting depicted the city where the demons originated from and first appeared—the Northwestern corner of Land of Dawn.

Zero agreed with this theory. The painting's blood red colors and black spires were very similar to the demons' living environments, and the helmet of the owner of the throne had a distinct demonic style. The only strange part was that its body was exactly like that of a regular human, and not like the strong and horrific bodies of the Fearsome Demons or Lords of Hell recorded in the Holy Book. Thus, there were many speculations about its identity. Some popes believed that it was the source of evil, while other witches thought that it was a member of the demons that guarded the secrets of God.

The second painting was much more mysterious.

It had few contents, which seemed to keep moving. At least in Zero's limited number of observations, she had never seen the same scene twice.

This time, she saw water.

The light blue water rippled backward against three large skeletons, which were completely hollow inside, but the water was somehow held outside the bones by an invisible barrier. It was as if the giant skeletons were keels supporting the side ports, and she felt like she was in a boat and looking out through the window—except these windows spanned the entire wall.

Zero was quickly enthralled by the strange scenery in front of her... She was standing at the border between water and sky, with half of her underwater, and the other half floating above. She could see the bright sunlight and sparse clouds above her, but her legs were encased in water. Under the sun, she could clearly see the color of the water changing from light blue on the surface to bright green, and then dark green, as it went deeper and deeper.

Suddenly, the scene began to shake, and Zero felt the world tremble below her and almost fell over. She subconsciously tried to open her eyes but stopped herself at the last second. "This isn't reality," she told herself. "This is God giving you a sign."

The water was quickly rising and almost drowned out the sky.

Or, perhaps the water was not rising, but she was sinking downwards.

Soon, everything outside the window was covered by water, and she even saw red fish swimming by the skeletons. First, there were only a few of them, but then there were more and more, and the dense schools of fish surrounded the invisible barrier like a red ribbon. The water gradually changed from dark green to a dull black, until the scene was shrouded in a complete darkness and totally disappeared.

Zero broke out of the painting, panting. This was the first time she experienced such a clear vision, and when the darkness covered her eyesight, she felt like she was about to choke. However, she did not find

any useful clues—according to the secret history, the contents of the second painting were always changing. Some recorded seeing a giant eyeball, others saw a volcano spewing bubbles and yellow smoke, and others saw a bottomless abyss giving off a faint light. No observers had ever seen the same thing.

She rested for a while and turned her attention to the third painting.

However, there was still nothing in it... it was like the world outside the frame, dark and dead silent.

The secret history mentioned that in the beginning of the first Battle of Divine Will, there was something in the painting... but this recording was so ancient that its pages were tattered and basically illegible. However, she was certain that a hundred years after the Battle of Divine Will, this painting turned black and never showed anything ever again.

The fourth painting was not at all mentioned in the secret history.

It was difficult for Zero to understand as if they were all in agreement to hide something—if even the sole messenger of secrets, the pope, did not have the right to know, then the secret would be unknown to everyone forever.

The painting depicted a wall.

It was an unassuming rough gray stone wall.

Parts of the gray paint were chipped off, revealing the cracked stone blocks under it. It had obviously stood here for a long time. Besides this wall, there was nothing else.

After staying in the painting for a while, Zero started to feel exhausted.

Reading God's signs took a lot of energy, and even she could not do it for a long time.

Zero opened her eyes to disconnect from the sphere of magic power, causing the dark world and giant paintings to disappear, and she was back in the dim small room.

She sighed deeply and stumbled down the stairs, only recovering after drinking off her cold black tea in the library.

Although God did not give her any response, her anger before was completely calmed. "Isabella knows nothing about God, but I do."

Zero looked out the window at the busy figures under the tower, and her feeling of control returned. Her experiences during the past 200 years made her disregard everything in this world, but after she became the Pope, she realized that she had only scratched the surface in understanding the world—now, she faced a whole new mystery, and her immortality was perfect for solving it.

Zero felt in her heart that she was the real person chosen by God.

If she could approach God, it was worth the 400 years' wait, even thousands of years.

Chapter 485: The Day of Leaving

"Here comes the ship."

A sail peeked over the end of the light gray horizon. There were no other merchant ships around, so it had to be a ship from Sleeping Island.

"Uh-huh," Tilly gently replied, her voice muffled by the sounds of the sea washing onto the shoals. She had turned her back to Roland, so he could not see her face.

"We're leaving now," Andrea said regrettably. "I really liked your domain, and I've no idea if I can make the same delicious ice cream bread as you have here when I'm back at Sleeping Island."

Along with a bolt rifle, Roland had given her the ice cream recipe as well. "As long as you have eggs and milk, it won't taste too bad. When you come back to Border Town... no, City of Neverwinter next time, I'll have more delicious food for you."

"Will it be even tastier than ice cream?" Andrea held her stray hair and said with a laugh, "You'd better not lie to me. I have your word."

"If you're reluctant to leave, you could stay here," Ashes laid out her hands and said. "Princess Tilly definitely won't mind leaving such a gluttonous witch like you behind—you won't be allowed to eat as much as you want on Sleeping Island."

"Is that true? I won't give you any ice cream when we get back." Andrea stared at her. "You should just eat your dried fish and drink your fishy soup every day."

As they continued to bicker, the sailboat neared the coast. The flying pink flag on the top of the mast told everyone it was the Charming Beauty.

Shavi summoned the invisible barrier, which allowed her to travel and move between the shoal and the ship, enabling her to carry all the books, goods and materials to the ship, without docking. Then, she carried the card-playing three and Princess Tilly, but as Tilly was stepping into the barrier, Roland called her name.

"... What?" She turned her head, her eyes revealing a complex mixture of emotions.

Roland was not good at saying goodbye and had stopped her without forethought. He took a deep breath and shouted, "If you have any problems on Sleeping Island, you can tell me. I'll do my best to help you. And remember that you're always welcome in the City of Neverwinter."

"... " Tilly smiled after a moment. "Thank you, and you too."

"Goodbye, everyone." Andrea and Shavi shouted while waving their hands.

Ashes did not say anything and just waved her hand too.

After their farewell, the barrier carried the witches to the Charming Beauty quickly.

"What's wrong? You don't want them to leave?" Nightingale asked from behind him.

"I just think it's a pity. There are 300 witches... It would be wonderful if they all moved to the Western Region," said Roland with a fake casualness.

"Yeah, and then you'd feel even more guilty." Nightingale rolled her eyes at him.

"Guilty?" Roland felt terrified and asked.

"Why? Living here is better than living on Sleeping Island, isn't it?" Anna was also confused.

"You wouldn't understand, even if I told you." Nightingale turned around and walked towards the hot air balloon. "And that's the most irritating part."

Watching her walk away, Roland felt a sense of relief. Nightingale had disappeared for the last two days, and now she was finally back to normal, so he had nothing to worry about.

"Let's go. There're a lot of things for us to do," Wendy said while smiling.

"OK." Roland and Anna smiled and walked to Cloud Gazer while holding hands.

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Back in his office, Roland opened his notebook and thought about how he would develop his domain in the coming year.

Undoubtedly, there were two things of the utmost importance that needed addressing.

The first thing to do was to dethrone Timothy and stop him from diminishing the countrymen with the Berserk Pills. This could also greatly expand Roland's reputation and prepare everyone for the unification of the Kingdom of Graycastle.

The second was to absorb Longsong Stronghold as soon as possible to put the City of Neverwinter on the track for construction.

Iron Axe, Carter, Theo in King's City, and he had already discussed the former many times, and they decided to launch the spring offensive at the end of April, which would be at the end of this month. It was the plowing time in many cities, which would not affect the professional First Army, but would affect the traditional noble, because people would be constrained by their crops and unwilling to start a war at the risk of starvation. If the army suddenly appeared at the outskirts of King's City, Timothy would be totally unprepared.

The steam engine plant, ammunition factory, and concrete boat plant were all busy producing resources for battle. Meanwhile, logistics operations were at full speed. Plus the City Hall boasted enough manpower, and the First Army was experienced in battles. Roland had a good grasp on the necessary resources and their deployment, so he was not worried at all about either.

The most important thing at the moment was to utilize the resources of Stronghold.

Thinking of this, Roland told Barov to come to his office.

"Have you cataloged all of the industries in Longsong Stronghold and its surrounding territories?"

Barov pulled out a notebook. "It's all in here, Your Highness. The primary income was from the mining industry and salt industry, especially the former—there was a high-quality gem mine to the west of Longsong Stronghold near the Impassable Mountain Range, whose output accounted for more than half of the Stronghold's income."

"Gem mine?" Roland was not interested in luxuries. "Isn't there also a gem mine in the North Slope Mine? Why did that town appear so poorly last time I visited?"

"It's not the same, Your Highness." Barov rubbed his hands and said, "The gems of the North Slope Mine are the byproducts of other mineral veins, so the quantity is very small, and they might not even be good enough to be made into jewelry when they're cut. But the gem mine in Stronghold is full of colorful stones on the prism, and each of them can easily be made into a high-quality multicolored stone. The gems are worth dozens of gold royals once sold in King's City, and the output and quality are far better than that of the gems from the North Slope Mine."

"A multicolored stone?" Roland asked curiously, "What does it look like?"

"It's generally transparent and has no fixed color. It reflects many different colors under the sunlight, from light green to orange-red, and it shows multiple colors after being cut. It's more like crystallized sunlight than a normal ruby or sapphire." Barov paused. "The multicolored stone of the Kingdom of Graycastle, the Ice Stone of the Kingdom of Everwinter and the luminary stone of the Kingdom of Dawn are the most popular gems among the noble."

"That gem sounded pretty luxurious." Roland thought. "Maybe it could be used to make a ring for Anna. But, the gem mine has little value when talking about the improvement of people's livelihood.'" Roland asked, "Any other mineral resources?"

"The Maple Family and the Wild Rose Family each have an iron ore mine," Barov said, "but, they're both smaller than the North Slope Mine."

"The domains of the two families are both surrounded by the Impassable Mountain Range—these mountains crossing the Four Kingdoms may be full of treasure," Roland thought. "Maybe I can explore along the foot of the mountain with Sylvie to find an ore reserve for the City of Neverwinter. After all, steel is a powerful resource for industrial manufacturing."

Chapter 486: A Call for Help

"What about the salt industry?"

There were many ore resources in the Western Region, so it was not surprising that mining was the primary industry of Stronghold. However, this was the first mention of the salt industry, and Prince Roland had no knowledge of local specialties. In Roland's opinion, salt should be the main industry in coastal cities.

"Stronghold, the Elk Family, and the Honeysuckle Family each have one salt well. In fact, the three salt wells are very close to each other and basically located on the borders of their domains. I heard that over 200 years ago, civil wars in the Western Region often happened there and lasted for 50 years." Barov stroked his mustache.

Roland wondered if the three nobilities occupying the area had then become the biggest winners. He asked with great interest, "What's the output of these salt wells?"

"Besides supplying the Western Region, the salt was also sold to Fallen Dragon Ridge, Redwater City, and some other small villages along the way." Barov leafed through his notebook. "It accounted for almost 15% of the Stronghold income."

"Why such a low percentage?" Roland asked in surprise. "The market price for salt isn't low."

"It's too hard to get the salt out of the deep pit." Barov shook his head. "I know a nobleman in Silver City who has a salt well in his domain. It's about the size of a human head and too small for a cask. People mine it by putting water in and scooping it up with a bamboo stick after the salt melts."

"Why not expand the well?"

Barov smiled smugly. "Your Highness, the salt bed is too deep. If we dig it like a water well, its walls will collapse. According to him, the salt well has been mined from his grandfather's generation, and now the well is as deep as a belfry in King's City."

"I see," Roland thought. Limited by the depth, people here mined salt wells using the brine method, but the process could be improved. Lifting the salt mine with Lotus's power or extracting the brine with a steam engine would be more efficient.

An abundant salt supply would not only bring great profits to the City of Neverwinter, but also popularize healthier and more delicious food to the subjects. The salt they had at present was crude and saline with all kinds of impurities and foreign substance.

"I see." At this thought, the prince nodded with satisfaction. "You can go now. Don't forget to do population expansion work. The Months of Demons just passed, so it's a good time to recruit before refugees starve without their crops."

"I had the same thought, Your Highness," Barrow said with his hand on his chest, "The new emissary delegation will leave soon, and I think they will gain more than last year."

After the chief left, Roland was about to plan how to deal with the Stronghold resources, when he heard a knocking on the window.

He turned his head and found a gray falcon lying on the window grille with a note on its foot.

Nightingale opened the window and let the flying messenger in.

It was a letter from Petrov Hull in Longsong.

Roland read the letter quickly and could not help but laugh. After Nightingale came back to Border Area with him, it had been difficult to continue the fight against crime. They received all kinds of reports from the masses, and it was difficult to identify what was true, and what had been made up for the cash reward. Less than half of the Rats had applied for jobs. The new Minister of Justice, Rene Medde was busy all day long and could not control the Black Street Forces. If it went on like this, public safety would deteriorate.

Petrov had written at the end of the letter that he wanted the prince to help him with manpower and technology, but Roland knew he actually wanted Nightingale and Vader to help the Earl of the Elk Family.

He gave the letter to Nightingale. She glanced at it and said, "They can't hold Stronghold anymore?"

"The former Ragingfire was just a response to the war among the masses. He has no experience in battling or capturing the Rats." Roland smiled and said, "As I expected, they have a long way to go in fighting the Rats, and there'll be many relapses. But they'll eventually be destroyed with powerful measures and given a better way of life. Once they're on the right track, it'll be hard to stray into evil again. This is the case for both people and cities."

"Do you want me to go?" Nightingale sighed.

"Don't forget that Longsong and Border Town are one city now. Don't separate them from each other." He shrugged. "I said at the expansion meeting that there'll be a day when we could have breakfast in Border Area and work in Longsong Area half an hour later. And you are in charge of the Security Bureau, you are expected to travel between the two places and inspect the work."

"If I go, what will protect you?" She shook her head. "Don't tell me there'll be no danger. You are the thorn in Timothy and the church's side, and only I can stop assassin witches."

Roland wanted to say that he had the God's Stone of Retaliation and would not be hurt by a normal witch, but he realized that was not what she was worried about. "Listen to me."

She cut in, "You can't make me promise anything, and Wendy and Scroll will agree with me. You're the most important person in the Witch Union—"

"I'll go with you."

"Ahem, re-really..." Nightingale choked in shock and turned her head to avoid his gaze. "I guess I'm the only one who can help them."

The prince could not help but laugh. "Take Summer with you. It's time for her to practice."

"And Sylvie and Soraya should go too to establish the identification systems while checking out the mines, and maybe even build up the City Hall," he thought. "I wonder how the training of the nobility in Longsong Stronghold is going."

...

Three days later, Roland boarded with the witches and the nobility in Stronghold to go to Longsong Area.

Looking at the cement paddle steamer and the coal cinder in the deck seams in the Redwater River, he sighed. It seemed impossible to reach Longsong Stronghold in one day, this speed was still too slow for him. After all, time was money. Roland planned to build an exclusive luxury high-speed ship.

Chapter 487: The Guarding Shield

By dusk, the ship reached the port of the inland river near Longsong Stronghold.

Petrov had heard about their trip and greeted them at the port with his followers. When they returned the castle, a grand welcoming banquet awaited them in the hall of the first floor. After taking over

Longsong Stronghold, something changed in Roland's heart. When watching the nobles giving toasts to each other, he felt the money spent on the banquet came out of his own pocket.

After briefly greeted the eldest son of the Honeysuckle Family, he cut to the chase. "Have the Rats come out again?"

"Judging from the reports we received, it seems so." Petrov made a gesture to guide the prince to a corner of the hall. "Compared with the former organized Black Street groups, the criminals we recently arrested mostly acted individually, such as thieves, burglars, and murderers, all of whom were pulled to the square to be hung. Since you asked us to judge with adequate proof, the criminals we executed were only a small portion of all the reported criminals. Verifying the information in hand took quite some time. Besides..." The eldest son of the Honeysuckle Family paused. "We're in a great trouble recently."

"What is it?"

"Someone openly resisted your policies, Your Highness," Petrov said in a worried tone. "Earl Medde knows more about it. I'll ask him to tell you in detail."

"Your Highness, the Elk Family greets you." After being summoned, Rene came and bowed to the prince, and then he began to tell the whole story. "Recently, something serious happened in North Street of the outer town... Um, Sheriff Vader would call it a serial killing case."

"Um, it's actually what I would call it." This triggered Roland's interests. "Carry on."

"Yes," Rene Medde said in a serious voice. "Since three days ago, a resident has been found dead at home every night. The victims were all male, lived alone, had no families, and most importantly, they applied for jobs in the City Hall."

The prince frowned. "Were they regular employees?"

"If handymen can be counted as full-time job, then yes." The Earl of the Elk Family nodded. "In the room of each victim, there was a painting drawn with blood—a crown and a cross. Because of the identical mark, I sought confirmation from the City Hall and then found all the victims were among the list of people who were about to be sent to the Redriver District to build houses.

"You think their intention is..."

"To sabotage your enrollment plan, Your Highness," Rene replied. "Rumors have been spreading in North Street saying that whoever applies for a job in the City Hall will be a target for killers."

"I believe that's what's happening." Petrov chimed. "We've employed less than we'd expected, and there're barely any applicants from North Street. Moreover, there're applicants who regret applying and say that they're physically unfit for going out of town and hope that the officials can take their names off the City Hall's enrollment list. Now, the rumor is only spread in North Street, but if it goes as far as other blocks, it could sabotage your construction plan."

Roland contemplated for a moment. "Have you got any clues about the suspect?"

"We..." Rene opened his mouth and said after a while, "There were no witnesses to the crimes, so we've no idea where to start the searching."



"Really..." Roland felt surprised. "How did you solve such cases on previous occasions?"

"Do you mean the patrol team?" The young Earl of the Elk Family hesitated for a while. "As far as I know, they didn't have standard handling methods. If it was an influential case where the families of the victim appealed to the Lord, and the Lord decided to show his subjects justice, he would pressure the Black Street gangsters and order the Rats to hand over the criminal—the patrol team didn't care if the person they handed over was only a scapegoat or not. If the victim was only a foreigner or lived alone, the patrol team would usually ignore it."

"This is outrageous!" Roland was shocked. "The patrol party's way of handling such cases is equal to handing over the jurisdiction to the Rats. No wonder people were saying that Rats were the other party who ruled the city. Besides, in this era, there seems to be no such a thing as a criminal investigation, so if there's no witness in a murder case, it'll most likely become suspended—of course, that's only the case for civilians."

Border Town has always been under Nightingale's supervision, plus it has a simple population composition, so all the crimes here are instantly cracked, which led to my neglect of this matter. Although Rene didn't say so, he might think that my request of a verdict on verified evidence is too demanding.

But no matter what, I won't allow the using of scapegoats in my territory."

"I see. From tomorrow on, the Security Bureau will take over this case, and all you need to do is to cooperate."

"Yes. Thank you, Your Highness," Rene said joyfully.

...

After the banquet, Roland returned to his study on the top floor of the castle. The interior of the study looked very different now—the book shelves around the walls were all torn down, and a soft couch, a tea table, and cushions were added. Behind the desk, the wall was knocked open, and two French windows were installed. Although they were not made of crystal glass, they greatly expanded the view of the room. Through the slightly tinted glass, Roland overlooked Stronghold, enveloped in darkness, and nodded with satisfaction.

It seems Petrov followed my orders with great care, which means my choosing him as my deputy was a wise decision.

"How do you plan to handle this?" Nightingale emerged from the Mist sitting on the desk with her legs crossed.

"I'm not planning to handle it at all." The prince smiled, shaking his head. "Now that all the nobles have returned to Longsong, tomorrow the primary work is to have them establish the secondary City Hall, divide them into departments, and place some people in charge. The sooner the structure is established, the earlier Soraya can draw identification cards. You'll be the one in charge of fighting crimes."

"Me?"

"You're the head of the Security Bureau, so it's totally up to you to decide how to solve a case... The whole police department of the City of Neverwinter is in your command; both Vader and Rene are your subordinates."

"But didn't you always say that the authority of the departments should be separated, and administrative status should be equal?" Nightingale felt bewildered. "I don't understand how the City Hall operates, but this arrangement seems to put the Security Bureau above the City Hall."

"Territorial security is top priority, which is exactly why you report directly to me," Roland said affirmatively. "Not only for the police department, but all the examination work for the City Hall and the army will be carried out by you. Indeed, each department should be separated and not interfere with one another, but there needs a web that binds them together and stops power abuse and corruption. It'll prevent the collapse of the new system from within. You must have heard the saying: the firmest defense collapses from within." He paused for a while, looking into Nightingale's eyes. "You're the most powerful shield to prevent all these things from happening. Now, both my personal safety and the security of the territory are in your hands."

."

Chapter 488: The Breeding Ground for Evil

"We're going to catch all the criminals and stop them from perpetrating in the City of Neverwinter!"

Nightingale held onto Summer's shoulder and said loudly.

"Uh, yes... Lady Nightingale." Summer then shrank back. "But it's time to go to sleep..."

"It's still early. Let's talk about the countermeasures for tomorrow." Her eyes were sparkling. "No one can escape our hunting, not even the most cunning Rat! Right, you can call me sister instead."

"Yes... Sister Nightingale."

Oh, my God, Summer did not understand, why as an ordinary townsman, she had to catch criminals. Wasn't it the patrol party's job? Plus, Lady Nightingale... no, Sister Nightingale had been so excited since she had returned from the prince's office. She had been saying "catching criminals" over and over again.

"She's really a witch who hates evils as she does her own enemies." Summer said to herself. "But can I really help her?"

As Summer thought about this, she asked cautiously. "What shall we do? I've never caught a criminal."

"It's my job to catch the criminals," Nightingale patted her chest proudly and said, "And, you only need to rebuild the crime scene to show us who the murder was!"

"You mean the exact moment of the killing?" Summer hesitated and continued, "But, how can I know when exactly the killer did it?"

"Uh..." Nightingale paused. "You're right. How often can you use your ability?"

"I practiced with Sister Wendy for a week and four times is the limit now, I think that's the best I can do," Summer said with frustration. "My magic power is very limited and if the illusion lasts a little longer, the number of uses will decrease. Besides, I cannot rebuild a scene from two days earlier, otherwise, the magic power will run out very fast."

"How long can the illusion last?"

"Half, half a quarter."

"Um... that's rather short." Nightingale paced to and fro at the bedside. "It'll be troublesome if the flashback doesn't reveal the criminal." She meditated for a few minutes. "If you reduce the lasting time of each illusion, can you try a few more times?"

"Maybe I can, but I'm not sure," Summer murmured, "Sister Wendy told me if I could control the magic power accurately, I would be able to control the length of time. But every time I summon my power, I always feel the magic waning quickly."

"It's such a pity Countess Spear isn't here," Nightingale said with a regretful look. "Anyway, let's deduce a time and take a chance."

"Take, take a chance?"

"Yes!" Nightingale said, laughing. "I'm always pretty lucky; otherwise, I wouldn't ever have met Prince Roland." She suddenly became sad at these words. "... if only it could have been a few days earlier."

"How could that be considered as lucky?" Summer shouted in her mind. "Anyway, luck is unreliable! My ability won't work even a few hours later, let alone days. Can we really catch criminals tomorrow?"

"Well, now go to sleep." Nightingale blew out the candles and darkness soon enveloped the room.

"Uh-uh." Summer answered and climbed onto the big bed. The soft bedding covered her immediately.

"God, this is the bed of a noble? It's too comfortable." Summer buried her head into the clean pillow and felt her body sinking into the bed. She stretched her body and quickly started to fall asleep.

Do all the witches in the castle sleep with such comfortable bedding? If I slept on such a bed, I wouldn't ever feel like getting up again.

She could hear Nightingale mumbling while she was trying to fall asleep.

"I'm his shield..."

And then Summer fell asleep.

...

Early the next morning, she was woken up by Nightingale.

"Hurry up. We ought to go," Nightingale said energetically.

"Yes..."

Summer struggled to get off the bed, put on her coat, and went downstairs with Nightingale. In the lobby, there was a tall man with brown hair pacing back and forth. When he saw them, he stepped forward and said with a bow, "Good morning. I'm Rene Medde, the Earl of the Elk Family. I've been waiting for you, you must be Lady Nightingale, and this is..."

"Summer, she's my assistant." Nightingale raised her head a little. "She's a witch, too."

"Is that so?" He looked a little surprised but quickly nodded at Summer. "That's great. The criminals will have nowhere to go if I get your help."

"Where is your staff?"

"They're all waiting outside the castle."

"Very well. Ask them to wait a little while longer, I haven't had my breakfast yet."

"Of course, please take your time."

Summer fixed her eyes on them until Nightingale turned into the dining room. She hurried to follow at her heels. "God, is this Sister Nightingale? She hadn't seen Sister Nightingale so dignified and serious— No, not exactly. She's so supercilious as if she were a noble."

That's definitely not something to be expected from a civilian.

Besides, the man is an Earl. In Valencia, the young Earl would be the perfect lover in every woman's eyes. If I were Sister Nightingale, I'd be too nervous to say a word. But Sister Nightingale seemed not care about this and kept him waiting for her.

"Is this all right?" Summer asked with concerns.

"Take it easy. His Highness told me that a noble is just a title in his territory and even the Earl won't devour you." Nightingale smiled. "Besides, Security Bureau is superior to the City Hall and I'm his boss. Why can't I make him wait for me?"

Summer felt the woman was suddenly beyond her reach.

After breakfast, they left the castle to investigate the scene of the murder. Last night, another victim died at home. This time, however, it was on the corner of North Street and West Street.

"It is the fourth one." Nightingale frowned. "And the murderer is moving to the west."

"It shows the killer realized the propagating effect of committing crimes only in a specific block was unsatisfactory," Rene nodded. "After all, the Rats' organization no longer exists."

Walking not too far down a muddy alley, the leading police officer stopped at a tumble-down cabin. "Sir, it's here."

Summer walked into the cabin after Nightingale and her heart skipped a beat.

A man was lying on the floor with his neck cut open and his vital fluid everywhere. There was a crossed crown on the wall facing the door and the heavy, metallic smell of blood filled the room.

"Ugh..." She had to cover her mouth to prevent herself from throwing up.

## Chapter 489: Tracking down the Criminal

"Is this the first time you've witnessed a scene like this?" Rene came up to her, looking quite concerned. "Perhaps it'll be better if you go outside and get some fresh air."

"No. No, thanks." Seeing Nightingale squatting by the body examining the wounds, Summer declined the offer. If Nightingale was still able to keep her composure at such a horrible crime scene... she must also stay here. Summer continued, "I, uh, feel much better now."

"When was he found?" Nightingale turned questioning.

"Early this morning. The residents nearby found his body when they went to draw water. It was before sunrise. The door was left wide open as it is now, as if the killer wanted to announce the death to the whole community." Rene answered. "In the past, it would take two or three days for us to hear about something like this. The City Hall has been offering rewards for information, so it was reported sooner."

"Do you know the victim's identity?"

"Shovel, freeman." Rene glanced about the room. "Nothing valuable has been found. Um... it looks like he used to be a Rat, too."

"Did anyone see him last night?"

"I checked. Nobody."

"Any noises heard?"

"None."

"It doesn't sound right; a strong man like him?" Nightingale frowned. "Even if his throat was slit, he wouldn't die immediately. Someone should have heard him struggling for life or banging on the floor. Are you sure they weren't lying?"

"I don't think so," Rene replied hesitantly. "The murder has sparked panic among the community. Plus, the residents get rewards for assisting the police. They shouldn't have any reason to lie."

"Well, bring them here. I'll interview them myself. And, Summer?" Nightingale looked toward her assistant.

"Yes?" Summer responded with a shiver.

"Go to the castle and bring Soraya here."

"Uh, sure."

Summer staggered out and ran toward the castle.

Somehow, she found the way in which Nightingale gave commands utterly beautiful. Everything about her character demonstrated great confidence. No wonder His Highness trusted her with the Security Bureau.

...

When Summer came back, there were another two people following her.

"Why didn't His Highness ask me to deal with such matters?" Lightning flew into the room, exclaiming. "He's unfair!"

"Coo, coo!" Maggie rejoined.

"I couldn't stop them," Summer said timidly.

"Shouldn't you protect Prince Roland while I'm away?" Nightingale's brows went up a fraction of an inch. "This isn't an adventure game!"

"Relax. Sylvie's there, nobody can easily approach His Highness," Lightning winked. "Besides, His Highness is going to call a meeting with the nobles and there'll be no danger in the castle hall."

"How incredible..." thought Summer. How could these two girls act so airily at such a horrendous crime scene? Especially Lightning. She was several years younger, and her eyes were sparkling with excitement. What on earth had they been through since becoming witches?

"Who are these?" Rene and the other policemen stared at the girl and the bird, eyes wide open.

"They're witches." Nightingale grumbled. "Anyway, you ought to get back to the castle before the end of the meeting. Got it?"

"Aw..." Lightning pouted.

"Um, you wanted me to draw the body?" Soraya was the last to enter the room. Summer felt slightly relieved when she noticed Soraya looking as ghastly pale as herself.

"Not the body, the murderer." Nightingale closed the door and disclosed the plan. "Once we've got a picture of the killer, we'll post it on the bulletin boards at the square and offer cash rewards to people who provide tips. This should be the fastest way to find him."

The Earl of the Elk Family gasped. "You mean the witch here, Miss Summer, can reconstruct the crime scene?"

"It depends. She can maintain the illusion for only a limited period of time, so we also need a bit of luck. You'll see." Nightingale gave Summer a nod of approval. "Go ahead."

"Okay." Summer shut her eyes and traced time back to somewhere between midnight and dawn as Nightingale instructed. In the darkness, her magic power streamed from the tips of her fingers and intertwined, gradually forming a clear image. Slowly, some wooden planks, a bed, a table and a room took shape. A house was constructed in her mind. The victim was lying on the floor, his blood running onto the bumpy ground. The previously locked door was pushed open.

"Is this the witch's power?"

"It's unbelievable!"

"Gracious! The illusion is so lifelike. It's almost like the demons' power."

"Hush! Shut up!"

The surrounding police hushed to a whisper.

"It seems he's already dead." Nightingale patted Summer on her shoulder. "Don't waste your magic power. Switch to another time point."

The second time, Summer traced the event back to somewhere close to midnight. The figure on the floor disappeared abruptly, and the victim was lying in bed, appearing to be in deep slumber.

"Does this mean he was killed between the two periods of time?" Rene asked in bewilderment.

"Correct. The killer took action between midnight and three o'clock this morning.

"I got it! Miss Summer's power doesn't last long, and we're likely to miss the exact moment the murderer was committing the crime. That's why you said we needed a bit of luck!"

"Precisely," said Nightingale. "It likely took a long time for the murderer to leave these marks after he finished the business. Summer, you just start from somewhere close to three o'clock."

Summer nodded and heaved a heavy breath. She summoned her power again and set the time between two and three. The magic power swarmed toward the wall and revealed a stranger standing at the bedside. He was drawing something on the wall with the bloodstained sheet.

"It looks like we've found him." Nightingale smiled. "Lucky indeed."

"So this man is the killer, coo?"

"He looks like nothing special... I thought it would at least be someone stout and strong." Lightning remarked in disappointment.

"I can only draw a side face from this angle." Soraya looked at the murderer from the wall. "Is there any way to turn him around?"

"Summer, I'll leave it to you." Nightingale instructed.

"Alright." Without further explanation from Nightingale, Summer knew what to do. She pushed the time of the last illusion a quarter backward. This time, everyone saw clearly what the murderer looked like. He first strangled Shovel to death with a rope, dragged him to the floor and then slit his throat with a dagger. During the whole process, Shovel was sleeping like a log without any signs of struggling.

It suddenly struck Rene when he turned and noticed a water tank in the corner of the room. "Did he drink Dreamland Water?"

"It looks like it." Nightingale nodded. "That's why there was no noise. The killer slit his throat just to obtain some blood. The victim had already been dead."

"My, my lord! I've seen this man before!" said a police officer suddenly.

"What?" Both Nightingale and Rene rested their eyes on him.

The police officer paused a moment before continuing. "His name is Maans, and he used to be a patroller. I've dealt with him before."

"Do you know where he lives?" Rene pursued.

"I remember he lives in the inner city... West Street, near the Sheep Tavern."

"Very well. We don't even need to search him out. It appears God is on our side." Nightingale scoffed.

"He can't get away with it. Let's go!"

"Yes, my lord!" The police shouted in unison.

#### Chapter 490: The Real Target

Upon arriving at the Sheep Tavern, the group promptly obtained Maans' address through enquiry.

"I'll go in first to take a look. You guys enter from the front door afterwards. Summer, keep an eye on Lightning and Maggie. Don't let them in." Nightingale entered her Mist and vanished after delivering the order. In her world of black and white, the lines that constructed everything started to twist and distort. She soon located a crack invisible to the naked eye and glided through the wall effortlessly.

The man's abode was as humble as Shovel's. It appeared that Maans had been destitute since losing his job as a patroller. She could see clearly so she knew that there was no God's Stone of Retaliation in the vicinity. Nightingale soon spotted her target in the bedroom. The man was sound asleep beneath the blanket. His coat hung at the bedside with blood smears still on its sleeves.

Nightingale returned to the drawing room to open the door. The police swarmed in. They pushed Maans, who had just woken up with a start, back on the bed and tied him up.

"Who are you? Let me go!" He yelled with horror.

"You're under arrest for murders!" Rene silenced him with two loud slaps. "How dare you plot against His Highness. It'd be merciful even to have you hanged at the city gate!"

"No, I, I didn't..."

"You didn't!?" The slaps turned into punches. After a few muffled sounds, Maans gasped in pain, his mouth full of blood and his front tooth falling out. "We saw you murder Shovel last night. Do you think we'll believe your cunning excuses? You used Dreamland Water to knock him out. Then, you strangled him to death before cutting his throat to avoid getting blood on you. That was pretty smart, eh?"

Maans did not say a word, but his eyes were filled with shock and terror.

"Who gave you the order to kill Rats applying for jobs? Who instructed you to draw a crossed crown with blood at the crime scene?" Nightingale picked up a glass bottle from the night stand, it was filled halfway with light blue liquid. "Dreamland Water isn't cheap, and it isn't easy to get a hold of it now that the gangs have been eradicated."

"I..."

"We might exempt you from death penalties if you spit all out." Rene clasped his hands. "Otherwise, I'll make you fully understand the consequences of infuriating a noble."



Nightingale did not stop his threat, even though she knew the Earl of the Elk Family was lying. Like His Highness had said, security was the top priority, and anyone who posed a threat to it should be punished severely.

Maans hesitated, more punches landed on him.

The knight, who had received professional combat training, hit him between the abdomen and the ribs with just the right amount of strength to inflict excruciating pain, but not enough to cause death.

"Mercy! Mercy! I'm sorry, my lord! It was a guy from the inner city, he told me to do it! He'll pay me four gold royals for each person I kill. He said by doing this, people will nurse a grudge against the police and think those black uniform guys are incapable of protecting the public. In this way, we can reassemble the patrol party!"

Maans collapsed. He was not a strong-minded person. A person who stood firm in his spirit would never choose to be a patroller and benefit himself through robbery and pillage, and certainly would not take four lives for just a few gold royals. Nightingale believed he had probably never expected to be tracked down by the Ministry of Justice so soon after committing the crime, and definitely never thought he would be found out in a city of 20,000 people in merely four days.

Maans confessed everything tearfully, smearing blood and snot all over his collar.

"I don't know how he found me. Our first meeting was at a tavern. He handed me that bottle of Dreamland Water and told me as long as I did what he asked me to, I would get a big chunk of money. I didn't have any savings at the time, and the police had rejected my application. I was feeling bitter and resentful. So, I agreed."

"The police department will never hire a scumbag like you." Rene coughed out a spit.

"Do you know the man's name and identity?" Nightingale questioned.

"I don't know."

"You're lying."

"I really don't know!"

Nightingale looked toward Rene who immediately took the hint and delivered a few more punches. "The lady here is a witch. She can tell whether you're lying or not. It's indeed very stupid of you to lie in front of her! Don't test our patience!"

"No, my lord, I'm just... just not sure." Maans cried in his shrill voice. "Because he has never told me his name or identity!"

"What did you mean by 'not sure'?"

"I've also wondered why he pays so generously, as he doesn't look like a noble at all. When we met a couple of days ago, I could tell he was in a hurry and his attire looked a little weird too, like he layered one coat on top of another." Maans panted. "But he seemed to wear a uniform inside, and I also saw an emblem shaped like a petal on his collar."

"An emblem of a petal?" Nightingale and Rene exchanged a look. "Isn't that the emblem of the Honeysuckle Family?"

"That's why I'm not sure. Everybody knows the Halls are the lord's supporters, and they would never plot against Lord Wimbledon." Maans said, hanging his head.

"It can't be Petrov, it must be someone else," Rene said firmly. "Since they meet each other on a daily basis, why not set up a trap to catch the guy?"

This appeared to be the only feasible way. They would arrest the man when Maans met with him and "asked for compensation". By then, everything would be cleared up. Nightingale nodded, but still felt something was missing.

Maans wasn't lying, and what he said was all true. What had gone wrong?

"Nightingale, are you guys alright?" Lightning shouted from outside.

"They've almost finished the meeting, coo. We have to head back now, coo!"

Nightingale had asked Lightning, Maggie and Summer to wait outside because of the violence that might have occurred during the arrest. A flash crossed her mind when she heard the word "meeting" from Maggie. His Highness was now in a meeting with the nobles, discussing the details of founding a new City Hall!

This meant there was not a single guard with the prince to protect him, and the closest one would be outside the hall.

If this person was really a member of the Honeysuckle Family, he could go straight into the castle and enter the hall on the first floor without raising any suspicion, though he would be forbidden to access the second and third floors, which were exclusive to His Highness. Yet she happened to be away from Prince Roland at this very moment!

"Lightning!" Nightingale had no time to explain to Rene and Maans, she dashed out of the room and grasped Lightning's shoulders, yelling, "Take me back to the castle now! His Highness might be in danger!"

"Huh? OK... Hold on tight." Lightning was very surprised, but she carried Nightingale on her back at once. She did not raise any unnecessary questions and flew straight toward the castle. When she was loaded, she flew much lower but still maintained a speed around 100 kilometers an hour. It would take her only half a minute to reach the destination.

Nightingale hoped she was wrong, but felt her terror grow as she further examined the details. The murders started three days ago, which was exactly when Petrov's letter for help arrived at the Border Area. If this man's real purpose was to distract everybody with several murder cases and put Roland in a defenseless and vulnerable position, it would be the worst-case scenario.

When they were close to the castle, Nightingale stepped into the Mist and entered the hall from the air. Her heart sank when she saw the meeting room in chaos. The nobles seemed to be petrified and were all standing by the wall murmuring. The guards were blocking off the scene. The host seat at the end of the long table, where Prince Roland should have been, was vacant. A man was lying on the floor.

Nightingale could not tell whether he was alive or not, but could see his body was covered by the black curtain created by the God's Stone of Retaliation.