

Witch 521

Chapter 521: The Star Watcher

Though most of the astrologers' findings were just common sense in the modern world, Roland still could not help being surprised by the fact that the astrologers could be able to tell the orbital motions of the stars without any modern observation techniques.

"The Star of Extinction also moves along a certain path," he said, "and it appears every 400 to 500 years. That means, it must orbit within a much larger area than the sun and the moon that are near us in space and can run a circle around us in a day and a night." He panted for breath and continued. "Given that an object appears big when it's near and small when far, the Star of Extinction in the sky will change from dark to bright and then turn into a crescent when it's getting closer and closer to us."

"Have you found it?"

Dispersion Star shook his head. "The secret mission has been passed down for hundreds of years but doesn't specify the exact time when the Star of Extinction will come. Maybe it's still in some distant position we can't observe."

"For decades... you've buried yourselves in this job?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." The old man sounded very tired. "I became an apprentice in the Astrological Association 40 years ago. Since then, I've been watching the little changed starry sky every night. However, I had no idea of this secret mission until I became the Chief Astrologer. Besides observing the stars and recording the time and seasons, astrologers also work as fortune tellers in festivals and celebrations, but we only say what the king orders us to, instead of truly predicting the future. It's a secret between the king and us. Astrologers need to be venerated as sages, in order for our association to recruit more apprentices."

"You regret it?"

Dispersion Star shook his head. "I would regret that ten years ago, but since I became the Chief Astrologer and received this secret mission from my predecessor, Meteorite Astrologer, I've understood what I'm doing is meaningful and it's really about astrology and foretelling the future. The significance of the job is beyond compare, but unfortunately, I don't have much time left."

Looking at his gray hairs, heavily wrinkled face and countless brown spots on his forehead, Roland had to agree with him and thought, "That's true. I'm afraid he can only survive for another two or three years."

"Is there any strategy left by your predecessors we can take to fight against or escape from the devastating disaster?"

"No, that's your problem, Your Majesty." Dispersion Star gave Roland a weak smile. "You're the one who leads the people to get through hard times. The Astrological Station is just your eye and will warn you about the coming disasters, thus increasing the chance of survival for the people. Given that, you can't close it."

The Chief Astrologer's attentiveness to his duty commanded Roland's respect. For most people, it was hard to persevere with such a boring job, but this elderly man had searched for the Star of Extinction in the sky night after night for decades without flinching. Roland now guessed the reason why ancestors of the Wimbledon Family made the rule that the confidential information about the star should never be revealed to the new king before he turned 30. If young successors of the royal family knew about it, they would probably indulge themselves and do everything in their power to enjoy the rest of their lives.

After a long silence, Roland raised his last question. "What about Astrological Associations of the other three kingdoms? They're searching for the Star of Extinction, too?"

"I've no idea... I've never left the King's City and they've never contacted us here in the Kingdom of Graycastle."

"I see, and that's all for today."

"You... decide not to close the Astrological Station?"

"No, let's keep it," Roland answered, stood up and then walked towards the hall outside. Before he left the room, he turned around to look at the Chief Astrologer and said, "I'll send you better equipment for observing stars and tell you about the real knowledge of star image."

"What?" The chief astrologer looked confused.

Without explaining anything to him, Roland continued. "Besides, even when the Bloody Moon comes, it's not our end." He paused a bit and spoke assertively, "We'll survive it."

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The hydrogen balloon was blown up. Roland and the witches got in the basket and flew towards the palace.

"What were you talking about?" Lightning asked, clutching the basket from outside.

"I want to know, too, coo!"

"It's a story about a man who left his work half done," Nightingale said and shrugged.

"In that condition, how could I insist on closing it now?" Roland rolled his eyes and described what had happened in the hall to them. "I planned to send them to the Western Region, but let them finish what they're doing now at the Astrological Station. They've remained loyal to their duties for decades."

"You're indeed a merciful king," Wendy said with a smile.

"Coo, a kind man!" Maggie flapped her wings and crowed, stretching her neck.

"Ahem." Roland quickly changed the subject. "The Star of Extinction they're searching for should be the Bloody Moon mentioned by Agatha. When it appears, the world is going to come to an end. This prophecy must have something to do with witches."

"I think so, too," Sylvie said after a thought, "and there's an obvious proof. This used to be called the Barbarian Land. There were only villages and no cities at all. How could the people here suddenly start to pursue something so impractical? It must be the survivors from the Union. When they came here to

rebuild their homes, they brought the information about the Bloody Moon here and then passed the task on to the earliest astrologers."

"And one of them is His Majesty Roland's ancestor?" Lightning said, excited. "What a wonderful adventure!"

"An adventure? Where's the danger, coo?"

"You fool, not every adventure is dangerous. Finding out a secret is rewarding enough for an explorer."

"Coo? But you've said that an explorer should pay more attention to the experience than the results." Maggie blinked her eyes innocently.

"Uh... A great explorer can choose either to focus on the experience or to search for the results. That's how we make each exploration enjoyable." Lightning said in a low growl. "You're a long way from being an explorer!"

"Coo..." The pigeon gloomily fell on Roland's head. "Is that true?"

The witches burst into laughter.

After they went back to the palace, Roland immediately went through the records of the Wimbledon Family history he found and then could not help frowning.

"What happened?" asked Nightingale.

"There's no record about astrologers in the family history." He pointed at the yellowing page. "The first ancestor is Monde Wimbledon and the first king is Taraq Wimbledon. Nothing about the Astrological Station or the supreme commander... Their recordings were erased."

"Who did it?" She was surprised. "The writers of the book must be the kings in the past, right?"

"Yes, recordings written by each king will be added to the family history. Nothing should be left out," Roland said slowly, "and when the people started to build the cities here, he or she already had the ability to have the orders carved on metal sheets, but why are there no recordings about that person at all?"

Did someone try to conceal something? But why did that person leave a trail of clues in the Astrology Association? Every king or queen of the Wimbledon Family should know the real purpose of the Astrological Station... What happened to the family 400 years ago?

Chapter 522: A Drastic Change in the Northern Region

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"What?"

Calvin Kant, the Lord of the City of Evernight and Duke of the Northern Region shouted. He rose suddenly and stared at the messenger with disapproval, toppling his water cup from the side table. The cup hit the floor with a smash, making a crisp, clear sound.

"Your Grace, I saw it with my own eyes!" said the messenger, further lowering his head. "The rebel king breached the city wall of King's City in just one day. Even the king himself failed to escape. I'm afraid he's probably dead now."

"How... could this happen?" Calvin murmured. "It's King's City!"

Its blue stone city wall is more than 54 yards high and guarded by thousands of soldiers equipped with catapults and snow powder. No one can break through that city's defenses unless he has an army of 20 to 30 thousands. Even if Prince Roland had such a huge army, it's still hard to believe that he captured the city in merely one day!

"They had invincible firearms," the messenger said in a trembling voice possibly caused by tiredness from traveling the whole night or the shock he had experienced in the battlefield. "They could fire without a break. Their weapons were just too powerful for the knights and even the crazed army of the king. No one could stop them. Anyone who got close to them died or was severely wounded... Compared to their firearms, the king's flintlocks were cheap, useless iron sticks."

Calvin's mind was a blank. His whole world was turned upside down. He felt it was all over.

He had received an order from Timothy, which had required that he should send an army to support King's City. As the new Duke of the Northern Region, he must follow the king's order and after some discussion, he had assembled an army of 2,500 by choosing soldiers from troops of the Horsehead Haws, the Snow Fox Lista and his own families. This army had been planning to set out after the snow melted and to arrive at the King's City two to three weeks after he had received the order. He had never thought that the army would miss the war in King's City as a siege warfare usually took months.

The army was mostly comprised of mercenary and freemen. Not many knights or serfs were in it, since the plowing season was about to start. However, no matter what kind of army he had sent out, he had already done something that the rebel king would consider guilty of rebellion. He was afraid that his good days were going to be over very soon.

"Edith!" Calvin suddenly thought of his brilliant daughter. "Maybe she can think of something to save us."

"Go! Bring my eldest daughter to my room!" he shouted to a guard by his side.

Edith soon walked into the study, wearing fitting clothes and carrying a training sword. Her hair was done up in a bun, and her nose was dotted with small beads of sweat. She had been practicing with her sword as usual and now seemed slightly displeased. "I've asked you not to disturb me when I'm practicing."

"I know I promised but we're in big trouble!" Calvin urgently repeated what the messenger had told him and asked her, "What should we do?"

He looked at his daughter, eager to hear a solution. Edith Kant, the brightest Pearl of the Northern Region, was not only a beauty but also a naturally talented politician and strategist. She had contributed greatly to the success of her father's rising from an Earl to the Duke of the Northern Region and even the sons of the Kant Family were overshadowed by her.

She was startled hearing that Prince Roland had conquered King's City in just a day but quickly recovered and said calmly, "Now you understand why I didn't agree to marry Timothy?"

Calvin stared in surprise and asked, "You knew that he would end up like this?" Timothy had stayed in the Northern Region after he defeated the rebellious Duke Ise and like many other men, had his eyes on the Pearl of the Northern Region. But she skillfully turned down the messenger he sent to her. Her father was confused and even blamed her for refusing the king since if she had married Timothy and become the queen as many girls had dreamed of, the Kant Family's status would have been further secured.

"You mean his city was occupied in one day? No, I didn't expect that." Edith untied her hair band to let her long green hair down. "I just felt he was not the right person."

"Not the right person... Who is the right person is for you? Though his reign turned out to be quite short, he was still the king of the Kingdom of Graycastle at that time!" Calvin complained in his heart but did not tell his daughter what he thought. He had made his mind to pass his Duke title to Edith who he believed would bring a brighter future to the family, compared with her two brothers, if she refused to marry anyone.

"Anyway," Edith bent to pick up some broken pieces of the porcelain water cup. "First, you have to order the army to retreat."

"But they've been out for four days, and I've no idea which route they took. I'm afraid it's too late."

"That's not a problem," she arranged the broken pieces of the cup to represent the three locations and said. "You can send someone to Deepvalley Town today. If he sets out now from here, he'll arrive at the town by evening. Tomorrow, he can take a boat to King's City and reach it at least one day before the army. No matter which route the army took, they'll end up on the main road leading to the city's north gate, so if the one you send walks in the opposite direction to the army, he'll meet and stop them in the suburbs of King's City."

"I see." The Duke patted his head heavily and thought, "I should have thought of this solution. The news was just too sudden and astonishing for me to react calmly and quickly." He said, "I'll write a letter now! No, I'll send out a guard with my keepsake to deliver the command! Guard!"

A guard came to receive the order and then quickly left. Edith said slowly, "Father, do you think we can withstand Prince Roland's attack?"

A shiver went through Calvin. He knew that the outer wall of King's City, which had been twice as sturdy as that of his City of Evernight could not stand long in the suppression of Roland's powerful firearms. He replied, "I don't think we can."

"So, it's not enough just to withdraw the army." She shrugged and added, "Don't forget that it was Timothy who made you a Duke. It's natural for Prince Roland to consider us his enemies and it's just a matter of time for him to destroy us. Under such circumstances, we have to be more proactive."

You mean that I should swing to Prince Roland?" Calvin hesitated. "But why should he trust me?"

"Show your sincerity," Edith said softly. "Most nobles hearing the news will be intimidated by Prince Roland's overwhelming victory over Timothy and won't be able to fight in unison against him. Given

that, we would have to surrender to him as early as possible. I'm sure I'm not the only one who thinks this way, so we have to show sincerity great enough to impress him."

"But... how?"

Before Calvin could work out what she meant, Edith drew out her wooden training sword and smashed two of the broken pieces of the water cup with a smile.

"I think the Haws Family and the Lista Family would make great presents. What do you think, father?"

Chapter 523: The Blood Pearl

In the evening, Calvin Kant summoned the nobles of the Northern Region to the castle.

The fireplace in the banquet room burned brightly with swaying flames, causing the guests' shadows on the walls to dance up and down as if they formed a very unusual painting.

Four long tables traversed the hall, each placed full of steaming hot meat dishes and wine. It appeared to be a highly sumptuous dinner, yet the atmosphere was not relaxed at all. This was even more so after the Duke announced that King's City had been seized.

"I've dispatched men to rescue the platoon that was sent out four days ago. Thankfully, they've returned alive," he declared in a deep voice while sitting on the host's seat. "But today, the question I want to ask you is... what should we do about the Northern Region?"

The nobles looked around the room blankly. Perhaps, the news that Timothy was defeated in a day was so astonishing that everyone in the hall was speechless and afraid to reply. Calvin could see the fear and regret in the eyes of the lower nobles. "Edith was right. We can't depend on these people to defend against Roland Wimbledon. Dividing the land was never an option from the beginning—there's only one path ahead."

However, for the nobles who had only recently sought refuge with Timothy, it was rather embarrassing to openly turn around and switch allegiance.

"Why don't we send a spy to eavesdrop on Prince Roland?" Someone in the room suggested after a long period of silence.

"If he doesn't disturb the Northern Region, we may as well endorse him as the new king." These words immediately garnered the approval of another noble. "These are the Wimbledon Family's issues. It doesn't make a difference to us who becomes the king."

Upon hearing this, Earl of Lista laughed grimly. "No difference?"

Calvin frowned slightly and knew that the keynote was coming.

Indeed, after the Earl spoke, everyone in the room became silent, and this made Calvin feel a little uncomfortable. In reality, the three families were equal in strength, while the Kant Family was slightly inferior to the others. It was only because he had heeded his daughter's advice and was first to play up to Timothy that he was able to obtain the position of Duke.

Of course, he also understood that this was one of the new king's balancing tactics. Timothy was probably glad that the other two families belittled and were dissatisfied with him.

"Have you forgotten about Duke Ise? He was arrested for treason and executed." Lista asked the room callously. "He didn't actively provoke Timothy. If we admit defeat so early on, the noose may be tied around our necks at any time, and it would then be too late to struggle! In Prince Roland's view, we've already participated in treason and none of us can deny our relations with Timothy!"

"What else can we do but admit defeat? If King's City couldn't even last a day, we would simply be throwing eggs at a rock..." One of Calvin's feudatories, who looked like he had lost his usual vigor, retorted softly, in accordance with the agreement. Under the incensed gaze of the Earl, he was unable to enunciate the latter half of his sentence.

"Even if we only have eggs, I'll try my best," Ed Howes proclaimed. "The rebel king murdered my elder brother! He has to pay for it!"

"It may not be us holding the eggs. The Northern Region's full of hills and mountains, and dangerous roads are all over. Roland's army may be able to travel quickly over plains and rivers, but it'll be a whole new game here." Earl Howes followed up swiftly. "At worst, the Horsehead Family will retreat to Coldwind Ridge, where I don't believe that his army will be able to reach."

"That's as good as baring your entire back to the church," Calvin silently thought. "Those f*ckers don't harbor any good intention for the Northern Region either." He had heard about what happened to the eldest son of the Howes Family. "It appears that he died in a fight against the lord of the Western Region... but death is inevitable in any war. If shouting could injure or kill enemies, there won't be a need for weapons and armor."

The hall started to become rowdy. As the Lista and Howes families stated their opinions, the voices which proposed to "halt the troops and get ready to fight the advancing enemy" gradually suppressed the ones which proposed to "actively pry on Prince Roland's position and express friendliness." Although Calvin remained silent throughout this discussion, he was beginning to feel quite anxious.

Surely Edith hasn't run into trouble?

"What does the Honorable Duke think?" His long silence had become suspicious, and Earl Lista was now staring straight at him.

Calvin's heart froze when he knew it was his turn to say something. "I brought all of you here tonight because I wanted to listen to everyone's opinion. This matter is important to the future of the Northern Region and we can't be too careful..."

Earl Howes interrupted him impatiently. "Enough! I've got a feeling that you've already planned to swear allegiance to Prince Roland. Why else would all those who expressed cowardly opinions happen to be your feudatories? If we're to hand over power meekly now, we'll just become lambs to the slaughter!"

"You..." Calvin felt an urge to toss his wine glass at the Earl but managed to refrain himself in time.

"Since that's the case, we have nothing else to discuss." Lista stood up and headed towards the banquet hall's exit. "By the way, if you want Prince Roland to spare your pathetic life, you may offer Edith, all tied up, to him. I've heard that he highly appreciates beauty... ugh..."

The audience's laughter ceased as the Earl turned silent unexpectedly. A sword tip visibly protruded out of his back. The blood stains on the blade seemed to shimmer dimly under the light from the fireplace.

"Are you talking about me, Sir Snow Fox? I can't pretend that I didn't hear what you said."

The Earl's body collapsed onto the floor feebly. The tall and lean figure of an armored warrior appeared in front of everyone. She pulled her sword out nonchalantly, stepped over the Earl who was still squirming in utter pain, and walked into the hall.

It was none other than Edith Kant herself.

Calvin immediately felt a great sense of relief.

Her armor plates were stained full of blood, an evidence that she had just been in a violent fight. Even so, she was as composed and elegant as ever—she had the face of a beautiful smiling assassin. A platoon of warriors followed behind her and surrounded the hall in the blink of an eye. By now, everyone that was present understood what had happened.

"The guards!" Earl Howes' eyes widened as he spoke. "What have you done to the guards outside..."

"How can I deal with you lot if I hadn't disposed of them first?" Calvin exhaled a sigh of relief and smashed his glass on the floor. "You seem to have forgotten that I'm the one in charge here!"

He had long awaited this moment. This kind of banquet was held every once in a few days, and as such, most of the nobles did not take many precautions. They were each accompanied by less than 100 servants, most of whom they instructed to keep watch outside the castle area. It was the perfect opportunity to capture all of them together. After the guards had been taken care of, the rest was easy.

Of course, the person who planned and executed this trap was his daughter—the Pearl of the Northern Region, Edith.

As the exit doors of the banquet hall were slowly shut, the flames in the fireplace seemed to wobble for the last time.

The feudatories of the other two families pulled out their swords. By contrast, the lower nobles seemed shell-shocked.

"Are you out of your mind?" Ed Howes snapped angrily.

But Calvin had no time for a war of words. "If you put down your weapons and surrender, you'll be spared." All resistors will be killed!"

As the words left his tongue, two factions of people began to brawl.

Chapter 524: A Night of Bloodshed

Chaos and confusion erupted in the hall. Wooden tables were flipped, while bowls and dishes fell all over the floor, creating a symphony of clanking and cracking noises. Spilled soup flowed along the crevices in the stone slabs until it was everywhere.

It was the first time for the Duke's two sons to witness such a life-and-death fight from such a close distance. The older son, Cole, held out his sword and stood in a rigid posture to defend his father. It was completely unlike his carefree attitude during training sessions. Meanwhile, the younger son, 17-year-old Lance, cowered behind his chair.

Calvin sighed in silence. If he did not have Edith, his sons would probably not look so useless by comparison. The gulf of ability between her and them could not be bigger. Perhaps, they were already resigned to this fact and had long lost the courage and motivation to catch up with her.

The Duke looked towards the center of the banquet hall. His wunderkind eldest daughter already had her eyes fixed on Ed Howes, the strongest challenger around.

First, she took a bottle of ale and flung it at her opponent, forcing him to turn away. Next, she leaped up onto one of the long wooden tables and dived straight at him with her sword. Her quick and agile movements were like those of a cat. Ed adeptly parried her blows, and the clashing of swords caused sparks to fly.

She struck out half a dozen times within a split second, and her sword came together with Ed's to form a continuous clinking sound which seemed to signal the impending arrival of death. In this critical situation, Ed displayed frightening technique and strength to negate every one of her strikes. It was hard to pick a winner. While they fought around the long tables, many of the Howes Family's knights had already succumbed in battle. Yet, Ed did not flinch or cower but instead became increasingly aggressive.

Calvin began to worry.

As evident from the blood stains on her armor, Edith had earlier been involved in another tough fight. Even if she was not wounded, her physical strength had been expended considerably. Furthermore, as a female, she was naturally disadvantaged in terms of strength. It would be unfavorable to her if the tussle drags on.

However, there was not a trace of fear on Edith's face.

Her eyes were fully focused on her opponent—her bright pupils were like twinkling stars that could illuminate the world. Beads of sweat flung out of her hair ends with every strike she made. Although her energy was visibly diminishing, she continued to thrust relentlessly at her opponent, forcibly keeping him in a defensive stance.

Ed seemed to take notice of this. With a loud roar, he changed to a technique which would deal great injury to both of them. However, Edith was not keen on exchanging blood with blood, and became the one deflecting attacks. The disparity in strength between them finally told. Edith lost her balance as her sword was sliced into two, causing her to fall off the long table.

The Duke's heart jumped into his throat. "F*ck, help her now!"

However, even the nearest guard was not able to assist—everything happened too quickly.

Instead of attempting to stand up immediately, Edith astutely used the remainder of her sword to slice off the legs of the long table. At this moment, Ed jumped onto the table with both of his arms raised, intending to finish her off with a powerful blow. He completely did not notice what she had just done.

Calvin stared in disbelief at what followed. The table, missing a leg, caused the knight to lose his balance. If the table toppled normally, he would have been able to leap off easily. But just at that instant, all of his strength was concentrated in his arms, while his feet were fixed on top of the table, and his body was hunched forward in the chopping posture. As such, he fell headfirst onto the floor with a loud thud.

There was no chance of a comeback.

Edith jumped onto her opponent's back and pulled out a dagger from her waist. She plunged it straight into his neck and twisted it. The knight's body began to spasm.

"Was it... a matter of luck? Probably not..." the Duke realized that Ed had fallen into his daughter's trap the moment he jumped onto the table. When Ed took over his opponent's high position, it made him feel as though he had turned defeat into victory. The advantage that he built up over the course of the fight caused him to think that strength and power alone would decide the outcome, and his confidence grew at the sight of his opponent's weakening resistance. This was why he placed all of his strength into his final blow. Under normal circumstances, Edith would not have been able to survive it.

But this turned out to be the perfect opportunity to trick him into losing his balance completely.

The resistance of the two families did not last very long in the face of opponents who outnumbered them by three to one. After less than 10 minutes, the hall quietened down again. The fireplace continued to burn calmly, while the only noticeable difference in the hall was the strong smell of blood that mixed together with the smell of spilled alcohol and other drinks.

The Duke returned to his seat and looked around the room. The lower nobles hurriedly lowered their heads and did not dare to look straight at him.

"Earl Lista and Earl Howes conspired against King Wimbleton and have been duly punished. Right now, you all have a choice. Do you all want to serve these two corpses or the new king?"

This time, the responses were uniform and there were no extra remarks.

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"So, it's settled?" In the study, Calvin used a handkerchief to wipe off the blood stains on his daughter's forehead. "Will His Majesty Roland Wimbleton accept us?"

"You were calling him a rebel king only yesterday," Edith quipped teasingly. "Are you going to pledge homage to him so soon?"

"Wasn't this what you said?" The Duke glared at his daughter. "Since we can't beat him, we may as well surrender earlier. If we don't win his trust, the nobles will hate us too!"

In fact, the execution of the two great noblemen without going through due process violated the bottom line agreed among the noble. If it was not for the fact that the Kingdom of Graycastle had been

at war for two years and the lords of various lands had changed rapidly, as well as Timothy being a bad example, Calvin would never have dared to do things as his daughter had suggested.

"I don't know if we can."

"Wh-what?" The Duke quivered and nearly dropped his handkerchief. "You don't know?"

"Indeed. All we can do is to display our sincerity, but ultimately it'll be Prince Roland who decides the fate of Northern Region. You should know this, Dad," Edith said almost nonchalantly. "There's a chance he'll send his own people to take over Northern Region, and it won't be surprising if your rank is lowered. But I know that if we don't try, our Kant family won't have a chance to survive."

Calvin stood rooted for a long time before he sat back down, looking extremely displeased. He knew that his daughter was right, but yet he found it hard to accept her reply.

He did not want to lose the position of Duke.

Just then, Edith laughed. "Don't lose heart, Dad. You still have much work to do tomorrow. We'll seize the mansions and fiefs of the two Earls. Besides, the outcome of this matter will heavily depend on the level of competence we display to His Majesty." She paused for a while, before continuing. "Sincerity is our ticket into the negotiation, but ability is what will decide the outcome of the negotiation."

Calvin frowned in incomprehension. "What do you mean?"

"I'll bring these two heads to King's City, Dad." She laughed in a charming yet wicked way. "Let me be your messenger to His Majesty."

Chapter 525: Return to King's City

"King's City! After a year and a half, I'm finally back!"

Barov's heart stirred as he watched the cyan stone wall gradually become closer and clearer.

In fact, he had been excited ever since he received the prince's orders. Prince Roland had defeated Timothy smoothly and easily, as expected. This once again showed that no one was able to resist the army of Western Region's Lord.

Of course, it was now rather inappropriate to call Roland the "Lord of the Western Region".

He was now the only surviving son of King Wimbledon III, and thus was the bloodline inheritor and rightful heir of the royal family.

The obstacles to his ascent had been completely swept away.

It was a matter of time that Roland would be crowned king.

As for Barov, he would soon become the Prime Minister, second in power only to the king. This joyful thought made him become steeped in reverie. "When those 'old friends' of mine, who're so concerned about me, see that I've attained a position that they can't even dream about, how will they feel? Shocked? Jealous? Envious? Or gnashing their teeth while putting on a fake smile and trying to please

me?" These imaginations gave him immense pleasure. It would be even better if his former mentor, Treasurer Lauren Moore, could witness the scene of his promotion.

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The concrete boat slowly docked at the pier in the outskirts of the city. Barov sauntered down the trestle bridge together with Kyle Sichi and other companions. Under the escort of the First Army, they walked through the familiar streets and entered the inner city palace.

The Palace of Twin Towers was still as majestic as it was in his memory. In the past, he could only look at it from far away in a small room in the City Hall. This time, he could walk into the palace boldly.

He was led straight up to the study, where he once again met Roland Wimbledon.

In a state of excitement, he got down on one knee and greeted, "Your Majesty, Kingdom of Graycastle is now yours!"

"Actually, not yet. Eastern Region and Northern Region remain under Timothy's control." Roland laughed. "Get up you, there's much for us to discuss."

To Barov, Roland looked and acted exactly like he did before. He spoke in his usual calm tone and was warm and friendly. He did not seem to be affected by his upcoming coronation at all. Barov's attitude thus became even more respectful. He stood up slowly, dusted himself and replied, "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Our prior task at the moment is to maintain the administration of King's City. I'd made this clear in the letter." Roland poured a cup of hot tea and placed it in front of Barov. "Do you have a preliminary plan?"

Barov hurriedly received the cup of tea. "It won't be difficult to maintain the existing order. Your Majesty, how about you let me handle the lower nobles? They'll know what's good and bad for them." Also, I've brought over 10 of my most outstanding students from Border Area. Some are proficient in business and some in tax administration. Even when I'm not around, my students will make sure that those noblemen don't steal or do anything funny." He paused before adding. "But, Your Majesty, I hope you'll assign the left-behind soldiers of the First Army to assist in their supervision. Without military force as insurance, supervision alone may not have the right effect."

Roland appeared a little surprised. "You don't wish to remain in King's City?"

"Of course not, Your Majesty," Barov replied without the slightest hesitation. "The government affairs of City of Neverwinter are much more complex and important. As such, I can't be away for too long. And it'd be too exhausting for you to go and handle these issues yourself." Please, Your Majesty, let me continue to manage the City Hall of City of Neverwinter for you. It has suited me well to serve under you."

Barov had thought very clearly about this. His Majesty had confirmed that City of Neverwinter would become the new capital of Kingdom of Graycastle, and therefore, it was only a matter of time that it overtook this city. At present, the former's population and development potential had already surpassed King's City, and after the launch of the new batch of recruitment programs, its scale would be unarguably greater than any other city within the Four Kingdoms. Of course, he would get to listen to the mourns and wails of his "old friends" if he remained in King's City, but over time, he would inevitably get bored and sick of them. Furthermore, such mourns and wails could not provide him with more

authority and influence, and on the contrary, would gradually pull him away from the power center. He knew that it was only by appearing regularly in front of His Majesty Roland that he would be able to leave a strong impression.

Roland gleefully observed Barov for a long while until the latter lowered his head out of his guilty conscience. Then, Roland consented. "Alright. But my condition is that the change of city hall officials mustn't cause King's City to fall into disorder. You should know that every single person in this city is important to me."

...

Subsequently, His Majesty enquired about the details of the situation regarding the mining and farming projects in Longsong Area. He paid particular attention to the latter. Barov had known about Roland's preference beforehand and thus had obtained information about the farming projects from Petrov. He replied smoothly to every question, such that Roland continually nodded in agreement.

The afternoon passed quickly. After asking his last question, Roland patted Barov on his shoulder to show his appreciation. "You've done well. I won't have to worry when I'm out leading the army into battle. Go and have dinner. We'll discuss the development plans of Longsong Area tomorrow."

"Yes..." Barov hesitated for a moment. He noticed that out of so many questions, Roland had not mentioned his coronation. "Your Majesty, may I know when you intend to be officially crowned and proclaimed King?"

"Plans haven't been made," Roland replied calmly.

"What?" The City Hall Director could not believe his own ears. "These things should be arranged as early as possible! With it, your prestige will increase tremendously, and the people's hearts will unite as one. There aren't any downsides. Why don't you..."

"It needs too much time." Roland cut him short, stood up, walked over to the window, and looked down at the magnificent city under the dusk light. "I've asked the ceremonial officer. He says that a full coronation will require many months of preparation. Aside from making the gold crown and the gem scepter, invitation letters have to be sent to the church and the other three kingdoms. The ceremony can only begin after all of their emissaries have arrived. Even if we omit the Holy City of Hermes, Kingdom of Everwinter and Kingdom of Wolfheart, it'll still require more than a month to contact Kingdom of Dawn. This will severely slow down our plans for the second half of the spring offensive."

"Your Majesty, you can simplify this process..."

"That would lower the prestige of the coronation, such that it might even have an adverse effect." Roland shrugged his shoulders in rejection of Barov's idea. "Even Timothy pays heed to this process. I can't appear to be more anxious and cheaper than him. However, my ambassador to Kingdom of Dawn will set off shortly. He'll notify them about this. When we get a formal reply from them, it won't be too late to consider this matter."

After Barov took his leave, Roland could finally exhale a sigh of relief.

There was another reason that he had not mentioned. It was the deep and pervading notion of "Focus on amassing grains, while slowly becoming king", in other words, "Become rich silently". At present, he only occupied Western Region, which was not even a third of the land area that Timothy occupied when he was king. It was best to be modest before the church officially attacked Kingdom of Dawn, and it would be troublesome if Hermes made him the prior target. Though he was no longer afraid of falling out with the church, he did not want to draw aggro on behalf of others.

Shortly, Roland summoned Kyle Sichi to his study.

He was hoping that his Chief Alchemist had already thought of a way to intimidate the Alchemist Workshop of King's City.

Chapter 526: The Alchemist Workshop

The Refining Hall located in the east of the city was Retnin's favorite place to stay.

It was a place always full of vitality, often filled with students and apprentices constantly moving materials back and forth. He could see steam rising from various vessels and perceive the smells of sulfur and acid water. Occasionally, he could hear crashes of broken glass, usually accompanied by loud scoldings from alchemists.

Even though he was promoted to one of the three chief alchemists two years ago and had his own alchemical room, he preferred the busy and crowded Refining Hall for inspiration. Just like the Refining Hall where people of different kinds gathered and mingled, alchemy was a process of mixing various matters. Nevertheless, only a few, such as crystal glass and snow powder, could distinguish themselves from the ordinary and shine through the muddy mixture.

The charm of alchemy lay in the refining process, in which those grayish white sand and black charcoals could turn into such a splendor that nobody had ever foreseen. The same held true for people. The Alchemist Workshop accepted a large number of new apprentices every year, but only a very few of them would eventually stand out from the rest and become first-rate alchemists. Retnin was one of the very few. It had taken him 34 years to go from apprentice to chief. Although he was now nearly 50, with one foot in the grave, he felt content with his life, for having learned the aesthetics passed down from the sages.

The only thing that disquieted him was the recent round of incidents in the King's City.

The biggest overturn was the change of the king. After Prince Roland hanged Timothy, he had indubitably become the successor of the King. The news should have had nothing to do with the Alchemist Workshop. They needed to be responsible for alchemical production whoever the king was. However, he was not sure if they could stay out of this trouble once Prince Roland found out they had provided Timothy with snow powder as a war material.

King's City had gradually restored its peace. Yet the fact that the prince had visited the Astrological Station instead of the Alchemist Workshop gave Retnin an ominous feeling.

"Are you still worried about the Astrology Association?" asked a voice at his side. "Its not like you to sit here in a daze, brows furrowed."

Judging from the unguarded tone, Retnin knew it must be another chief alchemist. He turned around and found Rayleigh, whose hair was as frosty as his, sitting next to him. "What on earth do you think His Highness is planning?"

"He's thinking those fellows who only care about stars are wasting money. What else can he be thinking about?" Rayleigh said carelessly. "It's a pity he didn't stick to his opinion. Those guys shouldn't be crowned as sages anyway. They should have been laid off a long time ago."

As the two major academies in the Kingdom, the Alchemist Workshop hired spies to collect information about the Astrology Association. The Alchemist Workshop somewhat knew the purpose of Roland's visit to the Astrological Station, but did not know what exactly the chief astrologer had said to Prince Roland in secret that made him change his mind about shutting down the Astrological Station.

"Are you worried that the Alchemist Workshop will be shut down as well?" He patted Retnin on his shoulder heartily. "Don't forget the profit we bring to King's City! Once the limit in the production of crystal glass and perfume is lifted, the gold royals we'll earn can probably fill the prince's entire bedroom. How can he resist such a lucrative business opportunity and shut the Workshop down?"

"But we produced snow powder for Timothy."

"So what? Could we disobey the King's order?" Rayleigh grunted. "Any reasonable person should know it isn't us to blame. Besides, he also manufactured loads of weapons fueled by snow powder himself. I bet he must have gotten the formula from Boer, the traitor. In this light, we actually made a contribution to his victory. Perhaps he'll even reward us if we hand in the advanced formula."

"Hopefully." Retnin nodded, feeling a little relieved. Like Rayleigh had said, the Alchemist Workshop was the largest gold production organization. The prince might have been stuck in the middle of something and therefore failed to visit them right after the war.

Just as Retnin was about to instruct a group of alchemists, a student dashed into the hall. Out of breath he shouted. "M-Mr. Chief Alchemist, His Majesty is here!"

"What? Where?"

Hearing Retnin's exclamation, everybody in the hall was silent, looking at the student.

"Above the yard in the air." The student swallowed hard. "His Majesty descended from the sky!"

Retnin and Rayleigh exchanged an astonished look. "Bring Chief Alchemist Archer here. Everybody else, follow me to greet His Majesty."

"Yes, sir!"

...

A giant balloon that covered almost half of the sky was floating in the air outside the Alchemist Workshop. Soldiers armed with snow powder weapons surrounded the yard. After they had searched the Association thoroughly, making sure it was safe, the balloon started to land slowly.

"That must be the transportation device the prince used to visit the Astrological Station with the witches," Rayleigh whispered in Retnin's ear. "I didn't expect it could truly make a person fly."

"Anyway, he's here." Retnin felt alleviated. He grabbed Rayleigh's shoulder and said, "It doesn't matter how we address him in private, but you ought to show some respects in an official meeting. He is King of the Kingdom of Graycastle, even without an inauguration ceremony. Be serious."

"Don't worry. I know how to behave properly." Reyleigh assured him with a smile.

After the basket landed safely, a beaming gray-haired man came up to them under the protection of the guards. He was bareheaded, not splendidly dressed, and held no scepter in his hand. He was not as marvelous as he was rumored to be, yet the prince's every single gesture was majestic and dignified. Next to him stood an elderly man in a cope, who seemed surprisingly familiar to Retnin.

"Your Majesty, welcome to the Alchemist Workshop." The three chief alchemists bowed, followed by all the other alchemists.

Roland smiled. "My father used to talk about you often when I was still in King's City. He said both crystal glass and perfume are quite popular alchemical products, they have even been sold to the Fjord Islands. These products have brought great profits to the palace. So, I built an alchemical workshop myself after my father sent me to Border Town."

"Pft—" Rayleigh almost burst out laughing upon hearing these words, whereas Retnin restrained himself and managed to conceal his amusement. "That must not have been an easy business, Your Majesty. Every alchemical workshop requires a large amount of gold royals to operate."

"Really? But I didn't invest a lot of gold royals. You know how deficient the resources are in Border Town. At first, I could only do the experiments in a few wooden sheds. But now I'm able to produce various products, including glass and perfume." Roland continued casually, "So I'm wondering where those gold royals actually go."

"Your Majesty, what... what do you mean by that?" Retnin's heart sank.

"This is my Chief Alchemist, Mr. Kyle Sichi," Roland replied, pointing to the elderly man next to him. "He'll examine and evaluate your products. If there have been no innovations in recent years, I might as well shut down the Alchemist Workshop. After all, King's City was just ravaged by a war, and I believe tons of gold royals are needed for reconstruction."

The alchemists were outraged by the prince's comment.

"Your Majesty, I can't accept this!" Rayleigh was so angry that he couldn't bear it and stood to challenge him.

Chapter 527: The Ultimate Goal of Alchemy

"Huh?" Roland turned to him. "Why?"

"Well, Your Majesty... You're likely to be deceived by someone since you may not know alchemy well." Retnin interjected immediately. He knew Rayleigh took great pride in his work and sometimes even failed to pay due respects to Timothy. Certainly, he disdained the notorious Prince Roland. If Rayleigh accidentally enraged Roland, the rest of them would all have to suffer the King's wrath. "Alchemy is a process full of changes. Every formula represents a potential product. However, not all products are as

dazzling as snow powder. They may not instantly bring you gold royals, but they can help with the production of another extraordinary product."

"Exactly." Rayleigh rejoined indignantly. "Take snow powder as an example. One of its ingredients, ice nitrite, is converted from feces. The conversion itself is a sort of reaction. However, ice nitrite can also be mixed with other products and turn into snow powder. All these reactions and conversions are the result of long-term exploration and research. Even an experienced alchemy master can't readily jump to the conclusion that one specific product is useless. Your Majesty, you can't evaluate our work simply with gold royals." Rayleigh stared at Roland's chief alchemist with deepened brows. "If someone promises you that every single product can instantly bring you profits, he must be lying!"

"What's your opinion on that?" Roland the man beside him.

The chief alchemist looked quite unperturbed. He stroked his whiskers and remained silent until nobody else was talking. "Your Majesty, they say this because they haven't probed into the nature of alchemy. I can prove to you that their formulas are all outdated. I already know whether their products are useful or not."

The alchemists all gasped at these words.

Retnin was speechless for quite a while. Did this man know what he was talking about? He'd just said he understood every single alchemy formula! What a terrible joke he was making! The Alchemist Workshop in King's City had discovered more than ten new formulas in the past two years, and it would take several days just to read them through. How could he say there was nothing new?" Retnin was stunned but at the same time he was secretly delighted. It proved Kyle was completely insane. And if there was a single formula he didn't know about, he would be accused of lying to the King!

Just then, Archer, the quietest chief alchemist, came forward. He asked sternly, "How do you want to prove it?"

"Very simple." Kyle strode toward the three chief alchemists. Confidently, he suggested, "Give me the ingredients and I'll tell you the formula. How does that sound?"

Rayleigh was so furious he was ready to burst. "Very good. There are all kinds of ingredients in the Workshop. Feel free to use them. If you name one formula wrong, His Majesty will know you've been lying!"

"What if I'm correct?"

"That's impossible!" Archer shook his head. "A few alchemy formulas can be repetitive, but there's absolutely no way formulas can exhaust. You take alchemy too lightly!"

Hearing this, Kyle suddenly had a strange look on his face, as if he were studying them with sympathy or other mixed feelings. "I'm not taking it lightly. The truth is that your perception of alchemy is mistaken."

Retnin could feel his temples throbbing. "What did you say?"

"May I ask what you think alchemy really is?" Kyle remained undisturbed. "Do you think it is chaotic, volatile and too complicated to study? No. You're wrong about alchemy all the way from the beginning—or rather you know nothing about the nature of matter."

"Nonsense!" Rayleigh hollered. "Are you implying that the theories passing down from sages are simple and straightforward? If so, why are there so many derivations and why is every single rock different from another?"

To Retnin's horror, a winning smile fluttered over Kyle's face. "Ah, yes. It's simple and straightforward, it is."

"What are you..."

"As to the reason why the world is diverse and manifold, it's beyond the scope of alchemy," Kyle explained placidly. "In other words, it's a higher realm that I just got a chance to set foot in."

"Enough." Retnin stopped Rayleigh who was about to explode. "Ask the students to prepare the materials. I'm sure all this monstrous absurdity will be refuted by facts later."

If he let Rayleigh keep going, the latter might raise his voice and lash out at Kyle, and perhaps even start to criticize Roland who employed him.

The man was indeed crazy to think that alchemy is simple and straightforward, Retnin thought bitterly. He would definitely teach Kyle a lesson afterwards.

...

A long table was arranged in the Refining Hall, with three vials and three pieces of paper on the top. Each piece of paper contained the names of the ingredients.

After a heated discussion, the three chief alchemists each selected a formula for Kyle Sichi to prove his theory. In order to show fairness, as well as to stop Kyle's blabbers, the three wrote all the ingredients' names down. However, it would not be their business as to whether Kyle recognized them.

When everything was ready, Retnin turned to Roland's chief alchemist and said, "You can start now."

Kyle paced to the table and glanced at the first piece of paper confidently.

"Burn the mixture of saltpeter and green alum?" He was surprised by what was written on the sheet. "It seems you've also learned the double-stone acid-making method. The products of the reaction are multiple solids and acids, and the latter can dissolve metals." He wrote a long list of symbols on the paper as he answered.

Archer, who wrote the question, suddenly was very embarrassed. "Correct." He pronounced the word with gritted teeth.

The spectating alchemists started to exchange whispers. They had probably never expected Kyle could give the right answer to the first question within a second.

"Silence!" Retnin bellowed. "There are two questions left!"

"It was pure luck." Rayleigh stamped about with indignity. "I don't think he can answer the second question that easily. What is he writing on that piece of paper by the way?"

Retnin shook his head. His heart sank rapidly. To both Retnin and Rayleigh's surprise, Kyle gave the answer to the second question a great deal of thought and even saw through the trickiness of Rayleigh's

question. "Green vitriol acid and copper? The reaction won't start if the acid is in deficiency. With sufficient acid, the liquid will turn blue when heated, and it will bubble as well."

When it came to Retnin's question, Kyle did not linger either. "Just take out the Stone of the Netherworld?" He picked up the vial, shook it, and studied the white solid soaked in the water. "This is quite rare. It will burn on its own in the air and produce white smoke and white solids. Am I right?"

"Um..." Retnin was totally shocked. He had obtained this queer chemical substance from the alchemists in the Kingdom of Wolfheart. Few people had seen it before, and even fewer people could name its properties!

"Please feel free to raise questions." Kyle turned around and glanced at the spectating alchemists. "I can prove to you that I'm not lying."

The words stirred up the audience.

"What will happen when burning the mixture of ocher and charcoals?"

"Ocher is essentially a kind of special iron ore. If the temperature is high enough, we'll be able to get iron from it."

"Why are the colors of glass obtained via smelting different? Didn't you say alchemy is invariable?"

"Because of the different impurities in it. We need the purest gravel to produce crystal glass."

"Sir Kyle, I have a question!"

"Me too!"

To Retnin's astonishment, the atmosphere in the hall was changing swiftly. The alchemists were gradually convinced by Kyle's extensive knowledge and naturally started to show some respect to him. It suddenly struck Retnin that the alchemists were slowly accepting Kyle.

"Shut up, all of you!" Rayleigh cried abruptly. "These are all old formulas the Alchemist Workshop has known for ages. If you really understand all formulas, then write a new one that nobody has ever discovered. For example, the ultimate goal of alchemy!"

"That'll be impossible," thought Retnin, who swallowed hard. He believed all the alchemists here thought such a goal was as unrealistic as a mysterious legend.

However, he was astounded to notice a smile lingering on Kyle's lips.

Kyle Sichi smiled to all the members of the Alchemist Workshop, who rested their eyes upon him. "Are you saying turning stones into gold? Of course, I can. Let me show you."

Chapter 528: Turning Stone into Gold

"Could it be that... you've extracted the Philosopher's Stone successfully?" Archer asked in a trembling voice.

The hall suddenly fell into pin-drop silence; it was perhaps an answer that everyone wanted to hear.

The Philosopher's Stone the culmination of alchemy and the rumors claimed that it had the ability to transform anything, which was the very reason why alchemy was called the art of philosophy. When used as a medium, it could transform a generic metal or lead into gold, creating unlimited wealth; it was also the origin of the term "turning stone into gold".

"A stone that can transform everything... it was simply an invention of the ancient alchemist who wanted to be lazy," Kyle waved a hand and said, "And, what I'm about to show you is the mystery of the world."

He pulled out a strange-looking pipe, which was made of crystal glass, from his bag and generously displayed it in front of the alchemists.

Everyone, including Retnin, was stretching their neck to take a peek at it. The pipe was as thick as two fingers and was sealed at both ends. It contained some matte-looking, brownish-red powder that looked just like some dried soil at first glance. It was hard to imagine how that powder had gotten inside.

Kyle asked for a glass of clean water before he picked up a green alum stone from the table and used it to smash one end of the pipe, shattering it into pieces.

This caused a stir among the crowd.

Even Retnin was feeling greatly distressed; the immaculate transparent color showed that the tube was obviously made from first-class crystal glass, which must have taken the craftsman a lot of effort to make into such a symmetrical shape. Yet, Kyle simply smashed it to pieces. However, he realized that Prince Roland was not lying when he claimed that the domain had developed crystal glass since the Alchemist Workshop of King's City would definitely not produce this type of strange vessel.

The water was quickly provided and Kyle poured the powder into the glass of water, and then the color of the water gradually turned into a yellow-green hue and the powder disappeared.

"Do you have any lead bars here?" he turned around and asked. "Give me two of the best quality."

"Hang on!" Rayleigh said, "Since it's an alchemic reaction, it shouldn't matter who does it. I've seen some street performers who're very good at covering-up; switching bronze royals into gold royals in front of a crowd... I'm not doubting you but it's better to be cautious on such an occasion." He looked at two of the other chiefs and said, "What do you think?"

"Indeed," Archer slowly answered.

Retnin hesitated. It was obvious that Rayleigh was doubtful and comparing Kyle to the street performers was indeed quite disrespectful. However, he had to support the Alchemist Workshop in this situation.

"I... agree as well."

He was expecting the Chief Alchemist of Border Town to be furious. However, Kyle Sichi simply smiled and said, "Of course, there's no difference if the last step is carried out by either the alchemist or the apprentice. Just as I mentioned, the essence of alchemy is simple, orderly and straightforward. Who would like to do it?"

"I'll do it." Retnin was so excited that he did not dare look at Kyle, but he was not able to resist his curiosity towards learning the art of turning-stone-into-gold. "Can the glass of yellow-green liquid really transform the lead into gold?"

The apprentice quickly presented the materials—some green-and-white colored refined lead rods which were usually kept in a cotton-lined wooden box. They would be considered the best of the inventories. Retnin picked one up and carefully put it into the glass. To his surprise, he saw a golden tint appear on the surface of the lead bar!

He could feel his hands trembling uncontrollably.

"Look! It looks like something is growing out of it!"

"It's golden... Oh God, it's gold in color!"

"Is that gold?"

"It could be copper as well!"

The sounds of discussion behind Retnin grew louder. He turned around and realized that all of the alchemists and students were staring intently at the changes happening in the glass on the long table, with eyes wide open. They sounded surprised and unconvinced. All the while, Archer was looking lost and confused.

He was feeling the same at that moment... "Perhaps Kyle was right—alchemy is truly constant itself, completely simple and concise; and any self-assumed chaos is simply caused by making a wrong choice."

In that case, what's all of the decades of study for?

When the lead rod was lifted from the glass of water, there was already some filament blooming on the surface, resembling coral.

"These are all... copper!" Rayleigh was biting his lips and yelling with his last-ditch effort, "It's impossible for you to know the way to transform stone into gold!" It makes no sense! Otherwise, you'd have bought the entire Kingdom of Graycastle with gold royals, instead of simply becoming a Lord's Chief Alchemist of a small town!"

"I'm choosing this path, not for the gold royals but to understand the world." Kyle's voice seemed to come from far away. "If you don't believe, you can always examine it... I think as the Chief of King's City, you would know the differences between copper and gold pretty well, so do you?"

However, there was no reversal to be incurred for a post-verification, a piece of the gold wire was sliced off and baked on a plate in the fire. It quickly melted indicating that it was gold. It was obviously not copper because copper would darken into an ugly solid mass under high temperature, while the flowing metal solution on the plate looked as bright and golden as the sun in the sky.

True gold fears no fire.

It was indeed real gold.

The hall already seethed with excitement!

"The alchemic formula for turning rock into gold does exist!"

"Lord Kyle, what were the symbols you wrote down on the paper just now?" Was that part of a higher-level formula?"

"Where exactly did you acquire all the knowledge from?"

"Lord Chief, do you still accept any student? I'm willing to start as an apprentice!"

Kyle Sichi extended his arms, intending to suppress the cheering noise. "Listen, everything you have seen today comes from a more ancient subject. It not only includes all the possible alchemy formulas but also discloses the mystery formed within the world! From it, you can even predict those alchemy formulas that have never been seen before, and turning stone into gold isn't an exception! I could teach you all this, as long as you follow me to the Western Region!"

"To the Western Region?" Retnin became stiff, looking at Roland Wimbledon, His Majesty, who was sitting off to the side with a smile... "Is that the true purpose of why they're here?" However, it was too late for him to realize how effective it would be. The enthusiasm on the scene had totally gone out of his control. Imagine that who wouldn't want to work for the association if he could master the art of turning stone into gold? Perhaps, none of the alchemists in the hall would stay, and the hundred-year-old Alchemist Workshop of King's City had unexpectedly crumbled within a day.

Retnin noticed that Kyle was slowly walking towards him.

"Do you still remember the apprentice who wanted to configure the molten gold solution 27 years ago?" He leaned forward and whispered, "After failing the test twice, you took away his money and banned him from ever passing through the door of the association... In fact, the failure was mainly caused by a lack of acid concentration, which should have been provided by you."

"You were the apprentice who was audited by me..." Retnin said in shock—the pieces of memory in his mind were overlapping with the silhouette in front of him.

"That's right." Kyle nodded. "I'm just claiming what I deserve."

I recommend a book titled "The Noble Evil King", whose author is Kaihuang; the title may be slightly witless but the content is very good, please take a look if you are interested in~!

Chapter 529: The Returned Witch

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Two days later, Kyle Sichi bade farewell to Roland.

"Don't you want to spend a couple more days in King's City?" Roland jokingly asked, "This is the center of Graycastle, the best place to have fun within the Kingdom. If you miss it now, it may not be here next time."

"I'm not you; I don't want to have an unfinished romance here." Kyle rolled his eyes and said, "There's still a lot of work to do in the laboratory and the plant. It's best for me to return to the City of Neverwinter if you want the production line of gunpowder to run smoothly."

His reply made Roland depressed. After the situation settled down, the atmosphere in the city was a little strange: First, many women claimed to be his lovers, followed then by their illegitimate children. Of course, he knew these were all rumors. Nevertheless, he could not stop the rumors from confounding the truth. Especially, when his history was so notorious. No matter how bizarre the stories were, they would still sound convincing to some... He could only get Theo to come forward and compel the Rats to eradicate the rumors.

"Alright." He was speechless for a while before he nodded and said, "I'll arrange a paddle steamer to send you back to the Western Region. Thank you for your hard work over the past few days."

"As long as you know it," Kyle said while shaking his beard. He left after paying respect by covering his chest with one hand.

"This guy's really ungrateful." Roland twitched his lips but didn't take it personally. He even started happily singing.

"You seem very happy surrounded by so many women," said a cold voice behind him.

"Ahem..." He was almost choked by his own saliva. "What're you talking about?! They were just trying to get some money out of me by saying that. I'm sure you know that."

"How, how would I know?" Nightingale said in a panic.

"Oh? You really don't know?" Roland retorted. "I thought you've investigated everyone here."

"... Okay," Nightingale revealed herself. She turned around and sat on the table. Staring down at him, she said, "I have indeed gone on an investigation. It was, however, because I was worried about your safety and afraid you'll let dangerous people into the palace. Do you understand?"

"I understand," he said, trying not to laugh. But, the next words Nightingale said froze the smile on his face.

"Most of their statements were false. What about Miss Kingfisher and Mrs. Rother? They were not lying!"

"Damn Yorko, I didn't expect her to actually keep it in mind after the last cover-up." Roland silently cursed the "old friend" a million times. While staring seriously into her eyes, he said, "I didn't lie to you... The Prince Roland whom they were talking about wasn't me. You should be able to tell that I'm not lying."

Nightingale was feeling slightly uncomfortable being stared at and averted her eyes. "So, it's a misunderstanding? They thought it was you, but you weren't there? "

"Of course not," said Roland righteously. "In fact, I haven't seen them before!"

She looked slightly calmer and said, "So, you're just going to let the ladies who claim to have slept with you continue to make a scene? Theo said you didn't order them to shut up."

"Of course, it's exactly what they want—to be paid to shut up. It's too much to be violent, and it'll just increase the suspicion of the people." Roland was still unable to kill for this reason. "It'll be easier distracting people with bigger news than forcing those women to stop."

"Bigger... news?" Nightingale curiously asked.

"Yes, something they'll be discussing for weeks." He said smiling. "For example, King's City is to be renamed the City of Dawn; the City of Neverwinter in the Western Region is to be the new capital of Graycastle, etc. The rumors will subside after I leave."

Of course, there was more news, such as that the king is not having a coronation, as well as the competitive plan for skilled craftsmen recruitment... Cumulatively, this news should be able to fill up the public's leisure time. Currently, the Rats were slowly spreading fragments of the news to the crowd. This followed the posting of the announcement of the City Hall in order to achieve the best publicity effect. It was expected these would be the topics of discussions in pubs for a long time.

"So, you weren't happily smiling because of them just now?"

"Not at all!" Roland patted the list of names on the table and said, "I was happy because of this." The chemical presentation led by Kyle was a huge success. The effect was better than he thought—there were more than 320 people from the association who were willing to move forward to the Western Region, including alchemists, students, and the apprentices. The final number was confirmed at around 500, including the family members. "That's the sum of employees in the five chemical laboratories and two plants in the Border Area. Now the number is doubled in a blink of an eye and most of them are the proficiently who could be assigned to work after some slight training. It's the biggest accomplishment after we conquered King's City." He paused and said, "It's not, however, what I'm happiest about."

"What's the thing you're happiest about?" Nightingale asked curiously.

"Take a look at this." He spread the list, pointing out the names at the bottom.

"Retnin... Rayleigh... Archer, aren't they the Alchemist Workshop Chiefs?"

"That's right, Kyle didn't refuse them," Roland softly said. "He said he had already taken back what belonged to him." Roland thought Kyle would have a serious initial retaliation after learning about the argument between the Chief Alchemist and the Alchemist Workshop of King's City; without even meaning to continue the hatred, Kyle had received the consensus he deserved and accepted the three of them on behalf of the City of Neverwinter. It warmed Roland's heart to see there was still a group of people taking the right path in a tough time; the kingdom would definitely be continuously improving by having them in the realm.

Right then, a rhythmic knocking sound came from outside the window.

Nightingale flashed out of the window and came back to the table in the blink of an eye with the messenger in her arms. "A secret letter is here."

"You scared it." Roland shook his head. He didn't know whether he should laugh or cry while looking at the stunned gray falcon on the table. He quickly glanced through the content of the letter lifted and said, "Ah... it was sent by Scroll. I think we'll have to leave as soon as possible."

"Is there anything wrong in City of Neverwinter?" Nightingale frowned.

"No..." he twitched his lips and said, "Lotus and Honey are coming back soon."

"The two little brats..." Somehow Nightingale sounded unhappy. "Do we really need to leave in such a rush? After all, there are only two of them. Lightning and Maggie can always go pick them up. They're much faster than the hydrogen balloon. They'll reach King's City within a day."

"We could definitely do that if it were just the two of them," Roland excitedly said. "However, the letter says Tilly's sending along new witches."

Chapter 530: Lotus' Concerns

The surface of the vast sea regained its former clear blue hue. The Charming Beauty sailed forward, riding the wind and waves. The hull moved up and down in the glittering waves, making rhythmic creaks.

"Set the sail full! Boys, move!" One-eyed Jack shouted, "We can make it to the Shallow Beach today."

The sailors on the mast were singing a work song together and pulling the three-finger thick hessian rope, releasing the sail bit by bit. With the ever-changing weather on the sea, they had to repeat such release and roll-up movements several times a day. Lotus watched the sailors, as flexible as monkeys, climbing back and forth over her head.

"So troublesome," the old captain walked towards the witches and said. "It would be so much easier if I had a boat such as those in Crescent Moon Bay, they can navigate without sails. What's the thing called again?"

"Paddle steamer," Lotus said, raising her eyebrows. "It was made by His Highness, Prince Roland himself."

"Why don't you ask His Highness to build one for you?" Honey asked, teasing the seabird on her shoulder, "His Highness may not do others such a favor, but he may do it for you."

"You little brat, you make it sound like I'm very close to him."

"Well, you're close to Lady Tilly," Honey stuck her tongue out and said, "and His Highness Roland is very kind to Lady Tilly."

Jack smoked his pipe heavily, feeling a pain in his chest. "... Never mind. I heard from those merchants that one paddle steamer costs more than 1,000 gold royals. That's the amount I'd never have even if I were to sell all of you."

"That's not for sure," Breeze said jokingly. "In Sleeping Spell, the reward for Lotus is counted by hundreds of gold royals. Besides, last time a merchant named Durat Kimshoe intended to employ her for a long term with 1,000 gold royals. That's only Lotus, so the four of us would be worth much more."

"Breeze!" Lotus punched Breeze angrily. "You knew what he was up to. I don't want to hear that man's name ever again!"

"Just kidding." Breeze held Lotus into her arms and said gently, "How could I ever sell you. When Lady Tilly heard about Kimshoe's proposal, she practically negotiated with the entire chamber of commerce of Crescent Moon Bay. After that no one would dare do such a thing anymore."

"You two seem to get along well." Jack spouted some smoke rings. "But the other two over there do not seem to have much to talk to you."

On hearing that, the three of them fell into silence for a moment. A while later, Breeze broke the silence. "They were witches from the Kingdom of Wolfheart."

The old captain felt confused. "Aren't you all the same?"

"They support Heidi Morgan more than Lady Tilly."

"Morgan..." The captain stroked his chin and thought for a while. "Is she a noble in the Kingdom of Wolfheart?"

"Only from a branch." Breeze waved one hand. "Nothing serious. It's just we haven't been together for long, so we can't open our hearts to each other yet."

The old man seemed to have realized something, so he did not pose more questions.

Lotus did not know much about the nobles in the kingdom. She only knew witches from Sleeping Island were not as close as the witches in Border Town were. Among the witches in Border Town, most of them were from the Kingdom of Graycastle, and a small group of them were from the Kingdom of Dawn and the Kingdom of Wolfheart. Since Tilly was the organizer of the migration operation and had the noblest status, all of them, including the foreign witches, just regarded her as the leader. But after the church in Fjord Islands was eradicated, the situation had changed.

Lotus, who had returned to Sleeping Island after the Months of Demons, could clearly sense it. After only a few months' time, the witches from the Kingdom of Wolfheart had moved in together, and they seldom talked to other witches when they ate in the dining hall. According to Molly, they were all members of the Bloodfang Association, an organization similar to the Witch Cooperation Association of the Kingdom of Graycastle, with Heidi Morgan as its leader.

In the beginning, there were just over 20 witches from the Bloodfang Association on Sleeping Island. They were a minority on the island, which was nothing special. The extraordinary thing was that 18 of them were combat witches. In other words, the Bloodfang Association had carefully selected its members before the enrollment, and only those witches who were powerful could join in, which was totally different from the way the Witch Cooperation Association and Sleeping Island enrolled witches. Because of this, the Bloodfang Association was very competitive. When Tilly had carried out her eradication plan, the small group of witches from the Kingdom of Wolfheart alone took care of the Twin Dragon Island cathedral which had the most believers.

And because of this, Heidi Morgan thought the Bloodfang Association was the core of Sleeping Island. Although Morgan did not express her opinion in words, Lotus could feel it. Lotus did not like the argument that combat witches had higher status than non-combat witches, and she agreed with Lady Tilly's idea of "witch equality". Unfortunately, not everyone shared her opinion. While Lady Tilly was away, Heidi had fought several times with Camilla Dary, Chief Butler of Sleeping Island. Luckily, Camilla,

who was also a noble in King's City, did not appear dwarf in front of Heidi and calmly quieted the conflicts.

At this thought, Lotus sighed helplessly. She was not worried about Lady Tilly's safety. After all, Ashes, the most powerful witch from Sleeping Island, was a faithful supporter to Lady Tilly. Ashes was the only Extraordinary who could fight wearing a God's Stone of Retaliation. In her presence, all the other witches from the Bloodfang Association would not stand a chance to win. What worried her was this trip. Honestly, she did not want to stay with the witches from the Kingdom of Wolfheart.

And also, the witches being chosen for this trip were a weird combination—except for herself and Honey, two of the other three witches were combat witches. Normally, Lady Tilly should have known that His Highness Roland preferred assistance witches because those bizarre weapons he owned were enough to enable the commoners to defeat the Judgement Army of the church. To what end did she send the witches from the Bloodfang Association?

She racked her brain but failed to find an answer, so she decided to put these distracting thoughts aside.

Maybe Lady Tilly had her own concerns beyond her comprehension.

...

As the sun moved to the west, the golden Shallow Beach shone in everybody's eyes.

At the same time, a hot air balloon appeared, floating in midair along with a strange, giant bird.

"Oh God! What's that?" The sailors on deck exclaimed when they saw the strange bird fold its wings and dive towards the Charming Beauty. As the bird drew closer, its sharp claws and bloody mouth became visible to the sailors.

"Is there an enemy?" Hearing the shouts, the Bloodfang Association witches rushed out of the cabin and were startled by the giant beast. "What's that monster?"

"Whatever it is, just catch it!" The other witch soon calmed down. "A target's size makes no difference to us."

"Wait a minute... That's not the enemy." Lotus hurried to stop them. "It flew alongside the hot air balloon."

A witch from the Bloodfang Association quickly glanced at her. "A hot air balloon?"

"It's a vessel that His Highness Roland uses to transport witches." Breeze stepped in front of them to stop their argument. "Relax. You can trust Lotus' judgement."

The horrible giant beast was getting closer and closer, making resounding roars. But Lotus could feel the roars were not for intimidation.

"Oh-oh-coo!"

The giant figure of the beast disappeared just as it was about to hit the sail of the boat, and a white pigeon landed steadily on Lotus' head.

"You're here finally," Maggie rubbed her forehead and said. "Welcome back, coo!"

