

Witch 821

Chapter 821: A Meeting

"My lord, your guest is here, " said a maid who pulled the curtain and poked her head in.

"Send him in," Otto Luoxi handed a silver royal to the bar girl beside him and said, "I need a private minute with him. I'll call you later."

"Yes, my lord!"

"Is this the covert place you mentioned?" The man who came in removed his hood and glanced around. "If I hadn't seen the Luoxi guards standing outside, I would think I'd come to the wrong place."

"It isn't easy these days to see you, I had to take extra precautions, " replied Otto, grinning.

The guest was Hill Fawkes, a member of the emissary delegation who "betrayed the King of Dawn, killed the guards and knights and escaped from the City of Glow with some fallen minions". Ever since Yoroko's secret departure, Appen Moya, the King of Dawn became so furious that he claimed it was a blatant provocation to and contempt of the Kingdom of Dawn on Graycastle's part. He also said that it was a witch that killed his father and he absolutely did not allow such an evil existence in his domain.

Of course, Otto knew far more than that. For example, that while Appen was searching for the witches, he also dispatched a group of knights to chase the emissary delegation. He ordered that any member of the emissary delegation, other than Yoroko, could be killed on the spot, especially the witches who dared to collude with the neighbor country. At the same time, investigations were carried out in the King's City. Denise, a businesswoman who had an intimate relationship with the ambassador, was taken to the palace several times for inquiries. Hill and the others who voluntarily stayed as contacts, on the contrary, disappeared.

Otto did not hear anything from Hill until a few months later when the event no longer received so much public attention.

This was their first meeting after their last departure.

"Would you like some drinks?" Otto patted the soft couch beside him and asked, "I guess you usually have no chance to enjoy it."

Hill did not sit down; instead, he walked to the window and looked around. "We're on the second floor. Where's the reliable path you mentioned in the confidential letter?"

Otto, the eldest son of the Luoxis, sighed, stood up and opened a board under the soft couch, revealing the dark passage beneath it.

"Slide down from here, you'll arrive at the back garden. In the yard, you'll find a secret door and a dry well. You can choose either way to leave."

"Nobody else knows this path?"

"Of course, both the back garden and the tavern belong to the Luoxis." He said, shrugging, "No wonder Sir Yorke said you're a fox. You're still as cautious as you were before."

"If I were not like this, I'm afraid I would have been hanged on a gallow now," replied Hill, who took a coin from his pocket and dropped it down the tunnel. After listening to the sound for a while, he closed the board. "If you want to tell me any information in the future, write me an encrypted letter. It's not safe to meet in this way."

"But an encrypted letter is also not safe for me. If the information in the palace is leaked, King Appen will certainly suspect our families." Otto sighed and said, "He's no more my good friend who talked about everything with me."

Hill raised his eyebrows without denying. "Does the King of Dawn have any new plan?"

"He intends to attack the Church of Hermes and avenge for his father," Otto slowly told him what he heard during the court meeting, "although the ministers tried to dissuade him, His Majesty still persisted. Now they start to collect grains in the City of Glow. When snows melt after the Months of Demons, he'll immediately take actions. The royal knightage will go together with Duke Carb who is in charge of the Western Field."

"No wonder the porridge is a bronze royal more expensive than before... Fortunately, the supplies in the Kingdom of Dawn are rich enough. If it were in Graycastle, the lord would not prepare for the war during the Months of Demons unless he wanted to trigger riots." Hill said meditatively, "Is there any problem with Hermes?"

Otto knew why he asked. Though the church and Graycastle had a battle on Coldwind Ridge and it was said that the Holy City was severely defeated, later it was reported that both of them retreated to their own domain. The ministers all agreed that the church might have suffered heavy losses, but had not been completely defeated. Otherwise, the King of Graycastle should have led the arm to loot the Holy City. As the core city of the church, it should be where all the wealth church had accumulated for hundreds of years was.

Maybe Appen was deeply impressed with the God's Punishment Warriors brought by the Pure Witches. He just dispatched more scouts for further information without any further actions.

Since he changed his mind, it was possible that he had discovered something there.

As for whether it was to avenge for his father or take advantage of the chaos, it did not matter at all.

"His Majesty didn't tell us many details. But I heard from the businessmen coming back from the west that many refugees appeared in the old Holy City."

"Refugees?" Hill nodded while rubbing his chin. "I'll report this to Neverwinter."

"There's one more thing," Otto hesitated for a while and said, "in the court meeting last month, the Minister of Foreign Affairs mentioned Graycastle. He said that Roland Wimbledon could not be counted as the real ruler of Graycastle, as he hasn't either held enthronement or lived in the palace. What's more, many nobles in Graycastle oppose him, especially in the Eastern Region. Since he trampled on the alliance of the two countries, the Kingdom of Dawn needs to be cautious of him and suppress his power. For example, We should support those nobles to resist the rule of Wimbledon."

"Well," Hill immediately became serious and asked, "What did the King of Dawn respond?"

"His Majesty did not respond immediately, but his expression... showed that he has a great interest in the matter."

Otto did not know why he told these things to Hill... or, to Roland. Judging from the current situation, he could see the relationship between Graycastle and Dawn was deteriorating. He should have stood on the side of Appen Moya, just as the family of Luoxi had assisted John Moore's royalties for generations.

But he could not persuade himself to accept His Majesty's policy. Killing all witches meant that Andrea Quinn should also be killed, who was definitely not evil as Appen described. He had tried many times to explain the differences between witches and Pure Witches from the church to His Majesty, but his explanations were futile.

Appen no longer regarded him as his hand.

Otto also found that although he still addressed Appen as His Majesty, he did not have the same respect as he had for the old king.

He had pondered over it for a long time. Maybe he admitted that he was unable to change the situation and had to put his hope on Graycastle. In Neverwinter, he met Andrea who had a free and easy life. In order to let her continue to have such a life, he hoped that Roland's rule could continue.

"I see," said Hill in a lower voice. "Don't worry. His plan won't succeed."

Otto nodded, took a deep breath and asked, "Then... can you tell me how Miss Quinn is doing these days?"

Chapter 822: Traitors

"She's fine. She lived on the Sleeping Island in Fjords for a while and has returned to Neverwinter now." Hill laughed and said, "I heard that Miss Quinn is especially close to Princess Tilly, His Majesty's sister. So His Majesty will definitely treat her as a distinguished guest."

Afterwards, Hill told him some trivia about Andrea. Otto learned that Andrea loved playing cards and improving her marksmanship. She occasionally argued with another card-playing buddy, but on the whole, she got along well with them.

Her news made him nearly forget about the passage of time.

Until he heard arguments outside the room.

"What happened?" Hill stopped talking and quickly walked to the door, peeping through the door slot, and then he said, "Something is wrong on the first floor."

"Let me send someone to check it," Otto indicated Hill to sit down first. He then yelled toward the outside, "Who's making noise outside? Go to see what happened!"

"Yes, my lord," replied the maid who had been at the door.

"Maybe someone is drunk." He then said to Hill, drawing the blanket on him, "It's unusual, but does happen in the tavern. You mentioned Miss Quinn participated in a Neverwinter hunting competition. Who won?"

Instead of replying, Hill raised a finger to his lips as a sign of silence and gently leaned his ear on the door.

After a few seconds, his face clouded over.

"Those people downstairs are armored and armed."

"What?" Otto was a little stunned.

"I heard the sounds of iron boots and sword hilts hitting the ground and chairs. Do you think anyone would wear a full set of armor when drinking?" Hill no longer waited for the maid but directly opened the soft couch. "I don't think a drunk would like to dress up as a knight. We're in trouble."

"How... how is it possible?" Otto frowned and said, "Please believe me. I absolutely didn't..."

"Of course. If I didn't trust you, I wouldn't be here," Hill interrupted.

"Well... We can meet next time. You leave first. If they're really coming for you, I can stop them." Otto replied. "After this meeting, I don't know when I will learn about Andrea again," he thought regretfully.

"Won't you leave with me?" Hill was slightly surprised and asked, "Apparently, they aren't coming for a visit. You'd better go back to your own domain."

"Rest assured. I'm the eldest son of Luoxi family. They can't do anything to me," Otto shook his head. He did not tell his father that he tried to rescue witches and secretly contacted Roland's scouts. If people outside the room came to search for the emissary delegation members while he ran away, it might raise the suspicion of the king. Then he would really be in trouble. "No one knows the secret path, but it isn't difficult to find it. If they saw an empty room, they would be suspicious. I'll stay in the room. Only in this way can you withdraw more safely."

"Then, good luck." Hill did not insist. He loosed his hands and slid into the secret path.

Otto rearranged the blanket and quilt and lay on the soft couch again.

A short while later, he heard heavy patters of footsteps at the staircases accompanied by the scraping of metal. The maid who left to inquire about the situation never appeared again.

Without knocking or asking for admission, they directly broke in.

A group of full-armored knights rushed into the room.

"What're you doing?" Otto furiously questioned, "This is the private property of Earl Luoxi! Are you planning to commit treason?" He intended to stand up and drive the rude knights out of the tavern. Out of his expectation, the knights stepped forward and tightly pressed him on the soft couch.

"I'm sorry, Sir. We aren't committing treason, but you are." The leading knight replied, shrugging. Though they wore the gold armors and royal knightage emblems on their chests, Otto found that he had never met this group of knights.

Hell, where did they come from?

"Let me go!" He struggled and shouted, "That's a slander!"

"Say this to His Majesty," said the knight. "You fail to live up to his trust, my lord."

When he heard the name Appen Moya, Otto's heart suddenly sank.

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It was two days later when he saw His Majesty again.

"I heard that you haven't eaten anything for two days, but insist to see me?" Appen said. He still seemed to be a little weary, but looked more mature. His eyes revealed emotions which Otto was unfamiliar with. "Now your requirement is satisfied. Start to eat."

"Where am I?" Otto asked in a hoarse voice, hands on the steel bars, "Why did you do so? What did you do to my father?"

"Are you not satisfied with the room?" Appen said, looking around, "It's decorated according to your room in the Duke mansion. It's not large, but you have a bed, a desk, chairs, and a bookcase. I think you can live a comfortable life here." He paused and said, "As for where it is... Of course, it's under the palace. I can only feel at ease when you're kept here."

Otto gritted his teeth and said, "Your Majesty, I need to talk to you. I didn't..."

"Betray me?" The King of Dawn interrupted him, "Do you think I'll still believe these lies and continue to be deceived by you? It took me two months to find some clues about the witches. I have never thought that you were actually involved. You asked Yorko, the Ambassador of Graycastle, to 'Black Money' to participate in the auction, and also helped him leave the City of Glow. Wasn't that betrayal?" He raised his voice, as he apparently did not want to suppress his anger anymore. "That day in the palace, didn't you hear how the King of Graycastle abandon the covenant and trample on my father's feelings?"

"I..."

"Do you want to talk about the traitors or the witches who should go to hell?" Appen asked in a tone full of hatred. "Enough, Otto Luoxi! If you were not my friend since childhood, the eldest son of the three noble families, I would have long sent you to the gallows! I still need the support of the three families now. But that doesn't mean I need you forever. This is my last chance for you. Don't force me to do that!"

Otto's heart sank at his words. He had never seen his playmate show such a ferocious look. Thinking of those "royal rights" he never saw before, he suddenly understood something.

Perhaps they had lost the trust of the new king since the death of the old king.

"But the way, you just asked what happened to your father." Before leaving, Appen suddenly said in a cold voice, "Nothing happens to him. He still attended today's court meeting. As long as you eat food, Earl Luoxi will still be a good loyal noble. Stop this stupid hunger strike. That's good for both of us. If you persist, I have to take the hard way."

Chapter 823: Dark Clouds over Hermes

Although it was snowing slightly, it was a fair day in the Northern Region.

Nail was rubbing the oil stick on the gun barrel out of sheer boredom. He occasionally glanced at the Impassable Mountain Range with the telescope. Since they had been stationed here, he did not observe the mountain as frequently as he did before. He usually checked it two or three times a day and spent the rest of time on maintaining the flintlock and chatting with his companions.

Maintenance of weapons required a person to be detail-oriented. Every half a month or so, they would get a portion of a thumb-long "oil stick" wrapped in hard paper. It was heard that the oil stick was made of abandoned oil from the soap factory. When they used it, they needed to heat it up and then rub it onto the special double-ended brush, which had a large and a small brush on either end, to be inserted into the gun barrel and cartridge. In the past, every squad was equipped with only one set of cleaning tools. But nowadays as there were more and more factories and workshops in Neverwinter, the brushes became accessories to the guns and everyone had one.

Of course, when there was no bonfire, they could heat the oil stick by body or mouth temperature. Though the soldiers in the First Army was forbidden to eat the abandoned oil, some people still secretly rubbed it on their dried food as a seasoning.

As a squad leader, he usually chose to turn a blind eye.

After all, the teams responsible for guarding the Northern Region were basically veterans. Some of them were even over 20 years older than him. If he had not attended the primary education class, he would not be selected as the squad leader. He could only smile to those who used to be his neighbors in the past.

After assembling the parts one by one, the rifle became shiny again. He pressed the trigger several times to ensure the empty gun could shoot normally before he once again checked the front.

He was still unable to forget the defense battle in autumn. Once he closed his eyes, the image of that young woman wearing a red cope would emerge in his mind. It was in this blockhouse that he witnessed her death. He knew that she was an enemy and a Pure Witch of the church, but her struggling in the gunshots still made him uncomfortable. If it were not Iron Axe's command and his loyalty to His Majesty, he would have chosen to leave the army and return to his previous job as a steam engine operator in the mining area.

Although he still served in the First Army, Nail made up his mind to leave the machine gun team but become an observer who protected machine gunners. He knew that he was self-deceiving, but he had no way to overcome the obstacle in his heart.

The battlefield, which had been soaked with blood, was restored to the ordinary look as if nothing had happened. The barbed wires had long been removed, leaving only a dozen of crooked stakes. Trenches were also filled with snow. If there were no blockhouses, one could not distinguish this field from the wild field around. Except them, no one knew that over 2,000 people had once died here, just several hundred meters in front of the first line of stakes.

"Chief, we're running out of firewood. Let me go to fetch some," said a soldier who was nearly as young as Nail. The firewood he mentioned was the stakes once used to fix the barbed wires. He said, "Otherwise the other squad will blame us for not adding more firewood after using it."

"But it's duty time now..." Nail shook his head and said, "You may be seen by others."

"They won't say anything," another veteran said, laughing. "It's so cold today. No one will care if we go to get firewood to warm us up. It has been several months since the cowards of the church retreated. Do you think they'll come today?"

His words were agreed by everyone else.

Nail also knew the veteran was right. At first, Iron Axe required 500 soldiers in the camp keeping stationed at the foot of Coldwind Ridge to guard against the last struggle of the church or the invasion of the demonic beasts. However, to their surprise, no enemies appeared. Maybe the superiors believed that enemies would not come, so they transferred over 200 soldiers to other places and divided the rest of soldiers into patrol teams, whose mission was to stay in the blockhouses to monitor in the northwestern direction in turns.

Nail hesitated but finally agreed with that soldier. He said, "You alone will be too slow. Go there with more people."

The soldier whistled and replied, "Yes, Head!"

Nail turned back and picked up the telescope to look toward the snow-covered field. What he could see was the white snow. Nothing changed.

Just when he was about to wipe his pistol, he suddenly saw two or three dark spots which were especially striking in a white background.

He was startled, and then shouted, "Wait!"

The soldiers who had reached the stairs stopped immediately, and the others around the stove hurriedly stood up and drew close. "What's wrong?"

Nail wiped the lens with his wool neckline and looked back in the northwestern direction. He saw more dark spots. He held his breath and observed them for a moment, only to find that they were a group of people slowly walking in the snow.

"Blow the horn to alert the soldiers! Someone is approaching the front!"

"Woo—woo—woo—woo—" As the horn sounded, the entire camp was seething at once.

With a rifle in his hand, Nail led his squad members out of the blockhouse and stood in a line around the blockhouse, placing their gun barrels on the sandbags covered with snow. As the trench was filled with snow, they had to shorten the front line, assisting the heavy machine gun to defend.

"Are they from the church?" someone asked.

"Who else will come?" muttered the former veteran unhappily. "Coldwind Ridge has long been abandoned by His Majesty. Only people in Hermes will come from that direction. I underestimated their guts."

"I hope they're not the monster-like warriors. We don't have the support of the Artillery Battalion this time."

"We have nothing to be afraid of. I don't believe they can run quickly in the heavy snow." The veteran spat. "If they wear armors, they'll sink in the snow and become our targets."

"Head, their distance?"

"At least 1,000 meters away," replied Nail, frowning at the suspicious group. "It's so strange. Something is wrong..."

"What's wrong?"

"They... aren't like the God's Punishment Army."

"Does the church send the Judgement Army?" All soldiers were relieved. If they were just ordinary Judgement Warriors, it would be impossible for them to approach in the crossfire of machine guns on the blockhouse.

"No, not the Judgement Army... They're not armored. Actually, they're so ragged." said Nail, holding the telescope and said in surprise, "Gosh, how did these people come down from the mountain? They're like... a group of refugees! "

"Or maybe the God's Punishment Warriors disguised as refugees," the veteran shrugged. "Hey, where are you going?"

"I'm going to tell them to stop!" Nail said without turning back, "Otherwise, the other squads will shoot them!"

Chapter 824: The Symbol of the Fall

As he approached the front, he could clearly see the group of refugees without the telescope.

Men, women, old men, and children. They were all ragged and staggering, looking weak and frail. They were even weaker than common militia, not to mention the Judgement Army.

Nail was more sure about his judgment.

But he knew that the church had a pill which could enhance the taker's physical strength within a second. Considering that they might use the Berserk Pills, Nail told his squad members to hold up the heavy machine guns within the suppressing shooting range before he approached alone and shouted, "This is the border defense line of the Kingdom of Graycastle. You're forbidden to step forward. Freeze, or we'll fire!"

Apparently, those people also saw him. They did not stop moving; instead, they accelerated their pace in excitement.

Nail shot twice upward and repeated his warning, but they continued to run toward him.

"Mr. Nail, come back!" Cried the veteran behind him. "They don't even know what flintlocks are. They won't stop no matter how loud you shout!"

Hearing that, Nail hurriedly shouted that he would shoot arrows, and those people finally responded. Nevertheless, after a moment's hesitation, they continued to move forward and waved both hands toward the First Army, yelling while running.

He could only tell that they were crying for help.

"No, stop!" Nail was still trying to stop them until he was dragged back to the defensive line by his teammates. When those people crossed the first line of stakes, flames spurted from the two blockhouses at the same time. Whistling bullets flew overhead and fell near the stakes, splashing snow dust and submerging their cries.

There was immediately a mist of blood among the crowd.

This time they finally stopped moving forward.

Except for the refugees who had been shot and fell, the others fell on their knees one after another and then threw themselves down in the snow. Terrified as they were, they did not turn around. It seemed that they were more afraid of some even more dreadful things behind them.

"Stop! Stop! Don't fire!" Nail took off his jacket, got up and waved toward the blockhouses, risking being hit by a stray bullet. The machine gun squads finally released their triggers. Probably they noticed his strange move, two more squads left the blockhouses and approached the front line.

Walking through the still-smoky field, a five-man squad held the rifles, followed Nail and slowly approached the strangers. Those strangers were trembling but dared not to move again in spite of the chilling snow.

"Where are you from?"

No one answered.

"Haven't you heard the question of our squad leader?" cried the veteran. "If you don't answer it, you'll be treated as spies and hanged."

"My, my, my... my lord," someone finally spoke this time. "We... we all came from Hermes."

"So you're believers of the church?" Nail asked, frowning.

"Yes... No, no, we aren't," answered the man, banging his head on the ground again and again. "In the past, we were deceived by the church. But we regret now! The deities did not protect the church. We were wrong. Please give us some food."

His words stirred up the crowd. They begged, "My lord, please, please give us some oatmeal. My child is starving!"

"The army of the church was after us. We had to drop our luggage."

"My lord, I haven't eaten anything for three days."

"So they would rather be shot by machine guns than run away?" Nail thought. He could not bear to look at the withered faces and bleeding bodies. After they fled from the Holy City, Graycastle was their only hope to survive. He reached his dried food in his waist pocket and was about to throw it to them while a veteran grabbed him by his wrist.

"Hey, what're you doing?"

"Give them some food."

"Are you sure? These guys are believers of the church." The veteran lowered his voice and stressed, "They're our enemies."

"But now they aren't. Didn't you hear it? They admitted that they had been deceived."

"Hmm, deceived?" The veteran replied disdainfully, "When they can't survive, they'll even worship demons. Compared with those Judgement Army soldiers fighting for the church, these people are just timid drifters."

"Head, Uncle Sang is right. Maybe they made the weapons and armors used by the church army."

"Who knows whether they've hurt the First Army?"

"They deserve it. That's what they'll end up with since they've fought against His Majesty. I'll definitely not give any food to them."

Nail took a deep breath and made a gesture to tell them to be quiet. He said, "Listen to me. We all know what Border Town was like before His Majesty came. At that time everyone was deceived by the church. But His Majesty didn't abandon us or treat us as betrayers. Then how could we despise them? Of course, I agree that we should spare none of those who committed a crime. Give them some food, and then bring them for interrogation. That's what we should do."

"Eh, well..."

"And His Majesty once said in his book that the Kingdom of Graycastle is a whole. As long as someone isn't guilty and is willing to pay allegiance to Graycastle, he should be treated as a subject of the king, rather than being persecuted and excluded." Nail continued to say, "If there are innocent people among them and we watch them die in front of us, aren't we against His Majesty's wish?"

The crowd fell into silence for a moment. Then the veteran grinned and said, "Head Nail, now I know why Sir Blair chose you as our squad leader. You've become so different since you went to school. In the past, you always stumbled when speaking in front of a crowd. If Iron Head knows it, he'll be proud of you."

Apparently, he did not agree with Nail's remark that "anyone who pays allegiance to Graycastle is the subject of Graycastle", but since everyone in the First Army admired King Roland, they did not oppose Nail's decision anymore. The veteran said, "But you can't directly throw food to them. That'll cause a chaos. Pick up some starving ones and order them to come up one by one."

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As more and more soldiers came, Eagle Face, the deputy battalion commander who was in charge of Northern Region garrison, also came to the front line. This tall man, who had round eyes and a pointed mouth like a grey eagle of Western Region, was one of the excellent hunters who joined the Militia with Iron Axe. He asked, "Can someone explain what happened?"

Nail stepped forward and saluted, and then briefly told him the incident.

"Escaped from the Holy City?" Eagle Face asked thoughtfully. He ordered them to bring a refugee forward and said, "What happened in Hermes? If you tell me the situation in details, I can give you food."

"My, my lord..." The refugee nervously swallowed and replied, "The Cathedral of the New Holy City... collapsed..."

"What?" Nail was shocked for a moment. He had heard that the Hermes Cathedral was a symbol of the immortality of the church. Before the completion of His Majesty's Miracle Building, the tower had been the tallest building built by mankind. At the start of the defensive battle under the Coldwind Ridge, he also had dreamed to follow His Majesty into the Hermes Plateau and occupy the tower that could reach the skies in the legend. But this magnificent building... did not exist anymore?

"I heard that a big pit suddenly appeared below the church and the entire tower fell..." The refugees stumbled, "The Judgement Army blocked the scene, but a big building disappeared without a trace, and the mighty bang... Everyone knew what happened. The church is over, my lord, the deities no longer favor it. The outside residents have begun to flee. We were a little later, and then we ran into the Judgement Army who was chasing us. Among the hundreds of people, only we escaped..."

"That means the Holy City is a mess now?"

"A mess, a mess..." That man nodded and said, "Beside the Western Gate, the Southern and East Gates are also open and unguarded. Obviously, the guards have also run away. I heard that the situation in the old Holy City is even worse. I really haven't seen any caravans come into the city for a long time."

"Got it. You're excused."

After the soldiers took the men away, Eagle Face looked excited. "This is an unexpected good news. Maybe we'll occupy Hermes before the arrival of the army."

Nails naturally knew why the deputy battalion commander was glad about. If he became the first Commander to lead the army into the Holy City, it would undoubtedly be his great achievement. But Nail did not pay much attention to whether he would win more achievements; instead, he cared more about those refugees who had suffered hunger and coldness.

After Nail told his concern, Eagle Face looked at him thoughtfully and answered after a moment, "It's impossible for the camp to keep these outsiders. Give them some tents and food, and allow them to encamp in places where the heavy machine guns cover."

"In this utterly unsheltered field?" Nail said worriedly, "If the weather becomes worse and there is heavy rain or storm at night, they probably won't survive the night."

"As the head of the garrison in the Northern Region, I must give top priority to the safety of the First Army." Eagle Face was unmoved and said, "I will inform Duke Kant to accommodate them. Before the arrival of the helpers in Deepvalley Town, these people have to pray to have a good luck."

Chapter 825: Dusk Tolls

Tucker Thor climbed up the fortified city wall of the New Holy City and slowly walked to the blotchy parapet.

It was probably the most peaceful Months of Demons after the establishment of the stronghold.

As a tactic to defend against demonic beasts, the city wall was cleaned up regularly, covered with no ice or snow, but stood out in the bleak, vast whiteness like an ash-gray giant all the year round, no matter how big the snow was. At present, however, Tucker could easily leave his footprints on the snow-covered wall.

All traces of the battle had been wiped out by thick snows, including lumps and bumps on the flagstone pavement, and blood that seeped through the crevices between the slabs, as if nothing had ever happened. It would be an incredible scene in the past.

Nonetheless, the recent drastic changes had completely overshadowed such aberrancy.

Tucker had thought the Holy City of Hermes would be razed to the ground by swarms of demonic beasts. In fact, all the believers had determined to remain in the cathedral to the last, but they had not anticipated that few enemies had actually appeared. Those who did come to attack had not even made an attempt to crawl up the city wall.

While everybody was still absorbed in profound astonishment and celebration delight, the subsequent event, however, came as a heavy blow in such a cruel fashion that they were once again reminded of the volatility of the deities.

As the church had suffered a great loss during the war against Graycastle, the top priority in winter had become the election of three new archbishops and other senior executives. In order to maintain the order in the Holy City and restore believers' faith in God, many young believers had been promoted to key positions. Tucker had also been elevated from Chief Justice to one of the acting bishops.

Just when the situation was about to turn for the better, the abrupt collapse of the cathedral at a windless night, which had killed a number of senior executives, destroyed all hopes of the war survivors. At that time, Tucker had happened to be patrolling the campsite and therefore had narrowly escaped death.

Nobody knew how it had happened, although rumors about a great fire in the core underground area beneath the church remained afloat. It was also rumored that the area had once been attacked by demonic beasts. Yet without the permission of the pope, they could not access the secret trap on their own, notwithstanding the mysterious disappearance of the acting pope Reverend Tayfun.

The sag of the Hermes Cathedral could be considered as a more miserable defeat than the war. The loss of the war could be attributed to the poor and confusing communications between commanders and

soldiers, or to the treachery of their enemies, but the collapse of the Tower of Babel, which represented the spirit of the church, meant that they had been abandoned by God.

The incident had almost become their last straw in consideration of their already precarious situation. Although the church had blocked the scene immediately, the news still spread out. Residents in the Holy City started to flee Hermes, beginning from masons and tradesmen living in the outer part of the city, who did not put much faith in the church in the first place. Then, like a contagious plague, terror slowly spread to the outer city and the inner city, except this time there was no divine cure for the disease.

Tucker had once organized a reverent pray ceremony on the city wall with all the members of the Judgment Army and priests, hoping that the deities would once again divert their attention to this last human stronghold and protect living beings behind it from the evil power in Hell, but the deities had not responded to their pray.

Tucker Thor remembered that Pope Mayne had once taught him that power was the only means to defy evil. However, he could not think of anything other than praying to God to re-establish the church's integrity.

"Your Eminence... here you are." A woman's voice came from behind. "The army responsible for pursuing fugitives has returned, but..."

"Some of the units fled, right?" Tucker turned around and said in a soft voice.

As he had expected, the reporter was Farrina, one of the commanders that survived of the Judgment Army who took over his previous position. The resemblance on Farrina's face reminded Tucker another woman, Alicia, a warrior from the advance battalion who had sacrificed herself for the church. As one of the few female Judgement Warriors, they both had a tough character. Alicia had fought to her death when over half of her comrades had been killed as demonic beasts had approached the wall of the cathedral. Farrina, on the other hand, assumed the critical role of the commander of the Judgment Army when their very survival was threatened to keep the situation from getting out of hand.

Farrina stomped indignantly. "Yes. Those new recruits who just joined recently cannot be of any use. More than 20 people went to catch fugitives but only one or two returned. I know they haven't received much training, but it's very unlikely that they would be killed by refugees. If I ever find them, I'll definitely let them know the consequence of betrayal!"

Tucker sighed. "It's inevitable. How many people are left in the Judgement Army?"

"564. They're all guarding the inner city gate of the Holy City, so they should be able to stop residents in the inner city from leaving."

Tucker knew that these soldiers plus around 100 God's Punishment Warriors down the ruin of the church were the only forces left. He concluded that human beings were doomed, for it was impossible for these 100-odd soldiers to stop demons.

Tucker had learned this powerful enemy from Pope Mayne. What the church had been striving to achieve was to help human beings survive the Battle of Doomsday and ensure the continuation of the human race. That was the reason they developed powerful warriors like the God's Punishment Army.

But that was not sufficient. The church also had to unify the Four Kingdoms before the great battle and combine all human power in order to gain the eventual victory.

What was the point of keeping the hold of this plateau stronghold when there is no hope?

There was little he could do, but for those 500 odd people, they could be relieved of the burden of protecting the whole human race.

Tucker finally broke the silence. "Go to the east. The Kingdom of Everwinter or the Kingdom of Wolfheart, whichever it is, pick somewhere close to the coast. We can build a new holy city there."

He believed in that case, even if demons invaded the Four Kingdoms, they could still, if lucky, flee by boat from the harbor to some distant islands and spend the rest of their life there before human beings were wiped out.

Farrina was stunned. "Leave Hermes? But Your Eminence, if we leave, who will defend against demonic beasts?"

"We can blame Graycastle if demonic beasts invade the inner continent from the breach. Our current top priority is to reserve our strength. We can always build a new cathedral but we can't let our believers suffer. When the Four Kingdoms are permeated with demonic beasts, people will naturally remember our power again."

"Demonic beasts don't really matter, as they aren't our true enemies. The greatest threat is from the depth of Hell, but there's nothing you guys can do about it. What I can do at this last moment is to keep you as far away from the battlefield as possible. You've done enough to protect human beings," Tucker said within himself.

Farrina's slender brows furrowed. "Those pious believers who resolve to fall with the Holy City may not agree to abandon Hermes."

Tucker replied after a moment of silence, "The Holy City lies where you stay, child. Explain to them, and they'll understand. This is also the order of the acting pope, which is to preserve ourselves and the spirit of the church. Do you understand?"

"Let those fugitives leave as they please and spread the news of the fall of the Holy City. By that time, the King of Graycastle will probably be anxious to take them in," thought Tucker.

"I understand, Your Eminence... No, Your Holiness," Farrina bit her lip. At length, she curled up her hands into a fist, placed it over her chest and bowed.

Just then, the somber sky was overspread by a haze of dusk. Tucker turned around and saw the orangey red rays of the setting sun slowly streak through clouds and that the fresh white snowfield was basking in slanting beams of sunshine.

"Does this mean... the Months of Demons has ended?" Farrina's face lighted up.

"Yes. The snow will melt in no time. Go and tell the news. If they start to prepare now, we'll be able to take off in two or three weeks."

"OK. Please excuse me!" She nodded and ran to the inner city.

At that moment, the bell in the Holy City tolled, announcing the arrival of evening. The bell tolled nine times to tell believers that it was time to close their eyes and pray to God.

Yet Tucker Thor did not pray.

Because God was not listening to them anymore.

He took off the crown on his head and placed it on the balcony. Then he ascended the city wall and gazed at the last splendor of the setting sun.

He had one more thing to do to persuade people to completely abandon Hermes.

But Tucker did not mind it because by doing so, he would be able to reunite with his old battle companions who had once fought with him.

It was not only a twilight for the church, but also for the whole human race.

Tucker shut his eyes and stooped over.

...

Farrina heard a gentle thud behind her as if something had slipped down the wall and into the valley.

When she turned around, however, there was nobody on the city wall.

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The End of the Volume: The Bell of Twilight

Chapter 826: Conference of Agriculture Mobilization Movement

The Months of Demons this year lasted for nearly five months. By the time murky clouds that overhung the Western Region were dispersed by warm sunbeams, it was late spring.

Roland faced a pressing issue.

It was spring plowing.

Although the war against the Southernmost Region during the Months of Demons, when the other powers were all sort of in a state of dormancy, had won him a lot of time to prelude the unification operation, it was also undeniable that he had consumed tons of food in winter.

Due to the lack of food input and the rapid increase in the population, the food in the granary in the Border Area was, for the first time, exhausted. Roland was secretly happy that he had entrusted the seeds of Golden Ones developed by Leaf to Petrov and had ordered him to promote engineered food to the public right after the seizure of Longsong Stronghold; otherwise, they would not have peacefully made their way through the Months of Demons this year.

The concrete boats traveling between the border and the Longsong area was the lifeline of the First Army, for they transported pancakes made from coarse-grained wheat flour to soldiers fighting at the front.

As a result of the urgency of the matter, Roland convened a spring plowing conference right after the celebration of "Victory Day".

On that day, not only the Ministry of Agriculture but the whole City Hall, including secondary officials in the Longsong area, the district governor, Petrov, and the governor of Fallen Dragon Ridge, Spear, were all summoned to the Neverwinter castle. It should be noted that Spear Passi was directly transferred by Maggie. Ghastly pale and frightened, she complained about her rough flight when she landed and bowed to Roland.

Calvin Kant, the lord of the Northern Region, was absent, but he sent his daughter Edith and his second son Cole to attend the conference on behalf of him. Roland was not sure if it was an illusion, but he noticed, somehow, that the Pearl of the Northern Region had become more radiant since her return from the Great Snow Mountain. Compared with her resplendency, Cole seemed increasingly frail and insignificant. Roland also wondered whether his attire was a little too... androgynous?

Anyhow, the attendees of the conference came from all parts of Graycastle, except the Eastern Region, whose lord had yet to pledge fealty to Roland, and the Central Region, where Roland had yet to establish a well-functioning city hall. Without these two regions, the conference could be considered as the first National Congress.

Roland surveyed the hall in satisfaction and then tapped the desk.

Everybody instantly became silent. All the eyes rested upon the king.

"You must be wondering why I wrote the word 'operation' on the banner." Roland pointed to the red banner on the wall behind him. "Because this is essentially a war. It determines whether we can successfully implement our strategic plan this year and whether we're doing the right thing for people in Neverwinter! I promised to refugees when I took them in that as long as they worked hard, they would never starve."

"In the past three years, I fulfilled my promise. My domain expanded from a small, underdeveloped border town to more than half of the territory of Graycastle. I see no reason that we can't make it happen this year. Our kingdom would only be stable when our subjects aren't worried about food. Therefore, I need every one of you to take spring plowing seriously. All of you have to reach your agricultural production target this year in accordance with the plowing regulations and guidelines drafted by the Ministry of Agriculture." Roland paused for a second and then continued, "Also, starting from this year, there'll be an assessment specifically targeting the agricultural progress in your jurisdiction, which will include evaluations on how much virgin land you've cultivated, the number of farmers in your domain, as well as the agricultural production. These factors will be incorporated into the criteria for a competent governor!"

Perceiving the confusion among all the attendees, Roland smiled faintly. "It's OK you don't know about these evaluation items, because Sirius, the Minister of Agriculture, will later spend one day explaining to you in detail. In conclusion, if you fail to meet my criteria, it tells me that you aren't competent to rule the region and are no longer suitable for the governor position."

Nobody uttered a word, but Roland could clearly sense the tension among them from their expressions.

This was exactly the effect Roland wanted to achieve. The abolition of the feudal system not only meant the cancellation of feudal rights but also meant the abolishment of the hereditary system. Roland allowed those officials to receive benefits from the government, but he would not tolerate any delays of his development plan.

The agriculture assessment was simply a start.

Roland uncovered the curtain behind him, revealing the big red number underneath, and said, "I'll set an easy target for you for the first year in terms of other criteria. But in terms of agricultural production, I want you to reach this number!"

Everyone gasped. "2,500,000 kg?"

Roland was not surprised at their reaction. The average production in this era was 500,000 kg for a mid-sized city and 750,000 for a big one like the old king's city. The first time they had grown Golden Ones in Border Town, the food production was a little over 350,000 kg, which had been considered as an unprecedented big harvest at that time.

Of course, the actual food production was largely influenced by farmland areas and the number of farmers. Unlike Border Town which relied heavily on high-return crops, big cities totally depended on the surrounding villages and small towns, as well as the work of thousands of farmers to obtain such a big quantity of food. Because of this, he decided to include farmland areas and the number of farmers in the evaluation.

The fewer farmers were, the more workers would be in the factory.

Roland signaled everybody to be quiet. "In fact, when you see the testing field for Golden Twos, you'll understand this target isn't that unrealistic. After numerous repeated tests by Leaf, Golden Twos can now yield food more than two times Gold Ones per unit. The wheat-straw in the field is overloaded by ears of wheat."

Petrov exclaimed in surprise. "Your Majesty... is it true that Golden Twos can yield two times more?"

Among all the officials outside Neverwinter, Petrov was the only one who was impressed by the amazing production rate of Golden Ones. During the war in the Months of Demons, the Longsong Area had provided the First Army with over half of the total supplies, thanks to the cultivation of Golden Ones that had generated a huge amount of excess. In comparison, the normal wheat they had previously grown could not even suffice to feed people in one city.

"That's right, but Golden Twos isn't perfect either." Roland looked at Leaf standing next to him and announced, "Now I'll hand over to Miss Leaf from the Witch Union, who will talk about the features of Golden Twos in detail."

After a slight nod, Leaf walked up to him with a bag of grown wheat in her hand and showed it to everybody. She said, "Golden Twos is different from any wheat you've grown before. It can only be grown once. So, you have to come to Neverwinter annually to get new seeds. I've strengthened the root of the plant so that it can absorb nutrition from the soil deep down the earth. That's also the reason it requires a lot of fertilizer; otherwise, we'll have to adopt a fallow system by marking out three farmlands and using them in a rotation. Also..."

Roland stroked his chin in satisfaction while watching Leaf become more confident and comfortable to speak in public. Golden Twos could be viewed as a new type of wheat that produced its own "Jinkela". Its roots could extend four to five meters underground and absorb nutrients more efficiently. Apart from being unable to reproduce, it surpassed Golden Ones in every aspect.

This sole defect of Golden Twos was actually a merit for Neverwinter. As the plant could not reproduce, the other cities would have to rely on the new king's city's supply once they started to grow Golden Twos. At the same time, other low-yield wheat would be obsolete and pushed out of the market. In a sense, Golden Twos enabled Roland to create a food monopoly, and the government would definitely benefit a lot from the control of the food resources.

Roland believed no farmers would want to grow normal wheat again after they tried out Golden Twos.

The promotion of the newly-developed seeds throughout the whole nation would largely alleviate the problem of food deficiency.

With more food... he could feed more people.

Because now, he no longer contented himself with ruling Graycastle only.

Chapter 827: War Supplies

Edith was the first to raise questions after Leaf finished. "Your Majesty, is it safe for us ordinary people to consume the magic-engineered wheat?"

It was probably the problem that the people here were most concerned about. After the Pearl of the Northern Region brought that up, not only Petrov but also Spear was anxious to get a straight answer.

Roland replied with a smile, "First of all, there's no significant difference between Golden Twos and Golden Ones, for both of them are developed by Leaf. The only difference is that Golden Twos yields more food than Golden Ones. Second, although it's enhanced by magic power, the plant itself doesn't contain any, so you don't need to worry that it will cause harm to ordinary people. In fact, the oatmeal and the pancake I ate a few days ago were actually made from Golden Twos in the testing field."

Roland somehow remembered the fervent discussion about natural food, hybrid food, and genetically engineered food in the modern world. Some people stressed that the best food was natural food, but they had forgotten what natural food had originally looked like.

The origin of Golden Twos was very complicated. To fully explain it, Roland had to educate them on genetic mutation and the mechanism of heredity, a part of knowledge that even Leaf did not know much about. Although Leaf's ability could induce great changes to plants in a short period of time, she had to constantly supply the plants with magic power to sustain the change, and the change could not pass down to next generations. If the change was too great, the plants would die instantly when the supply of magic power suspended.

Therefore, when Leaf cultivated golden wheat, she used her ability mainly to create genetic mutations and accelerate the growing speed of the plants. Then, she picked out those fit for survival and eliminate those not. After numerous rounds of selection and reproduction, she finally cultivated a species with a

distinctive character. The process was no different than traditional farming, except it was a lot faster. The selection process, which usually would take hundreds of years, had completed in merely two years.

Roland had once seen what an original watermelon looked like. It was a fist-sized fruit wrapped in a hard shell with several pieces of yellow flesh in it, pretty much like a mandarin. By the 17th Century, however, the flesh had turned to a red color and the fruit itself had also become much larger. Unfortunately, over half of the fruit was filled with white tissues, with only four or five spoons of eatable flesh.

Apart from watermelon, many fruits people often saw nowadays looked quite different from what they had looked like in the past. In fact, the same held true for plants and animals. The most typical example was dogs, an originally non-existent species that had transformed from wolves as a result of generations of human influences.

Therefore, the so-called natural food was also a product of repeated human selection and filtering. The true, original food was most likely tasteless.

Plus, not only human beings but also other species, from mammals all the way to microorganisms, were all constantly changing to adapt better to the environment. In Roland's opinion, it was as natural for human beings to build a power station as yeasts ferment bread, because life itself was a part of nature.

Roland knew these theories were beyond the understandings of these local officials, so he simplified his answer to two sentences: a) It was safe to eat Golden Ones, and it was certainly OK to eat Golden Twos; b) I ate them as well. The best way to persuade them in this era was that the king set an example for his people.

Seeing that everybody was now convinced, Roland went on, "Furthermore, like what we're doing in Neverwinter, all food trades in your city should be supervised and controlled by the secondary City Hall. Private food sale is forbidden. Barov, the Governor-in-Chief, will talk about the detailed implementation of the policy."

Countess Spear Passi raised her brows. "Your Majesty, if Golden Twos does provide high yields as you've described, there must be a large excess after all subjects are fed. That'll create a huge financial burden for the government if City Hall plans to buy back all the excess. The population in Fallen Dragon Ridge is just a little over 10,000. Considering that, do we also have to produce so much food?"

"Yes, because we aren't going to consume the excess of food but to stock them."

"Stock them?" Spear was a little surprised.

"For the upcoming Battle of Divine Will." Roland pronounced the words slowly.

Other than attracting immigrants to Graycastle, the other reason he forced local officials to promote Golden Twos was this battle that was going to determine the survival of all human beings. Since Roland was born in peacetime and had not experienced the cruelty of a prolonged war, he could only make war preparations based on what he had learned from histories.

The worst scenario Roland could think of was that the population reduced by 30% and that all young, abled ones went to war, leaving women and children working in the plant to provide supplies to the front. In that case, the farmland would be very likely deserted. If, however, they had food excess that

could last two to three years, they might be able to survive the most difficult wartime and wait until things turned better.

Roland had discussed the matter with Karl Van Bate, the Minister of Construction. The latter believed that a granary that was well-designed, well-structured and well taken care of could preserve grains for at most five years. Although stale grains of one or two years old would not taste as good as fresh ones, nobody would give much thought of it when they were overwhelmed by the bitterness of a war.

It was worth noting that there were high-yield crops other than wheat in Leaf's testing field. After two years of experimenting, Leaf had successfully enhanced other imported crops, such as sugar canes, corns and potatoes, and cultivated their high-yield breeds. Corns and potatoes, in particular, genetically produced more food than wheat. The reasons Roland chose to promote Golden Twos rather than these two plants were: a) he could not easily create a monopoly on food trades as they could reproduce; b) their storage life was shorter than grains'.

Of course, agriculture was a very complex industry, which involved food for both human beings and animals... For example, poultry relied heavily on fodder beans. However, Roland had no time to carefully plan that part out at the moment, as the food problem in wartime was already a project big enough for him to worry about.

Since most of the attendees knew what the Battle of Divine Will stood for, nobody raised questions on the policy pertaining to the survival of human beings again. At the end of the conference, Roland fastened his eyes onto Scroll and said, "I hope that we add agriculture to our secondary education as a subject so as to train people into experts who specialize in farming various plants and crops."

As the education level in other cities was incomparable to that in Neverwinter, Roland felt it hard to realize the democratization of education throughout the whole Graycastle. As such, he believed it was easier to dispatch some trained professionals from Neverwinter to supervise the agricultural industry in other cities. The movement would set a precedent for the other industries, such as chemistry, architecture and medical science. He did not expect his subjects to conduct their own research or construct new theories, but simply to apply what they had learned to the mundane operation of the industry.

After the conference, Wendy brought Roland a piece of news.

The witches who were exploring the snow mountain of the Western Region had safely docked at Neverwinter.

When Roland arrived at the wharf, someone dashed to him and threw herself into his arms.

Her blond hair tickled his cheeks. The air was impregnated with the scent that Roland was so familiar with.

"I'm back," Chuckling, Nightingale whispered in his ear.

Chapter 828: Nightingale's Secret Plan

Roland was too overwhelmed by the swell of emotions to develop an immediate response. He wanted to reproach her for risking her own life, but his words, which were about to come out, finally yielded to a look of resignation when he saw Nightingale's beaming smile.

In the end, he patted her on the back and said, "Be more careful next time."

Nightingale nodded and then shook her head. She whispered to him in a voice that nobody but he could hear, "Unlike Anna, I can't convert those drawings to physical entities... This is the only thing that I can do for you." She then paused for a moment and went on, "But please don't worry. My top priority is to protect you... and stand by your side. I won't recklessly put myself in a dangerous situation."

Nightingale flushed at her own bluntness. Although her voice kind of trailed off in the middle, Roland still clearly heard the word "you".

The act had probably consumed all Nightingale's valor. With these words, she disengaged herself and vanished in the Mist.

It was hard to imagine that the girl, who had to obviously muster all her courage to proclaim her feeling, would actually challenge a fearsome monster to a duel in the ruin, with nothing but a flintlock and some explosives in her hand.

Roland was deeply moved.

"Please let me continue to protect you in the future."

Hearing Nightingale's calming voice from behind, Roland somehow felt a sense of security which he had not experienced for a long time.

Next, as a common practice, he gave all the other witches a welcoming hug.

Nonetheless, Roland was a little discomforted by the look of the Taquila survivors.

Unlike the laughing and cheering union members, the Taquila witches, following their leaders, landed in an orderly manner, each with a black box on the shoulder. When they passed Roland, however, they stared at Roland, eyes fastened onto him, full of ardent desires and a feverish aspiration that made Roland shudder uncontrollably.

Roland knew very well the reason behind their lusty gazes. Apparently, Pasha and some of the other witches had informed the God's Punishment Witches at the snow mountain of the Dream World. Apart from exploring, the purpose of their expedition was to transport the soul device to the Great Snow Mountain and transfer their souls to the devouring worms.

Roland did not mind wild gazes from women, but the problem was that most of the God's Punishment Witches had a male appearance. Roland understood that due to the limitation in the choices of shells, they were forced to pick male God's Punishment Warriors. However, for Roland, it was a very unnerving feeling to be stared by a person of the same sex.

Even though he knew the souls beneath these shells were female, he could not help feeling a little queasy under the scrutiny of a group of big, strong "male" warriors. It was even worse when the stares were overflowed with some ineffable eagerness.

After the greetings, Roland returned to the castle and found Nightingale had reappeared at his desk, her slender legs dangling in the air.

"So it's true... that those shells can enter the Dream World?"

It seemed some union witches had also learned the news.

Roland shrugged. "I was surprised at first as well. They will intrude the dream if they disconnect themselves in the area covered by the beams of light. Those beams are more a transportation channel than a connection with the deities."

Nightingale pursed her lips without uttering a word. Her eyes, however, brightened as she listened. She even cocked her feet to Roland's knees. Evidently, she was much bolder when they were alone.

"No!" Roland immediately objected. "I know what you're thinking. You want to convert yourself to a God's Punishment Witch and enter the dream. I won't allow you to do that."

Roland had learned long before that Nightingale, unlike Anna, was more audacious. So he instantly renounced her crazy idea after noticing what she was planning on. If he did not, Nightingale would probably really plunge into action.

"But I..."

"There's no room for negotiation," Roland interrupted her decisively. "Entering the dream world doesn't mean you're fused with my mind, nor does it mean that you'll become immortal. It's just a fake, strange world which has been eroded by some unknown power. Perhaps someday it'll just vanish. Plus, even if you enter my dream on a daily basis, that's just one night. What about all those other moments? Are you planning to live in a shell that doesn't feel forever?"

Nightingale lowered her head. After a long silence, she muttered, "I just feel it's too unfair that they can go to places you once visited."

Roland was amused by her brooding tone. "It's an unimaginable price they've paid for. A senseless life of eternity is more terrible than a life of imprisonment. The Dream World is simply a small comfort to them. There's no need to envy them. You said 'My top priority is to protect you and... stand by your side'. Are you planning to break your promise?" Roland mimicked her voice. "I don't want a bearded God's Punishment Warrior to stick around all day."

Abashed, Nightingale turned her head immediately. "I, I got it! I didn't say that I would live in a shell. You did though."

Roland smiled. "Would you like some Chaos Drink?"

She instantly turned back. "Yes!"

"Well, she's really easy to please," thought Roland.

Roland produced a pack of delicious dried fish from the drawer and put it on the desk, after which, he uncorked a new drink coming in a sky-blue bottle and filled Nightingale's glass. Roland said, "Thank you for your help. Agatha told me if you did not severely wound that monster, everybody would have been in danger."

Nightingale gulped down the drink and exhaled a long breath. She nibbled one piece of dried fish and rubbed her nose. "Anytime. You're being over-polite."

Roland shook his head. "No, I'm not. If all the members of the exploration team of the Witch Union are killed in this operation, it'll be a permanent loss for Neverwinter. Therefore, your job is equally important as Anna's. You just specialize in different things. Do you understand?"

Hearing this, Nightingale could not help smiling. She soon continued to chew her dried fish as if to cover her joy and the intricacies of her little mind. "Um... right, you said the Dream World has been eroded by an unknown power. What does that mean? Will you be in danger?"

Roland was amused by the stiff manner in which she switched her subject, yet he did not point out but simply replied, "That's a long story, but one thing is for sure, which is whatever that world becomes in the end, it won't affect the real me. No beams of light will appear if I don't want to dream."

As to the unknown power, Garcia said the Martialist Association would eventually lead their new recruits to uncover the mysterious veil of the dream world. No matter what she referred to, Roland would only know what she was talking about after seeing it.

Compared with the erosion, Roland cared more about the newly amended Mathematical Olympiad textbook.

Chapter 829: Findings at the Snow Mountain

The Mathematical Olympiad textbook itself did not bear much significance, but the premonition attaching to it did. During the initial exploration of the Dreamland, Roland had discovered that the books that he had never read were all blank, and this theory applied to both the books on bookstands and those in the library. Most books were nothing but blank sheets topped with a cover. He even speculated that those book covers were productions of some thin threads of his memories fading into oblivion. If he had never seen a book, it would never exist in the dream world.

But the Mathematical Olympiad textbook on Zero's desk debunked his theory.

He wondered why he had not noticed the peculiarity at the beginning. Had he overlooked it during the exploration in the first two or three months, or it was actually a change that occurred later?

If it was the latter, he had to probe into it.

If the Mathematical Olympiad textbook could come out of thin air and gradually restore its original appearance, would other books do the same trick? What about things he had never beheld?

Roland tried to figure out the connection between the three events, which were the strange power he had obtained, the extermination of Fallen Evils, and the release of the Force of Nature. He was eager to find out if they were the driven factors of the changes to this world.

"Your Majesty?"

Nightingale's voice interrupted his train of thoughts.

Roland looked down and found that he was stroking Nightingale's feet with his hands without noticing it. The thin fabrics of socks did not prevent him from touching Nightingale's smooth skin and dainty toes.

Nightingale looked a little embarrassed. "I changed my socks, but since I couldn't take a shower on the ship, I'm probably still a bit dirty... Would you mind if I taking a shower first?"

Roland was abashed. He did not know why he did that when his mind was apparently on some serious matters.

Plus, the equivocal remark "take a shower first" seemed to contain some unintended meanings, but his action was absolutely unintentional!

While he was rummaging for an appropriate answer, the knocking on the office door greatly alleviated his trouble. After Nightingale vanished in the Mist, Roland cleared his throat and said, "Come in."

Agatha came into the office. After an unceremonious bow, she asked, "All the samples from the Great Snow Mountain have been transferred to the Third Border City. Do you want to take a look?"

Roland managed to calm himself down in the guise of contemplation. He then gave an approving nod. "Of course, let's go now."

Agatha replied a "yes", but she soon turned around at the door and asked, "Are you not feeling well?"

"Why did you say that?" Roland was a little surprised.

Agatha answered in a serious tone, "Your voice sounds a little weird, which is a typical symptom of a cold. Although the Months of Demons has passed, it's still the coldest time of the year when snows melt, and people are most vulnerable to diseases at this time around. You aren't a witch, so you should take care of yourself, not only for you but for the whole human race. Do you understand? Before we take off, I suggest sending for Lily and asking her to check on you."

...

The physical examination did not take long, but Roland drank a bottle of "anti-illness water" made by Lily in great amusement. Under the protection of both his guards and the witches, Roland descended to the bottom of the Impassable Mountain Range.

He was a little relieved when he saw the Taquila survivors.

Since all of them were frequent visitors of the Dreamland who had experienced the pleasure of the Dream World except Pasha and Alethea, they looked more approachable. The visitors included Phyllis a.k.a. "No. 76", Faldi a.k.a. "Magic Bug Nest", Dawnen a.k.a. "Matte Curtains", and Ling a.k.a. "Shadow Walker". Among them, Phyllis was the only one who had a female appearance.

Alethea ventured, "I've heard that you plan to raise those unknown bugs in our hall and tame them? Mortal king, I have to say you're as bold and crazy as those researchers in the Quest Society. You know one day, your curiosity will eventually destroy you. Those are species left by enemies from the deep ocean!"

Roland shrugged carelessly. "That's why I want you to guard them. The captured bugs aren't aggressive. They can't even drill holes. One secret chamber would be enough to confine them. Plus, according to

Agatha's observation, these bugs don't have self-consciousness but the instinct of feeding and reproduction. There's a chance that the multi-eyed monster regains its control over them. However, if Neverwinter is so defenseless that even a creature as stupid as that can approach our city wall, we would probably have been wiped out long before."

"Isn't Agatha also a member of the Quest Society?" Alethea swayed her tentacle disapprovingly. As she had also been a higher ascendant before her conversion, she did not pay as much respect to the Ice Witch as Phyllis did.

Agatha, who happened to become the subject of their conversation, simply twitched her lips, apparently having no intention to involve herself in this altercation.

"If you really want to make a fuss about it, Celine is also a member of the Quest Society. If she hears you say this nonsense, she'll certainly go against you." Pasha came forward and apologized to Roland, "Alethea meant no offence. She's just worried that those mutated bugs will have negative impacts on Neverwinter."

Roland waved his hands. "That's fine. Let's go take a look."

He knew that Alethea's fear was not baseless, but what Agatha and Lightning wrote in their reports carried a significant meaning. If he exterminated the bugs because of some potential risks, it would be like throwing out a child along with the bath water. Placing them at the bottom of the mountains was already a safety measure.

"OK. Please follow me." Pasha nodded.

...

Across the spacious hall and a narrow corridor, they found themselves in an empty room almost as big as four or five castles. In the light of several Stones of Lighting in the wall, they detected the obscure outline of the room. Littered with loose soil, the ground underneath appeared to be excavated thoroughly. On the other side of the room, they could hear interminable patters of running water.

Pasha introduced the room to the visitors, "This is a culture room newly set up by Fran. It's absolutely safe in here, for there's only one exit and the underground water was the seepage from the rocks. Are you... really planning to grow mushrooms and mutated bugs in here though?"

Agatha further explained, "Because those huge mushrooms were exactly what the bugs feed on. If they can grow in here like they normally do in the natural environment, we can obtain a large number of mutated bugs effortlessly.

If they could not transplant the mushrooms, they would have to resort to Lily's artificial cultivation method. Roland thought it was a pity that the mushrooms down the ruin at the snow mountain were not edible because of their poisonous nature, for from their size and quantity, they were definitely high protein food that could serve as a meat substitute.

"What are those bugs for?" Phyllis asked out of curiosity. "If you want to study them, just grow a few and that should do."

Roland eyed Agatha and answered, "They'll probably play a big role in the development of Neverwinter if the report is correct."

Agatha responded with a nod. She picked a strange bug crawling on the mushroom and dropped it to the ground. Then, she nailed the bug with two ice pitons in its joints on its head and around its waist.

The bug soon became motionless after a fierce struggle.

Chapter 830: The Function of the Mutated Bug

As what the Ice Witch had written in her report, the bug, which resembled a hairless spider or an ant with a big belly, had a slim upper body with projected joints and a prodigious lower body almost as big as a grown man's torso.

It was evident that this was not the largest size the bug could grow up to, for, to stuff a Mad Demon into its abdomen required its belly to swell out to be at least two or three times its normal size. Based on the "photographs" taken at the scene, when the bug had a Mad Demon inside its body, it would tuck its head into the ground, leaving its swollen belly up in the air. Therefore, it looked like a huge, fully-grown egg at the first glance.

"Did you kill it?" Phyllis asked.

"That'll save us some trouble. It wasn't aggressive, but it ran pretty fast." With these words, Agatha thrust the long sword made of ice into the bug's belly.

Some stinky, milky-white liquid instantly gushed out.

Agatha said, "The slime can be used as a preservative. It's fluid under normal conditions, but it'll slowly solidify and turn into something like egg white as time goes by."

"And... are we going to eat it?" Faldi frowned.

Agatha shook her head. "I haven't eaten it, but I guess it won't be very tasty. The key lies in another liquid in its body."

This time, after spending seven or eight minutes flaying the bug's back, Agatha took out a slimy green organ.

"It looks like a gallbladder." Phyllis poked out her head in excitement.

"But it isn't gall in here." Agatha carefully cut it open and added two drops of dark green liquid to the slimes on the ground, after which, she produced two ice pitons and quickly mixed the two liquids together. "What comes next is the key."

Roland held his breath, watching the "preservative solution" slowly change.

Before long, the liquid gradually thickened and the Ice Witch's movement slowed down. In about two or three minutes, the ice pitons were stuck in the slimes as if it was glued to something.

Roland stuck out his fingers and pressed the liquid surface, only to find that the slimes had turned into a gel-like substance. Although it felt soft, he could only make a dent of several millimeters in it.

Phyllis exclaimed in surprise, "This is..."

"Biological rubber," Roland answered excitedly. "This is what made Fran get stuck in there."

Roland had noticed in Agatha's first report the peculiar feature of the bugs down the ruin. He had thought it was similar to spiders' cobwebs, but after he had read subsequent reports, he had found the solidified slimes were as flexible and tough as rubber. It could not only cling to the surface of an object but could be also molded into various shapes. These two properties made it highly practical.

Indeed, Roland had been asking people to look for rubber plants. He believed once he found a sample, Leaf could enhance it and subsequently turn it into high-yield crops that could grow on a mass scale. Unfortunately, his search for either rubber trees or rubber grass was fruitless. Nobody, not even people from the Kingdom of Dawn, which was famous for its diverse species, had heard of such plants. As a result, he had to rely on Soraya's ability to produce elastic materials.

The lack of natural elastic materials greatly limited the productivity of Neverwinter.

With more new machine tools being invested in production and a substantial increase in the plant's productivity and processing level, the deficiency in rubbers had become a prominent problem. Roland knew very well that rubber, which could be both natural and artificial, was simply a generalized term for all elastic materials. Nevertheless, he had no knowledge of specific rubber production procedures.

While Roland was suspecting that there were probably no rubber plants in this world, the reports on the exploration of the ruin at the snow mountain came to him as a pleasant surprise.

That was why he decided to cultivate these mutated creatures brought by monsters in the deep ocean despite potential risks.

Now that he had seen the bug in person, he knew that he had made the right decision.

Roland did not care much about the lasting power of the solidified slimes. As long as the material could seal and fasten moving parts, it could veritably be classified as rubber.

Agatha said slowly, "After reviewing the scene reconstructed by Summer, we found it was exactly those bugs that made Fran glued to the hole. They tied her tight with a net of slimes that streamed from their tails. However, the liquid in their belly alone won't solidify. Only when it's mixed with the liquid in the organ at the back will it become sticky and gooey. If Sylvie didn't find Fran with the Eye of Magic, we would have looked for her for another 10 to 15 days."

Pasha nodded. "I see. This is a really good material for making fishing nets and ropes."

Alethea retorted flatly, "Maybe good for fishing nets but not for ropes. It's too soft and stretchy. Nobody will like a rope that stretches infinitely. Plus, I don't think our learned mortal king would bring these unknown bugs to Neverwinter just to have some more salted fish." She paused for a second and then turned to Roland. "No matter what crazy research you want to conduct, don't forget that now you're representing parties other than Graycastle."

Her comment stunned Roland for a second. Roland had never expected that Alethea, who had been brooding on him being the sole leader of the united front, would understand his research intention, and certainly had never expected her to say something that, in a sense, acknowledged his leadership.

At this thought, Roland managed a smile. "Of course. If everything goes well, you'll soon see its wide variety of uses in the near future."

Pasha asked, "By the way, how do we make the bugs eject slimes without the monster that controlled them? We can't kill them every time, can we?"

Agatha put the organ into a leather bag and wiped her hands. "This is what we're going to research later. If nothing else works, we'll have to grow them on a mass scale."

Apart from the "rubber worm", Roland also checked some other new species taken from the ruin, such as the fruit plant that emanated a ghostly glow and a type of boneless transparent fish which lived in the underground river, but they were nothing next to the mutated bugs.

The glow of the fruit plant, which could not be used for street illumination, was simply an offspring of symbiosis, where a large number of glowing beetles nested in the fruit. Once the flesh was gone, those beetles would disperse while spreading out the seeds. The fish could hardly survive in the daylight, but could only live in an underground river. Although it was tasty, Roland did not think they could farm them on a large scale. They could only serve as a luxury for a few.

Having said that, Roland certainly did not expect that every new species would surprise him like the "rubber worm". He was content with the findings in the exploration of the snow mountain.

Before leaving the Third Border City, Pasha brought him two God's Punishment Witches that Roland had never met.

"Your Majesty, they volunteer to transfer their souls to become new devouring worms. But before that, could you take them to the Dreamland to let them experience the wonders of that incredible world once?"