

Witch 891

Chapter 891: The Cloister's Bitterness

"I'm not the pope, Supreme Pontiff was—" Isabella had the urge to refute, but was stopped by Agatha as she placed a hand on her shoulder.

"The task at hand is more important. I don't think His Majesty will mind."

These words seemed irrelevant however Isabella quickly understood what Agatha meant. She knew that this form of deception was a simple solution however these sorts of methods are often seen as a red flag for liege lords that valued power.

Isabella decided as she recalled all the things she seen in Neverwinter and quickly swallowed her disbelief. Instead, she asked, "What do you mean needing us to help you? Where are the Judgement Warriors and priests?"

"They all fled!"

"Not exactly, some were recalled to the Holy City!" Another nun refuted.

"We committed crimes. We even killed the priests..."

"That's not her fault!"

"We have no food, no clothes... and we haven't received supplies throughout the past two months. Are we abandoned?"

"Nonsense! Don't you see Her Holiness here?"

The nuns and orphans started to bicker and shout among themselves.

"Quiet! I only need one voice," Isabella shouted impatiently. Her eyes moved over the crowd and then she pointed at a nun who seemed to be their leader, saying, "You first. Arise and tell me."

"Yes, Your Holiness." The nun respectfully pressed her forehead on the ground before laboriously struggling onto her feet. "It's been over a month since we received news from Hermes..."

It took Isabella around an hour to get an overall understanding of what had happened here.

After the battle of Coldwind Ridge, each day the amount of the supplies the cloister received steadily declined. At first, portions of food decreased, and then delivery times were slashed. Times were hard yet order was maintained, largely thanks to the secure management the three cloisters had adopted and limited information they received from the outside world reducing panic. The priests and Judgement Warriors stationed here encouraged the orphans and nuns to pray more and be strong to get through the hard times claiming that the hard times were almost over.

However, such a time never came.

What the nun had said about church's final order to transfer all the Judgement Warriors and priests back to Hermes was six weeks ago.

The nuns did not exactly know what the order was at the time however they remembered how desperate those believers were. Those who were left behind, looked as if they lost their souls as they left the Great Hall.

Since then, the cloister destabilized.

The institution had vacant positions which would be replaced automatically by lower ranking subordinates. These positions offered the remaining believers the rights to proclaim themselves as the new priests. However they abandoned all the duties and responsibilities a priest had to uphold. Neither did they follow the discipline of saving resources set up by their predecessors. Instead, they wantonly squandered the meagre rations left and even deducted portions that would've gone to the orphans.

It was only when the nuns went to the new priests and bargained for food did they know of monstrous news that the Hermes Cathedral collapsed.

The church had reached a point where its very existence was at stake.

In order to fight the enemy with all their forces in the last battle, the church's executives decided to give up the old Holy City and recall all formal members to the highland. The last order they gave to the people left in the cloister was to resist the invasion on their own, until the last moment of their lives.

The turn of events seemed too unrealistic to believe, but the fact that the passage leading to the Reflection Church had been sealed off validated the news.

The grievous news had split the nuns into two factions. One called "The new priest faction" consisting of those who were completely disappointed by the old regime. The other faction made up by those who were hesitant and bewildered. The leading nun explained that the church used to be so powerful that there was no need for them to think or even consider their own fates... That was why they were so disturbed by the news. It was like their old, familiar world had suddenly shattered.

It was the new priests' selfish deeds that broke the situation.

Those new priests came from the bottom, and their usual positions were just a little higher than the nuns'. They often assisted the managers to deal with internal affairs without any possible promotion. As a matter of fact, no capable man would be deployed to here. So as soon as they tasted what the power could give them with no one looking over their shoulders, they would naturally become audacious and get out of control.

For example, the "Blessing" of the choir and the ritual class.

In fact, it should have been banned, but because of the Holy City's lax supervision of the cloister. From time to time many dignitaries that had some special interests would come and have some fun, which was no secret here. It's only when that young extraordinary escaped did the church increase supervision.

However, now that the security is gone, the new priests didn't have to care about punishments.

At first, in the name of "Blessing", only a few girls were forced, then the whole class had to obey, and at last. The situation became so incredibly hideous that the girls had to give their virginity in exchange for

food. This kind of behavior not only violated the laws of the church but also pushed away those hesitating nuns and resulted in their alliance with the orphans.

Although girls of different ages were plundered from everywhere in the Four Kingdoms. The nuns had spent time with them, teaching them to read and sing and imparting the knowledge of ethics and rites to them, so naturally they bonded with the girls. That and the order that the church had given them pushed them to defy the new priests. They frequently stole food from the warehouse for the starving girls.

But no matter how much they tried to save the food. They could not stop the decreasing trend of the stock. As priests suspected the nuns' "betrayal", conflicts between them broke out. Two nuns were caught red-handed when they were smuggling food out of the warehouse and were executed by the priest who wanted to intimidate their subordinates. This backfired however and ended up disturbing the rest nuns to revolt. Under one nun's leadership, the nuns and orphans planned and prepared. One night when the priests were indulging in entertainment, they launched an attack. The nuns crushed those priests once and for all.

Additionally through the underground tunnels, the leader got contact with the other two cloisters. Together, they overthrew the disgusting believers in the same way.

When they attempted to send a representative who would find a way to cross the high wall and report the plight here to Hermes, the army from the Kingdom of Dawn appeared on the border of the old Holy City.

Since they had been abandoned, they had no choice but to resist by themselves. Everyone knew that once the enemy took the cloister, even surrender would not do them any good. That was why Isabella saw them in a hasty defense stance as she came in.

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Isabella was very confused after she heard the nun's recount.

The corrupt custom in the cloister was not unknown to her, nor was she surprised to see the incompetent believers deprave so quickly after they gained power. However what surprised her was the order from the church.

In order to do battle with the enemy one last time? If that was true, they could never ignore to guard the mountain path if they were intending to give up the outer city walls. It was like they had handed over the first defense line to the enemy voluntarily.

Even though the Holy City had run so short of manpower that it could not keep an eye on the Cloud Ladder. It was impossible for them to bring out any words like "give up the Old Holy City".

Isabella knew, without a doubt that there was a secret area of the church that was hidden from most of the believers. Neither the New Holy City in the highland nor the Old Holy City at the foot of the mountain was the heart of the church. It was the Pivotal Secret Area resting deep under the ground that was the church's one true core, a 400 years old place where they mined the God's Stone, studied the Sigils of Magic Stones, and held the incarnation ceremony of God's Punishment Army.

The Old Holy City had a secret path leading to the Pivotal area, and even the main exit of the path led here. How could they abandon such a crucial site so easily?

The order was full of flaws, a complete lie!

Chapter 892: Appreciated

There must be someone lying, the church or the nuns.

Isabella could not think of any reasons for the nuns to make up an order, since they were abandoned and discarded. Judging from their pale, emaciated look, she estimated that probably one more fortnight of starvation would kill them all.

But if the church was lying, what were they going to do by recalling all the formal members to Hermes and leaving the Cloud Ladder and the Old Holy City unguarded?

Trying to set aside her speculation, Isabella looked at the leading nun and asked, "What should I call you?"

"I am called Qiu, Your Holiness."

"Haven't you ever thought of getting out of here?"

"What, why?" The nun seemed surprised.

"Granted that the walls are high and the gate is thick, they're not impassable. Six weeks should have been long enough for all of you to make a wooden ladder or stack the firewood at the bottom of the gate to burn the planks and melt the chain. You're free to do anything that could get yourself out of here," Isabella said confused whilst trying to ascertain the validity of the situation. "Since you could send a representative to report to Hermes, why didn't you get out of here together? With the food supplies severed, you're facing a certain death even without the army of the Kingdom of Dawn's invasion."

It took Qiu a long moment to come back from silence. She muttered, "Where... Where could we possibly go if we leave here?"

All the residents of the cloister lowered their heads at the question.

"I've never left the cloister..."

"Nor have I."

"Although there's not much, at least we have something to eat. I don't think the outside world would be better." Some orphans joined in.

"If we start to beg for food, then our lives will revert back to the one we used to have."

"The book told us that we shouldn't take begging for granted."

"I don't... want to live like that anymore."

Looking at their bewildered looks, Isabella finally realized that it was not the church's order that bound them. They knew nothing else but their sheltered life. The situation seemed neither good nor bad. It would be easy to cope with the nuns. Just kill the ones who were still loyal to the Holy City and be done with it. But if all the orphans here had become obstinately loyal, that would become a thorn to His Majesty.

"I have one more question." Isabella drew a deep breath and asked in a low voice, "Why do you address me as the Supreme Pontiff?"

"Well..." Qiu looked intimidated. She hesitated for a while before saying, "Pope Mayne was dead, and so were the three archbishops. There's no new nomination declared in Hermes, so according to the institution. We have to promote all the subordinates to fill in the gaps, you're the one closest to the holy temple."

"Pope Isabella! Please help us!"

"Please don't leave us behind. We'll bear whatever punishment you'll give us!"

"Please take us back to Hermes!"

Again, the nuns started to plead.

"It appears that they did not call me Her Holiness for anything particular, but for the chance to regain the church's attention," Isabella thought. The institution was not suitable for the top-level executives in the church as they were already at the top. However the ones who were drowning at the bottom of the hierarchy could not care less. They would clutch anything that could save their lives as tight as they could, even it was a fragile straw.

As Isabella thought of this, she weaved an idea in her head. "I'm here to tell you an important thing. Listen carefully!"

All of them held their breaths.

"The church has changed," Isabella said loudly. "Mayne was no real pope. He not only betrayed Lord O'Brien but also stole the throne! In fact, there was another successor to whom Lord O'Brien meant to pass his power."

The words were like a stone that created numerous ripples as it was tossed into the water. The listeners burst into an uproar.

"The successor was his first Pure Witch, Zero," Isabella said. She did not know what His Majesty would think of those words, but since she started off, she would do her best. "Graycastle isn't our enemy. Instead, in order to defend the real enemy, Lord O'Brien even hope to ally the church with Graycastle."

"Do you mean... the demonic beasts?" Someone could not help asking.

"They're more fearful than the demonic beasts." Isabella shook her head and said, "They're recorded in canon within the church that only a very few people could see. Mayne was averse to let the Pure Witch seize the power, so he secretly revolted and framed Zero who was about to leave for Graycastle as a messenger. That's the cause for the battle of Coldwind Ridge." Fortunately, Mayne's trick didn't work

out. I survived that battle, yet the initiators of the rebellion died within more than a month. There was no doubt that they were punished by the deities."

"There's no so-called last battle, and you don't need to hold the cloister alone to the last moment, either," she paused. "You're safe now."

Both the nuns and the orphans looked as though they could not believe their ears.

"What about... our punishment... for killing the priests?"

"They had dishonored their names and therefore disqualified for what they had done, so I decided spare all of you."

There was a moment of silence. Then they started to cheer wildly. "Thank you! Your Merciful Holiness!"

"Long live Pope Isabella!"

"Long live Your Holiness"

Isabella pressed her palms downward to make them calm down before she continued, "Just as I said, I'm no pope. The rules don't really make me attain the that role. I'm just the executor of Supreme Pontiff, as I was before."

"But you still represent the Church of Hermes!" Qiu said, thrilled.

"I have a mission for you," Isabella said clearly and with certainty. "Of course, that's after all of you eat your fill."

The nuns and the orphans knelt again after hobbling back to their feet. They said as one, "At your service."

Isabella knew very well that those people did not side with her because they were convinced by her. They had been forsaken and should have been done for. Now that they were given the hope to return to the church, they naturally would devote anything, even if the "church" they would know now was not real.

Supposing that the real Church of Hermes was still standing, they might mull over whether they had made the right choice after they removed themselves from the plight and cooled down. But that was impossible now. By the time the First Army arrived, what she had said would definitely come true.

Only by breaking their old beliefs of the church and instilling a half-true story she had made up as the new "truth". King Roland would now be able to control this land veritably.

"It's very simple. I want you to restore order in the Old Holy City," Isabella said methodically. "Qiu, first gather the residents of the two other cloisters and retell them my words. You must also see to it that every child gets their portion of food before nightfall. The First Army of Graycastle will answer your call and help you. Since they had known that it was Mayne and other men who betrayed, they wouldn't make things difficult for you. After that, all of you must walk out and inform every household of the news and note the names of whom have left and stayed respectively. If you run into the treasonous priests or the believers, report to me immediately."

As the orders were given, the nuns went into action right after they answered the "yes". The situation they were in did not magically improve but a new outlook and hope dwindle in their eyes.

Soon, they ripped down the gate. When a nun was about to take the girls out of the cloister in order, one girl suddenly bowed low to Isabella.

"Thank you, Lady Isabella."

The other girls followed her behavior one after another.

"You're so nice, My Lady."

"I'll remember you forever."

Every girl in the line echoed these kinds of words.

"Thanking me..." Isabella slightly closed her eyes, lost in thought. She had received much hatred and many curses since the day she became a Pure Witch, yet this was the first time she was being thanked.

But what she had done was not for gaining gratitude, but for her goal. She would also put those people to death without the slightest hesitation if that was needed to achieve her goal. So... this kind of gratitude seemed unwanted to her.

Although that was she had been thinking, Isabella felt like something unknown emerged in her heart, a feeling she had never had before. She could feel a soft distension occurring in her heart and warmth like a fire. Isabella thought she would resist the feeling, but... it was not as annoying as she had expected.

Was this King Roland's intention?

Isabella slightly lets out a breath and then slowly followed the end of the line to the camp.

Chapter 893: Fate Passes On

Two weeks later when summer was already nearing its end, Roland finally arrived at Hermes.

He was welcomed at the gates of the Holy City by the witches and the First Army garrison from the Northern Region. He also spotted several nuns in black church clothing amongst the group of people.

Although Roland had heard from Lightning that all the top-level figures of the church had disappeared, he still couldn't believe what had happened as he entered this now empty stronghold. The fierce battle that he thought awaited them did not come. Neither the God's Punishment Witches nor the new mortars had to be used. There was no doubt that things couldn't have gone any better, but this turn of events just felt somewhat anticlimactic for Roland.

He had made a right decision in letting Isabella come along with the First Army to this expedition. According to the reports from Eagle Face and Agatha, the former Pure Witch was quickly alerted to the strange happenings within the Church and promptly suggested the army to investigate the Holy City of Hermes right after they finished taking care of the orphans in the cloisters.

To their surprise, the entire city was empty except for the people who lived in the surrounding areas. They didn't get to leave in time, thus creating a facade that the church was still under operations. In reality, those people had no idea about what was really happening in the inner city, and all they heard was that the church was preparing for the last battle.

After that, the nuns, organized by Isabella, entered Hermes and visited as many houses as possible to explain the situation. As a result, the number of evacuees started to decrease, and at least no more large groups of people were spotted fleeing towards Wolfheart and Everwinter. The church abandoning the Holy City was such a shocking turn of events for the people, and it had utterly ruined the church's reputation. Compared to those cowards who ran at the first sign of danger, the nuns who came out and tried to restore order seemed more like the real successors of the old church.

"How did they escape?" Roland could not help asking. The message he had received did not include many details, so Roland wanted to know where the remnants of the church had gone. "There ought to be thousands of people in the Inner City. How could they have managed to leave the plateau without passing through the city wall?"

"There are many tunnels under Hermes, some of which go under the city wall. If they evacuated in batches, it would have been possible for them to escape without alerting the residents in the outer city." Isabella explained. "The tunnels were designed to work only one-way so that intruders wouldn't be able to take advantage of it. Moreover, the tunnels can only be used once. I've checked a lot of tunnel entrances, and most of them were already destroyed."

"Where do the tunnels lead to?"

"Only people who have used them would know," Isabella said as she shook her head. "If they had planned the escape beforehand, it would be near impossible to track them now that they already had six weeks to run."

"So the church is like a cornered lizard, cutting off its tail to escape, and hoping for a chance to come back in the future?" Roland frowned as he pondered over this. "But giving up the Holy City meant that they abandoned their base of operations, which is far worse than just losing a tail, as this was as good as them losing everything. How could they be so confident that they would be able to find a new base that can rival Graycastle? Or are they going to scatter into different places and harass my land?" Thinking about how he had to keep an eye out for fanatical believers in the coming years gave Roland a headache.

"No need to worry, Your Majesty. They won't come back anymore," Isabella smiled, as she read Roland's mind.

"Why?" Roland was surprised.

Isabella replied, "They left behind a messenger."

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In a small church on the north side of the Holy City, Roland met the messenger that Isabella mentioned.

He was a grizzled old man in a brand new red priest robe hemmed with gold. Seized by two guards, he walked out with a thick book held in his arms.

The old man hobbled towards them unsteadily, but he kept his chin up as he tried to strike an imposing figure. He cast a cold glance at Isabella and then looked at Roland. "Are you the King of Graycastle, Roland Wimbledon?"

"Yes, that is I."

"You have your father's grey hair and grey eyes," the old man said slowly. "My name is Jacob, the High Priest of the Holy City. In your terms, my position would be similar to that of a duke. ... But of course, I don't own any land, nor do I need that many servants."

"I heard that you've insisted on waiting for me here?" Roland shrugged. "What happened? Why didn't they take you with them when they turned tail?"

"I wanted to stay," the old man said solemnly as if these were his last words. "I'm too old to run... Even if I could go with them, there won't be much time left for me. I'd rather be buried in this city than start a new but short life."

"New life?" Roland quickly seized the keywords.

"Yes. Let go all of all of our duties and live a new and peaceful life for the rest of our days." Jacob's voice sounded satirical. "You've won, Your Majesty. The church won't be fighting against you anymore. This city will become yours with everything intact, and so will our nightmares. if you so desire."

"Oh?" Roland said noncommittally.

"What other reasons do you think that made us guard this barren plateau?" The old man's voice rose. "Look what you've done. Humans are going to perish because of you!"

"Really? What a harsh accusation. However, I don't see why I have to bear it." Roland said as he roughly understood the High Priest's intention. Surely enough, the church would not let him take the city so easily, and even though they did not have the force to fight back, they would try to obstruct him mentally. Zero had tried the same trick before the final battle between them, although their intentions were different. If Roland knew nothing about the Battle of Divine Will, then the news about how the demons would soon annihilate humankind would have definitely taken him by surprise. Additionally, if the church manipulated the truth and made it seem like he was at fault for mankind's imminent destruction, then they would have succeeded in breaking his will."

"Accusation? Sigh... what gibberish. Do I look like I'm kidding? O, young and untested King, it appears that Her Holiness, the Pure Witch didn't tell you the truth." Jacob gave Isabella a meaningful look before he continued. "The church was laden with a heavy responsibility that is beyond imagination and is unknown to all but a few superiors of the church. You have no idea what kind of enemy we've been preparing to fight over the past few centuries. Now that you've ruined the church, like it or not, you must take full responsibility for what is going to happen. When the end comes for us all, you will only be able to helplessly watch on as your kingdom get razed to the ground!"

"It seems that this man is not only attempting to attack me mentally but is also trying to take any opportunities to alienate me from Isabella. It's a shame that he has misjudged me and sent the wrong signals." As Roland looked at the self-righteous old priest, an old quote came to mind: All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.

"You don't have to believe me, but a truth is a truth." As the priest said this, another sentence emerged in Roland's head: People die if they are killed. Jacob let out a long breath after he finished those words. He then flipped open the book in his hands and handed it over, saying, "This is the Canon of the church. You'll understand all the foolish things you've done after you read it! Our... no, I should say the human beings' real enemy is—"

"The demons, right?" Roland chipped in casually. "You built the Holy City here not to fight against the demonic beasts, but for the God's Stone mines in the mountain. There's a Pivotal Secret Area under the cathedral, where you mined the God's Stones and made the God's Punishment Army, and that's the true form of the church. Of course, I don't know if you've learned this information, for only the pope was entitled to know of the incarnation ceremony of the God's Punishment Army. Oh, were you going to tell me the Battle of Divine Will or the Divine Smile? The battle that occurs every 400 or so is no news to me. Furthermore, the demons are not some invisible ghosts either. In fact, I've fought against them before. So... what else do you want me to know?"

"You—I—" At the moment, Jacob was so shocked that he opened his mouth, stammered, yet failed to make out any words. He looked like he would pass out at any moment. After a while, he pointed his shaking finger at Isabella and said, "It's you..."

But Isabella shook her head softly. "I didn't tell him that," she said, "From the very beginning, he knew much more than we had expected. You have underestimated him, or more like, we all did."

"Now that you've finished your story, let me tell you mine," Roland said, giving a cold laugh.

Chapter 894: Worthy To Save The World

Since there were still some First Army soldiers present, Roland omitted the origin of the Battle of Divine Will in his story. He briefed the old man only on the part of the history of how the witch empire of old had transformed into the church.

Despite the fact that Roland had only briefly mentioned bits and pieces of the story that he knew, Jacob was still shocked when he realized just how much Roland already knows about humanity's past. His eyes widened every time the church's highly confidential information just slipped out of Roland's mouth as if it was worth nothing. In the end, Jacob's eyes got so large that they looked like a pair of lanterns. Every time the old man wanted to refute what Roland had said, his words would end up being caught on his lips. A lot of what Roland said was beyond his understanding, yet it all fit perfectly with the rumors that went around within the church.

Roland paused as he saw the old priest gasping for breath. He didn't stop talking because he had nothing else to say, but out of concern for the old guy who looked like he would pass out any second now. Of course, Roland didn't really care if the old man were to pass out; he just wanted to enjoy the face-smacking some more.

He did not continue until Jacob had finally caught his breath. "It looks like you were never told about the inner workings of the church. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been so shaken by these trivial facts. You can't berate me for talking nonsense even if you want to because you can't help but find what I said just now similar to the clues you have found out yourself in the past. I believe that all the knowledge of the

demons and the Battle of Divine Will had been passed down by generation after generation by the popes, to keep the goal... or should I say, the faith, unforgotten. However, the current fools who call themselves the successor of the church have a fear of witches that runs so deep, that they dare not reveal the truth of the past. Not to mention the will of the first Pope. You people proclaim to be fighting for humanity, yet how many believers in the entire Holy City of Hermes are even aware of the existence of the demons and the upcoming Battle?"

"But this isn't how things are run in Graycastle. Information about the Battle of Divine Will is no secret in Neverwinter. Every minister working under me knows of the demons. The planning and preparation for the upcoming Battle of Divine Will form one of Neverwinter's fundamental policies. Be it farmers or blacksmiths, all my subjects are doing their best in contributing to the inevitable fight against evil. That's the largest difference between us. I've been preparing Graycastle to withstand the onslaught of our enemy for years." Roland took in the look of distraught apparent on the old man's face with joy before he continued, "Do you still think that the church is the one and only savior of humankind? Don't you think you've been thinking too highly of yourselves? Even if we set aside the fact of whether or not I will be able to come out victorious against this powerful enemy, one thing is still for certain—"

He walked over to the old priest and spelled out his next words slowly, "How can the church hope to save the world when they can't even defeat me? Stop dreaming!"

"We..." Roland's words had caused Jacob's face to turn pale as if the last sentence had pierced through his heart. Jacob had indeed questioned the church's strength in his mind before, but he had always kept his doubts hidden. Now that the truth was brutally shoved in front of his face, he had lost even the last bits of his remaining determination.

The old priest then felt strength leave his legs and he collapsed on to the floor, and the dignified look deserving of a respectful figure that he initially displayed quickly disappeared from his face without a trace.

"Take him back to the dungeons," Roland ordered, waving one hand. "He is too old to work in the mines. Keep him alive until the Bloody Moon comes and have him witness how my people fight against the demons. I hope by then he would still remember how to repent to God."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The soldiers pulled Jacob up and carried him away by his arms.

Roland turned to look at Isabella and said, "Well done. Without you, we wouldn't have restored order in the Holy City in such a short time."

Isabella, being unlike her usual self, looked away from her King and said in a slightly shaky voice, "Is this really okay? Do you really want me to be the one to give the orders as the Pope's representative and gather those who were abandoned?"

He had received reports from Edith, Eagle Face, and Isabella herself, and understood their proposal to rewrite history to split up the church once and for all. The Pearl of the Northern Region had praised this move, saying that it would help Graycastle conquer both the old and the new Holy City and take over all the influence that the church had accumulated over the centuries. Even if the scattered believers somehow found themselves an opportunity to start up a new organization, they would look like illegitimate rogues in comparison to Roland who had actual control over Hermes.

Roland, on the other hand, looked at this move in a more practical way. Located in the middle of the Impassable Mountain Range and facing the big breach, this piece of plateau would be a major choke point for them to defend in the Battle of Divine Will. Roland had intended to take over the place since the day he planned to wage war on Hermes. Now that they could utilize the local workforce and resources to their advantage and cut down expenditures for Neverwinter, Roland didn't see why they shouldn't go ahead with the plan.

"What would I have to mind if what you did turns out to be effective?" Roland said, smiling. "However, your sentence still stands."

"I never had that kind of intention..." Isabella said hurriedly.

"But of course, I can't leave you unrewarded for your help either." Roland waved his hands and said, "If there's ever a day when you're required to intervene as a representative, then in that day you shall be treated properly, in a way that is befitting of a representative. What do you think?"

"In a way that... is befitting of a representative?"

"The representative would be equivalent in status to the Prime Minister or the Hand of the King." Roland smiled. "Of course, this wouldn't give you the equivalent authority or power, but only the accommodation and food, such as a commodious, a posh suite, delicacies served by imperial cooks, all the Chaos Drinks you could ever desire, and more. If you don't want them, you're allowed to take an equivalent amount of gold royals—"

"No, Your Majesty." Isabella shook her head. "The former is good. I mean... just have it your way."

"Well, that's settled then," Roland said pleasantly.

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As the main body of the First Army joined in the investigation in the city, the detailed workings of the foreign city slowly became clear before Roland.

To his surprise, the old priest did not exaggerate when he said: "with everything intact." Apart from the collapsed Hermes Cathedral, all the buildings were in excellent condition. Even the broken parts of the city wall had been repaired, and the mangonels that stood upon the wall were left untouched.

In addition, a large number of Berserk Pills that Isabella had mentioned in her report rested quietly in the underground cellar. According to the inventory count that they made, there were around 240,000 pills in total. Thinking that Zero planned to use millions of berserk soldiers to fight against the demons, Roland was relieved that her plan never came to fruition.

After the inventory count, they set up a big fire on the high city wall to burn the pills into ashes that were eventually swept down off the wall and left frozen in the dirt. At last, the threat of a crazed army that had bothered him all this time eventually came to an end.

But the investigation report included some even more interesting things.

Such as, food.

And weapons.

Every day since the investigation began, the First Army would find new hidden goods that had been amassed in frightening amounts. The resources they have found so far were enough to equip and maintain several orders of knights. No wonder that Appen Moya, the King of Dawn, and his feudatories were willing to travel thousands of miles to plunder this city. Roland noticed that the top-level executives of the church had only taken the gold royals and jewels, leaving most of the war supplies untouched, which partly proved that they would no longer return and were instead fleeing away to start a new unfettered life.

The leviathan that nested in the northwest of Graycastle had finally bitten the dust.

Roland had a lot of free time now. All he needed to do was to wait for Iron Axe to annex the Eastern Region and march the army to the border of their neighboring country where they could join forces. After that, they would work together to outflank the Kingdom of Dawn.

With free time he didn't usually have, Roland wanted to look around the city that the church had run for hundreds of years. After all, the Holy City of Hermes was incomplete in the memory fragment.

The place he would like to visit the most would undoubtedly be the place of the phantom, the Reflection Church that Isabella had told him before. It was said that it was by phantom playback that Alice, the Queen of Starfall City, managed to pass down her faith across hundreds of years. That was also the place where Zero finished her transformation from a Pure Witch to the Pope.

Chapter 895: Reflections of The Past

In a way, the Reflection Church was not only the place for the transition of power between Popes, but also a museum.

The busts of the past influential figures of the church radiated historical significance, not to mention the Sigil of Magic Stones which could replay major historical events in the form of holographic images.

If it were to become a tourist attraction for future generations, it would definitely be very profitable.

But if Roland wanted to enter it now, he would have to spend quite an effort—although the Reflection Church was right beneath the old Holy City church in a totally mirrored way, the two churches were not connected. The slate and clay between them were as thick as 10 meters with God's Stones of Retaliation mixing in the wall, so forcefully digging through with manpower or phasing through it by using the Magic Ark would both be extremely troublesome.

After inquiring about the details with Isabella, Roland decided to instead enter the Reflection Church through the tunnels under the cloister.

After all, those tunnels used to be unobstructed. Although they were purposely sabotaged and blocked, it would still be easy for the Magic Ark to go through them. More importantly, the abandoned tunnels were not under the influence of God's Stones. Compared with the entire cave that was under the influence of the God's Stone mineral vein, the tunnels seemed to be a much safer and reliable choice.

To avoid getting lost, Roland asked Sylvie to scan the whole underground structure to determine the best route for this sightseeing trip.

The witches were alerted by all the preparation that was going on and so learned about Roland's upcoming trip. On the day of his departure, Roland found a crowd of people gathering outside his tent, with the little girl, Lightning, being the most excited of them all.

"Your Majesty, how can you leave me behind for such an important expedition!" She pouted after saying that as she felt that she had been wronged. "Am I not your chief explorer?"

"Coo, coo! Adventure, coo!" Maggie agreed.

"Um... this is only a sightseeing tour. There won't be anything exciting in the places where Popes conduct the transition of power, let alone any danger."

"But I want to go with you... can I?" the little girl asked with her sparkly puppy eyes.

How was Roland supposed to say no to this?

Now that the floodgates were opened, the witches' requests came one after another.

"Your Majesty, take me too," Hummingbird asked in a low voice. "I can help you with the luggage."

"As a member of the Quest Society, how can I miss such a key moment. Am I right, Your Majesty?" Agatha asked.

"I'll go wherever elder sister Anna goes!" Nana said with a clear voice.

"What if the underground building is infected by the demonic plague? Didn't you say that places which lack ventilation are the perfect environments for bacteria to grow?" Lily asked seriously.

"Since the Queen of Starfall City is there, I'd like to see her again..." Apart from the witches, even No. 76 Phyllis came to express her desire to join.

"Wait a moment, was she not an enemy of Taquila?" Roland curiously asked.

"But she was still a respectable leader—if not for Lady Alice, we wouldn't have even survived until the split between Taquila and Starfall City."

... In the end, pretty much everyone was able to get the free trip to the Reflection Church that they wished for.

Originally, Roland only planned to take Anna, Nightingale, Sylvie, and Isabella with him. But now, due to the increase in participants, Margie had to go back and forth several times before she was able to transport everybody into the abandoned tunnel.

Although these complex tunnels were shut down long ago, they were still in good conditions, with no sign of leakage or erosion. Although the tunnels were quite dusty, the group still traveled through them without much of a hitch.

After walking for about fifteen minutes, they arrived at the upper region of the Reflection Church. Under the guidance of Isabella, they soon arrived at a grand hall. The hall's width was nothing impressive, but the ceiling extended so far that Roland could only see the pillars extend into the darkness above.

In other words, its height was much greater than its width.

Despite its grandness, Roland felt claustrophobic the moment he entered the hall. It felt like he was walking through an extremely deep valley. Even though Stones of Lighting illuminated both sides, their faint yellow light was only able to light up a small part of the hall.

"This is the Prayer Room. The portraits of all the previous Popes are hung on the walls of this hall." Isabella explained while walking, "On the day of power transition, O'Brien, taking Mayne, visited here too. But the Archbishop did not know that O'Brien took someone else with him."

"That was Zero," Roland said with a low voice.

"Yes. Normally, a Pure Witch would strictly be forbidden from entering this area; even the witches used to instill magic in the Sigils were chosen from those soon-to-be sacrificed. As soon as they saw the phantoms, they would then go through the God's Punishment Army's incarnation ceremony." Isabella nodded. "The moment that Zero arrived here, she had become a candidate for the Pope."

"Disgusting!" Nightingale snarled, although it was unsure whether she was referring to the incarnation ceremony or Zero.

Isabella shut her mouth sensibly.

When everybody arrived at the end of the hall, a full-length portrait taking up the entire wall appeared in front of them. Different from the passage under the dim yellow light, this portrait's frame was surrounded by Stones of Light. Every detail of the portrait was vividly exhibited under the soft light.

Although Roland had heard many times about the appearance of the Queen of Witches from Agatha and other witches, when he saw her portrait with his own eyes, an unspeakable feeling rose from his heart.

In the portrait, Alice was holding a sword with both hands and looking at the front. She looked as if gazing into the unpredictable future, while at the same time examining Roland.

There was no single word that can describe her accurately. She was soft yet strong; cold yet fiery. One could never forget her as soon as one laid eyes upon her. However, if a pretty face was all that she had, Roland would not have been too surprised. On Alice, there was the overwhelming aura of a natural leader—an aura so intense it seemed as if she was born with God's Honor; leading her followers to victory until the end of time.

"What a beautiful woman," Anna said with complicated feelings. "Fortunately, she's gone."

"Hey, what do you mean by that?" Roland patted her head slightly. "Even if Alice were alive, would I have been head over heels for her?"

But seeing Nightingale who was by his side, he decided not to voice out his thoughts.

I have nothing to hide, but if... if she judged that what I said was not the whole truth or partly-true-partly-false, what can I do then?

After appreciating the looks of the Queen of Starfall City, they walked into the Illusion Room concealed behind the giant painting.

"Nine Sigils of Magic Stones are stored here. I haven't seen all of them. Some of them seem to have been passed down from the older generations." Isabella pressed at a Magic Stone. "If you wish to see all of them, I'll activate them one by one."

"Then let's begin." Roland nodded.

Their surroundings suddenly became pitch-dark.

Chapter 896: Dust-laden Secrets

In the darkness, Roland felt that two hands had simultaneously grabbed him. Nightingale said alertly, "What's going on?"

"The illusion created by this sigil is directly projected into everyone's brain," Agatha explained. "It will seem like you have been teleported to another world alone, but the reality is unaffected. We're still standing in the grand hall."

"If you don't want to watch it, you can just walk out of the effective range of the sigil" Isabella added.

Not long after, the darkness gradually faded away, and the transparent glass dome, marble floor, and spacious roundtable appeared in front of their eyes. Sitting around the table were witches in the Union-style copes, among them was the impressive Queen of Starfall City whose hair was as fiery red. Although this was a scene from 400 years ago, everything in the phantom looked so realistic. Even the tea on the table was giving off puffs of hot steam. It felt as if a moment that had long been buried history had been revived to the present once again.

If such a technique had existed from where Roland came from, historians who had worked their asses off in the dirt to search for a few pieces of text fragments would definitely be moved to tears.

Seeing that there was no danger, one hand let go of Roland. However, the other one did not loosen its grip at all, but instead moved down and eventually the two's fingers were tightly intertwined with each other.

Roland instantly knew who that was.

He smiled and softly squeezed the other person's fingers before he shifted his attention to the center of the phantom.

Isabella activated the magic stones one after another. The locations in the phantoms changed from the witches' escape route to Taquila, then to Starfall City. As Alice became younger and younger, the appearing witches kept on changing, and by the end, only a few familiar faces could be seen. Undoubtedly, during this prolonged brutal war, the Union suffered tremendous losses, and very few senior witches were able to survive until the escape.

This was the result of the witch empire's systemic flaw: the more powerful a witch was, the higher ranked she would be. It sounded logical, but when war erupted, the high-ranking witches had to fight on the front lines themselves, instead of commanding the war effort from somewhere safe. Roland had heard from Agatha that Alice evolved into a Transcendent during an extremely dangerous battle. During her reign, she went through several massive battles just like that one. In other words, if she had made

even a single mistake, then the history of the Union... or maybe even the history of the entire human race would have turned out differently.

Such was the case for the Head of the Three Chairs, let alone the other high-ranking witches.

As a matter of fact, that system did not provide a suitable place for leaders to be developed—a rookie only had to survive one or two battles and taste some fresh blood to become a veteran, yet a high-ranking officer had to go through quite a few battles and witness thousands of deaths to genuinely mature. Having the leader personally lead a charge was indeed the best way of enhancing an army's morale, but this should only be used as a last resort. If everything went well, the troops would keep on fighting with high morale without the need for a leader to make an appearance.

Leaders and common troops do not have the same value—when faced with a large-scale war where large numbers of casualties were inevitable, such a practice was truly reckless.

Roland was not expecting to find any astonishing secrets through the sigils. He believed the past Popes must have repeatedly watched these phantoms, so if there were records about the origins of the Divine Will or the nature of the relics of gods, then the church wouldn't have fallen to such a sorry state today. The purpose of his trip was, apart from satisfying his curiosity, to gain some more experiences for himself.

He found that what had happened was more or less the same as he had imagined. As the phantom played out, the group mostly saw scenes such as important conferences, festivals, and battle mobilizations. It was understandable that the Sigils of Magic Stones were only used on such occasions.

According to Agatha, sigils that were able last for such a long time cost quite a fortune.

Soon enough, they came to the last phantom—Alice and the other two chairs were nowhere to be found, and instead, there was a crowd of senior witches in disheveled clothing. The image quality was also visibly worst than the previous playbacks.

Agatha asked with surprise, "Are those people..."

"The founders of the early Union?" Phyllis asked.

"Who are they?" Roland asked, raising his eyebrow.

"The Extraordinaries who survived the first Battle of Divine Will. It was them who founded the Union. Look at the documents on the table! Could this be..." Phyllis asked in surprise.

"Indeed." Agatha's voice was full of joy. "I never expected to witness the well-known vow of the three queens with my very own eyes!"

Roland was bewildered. He raised his head and tried to get a better look, only to find texts written with magic power, which were only readable to witches.

"Can someone explain what the vows were about?"

"Allow me." Agatha's voice came from in front of him. "It was considered as a symbolic event in the history of the Union where this loose organization integrated into a centralized power. This event was something every awakened witch had to learn about. After the end of the first Battle of Divine Will, the

Union, which was entirely under the witches' rule, was founded. At that time, different opinions were circling around the young organization, whether it was about the ruling of ordinary people or the methods of fighting against demons. Such debates lasted for years until three major powers emerged. Over time, the three forces grew until they finally overpowered the other lords and city-states, after which the Union ended up with the oligarchic organizational structure that we all know about."

"Were the three powers Starfall City, Taquila, and Arrieta?" Nightingale asked.

"That's right. Due to the special positions of these three Holy Cities, their lords were often crowned as 'Queen,'" Agatha replied. "The Three Chiefs of the last tenure in the Union were the Queen of Starfall City Alice, the Queen of Sunchaser Natalia, and the Queen of Moonradiance Eleanor."

"No wonder." Roland thought. To witches in that era, the vow of the three queens was more or less the same as the founding constitutional amendments of a nation. This event signified the point after which the Union had transformed from an unofficial alliance to a unified political entity. No wonder witches like Agatha and Phyllis were this excited about the vow. Indeed, it had important historical significance. Although the Union ended up in a disaster, without the Three Chiefs system, it would have been defeated much sooner in the second Battle of Divine Will, let alone leaving behind the numerous witches who took on "resisting demons, recovering Taquila" as their lifelong mission.

But such information was not particularly interesting to Roland. With his mind drifting away, he laid eyes on the minor details in the phantom such as the witches' clothing, the cups and stationery they used, and the furniture and decoration in the hall. Since Alice came from a time several centuries ago, the furnishings of her age were much shabbier. Obviously, after the defeat of the first Battle of Divine Will, the domain of the witches ended up in an extremely underdeveloped stage.

On the walls of the conference hall, Roland saw over ten portraits, and surprisingly, two of them were men. He guessed that they were probably some outstanding heroic figures from the war.

Apparently, at that time, the Union hadn't started to consider ordinary people as lower beings, since men could still attend such an important conference.

Just when Roland was about to ask Agatha whether she knew who they were, he felt as if all the blood in his body suddenly froze.

An indescribable chill rose from the bottom of his feet and penetrated through his spine. The panic was so intense that goosebumps sprung on his arms and his fingertips started to shiver slightly.

"What's wrong?" noticing his uneasiness, Anna asked urgently.

"That, that painting..." swallowing his saliva, Roland was able to barely stutter out his words.

"Painting?"

"The person in the painting... I've seen her before."

It took him quite a lot of effort to utter those words—although the phantom was not as clear as the previous ones, he could still distinguish the silhouette of the person in the second to the last portrait. It was a middle-aged woman, not outstanding in appearance, with her black hair coiled on the top of her

head, one of her eyes covered with a patch, and was sitting on a high-backed chair with her hands crossed over each other.

Her appearance was exactly the same as Lan, Garcia's master in Roland's Dream World!

Chapter 897: Jungle Fiesta

The heavy rain in the jungle had washed away most of the corpses' bloody smell.

An ordinary hunter might have found it hard to search for his target under this kind of condition. But for Lorgar, the faint smells that were mixed with the rainwater were more than sufficient for her to hunt.

For example, she knew that a number of animals had died at the same spot. She could sense that the within the different smells of blood, some still smelled fresh, while others carried a rancid odor. This means that several animals had all died at the same place for some time.

It was unlikely for the smell of small animals such as rabbits, rats, and foxes to spread for so far, and even if it did, the smell shouldn't have been so distinct. In other words, this scent most likely came from the carcasses of large animals no smaller than bulls or horses.

The creature that dragged all these large animal carcasses around must have possessed a certain level of strength. Mass storing food this way was also a frequent habit among the carnivorous predators.

Such places were often the nest of these predators.

Most importantly, Lorgar caught an indescribably foul smell within the stench of blood. This was the smell unique to those of hybrid demonic beasts. Had she not turned into a wolf, she would've been only able to smell some odor in the end. Only when she used her ability to transform could she detect the subtle differences in the damp air.

There was a hint of magic power in that smell.

Not every demonic hybrid could absorb magic power, but this one must be a demonic hybrid since its blood contained traces of magic power, making the beast much stronger than ordinary demonic beasts.

It was also one of the improvements she made through hunting in the jungle for these past few months.

If she could have mastered this technique before the holy duel, the Four-winged Eagle that attacked her from the air wouldn't have even been able to touch her.

Although the climate, the environment, and the preys in the Barbarian Land were far different from those in the desert, the technique for hunting was fairly similar. Basically, when it came to hunting, it was all down to being cautious, meticulous and patient no matter where he or she was.

Lorgar's current target was a large demonic hybrid bear.

When it stood up, its height was as tall as three men standing atop one another, and it looked like a mobile iron tower. Lorgar could not tell which demonic beast it managed to integrate with. The monster's skin was as thick as armor and could not be bitten through even by her sharp fangs. Its head

looked even crazier. It had four eyes, two in the back, which made her sure-kill techniques such as a sneak attack from the back and biting the throat lose their usual effect.

Five days ago, Lorgar had encountered the demonic bear. After a harsh fight, she broke two claws while the bear lost half of its forefoot and ran away with its stomach cut open. This bear-like beast was probably the trickiest prey to deal with within the Barbarian Land ever since Lorgar had gotten there. It was just about as strong as the legendary beast of the desert. If this monstrosity were instead the first opponent that she had to face after arriving in the Barbarian Land, then she would have been the one running for her life. But now, things are different. She was able to get plenty of battle experience from all the other demonic beasts she had killed before this.

Nevertheless, it was a hunt. Not a duel. She brought herbs cultivated by Leaf and the Cleansing Water made by Lily for this trip. Also, she did not need to worry about minor injuries as she had excellent healing ability after transforming into a wolf. During these days, apart from healing the wounds, she spent the rest of time searching for the demonic bear.

As the smell became stronger and stronger, Lorgar knew that the chase was about to come to an end, and the victor would soon be decided.

She lightly jumped across a puddle. Her paws sank into the wet mud without any sound. She chose to start her attack from a downwind position since this would make it difficult for the beast to detect her presence through smell. She approached the source of the bloody little by little, pinpointed the position of the enemy using her hearing, and slowly lifted the vines in front of her with her front paw.

The demonic hybrid bear then appeared in front of her.

It was not aware of her arrival as it was busily biting into a stout buck, with blood stains on both of its cheeks. The bear's broken limbs that exposed the bones inside made the scene look even more appalling. For ordinary animals that suffered such severe wounds, they would typically opt to hide and recover first before doing anything else. But the bear seemed not to care about the wounds and instead acted as if nothing else mattered other than filling up its stomach.

The Wolf Girl tensed up her hind legs and went into a prone position. This time she intended to destroy its four eyes first so that it would have no chance to escape.

Just as she was ready to go, footsteps could be heard coming from the depths of the jungle.

Lorgar was stunned for a moment.

Why are there such orderly footsteps in the depths of the Barbarian Land?

The new group's footsteps were very heavy and loud, and they apparently didn't care about making their presence known. The alternating sounds of one-two footsteps meant that they were humans, and there were more than one.

Did some hunters from Neverwinter lose their way?

"No..." She immediately rejected this idea. It would take over ten days to come here from the border of Graycastle. Considering the dense forest and wild grassland, it would take more time if they had to walk on land. Not to mention the fact that there were fierce beasts and snakes everywhere once you pass the

grasslands. Moreover, hybrid demonic bears roam the grounds around the Taquila ruins. Even if someone had lost their way, they wouldn't have been able to reach here alive.

Lorgar suddenly thought of an answer.

A seemingly reasonable answer, and one that was much-anticipated by her.

At that moment, she felt the hair on her body stand up straight, and her heart started to beat violently. Though she was extremely nervous, her body instantly entered a battle-ready state.

The demonic bear also noticed this unusual sound. It dropped the half-eaten deer leg, climbed up and roared toward the direction of the footsteps.

The bush shook, and the staggered branches were pushed open. Two ugly and ferocious monsters then emerged out of the shadows.

They had dark brown skin and muscled arms, and also wore skull helmets and held deadly-looking bone spears.

Exactly the same as Lightning had described—

They were the demons!

She had finally found them!

The moment the demons appeared, the demonic hybrid bear launched its attack.

It lifted its still-intact front paw and plunged toward the newcomers who dared disturb its feast at a speed which far exceeded that of which should be possible for something as large as itself.

In addition to the demonic bear's power, the charge was further strengthened by the momentum of its entire body. This move was no less deadly than the Four-winged Eagle's dive from the sky. If it were Lorgar facing the charge, she would definitely try to avoid it. After all, she was not an Extraordinary and would have to pay a huge price to block this strike.

But instead of dodging, one of the demons stepped forward, and one of its arms quickly swelled and clashed directly against the giant palm of the demonic bear. With a muffled sound, the two monsters crashed into each other!

It was a stalemate!

Neither the demonic bear nor the demon could push further. But the demon was much shorter than the bear, so it would be unfavorable for the demon if this had dragged on.

However, there was more than one demon!

Another Mad Demon had taken the bone spear and aimed it at the hybrid demonic bear.

The fight was going to end in a moment, and Lorgar had but moments to spare if she wished to take action.

Leave or stay?

"Although the tube on the back of the demon is its weakness, it is still difficult to deal with." She suddenly recalled Lightning's warning. "If you meet the enemies, you'd better immediately retreat and report it to His Majesty."

Reason also told her that she needed to retreat, but her instincts were telling her otherwise as a burning sensation surged through her body.

No, this was not something that she needed to think about.

It was dangerous, but this was what she came for, wasn't it?

According to the information, the Mad Demon would experience a significant period of weakness after its arms had swelled. Lorgar could take advantage of this even if she were fighting against two demons!

"Shoo—"

With a piercing sound, the bone spear shot through the air.

At the same time, Lorgar pounced out of the shadows and bit towards the demon which was still struggling against the bear.

Chapter 898: Dark Tide

Everything happened in the blink of an eye.

With a flash of white, the bone spear directly pierced the demonic bear's chest. It had happened so quickly that it could not be captured by the naked eye. If it were Lorgar that was the target, with that kind of distance, she could not have avoided it.

It seemed that the demon was aware of the giant wolf that leaped out of the bush, but it was unable to block or avoid the attack as its right hand was still struggling with the demonic bear's paw. It only managed to raise its other arm to protect its head by instinct.

This action protected its throat but left its left arm exposed to Princess Lorgar.

Without the slightest hesitation, she bit into the demon's arm and tore it apart. The heavy taste of blood immediately spread into her mouth.

Compared to the enormous demonic bear, which had near-impenetrable skin, the Mad Demon's skin was similar to a human's in softness. Even though they had bulging muscles, their flesh was still as soft as a piece of cloth between Lorgar's fangs.

The effortlessness with which Lorgar's fangs tore apart the demon's arm gave her an immediate confidence boost!

Lorgar then moved past the demon and created a distance between them.

She remained unhurt while one of her enemies had lost the means needed to continue the fight.

That was undoubtedly an extremely successful attack.

The badly hurt Mad Demon did not move until the hybrid demonic beast fell. It then stumbled back a few steps and roared at her angrily. However, it had lost its left arm and its right arm had now shrunk. It was barely able to keep itself up, let alone be a threat to her.

But at this moment, the other demon's actions surprised Lorgar.

She saw it take out a horn from its pocket and began blowing into it.

"Woo———"

Its deep sound broke the silence of the forest and scared off a group of birds.

What does this mean?

Are there other demons nearby?

But she had already scouted out the area. With the exception of beehives and bird nests, which Lightning had asked her to mark, she did not find anything else worthwhile around here.

Lorgar decided not to think about it and would first kill the one-armed demon.

Even if they had reinforcements, there would only be corpses waiting for them by the time they arrived.

She rushed forward and pounced towards the demon. The demon dropped its horn, pulled out a stone ax that was hanging on its waist, and slashed towards the Wolf Girl!

If this had happened six months ago, Lorgar would have chosen to avoid its edge, stepped back, and looked for another opportunity; however, after the battle with the Extraordinary, the Four-winged Eagle, and many kinds of hybrid demonic beasts, she had made many improvements in terms of her combat skill.

Lorgar lowered her body and extended her hand and leg to one side, and sprung from this seemingly awkward angle with her body nearly flying out sideways!

The ax missed its target.

However, this move by Lorgar wasn't merely just a dodge. When the demon's attention was distracted by her movements and fixated on her mouth and claws, she launched her real attack. Lorgar curled her huge tail and swept it towards the back of the demon's head. This blow took full advantage of her body's momentum and was just like an invisible hook.

"Thud!"

With a muffled sound, the surprised demon flew away and hit a nearby tree. Its stone ax was flung to the ground.

"Roar——!"

Just as Lorgar was ready to seize the opportunity to deal the finishing blow with her claws, she suddenly heard a shrill roar from behind.

Her instincts warned her of immediate danger. She turned around and swept her paws sideways to block the one-armed Mad Demon which had rushed towards her. Her claw struck hard and cracked the ribs of the demon, even piercing through the leather armor on its body.

This was a suicidal attack. It seemed that the demon had deliberately embraced her giant paw with its body.

Why?

Lorgar immediately knew the answer to her question before the thought had barely left her mind.

The shrunken right arm of the one-armed Mad Demon began to swell up again!

Wasn't it only supposed to recover after seven minutes?

Lorgar was shocked and tried to get away from the enemy. However, her claw was tightly clung onto by the demon as if pinched by an iron plier.

Why? Does it...

She quickly turned to the other demon that was struck by her tail, and her heart sank.

The demon's arm also swelled up, and a few veins even burst out of its dry skin.

Wait a second... She suddenly remembered what Lightning had said. When they encountered the demons on the hot air balloon in the Great Snow Mountain of the Western Region, the Mad Demon did show the ability to throw spears twice within a short period of time. However, the strength of the second throw had decreased dramatically, and the demon's arm, which was embedded with magic stone, was rendered useless. It could be described as a suicidal technique, and not very threatening. She was stupid to believe what Lightning had said.

She couldn't believe this. Lorgar had almost got herself killed by the words of a foolish girl!

Although this desperate struggle by the demons would cause them severe backlash, it could also cause huge trouble for their opponent, especially in a life-and-death situation such as this one. There was a common saying in the Sand Nation which could explain this current situation: "Beware a cornered fighter." Since they had already put their life aside, their last blows would naturally be deadly.

The demon that was holding Lorgar's arm was not able to completely restrain her actions. This would only be possible for an Extraordinary. However, Lorgar understood that her opponent's purpose was to slow down her movement. Even if she tried to turn around or dodge, she would not be able to escape the other demon's fatal blow.

In just a few seconds, the Mad Demon's arm had swelled to its maximum size, and blue blood spurted out from the cracked skin as if the whole arm was going to explode at any moment.

It held its last bone spear and aimed it at the Wolf Girl.

At this moment, Lorgar could only take a gamble!

Lorgar opened her eyes wide and focused on every movement made by the enemy. For a moment, the world seemed to have turned silent. The only sound she could hear was her own heart beat.

As soon as the Mad Demon threw the spear, she cut off the surging magic power in her body.

Her body began to quickly shrink in size, creating a huge gap in the initially tight grasp of the Mad Demon. To the spear throwing demon, it basically had its target swapped out at the last moment.

The bone spear, which flew through the air like a streak of lightning towards the head of the huge desert wolf, pierced the broken-arm demon instead. At this point, she had already finished transforming back to her human form.

She won the gamble.

The spear thrower did not expect her to do this. Stunned, it held its now withered arm and uttered out two syllables when Princess Lorgar walked in front of it.

"Ta...qui..."

Lorgar then transformed one hand into a wolf's claw and crushed the demon's helmet.

As the Red Mist dispersed, the demon collapsed to the ground with a soft thud

Only then did Lorgar dare to relax and let out a long breath.

She had won!

One versus two!

The demons were not that strong after all.

Even though the demons were amazingly powerful after strengthening their arms, they had no combat skills at all. They mainly fought by instinct, which was a waste of their physique and talent. In terms of the warrior's path, the demons had not reached very far at all. She believed that hunting would become easier for her if she had a few more encounters with these demons.

The vast Barbarian Land that spread out around her would become the best place for training.

Then Lorgar heard the sound of tremors. It was as if the earth itself was shaking. It felt as if an immense force started to roll over the lands like a tsunami.

"Sh— sh— "

How is this possible?

She frowned a little and raised her ears towards the source. She was in the land close to Graycastle. This was not like the Southernmost Region, which was close to the sea. She was not supposed to hear waves here. Was it a flood? But there was no mountains or rivers here, so a flood wouldn't be possible.

Lorgar looked around and climbed up the highest tree she could find.

The tremor came from the direction of the Taquila ruins.

The next moment startled the Wolf Girl as she stood at the end of one of the tree's branches.

She saw countless demons appear on the horizon, moving forward like a dark tide. Above the tide were hundreds of Devilbeasts, flying back and forth in formation. Most inconceivable of all was the group of

colossal monsters stomping their way toward the ruins. They were as tall as ten-story buildings, and the four twisted legs could almost climb over Taquila's city walls directly. Anyone standing in front of them would look insignificant. That's not even considering how hard it would be to launch an attack against it. Even just standing in front of it would make a person lose their will to fight.

Lorgar looked up at the sky, which was particularly blue after the rain. A soft breeze would blow past every once in a while and the white clouds floated in the sky. Everything was as it should be and it seemed so quiet and peaceful.

Lorgar neither saw the Bloody Moon that symbolized the doomsday described by Lightning nor did she see the gloomy and depressing Red Mist.

But she knew that disaster had come knocking.

Chapter 899: The Witches From Afar (Part I)

"I see the port!"

Molly's sudden exclamation immediately drew the attention of the witches on deck.

"Where? Where?"

"Sigh...We're finally almost there. It has been about half a month since we started to float around the sea..."

"That silver speck over there is another ship, isn't it?"

"Didn't somebody said that only the 'Charming Beauty' sails on this route?"

"Then it's probably a fishing boat."

Everybody went to the railing and stood on tiptoes to get a better look at where Molly was pointing to.

Seeing the witches all excited and cheerful, the old captain Jack "The One-eyed" shook his head with a smile. He turned to Camilla Dary, who unlike the rest of the witches, had a stern look on her face, and asked, "You don't look quite excited. What's wrong? Today is a good day."

"Good in what way?" Camilla replied indifferently.

"Good to be home." Jack shook his pipe and said, "Is returning to your homeland after so many years not worth celebrating? It is obvious that you guys never considered the Sleeping Island as your home. Not that I'm saying you dislike living at the Fjords, but after all, a refuge is still just a refuge."

Camilla didn't know what to say to that. She did not know whether Jack was right, but she knew that most of the witches who were willing to go to the Western Region of Graycastle had increased after the arrival of Princess Tilly's letter. Initially, only half of the witches wanted to go, but the number had risen to around 80% after. If the first batch of witches were able to properly settle in Graycastle, then it would be hard to say how many of the witches would still be left in Sleeping Island.

Sleeping Island should have been their home. It was a place where they wouldn't be hated for being who they are, and also where the church did not constantly threaten their lives. Although the island was relatively underdeveloped compared with the kingdoms on the continent and had a huge difference in terms of local customs and traditions, she believed that Sleeping Island would prosper given ten more years. Perhaps, it would not even take one generation before newly-awakened witches treated the island as their real hometown.

After a long silence, Camilla spoke in a low voice, "I wish what you said was true."

"Hmm." Jack stroke his beards. "You don't trust the new king?"

"How did you know?" Camilla looked up.

"It was written on your face." The old captain smiled. "Do you remember what you looked like three years ago when you sailed out for the first time?"

"Three years ago..." The steward of Sleeping Island contemplated for a while. That was when Princess Tilly started to gather the witches and encouraged them to leave Graycastle. As one of the few captains who did not discriminate against witches, Jack and the "Charming Beauty" had smuggled a large number of witches from harbor cities to the fjords with the risk of getting caught and being sent to trial. That was why Sleeping Island had built a long-lasting and intimate friendship with the one-eyed captain.

"Perhaps worn-out and frightened?" Camilla answered hesitantly.

"Worn-out and frightened?" Jack burst into laughter. "Just that? You were no better than a bunch of walking dead at that time, all beaten-up and desperate. Look at yourselves now. Don't you feel completely different? The past is the past. You should look ahead. Some of the witches had already been to Neverwinter several times. If it were really that miserable of a place, they wouldn't have such bright smiles on their faces right now."

"But the nobles are all two-faced..."

"But are you?" The captain interrupted her. "If I remember correctly, you're also from a noble family, aren't you? You were better dressed than anyone else the day you left Graycastle. Civilians can't afford silk fabrics. If I detested nobles like you do back then, what would have happened?"

"..." Camilla opened her mouth, grasping for words that did not come.

Jack "The One-eyed" slowly blew a tendril of white smoke. "I don't think you can judge a person only by his background. Other than the Three Gods, who can choose their own family? The same goes for witches... Don't you think that you hating nobles because they are nobles is the same as people blindly hating witches?"

The words sent a faint shiver through Camilla's heart.

"Perhaps you could say that you understand what the nobles are because you were one of them. But don't forget that your prejudice could potentially harm someone innocent, as long as there exists a person that doesn't fit your mold." The old captain paused for a second and said, "Sorry, child... I am probably not the best person to lecture you on this, but I don't want to see you let your past cloud your judgment—what I said doesn't only apply to this matter. After all, people can't always live in the past."

"No, nobody else would say something like this to me," Camilla thought to herself. Princess Tilly must know that people should look forward to the future and not live in the past. That was why she had voluntarily traveled to Neverwinter. However, Camilla knew Princess Tilly would never be so open to her, and certainly would not criticize her hatred for the nobles. Their intimate relationship and the respects Tilly had for her prevented the princess from giving her further counsels.

Perhaps, the old captain was the only person on Sleeping Island who would view her as a child.

Camilla breathed out a long sigh and said, "You may be right."

"Right?" Jack chuckled. "I'm old and happen to have a lot of similar experiences. If I don't always keep optimistic, I wouldn't have been able to sail on the sea for this long. But the things are most likely going to get tough in the near-future."

"Why?"

"Who else would board the "charming Beauty once you witches all return to the main continent? I've heard from those big Chambers of Commerce that a new type of ship that doesn't require a sail will soon replace the current wooden boats and be used by the majority of the merchants at Fjords. Those new ships would be a lot faster than this old baby and can also carry a lot more. I bet nobody will ever use her again. Not even for transporting cargo."

"I can probably talk to Princess Tilly about this..."

"Talk about what? Do you want to support me for the rest of my life?" The old captain tapped his pipe. "That'll be a little too early. My legs haven't given away yet! In fact, I plan to join Sir Thunder's expedition team after you guys arrive at Graycastle."

"Expedition?" Camilla echoed in surprise.

"That's right. If I can find something in an unexploited sea across Shadow Islands, the money I can earn from that will be more than enough to let me build my own fleet if I wanted to. Not to mention supporting myself." Jack "The One-eyed" turned around and looked at the vast ocean spiritedly. "Although I'm getting old and my legs are no longer as nimble as they were used to be, I can guarantee you that no captain in the entire Fjords 's better at navigating the seas than me!"

"Really..." Camilla asked in her heart. She glanced at the Fjorian old man as if it were the first time she met him. His appearance was nothing extraordinary, but the current expression on his face perfectly demonstrated his fearlessness in facing the unknown future.

"Captain, we are nearing the shores!" The lookout perching on the mast yelled.

"Do I still have to tell you what to do next?" Jack looked up and stared at him. "Take in the sail and slow her down!"

Camilla looked toward the dock area and found there were red banners of different kinds everywhere, all of which read "Welcome to Neverwinter." Among the people who came to greet them, there were not only witches but also ordinary people. She even saw a column of children around 11 to 12 years old, each of them with a bouquet in their hands. The children were standing next to the trestle waiting for the witches' arrival.

"Such a marvelous reception." The old captain whistled. "Just for the way the King is greeting you, you should give him some more credit, right?" He then waved his arm at the busy sailors on the deck. "Lads, get ready to dock. We've arrived at Neverwinter!"

Chapter 900: The Witches From Afar (Part II)

"Is this really alright?" Wendy said quietly as she pointed to the ordinary people on the dock. "I mean, we hired random people to greet the witches from Sleeping Island... If the witches knew the truth, they surely wouldn't be pleased about it."

"Are you able to find any residents who truly welcome their arrival?" Scroll asked in an equally low voice.

"... No." Wendy hesitated for a moment and shook her head. Indeed, it was hard to find even one or two residents who would welcome the witches from the bottom of their heart, let alone a group of them. Although citizens in Neverwinter had gradually started to accept the witches under Roland's influences, and some witches were even adored by the public, the immigrants from Sleeping Islands were strangers to them. It was basically impossible to ask people to stop their work and greet a group of witches they had never met.

Without King Roland's presence, only the families of the First Army could be persuaded to do so.

"Therefore, there's nothing wrong with His Majesty's arrangement." Scroll shrugged. "All the expenses incurred in this welcoming has already been included in Neverwinter's budget, including the expenses for those big red bouquets, banners, and family greeting teams. If you don't use that part of the money, the other departments will. His Majesty originally planned to have the welcome reception on a much bigger scale than this."

"Well, you might be right..." Wendy swiped at the non-existent sweat on her forehead. His Majesty had been extremely excited ever since Princess Tilly had told him that the witches on Sleeping Island were coming here. Apart from what Scroll had just mentioned, Roland had also listed many other welcome events on his memo, such as ceremonial parades, a musical, and fireworks. Had the news from Hill Fawkes not prompted Roland to carry out his war plan immediately, Roland would have hosted the ceremony himself, which undoubtedly would have made things even more jubilant and spectacular.

Scroll said smilingly, "That's why directly hiring people is the best option. We don't just recruit random guys. Those selected ones are all families with good city hall records. You don't need to worry." She took a short pause and continued, "The witches are coming. Go meet them, Ms. chief of the Union."

"Scroll!" Wendy raised her voice, looking at the former reproachfully. Then she gave Princess Tilly a curt nod before walking up to the guests who came here all the way from the island.

"Nice to meet you!" As the two groups of witches met each other, Wendy opened her arms and greeted them with her most gentle voice while smiling. "I'm the superintendent of the Witch Union. Welcome to Neverwinter!"

...

According to the agreement, the witches from Sleeping Island were only considered as ordinary subjects of the Western Region and would not be under the management of the Witch Union. As such, Wendy decided to take them to the residential area first and have a rough head count so that the City Hall would know how much food to provide to the new group of witches. As for the subsequent tour and work schedules, she planned to discuss that with Lady Tilly only after everybody settled down.

The construction of the residential area exclusively for the use of the witches from Sleeping Island had been completed two months before their arrival. It was located close to the Miracle Building and was named Sleeping Spell, the same name used by the Bounty Guild.

Some of the witches gasped at the sight of the "magnificent building" which was now six stories' high.

They were especially impressed with the polished and glossy surface of the concrete.

"Are these real stones? Why do they look so smooth?"

"We're not going to be staying here, are we?"

"Stop dreaming. This must be the Lord's castle."

"The view from the top floor must be breathtaking."

Seeing everyone was burning with curiosity, Wendy took this opportunity to make a brief introduction.

"The building is only half-complete at the moment. Once the construction is done, it will reach 55 meters, which is 180 feet and 5 inches. But His Majesty doesn't live here. His castle is only three stories' tall and is located in the center of Neverwinter."

"That's so tall... Aren't you afraid that it'll collapse one day?" someone questioned in surprise.

Wendy smiled. "His Majesty invented a special construction material that can convert fluid slimes to solid stones. This is simply a pilot project. He told us that we will be able to build architecture as tall as the mountains with this type of material. Of course, the whole project cannot be successfully completed without the help of the witches. In fact, this building is the result of the joint efforts of the witches and numerous construction workers. Am I right, Lotus?"

"Hey, did you really build this?"

"But isn't your ability elevating earth?"

All the witches rested their eyes on Lotus.

A little embarrassed, Lotus scratched her head and answered, "I just build slopes for the workers. When they need to add another floor, I elevate the surrounding earth to create a platform next to the building to make it a bit more convenient for the construction workers."

"Did... they hate or show disgust at you because you're a witch?" As expected, someone raised the question that everybody was most concerned about.

"I haven't come across anyone like that yet. I think they've already started to treat me like a normal person." Lotus waved her hand. "Sometimes, the workers will even share pancakes with me if I went to work early."

This was the exact effect Wendy desired to achieve. "Perhaps a lot of you are still cautious of the people here and wonder how you'll be treated in the future. That's perfectly normal, after all, Neverwinter to you is a completely foreign city. I don't think I have to go on about the miseries that had fallen upon us witches over this past century. However, I assure you that you'll feel at home here, just like the city name endowed by His Majesty suggests. I understand that you aren't a member of the Witch Union, but please don't hesitate to ask me for help if you encounter any difficulties. No matter how small it seems to be, I'm here for you."

"Good job." Scrolled gave Wendy a thumbs-up and whispered to her approvingly.

...

Wendy did not expect, however, that the first problem arose when she tried to gather the personal information of the witches.

"Why do you need such information?" A red-haired witch protested after Wendy distributed the forms. "Didn't you agree not to force us to stay here? I just plan to stay here for a couple of days, so I don't think it's necessary."

"Me too. Princess Tilly told us that we could leave Neverwinter whenever we wanted to. I want to go back to the Eastern Region right now."

"Since the church is gone now, I don't think it's necessary to disclose our personal information. It'll put us in a very disadvantageous position if the information leaks to someone with malicious intent."

There were quite a few witches who opposed to registering their personal information.

"I knew it... It's Azima and her little clique again." Ashes knitted her brows.

"Azima?" Wendy asked in surprise.

"A witch organization from the Eastern Region. Sorry, they don't really acknowledge my leadership," Tilly explained in a low voice. "But they're at least much better than the Bloodfang Association." Tilly turned to the red-haired witch and said, "I understand that you yearn to return to the Eastern Region, but this is not a good time. Although the church has fallen from power, the public is still unfriendly to witches, not to mention those nobles. The situation is particularly bad in the Eastern Region. Before Roland officially retrieves that area, the attitude of people toward witches would not change much over there."

"How do you know that if you haven't been there?" Azima persisted. "Or maybe you're just favoring your brother?"

"Mind your attitude." Ashes retorted coldly.

"Why? Are you going to pick a fight with me here, like you did to Heidi and Skyflare?"

Wendy bit her lip. She did not foresee such a bitter confrontation, but she could not find a proper way to ease the tension between the two parties.

Just at that moment, Scroll stepped forward.

"Mind if I ask you a few questions?" She asked.