

Witch 441

Chapter 441: Storm Clouds

It was a secret room of the Tower of Babel in the Hermes Cathedral.

Tayfun stared at the witch across him and couldn't help but sigh.

"Is His Holiness Mayne really so busy?"

"Of course he is." The witch stroked her golden curls. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have sent me to meet you. Let me introduce myself. My name is Isabella, and I'm a Pure Witch of the Supreme Pontiff."

"Your Excellency Tayfun, this..." The other two newly appointed Bishops, Soli Daal of the Judgement Army and El of the Tribunal stared at each other. Although they knew about the church's secret witches, they never expected them to be allowed to participate in such important meetings.

"She's a direct subordinate of the Pope with the same rank as a Bishop—she just doesn't have an official position in the church," explained Tayfun with a sigh. "Bishops can also have their own Pure Witches, so when the Months of the Demons are over, you two can choose a few witches to raise."

"I... I see." Soli widened his eyes. "So... so what kind of powers do they have?"

"This is highly confidential, and only the Supreme Pontiff knows about it."

"Why would we want to raise witches?" El seemed quite annoyed. "If the believers find out, the church's reputation will be terribly damaged!"

"Of course, they can help you take care of shady business." Isabella raised her eyebrows. "Also, they can sleep with you, let you vent your anger, or do many other things... you should know that witches are completely different from regular women."

"Absurd!"

"Ahem, that's enough." Tayfun coughed. "Your Excellency El, I already said that the Pope's Pure Witches are of equal rank as bishops and should be seen as his representatives, so you should show them some respect. And Lady Isabella, please refrain from making these jokes. They aren't as old and near death as me, and might get very angry at what you said."

"As you wish, Your Excellency," Isabella said with a smile.

"Hmph." El uttered a nasal sound and ignored the witch.

"Then let's get to business," Tayfun said, stroking his beard. "Do you have anything to report?"

"I don't understand why His Holiness Mayne is suddenly asking all of the local church groups to send their captured witches to the Holy City. Even if it's to create God's Punishment Army, it's still a high price to pay." El took the lead and said. Her tone sounded harsh probably because of her anger towards the Pure Witch. "Ever since the order was passed, we've captured three witches. While they were being sent over, one broke out of her cage and killed the accompanying guards, and we have yet to find her."

"Wasn't she restrained by a 'metal leash'?" asked Soli.

"Not all churches are equipped with the most advanced God's Locket of Retribution," said El annoyedly. "We lost 16 believers to this witch, including four who were supposed to become Judgement Warriors. If something like this happens again, people might be too afraid to capture witches."

"But we all know that combat witches are a minority, and most of the Fallen aren't capable of fighting back, so this kind of issue is very rare," said Isabella nonchalantly. "Also, every time you bring back a wild witch, the church can gain two new God's Punishment Warriors, so I shouldn't have to explain to you which is more important."

"I agree with Lady Isabella," Soli said, nodding his head. "With the stress on Hermes' line of defense increasing every day, we desperately need more God's Punishment Warriors to fight the demonic beasts. One God's Punishment Warrior has the fighting ability of three or four Judgement Warriors, and even more Warriors-in-training."

"Since the Supreme Pontiff has made his decision, we should just carry it out to the best of our ability." Tayfun turned to Soli Daal and asked, "What's the situation at our line of defense?"

"Very difficult. Regular demonic hybrids are easy to deal with, but every time a Fearful Beast of Hell appears, a God's Punishment Warrior gets injured or killed." Soli shook his head. "Burying snow powder and detonating it is a good idea, but we can't guarantee that they walk over the snow powder every time."

"His Holiness has also considered this," said Isabella frankly, "and he plans to use the 'Siege Beast' ahead of time."

"What's that?"

"A siege weapon controlled by Pure Witches with a range, accuracy, and power that far exceed those of the mangonel, and the key to conquering the Kingdom of Wolfheart," explained the Pure Witch. "The 'Siege Beast' was originally used to fight demons and giant demonic beasts, so since the Fearful Beasts of Hell showed up early, we should start using it."

"Why didn't we use it from the beginning?" Soli asked confusedly.

"Because of the potential damage." Isabella shrugged. "We can't build new ones and can only repair parts of it."

"So where did it come from?" El asked with a frown.

"This is top secret, so you don't have the clearance to know."

"You..."

As the secret room fell quiet, Tayfun broke the silence by clapping his hands and saying, "Alright, since you all brought bad news, I shall share a piece of good news. Besides a few cities in the Kingdom of Wolfheart that are still resisting, all the other nobles have pledged their allegiance to us, just like the weaklings in the Kingdom of Everwinter did. There'll be more believers joining the church, and by next summer, the Holy City's resources and Judgement Army will double in size. Also, the Kingdom of Dawn

caused an uprising because of its hostility against believers, and our people are secretly helping them fight the noble, which might last until the end of the Months of the Demons."

"Finally, some good news." El sighed. "I thought the church was done for."

"What kind of nonsense are you talking about?" Soli glared at her. "Aren't we progressing exactly according to our plan?"

"Good job." Isabella nodded approvingly and glanced at the three bishops. "Since you're all done talking, I'll share the Supreme Pontiff's new order."

The three archbishops all immediately looked at the Pure Witch.

"His Holiness orders that we adjust next year's attacks by targeting the Kingdom of Graycastle first and the Kingdom of Dawn last."

"What?" Soli Daal was stunned. "But all of our strategies were made in accordance with the Kingdom of Dawn, including our resources and reinforcements, so if we change our plan now, we'll have to delay our date of the attack."

"Wasn't this plan already in place when Pope O'Brien was in power? Why are we changing it now?" El asked curiously. "Both kingdoms will fall eventually, so why does the order of attacks matter?"

Tayfun was silent. When His Holiness Mayne ordered him to send Pure Witches to the Kingdom of Graycastle to plot the Western Region, he had already predicted this change. "His Holiness wasn't interested in King's City, but in the border area of the Kingdom of Graycastle."

After the two men stopped bickering, Tayfun said quietly, "I've nothing against the order itself, but there's a lot at stake, and I want to see His Holiness Mayne before we carry it out. Can you pass the message for me?"

"No need for such trouble." Isabella smiled. "It just so happens that His Holiness wants to see you too."

Chapter 442: The Approval of God

As he walked down the stairs to the bottom of the church, Tayfun felt an inexplicable chill.

In the eerily quiet church basement was the core secret of the church—the Hermes' underground castle.

It was the first time for him to come to this place.

"His Holiness Mayne really wanted to meet me here?" According to the convention, only the archbishop who was in line as the Pope was allowed into the Secret Area, but he was too old to be Mayne's successor.

"You've served the church for so many years and have worked together with His Holiness, so he trusts you deeply," Isabella said with a smile. "Also, past rules don't apply to war-times like these, and God's will shouldn't be hidden underground but used to guide the lost believers and lead us to face our final challenge."

"Is this... His Holiness's idea?"

"That's right," she said gently.

When they entered the Secret Area, they were greeted by two Judgement Warriors. "Milord Bishop, His Holiness is currently testing Magic Stones, so if you are carrying a God's Stone of Retaliation, please give it to me for now—it might affect the stones' magic power."

Tayfun nodded and handed a string of stones to the Judgement Warrior.

"His Holiness is right here, please follow me."

Isabella turned into a long passageway and pushed open the metal door at the end. Following the screech of the hinges, Tayfun saw another masked Pure Witch. She blocked the doorway like a ghost, her white skin peeking through the black silk covering her body, and she wore nothing else besides this chiffon. The most striking thing about the witch was her dull gray eyes that were different from those of ordinary people. They seemed to have whirlpools inside them that sucked him in if he looked for too long.

Tayfun subconsciously lowered his head.

It was only then that he noticed that she was barefoot and her toes were covered with flecks of red.

The archbishop recalled Isabella's sentence that "witches are completely different from regular women."

Damn it; are all these witches demon spirits?

Those delicate feet soon moved out of the way, and Tayfun heard Isabella's voice. "Milord?"

"Ahem." Tayfun broke out of his thoughts and walked into the room.

The room was not big, and even though the rosin torches on the walls were burning brightly, they didn't give off their usual sweet smell.

Four Pure Witches sat around a stone table and were fiddling with a clear stone, while the incumbent Pope, His Holiness Mayne, stood by the table.

Tayfun was about to kneel in respect, when Mayne grasped his arm and stopped him.

"There aren't any outsiders here, so there's no use for all this red tape." He smiled. "We go way back, Milord Tayfun."

In two months, Mayne's forehead had become much more wrinkled, and he had grown a few more strands of silver hair, but his humble tone was still the same.

"You can't do this..." Tayfun's heart suddenly felt warm. "Even if there aren't other believers here, I still have to follow the church's rules."

"And I make the rules." The Pope smiled nonchalantly. "Anyway... are things alright above ground? I originally wanted Isabella to bring me the news, but since you're here, you can report directly to me."

"Yes, Your Holiness." Tayfun nodded. After he shared the recent state of the church, he mentioned the order that Isabella had brought up earlier. "All of the resources we prepared up until now are specific to the Kingdom of Dawn, so adjusting our target will take a lot of effort. Why do you suddenly want to attack the Kingdom of Graycastle first?"

"That's also why I called you here." Mayne sighed. "The Kingdom of Graycastle is starting to show signs of decline because the Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince and Pill of Madness are achieving their expected results. Meanwhile, the Kingdom of Dawn is in even more chaos, so both of them will eventually fall, and it doesn't really matter whom we attack first."

"I agree, but... Graycastle is still a formidable enemy."

"I have two reasons for changing our plan of attack," said the Pope slowly, clasping his hands behind his back. "The first is basically the reason why you're worried: The Kingdom of Graycastle is vast and rich in resources, which means it's a high-risk, high-return opponent. If we can make it a territory of the church earlier, our benefits will be much greater than if we conquer the Kingdom of Dawn. If I had ten more years, I would definitely act according to Lord O'Brien's plan, but we don't have enough time. The appearance of the Fearful Beast of Hell means that the Bloody Moon may appear even earlier than predicted in the Holy Book. In times like these, a little risk and more sacrifices will be worth it."

Tayfun nodded slightly, thinking, "This is a good reason, but the problem is... it doesn't seem Mayne will do it in this way." He continued, "And the second reason is..."

"Roland Wimbledon of the Western Region," the Pope said decisively.

"You mean... Prince Roland of the Kingdom of Graycastle?" Tayfun was shocked.

"By combining the past year's reports, I've discovered something incredible." Mayne patted the bishop's shoulder. "Both the church and the Kingdom of Graycastle failed in all their attacks against him. The first failure can be traced back to the one when Duke of the Western Region attacked him, and what did Roland have at the time? Nothing but a run-down small town. Outsiders think that he defeated the Duke's knightage by succumbing to the demons, but we all know that besides Extraordinaries, a few witches have nothing against knights equipped with God's Stones of Retaliation."

"Also, the reports have only become more and more confusing, such as the secret letter sent to the Holy City two months ago, which stated that King Timothy once sent 2,000 crazed soldiers to attack the Western Region and was immediately defeated. What does this mean?"

Tayfun couldn't help but gasp. "2,000 crazed soldiers! Even in Hermes, this is a considerable force."

"If these messages are read separately, they might seem normal, but when combined, they're very shocking—Roland Wimbledon has never lost a single battle!" the Pope said quietly. "Also, our reports show that his power is growing at a concerning pace, and he seems to be preparing for expansion. If we delay for another year, the entire Kingdom of Graycastle may fall into his hands, so it'll be even more costly to try to defeat him." He paused and turned to Tayfun. "There are a lot of matters to be dealt with in the Secret Area, and I have no time for the operation and expansion of the upper levels of the church, so I can only entrust them to you."

After the Archbishop left, the appearance of the room suddenly changed.

The torches on the wall, the Pure Witch who was studying the magic stones, and the stone table disappeared. The figure of the Pope also gradually faded, leaving only Isabella, Zero, and the woman in black.

"If you hadn't mentioned it, I wouldn't have known that Prince Roland of Kingdom of Graycastle was so interesting," said Isabella. "Why do I get the feeling that he, rather than the church, is more likely to defeat the demons?"

"What does that mean?" asked the woman in black, frowning. "Do you want to betray the church?"

"Betray? Don't phrase it like that." Isabella shrugged. "Isn't the purpose of the church to ensure that human beings survive the Battle of Divine Will? If someone else can do this, I don't care who I serve."

"You...!"

"Stop fighting," said Zero. "Isabella isn't wrong. In the so-called Battle of Divine Will, only the final winner can be protected by God." She looked expressionlessly at the two witches. "As for who will receive the approval of God—the Union or a prince of the Kingdom of Graycastle, I think this war will give us the answer."

Chapter 443: The Conspiracy

Somewhere to the north of Longsong Stronghold, the Western Region of Kingdom of Graycastle

Sir Eltek was sitting by the fireplace contemplating.

They had not heard anything from Miso Eltek since he had left the night before. It was morning now, and he had yet to return.

Sir Eltek felt a deep sense of unease.

Recently, Miso had been very close with the major families in the Western Region. As the prince's agent in Stronghold, the Honeysuckle Family had announced His Highness' intention to integrate the Western Region. All territories would adopt one law and the enfeoffment rights of the nobles would be taken back, which meant they could not expand their subordinate nobles or recruit knights to fight for them.

As for lower nobles like the Elteks, they felt little influence and enjoyed many benefits. As the rumor went, anyone who was loyal to His Highness would be rewarded his favor. Right now, the less influential nobles were the safest people because they would determine the success or failure of His Highness' reform plan.

Consequently, the smartest thing to do was wait and see.

However, Miso Eltek hadn't shared that philosophy.

"My lord, the attendants looking for the second master have returned." said the steward, pushing open the door to the knight's study.

"Have they found him?"

"No," the steward shook his head. "They've searched the taverns, casinos, theaters and brothels and still can't find him."

Eltek was increasingly anxious. He had dispatched two companies of scouts to search for Miso. The first one went to the homes of lower nobility nearby. Most of these nobles were vassals in the employ of Duke Ryan and retained a status comparable to the Duke's family. Miso often went to these places for parties or dinners.

The second group went to the entertainment venues, popular spots for young nobles.

Seeing both parties return empty-handed, the knight's sense of dread intensified.

He stepped to the window, looking toward the eastern territory. The territory of the Elk Family lay in that direction. It was the largest earl domain in the Western Region. Since the collapse of Duke Ryan, Petrov from the Honeysuckle Family had completely swung to Prince Roland and the Elk Family had edged ahead to become the leading power against the prince.

Hell, had Miso gone there...

"My lord, the second master has returned!" Suddenly an attendant ran into the study, breathless. "He's changing clothes in the hall, and it seems he is getting ready to go out."

"What!" The knight immediately grasped his crutch and rushed downstairs, disregarding the steward's pleas for restraint.

The moment Eltek stepped into the hall, he felt his anger rise to a new level. He saw Miso replace his thick coat with a thin and soft leather. The shiny armor of a knight was in front of him and two squires were doing their final preparation work.

"Where did you go yesterday?!" The old knight couldn't help shouting. "What are you up to now?"

"Father, our chance is coming," Miso said excitedly, "A chance to be baron. Maybe even viscount!"

Eltek felt his blood pressure increasing. "Who told you this?"

"Jacques Medde, he brought the king's confidential order!"

Eltek took two steps back, his heart sinking. Jacques Medde was the eldest son of the Elk Family. Never mind the involvement with Timothy. Everyone knew that Timothy wanted to eradicate Roland Wimbledon.

His worst nightmare had occurred and now it was even more serious than he had anticipated.

"What did you hear?"

"Lord Medde summoned the nobility of the Western Region into his castle and opened his Majesty's holograph. It said that if someone conquers Longsong Stronghold, the king will promote his title and expand his domain!" It seemed that Miso was still immersed in the grand scene. "Lady Miller from the Wild Rose Family, Lord Cavan from the Maple Family and Lord Remy Noah from the Wolf Family all

pressed their fingerprints and pledged an oath of allegiance, without hesitation. The rest of the nobles and knights are determined to follow the four families and remove the Honeysuckle Family."

It was ridiculous. How could the four families make such a decision based on a piece of paper? The knight lamented inwardly. Had you forgotten how they had treated King Wimbledon III when Duke Ryan was guarding the Western Region? When had they become so loyal?

The only answer was that this was a complete fraud to convince the lower nobles to become pioneers in the movement. The plan would commence in a few months and the four families might agree on the benefits after finding success.

Eltek opened his mouth but didn't share his thoughts. This was Miso Eltek, not his eldest son Ferlin, and such dissuasion wouldn't convince him.

"Where are you going in this armor?" the old knight asked after short silence.

"To win honor and status." Miso wore a cuirass made of stainless steel. "Morning Light, the top knight in the Western Region, only won honor for himself. While I fight for my whole family. Father, when this is finished, you'll know that I'm as worthy of respect as my brother."

"If Timothy vanquishes Prince Roland, your words may come to pass. However, the army of the new king is still far away while Prince Roland's army is very near," the old knight thought.

"Don't you remember how Duke Ryan collapsed?" Eltek said in a low voice.

"Things are different this time. The king has shipped a number of snow powder weapons, the same ones used by Prince Roland. He'll provide better ones to Medde. Without the possession of superior weapons, can Roland seize Longsong Stronghold again?" Miso clipped his sword to his waist and nodded to his father. "The battle is coming soon. Please wait here for good news."

Looking at his back, Eltek threw his crutch to the ground.

"My lord, why didn't you stop him?" the steward came up to hold the trembling Knight.

"It would be easy to stop him, but the family would suffer a great calamity," he nodded slowly. A noble attending the 'rebellion' meeting hadn't shown up at the agreed place. What did this mean for the four families? The crime of escape or defection could lead the whole Eltek Family to death.

"Look on the bright side, if the four families win," the steward comforted. "After all, the months of the demons are long and it'll take two or even three months for the snow to melt. When the army of Prince Roland arrives, the king's army may have already besieged the Western Region."

If it were the past, he would view it in the same way. However, after having visited Border Town once, the knight had a totally different view of Prince Roland. Not to mention his eldest son Ferlin Eltek and his family's benefactor Lady Agatha were all living in Border Town.

He turned to his steward and told him in a stern voice, "Go to Border Town immediately and deliver this news to His Highness. If the city gate has closed, go to the docks in the outskirts and find some ferrymen or fishermen. It doesn't matter how you do it, just do it quickly!"

Chapter 444: The Intelligence

Before the housekeeper left the Eltek territory, Roland received a letter from the Second Army of Stronghold delivered by a bird.

An hour later, Petrov's call for help also reached the town's castle.

Since the carrier pigeon could only carry limited information, Roland had to combine the two messages and discovered a piece of astonishing news.

The four families of the Western Region had rebelled!

"Who on earth gave them the confidence to plot treason under my nose?"

Roland immediately summoned Carter and Iron Axe and showed them the notes.

"Your Highness, is this..."

"A message from Stronghold," Roland said angrily. The winter was drawing to an end, and the new year was in three days. Not only were there various matters concerning the city construction, but also the installation of the equipment for the Three Supplies Project required his instruction. "Those nobles chose to trouble me at the wrong time; they must be looking forward to dying!"

According to the secret letter, the inner city nobles led a bunch of squires to attack the city guards. By the time the sentries on the city wall realized something was wrong, the switch for the northern drawbridge had fallen into the control of the enemies. The sentries could do nothing but light the beacon fire and rely on the city wall to hold their positions.

When the other members of the Second Army saw the beacon signal, they followed the emergency response protocol by dividing the camp's ten teams of about 50 soldiers in total into two platoons. One platoon charged toward the north gate, while the other went to the Stronghold castle. Petrov's secret letter was sent after the second platoon confronted the enemies at the castle and realized they were fighting the local nobilities.

"Petrov Hull mentioned that the attackers sieging the castle were carrying the four families' banners, which means this rebellion was planned," Carter frowned after reading the notes. "Since the four families are acting together, there must be a leader among them."

Indeed, the four families, or five families including those under Duke Ryan, were great nobles on equal footing. If they were to set aside their prejudices and cooperate, it was most likely because a bigger force was behind them. Otherwise, with the Earls looking down upon each other, it would take over a decade for them to decide on a leader.

At the moment, there were only one or two people who would be interested in meddling with the Western Region.

"Do you mean... Timothy in the King's City?" Iron Axe looked at the Chief Knight. As a member of the Ironsand people of the Mojin Clan, he was far less sensitive to the political situation of the Kingdom of Graycastle than Carter was.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it's the church," Roland twitched his mouth and said. "Judging from their actions at Fallen Dragon Ridge, it's only a matter of time before they attack the Western Region."

"The problem is, in the second letter, Petrov mentioned the enemies might have firearms." Carter frowned. "Does it mean they have learned the formula for gunpowder?"

"Snow powder isn't unknown to the church and Timothy, but they have a long way to go before they can use it smoothly." The prince knocked on the table lightly. "What puzzles me is that with Border Town as the nearest town to Stronghold, the help they get must be from somewhere further. So even with the support of an unknown force, how did they gain enough confidence to confront the First Army?"

"Probably because we're in the Months of the Demons," Iron Axe replied after contemplating for a while. "Although last time Your Highness defeated the Duke's knights using thunder power, our troops didn't show extraordinary skills in battle. Now with the snow blocking the roads and demonic beasts attacking the borders, it seems like perfect timing for a successful rebellion, and it'll be at least two months before you have the resources to attack Longsong Stronghold."

"And I'll be hindered by the lofty city walls and powerful flintlocks?"

"Yes," Iron Axe couldn't help but grin. "They have all the weapons that you have, plus the insurmountable city wall and reinforcement of an unknown force, so they have a very good chance of beating you at the foot of the city wall. That's probably what they thought."

"Yet they're fully unaware of the power of Border Town." Roland stood up. "Iron Axe!"

"At your command, Your Highness!" Iron Axe instantly stood at attention.

"The First Army must immediately prepare for an expedition. We'll set off tomorrow morning," Roland said decisively. "Choose 500 soldiers. Carry six field artilleries. You are in charge of making the specific arrangements."

"Yes, Sir!" Iron Axe saluted.

The scale of the First Army had quadrupled its original 500 soldiers to 2,200. Revolving rifles were upgraded, and their firepower was drastically increased. Besides, the efficiency of the First Army's executing instructions was greatly enhanced due to the improvement of the soldiers' educational level. Upon command, personnel would deploy ammunition and rations based on the number of soldiers on the operation and the number of days. The logistics work for 500 people could be done in almost one day. Compared with the knights or the mercenaries, who needed weeks to prepare, Roland's army was functioning at an incredible speed.

The army headed towards the inner city of Stronghold on 11 paddle steamers. After entering mass production, the production of a boat with a reinforced concrete hull took only five days, which was even a deliberately lowered speed, because its number was limited by the available crew and steam engines.

"Carter!"

"At your command, Your Highness," the Chief Knight said and raised his head high.

"You stay in Border Town."

The corners of the knight's mouth instantly fell down. "Wha-what? No. Your Highness. How could you leave me behind again?"

"We're still in the Months of the Demons. Demonic beasts pose a greater threat than the nobility," Roland said unwaveringly. "Guard the town well."

After the two of them retreated, Roland sighed. "This time the witches need to go with me."

"I'll follow you, no matter where you go," Nightingale said with a smile.

Considering their opponent could be the church, Roland knew that only the witches could effectively counter the Pure Witches' attacks without God's Stones of Retaliation. After debating his options, Roland decided on the witches who would accompany him: Lightning, Maggie, Sylvie, Nana, Lily, and Nightingale. "If I add the three combat witches from Sleeping Island to the list, it'll be very hard for the Pure Witches to defeat us."

Roland stood at the window and looked at the snowy mountains and plains.

"If I view the Impassable Mountain Range as the city wall of Stronghold, then the Barbarian Land in the north is also the domain of the four families, a territory beyond the reach of my power. Elk, Wild Rose, Maple Leaf, and Wolf families... have operated separately on their own lands for over a decade, forming their unique laws and customs, so even Ryan, the overlord of the Western Region, seldom interfered with their businesses," mused Roland. The prince had intended to slowly divide and annex these aristocratic territories after building the new city, but the rebellion gave him an early opportunity—one to swallow the vast land and population of Stronghold in one gulp.

He didn't intend to let go of the nobles this time.

Chapter 445: Attacks

Cacusim arrived at the dock as the first rays of sunlight started to peep through the clouds.

Unlike the usual, the dock was packed with silent soldiers. They stood erect, with their sacks and long-barrelled guns on their backs, looking like a thick forest in a storm. Although the dock was crowded, everyone was moving in an organized manner. Watching the soldiers board the paddle steamer one by one, Cacusim was filled with an indescribable sense of power and strength.

He swallowed hard while thinking,

These are the soldiers trained by His Highness.

"How incredible!" The old man had traveled from Seawindshire to the Port of Clearwater as a youth. This distance was over half the Kingdom of Graycastle, and he had also led the commercial fleet to the Fjords and nearby islands. So, he had personally witnessed the arrogant demeanor of the armored knights, as well as the fierce demeanor of the barbarians who killed beasts bare-handed. To him, these soldiers were undeniable fighters that could exercise extreme power. However, he had not expected to feel that power once again, but while standing with the group of ordinary people he could feel it and it was stronger than ever.

"No doubt these are just ordinary people..." He thought. It had been about four months since Cacusim arrived at Border Town, and each day he understood the town a little better. He knew that the First Army consisted mostly of locals and that many of them were miners, hunters, furnace laborers, and masons before they joined the army. Because of this, they had never received any professional combat training.

Nevertheless, in just a few months, these people had become as brave and disciplined as any knight. "What magic did his Highness use on them?"

"Are you... really going?" Cacusim heard Wade whisper from behind him. He could tell from his lowered voice, that he too was silenced by the presence of the army.

"Why did I apply for the captain position if I wasn't going?" Cacusim answered while taking a deep breath.

"But they are off to fight." Wade continued.

"They all offer their services to His Highness." The old man corrected. Without turning his head he added, "And so do I."

Following the momentary silence, Wade then implored, "Stay alive."

Cacusim waved in response.

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Cacusim boarded the sixth paddle steamer as it arrived with the swirling snow. According to the tradition, a captain can name their own ship, and even though this boat belonged to His Highness, he was still allowed to decide its name.

Yet, he still had not made up his mind.

This was the second time he had assumed the position of captain since his retirement ten years ago. So, he wished to come up with a name dedicated to his memory.

"Captain, there you are!" As soon as Cacusim stepped into the cabin at the helm, the first mate came up to greet him. "We are now preheating the boiler, and I promise it will soon be ready to go"

The young man was called Pike and he was from the Southern Territory. He had a few years experience fishing on the sea. If he was a part of another fleet, he wouldn't even pass as a sailor but on this boat, everyone was a newbie.

"Everyone's here?"

"All are on board. You were the last one," Pike replied with a wink.

"If you don't know how to respect your captain, I'll be happy to teach you through a full day of deck cleaning."

"Yes, captain." The young man shouted, erecting himself immediately, "Of course I do!"

"That's better," Cacusim commented. While stroking his beard he gave Pike orders. "Tell the boiler house to stoke up the fire, but not to shut the damn steam valve. I don't want to rear-end the boat in front of us!"

"Yes, gotcha." Without finishing the sentence, Pike had slipped back into his previous playful manner. He quickly winked at the old man and dashed out of the cabin.

"That rascal," Cacusim mumbled while shaking his head smiling. He was more at ease after the interaction, as if he had slipped back to the good days of when he roamed the sea. The old man went back to the wheel, where he gently stroked its wooden handle. Slowly he began to remember the operating procedures for a paddle steamer.

The stone boat invented by His Highness was very different from the sailboat. It didn't have a mast or a cabin below deck, instead, it had two chambers. The first chamber is located at the helm and is called the wheelhouse. This room has two large windows from which the captain can see the route and navigate clearly. The second chamber is found in the middle and it contains the boiler that powers the boat.

Behind the wheelhouse, there was a bare deck and this space was often filled by miners during training. During this time of training, they would often travel west along the Redwater River to drop the miners off at the edge of the Misty Forest, where they could find coal. Coal lasted longer than wood and was the preferred fuel for Seawindshire. Now, there was a makeshift shed constructed from cloth, apparently set up in preparation for the boarded soldiers.

Although Cacusim was not familiar with the stone boat, he soon realized it was not hard to operate and even simpler than a sailboat in many ways. First of all, this boat didn't require wind and sails for direction and power. Overall it took less man power to run. Furthermore, it would not be hard to teach a villager how to run a stove, whereas it would take at least six months for them to master sailing. The stone boat could run by itself for a long time as long as the engine was on and the steam valve was shut.

Just then, the tranquility of Border Town's early morning was broken by a dull steam whistle from the front of the line.

The first boat was sailing off.

"Captain, the water in the boiler is ready!" reported Pike who scurried back to the wheel house.

"Ring the bell to tell Bigpad and Grizzly that it is time to shut the valve and speed up. It's time to move." Cacusim solemnly gave the instructions.

"Yes, sir. Advance!" Pike pulled on the long iron string attached to the wall, which would ring the bell in the boiler house and deliver the captain's command.

In response, the boat shook violently, and the wooden tires on either side started to move slowly.

Cacusim held tight to the wheel at the helm and looked straight ahead. When Vader asked him why he wanted to fight, he actually did not tell him the truth. Saying it was to serve His Highness was only a small part of the reason.

The truth was he simply enjoyed being a "captain".

It didn't matter if it was a sailboat or a paddle steamer, Cacusim truly loved the feel of the wheel in his hands as he navigated the bow through the thrusting waves.

This is the life he really wants.

"Full sail... No, continue to shovel coal!" The old man turned to face starboard while hollering. "Hold on guys! We're setting out!"

"If you ferry me to Border Town the Eltkes will pay you well. How about five... no, ten gold royals?" The steward asked while blocking the troubled boatman's cabin door. The steward had placed his left foot in the crack of the door to prevent the boatman from closing it in his face and effectively shutting him out.

"Y... Your Excellency, I'm happy to be at your service, but I just can't." The boatman stammered, "L... Look, there isn't even a shed above my boat to protect you from the snow. It wouldn't be a problem to ferry you across the river, but to Border Town... that would take several days! "Just consider this freezing weather. Where would we sleep?" the boatman implored. "We would become frozen like popsicles in just one night on the boat, wouldn't we?"

"Are there any other boatmen nearby who can ferry me to Border Town?" the steward persisted.

"No, not a one." the boatman denied while waving his hand. "We only have small boats. Y... You should go to Stronghold to find a boat you can spend the night on."

If I could have entered Longsong Stronghold, why did I come here looking for a boatman that fished and ferried for a living? the steward thought to himself as the boatman shut the door.

The steward kicked at the snow. Ever since the four families started to attack Stronghold, all the city gates had been closed. He spent a long time taking this detour and now found that all of his efforts were in vain.

It will be getting dark soon. How am I going to complete my Lord's task?

The steward sullenly looked at the Redwater River, but he was soon stunned.

Good Heavens, what's that?

He rubbed his eyes in disbelief, making sure what he was seeing was not an illusion. A huge fleet was coming down the river and the boats were unlike any he had seen before. Through the dense misty snow, the vessels roared and whistled towards him at full speed. There was not any sail on the gray boats and yet they were still proceeding against the wind, their bows cutting the water and cleaving through the waves.

On the first boat, he could see a flag flapping in the wind with the embroidered emblem of a tower and a gun. The steward held his breath in realization, "This is the fleet of Prince Roland Wimbledon!"

Chapter 446: Here Comes the Giant Beast

Longsong Stronghold was bisected by a branch of the Redwater River; to the West laid the residential area and to the East laid vast farming lands.

Unlike the other big cities that were set in the suburbs of farmlands, the towering city wall of the Stronghold encircled both the residential area and a portion of the farmlands. It was built to defend against human beings, and not demonic beasts. However, even if the city was under siege, Stronghold would still flourish and be able to supply its people.

As such, the outer wall of Longsong Stronghold was split where the river divided the two sections of the city. Between the divide in the walls hung several massive chains which were the width of a man's arm. If an enemy decided to attack from the river, the hemp cords holding the heavy chains would be cut and send them crashing into the water to stop the enemy below.

Fortunately, the inner land of the Western Region had rarely been attacked by any fleets. So, these cables had almost never come into use, and would not this time either. Out on the water, Roland's fleet pushed through the storm. Around twilight, they were able to see the silhouette of the fortress in the distance. Strands of the beacon's fire could be seen flashing above the city, slashing through the inkiness of the ever gradually darkening sky.

"The enemies have already reached the lord's castle and there are some militias fighting with the guards at the north gate of the city wall. It looks like they can't hold up any longer." Lightning, who had carefully investigated the situation in the city, continued giving her detailed report to the prince, "There are around 200 people attacking the castle. The first round of attacks failed. The enemies have weapons similar to our flintlocks, but they look completely different."

"Is Petrov alright?" Roland inquired, showing concern. Roland currently cared most about the safety of his agent.

"He's fine, other than being a little frightened. But... "

"But what?"

"His family was killed," Lightning answered, her mouth twitching. "His Excellency Petrov warned his father and asked him to get to the castle. However, his other family members were taken as hostages, including the Countess. They were being held by the four families in exchange for surrender and subsequently they were executed one by one." The little girl paused for a moment before continuing, "I took an opportunity to fly into the castle to tell him that you would be coming soon and he had only one request."

Roland nodded and asked, "What is it?"

"Blood for blood."

There was an unwritten rule among nobles where people with bestowed titles were exempt from being murdered in times of battle. In the case of the family of Earl Honeysuckle, most of his loved ones had been honored with a knighthood. However, the four families had betrayed that rule. Not only did they hate the Honeysuckle Family because of the benefits of Roldan's support but they were also being driven by a new political power.

In light of this, Roland was almost certain the power behind them was the new king, Timothy Wimbledon. He now realized there was no room for mercy and that he needed to crush them. Supporting the king and executing rebels was very different from helping the church slaughter nobles. The prince looked towards Stronghold and coldly gave the order, "Go straight into the city and take the dock!"

Ayt heard the sound of footsteps below the city wall.

He raised the flintlock numbly, aiming it at the dark hole below. This was the only path to climb up the city wall from within. There had been several rounds of attacks since the enemies captured the city gate, but they were still not able to seize the northern part of the city wall.

The battle started yesterday at noon and had yet to cease. He hadn't expected to be standing in the cold, brisk wind for so long. After watching his supporting comrades fall one by one into pools of blood, all he could focus on was fighting.

"Are they coming again?" Seeing a long-barrelled gun pop up next to him, Ayt tilted his head to the side and found that it was his unit leader, Bronzehill.

"I could hear them," Ayt replied feebly, "but I have no idea how many there are in the darkness."

"They don't know how many of us are left either," Bronzehill comforted him.

"So... how many are left?"

Bronzehill answered after a moment's hesitation, "Only five. Raven just took his last breath."

"And we probably won't see the sun tomorrow," Ayt said bitterly. After the initial feelings of fear and panic, he then became numb. It was this experience that helped him finally understand what his instructor had meant when he said, "Only a real battle will quickly make you a man." However, this did not make the current situation any better. Out of the three units, there were only five people left. Even if the enemies didn't make it up the wall, they would likely die from starvation or exposure to cold. "Can we still surrender?"

"Surrender?" Bronzehill snorted. "Didn't you hear what they were yelling? 'Kill the rebels!' There's nothing but death ahead. We'd better take down as many as possible while we can."

Ayt knew the unit leader was right. Many captured soldiers from the Second Army were beheaded. They were not nobles, and nobody would pay a ransom. But... he just hated the idea of dying up here.

The instructor had told them about how happy life in Border Town was and promised that once the Months of the Demons had passed, soldiers who did well in the Second Army would be transferred to the First Army and receive free housing there. There was plenty of food in Border Town, as well as running water and a heating system that could warm up a whole room without ignition...

He wanted to survive and see the amazing things that his instructor had described.

"Here they come!" Bronzehill suddenly shouted while pulling the trigger. In the muzzle flash, Ayt could see the figure of the enemy revealed in the darkness. Six or seven people were creeping slowly up along the wall, holding up their shields. He even caught a glimpse of the terror in their eyes.

The unit leader missed his target, fortunately, he was already pointing the gun in the right direction.

He aimed at the fleeting figure and fired again.

There was the muffled sound of a bullet hitting a wooden shield, and then a shriek, followed by the sound of a heavy object rolling down the stairs. Realizing that they had been exposed, the rest of the enemies rushed to the opening recklessly.

Bronzehill was struggling to reload his gun, but his frozen hands hindered the process, slowing him greatly. Ayt jumped back from the open pit and groped frantically for his gunpowder sack. His heart sank when he found it empty and he realized that he had already used it all.

According to his training, now was the time to use the bayonets.

He pulled out the bayonet and struggled to attach the knife to the front of his gun. Clenching his teeth in frustration, he finally got it to attach and lifted it just in time as the enemy breached the hole and rushed at him.

Instantly firing, Bronzehill took the first man down, but there was a second close on his heels and this one managed to slide a sword into Bronzehill's chest.

Ayt was stunned and his training took over. He mechanically thrust his bayonet in futility, only striking the enemy's shield. The enemy easily kicked him to the ground, disarming him completely.

Am I really going to die here?

Looking up at the night sky in despair, he noticed a dark figure above him.

He normally wouldn't notice something so dark against the inky sky that night, but the shadow was close and rapidly getting closer still. It plummeted towards him like a collapsed curtain made of night.

Ayt's eyes bulged as the shadow became more defined and he realized it was a giant beast!

This was a beast only found in nightmares. Its huge crimson mouth was gaping, head larger than a bull's, and giant wings that almost covered the entire length of the city wall.

The giant beast descended right in front of Ayt, crushing the enemies who just surfaced from the opening.

"Ow... Ow...!"

It released a thunderous growl that was loud enough to wake the dead!

Chapter 447: The Reaper

Ayt was paralyzed with fright. He helplessly stared at the beast, who now also turned to look at him. He could clearly see mucus dripping from its beige fangs.

"Relax. I'm not going to eat you." The beast suddenly spoke in human language with a muddy voice, which almost horrified him enough to shriek.

He was astounded again when seeing a girl jump off the beast's back. She walked towards Bronzehill, turned him over and checked him out. She said to the beast, "He's alive. Maggie, send him to Nana."

"Ow!" The beast seemed to understand what she said. It grabbed Bronzehill with its claws and flew up again. The flapping of its wings stirred up the air, producing strong winds, which made Ayt unable to open his eyes. When the wind and snow finally stopped, he squinted at the city wall but saw nothing at all—as if everything that had happened was just a dream.

"No, it's not a dream... That girl is still here!" he thought.

He vaguely saw the girl's figure in the darkness. There was apparently no light around, but her pupils were emitting weird golden lights, like stars in the night.

"You... you're..."

"I came to help you." The girl's reply left him dumbfounded.

"Wh-what?" Ayt felt this was more implausible than a dream. "You're here to help me?"

"Yes. His Highness Roland sent me here." She squatted down, dug out a long sword from the flattened corpses and swung it, completely disregarding the fact that the sword was covered with flesh and blood.

Ayt was overcome by a feeling of sickness. He retched twice but vomited nothing except bile. Just then, outside the city wall, a battle cry resounded again. The beast had just terrified the enemies—but now that they saw it had left, and they had no idea what had happened up there on top of the city wall, they began to stir again.

"By 'His Highness'... you mean the prince of Border Town?" He wiped his mouth and gasped.

"Is there another Roland besides him?" the black-haired girl asked, as she started to dig another weapon from a corpse. Ayt immediately turned his head away from her.

"But it takes at least three days to get here from Border Town... How did His Highness know about the noble's rebellion so quickly?" Ayt swallowed hard and continued, "and the beast just now..."

"It's not a beast, but a witch that came here to save you." Her voice turned cold. "I don't have time to answer all your questions. Just keep quiet."

As there was no flintlock blocking them this time, the enemies easily came up on top of the city wall. When torches lit the place up again, they were surprised to find only a girl standing in front of them.

Malicious laughter soon broke the silence.

Ayt immediately knew what they meant by the laughter.

"Stay alert. Don't give them any chance to play any dirty tricks on us."

"Don't worry, my lord. We'll take care of it, but later..."

"When I'm done, I'll leave her to you."

"Hey... fine with me."

"Qui-quickly come back here to me!" Ayt struggled to stand up, but what happened next made him stare in amazement.

A silver light chopped down and the laughter died abruptly.

The leader of the enemies was chopped into two pieces by the long sword. His shield and armor could not stop it at all. In fact, he didn't even see the girl strike.

When the two pieces of his body fell down with blood spurting out from the wounds, everyone's smile froze on their face.

However, this was just the beginning.

The black-haired girl took one step forward and swept her sword. Before Ayt could clearly see her movements, he heard the sound of flesh scraping and bones breakings.

The three men had no time to react as they were ripped open in their stomachs.

Their intestines fell out mixed with blood and spilled all over the ground.

"You..." Ayt opened his mouth a little but didn't know what to say.

The girl looked back at him and said, "Go find your surviving battle companions and gather on top of the wall. Someone will come to fetch you later." With these words, she jumped directly off the city wall.

"The city wall here was thirty feet tall!" He endured all the pains in his body, fumbled to climb close to the edge of the wall and looked down. He saw the crowd down there turning into a meat grinder. The girl killed wherever she went. She freely dashed among the crowd, with her weapon moving around smoothly in her hand. She easily cut down the entire enemy who dared to stand in front of her, like the reaping of wheat.

In less than a quarter of an hour, the enemy collapsed.

They'd never seen such a fierce opponent, who was faster than a snow wolf and stronger than a grizzly bear. Facing her sword, nobody could react, dodge, or fight. The noblemen hurriedly retreated and the siege was extinguished, merely by one person.

She followed the escaping crowd all the way, leaving a trail of blood behind her. At this sight, Ayt dropped to the ground and cold sweat soaked his spine.

That's a witch?

Well. whatever... I survived!

The Stronghold castle was tightly besieged by the four families' armies. A dozen bonfires around the castle brightly lit the place up.

After a day and night of fighting, the second floor of the castle had already been conquered. The Honeysuckles now shrunk back to the very top of it and must be suffering from both hunger and fear up there.

Jacques Medde looked at this towering lord's castle and began to feel excited.

After his father died, he traveled all the way back to the territory from the King's City just to inherit the Earl's title, but now he had an even better chance.

Timothy mentioned in the secret letter that if he could take hold of Longsong Stronghold for the King's City, the king's army would come here when the snow melted to conquer the rebel king, Roland Wimbleton. Once the rebel king was eliminated, Timothy would probably let him govern the Western Region.

Together with the territory of Earl Honeysuckle, Jacques would have both the land and title of a duke.

Duke Medde. What a wonderful name!

This castle would also become my residence.

"My lord, the sixth platoon has come back down," a knight came and reported, "and they said they heard a lot less flintlock sounds from the enemy. Is it time to send iron armor platoons up there?"

Jacques Medde nodded and said, "Go and arrange it."

Iron armor platoons were specially developed to fight against flintlocks. During the fighting, three or four soldiers formed a team—two of them held shields made of wood with several layers of iron coating, which could cover them all up, and had holes for aiming and firing. In order to make more shields like this, he made the tough decision to tear down a dozen knight's armors. Of course, those thick iron-coated shields had a weakness, too. As it was hard to carry and the whole team had to move slowly, they would easily become targets for their enemies.

"Luckily, the Honeysuckles can't hold out any longer." Jacques sneered silently. "They reacted unexpectedly quickly and withdrew part of their soldiers and knights back into the castle before the four families' armies arrived, and they had just only nearly a hundred men. It's impossible for them to fight a long, hard battle.

It'll probably take several days before Prince Roland receives the news.

If I send Petrov's head as a gift to Roland Wimbleton, how will he look like?

Chapter 448: A Hail of Bullets

"My lord, the dock area in the west city seems strange," reported a guard who was in charge of sealing off the street. "I've heard strange noises coming from there and sent two platoons to investigate but none of them came back."

"What?" Jacques Medde said with a frown, "You must have misheard it."

"No, it's clear, like the sounds of heavy, rapid breathing. Wheeze, wheeze..." the guard said, imitating the sounds.

"Maybe it's the snoring sounds of a tramp?"

"My lord, in this weather, anyone sleeping outside will be frozen to death," the guard insisted, "and nobody can snore that loudly. It must be a giant almost as tall as the city wall if they're really snoring sounds."

The Earl stared at him for a good long while and then turned away, shouting, "Knight Dowcan!"

"My lord, what can I do for you?" a knight wearing the badge of the Maple Family on his chest responded, striding toward the Earl.

"Summon your platoon and follow my guard to investigate the dock in the city." Jacques patted the knight's shoulder and added, "Inform me at once if you've any news."

"Eh... Could you send someone else there?" the young knight said, hesitating. "My father urged me to enter the castle together with you."

"It won't take you long to go to the dock, but I can assure you here it'll take a lot longer," the Earl said with a smile, "and if the Honeysuckle Family surrenders, I'll wait for you here."

"Ah... fine."

After the knight left with his guard, Jacques' facial expression turned stone-cold. "Keep dreaming! You think you can receive the same credit by sending a son here to enter the castle with me? His Majesty mentioned only me in the secret letter!"

Before long, he heard the distant sound of gunfire coming from the west.

Jacques was instantly on the alert. "What's that? The eldest son of the Maple Family has no flintlock."

When he was planning to send some of his knights there to check the situation, the guard who had reported to him earlier stumbled back into the battalion. "My, my lord... things have gone wrong!"

"What went wrong?"

"The rebel king... he came here!" The guard said with his eyes widely opened, "Thousands of enemies are heading for the castle!"

"You meant Roland Wimbledon's army?" Jacques raised his hand and slapped the guard on the face. "Thousands of them? If you dare to talk nonsense, I'll hang you up on the city gate!"

"My lord, they carry the flags of the Kingdom of Graycastle." The guard did not dare to dodge. He got down on one knee and continued, "I wanted the squire of Knight Dowcan to catch one or two enemies to get further information, but the moment they charged towards them, they were, were..."

"What happened to them?" the Earl pressed.

"They were shot down by intense gunfire." The Earl could tell from the guard's face that he seemed to have witnessed very terrifying scenes. "At that time, it looked like numerous fires popped out all of a

sudden in the darkness and the cracking sounds never stopped. Twenty people only charged forward for less than 100 steps before they were all shot down and so did the horses!" The guard swallowed and went on, "My lord, I've never seen such an intense gunfire. If there weren't more than a thousand enemies, how could they eliminate the knight's platoon in just a blink?"

"Where is the eldest son of the Maple Family?"

"He's... run away."

The Earl sank, weak-kneed, into his chair and was completely confused. "How is it possible? The four families started to act from yesterday at noon and Prince Roland came to support Longsong Stronghold tonight. If we count the messaging time, does this mean he needs only one day to come here from his town? Even when sailing smoothly with the wind the entire time, they can't reach here that fast, let alone while carrying a thousand people. To transport that many people, he needs at least a huge fleet, but according to the intelligence, Border Town has no ship in the winter!"

How could things turn out like this?

"No, I have to be calm in such an emergency." Jacques Medde wiped the sweat from his forehead and thought that maybe the guard did talk nonsense. Without torches, he could not see clearly how many enemies were there on the dock in the darkness when he was obviously shocked by their firing flintlocks. "Flintlocks may seem powerful. However, their shooting range was merely about 40 steps and their reloading speed and hit rate were extremely low. Assuming that every enemy is equipped with this kind of weapon, they won't be unbeatable for at most two dozen soldiers who can march abreast in the street leading to the castle. If I inform the Wild Rose and the Wolf Family now and gather all the knights, mercenary fighters and guards to attack them after their first round of firing, maybe we could defeat them.

Unlike battles in fields, the poor efficiency in flintlock reloading is a fatal shortcoming in street fights.

"Damn it." Jacques slapped on an arm of his chair and said to the head of his guards. "Go to invite Earl Wild Rose and the Viscount of the Wolf Family to come here and order all the men with flintlocks to block the entrance of the castle. Go!"

Compared with crossbowmen, it's much faster to train flintlock soldiers. Let them block the enemies first. Their lives aren't worth much. If necessary, knights can tread on them.

To his great surprise, the head of his guards came back and reported, "They've already left the battalion with their men."

To besiege Petrov, the four families respectively held the four sides of the castle. Jacques did not expect that the other families received the news earlier than him.

Now, the sounds of gunfire were nearing the castle. As the guard had described, they were the deep rumble of dense drums, loud and clear across the growing mounds of snow.

"These bastards!" Jacques' heart froze. He looked at the castle for the last time. He had no choice but to order a retreat. This time, only he and his guards had the chance to flee. His men in the castle were left behind.

Outside the castle, the Earl was shocked by the scene.

The enemies were everywhere, and any knight who tried to break through the blockade would be shot down remorselessly. Their weapons were nothing like the flintlocks sent by Timothy. They could fire continuously and seemed to require no reloading. It was chaotic. Members of the other three families were trapped, with the exception of Knight Dowcan, who had been the first to flee.

"My lord, what should we do?"

"Send for the iron armor platoons!" he cried out. "We'll forge behind them and we'll be covered by their iron shields."

After all the troubles, three iron armor platoons finally gathered and slowly moved forward holding their shields. The other knights found it and followed them, too. They knew that this might be their last chance to break through.

Unfortunately, Jacques Medde made a mistake. When they were only 100 steps from their enemies, the latter's weapons exploded with dazzling bursts of fire. The iron shields made to block lead balls were instantly riddled with bullets. The men in the front holding the shields were killed. Splashing metal debris shot through bodies, stirring up a thick fog of blood behind the shields.

Before the Earl could call out the order of charge, he was cut down in a volley of fire.

Chapter 449: The Course of War

...

When Roland walked into the messy castle, Petrov and Earl Hull were kneeling down on one knee in the center of the hall, awaiting his arrival.

All the bodies on the floor had been removed, but the smell of the blood lingered. The pieces of broken furnishings and weapons could be seen everywhere; he could almost imagine the killing-scenes between the two parties in the battle for the castle.

"Rise." Roland walked towards Petrov, bending over to hold his shoulders.

"Yes," Petrov said in a choked voice, "Your Highness, you are finally here."

"You did a good job," Roland said with a heavy voice, "the four big families will pay a heavy price for this, and the murderers shall be brought to justice."

"I didn't guard Longsong Stronghold well..."

"You did your best. It's not your fault." Roland sighed. Petrov was not a ruler of war. This was evident from the seizure of the previous city by the light cavalry and the rebellion of the nobilities this time. He was good at managing the territory, proficient in trading, and skilled in capturing opportunities, but he was not a Machiavellian. He was definitely not an expert at fighting and plotting. If it wasn't for the Second Army that was stationed in the castle in accordance with the emergency measure, he wouldn't have been able to hold more than two days.

However, that did not mean Petrov Hull was not a good manager. If he was not good at war, he should be assigned to a territory without any war. Roland preferred operators with a business mind to those with fighting talents.

"I believe there must have been an inducement for this riot," Roland looked at everyone around him. "This is a downright conspiracy. The enemy seeks to subvert the order of Western Region in order to obtain benefits that don't belong to them."

The scene quieted down. Everyone, including both the armed soldiers of the First Army and the wounded knights behind Petrov, had their gazes on His Highness.

"They have committed a felony for this, murdering the nobility and killing the civilians. After the war, we'll see that many people have lost their families, and many houses will have been looted. But their conspiracy didn't succeed in the end. It was your unyielding resistance that prevented Stronghold from falling into a greater tragedy. Your performance was heroic and your willpower was laudable!"

The knights slightly lifted their chests without realizing it.

"However, the war isn't over yet. These rebels are fleeing in panic, and it's time for us to seek our revenge! I swear no matter where the enemies are hiding, they won't escape the coming trial, be it in the territories of the four families... or King's City!" Roland paused and said categorically, "The culprits who caused the rebellion are bound to be punished too! The blood you shed... will not be in vain!"

"Long live, Your Highness!" Petrov and Earl Hull knelt down once again.

"Long live, Your Highness!" The surviving knights and soldiers of the Second Army also began to kneel.

Soon, everyone was kneeling on one knee with their upper body upright, right hand on the chest, shouting the slogan in unison.

"Long live, Your Highness!"

...

After comforting the people at the scene, Roland summoned Petrov, Van'er, Brian, and Iron Axe into the study on the third floor of the castle, which was the only place that had not been invaded. All the furnishings were basically intact. Roland knew that he would probably have to spend the next few days there.

The first thing he had to do was to understand the situation regarding the battlefield within the city. He looked at Iron Axe, and the latter reported immediately, "The witches have seized back the northern gate and the eastern gate which was once occupied by the four families. The First Army is eliminating the rebels within the city under Miss Sylvie's guidance. The order of the city should be restored by tomorrow morning."

"What about the casualties?"

"A total of six people were injured so far, and all of them are from the rifle battalion, but they've been treated and cured by Miss Nana."

"What about the Second Army? Has it been counted?"

"Not yet... But according to the latest news, there are more casualties." Brian hesitated. "Both of the platoons sent to support the city wall have been defeated, and they haven't been gathered so far. Out of the 50 soldiers who were sent to defend the castle, 11 were killed, and almost none of the soldiers patrolling on the city wall survived."

Roland nodded. The militancy of this era was not as high, enabling the 100 people to persist for two days. The defensive party tended to have the bigger advantages, especially when the enemy lacked effective assault weapons. If the other party wasn't using firearms, the Lord's castle could not be broken through with only the flesh and blood of the mercenary and guards. This was fully taken into account during the design of this building to prevent enemy attack.

At this thought, he instructed Iron Axe, "Show me some of the rebels' firearms."

Roland was really concerned about the new hot weapons of this era. Although this day was expected to come sooner or later since the birth of the snow powder, the development speed of Timothy really surprised him.

Iron Axe carried out the order quickly. Only several minutes later, a few tube-like weapons of different lengths and shapes were carried into the study by soldiers.

After seeing the actual objects, Roland quickly understood why the enemies could build the weapons in a fairly short time.

These long tubes could not be called flintlock in the sense that they had no trigger and percussion device, and they were nothing more than metal tubes with a hole at each end. It was deeper at one end for loading gunpowder and bullets and had a needle-like hole at the end for ignition. The other end was shallower and could be used as the handle after inserting a bamboo stick or a wooden pole.

It was very similar to the prototype of the firearm, structure-wise.

The loading process of this primitive firearm was the same as that of the flintlock, but the launch was more troublesome. It required a gunman to hold the wooden pole under his armpit and ignite the gunpowder with the hand on the other side. Due to the limitation caused by the holding position, it was impossible to aim accurately and could only be roughly pointed straight ahead while shooting.

But it was still undoubtedly a hot weapon. Putting aside all the inconveniences, its launch principle was completely consistent with the flintlock. Its barrel and projectile were almost the same as those of the latter's, so the power was far greater than crossbow bolts. If shot, the armor of knights would not hold the attack.

Timothy's efforts on the customization could obviously be seen from the unique look of each firearm. Some were made of rolled-steel with clear thumping traces left on the body of the pipe, while some were molded by wrought copper and looked smooth. Considering they were simply testing products to assist the four families, the firearm used by Timothy himself should be better.

However... even the best firearm was merely a firearm.

The King's City had no chance of winning as soon as the launch of the spring attack began. They would be unable to face the Western Region army armed with revolving rifles, bolt rifles, and HMGs (heavy machine gun).

Roland shifted his gaze back to the four of them and said, "The First Army will be recovering the suburban territories of Longsong Stronghold one by one from tomorrow onwards. Any nobility who resists can be put to death on the spot. I hope the entire Western Region will be unified after this week."

"Yes, Your Highness!" The four of them answered in unison.

Chapter 450: Old Friends

...

Rene Medde had been trapped in the basement of the Elk's mansion for half a month.

He thought he could've stopped Jacques, but he hadn't expected his elder brother to make the first move.

"Here is your lunch. Hope you enjoy it." Sean, the long-faced steward, brought a plate of sticky food to the cell. What was on the plate looked like a mixture of oatmeal and vegetables, and the portion was only palm-sized.

"Set me free, you dumbass!" Rene threw the food on the floor. Holding the cell bars, he shouted, "Jacques is a dumbass too. He has no idea what he's doing. It's not too late to let me out!"

The steward shook his head regretfully, took out a handkerchief and cleaned up his dirty shoes. "If I were you, I would've eaten that food instead of spoiling it. The Earl told me to bring you food once a day all this week, to let you save some strength."

"Damn it. Haven't you heard what I said?" Rene burst out with strong language. "This isn't about a meal. If Jacques doesn't stop, he'll destroy the Elk Family. For my father's sake, open this cage!"

Seemingly, the steward was moved by what Rene said in the end. As he was just about to leave, he stopped. "Your father? I think if he were still alive, he would've expelled you from this house." He then turned around and looked at Rene, expressionless. "Master, you seem to have forgotten that it was Roland Wimbledon who killed the Earl of the Elk Family. On the other hand, the Honeysuckle Family has not only gone over to Prince Roland's side, but also assisted him in suppressing the other four families. At this moment, your elder brother is trying to correct this mistake, yet you're scared to death. How can you be a qualified knight this way?"

"It's not for you to judge whether I'm a qualified knight," Rene said angrily. "In the past three years, while I was defeating the demonic beasts in Hermes' defensive line, Jacques was busy enjoying wine and women in the King's City. Do you think it's out of bravery that he decided to attack the Honeysuckle Family? Don't be ridiculous. He's only blinded by profit!"

Sean sighed. "Even if you're the younger brother of Milord Jacques, you should show him some basic respect. After all, he is both an Earl and the head of the Elk Family."

After this, the steward ignored Rene and left the basement along the stairs. When the door was closed, the basement returned to silence.

"Damn it!"

The second son of the Elk Family smashed his fist down onto the floor forcefully.

Since the beginning of winter, Jacques had begun to visit the other families more often. Rene didn't pay much attention to it at first—after all, he wasn't interested in managing his family. Besides, when he was taken captive by His Royal Highness the first time, Jacques refused to pay the ransom, and it was Petrov who offered him a helping hand and got him released from prison. Since then, the relationship between the two brothers had fallen to the freezing point. Even so, Rene didn't plan to fight with his brother about who would be head of the household. When he heard the news about the construction of Border Town, he even considered going to the town and serving Prince Roland by becoming an official guarding knight. But afterwards, there were some changes in the situation. During a private feast held in the Elk mansion, Rene heard that the four families were planning to unite and fight together against Longsong Stronghold.

That night, Rene rushed into Jacques' study and confronted him, but Jacques wasn't happy about it and threw him out. Thinking about it overnight, Rene decided to tell Petrov the news and lead his patrolmen to stop Jacques. Unexpectedly, his breakfast was poisoned by Jacques. When Rene woke up, he found himself in prison.

Since then, despite his yelling and threatening, he hadn't yet earned himself a chance to meet with Jacques. Every day, he could only judge time by looking at the brightness of a louver in the basement corner, and the only person he had seen was Jacques's personal steward.

"Grrr..."

With this lengthy growl coming from his stomach, he realized that he was hungry.

Taking a glimpse at the scattered food on the floor, Rene turned his head and lay back onto the pile of straw on the floor. "I'd better go to sleep... I won't feel hungry once I fall asleep."

The moment Rene closed his eyes, a series of footsteps resounded in the basement.

"Could it be... Jacques coming?" He instantly hopped off the pile of straw and rushed to the bars. With the help of the dim light from the louver, he saw a small and slim figure. Obviously, that couldn't be the arrogant Earl.

"Brother, are you OK?" When the person arrived at the cell, he found it was Aurelia, the third daughter of the Elk Family.

"How did you get in?"

"Jacques wasn't around, and those servants couldn't stop me." Aurelia saw the oatmeal on the floor and said incredulously, "Is this what they are serving you? This is outrageous! Wait a moment. I'll tell the kitchen to cook something else for you."

"Jacques isn't home?" What his sister said suddenly saddened Rene, and he almost forgot about his hunger. "Where did he go?"

"I've no idea... He left two days ago," Aurelia shook her head and said, "along with most of the house guards. Otherwise, I couldn't have come here."

"Damn it." Rene was disappointed. "Jacques left two days ago, and today is the third day—even if I can get out now, I'm afraid it's already too late.

"Brother, I heard that Jacques was trying to hurt the Honeysuckle Family. Is this true?" Aurelia looked worried. "Will Milord Petrov be alright?"

"Right... Aurelia has always had a crush on Petrov Hull. Although I've tried to set them up as a couple, it seems my friend Petrov has somebody else in mind. But now nothing can be done." Rene leaned against the bars and sat down, feeling feeble. He knew Jacques fully well. "Jacques won't show mercy on the Hull Family, which would definitely cause Prince Roland to take his rage out on the whole Western Region."

"Jacques has spent too much time in the King's City, so he's no idea what he's got himself into..." Rene closed his eyes. He couldn't stop thinking about the day when he and his army attacked Border Town—fires continued blazing in front of his eyes; thunder boomed all around his ears unceasingly; knights in the front rows seemed to be hitting an invisible wall; and their skills, gained through years of training and the courage of fighting for honor, had all lost their effectiveness in the face of the enemies' powerful weapons.

From that moment on, Rene had totally lost the intention of fighting against His Highness ever again.

Nobody could defeat His Highness' troops—at least no human beings could.

"But when Prince Roland gets to know what's happening in Stronghold and decides to sweep through this area, what's the use then if the Elk Family gains a lot of profit? This time... Prince Roland may not let go of the four families."

"What's the matter, brother?" Aurelia shook him, but he remained motionless.

"The Elk Family is screwed."

Just then, some indistinct roars spread through the thick ceiling, and then the floor slightly trembled. It felt as if the mansion was hit by something.

"Is that what I think it is?" Rene turned around, and saw his sister with the same surprised expression.

Then came another dull, yet much clearer, thundering and a series of noises. Rene could hear panicked shouts from his family's servants coming from somewhere over his head.

"Could it be... Prince Roland's army coming?" Rene was stunned. "How's that even possible?"

"What's happening out there?" Aurelia stood up. "I'll check."

"Don't." Rene grabbed her hand. "Don't go anywhere. Just wait here."

"Huh?"

"Listen to me..." Rene swallowed, and said in a tiresome voice, "It might be dangerous outside."

The roars quieted down before long. Only a few minutes later, a platoon invaded the basement—they wore brown uniforms and held strange, long-handled weapons. At a glance, Rene realized they were Prince Roland's troops.

He felt totally hopeless. He had expected retaliation from His Highness, but not so quickly!

"Or maybe this is a drama directed and played by Prince Roland himself?"

"Who are you?! How dare you break into the Earl's mansion!" Aurelia stood up and questioned them.

A tall, strong man stepped out of the platoon. With an angular face and a chilling aura around his eyes, he looked as if he was from an alien race.

"Are you the second son of the Elk Family, Knight Rene Medde?" the guy asked.

"Since you know who he is, you... should retreat. What are you up to?" Aurelia said, voice trembling, but still she stood in front of the bars.

"I'm Rene! Don't hurt her... She's innocent!"

Rene thought he was about to see something unbearable, yet the guy totally ignored Aurelia, and what he said next simply shocked Rene.

"I'm Iron Axe, Commander of the First Army. His Highness Roland asked me to find you specifically," the guy said in a low voice, "and he asked me to tell you that Mr. Petrov wants to see you."