

## Witch 451

### Chapter 451: Aspirations

Rene walked out of the Earl's mansion, squinted instinctively, and took a deep breath. It'd been half a month since he last saw daylight and snow.

To Rene's surprise, there were soldiers in uniform everywhere, not shamelessly plundering the mansion, but guarding crossroads in an orderly fashion. A few blood stains dotted the snowy ground, but there were neither bodies nor scattered clothing around, which meant the soldiers didn't pillage the dead when they cleared the battlefield. What he saw confirmed his supposition that these troops were different from any he'd ever seen.

"Is Petrov alright?" He looked at Iron Axe. "How is... Longsong Stronghold?"

"Everything is alright." The tall, strong, foreign man spoke very little, but he'd answer as long as Rene asked.

"That means Jacques Medde's plan didn't work." Rene was slightly relieved. "If Stronghold is intact and the Honeysuckle Family is unharmed, Petrov is bound to put in a good word for me." He didn't care about Jacques' fate. "That idiot almost dragged the Elk Family into a catastrophe, so whatever happened to him isn't my concern."

"Brother... what on earth did Jacques do?" Aurelia leaned over and asked quietly.

Rene hesitated, shook his head and said, "I don't know."

Aurelia instantly made an expression as if to say "you're lying".

Rene smiled bitterly. He really didn't know how to answer that question... He couldn't simply say that Jacques intended to rebel, because he only knew about the planning stages and didn't know how that plan turned out. After some silence, he asked, "Do you really want to go to the castle with me?"

"Of course. I'm very curious about what exactly happened to give these men a reason to break into the Earl's mansion in broad daylight." She stared at Iron Axe and said, "I think Milord Petrov wouldn't just sit by and do nothing about it."

Rene understood that his sister was actually worried about Petrov, so he finally nodded and said, "Alright. If you ask him in person, he might tell you the details."

The group of people rode on horseback for about an hour along the snow covered roads and reached the Stronghold castle at noon.

With Iron Axe leading the way, Rene and his sister stepped onto the third floor, which was heavily guarded by sentries placed every few steps.

When he entered a room that looked like a study, Rene finally saw Petrov Hull, his childhood friend. However, Petrov only stood next to his desk respectfully. A gray-haired man sat by the desk, looking at

Rene and Aurelia with interest and playing with a quill pen. Almost instantly, Rene recognized who this man was.

He instantly went down on one knee. "Your Highness, Rene Medde is here to salute you."

"He is ..." Aurelia was a little surprised, but Rene tugged her clothes gently and hinted at her to bend a knee and bow.

"We met each other in Longsong Stronghold," the prince said with a smile, "right in the castle's basement. According to what Iron Axe just told me, you were locked up there again?"

"Uh..." Rene was embarrassed and didn't know what he should say.

Luckily, the prince wasn't expecting an answer. "Please rise. Before I ordered the attack on the Elk territory, Petrov had repeatedly assured me that you would never take part in Jacques Medde's rebellion, and it seems he was right about you. But... how did you end up in the basement?"

Rene cast an appreciative look at Petrov and told the prince what had happened in his family.

"I see." The prince nodded. "It's a shame. If you could have stopped Earl Jacques, Longsong Stronghold wouldn't have gone through this disaster."

That remark shocked Rene, and Aurelia couldn't help but ask, "What... happened?"

"Jacques Medde colluded with the Maple Leaf, Wolf, and Wild Rose families, and they attacked Longsong Stronghold two days ago." The prince said coldly, "The attack led to mass casualties of innocent people, and two blocks were burnt down. To force the Honeysuckle Family to surrender, they even hurt Petrov's family."

Rene couldn't believe his ears. "Even when fighting a rival noble, threatening them with their families is considered very shameful. How could Jacques do that?"

"This rebellion involved many parties, but I assure you that no one involved in the attack will escape the punishment of the law—all the rebels will be severely punished!" The prince knocked on the desk and said, "I came to Stronghold to clean the entire Western Region and not let a single rat slip through my fingers!"

Rene felt his back break into a sweat. "Your Highness, I..."

Roland waved his hand to interrupt him. "Don't worry, I won't take my anger out on innocent people, and the Elk Family's offspring will be spared. Actually, I have a question for you. Jacques Medde was killed in the rebellion, so are you willing to inherit the title of Earl and serve me, just as Hull does?"

There was only one answer to this question. Rene Medde knelt down without hesitation, a standard gesture of a knight, and he pledged to faithfully serve the prince.

To his surprise, he felt quite calm while pledging his oath.

Actually, he had never hated this prince who took his father's life. "In a battle field, anything could happen to anyone. Moreover, it was not the prince but Duke Ryan and the other five families who started the war. After the war, the prince didn't treat the defeated noblemen harshly, and he also

exchanged captives for ransom, a conventional practice among the nobility. If father hadn't died in the battle field, he probably could've gone back to our territory safe and sound, just as the Earl of Honeysuckle did."

Rene was trained as a knight and held the values of a knight deep in his heart—"A battle is plausible as long as it's righteous, and what Jacques did was not only unrighteous, but also had no purpose except to exacerbate hostility."

For the sake of Aurelia and all the other innocent members of his family, he must accept His Highness' offer. Without the protection of the Elk Family, these people would not be able to live a stable life ever again.

After the pledge, the prince smiled and nodded. "In the following days, you and your sister can live in the castle. Petrov will arrange rooms for you. There are still a few members from other families that escaped who are fighting in the suburbs, so it's better for you to wait until this rebellion quiets down before returning to your territory."

"Yes, Your Highness."

As Rene left the study, Petrov followed.

Looking at his haggard friend, Rene felt a range of emotions. "I'm sorry..."

"It's not your fault." Petrov patted on his shoulder. "Don't worry about it."

Somehow, Rene felt his friend was a lot different. He could see in Petrov's eyes a look he had never seen before—a subtle resolution and calmness that was as strong as steel that had been repeatedly tempered with fire.

Rene realized that his friend was on his way to becoming a real leader.

Chapter 452: The Unification

The rebelling nobles were powerless against the First Army, and it only took a round of firing in every confrontation to decide the victor. The First Army didn't even need to change cartridges before their enemies dispersed and ran away with their tails between their legs. Moreover, the enemies usually didn't even put up a fight, and the First Army only had to pursue and capture them.

Iron Axe cleared through one territory per day and quickly conquered the regions governed by the Elk, Wolf, and Wild Rose families. However, when the troops reached the Maple Leaf territory, they began slowing down.

They encountered some unexpected issues.

"Damn it. This is no different from Stronghold." Brian stared at the Earl's looming castle and spat angrily. "It's protected by a moat!"

"Was anyone hurt in the past round of attacks?" asked Iron Axe coldly.

"Two unlucky men were wounded, one in the arm and the other in the back while retreating, but it doesn't seem serious," said Brian, frowning. "The soldiers were at a great disadvantage because they were shooting upwards from the ground, so even if the enemies only had bows and bolts, they could still contend with us."

Iron Axe knew that Brian was right. No one had expected the Earl of the Maple Leaf Family to have a castle built like a tower which was supported by mountains and cliffs. The streams from the Impassable Mountain Range were led into a five-meter-wide ditch that formed a small moat surrounding the castle. Since the water was constantly flowing, although there were blocks of floating ice and snow, the moat was not frozen solid. The gate was the only entrance into the tower, so in order to reach it, they had to cross the bridge, where the enemy's force was most concentrated.

There were no concealments around the Earl's castle, only plains of snow, so standing on the higher ground made up for the enemies' disadvantage of using crossbow bolts. After two rounds of probing attacks, the First Army only shot down three or four people and suffered many casualties themselves.

"I wish we'd brought cannons with us," said Brian bitterly. "If we shot a few cannonballs at their gate, they would surrender in no time."

"It's too bad that the troops can't bring them here because it's too far from Stronghold, and the snow's too deep." Iron Axe glanced at the sky. "Let's call it a day and arrange for the troops to set up camp."

The territory of the Maple Leaf Family was northwest of Longsong Stronghold, next to Impassable Mountain Range, and it lay on the border of the Western Region. Simply walking here took almost a day, and the uncleared snow on the paths made it impossible to transport a 12-pound field artillery.

According to reports, the Maple Leaf Family barely contributed to the rebellion, and even the Earl himself didn't participate. This meant that their resources and power were all intact and stored in this guarded tower, making it very difficult to deal with without siege weapons.

At night, bonfires were lit in the camp's tents.

"What should we do tomorrow?" Brian asked, tossing wood into the fire pit. "Order the soldiers to rush against the rain of arrows? As long as we can blast through that damn steel door, they're done for."

"But the First Army would also lose dozens of soldiers." Iron Axe shook his head and didn't answer. If he were still in the Iron Sand City, he would gladly sacrifice hundreds of soldiers to complete his mission without feeling regretful. However, after he came to the Western Region, he felt somewhat protective of the soldiers whom he watched improve and whom His Highness Roland put so much effort into.

After a long pause, he sighed. "Let's use the witches."

Brian was shocked. "The witches?"

Iron Axe didn't want to do this either. He remembered the prince had once told him that a decent army should be able to complete its mission independently at all times. However, this was not important at the moment. In order to reach their goal of uniting the Western Region in a week and to minimize casualties, he was willing to give up his pride.

Also, His Highness also said that a good general accounted for his soldiers' lives.

"Send a messenger and tell the prince that we're in trouble and need Miss Maggie's help." He ordered.

The next morning, Maggie and Lightning came to the camp. "What happened?"

"Coo coo?"

Iron Axe coughed and explained his dilemma. "The enemies are mainly concentrated at the top of the tower, so rifles can do little damage to them. There's also a steel door blocking the entrance, so the First Army can't get close enough to place explosives. We can only rely on you to open the gates."

"We've got this," the little girl said, patting her chest.

Throwing explosives was a familiar task to them, and they were even trained with the First Army in the small town. Iron Axe nodded and immediately arranged the soldiers to begin the last attack—even if the explosives didn't have the desired effect, they would at least scare the enemies and give themselves enough time to break through the steel door.

"Are you fighting as well?" Brian watched surprisedly as Iron Axe strapped a rifle to his back and stuffed a few cartridges of bullets into his belt.

"Rather than say 'charge for me', say 'charge with me'." Iron Axe smiled. "His Highness always said this."

...

When the two men led their soldiers into the charging position, Maggie's figure appeared in the sky.

She transformed into a giant beast and charged towards the tower, her claws grabbing a bag of the new explosives. Everyone witnessed this stunning scene and the First Army erupted in cheers, while the side on top of the tower descended into chaos. The mercenaries and guards of the Maple Family all turned their crossbow bolts around and began shooting at the beast with no avail.

Meanwhile, Maggie finished collecting her strength, flapped her wings forcefully, rose rapidly into the air, and released the bag. The bag of explosives shot towards the top of the tower like a cannonball...

Iron Axe felt his surroundings go quiet, and then he saw a glaring ball of fire rise from the top of the tower. Suddenly, the earth began to shake! The entire world seemed to be trembling, and huge columns of smoke shot up through the snow. A heat wave struck him in the face, forcing him to stumble back a few steps with his ears ringing.

This is... the power of God!

Iron Axe couldn't help but recall the first time when he witnessed His Highness' gunpowder test, but the explosion this time was much more powerful. Even standing almost a hundred meters away, he could feel the scalding heat of the fire ball. As for the enemies close to God's Punishment at the top of the tower, their fates were all easily imaginable.

He quietly prayed to the Three Gods, raised his rifle high, and shouted, "For His Highness the prince, First Army, charge!"

"For His Highness!" The soldiers echoed his words and swarmed to the Earl's castle.

This time... no one dared to stop them.

When Iron Axe returned to Longsong Stronghold, it was already the sixth night.

The entire Western Region was finally under Roland's control.

#### Chapter 453: Dealing with the Aftermath

The Stronghold's castle office was much roomier than that of the small town. Tall bookshelves with gilded edges lined the walls to his left and right and were filled with all kinds of books. The bookshelves provided any subject he could dream of, from epics to travel notes. In order to reach the books on the upper levels, a wooden ladder was placed next to the bookshelves for easy access.

Probably out of safety concerns, the only waist-high window in the office was equipped with metal railings on the outside. When the daylight hit the room, he could clearly see a stripe of sun ray splash over the old fur rug while feeling a sense of aloofness as if he were standing against the world.

"Anna would definitely love this place," Roland couldn't help thinking. However, to him, the brightly lit town office with large windows suited his taste better. Even though it was small, it was comfortable.

As for Nightingale, he could tell by her habit of sleeping by the fireplace that she would not like it here at all.

Suddenly, someone knocked on his door.

"Come in." Roland placed the Secret History of the Western Region he was holding back onto the bookshelf.

"Your Highness." Petrov Hull entered the office and placed a stack of paper onto his desk. "I've finished collecting the data you asked for."

Roland walked back to his desk and read through the list of the nobles carefully. "These are all the nobles left in the Western Region?"

"Yes." Petrov explained, "They're divided into two main categories, guilty and innocent. After that, I ranked them by family names. There are 64 people who are guilty, and 137 people who refused to rebel or had no knowledge of the rebellion. The innocent people are mostly free knights, knights, and lower-level nobles."

Roland flipped to the first page and saw the name of Roman Candy, the Earl of Maple Leaf Family, listed on the top. According to Iron Axe's report, this great noble hid in a wine barrel in his basement after his castle was seized, and he soiled his pants out of fear when the First Army found him. He was also the noble with the highest rank among the captured in the war of unification.

Next was an entire page of the nobles from the Maple Family, which included two sons, other relatives, and knights.

Roland quickly finished reading the list and felt very satisfied. "Great job."

The six families of the Western Region had literally become history—Lion Ryan, Maple Leaf, Wolf, and Wild Rose were completely crushed, and although Honeysuckle and Elk still remained, they were no longer feudal nobles. Now, all the power in the Western Region belonged to Roland.

"Your Highness..." Petrov hesitated for a bit before asking, "Sir Iron Axe convicted the people on that list. Could there be any... misjudgment?"

Roland couldn't help chuckling. "He's a very skilled interrogator and didn't use torture to force confessions, so I think his final judgment is trustworthy."

Meanwhile, his interrogation was just a matter of formality. After all the nobles were locked into prison, Nightingale double checked each of them—it only took her a few simple questions to determine if they had involved in the rebellion. This was also why Roland felt confident in addressing the noble with a heavy hand. With Nightingale's help, he could ensure that he wasn't missing any guilty people or condemning any innocent ones. He didn't have to worry about shedding innocent blood or exonerating the real culprits.

"So... what do you plan to do with the guilty nobles?"

"Why do you ask?" Roland raised his head and glanced at Petrov. "Are some of these men your friends?"

"No, Your Highness." He shook his head. "I just think that if you hanged them all, it might harm your future rule."

"You were talking about an eye for an eye a week ago." The prince raised his eyebrow curiously. "Now you want to spare them?"

"I do want all these people to go to hell, but even if I strangle them all to death myself, it wouldn't change anything... It might even cause the other nobles to hate the Honeysuckle Family. Also, if everyone learns that you've executed the nobles, other cities might resist your rule."

After hearing this, Roland was quite surprised. This was the logic of a seasoned politician, who set aside personal emotion while weighing the pros and cons... "It seems that this battle hasn't made him hate fighting but actually helped him become mature."

"It doesn't hurt to tell you this beforehand." He stood up and walked to the window. "I'm going to announce everything about this matter to the people and hold an open trial for all the rebels at the square, including the nobilities, guards, squires, and mercenaries... the ringleaders and direct organizers of the rebellion, as well as scoundrels with the people's blood on their hands. They will all be hanged. People who are guilty of following their orders will be stripped of their titles and sent to the North Slope Mine."

"This way, only five or six noblemen will be hanged. The Earl of the Elk Family and the Viscount of the Wolf Family died in battles, so those who survived will be trading their titles for their lives. When the message gets out, I don't think anyone will see this as too harsh a punishment—after all, rebelling against the king is a capital offense."

Petrov sighed in relief. "Your Highness is merciful."

When the eldest son of the Honeysuckle Family left, Roland felt an unfamiliar feeling of satisfaction.

This operation had cleared all the obstacles for him in the Western Region, so he could easily make laws and distribute orders throughout this vast land.

More importantly, he gained the support from many people and nobles—after the rebels were removed, only supporters would remain.

This was especially true for the nobles—after losing their feudal and legislative power, they would have to wholeheartedly follow and spread his policies if they wanted to continue living a comfortable life. Since the nobles had more resources than civilians, it wouldn't take them much thought to figure out how to profit from them.

Once they started to gain small profits, they wouldn't ever want to go back to their old lives —after all, these low-level nobles had never gained much from their territories, and sometimes even went into debt if they didn't manage them well. They would soon realize that as long as they played by the rules, they would live an unimaginably comfortable life.

There was no doubt that he had taken a big step toward his city-building plan.

Roland wiped off the water vapor on his window and looked at the city enveloped in snow—since he still had to stay in Longsong Stronghold for a while to deal with governmental affairs, he might as well refurbish this office to his own liking.

For example... he would start with the French windows.

Chapter 454: Pensions and Punishment

Roland made a speech at the theater of Longsong Stronghold three days later.

To advertise the speech, he asked Petrov to relate the details of the rebellion to the entire city beforehand and also instructed Maggie to bring Echo from Border Town.

There was a smaller audience than he had expected. Although it was already spring, the endless snow stopped people from going outside.

Fortunately, driven by the prince's promise that "soldiers killed in action will be well compensated", all members of the Second Army and their families came to the theater. It would take Roland some time to earn trust from the rest of his subjects, but Roland believed the best marketing was word of mouth.

Once the seed was sown, it would spread its roots to more people. This was the reason he insisted on an army consisting of ordinary men.

They were as sharp as swords, as impregnable as fortresses, and perfect role models for publicity.

"Good morning, my subjects. I'm the lord of the Western Region, Roland Wimbledon. I believe most of you have already heard my name." Roland surveyed the audience and continued, "First of all, I'd like to express my deepest sorrow and grief for those who were injured or lost their lives in the rebellion. This was a conspiracy plotted in King's City. In order to disturb the peaceful Western Region, Timothy has tried to wage war against us numerous times. Unfortunately, the four families of Western Region didn't side with the people, but instead helped the wicked perpetuate wicked deeds, thus causing this tragedy."



The prince did not linger on the details of the rebellion. Compared with a formal speech, people were usually more interested in the rumors circulated in taverns. Therefore, he soon switched to the more popular topic of compensation after a brief introduction.

"During the rebellion, 56 out of 112 soldiers in the Second Army were killed in action. In addition, rebels looted and burned the residences, leading to 48 deaths among civilians and reducing 12 properties to ashes," Roland spoke in a low voice. "I hereby apologize to the subjects in Longsong Stronghold. As the lord of the territory, I've failed to fulfill my obligations."

The prince's words stirred up the audience, who apparently had never heard any royal family members apologize to civilians. Many of them were shocked and startled, but Roland thought this was the attitude a lord should have. He was not as inscrutably arrogant as other nobles, who always treated civilians with an air of scorn and condescension. History taught him that a ruler would not be truly accepted by his people unless he viewed them as his equals.

"I promise that those people won't die for nothing! Not only would soldiers killed in battle receive a proper burial, but their families would also receive a pension of five gold royals. Plus, they can apply for food and charcoals from the City Hall as additional compensation every month in the future. This pension plan is exactly the same as the First Army's, and I assure you subjects who join the Second Army as of today will also be equally compensated!"

Few people cheered for the prince's promise. Apparently, most of them were skeptical about Roland's alleged pension plan. Corruption and briberies among officials were normal on this land, so even winter relief rations were sometimes mixed with sand and leaves. How could they possibly believe that they would receive gold royals?

Nevertheless, Roland had already thought of a solution to maximize the effects of his advertising. He clapped his hands, and two soldiers from the First Army came up to the stage with a vault, followed by Petrov and Iron Axe. "I've got a list of the soldiers who sacrificed themselves in the battle here. Now the governor of Longsong Stronghold, Petrov Hull, will distribute pensions to you personally!"

When the soldiers dumped the shiny gold royals on the table, the audience finally became a little more enthusiastic.

"Ayat, from the First Gun Battalion of the Second Army!"

"Chapiter, from the First Gun Battalion of the Second Army!"

"..."

As Iron Axe slowly read out the names on the list, the soldiers' family members went up to the stage one by one and took the gold royals with excitement, bowing and kneeling in gratitude. For a time the theater was so chaotic that Roland felt Nightingale lay her hands upon his waist.

Fortunately, there were no accidents. By the time everybody had received their pensions, it was almost noon. Roland waved his arm to silence the murmuring audience. "Those who lost their homes during the war will also receive a shelter and food. Food will be delivered to you by assigned staff until the Months of the Demons end."

"Y-Your Highness, what about after the Months of the Demons?" asked someone in a loud voice. Of course, the "inquirer" was created by Echo.

"By then, the City Hall will have created a great number of jobs with competitive salaries and benefits. As long as you're willing to work hard, you don't need to worry about food!" Roland raised his right hand and announced, "The Western Region won't forget those who have contributed, and neither will I!"

This time his speech received a warm welcome as the audience raised their right hands in response. While the subjects cheered for the speech, Roland instructed his men to distribute the porridge, bringing people's high spirits to a peak.

By the afternoon, many more people had gathered at the theater. Since all the seats were occupied, many people squatted in the hallway, obviously waiting to watch the trial.

It seems everybody loves to see a prisoner be prosecuted, both in the world I used to live in and the current one.

Roland asked Iron Axe and Petrov to conduct the execution, while he himself sat in a box on the second floor of the theater as one of the spectators.

The verdict had been reached long before. The prisoners were led onto the stage and lined up on their knees in front of the spectators, with armed soldiers standing solemnly behind them. Iron Axe read out the counts, and Petrov the verdicts, after which the soldiers escorted them to the execution ground, the Stronghold Square.

At the sight of the prisoners, some of the victims' family members went up to tussle with them. As long as the fight was not life-threatening, the First Army just stood by. Nobody took pity on these scoundrels, who should have known the subsequent consequences the moment they committed murder and plunder.

In the end, 132 prisoners were sentenced to death, six of whom were great nobles. The rest were mercenaries, guards, and servants. The execution methods varied. Since gallows were limited in number, only the nobles had the privilege to be hanged, whereas others were shot. It was also the first time firearms were used for execution.

The other 900 people who had participated in the rebellion but had not committed murder were imprisoned, awaiting to be sent to the North Slope Mine in batches.

Now, Roland had weeded out all the nobles who challenged his authority in the Western Region.

The following day, he summoned the innocent nobles to the castle hall.

As it was just the beginning of the cleanup, he still had a lot of work to do before he could truly rule this region.

The most important step was to establish a new order.

Chapter 455: The Second Step of City Construction

Roland arranged a feast for the nobles to ease their minds.

A long table covered with a white tablecloth stood at the center of the hall, with a large variety of delicacies, delicious wines, and beautifully arranged flowers on it. The nobles were seated on either side of the table facing each another.

After drinking a few glasses of red wine, everybody seemed to feel more comfortable and less stressful. Given that the Honeysuckles and the Elks were both Roland's supporters and that all of the great nobles had been crushed, these petty nobles were unlikely to strike up a discordant tune at this hour. On the contrary, they voluntarily revealed their intentions to stand on Roland's side during the conversation. Under such circumstances, Roland knew it was time to talk about his new policies.

After they all had been fed, he distributed the booklet that was prepared beforehand to each noble.

It was the "marketing graphic book" which he carefully designed and drafted.

"Your Highness... what's this?" As he expected, the nobles soon asked in surprise, "Why are the drawings in this book are so lifelike?"

"Yes, they look so real."

"It doesn't look like a picture... No paint can express such delicate colors."

They were, no doubt, nobles from the big city, who knew how to properly appreciate artwork. Roland clapped his hands and replied with a smile, "They are indeed illustrated by a painter. The only difference is she's a witch, and the paints she has used are actually her ubiquitous magic power."

All of the nobles were startled by these words, not sure whether they should put down the booklet or not.

"The local church has fallen from power. What are you worried about?" The prince said, raising his brows, "Witches are no different from us. I've confirmed that myself many times."

"Uhhmm... Uhm." Petrov almost choked. "Your Highness is right."

"Of course Your Highness is correct. Haha..." the other nobles chimed in, managing to summon up a laugh.

"Um... looks like I just said something that contains an unintended meaning." Roland put on a look of indifference and switched the topic while thinking. Ever since he became a prince over a year ago, he had noticed that his ability to remain unflappable amid changes had improved by leaps and bounds—or rather he had become increasingly bold. "The point is the story inside it. The drawings are just to make it more readable and interesting."

While the nobles were still absorbed in the story, Aurelia, the Elks' girl, looked up abruptly and asked, "Is this the family history of a noble?"

"Aurelia!" Rene reminded her while lowering his voice, "You should call the prince Your Highness!"

"Correct. He used to be a noble in the Western Region." Roland gestured Rene that it was fine and then continued, "Some of you may still remember him."

"Your Highness... I know him," answered one knight. "His name is Tigui Pine. We used to be neighbors and his territory used to be adjacent to mine."

"I also met him once," someone else recalled. "He was just a Baron back then. His father was a feudatory of Joe Kohl. But since Lord Joe left the Western Region, his territory has diminished."

"Viscount Tigui is currently living in Border Town." Roland said, smiling, "The graphic book records how we met... as well as what happened later. As you can see, he's a noble living in a society regulated by the new system. He's now busy practicing flintlock. I expect that right after the Months of Demons, he'll take his daughter and guards to Misty Forest to have some fun hunting there. As far as I know, ever since he sold his territory to the east of Stronghold and settled down in Border Town, not only has he been promoted to a higher rank, but his properties have increased by several times as well."

Fear originated from the unknown. The same held true for changes to the system. As the nobles were ignorant of what impacts all these changes would bring about, they abhorred anything foreign or unfamiliar. In order to reduce their fear and resistance, Roland picked Tigui Pine as a living example and asked Soraya to sketch out his life in a cartoon format. Compared with those dull biographies, cartoons apparently presented the details of the story in a more vivid way.

"You may have known that I'm planning to build a city in the Western Region. In fact, I've been thinking about that for quite a long time. By then, Border Town, Longsong Stronghold, and the narrow land in between will all be consolidated into one," Roland continued, "someone may ask how the two towns, so distant from each other, can possibly be connected. I have to say that the unification will be confined only to administration. In other words, the new city will be governed by the same laws and policies. This is also the reason I take back nobles' feudal and legislative powers."

"Your Highness, but our territories..." somebody asked.

"They'll still be yours," he interrupted. "Like I said, you won't lose anything except these two types of power. The very nature of feudalism is to grant lands to others who will then become your subordinates, and thereby expanding your influences, leading lower nobles to defend against enemies and fight for profits for you. However, a professionally trained army will be responsible for city defenses under the new system. As long as you follow the rules, you'll gain far more than you used to. After all, you benefit more from slicing up a bigger cake than sharing a small one."

While the nobles were silent, Roland sipped tea before continuing his persuasion. "You've never been to Border Town, so it's perfectly normal that you don't know how much you can actually gain. In fact, the town's revenues for the latter half of the year reached 30,000 gold royals. It could have been 10,000 more if the Months of the Demons hadn't come so soon."

The nobles all gasped out. "30... 30,000?"

Roland had learned the annual financial situation of Stronghold from Petrov a long time ago. The annual income of the City Hall was no more than 30,000, and these petty nobles obviously earned much less than that. 100 gold royals would be a fortune to them.

"As you'll be administrators of trades of all kinds in the future, you'll certainly be well paid." Roland went on, "Back to the consolidation matter—aside from the unification of administration, the two towns will also be closer geographically. For example, it takes me one day to travel from Border Town to

Longsong Stronghold now. Once the construction of Kingdom Main Street is completed, it'll take less than a day to cover the distance on foot, and half a day by horse or bike, not to mention other faster transportation methods."

"What's a bike?" Aurelia questioned curiously.

"A manually operated riding apparatus that runs fast on a flat surface." The prince mused, "I bet in five years... no, in three years we'll be able to work in Border Town after having breakfast in Stronghold." As Kingdom Main Street ran straight between Stronghold and Border Town, it reduced the distance to a mere 60 kilometers, allowing people to travel within half an hour by tram or car.

Nevertheless, most of the nobles cared little about transportation. The knight who claimed to be Tigui Pine's neighbor asked cautiously, "Your Highness, by what you just said, did you mean that you want us to manage Stronghold?"

"Yes and no." Roland shrugged. "Like I said, the consolidation of the two towns will be limited only to administration. The Stronghold will become a district of the city, directly administered by the City Hall. But considering commuting a day to work still sounds quite unrealistic, for the time being, I'll set up a secondary City Hall in Longsong District. It'll operate in the same way as Border Town, with multiple secondary departments under it. You'll work in those secondary departments dealing with local matters."

"Secondary... departments?" the nobles echoed, looking bewildered.

"It isn't simple to manage a town. Although you'll get paid well, it won't be that easy to do your part," Roland said bluntly. "Therefore, I need you to come to Border Town with me once we've re-established order here. I want you to see with your own eyes what a well-functioning City Hall should look like. With respect to city management, you've got a lot to learn."

Chapter 456: The Differences

After explaining the administrative integration plan, Roland raised his cup and took several slow sips while waiting for everyone to process the information.

He needed a lot of people in order to maintain the area's daily perimeter patrol. In a time before the general literacy rate improved, he had to rely on the nobles. Most of them had their primary education and they had experience in management. If there was a noble that distinguished himself from the others, he would promote them and place them in charge of a city or territory on behalf of himself. If he was still living in his previous world, this position would be referred to as a governor or a mayor.

Several minutes later, Roland brought up the next topic.

It was time to crack down on crime.

In his idea about the new order, the Black Street organization wasn't needed. Everyone in the city could find work and they didn't need to pillage, so there was no demand for stolen goods. He probably couldn't have accomplished this in a highly developed, modern city with a population in the ten million range. The over saturation of minimum-wage jobs in the market would create a high unemployment

rate. Fortunately, the population of the Western Region, including Longsong Stronghold and the whole suburban area was no more than 60 to 70 thousand people. Since the major development had yet to start, the townspeople could find work as long as they wanted a job.

"How much do you know about Rats?"

"You mean... Black Street Rats?" Rene Medde coughed. "I've done business with them before."

"What kind of business have you done with them?" Roland asked with interest.

"Um..." Rene swallowed hard, a little embarrassed. "I was the leader of the Ragingfire, and I fought with several Rat gangs over territory."

"Bahaha." Several people broke into laughter.

Roland was astonished. He had never expected that the Earl's second son used to deal with Rats. Besides, Ragingfire... was such a lackluster name. He started to doubt the legitimacy of Rene being the Earl Medde's son.

"Your Highness, the truth is," Petrov started to explain, "several years ago, Black Street Forces were running rampant at the dock. Almost every day both civilians and foreign businessmen were killed, and the patrols would turn a blind eye to the matter. Earl Rene couldn't stand it anymore, so he brought in his own guards and a group of people from the refugee camp and together they drove the Rats out of the dock. At the time, he was writing to me daily to keep me updated on the progress of the operation. I was far away at the King's City during that time. In the letter, he told me it was a war that equaled the one against the demonic beasts, so I think..."

"Petrov, that's enough." Rene interrupted, embarrassed. "I was bored and just wanted to do something to occupy myself at that time."

So that was the reason. It was just the impulsive, yet gallant, actions of a young noble, which was a demonstration of his chivalrous demeanor. Roland believed that the second son of the Elk, who loved fighting as a youth, enjoyed nothing more than to command a group of followers. So, while Ragingfire was not a real army in the sense, what they fought was indeed a real battle.

"What of this gang now?"

"Uh, I don't know." Rene scratched the back of his head. "After I went to defend Hermes and fight against the real demonic beasts, I stopped all contact."

Roland nodded. "Actually, I'm going to eradicate all the Rats in Stronghold to enable everyone to live a peaceful life."

"Your Highness, I'm sorry to say this," Rene hesitated before saying, "but... that's probably impossible."

"Why?" He frowned. "I have the First Army at my side. Are the Rats more difficult to deal with than the knights?"

"That's not what I mean." Rene seemed to be looking for the right words to phrase it. "They're weak, timid, and with no weapons or armor. They don't even know any operation tactics, basically, they're by no means comparable to knights. However, if you execute them as you execute the rebels, that's to say,

execute them just because they used to be Rats, I'm afraid there won't be many civilians left in Stronghold after the cleanup."

"You mean..." Roland said.

"Rats and civilians are mixed together, they are one and the same, Your Highness." Rene replied respectfully, "After a particularly bad year, when the Months of Demons are long, many civilians have to become Rats to sustain themselves. That's why most lords turn a blind eye to the existence of Black Street. An internal conflict is apparently better than an external riot caused by starvation."

Roland's face clouded over. He had never thought about how the Rats came into being. "What about their organizers?"

"A few of these people are habitual criminals and some of them are supported by the local nobles, but there are also some criminals from other towns."

"Well, I hope none of you are supporting any Rats now," the prince stated while glancing around the long table, sullen expression clear. All the nobles hung their heads in response. The prince sighed, "It doesn't matter now. As long as you help with my cleanup plan, I will forgive your past misdeeds." After a pause, he looked at Rene. "I have a task for you."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"In the coming month, I will be focusing on cracking down on all of the criminal activities in Stronghold. You should cooperate with the First Army to eliminate all of the Black Street gang leaders and completely break down all their organizations. As for the specific methods, I'll send someone to you with instructions."

"Your Highness, what about the citizens that are depending on them? Without the gangs to provide them with food, they are not likely to survive the Months of the Demons." Rene was worried. "Plus this year the Months of Demons arrived earlier than usual, so there might be even more people depending on them than in the previous years."

"I'll let Petrov open the barn and distribute food to the citizens until the end of the Months of Demons."

The nobles around the table started to protest, "Your Highness, that's not going to work!"

"That type of support will just make things worse!"

"After that, everybody in the town will become a beggar!"

All of the nobles ventured to prevent him.

Roland slammed his fist down, hitting the table hard. "I've made up my mind and I don't want to hear your protests any longer!"

Roland knew the nobles thought the worst of people and believed them to be lazy, ignorant, incompetent, and filthy. They believed that the citizens were very greedy in their nature and considered them to be absolutely hopeless. However, Roland thought differently and knew the strength of the people. They may appear dumb, but with guidance and a role model, they could be a game changer. If people were really as useless as the nobles thought, how were they able to keep changing the world?

In fact, trying to better people was the best investment. Even the slightest positive change would have a larger payoff than could be expected.

"Finally, I want you to spread this message as soon as possible." Roland looked to Petrov, "You have experience in this, so I want you to work on it. If the subjects can't read the message, get someone to read it to them. Just make sure the written message contains what we have talked about here today."

"All of what we have discussed?" Petrov asked with a surprised look. "Even the information about the Rats clean-up plan?"

"Yes, include that and the information about the barn opening to distribute food." Roland glanced at the nobles around the table, challenging them. "These are the conditions that create a well-functioning City Hall and are a necessity in order for it to run properly. Publicize the policies, answer the people's questions, and accept feedback. This is the best way to implement a change to policy."

Roland believed he needed to first teach the nobles, and then unify the law by consolidating the administration, as well as enhance public safety, all the while carrying out political propaganda before re-establishing order.

#### Chapter 457: The Music of Fantasy

"You don't need to come with me." Echo walked along the Redwater River, the snow under her shoes crunching.

"Here the city isn't safe. It's not Border Town." Iron Axe walked behind her, with two steps between them. "His Highness told me to protect you if you leave the castle without other witches accompanying you."

"I shouldn't have told him." She mumbled, breathing out into the cold air. "Also, you don't need to call me lady anymore."

"You will always be the head of the Osha clan in my heart, my lady Drow Silvermoon."

When he mentioned Osha, Echo fell silent. Even though Iron Axe couldn't see her expression, he could feel Echo sadden at the mention of her clan. He wanted to console her, but he didn't know how or what to say. So, he just kept his mouth shut and followed her silently.

The branch of Redwater River that wound its way through the field outside of the city was different from the one that flowed into the inner city, which was almost a straight line. The river levees on both sides were covered by masonries, stacked, flat, and neat. About every ten steps, there was an opening with stairways to the river, which allowed the people to get water from the river.

Today's snow fall hadn't been too heavy and there were several pedestrians on the street. The men and women would look at Echo with surprised expressions on their faces. Lady Silvermoon was tall, and shapely with a lovely figure. Her beige skin and long blue-gray hair were quite special and eye-catching. In the inland of the Kingdom of Graycastle, it was seldom that one would see a purebred from the Sand Nation.

"Let's switch to the other side of the river." Echo obviously wasn't enjoying the attention.



"Yes."

They cautiously stepped on a frozen arch bridge across over the river and then arrived at the eastern zone of Stronghold. There were almost no houses and vast areas of farmland were all covered by snow. What they could see was just limitless flatlands and a dim, black figure of the city wall. This area was in sharp contrast to the western zone of the city.

"This place is nothing like the Iron Sand City." Echo said. "When I was in the Southernmost Region, I thought everywhere was the same. The sands covered almost all of the ground. Water sources and the Oasis were the most valuable resources and people would fight to the death over them. However, here, no blood would be shed over the Redwater River. If they want to drink the water, they just need to crouch down and drink it."

"However, here they would fight for other things," Iron Axe said seriously, "such as gold royals, jewels, honor, status... There's no escape from fights."

"Really? But, Nightingale told me that our prince would end all disputes." She looked up at the cloudy sky. "No matter who you are, people of the Sand Nation or people of the Four Kingdoms, ordinary people or witches, you can enjoy equal rights and live a free life."

"I... I don't know." Iron Axe hesitated. He couldn't imagine that everyone would throw off all barriers and live together peacefully. He thought that even though His Highness had the power of the gods and he would undoubtedly conquer all of his enemies, it would just be impossible for him to make all of his enemies accept his dominance willingly. Making enemies during the process of conquering was an unavoidable by product of battle.

"Do you want to go back to Iron Sand City?" Echo suddenly asked.

"No, Lady Silvermoon," Iron Axe quickly came to his senses and answered without hesitation. "I've sworn to the Three Gods that I'll serve His Highness, Roland Wimbledon forever and help him to expand his territory. Don't worry my lady. His Highness has promised to seek revenge for you. Please believe in him. When you go back to Iron Sand City, no one will disrespect you."

"But I don't want to be the head of the Osha clan," she whispered. "I'd like to stay somewhere the trees are evergreen. I'd like to stay with Wendy and Nightingale. I'd like His Highness to teach me songs. I hope someday I can go back to have a look, but I don't want to live in the desert and continuously fight for water."

"Either way, you're the only successor of Osha in my heart." Iron Axe didn't speak his mind fully. Instead, he just looked down and said, "No one can force you."

They walked across the white field to an open area where Echo stopped. "I'll practice here. I don't think I will disturb anyone."

Iron Axe knew that her power was to make various sounds and she usually practiced in the backyard of the town's castle. But this time, in order to not disturb the important meeting between His Highness and the nobles, she intentionally chose here to practice her power.

He nodded and took two steps back. "I'll stand guard for you."

"Oh, I made a song for our hometown." Echo turned around, "Would you like to hear?"

"A Song?" Iron Axe was a little surprised.

"Yes, I learned to use the arrangement method His Highness taught me. I now mix various instruments' sounds together to add a layering effect and build complexity," Echo talked about this with a relaxed expression on her face. "I've tried it and to my surprise, it worked. I didn't know a song could be so pleasant. Each added tone would add in a distinct feeling. I don't know where His Highness learned this method though. When I was sold to King's City, I never heard anything about something like this from any noble."

"Prince Roland was always special," said Iron Axe, he believed the Gods favored Roland.

"Yes... No one treats witches as sincerely as him." Echo fully agreed with Iron Axe. "However, His Highness gave me really strange and irrelevant names to the mix performance methods, such as 'Electricity sound' and 'Agricultural heavy metal'." She shook her head with a smile. "I think only he could think up names like that."

Before Iron Axe could reply, she started to sing.

When the mixed melody reached his ears, he was shocked and immediately stood, frozen in place. What an amazing tune! It sounded like the sands had gently touched the oasis. It was like a bright fire plum bursting from the earth's depths.

At the moment, Iron Axe felt that he had been transported to the desert and was standing under the scorching sun. "Is this... an illusion?" He looked down and found that the snow had disappeared and he was now standing in an Oasis. When he looked into the distance, what he could see was only sand. The girl before him kept her eyes closed. Her song resounded through the air as she stood in the shallow water, disturbing its smooth surface. What a breathtaking beauty!

"Going through sand and dust

to seek the traces of the Oasis.

Your footprints were left in the sea of sand.

Your shadow was reflected in the spring.

Someday, the oases will become the new deserts

and the deserts will also breed new oases.

The only eternal thing

is the legend of you.

Someday

I'll follow your footprints

to find your shadow

at the sleepless and wordless moment

before dawn."

...

When the song faded out, Iron Axe was back at the snowy Longsong Stronghold. It seemed that nothing had happened and that everything he had experienced just now was an illusion. He swallowed hard for a while and then opened his hand, there was a tiny grain of transparent sand shining on his palm.

光.

## Chapter 458: The Song of Resonance

Roland could not believe what he was hearing.

"You said that you saw a vast desert in Echo's song and you've brought back a grain of sand?" Roland asked. His mind was racing.

Was this simply an auditory delusion? How, then, could he explain this speck of powder?

"I didn't bring it back, Your Highness," Iron Axe put the grain of sand on the desk solemnly, "At the time, it rooted me in place and I never thought of checking whether it was real. This grain of sand just suddenly appeared in my hand. Maybe it was blown by the wind?"

It was becoming more and more implausible. Roland thought for a moment and asked, "Did she sing only the one song?"

"Some other songs, too. But I couldn't understand." Absorbed in his memory, Iron Axe continued, "It was like a miracle... Back in the Southernmost Region, if Lady Silvermoon claimed to be the Three Gods Emissary, I would firmly believe her. Your Highness, is it because she's evolved?"

This Ironsand man of the Mojin Clan had followed Roland more than a year and now had a much better understanding of witches.

"I think so, but it's the first time I've seen such a situation." Roland answered. After some thought, he decided to send for Echo and ask her in person.

When Iron Axe left, Roland picked up the grain of sand and looked at it carefully, "Was it created by magic power?"

"I'm not sure," Nightingale's voice came from behind, "There's no trace of magic power in it."

This did not necessarily mean that it was not made by magic power. It was a real thing in the real world, like Soraya's pictures. Once created, it would maintain itself without magic power and could not be affected by God's Stone of Retaliation.

Before long, Echo came into the study. Nightingale immediately stepped out of her mist to stand beside Roland. With a smile on her face, she said, "Congratulations."

Echo was surprised, "To me?"

Nightingale nodded, "The magic power in you has cohered. Don't you feel it?"

"Re-really?" Echo shook her head in amazement, "You mean my ability has evolved?"

Finding that things had turned out just the way he'd expected, Roland asked Nightingale, "What does it look like?"

"It's like a transparent blue gem, clear as water," Nightingale answered, "She has almost as much magic power as Maggie."

Echo's evolution seemed to be unrelated to enlightenment. She had condensed her magic power even before she knew it. When Roland told her what Iron Axe had experienced, she was astonished.

"He actually felt like he had returned to the Southernmost Region and was in the sea of sand?"

"The phrase 'Felt like' may be inaccurate. He returned with a grain of sand from the dessert," Roland said with smile. "Sand can be found everywhere, but I don't believe he went so far as to dig in the snow or mud for it only to deceive me." He paused a little and asked, "What did you see at the time?"

"Nothing at all." Echo answered with some embarrassment, "I had my eyes closed and wasn't paying attention to my surroundings."

"So how about showing us?" Roland suggested. He propped his hands on his chin, with interest. "Sing the song you created, the one about your hometown."

"Here?"

"Yes," he said, "Dinner isn't ready for another half hour. It won't disturb anyone."

"I want to hear an immersive song, too," Nightingale encouraged.

"Ah... fine."

Echo took a deep breath and soon a mixed sonata from a distant time resounded in the office. It was a sweet feminine voice, slightly restrained at the start. Maybe it was because she had never sung indoors. As the melody slowly soared, she became thoroughly absorbed in the music.

As she was singing, Roland could hear hot winds blowing through green woods; he even felt the temperature increase. He smelled searing sands under a scorching sun. As the song faded out, he lingered lost in the aftertaste. Undoubtedly, this was a wonderful, exotic lyrical song in which a tone-deaf guy like himself could never find fault. However, he'd seen neither desert nor oasis with trickling streams. He sat still in his study the whole time.

He glanced at Nightingale who shook her head. It was apparent that she had not seen any miraculous scene, either.

Was it because her ability was not effective this time?

Roland contemplated, and then asked Echo, "Did you write this song?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Now, sing several songs I've taught you," he thought for a moment and decided, "Let everyone come and listen."

Soon, the study was crowded with witches. The three witches from Sleeping Island had even come, too. They were still holding their cards in hand. Echo was clearly a little nervous, but with the encouragement of Nightingale, she calmed down. She sang all the songs including the Guerillas' Song.

She received warm applause from the witches without exception.

After listening to the witches describe their feelings, Roland had a rough understanding of Echo's new ability.

The amount the audience could be affected by her singing depended on their respective experiences. If they had the same experience as depicted in the song, they would be influenced more. He came to this conclusion based on the newer songs he'd taught to Echo. Guerillas' Song was the most popular one, because the witches had seen the First Army marching along to the beat of music. Therefore, they could understand this song better. This could also explain why her Southernmost Region song had resonated so strongly with Iron Axe.

Unfortunately, Roland could not tell from a test that how much her singing could affect the audience. He was wondering if the scenes in her song could become real things when a listener was fully absorbed in it.

Echo's new ability filled him with expectations. The ability to lift one's spirits should never be underestimated. She could encourage soldiers, pacify the masses, and sing background music for dramas...

...

The next afternoon, Roland met Vader from Border Town in his study.

"Your... Your Highness... I... I'm here..." he said with chattered teeth. Obviously, he had not recovered from the high-speed flight.

The fastest way to travel between the town and Stronghold now was Maggie's express service. However, even wrapped up in a thick blanket, flying at a speed of 60 kilometers per hour under the claws of a large beast was not a comfortable flight.

"Good job," Roland patted the fat pigeon on his shoulder.

"Coo!", she proudly held her head up.

"I want you here to assist the Elk Family with training," he looked at Vader and said. "The situation here is different from that in Border Town but similar to that of Valencia. Here there are rats, refugees and violent criminals."

"You mean, you want me to train patrollers?" Vader asked. He had finally stopped shivering after warming himself by the fireplace.

"No, I mean police." Roland explained his plan for taking severe measures against illegal and criminal activities. "The First Army will take care of it in the beginning, but public security work has to be handed over to the local police. The most important thing in training the police is to infuse them with the 'people's protector' concept."

"Treat the people warmly, like a spring breeze. And punish the criminals ruthlessly, like thunder," Vader repeated what Roland had said.

"Yes," the prince said with a smile, "I hope you can train them well."

#### Chapter 459: Snaketooth (Part 1)

During the Months of Demons, the streets and lanes in Stronghold were always desolate and the Rats here huddled themselves up, hiding in their respective evil territories. They were sharing the food that had been stored in the fall and waiting until a new prey emerged when it would warm up again.

This is the way it should've been.

"Shit, why do I have to struggle through the snowstorm to listen to some damned policy-preaching?" Snaketooth bitterly spat on the ground, "I don't give a damn what the lords will do."

"Put your collar up," he said to Joe, a small boy shivering next to him. "You'll die if you catch the cold-plague."

"He shouldn't have followed us out," Sunflower said, frowning. "Is it really necessary to send all the four of us just to get some information? Kanas must have it in for us."

"Save it, please. Even if he does, what can we do?" Tigerclaw, a strapping boy, said with disapproval.

"He's our source for food." Though he sounded unconcerned, he still quickened his pace to walk in front of the other three kids. From then on, Snaketooth felt that the cold wind was diminishing considerably.

"Th-thanks," Joe whispered.

When it came to Kanas, every one of them was reluctant to say anything.

Rats had social ranks too. Kings were at the top and tails at the bottom. Different ranks had different places to stay. As for Kanas, he was neither a king nor a tail. He was the ruler of the Endless Lane in the Western Zone of the outer city. If he must be called something, he should be a waist or a belly. No matter what he was, Snaketooth and his friends had to respectfully call him boss whenever they met him.

There were six rulers like him in the Western Zone, but their boss, namely the king of the Western Zone, still remained unknown to Snaketooth.

Kanas had several teams of Rats and they were one of them. The only way to win more favor from the ruler was to show stronger competency than the other teams. Unfortunately, as street kids in the lane, they were obviously at a disadvantage in both number and strength. But Tigerclaw was different—it was incredible for him, who ate only half a piece of brown bread every day, to be so well-built.

The reason the brown-haired girl, Sunflower, thought that Kanas was aiming at them was because of their prior mishap. They didn't take the witch that appeared in the lane to Kanas because Snaketooth wanted to use her ability to make some money first. Not long after they went out, they unexpectedly met the big shot from the Honeysuckle Family and lost the witch before they made enough money.

Because of this incident, Kanas was extremely angry with them. He thought if they had given the witch to him earlier, he would have made a lot more by selling her to the noble or the church.

"It's easy to say," Snaketooth said with contempt. "Selling her to the church for 25 gold royals? Where can he find those priests? The church is in ruins. The nobles won't honestly give gold royals to a Rat, either. He'll get killed instead of getting paid."

"Snaketooth is, is right." Joe agreed, still shivering. "If he re-really thought we made him lose 25 gold royals, he would have thrown us into the Redwater River."

"Kanas could only give the witch to the king of the Western Zone. He also needs to protect himself from her magic power and doesn't have any God's Stones of Retaliation." Snaketooth continued, "He's just disgusted with us."

"Stop saying 'selling'. She's Paper and one of us!" Sunflower gave Snaketooth a painful pinch. "You talk about her like she's cargo!" She suddenly paused a little here and asked, "Hey, did you sell her back then?"

"No, I didn't!" He exclaimed. "I tried my best to save her, but that person is the lord of the city."

"Is she alright in Border Town?" Tigerclaw sighed.

"How can she be alright?" Sunflower snorted. "What's the difference between being played by the prince and being played by the other noblemen?"

"Really... you say that now, but when you actually see the noble's lifestyle, you'll desperately want to be played by them," Snaketooth said and twitched his lips.

When they arrived at the square of Stronghold, they were taken by surprise. Several hundred people there surrounded a wooden stage and there was a bonfire. It was such a rare scene on a snowy day.

"Someone will actually come here to preach," Tigerclaw rasped. "What kind of tricks does the noble want to play?"

"It can't be good news." Snaketooth shrugged. "I suppose it's about tax collection or grabbing some able-bodied guys for military service. They've just fought a battle, right?"

"Whatever, it's none of our business." Sunflower said, "Let's finish this quickly and get home early. Joe, go over to the bonfire and warm yourself."

"Ye-yeah."

Snaketooth walked around the crowd to the edge of the stage. The man on it wore a thick, cotton-padded jacket, a wool hood, and a pair of deer-leather gloves. Snaketooth felt warm simply by looking at him. This was so much better than him and his dirty, old clothes. He thought of how great it would be if he had a chance to steal them, but also knew that was just in his imagination. The Elk Family label on the man's cloak indicated his identity.

A Rat could never afford to offend an attendant of the four families.

"Go with Joe to warm yourselves, I can take care of this here," Snaketooth said to the other two kids.

"Really?" Tigerclaw asked and raised his eyebrow a little.

"Of course, I've got a good memory." Snaketooth pointed at his head. "I remember everything—the words, the people, and the bitter hatred."

"Pfft," Sunflower scoffed. "Listen to you. Since you say so, I'll go. And thanks... Let's go, Tigerclaw."

"But you'll have to give me more at dinner tonight."

"We'll see. I don't know if there's any food tonight!" she said, throwing her hands up.

After they left, Snaketooth patted his cold face to draw his attention back to the wooden stage. The information was useless for a Rat tail like himself, but it might mean profitable opportunities for Rat bellies and kings. Unfortunately, even if they did make some profits, the tails at the bottom would still get almost nothing.

"My fellow citizens, here's a joint declaration by the lord of the Western Region, Prince Roland Wimbledon; Earl of the Elk Family, Shalafi Hull; and the lord of Longsong Stronghold, Petrov Hull." The man took a sip of his hot ale and continued to read a piece of parchment in his hand. "The City Hall of Longsong Stronghold now opens the grain market to the public. Any citizen who has extra grain at home can sell them in the market freely now. But pay attention please, starting next month, any unauthorized sale of grain will be considered a felony, and only the City Hall has the right to purchase and sell grain! Once someone is arrested for the unauthorized sale of grain, he'll be severely punished! The City Hall also welcomes public tip-offs about this kind of offense, and will reward anyone who offers correct information 25 silver royals!"

Snaketooth opened his mouth with surprise, for he never expected that he would hear such incredible news!

The noble wants to forbid the private trade of grain!

Besides, both the grain purchasing and selling prices offered by the City Hall are extremely low. Who'll sell grain to them at this low price? The grain price in Stronghold has already increased threefold because of the early arrival of this year's Months of Demons and it's impossible to drop before the snow ends. If the City Hall sells grain now, no matter how much, the nobles and merchants will buy it all. Did the prince and the city lord never think of this issue?

Wait... if they really do forbid private trade in grain, what will happen to us?" Snaketooth suddenly shuddered at this thought. Most of the citizens bought most of their grain from Rats. Once the policy was carried out and all the grain in the market was bought by the noble and merchants, it would be a disaster for almost everyone!

Chapter 460: Snaketooth (Part 2)

Snaketooth never expected that much more unbelievable things were yet to come—the speaker's next announcement rendered him motionless.



"In five days, which is the second week of the first month of spring, the City Hall will distribute rations at the square! Everyone can come here to collect two bowls of steaming hot oatmeal, one for lunch and one for dinner. Citizens, let's all thank the prince for his generosity!"

At this, the crowd began to stir.

"My god, Gayle was right—this was really in the notice!"

"Yes, I came just to confirm that."

"Do my ears deceive me? Free oatmeal every day?"

"Are you coming, too? Don't you have plenty of oats and dried meat at home?"

"It's still two free meals! My lord didn't forbid me from coming. Didn't you hear that he said 'everyone'?"

"My Lord!" Someone suddenly shouted. "Is the oatmeal really free? How long will this continue?"

This was the question on everyone's mind. The crowd quieted and turned to look at the attendant in unison.

The attendant waited for the good news to sink in, and then announced calmly, "That's right! The oatmeal really is free, and the distribution will continue until the end of the Months of Demons! Tell all your neighbors and friends about this news, because His Highness will always stay true to his promises!"

Hundreds of people instantly became excited, but Snaketooth still couldn't believe his ears.

"Free food? What does this mean? It means that they can temporarily avoid being threatened by Kanas and starving in the snow—No, not just them, but all Rats will be able to easily obtain food. Now, they'll be even more difficult to control!

Kanas won't just sit by and let this happen, so what will he do? Send someone to disperse the crowd, disrupt the distribution... or bribe City Hall officials to dump all the oatmeal into the Redwater River?"

However, Snaketooth also noticed that the announcer kept mentioning "His Highness", which meant it was the legendary Prince Roland that gave orders to distribute rations, not the Duke or the Five Families. "Will he let these Rats roam shamelessly, or will he really be different from the other noblemen?"

He didn't trust any of the noble, and the day Paper was taken away was still fresh in his mind.

However, a small voice in his head kept asking him, "What if it was true, what if... it was true?"

Luckily, his doubts didn't last long because the Elk attendant on the stage began to read another notice—he used to think that these orders were simply the nobles' tricks to mess with the citizens and had nothing to do with orphans like him, but even more surprising than the last two notices was the third one, which directly applied to the Rats.

"Citizens, listen up! There are brighter days to come!" The announcer shouted something to calm the rowdy crowd and then said, "In five days, or when the oatmeal distribution starts, His Highness will begin cracking down on crime in Longsong Stronghold, including Black Street organizations, theft, and

any behavior that threatens the safety and belongings of the citizens! When the time came, please don't hang around Black Street or visit pubs, casinos, and other unsafe areas to prevent unnecessary harm!"

"Order in Stronghold needs to be maintained by all citizens, and the City Hall is currently recruiting public safety officers and police personnel. Next, I'll explain the requirements!"

Snaketooth didn't feel like listening anymore, so he made his way out of the crowd and ran next to the bonfire. "Hurry, let's go back!"

"Are you done listening?" Sunflower rubbed her hands and asked reluctantly, "You should get warm before you leave."

"No, we have to go now!" he said urgently.

"What happened?" Joe could sense that something was off.

"I'll explain to you on the road." Snaketooth stomped his foot. "We need to go back right now, otherwise Kanas will hear about this through someone else and we'll be done for!"

...

The gathering spot for Rats in the Western Zone was a two-story house buried deep in the Endless Lane.

Kanas was an intimidating one-eyed man, and his temper and methods were just as cruel as his appearance. Snaketooth personally saw him nail someone who was messed up to a wall and then whipped him to death. At the same time, he controlled the food supply of several Rat organizations in the area, so no one dared to disrespect him.

Snaketooth felt the same way, so he knelt carefully in front of Kanas and told him about the notices.

"Is the lord of the city targeting us?" Kanas asked with a frown, "What kind of nonsense is that?"

"...It's not the lord of the city," reminded Snaketooth carefully. "The announcer was talking about the prince."

"What the hell do you know?" Kanas spat. "No noble, no matter how important, can do anything in someone else's territory. This's Longsong Stronghold, not Border Town or King's City, and the lords of the Honeysuckles or Elks are here, so there's nothing he can do. So what if he's the so-called protector of the Western Region? Just look at who's sitting in the castle. The king still rules Graycastle in name, but who cares about his orders?"

"You're right," a girl next to Kanas said softly. "Not to mention, even if power changes hands, it has nothing to do with us. Nobles are Nobles, and Rats are Rats. Just because the two groups live in the same city, it doesn't mean that they are anything alike."

"Rats are Rats? That's what I love to hear." Kanas grabbed the girl's behind. "However, the second notice is quite strange. Usually, if the noble want to improve their reputation by distributing food, they would let us know beforehand. Also, they usually restrict the amount they distribute, but how come it sounds like they're trying to feed the entire city this time?"

No one could answer his question, but Snaketooth knew that everyone was thinking about those two free bowls of oatmeal.

"Maybe... the noblemen want to get on good terms with Sir Bloodyhand?" The girl chuckled.

"Who knows." Kanas shrugged. "I'll go ask the boss later. Only he knows and understands these issues related to the noble."

The so-called "Bloodyhand" was the king of the Western Zone Rats, and it was rumored that he was very close with the lower-level nobles. In a sense, he was no longer a regular Rat, but a title-less "underground nobleman"—in fact, all Rat kings had similar social connections.

At this thought, Snaketooth breathed a sigh of relief. He knew that Kanas' lover was right. "Both the noble and Rats have existed for hundreds of years, so no matter how the upper level changes, the underground world will always maintain its own rules... His Highness is also a member of the noble, so what can he do?"

"By the way, I know exactly what you all are thinking right now." Kanas chuckled. "You want to try the City Hall's oatmeal? On the day of distribution, everyone must remain in this room, and no one can leave. Understood? If anyone goes behind my back to eat it, I'll make sure he never eats another thing in his life!"