

Witch 501

Chapter 501: Body of Steel (Part II)

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Eden was a newly promoted knight in King's City who had no land and no inheritable title, placing him in the lowest rank among the nobles. Some great nobles even believed that knights were not part of the nobles and only held honorary titles. Thus, he was very excited to enforce Timothy's blockade order. Since he had sailing experience from his younger days, and the king preferred new recruits, he eventually became the captain of a hawk-headed ship.

He believed that he was a good judge of opportunity—this blockade was his chance to prove himself and be crowned as a real nobleman, since most of the noblemen were not willing to leave the comfort of their homes to fight on ships for months.

It was also easy for him to prove himself because both merchant ships and caravans stood no chance against him. If local lords sent knights to protect the caravans on land, the merchant ships would be left vulnerable. As long as he was not too greedy, he would be able to complete this mission to His Majesty Timothy's satisfaction.

"Of course, His Majesty's satisfaction depends on how much money and cargo I can seize." At this thought, he glanced coldly at the happy Rats on the boat across from him. They had intercepted a merchant ship from Redwater City yesterday, and although the captain insisted he was sailing to Fallen Dragon Ridge, they still seized all his cargo and killed most of the crew. The cargo mostly consisted of furs, wine, and a jar of gold royals. "And these idiots dared to treat the seized cargo like their own spoils and divided it among themselves according to Black Street rules."

Eden chuckled coldly at this thought. "The Rats have no clue that their only purposes in this blockade are to openly plunder ships and to appease local lords. When the rebel king Roland is defeated, the Rat's heads will be sent to the lords who were affected by the blockade as an apology from the king. Then, the seized goods will definitely be added to the palace's vault.

But these Rats see this mission as a chance to strike rich and have no clue about their imminent deaths. How ironic."

"My lord, there's movement ahead!" shouted the sailor from the lookout position.

Eden peered out from the bow and saw a puff of black smoke in the distance, as if something was burning on the river. After a while, a gray smudge emerged and began to approach them. It was definitely a ship, but he could not see its sail.

"Isn't it traveling a little too fast for a ship?" asked his assistant after staring for a while.

Eden had also noticed this. Its speed was frighteningly fast, even for going downstream, and it had grown to the size of his palm from a gray speck in less than half an hour. He could also tell by its distance that it was much larger than regular merchant ships.

The other two hawk-headed ships had also spotted the target, and one of them began paddling quickly to reach this strange merchant ship before everyone else.

"My lord, should we approach as well?" asked Eden's assistant.

Eden pondered for a while and said, "Let's wait and observe first." He noticed that the hawk-headed ship behind him that was commanded by Baron Derrick was also holding back, while Rats' ship was already preparing to board the strange ship.

When he got a clear view of the approaching boat, Eden gasped in shock, and everyone on deck also exclaimed. The sailor on the mast shouted, "My God, my lord, what in the world is that?"

Unlike seaships with copper bottoms, the entire ship made of uniform glistening metal, including the strange iron tower on top of it. Its bow parted the river like a shuttle in fabric, and the foam it stirred up revealed how fast this steel vessel was going.

"Hum..." The boat gave off a deep whistle as it plowed forward and turned to crash straight into the first hawk-headed ship!

The hawk-headed ship was sailing sideways in order to board the approaching boat, a tactic that worked with slow merchant boats but left them vulnerable against this fast steel vessel—before it could turn around and escape, the vessel had already crashed into its defenseless side.

Its wood side split open with a loud crack, and the entire ship almost turned over into the river, as if it had been pushed by a giant hand. Fierce waves crashed onto the deck, and many men were flung straight into the water

"God!" Eden's assistant stared in fear. "It's heading straight towards us!"

"The enemies are attacking!" shouted the sailors. "My lord, the enemies are attacking!"

People began scrambling to set up bows and fill their flintlocks with ammunition.

Eden saw the flag of the tower and twin guns on top of the steel vessel, gulped and ordered, gritting his teeth, "Tell the rowers to start moving and take us close to shore!" He had never seen this flag before, but he guessed that such a terrifying thing could only be invented by the prince of the Western Region, who was rumored to deal with demons! Not only was it giant, but its speed was also faster than slim galleys. A mortal could never achieve this!

"Aren't we going to retreat?" asked his assistant, trembling.

"Retreat?" Eden yelled angrily. "How can we outrun a ship that is faster than us? Our only hope is to stay near the shore to prevent it from crashing into us and try to board it by circling behind! Damn it, go relay my orders!"

He pushed his panicking assistant aside and felt a chill as he saw the damaged hawk-headed ship. He could imagine how bad the situation inside the hull was. The steel vessel's bow was completely stuck inside its side, wrecking, if not completely splitting, the thin and flimsy hawk-headed ship. The unluckiest sailors were the rowers, who were either smashed to death by the steel bow, or worse, trapped in the hull and drowned.

Cries and curses erupted from the boat, and the fear they conveyed made Eden pity even the Rats on board—their circumstances were reversed, the hunter had become the prey.

As the current kept flowing and the steel vessel slowed down, the twisted hawk-headed ship fell off of the enemies' hull and turned over, spilling bloody river water from its hole. The second hawk-headed ship was desperately trying to turn around and run away, but the ominous whistle sounded again, and with a deafening rumble and long cloud of smoke, the steel vessel began advancing towards its next target.

Chapter 502: Body of Steel (Part III)

The second hawk-headed ship was still turning around, so its side was directly facing the steel vessel, making it even more vulnerable than the first. The Rats were all terrified by the incoming steel vessel, but a few of them still attempted to shoot the enemy with bolts. However, the bolts were as tiny as a needle compared to the giant boat and did not even make a dent.

Soon, the unstoppable steel vessel directly smashed into the center of the hawk-headed ship's side, instantly crushing a dozen of its paddles. Then, to Eden's disbelief, the river current and force of the impact caused the hawk-headed ship to flip sideways, which also lifted the bow of the enemy ship into the air.

The steel bow rose up and then crashed down heavily onto the hawk-headed ship's deck.

The hawk-headed ship cracked with a shrill sound, and the unharmed Rats jumped into the water to escape, while the others trailed blood all over the deck, screaming in pain from their injuries. Eden watched the steel vessel slowly lower into the thin hawk-headed ship, which fell apart under the weight with a series of cracking sounds. Its hull could not withstand the pressure and suddenly snapped in half, causing both ends to shoot upwards with a great splash.

The two halves did not immediately sink, but floated like corpses on the river with only half of the side port above water. On the other hand, the steel vessel did not have a single scratch on it and instead began to charge toward Eden's ship.

Eden heard the sailors around him gasp in fear. His hawk-headed ship was about to be the fifth one to be instantly snapped in half, and he was preparing to abandon the ship.

Luckily, he had given the right orders before!

His ship was completely pressed against the shore, and the enemy was turning to pursue the remaining Baron Derrick, which was trying to escape.

"Raise all your bows and torches!" Eden took a deep breath and roared, "I want all of these cowards hiding in this metal shell dead! I'll give you one gold royal for every enemy you kill! Do you hear me? One gold royal!"

If he survived and escaped back to King's City, he would definitely never be promoted, so his only chance of gaining Timothy's approval was to defeat the rebel king's ship. Even though this ship might have been produced by demons, the crew on it was still human and defeatable!

The sailors seemed to regain some of their confidence after dodging the last round of the enemy's attacks. These men all dealt with murder in their previous jobs, so they were used to seeing blood and gore—as long as they were not going to be completely slaughtered, they were still willing to earn a gold royal or two.

When the hawk-headed ship was completely safe from being hit, it left the shore and sailed parallel to the steel vessel, slowly inching toward its course, until the two ships were sailing alongside each other.

Before the steel vessel passed them and when the two ships were only meters apart, the sailors raised their various weapons. They would first fire at the passing ship and then board it to attack the crew, which was the common tactic used against merchant ships. However, there was not a single man on deck, only a dark tube encased in metal and containing a row of small holes, pointing directly at the sailors.

Before Eden could figure out what this thing was, the tube began to spit tongues of flames!

Bursts of blood began to appear among the row of armed men, and wooden fragments and gore flew everywhere. The sailors were cut down like rows of grass, while the surviving ones immediately began to search for cover. However, neither barrels nor masts were a match against the metal tube, which shattered the barrels and snapped the masts with a loud crack. After the sails fell into the water, the hawk-headed ship began to slow down.

Eden did not get the victory he had dreamed of. He realized that the tube was some sort of flintlock, but it was much faster and shot out streams of bullets with a hissing sound. However, he could not understand how the rebel king managed to drastically improve such a slow and inaccurate weapon... perhaps this could only be explained as the power of the devil.

Soon, he was struck by a shower of bullets.

This was Rodney's first time witnessing such a battle. The Roland barreled its solid bow straight through the enemy ships as if they were dry weeds, leaving them completely helpless. He waited by the cannons for an order to open fire, but that order never came.

When the fourth enemy ship was left floating in pieces in the river, the battle was officially over.

The enemies' screams and groans filled the air, while the survivors gave up their faith, swam to shore, and escaped without hesitation into the forest. His Highness did not order the crew to chase after these deserters and left them to run off on their own. There were also some badly injured men who were holding onto their last breaths and lying against the broken ships, but no one tried to save them from their inevitable deaths.

"What a shame." Jop put the unused shells back in their cases. "I thought we'd be able to show off the true power of cannons to those fellows in the Gun Battalion."

"Yes," agreed Nelson disappointedly. "Compared to the ammunition we used for the heavy machine guns, a round of cannon shells uses about the same amount and is much more effective."

"That's enough. Miss Anna personally made these, so they're much more valuable than machine gun bullets, which are produced by the hundred every day," said Van'er with a frown. "You'll get your chance when we attack the city, so be sure to aim well and save face for the Artillery Battalion! I hand-picked all of you..."

"To join your elite team, commander, you've told us this many times," said Nelson, splaying his hands. "Don't worry, it won't take more than three shells to blow open the gate in King's City." He nudged Rodney. "Hey, say something."

"I want a battleship like this one..."

"What?" The other four men were shocked.

"I hope to own a shallow water gunboat like this one someday." He repeated, his eyes glittering with excitement. "I'm going to call it the Rodney!"

"Wait, don't you think your elder brother deserves this honor first? The second boat should be called the Nelson."

"No way... I'm not giving you that right."

"Save it, you two. The second boat will definitely be called the Van'er. Don't forget that I brought all of you into the elite mortar team."

"Here we go again." Cat's Claw sighed.

"Could it be called the Cat's Claw or the Jop?" Jop mumbled quietly.

"No," responded the three men in unison.

After the concrete boats caught up to the flagship, the expedition fleet resumed its journey. Two days later, King's City's gray city wall emerged into sight.

Chapter 503: The Battle of King's City (Part 1)

"Your Highness, there's a platoon guarding the pier area," Lightning, who was responsible for monitoring the enemy's situation, reported. "There are about 100 of them, and judging from their uniforms, they seem to be militia."

"Only 100?" Roland was slightly surprised. It was predictable that Timothy would deploy troops to the pier of the outlying district—the massive fleet was certain to be noticed when it passed through Redwater City and Silver City. Though steamships were much faster than sailing ships, and could in five days cover a distance which the latter would require seven days for, they were still not as fast as messengers who continuously changed horses and traveled round the clock. Not to mention pigeons—if the new king's spies used pigeons to deliver their report, Timothy would have received the news two or three days in advance.

But it was unexpected that Timothy would deploy only 100 men to defend the pier. Roland had imagined that the first battle would take place in its vicinity. He anticipated that crossbowmen,

musketeers, and even mangonels would be stationed along both banks of the river in order to prevent his troops from landing on shore successfully. This was why he wanted to build inland river gunboats in time for the spring offensive. The efficiency of transportation by water was much higher than that of by land, but its disadvantage was that the troops had to alight at a dock and thus could be easily ambushed. If his army had the capability to attack across the shore, it would be able to handle any ambush easily and create a secure landing point.

It seemed as though Timothy had already given up on the "massive advantage" he would have while Roland's troops were landing. From Roland's perspective, although this was the right decision, it was unjustifiable—it was impossible that Timothy knew about the range and power of his 152 mm naval artillery.

As Roland thought about this, he beckoned Sylvie over. "Are the militiamen carrying any Berserk Pills?"

Sylvie summoned her Eye of Magic and took some time to observe the scene. "I don't see anything that looks like a pill. Some of them don't even have any weapons on them. But... there's something strange about the ground."

"The ground?"

"They have buried a few things in the ground... there're also some on the pier." Sylvie strained her brows to observe even more carefully. "Cocks and barrels... they're filled with dark gray powder."

"Gunpowder?" Nightingale exclaimed uncontrollably.

"Well, that makes sense," Roland said, acting as calm as he could. "The militia is just a bait to draw our attention. By presenting us with a false opportunity to scramble ashore and capture the pier, Timothy will then ignite the gunpowder and blow all of us up."

In his heart, he was not as calm as he appeared. This strategy was similar to the landmine warfare of the past and was indeed a good plan. Though he saw through it early, his troops would still need to land on shore—having made the choice to travel by water, the pier was a necessary crossing, and it seemed that Timothy was aware of this inevitability. He probably hoped to catch Roland by surprise by setting up an ambush instead of fighting straight up. If Sylvie was not around, there was a chance that Roland would have walked right into the trap.

The solution to this was fairly accomplishable. As Timothy did not have wireless methods to ignite the gunpowder, he would have to deploy people near the barrels to do the ignition. All that Roland had to do was to eliminate these people. In any case, it was important to preserve the pier, or else he would not be able to transport his cannons and ammunition on shore.

Through Sylvie's careful observation, Roland was able to pinpoint two places where the ignition was likely to be carried out. One was situated in a shack on the edge of the pier, as evident from a long iron pipe that connected it to the nearest barrel. The other was situated in the pier's warehouse. The two places had a similar feature - a shifting black hole formed by a God's Stone of Retaliation.

After some discussion with Iron Axe, Roland quickly decided the battle plan.

First, Nightingale would sneak into the warehouse, silently dispose of the ignition crew, and guard the gate against substitutes running in and igniting the gunpowder. Then, Roland would use the naval

artillery to destroy the shack. There was no problem even if it caused the gunpowder to ignite—so long as the pier remained in good condition.

Leaning against a battlement on the west side of King's City, the Steelheart Knight, Weimar, raised his telescope and observed the movement on the river.

The long and thin canal was like a strip of glittering gold ribbon which cut through the brown and white plains, of which much of the accumulated snow had already melted to reveal a vivid green that came from the sprouting of grass. This was proof that earthly things were coming back to life. Such a view was always pleasurable regardless of the occasion. The only things that did not fit the scene were the billows of black smoke that drifted through the air directly above the canal.

It's the fleet of the rebel king, Roland Wimbledon.

I never thought that he'd really dare to attack King's City.

Although Weimar felt that it was laughable, he also developed a hint of admiration for Roland.

Ever since this capital city was built more than 200 years ago, it had never been attacked. Once an enemy saw the towering and magnificent bluestone walls of the city, the courage to attack would naturally fizzle away. Not everyone possessed the audacity to fight when it was clear that the enemy held an absolute advantage.

At least, Timothy Wimbledon surely doesn't possess this courage.

While the person who does possess it is our enemy, unfortunately.

The knight was committed to his honor. As the Guardian Knight of King's City, he was entrusted with the responsibility of defending it, and would have to fulfil his duty until the very end.

"Sir, the rebel king's fleet is here!" A squire ran up to the battlements and yelled.

"Hush, I saw it long ago." Weimar placed his telescope down and spat out some saliva. "Convey my order that the 1st and 2nd Cavalry shall mount their horses and await my command behind the city gate, while the mercenaries shall follow closely behind the cavalries. Tell them not to piss their pants when the gunpowder explodes. The oil boilers will also be set on fire, even though I doubt that the enemy will be able to touch this side of the city wall."

The knights nearby burst into laughter at once.

According to the plan, after allowing the rebel king's platoon to occupy the pier, flags would be raised along the city wall. At this time, the snow powder buried near the pier would be ignited, which would be certain to disarray and damage the enemy substantially. Then, the city gates would be opened for the cavalries to launch their attack, ultimately delivering a comfortable victory.

"Those country bumpkins from the Western Region probably believe that King's City is comparable to their grandest city, Longsong Stronghold. Just climb a ladder and the city can be seized." The Ironfeather Knight, Scar, chimed in. "I think that you can save the firewood and bring them home to burn."

"Just for precaution." "What a fool," Weimar silently thought, "even if things like the boiling oil or the rolling stones aren't effective in battle, they must still be displayed for His Highness' sake. Trying to be cheap just because the enemy's too weak to break in—with this kind of mentality, he'll surely be kicked out of the city's knightage by Timothy sooner or later."

He raised up the telescope once again, only to see the front most sailless ship detach from the rest of the fleet and head towards the pier on its own. The top of the ship billowed black smoke which could be seen from miles away, while there were no paddles on either side of the ship. It was unclear to him how the ship operated. But these were unimportant details. No matter how weird a ship was, it could not come on shore and fight.

The sailless ship gradually reduced its speed and unhurriedly docked at the pier on the opposite shore.

"What're they trying to do?" Scar raised his eyebrows. "Do they intend to alight on the opposite shore? Don't tell me that 100 militiamen scare the rebel king?"

Weimar also felt surprised. Usually, when an enemy saw that the pier's defense was paper-thin, it would try to capture the pier quickly. He opened his mouth to say something, but just then, a blaze of fire lit up in front of the strange-looking ship.

The orange-red flames seemed to create a new dawn.

Chapter 504: The Battle of King's City (Part 2)

A few seconds after the flames blazed, Weimar heard a dull thunderous sound.

It came from a far distance away. Although its tone was not high, it was nevertheless powerful. He saw that right next to the shack, a pillar of earth rose up in tune with the sound.

"What just happened?"

"Was the snow powder ignited?"

"Doesn't seem like it. It seems to have been done by that ship."

"What a joke. It's about a mile away."

The knights were busy discussing among themselves. Weimar frowned and wondered. "Could it be that... the enemy has noticed something strange about the ground?"

According to the intelligence gathered from various channels, the rebel king possessed extremely powerful snow powder weapons which were superior in both range and accuracy to anything the King's City blacksmiths were able to knock up. Hence, from the beginning, Timothy had decided not to engage in direct combat, but instead to use the snow powder barrels as ambush so that Roland's weapons would be rendered useless. The things that released fire at the front of the ship were likely to be enlarged versions of the weapons. They were able to load more snow powder and shoot a more powerful projectile. The only issue was that they were much more difficult to manufacture than handheld weapons. Already, despite Timothy putting all of the city's blacksmiths to work throughout the winter, the devices they were able to create were not even as good as trebuchets.

After a short while, the flames appeared once again, followed by the same thunderous sound. This time, the earth pillar attached itself firmly to the shack and flew up, causing mud to splotch all over the roof of the shack.

Weimar's guess was proven correct. Clearly, the enemy had conceived a plan to get to the shack, which meant that they knew about the snow powder hidden near to the pier! As such, Timothy's ambush tactic failed. Weimar quietly thought to himself, "Perhaps they do have a chance to touch the city wall."

After this battle, it would become evident whether the snow powder weapons were more powerful or the walls of King's City were sturdier.

Just then, a booming sound was heard from the battlements...

It was louder and more sonorous than anything the knights had ever heard, as though thunder clapped right beside their ears.

A small hill began to arch upward in the space in front of the pier. Dirt and stones were hurled into the air before smoke and fog burst out of the dirt, forming a visible cloud-shaped gaseous mass. Violent quakes swept through the land, and in an instant, the top of the city wall began to sway terribly. Weimar instinctively crouched his body, but Scar suffered a foot sprain and fell to the ground beside him.

After reaching its maximum height, the flying soil began to fall like torrential rain. Yet, it did not make any noise when it hit the ground. Weimar's ears buzzed for a while, and it took some time for him to regain his senses after the tremors.

Damn it, that fool didn't wait for the flag signal to ignite the snow powder!

The ground, which was originally flat, now looked as if it had been chewed upon. Bumps and hollows were everywhere, while hot and white smoke emitted from the loose black mud, filling the air with the smell of gunpowder.

Weimar leaned one side of his head out from behind the battlement. He saw that in the distance, the fleet began to move once again. The ships formed a straight line as they headed toward the pier. The decoy militiamen were either paralyzed on the pier, or had dropped their weapons and fled in various directions.

"Who was responsible for the ignition?" Scar, who was angry from embarrassment, held a guard by the collar and interrogated. "I'll wring his head off!"

"It was a person arranged by His Highness." Weimar snapped. "Watch the enemy carefully. They're coming on shore any time now. Prepare to raise the blue flag."

"I hope the fella hiding in the warehouse will be able to complete his mission," he thought.

However, there was no movement in the pier area at all, and the enemy's crews were able to land the shore easily.

Allen Alba was busy maintaining his rapier when the thunderous booms sounded and shook the earth. The violent explosions and tremors almost caused him to drop the rapier out of shock.

Though he knew in advance that this would happen, he did not expect the sound of exploding snow powder to be so loud and terrifying.

After all, it took place at least two miles away from where he was. "How does it feel like on the scene?" He wondered.

Using his hands, he soothed his mount which had turned restless. Then, he kept his rapier in its sheath and beckoned toward the cavalries behind him. "When the gate opens, you'll follow my charge. Don't hold back your horses' energy. They have no way to retreat!"

From the uncertain response he received, it was apparent that few among the horsemen had recovered from the thunderous shock waves.

Allen cried out loudly, "This is a trap set by His Highness. The wrath of thunder shall punish our enemies, not us! Gather yourselves; our enemies have nowhere to run!"

"Yes..." The response this time was slightly more in unison.

The mercenaries waiting behind the cavalries were still in a dazed state. Allen shook his head disdainfully. He had never taken these people seriously—they were merely the back line responsible for cleaning up the mess on the battlefield.

After quite a long while, the city gate was still yet to be opened.

"What's going on?" He glanced toward the top of the city walls with suspicion. The Steelheart Knight had not issued any new orders—however, as the charge could begin at any time, Allen could not leave his position and inquire about the situation. Time went by slowly. All of a sudden, he heard a dull and muffled sound which seemed to originate from very far away. If he did not remember wrongly, it was the enemy's signal to attack.

Did something go wrong with the plan? Didn't the snow powder trap cause the enemy to disperse and flee?

Whew...

As Allen's anxiety reached its tipping point, he suddenly heard a strange wind sound. Before he could gather his thoughts, the bricks beside the city gate split open at once.

Ka-cha!

Stones and slags flew in all directions. He felt numbness around his waist and fell off his horse stiffly. The startled horse even stepped on his thigh as it attempted to flee.

The extreme pain caused Allen to howl. "Ahh, my leg...!"

"Captain!"

"My lord Allen!"

Two squires quickly gathered around him.

"Control the platoon, and stop them from running around!"

Allen shouted while trying to bear with the stinging pain.

The formation of the cavalries was in complete disarray. Nobody knew exactly what was going on, and many rode on their horses as they tried to avoid the objects flying through the air. Though the squires issued instructions as loud as they could, it was difficult for them to take charge of the situation while this was going on.

Allen tried several times to stand up but failed each time. Turning his head, he was horrified to see that his thigh had twisted into an irregular shape, and was badly ruptured and lacerated. His armor plate had deformed and tilted to one side, while a dislocated white bone had torn through his flesh and trouser to expose a small section with bits of tissue hanging on it.

Allen's heart began to turn cold. He knew that his career as a knight was effectively over.

Just then, he heard the strange wind sound again.

This time, the city gate was where the change occurred.

Allen saw the two guards standing at the city gate instantly become enveloped by large masses of debris, before flying pieces of wood and stone swept through them like a swarm of bees. When the debris dissipated, Allen was astounded to see that the upper bodies of the two guards seemed as if they had been sliced with sharp knives. Fresh blood mixed together with their red-green innards and trickled on to the floor. Behind them were another five or six horsemen heaped on the floor unconscious. What had appeared to be harmless pieces of wood had turned into deadly weapons and sliced through the bodies like knives. Even the pieces of stone, which were only the size of a thumb, were able to penetrate the guards' helmets and armors!

Furthermore, a gap of the size of a basin had appeared on the city gate, which was nearly two feet thick. All these had happened while the enemy was still more than three miles away!

"Demons, the enemies are demons!"

Out of nowhere, someone shouted something, and the scene, which was already dreadful and chaotic enough, became even more disastrous.

The cavalries, which had been prepared for the assault, hastily turned their mounts backward and galloped away. As they caught up with the fleeing mercenaries, they trampled over bodies and created even more serious disorder. In the twinkling of an eye, the situation near the west city wall had become completely out of control.

Allen had no more energy left to support his body. He collapsed on the floor and looked towards the sky helplessly. The cries of panic from the crowd and the continuous sounds of things breaking apart seemed to become more and more distant, and his surroundings gradually became quieter.

He had one last thought in his mind.

It's so cold...

Chapter 505: The Battle of King's City (Part 3)

Meanwhile, Lightning, Wendy, Maggie and Hummingbird were executing the final attack before the main offensive.

Because the main artillery of the battleships only fired solid bullets, they were largely ineffective against the personnel and defense facilities on the city wall. Hence, the witches aimed to destroy the first line of defense so as to puncture the enemy's effective strength and open up a safe channel for the general offensive.

This was also the first time that the hydrogen balloon was used in battle.

Unlike the thousand-mile raid five months back, the balloon lifted off from just beside the canal this time, allowing almost everyone to witness the ascent of this colossal object. Under Roland's plan, the hydrogen balloon, which could move anywhere without hindrance, was advanced enough to be used as a short-distance bomber during this era. With the fleet behind it providing logistical support, this earmarked the beginning of the generation of aircraft carrier combat.

Standing on the pier, the soldiers of the First Army burst into fervent applause. They knew well that no enemy was able to resist an aerial attack and therefore their wise and benevolent lord was certain to win this war.

Quickly, the hydrogen balloon drifted to the sky directly above King's City. From its perspective, the majestic capital was only about the size of a palm. Lightning pulled down her windshield goggles and gestured to Wendy to release the bomb. The latter nodded back at her and pulled the mechanism.

Shortly, a bomb dislodged from its frame and fell towards the ground.

Another difference of this aerial attack from previous times was that Anna was not onboard but was replaced by Hummingbird. Under the effect of the latter's sustained magic power, the four carried bombs weighed only a fifth of their usual weight as long as they did not detach from each other. This type of enchantment was a new method discovered by Hummingbird while she was cultivating her mastery of magic power. By maintaining the effect for a very short period of time, she could alter the weight of multiple connected objects and reduce the expenditure of magic.

Lightning easily caught up with the bomb and guided it towards the mangonel situated on one side of the city gate.

Halfway through the air, the young girl perceived the fear in the eyes of the knights standing on top of the city wall. They raised their crossbows and flintlocks, and fired towards the sky to shoot her down. However, she knew that it was difficult enough for them to hit a bird flying freely in the sky, not to mention that most weapons did not have sufficient range to hit her at her current distance.

Subsequently, the bomb hit the mangonel right on, and following a huge boom, a blazing red fireball lit up at once and swelled rapidly. The nearby guards were unable to dodge it in time and were instantly devoured by the flames. As violent blasts swept across the city wall, the oil boilers toppled and were quickly ignited. The blazes followed the spill flow of the hot oil and ignited the explosives that were placed at one corner. Explosions followed one after another, destroying everything in the vicinity and filling the place with nothing but flames and thick smoke. The knights, who were preparing for battle just a while ago, hastily fled in all directions. Many lost their direction in the thick smoke and fell straight

down the city wall. Others floundered about in the sea of fire or rolled on the floor to put out the flames on their bodies.

The top of the city wall had turned into hell on earth.

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"Their defense line has collapsed," commented Sylvie. She was observing the billows of thick smoke on the city wall, with a trace of pity in her expression.

"These people deserve it," added Nightingale, who was expressionless. "If we failed, they would've become even worse."

"Someone has to pay the price in this battle. If it isn't them, it's us," Roland opined, while pretending to be calm. He then beckoned to Iron Axe behind him. "Blow the horn and order the seizure of this city."

He did not want to lament the cruelty of war or expound the value of peace at this time. Above a fight for power or a battle for survival, this was a collision of ideas and classes. Whenever a backward class was displaced, it would not leave the stage quietly, but rather, it needed to be sent off with a huge amount of bloodshed.

To Roland, it was always better that the blood was spilt by the enemies.

"As you command, Your Highness!" The latter bowed neatly and departed the ship.

Soon, the signal for the general offensive resounded through the pier area.

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As a member of the Fourth Commando, Nail's target was to destroy the palace gate.

As the platoon entered the Inner City, its advance was abruptly impeded. Here, they faced a strong counterattack from the enemy.

"Edgar's injured, carry him down quickly!"

"F*ck, where's the field artillery?"

"They are blocked off by debris and have to detour!"

"Prepare the weapons. These monsters are charging right up!"

Nail slapped his own cheek forcefully before he filled a cartridge with bullets and handed it to a teammate in front of him. A volley of rifle fire sounded, puncturing thousands of holes in the crazed people charging at them. Blood splattered all over as they fell to the ground. Those who followed behind continued to pounce at the commandos recklessly. They did not slow down even if their arms, abdomens or other body parts had been struck.

These were certainly not militiamen. Nail felt his limbs become numb. The enemies were wearing either half-plates or chain armors and wielded excellent weapons, with everything from swords to crossbows. He had heard from the knowledgeable Jon that only the king's guards possessed such a complete range

of equipment. Unfortunately for Jon, his knowledge was not able to protect him at last. During a previous assault by the enemy, he was critically impaled by a bolt that was shot at him from sideways.

Hope he can persevere until Miss Angel arrives.

"Retreat, the Fourth Commando, retreat!"

"The three squads are ready to fire!"

The veterans, with no concern about economizing their use of bullets, shot precisely at their targets. In one breath, they emptied their cartridges and immediately retreated to the back line, so as to shorten the time interval between the suppression fires. Five commando teams took turns to shield the others along the main street. This was the first time that Nail had seen this method of taking turns to fire ever since revolving rifles replaced flintlocks.

However, their enemies did not attack from only one direction.

Suddenly, a platoon of crazed people leapt at them from a streetside house. Before most of the veterans could turn their guns, the platoon was already in their midst.

Screams and curse were heard at once. Nail watched helplessly as a teammate was cut into half by a red-eyed guard right in front of him. Although the guard was shortly struck dead by the other teammates, Nail knew that this particular teammate could not be resuscitated even by Miss Angel herself.

"Where are those bastard artillerymen?"

"Help me! Ouch... my legs!"

"Continue firing!"

As he heard his captain screaming instructions, Nail gritted his teeth and used his sleeve to wipe off the blood stains on a cartridge. He picked up a gun on the floor and reloaded it with the cartridge. Then, he aimed at an enemy who was tussling with his teammates and pulled the trigger.

Although he was afraid, the trainings that he had attended reminded him constantly that while facing a strong opponent, it was necessary to stick closely with his platoon and make use of the team's collective strength in order to have a chance of survival.

Just then, Nail heard the loud call of a support unit from behind him. "The artillery battalion has run into trouble on East Street. Lord Brian has sent us to assist you!"

"No matter who you people are, hurry forth!" The captain cried out without looking back once.

The support unit pulled two carts up the street. Noticeably, the weapons equipped on the carts were none other than Mark I type HMG. When their shooting positions were fixed, the guns discharged long rows of fire at the new wave of charging crazed army.

Chapter 506: No One Could Escape

In an instant, a cloud of dust and ashes sprang up from the street. As soon as the "Crack! Crack!" sounds of shooting began, the enemies stopped dead in their tracks and appeared to burst into plumes of blood. The dense hail of bullets seemed to form an invisible wall that blocked the forward motion from the drugged soldiers.

"Nicely done!"

"Die, monsters, die!"

Nail clasped his hands in excitement. Sparks flew off the enemy's armor as they were bombarded by the heavy machine guns. Compared with revolvers, heavy machine guns were much more efficient and powerful. They were able to kill a man with just a single shot to the head or chest, and they could easily cause severe injuries to limbs as well. A revolver could barely stop someone from attacking. Best of all, there was no interval between each shot of the heavy machine guns. The target would likely be hit even if several shots missed their mark.

Strands of white smoke escaped from the muzzles of the guns and drifted into the air after the sounds of shooting died down. Unable to compete with the heavy machine guns, the crazed army retreated in a panic, leaving numerous bodies behind. Those who sustained critical injuries from the bullets were lying on the ground moaning and wailing, having completely lost their ability to fight, much less drag themselves from harm's way. Nail caught sight of the terror in their eyes.

'Guns in the air!' The unit leader shouted aloud.

Thinking of the comrade who was violently slashed in half right in front of him, Nail coolly raised his rifle without the slightest hesitation.

The army was finally able to march forward after the road had been cleared.

When the five commandos arrived at the palace gate, they immediately circled out a shooting field as instructed during the training, while at the same time monitored the movements on the streets. To prevent a pincer attack from the enemies, the army responsible for taking the inner city was divided into three wings. Each wing would march along one of the three main streets and serve as a flank for another. In this way, the First Army would be able to defend against enemies coming from all directions.

However, Nail noticed the real combat was far more complicated than the training. The south street was devoured by the flames, and it was almost impossible for them to pass. His own troops, on the other hand, were hindered by the crushed stones and became scattered as the battle progressed. Meanwhile, the soldiers were overwhelmed by the extent of the counterattacks they encountered, and they had completely forgotten to watch for the flag signals from Miss Lightning. A commando that should have belonged to his wing was missing, and gunshots could be heard everywhere in the Inner City.

Fortunately, they were the first wing to arrive at the gathering place.

An hour later, the other wings trickled into the palace gate one after another, slowly followed by the field artilleries.

The hot air balloon once again appeared above the palace. As the four bombs burned the garden wall and the iron gate to the ground, the final storming of the fortified castle began.

"Your Majesty, they're already at the palace gate. Please, run for your life!" Osborne, the imperial bodyguard, urged in anxiety. "There isn't much time left!"

Timothy silently sat at the bedside in his bedroom, completely motionless. This was exactly where his father had taken his own life many years ago. Now it appeared to be his turn.

He had usurped the power of Prince Gerald, his biggest rival, by making him a scapegoat for the death of King Wimbledon III, and he had thereby ascended the throne. Within one year after becoming King, he had unified the Eastern and Northern regions in succession, driven away Garcia, his third sister, and quickly became the most powerful man in the country.

He had thought it would be just a matter of time before he occupied the Western Region and unified the whole Kingdom of Graycastle. However, he had not expected that the situation would suddenly take a turn for the worse. The turn was so sudden and severe that he was caught fully unprepared.

First, the crazed army had failed its mission to attack and conquer Border Town. Afterwards, the unexpected explosion had further shaken his confidence.

In a matter of three days, all of his advantages were gone.

When he received the message from Redwater City, he had never thought there would be only three days to prepare. The snow in the Northern Region had yet to melt, and it was still too early to start conscription since farmers were busy with the spring plowing. He immediately sent a letter to the new Duke in the Eastern Region for help, but it was likely that the Duke would just now be receiving the letter and probably had yet to read its contents.

In the end, he was forced to fight against the enemies in haste. He had the help of many well-trained fighters including knights in King's City, the mercenaries, the patrol team, and the guards and squires of the nobles nearby. Nevertheless, to his astonishment, the towering city wall that he had put so much faith in simply collapsed on the very first day of the battle.

"Son of a b*tch!" Timothy suddenly picked up the candelabrum on the nightstand and smashed it to the floor with all his strength. "You damn bastard... How can you ever defeat me if you haven't colluded with the witches and surrendered to the demons?!"

"Your Majesty..."

"Yes, the demons!" There was a tinge of dryness and tremor in his furious howl. "The church is crap! They've promised to kill the witches, but instead they have decided to just let Roland Wimbledon go! If it isn't the aid from witches, what else has made his firearms so much more powerful than mine? What else has enabled him to easily attack from above? I have far more laborers and alchemists, and I'm hundreds of times wealthier than he is! There's only one possible explanation: The demons in hell are helping him!"

Two explosions went off below the palace, and the glass windows started to rattle. He could hear muted yelling outside. This was the sound of his guards' last attempts to hold off the enemy.

"No, I can't die!" Timothy thought resentfully. "It would be too kind of me to commit suicide now. My brother is the one that should go to hell."

"Let's get into the secret tunnel." He tried to stand up, but his legs were too shaky to support his weight. The guard stepped in and grabbed his arm to steady him.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Osborne was relieved. He carried Timothy on his back and asked the guards at the door to join them. They walked toward the hearth together.

The secret tunnel had both a trap-door and a fixed gate. Once the fixed gate was shut, the entrance of the tunnel would be blocked permanently. The underground maze was filled with God's Stones of Retaliation and hidden traps. Due to the complexity of the tunnel's structure, Timothy had not yet had a chance to fully explore it. It was possible that the tunnel existed even before the construction of the palace.

When the group of six arrived at a large lounge area in the tunnel, Timothy ordered that they halted and asked them to take a rest while they waited for a chance to escape.

Although the tunnel had many exits, with the farthest one leading to the outer city, it was still very risky to plunge into action in the broad daylight. Timothy clearly remembered that Roland had a witch who could carry gunpowder to the sky.

The safest option was to wait until it was dark and quiet before exiting the tunnel. Given that the tunnel was fully protected by God's Stones, it was impossible for witches to sneak in.

"Your Majesty, since we won't set out until midnight, please take a nap here." The imperial bodyguard took out a blanket from the chest and unrolled it on the ground.

Timothy lay down. His brows furrowed when he smelled the damp, musty blanket. Feeling anxious and lost, Timothy could hardly fall asleep.

Where should I go next? The Northern Region or the Eastern Region?

There were nobles who supported him in both areas, and the dukes there were newly assigned... However, would they still be obedient once they learned that King's City had fallen?

Or... the church?

As soon as the idea of turning to the church for help crossed his mind, the thought was stuck and would not leave. Anyway, all those great nobles were just hangers-on. Even if they knew his brother was in collusion with the witches, they would still knuckle down to Roland upon threats and duress, just as the nobles in Longsong Stronghold. Yet the church... The church claimed that they would not tolerate a single witch, and they would certainly not tolerate a noble who supported a great number of them.

Although these church scoundrels were conceited and foolish, at least they were not too stupid to condone the demons and allow them to spread their power in the Kingdom of Graycastle so scrupulously.

If the church could support him, he would even be willing to sacrifice the kingdom of his father's.

Until... Until he could send Roland Wimbledon to the guillotine and torture those damn witches to death, he would never give up!

In the dim torch light, Timothy made up his mind.

After midnight, the group of people fled King's City via the longest passage of the tunnel.

They exited the tunnel and quietly made their way through the outskirts of town. However, they had yet to cover half a mile before the surrounding fields were suddenly lit up by hundreds of torches!

"Your Majesty, run..." Osborne's words stopped abruptly on the tip of his tongue.

There was no need for any explanation at this moment. The enemies had apparently planned out everything long before. They launched a perfect ambush and encircled the six of them, blocking all possible exits through which they could flee for their lives.

Timothy's heart turned cold. He knew there was no escape.

Chapter 507: The Wind-up

"Your Majesty, the road to the palace has been cleaned up, and the city is yours now!"

Iron Axe exclaimed in excitement as he knelt before Roland.

The battle started yesterday and did not end until early this morning. After entering the city, the First Army only spent four hours to complete their two main missions, seizing the palace in the inner city and taking the great church in the east. The next steps would be to clear out the enemies and eliminate Timothy's resistance.

Roland glanced around and noticed that everyone was exhilarated. The soldiers in the First Army and the witches were in high spirits. If he had made the official announcement, they would have probably been cheering for victory, but he had not yet. After Timothy's rule had been overturned, he was the King of the Kingdom of Graycastle even without a coronation ceremony.

However, Roland felt surprisingly calm and peaceful.

This "magnificent capital city", the political and economic center of the Kingdom of Graycastle, did not resonate with him, nor did he feel belonged to its soil. To Roland, it was simply an ordinary city, even less developed than Longsong Stronghold. The only thing that delighted him was that the chaos created by the Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince had finally come to an end. Now he could concentrate on the development of his territory.

Having said that, it was still a victory, a significant triumph. Roland believed by the time the news spread throughout the Kingdom, he would have built a greater reputation and gained more booming authority in the country. Subsequently, he could use his influence to recruit more talents and further the reforms. The plan for the spring offensive that he had been preparing for the last four months was half completed. The only territory yet to be conquered was the south. Roland looked toward where Fallen Dragon Ridge and the farther Southernmost Region lay. That was the territory he had to seize.

He took a deep breath, put the thought behind him. "Let's enter the city!" he announced.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Iron Axe stood up with great respect and delivered his command to the guarding soldiers who had been eagerly waiting for instruction. "Column of Twos, protect your new King and advance!"

The soldiers raised their weapons in unison and shouted, "Long live King Wimbledon!"

"Long live His Majesty!"

Roland stepped off the warship and set out for the palace.

...

There were few people on the streets when the army entered the city gate. Traces of the fight could still be seen, more in the areas close to the palace than anywhere else.

In the inner city, he saw property destruction, traffic barriers, broken limbs and blood stains everywhere. Although the First Army was able to occupy the palace in a short time, it was the most intense battle they had ever come across.

Roland's heart ached when he saw the ruins on both sides of the street. The casualties were still unknown. However, there had been more than 20 soldiers' bodies sent to the rear, despite the fact that Nana had come to rescue in a timely fashion. If the little girl had not offered to help, the number would have been at least three times higher.

When Roland entered the palace area, the guards knelt down. Two columns of soldiers neatly lined up on their knees along the road leading to the castle. Such a scene was rarely seen among the First Army, where military salutation was commonly administered. Roland did not stop them. He could tell from their thrilled looks that these people were not greeting him as a military member, but were paying their respects to the new King as subjects of the Kingdom of Graycastle.

As Roland passed through the green castle garden, an old memory from childhood suddenly struck him. Three blue stone edifices arranged in a triangular shape surrounded the aquatic garden, it was where the Wimbledon had been living for generations. On the left stood the Hall of Sky Dome where banquets and ceremonies were often held. Unfortunately, it had been completely destroyed by a bomb, save the ten soaring stone pillars. On the right lay the City Hall and the library, both of which were guarded by the First Army at the moment.

In the middle stood the most magnificent Holy Temple of Double Towers. Its structure was similar to that of skyscrapers in the modern world, with an oval three-story podium building as its base. It was even bigger than the castle area in Border Town. On either side of the podium building was a lofty tower. One tower was shaped like a King's crown, the other a Queen's, both representing the supreme power of the royal family. In the center of the double towers hung two crossed iron cables, representing the two guns on the Kamon. Both the design of the architecture and the theory behind it were masterpieces that could go down in history and remain immortal.

Roland stepped onto the long spiral staircase and entered the Holy Temple. It was strange that he knew every single chamber and hallway here, despite this being his first visit. In the temple, aside from the

armed soldiers, there was also a group of fidgeting nobles. When Roland went in, they all knelt to greet him.

"Please rise."

Roland enthroned himself as a matter of course and surveyed them from above.

He caught sight of several familiar faces among the nobles: Lauren Moore, Treasurer; Bullet Flynn, Minister for Diplomacy; Pilaw, Minister of Justice; Marshall, Director of Intelligence; Marquis Wyke, Prime Minister, etc.

These people used to work for King Wimbledon III, and some of their family histories could even be traced back to the time when the Wimbledon family settled in. When Timothy Wimbledon had succeeded to the throne, they had all pledged allegiance to the new King. Now, they apparently planned to play the same trick on him according to the usual practice.

Unfortunately for them, Roland did not need them.

This was not a negotiation but a trial.

"Timothy Wimbledon is suspected of the murder of Prince Gerald, treason, as well as collusion with the church. He's now been taken into custody and will be subject to severe punishment. Soon his conviction will be publicized and known by the whole country. Do you want to say anything about it?"

"These are all capital offenses. I once tried to stop him but failed." Marquis Wyke ventured first. "You've driven away a plague on the Kingdom of Graycastle, Your Majesty."

All the other nobles chimed in.

"Really?" Roland sneered. "When he was committing these crimes, were you standing with folded arms or holding a candle to the devil? Don't tell me that you tried to stop him with your vain persuasions."

"Well..." The Marquis frowned. "Your Majesty, you don't know the real situation. Timothy promoted a lot of his loyal followers, such as Lanry, Scar and Marquis Morris, after he took charge. We could command neither the knights nor the conscripted army."

"Yes, Your Majesty. That was indeed the truth."

"He didn't even try Prince Gerald before sending him to the guillotine." Pilaw coughed while defending himself. "The executor was also a knight. We couldn't stop him."

"So, you're saying that everything that happened this year had nothing to do with you?" Roland despised these ministers even more. They were not handy assistants to the King, but rather a group of bloodsuckers feeding on the benefits granted by the royal family, only caring about their own interests. Perhaps, these aristocratic ministers had been of great help to the King when the Kingdom of Graycastle had initially been founded, but they had gone downhill in the past few hundred years. "Well, since you insist on your innocence, let's play a game."

"G-Game?" All of them were taken by surprise.

"A 'trial game' where I question and you answer." Roland's eyes flitted across each of the nobles. "There are ten questions in total. You'll be out of the game if you lie. Remember, you only have one chance to answer each question."

Chapter 508: The Game

"Your... Your Majesty, I... I don't understand." Marquis Wyke wiped the sweats from his forehead.

"What... What do you mean by 'out of the game'?"

"Those who are out will either be hanged, banished from the kingdom, or sentenced to heavy labor in the mines. Or, perhaps, all of their assets will be confiscated." The prince explained airily. "The rules of the game conform to the royal laws. It's fair enough."

"No, I've served the royal family faithfully since the reign of your father. You can't..."

"But now I'm the king. I can do whatever I want." Roland interrupted him and continued. "Don't panic. Those who have answered all of the ten questions correctly will get promoted or rewarded. It'd be boring if there were only punishments and no rewards, right?"

"I... can't accept this," said Sir Pilaw, shaking his head. "Those punishments you've mentioned should only be ordered by the court. We can't take such serious things so lightly. Your Majesty, I'm sorry I feel uneasy. Please allow me to take my leave."

He turned around and tried to exit the room, only to find that the door had been closed and that there were two expressionless soldiers now standing by the door. They blocked his exit and would not budge.

"I'm not asking for your opinion, Sir Pilaw," said Roland, "and, if you insist on quitting the game, I'm afraid I'll have to add one more punishment," he made a gesture as if shooting a gun and added, "that is, to shoot you."

The frightened nobles opened their eyes wide and spontaneously stepped back a few paces, while the soldiers around them lifted up their guns and calmly looked at them.

"So, now, time for the game." Roland stood up and clapped his hands. "The first question, did you get involved in the matter of forcing refugees to invade the Western Region? Let's start with you, Mr. Prime Minister."

"..." After a moment of silence, Marquis Wyke said, "I did follow Timothy's order to recruit refugees from the Eastern Region and the Southern Territory, but I did not take part in the other matter you stated."

He felt Nightingale lightly pinch his right shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I told you that you'd only have one chance to answer each question honestly." Roland waved his hand. "Take him down to the jail beneath this hall."

"Your Majesty, what I said is true..."

"No, you and I both know that you're still lying, even now." Roland promptly rejected the Prime Minister's appeal. He watched him get dragged out into the hallway and then slowly said to everyone, "If you're smart, you'll understand that lying won't do you any good, because, I can tell whether or not you're telling me the truth."

The nobles all stood with mouths agape, and no one dared to speak.

"If nobody volunteers to answer the question, I'll just call out names." Roland looked at the Minister of Justice and said, "What about you? Sir Pilaw."

...

It had turned out just the way he had wanted. This was a trial.

He had to cut the Gordian knot by efficiently dealing with the nobles here in this manner. As he also had to handle the situation with the area to the south of Fallen Dragon Ridge, he could not afford to waste too much time here. The post-war city management would be transferred to the personnel trained by the City Hall, and the resistance they would meet was from the local nobles and Black Street gangs.

Given that he needed the city to smoothly get back to normal and that now there was not enough time and energy left for a long screening, he held the trial to quickly remove the guilty nobles who had worked in collusion with Timothy and to pick out the clean, honest nobles to work with. As for the Black Street problem, he would leave them to Theo.

After all, the purpose of the surprise attack was to prevent Timothy from using ordinary people to wage a meaningless, long-lasting war. If he were to just step away from the city after overturning Timothy's rule and leave the city in chaos, he would be no different from their previous King.

He did not plan to absorb King's City into his kingdom, nor did he want to find another agent to run the city for him. After a whole year of hard work and development, he just did not have the strength.

No matter to act against the noble or the church, he had the ability to beat them.

"Now, the last question, have you ever bullied or oppressed the people, including witches?"

After asking nine questions, less than 10 out of the over 50 still remained in the hall. Such a high outing rate did not shock Roland at all, as he knew for sure Timothy had already kicked the incapable ones out of the palace. They were the people who either thought he usurped the throne or questioned the cause of King Wimbledon III's death. However, what did surprise Roland was that there were still seven nobles working in the City Hall who had nothing to do with either Timothy's schemes or the church.

"Your Majesty, I'm guilty," said a noble, falling to his knees and sweating profusely. "I've ordered my men to beat up a civilian because he smeared my trousers with his feet. I failed to hold back my anger at that time and..., but I just beat him. I did not kill him."

"I, I had a secret love affair with a shop owner's daughter, but she seduced me first!"

"My housekeeper slept with my wife while I was out hunting. I cut off his penis straight away instead of sending him to the court... But, Your Majesty, a housekeeper doesn't count, right?"

Roland did his best to keep a straight face while hearing those various, funny answers. Those trifles were not considered misdeeds or even mistakes by nobles usually, but now they were apparently so frightened by the questioning that they spat out all those things in fear that it would be regarded as lying.

After they had all given their answers, Roland cleared his throat and asked, "Is there anything else?"

"No," the nobles said.

When Nightingale pinched his left shoulder, he finally nodded and said, "Congratulations, you've passed."

The nobles were greatly relieved.

"I did say that the winners of the game would be rewarded... Trust me, I'll keep my word, especially when there're so many vacancies in the City Hall, but I still have one question." Roland looked at the two people standing at the back of the room, who seemed to have never broken any laws since they hadn't said anything but "No" in reply for every question and their answers were all approved by Nightingale. "What're your names and positions in the City Hall?"

"I'm Alva Taber, Your Majesty," one of them replied, "and I'm in charge of the issues related to the star image."

"Blanche Orlando," the other person, a woman, said, "I'm the ceremonial officer."

"That's the reason. People in positions like theirs don't get many chances to do bad things... These two are indeed the only ones with clean hands in the City Hall." Roland went back to the throne and said, "You can leave the palace now. I'll send for you after I straighten up a few things with my family." He paused and added. "My way of ruling will be very different from my father's and Timothy's. You'll see that soon enough, and remember what got you through the game... Keep it up. This isn't going to be the last game you play."

The nobles withdrew submissively and then Roland left the hall and headed to the basement with Nightingale, thinking to himself,

"Time to meet my 'dear brother'."

Chapter 509: To Become a King

The dungeon of the palace was a childhood nightmare for Prince Roland. The feeling naturally came back to him as he was walking down the stone steps.

He started to search his memories and soon found the reason for this fear.

One day, Timothy invited Gerald, Garcia and little Roland to explore the basement of the basement under the palace hall together. The 12-year-old Roland had been so excited to finally get the chance to join their inner circle but had never expected what would happen next. Timothy had stolen the keys from the guards, locked Ronald into a jail cell and left with the other two kids while laughing.

Little Roland was left alone in the dark room. He had thought of the shrilling cries he occasionally heard throughout the hall. A guard had once told him that the cries were from wailing ghosts in the underground world beneath the palace. His teeth chattered with fright but he had not dared to cry out loud since he had been afraid of attracting the ghosts to him. At last, he huddled up in a corner, held his knees and pressed his face against them, sobbing uncontrollably. When Timothy, Gerald and Garcia returned to check how terrible he was, his face had been covered with his snot.

After that, Prince Roland had been too frightened to step back into the basement of the palace.

Roland now understood that the wails and shrills did not come from ghosts, but from the prisoners being questioned and tortured in the basement. The jail could not hold many prisoners which explained why little Roland had only been able to hear them every now and then.

Roland met Timothy Wimbledon in a small cell on the bottom floor of the basement. Compared with the jails in the Outer and Inner City, the place was pretty good. At least, it was dry and clean, without rats, cockroaches or stinky smells. This was the exact cell where the little Roland had been locked into and cried for an entire night.

Ironically, now Timothy swapped positions with Ronald.

Hearing unexpected noises, Timothy, who sat silently against the wall, opened his eyes and saw Roland.

This brother, that Prince Roland had feared the most in the past, looked almost the same as before. Like all the other descendants of the Wimbledon Family, he was gray-eyed and gray-haired. He resembled his father in appearance in that he wore short curly hair and had his father's nose and handsome face. However, his long, narrow eyes made his face a little ghastly, especially in the flickering torchlight.

Prince Roland had never dared to look into his brother's eyes before, but now, Timothy was just a helpless and defenseless stranger.

They looked at each other for a while during which nothing could be heard except the burning sounds of torches. Finally, Timothy was unable to veil his gaunt face any longer and gave up trying to overwhelm Roland with an aggressive attitude, for he found that it was useless now. The look in Timothy's eyes changed, and somehow he seemed to be terrified.

"Who the hell are you?" Timothy broke the silence.

His dry, emotional voice reverberated in the basement, from which Roland could easily tell that his brother was scared. Compared with Tilly, Timothy had had more interactions with Prince Roland and contributed a lot to his previous annoying and fickle behaviors. He felt that it was natural for Timothy, who had known Prince Roland quite well in the past, to spot something different in Ronald now and ask that question.

"I'm Roland Wimbledon," Ronald said as he had squatted down until his face was level with Timothy's and looked into his eyes, "You can't remember me?"

"No, you're not him," Timothy said in a trembling voice, "He could never look at me like this. He dared not look directly into my eyes." He heavily panted and continued, "I know... You're the real demon! You're not lured by demons. You're evil incarnate, wanting to steal my kingdom!"

Roland did not even want to bother explaining anything to a dying man like Timothy. Ronald said, "So what? You think you're better than the demons? You killed our father, framed our innocent elder brother and then executed him to keep the throne you stole. You collaborated with the church, who our father hated the most. You compelled innocent people to invade the domain of Princess Garcia and you can't even spare your weakest and most powerless brother Prince Roland. In only one year, you conquered and destroyed so many cities, dragging the whole kingdom into chaos and making the people homeless. Even the demons wouldn't do this!"

Timothy hurriedly refuted, "No! I didn't kill our father. He killed himself. Just like you, he was controlled by demons!"

"Suicide?" Roland asked, frowning.

"Yes! He lay in the bed as usual and drove a dagger into his heart with a smile on his face!" Timothy answered.

"Not the witches?" Ronald questioned.

"No, he wore God's Stone of Retaliation! Damn it..." Timothy shouted hoarsely and added in a choked voice, "It just happened without any warning and I couldn't stop it at all!"

Roland looked back at Nightingale who slightly nodded to him.

"It must have been an attaching magic witch. Once she performed her magic power, she would not be affected by God's Stone," Roland thought, "And unlike witches from other organizations, the pure witches of the church could possibly find a chance to get close to the king." Prince Ronald quickly recalled an incident that happened half a year ago when they were evacuating refugees. A witch tricked her way into the camps to assassinate Wendy by her ability to change her appearance. Connecting that incident to what had happened to King Wimbledon III, he thought the answer was clear.

If the church was the creator of those incidents, it could also explain the reason for the Royal Decree on the Selection of Crown Prince which clearly aimed at creating wars and chaos. He still needed somebody to testify this speculation and believed he would get something out of the High Priest of the King's City.

"But this can't be the justification of framing Gerald and expanding the war," Roland said in a deep voice. "You conspired with the church and used the Pills of Madness to create crazed soldiers. Have you ever thought that how many people would die of this?"

"Even if I didn't use the pills, who could guarantee that Garcia wouldn't use them? If they recognized me as the legitimate king at first, why would I destroy them mercilessly?" Timothy explained as he crawled to hold the railings. "And what do all these have to do with a demon like you? How the hell do you want to deal with me?"

"I want to expose your crimes, judge you and then send you to the guillotine. You'll end up like Gerald, except that you're proven guilty of unpardonable crimes for which even death penalty is not enough to serve the justice," Ronald said.

"No! You can't kill me. Demons like you can never stand in the light, since powerful deities will wipe you out. If you want the Kingdom of Graycastle, you have to rely on me." Timothy yelled.

"Deities?" Roland grinned. "You mean the church?"

"You don't know them! The church's hidden strength is unfathomable. There're incredible things father had written down in his notes and they're the reason why he could not make up his mind to banish the church in his life!" Timothy cried out. "Pills are just one of their formidable methods. If they uncover your identity, there'll be no escape for you!"

"No, Timothy Wimbledon. I know much more than you think I do and I've got a clear idea of the road ahead. It's a hard road and you don't have the ability to lead the people to a bright future," Roland said slowly, "Your life must end here for the crimes you committed. But, relax, you aren't the only one who is going to hell."

With those words, Ronald stood up and walked out of the jail, leaving Timothy to cry alone without even turning his head.

Chapter 510: The Flower of Revenge

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When he entered the basement of the palace, Hill Fawkes felt his heart tremble, not out of fear, but rather uncontrollable excitement.

The flickering flame of the torch seemed to dance for him, while his steps echoed praises off the stone floor.

He never felt the dark, quiet basement could be so wonderful.

After arriving at the ground floor of the basement, Theo searched his body again. He then patted his shoulder and whispered, "Go, and don't stay too long."

Hill nodded and walked excitedly into the darkness ahead... After a while, as he passed through a darkened walkway and approached the cage, he slowed down so he could fully savor this memorable moment.

He then saw the murderer who killed his wife,

Timothy Wimbledon.

At that moment, Hill covered his mouth, as his eyes were filled with tears... Everything that he had done before was not in vain, and the outcome came earlier than he expected.

"My wife would smile at this sight," he thought.

"Who... is it?" Timothy asked. He turned around, leaned against the rails, and he desperately asked, "Is that you, demon... Did you change your mind?"

Hill came out of the shadows and paced to the cage.

Timothy was shocked and then became wary. He moved two steps back. "Who are you? Who let you in? Where is Roland Wimbledon? I want to see him!"

This was the formerly haughty king.

Hill had only seen what Timothy looked like from a distance in the ascending ceremony. At that time, he wore a crimson robe, a shining and noble crown, and he held a golden scepter in his hand. Surrounded by the Knights of King's City, he walked to the high platform step by step and accepted the coronation. Hill once hoped that he would become a good king who would give everyone a stable life, but the later raid tore the whole city, the acrobatic troupe, and the families apart. As a result, all these expectations for the future disappeared.

Now, he finally felt the sweetness of revenge—it did not contain any pity for this enemy or emptiness after success. Instead, all he felt was just sweetness and happiness, which warmed his cold heart again... To his surprise, he found he actually was fond of this kind of feeling.

"I'm Hill Fawkes, Your Majesty," Hill said as he bowed. "I'm a member of 'Dove and Cylinder', and it's impossible for you to know me, but I know you."

"..." Timothy was stone-faced and speechless.

Hill did not care at all, however, and continued, "There should have been seven members in this acrobatic troupe, but we lost a partner because of you. Since then, the six of us left no longer focused on performing, but we hid among the Rats and hotels to inquire about your movements. After that, we organized and analyzed the information and sent it to Lord Roland." He paused, and then said, "By the way, we told him about your plan of developing snow powder and impressing militiamen to invade the Western Region. We also made the two saltpeter factories in the suburbs close down and transferred them to other places."

"What're you talking about?" Timothy squinted and said, "A hidden traitor who is proud of what he has done? A traitor who betrayed his king and reaped the benefits of betraying his dignity? I don't know anything about the 'Dove and Cylinder' at all. Stop your tricks, you lowlife!"

"Benefit? Betrayer? No... Your Majesty, I just followed my heart," Hill said quietly. "That partner is my wife. She died in your witch-hunting campaign. In prison, she was tortured and insulted, but the ultimate punishment for the murderer was just 25 silver royals."

Timothy's eyes glittered.

"Do you remember now?" Hill spread his hands and added, "Although the City Hall later gave three gold royals as compensation, it actually means nothing to me. My wife will never come back. She was not a witch, but she died because of you."

After a while, Timothy said, "I didn't do it."

This rather weak answer was as sweet as honey. Usually, this response would have been met by a sneer and a "so what?".

"At the time, Lanry, who executed the arrest, was your henchman. Even Steelheart Knight couldn't stop him. I just wanted a fair verdict, but the court and the City Hall rejected my appeal. There's no doubt that you were behind this..."

"No, enough! You lowlife!" Timothy could not help but roar, "Do you know what you're doing? If that witch-hunting campaign only wronged your wife, what you've done will ruin the Kingdom of Graycastle! Lord Roland? You idiot! Roland Wimbledon has been dead for a long time! Your master is a real demon! You decided to serve a demon just for a woman?"

"... Is that so?" Hill asked raising the corners of his mouth. "When I begged the Gods, there wasn't any response. At that moment, I swore that as long as I could get my revenge, even if he was a demon, I'd follow him to hell." He bowed with his hand on his chest and said, "Goodbye, Your Majesty. I'm much honored to have aided in your destruction."

...

When he returned to the basement's entrance, Theo nodded toward Hill. "Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, Your Excellency, please take me to see His Majesty Roland," Hill said, as he took a deep breath.

On the third floor of the palace, he finally saw the man whom he had served for the past six months—Roland Wimbledon looked much kinder than Timothy. Although they had the same gray hair and gray pupils, he did not have the arrogant temperament that kept people at arm's length. He did not even... look like a royal nobleman.

"I'm very grateful for your undercover work in King's City," said Roland. Hill was also surprised by his first sentence. "Thanks to your intelligence, I could prepare everything to conquer King's City at the lowest cost."

"Don't mention it, and I was doing what was right..."

"Certainly, I know you did that for revenge. Timothy will soon have his due verdict. Now that you have what you want, you can start a new life, but I hope that you can continue to work for me." Roland got up, walked in front of him, and looked at him. "There is still much to do to help the city restore stability and even return to its past prosperity. For example, Rats need to be controlled, and the restless noblemen also need to be watched, but Theo won't be able to cope with these tasks alone. What do you think? The members of your acrobatic troupe and you can work in a secret and formal position to protect the people of the city from a similar tragedy."

"I'd love to, Your Majesty," Hill said and solemnly knelt down. "Even if you didn't say so, I'd still follow you forever. You fulfilled what you promised before, and now it's my turn to do so," he said slowly. "The rest of Hill Fawkes' life will belong to you."

The flower of revenge finally bore its most delicious fruit.