

## Witch 601

### Chapter 601: The Stargazer

Observatory, City of Dawn in Graycastle.

With the collapse of Timothy's regime, the name of the king's city had gone with the wind. Astrologer of Dispersion Star had expected turbulence after that, but out of his expectation, the order of the city did not change a lot. People still moved through their daily routines. Farmers tilled their land in the suburbs, stonemasons worked on repairing the damaged city wall and blacksmiths banged over the armors in the store. The patrol team continued to play the cat-and-mouse game with the refugees in Black Street. It still seemed to be one of the most prosperous cities in the kingdom.

There were also some inevitable changes. For example, everyday people left the king's city to find new chances in the Western Region. The Alchemist Workshop in the king's city, the old rival of the Astrology Association, even moved out from City of Dawn. Some nobles, who had remained unknown to the public before, appeared within the palace now scrambling for the land and power left by the former noble families. As for the sages, they were completely forgotten. No one came to inquire about the future of the kingdom or ask them to foretell the future.

If it was not for the food and gold royals regularly provided by the officials left by His Majesty Roland, those apprentices of the Astrological Station would have already fled.

Luckily, they still worked for the Astrology Association even now.

As long as the Astrological Station existed, the mission of the astrologers would not be suspended.

"The Forever Stargazer"

The sun sank into the mountains in the west. The color of the sky changed from a gamboge to a dull red, and eventually to a deep purple... As the night fell, the astrologers started their work.

The wind-proof oil lamp had been ignited on a hathpace. The apprentices carried stargazing gears out of the warehouse one by one. They had to be extremely careful when moving these things in order to avoid any damage. Otherwise, they would be punished by lashes and salary deduction. The stargazing gears sent by His Majesty Roland were handled with the greatest care.

The Astrologer of Dispersion Star had not taken these instruments in the wooden box from Roland seriously when he had received them.

Admittedly, His Majesty had once promised to bring more advanced stargazing gears to the Astrology Association, but the preparation of the instruments was a process of extreme complexity. It usually took about a year to select the materials and manufacture a stargazing gear, and would cost approximately 100 gold royals.

If there were any similarities with the sage arts, the most obvious feature would be money-consumption. Astrology could hardly produce anything like the products obtained from alchemy, which could grow in popularity due to the nobles and rich merchants supporting the alchemists. Therefore, only the capital of a country could afford to build an observatory. Based on what he knew, Border Town

had still been a shabby, poor place only two years ago. He had thought that even if the Western Region had plundered a large sum of money from waging wars, they were not necessarily willing to allocate these gold royals to the astrologers far away.

However, Astrologer of Dispersion Star had been stunned the moment he had opened the wooden box.

He had never seen such a tool for observing stars. Different from the bamboo-shaped instrument used by the Astrology Association, its metal cylinder was the size of a bucket. The glass mirror embedded was bright enough to reflect the image of the people. No trace of scratches could be found on it, no matter how close one got to see.

The active gear of the stargazing gear was an ingenious design. It was merely a thumb-sized rotary knob at the tail end and was very convenient to use. As long as you pinched it and rotated gently, the distance between the lens could be corrected, and there was no need to lock it after the adjustment.

His Majesty Roland gave him three batches of new-style stargazing gears, six instruments in total. The king had given them a simple name "astronomical telescope".

Dispersion Star did not want to give an eye to his original old-fashioned instrument after he used the astronomical telescope.

The rest of five telescopes were naturally handed over to the five most experienced astrologers in the Astrological Station.

"Master, all of the stargazing gears are in their places," Yun, the chief disciple reported.

"Have you finished the division of the constellation?"

"Yes. Astrologer of Brightsky Star who is responsible for the North One area, is ill today, and Astrologer of Void Star will take his place," he glimpsed at the log book in his hand and said.

"Then light the flame, we shall start to observe star." The chief astrologer ordered.

"Yes!"

The fire blazed out from the brazier in the center of the Astrological Station, which symbolized the brightest Phosphorus in the night sky. The whole hathpace was strictly arranged in accordance with the star image, and the astrologers stood around the brazier, like the companion stars of the Phosphorus. By doing so, they seemed to be a part of the starry sky.

Apart from the invaluable stargazing gears, cultivating qualified astrologers also required a long time.

Their eyes were the only thing which they could depend on to do their job well.

Therefore, one of the prerequisites to be a qualified astrologer was to protect their own eyes. Although Dispersion Star was 50 years old, his eyesight was still better than that of most young people in City of Dawn.

It was really not an easy thing at all.

After being selected as the astrologer apprentices, what they could see in the night was only the stars in the sky. Reading books under the oil lamp and candles was absolutely prohibited. In addition, they had to avoid strong sunlight, and they were not permitted to go out at high noon.

The corresponding changes would be made for meals. It was of primary significance to eat animal innards and eyes. What's more, fish and spice were prohibited. According to the knowledge of the former astrologers, eating bloody meals was beneficial for the eyes. The fish was the property of water and the spice was that of the earth. The former would damage the element of fire in the blood flow while the latter would induce blindness.

Dispersion Star had stuck to those dietary requirements for more than 40 years.

He believed that the span of an eyes life was limited.

In order to use his eyes to observe the stars for as long as possible, Dispersion Star seldom read books and stellar maps. But he did not need to because the constellation had been deeply engraved in his mind.

Astrologer of Dispersion Star directed his eyes to the telescopic sight, which was like a tiny pipe, standing behind the tail of the stout barrel.

Obviously, a flat inclined mirror was installed here to refract light into his eyes.

What an interesting and practical skill!

Although the astrologers understood this principle, they never thought to apply it to the stargazing gear.

It appeared that the application of this principle could largely improve the environment for observing the stars. At least, the astrologers did not have to bend over when observing the high constellations.

Given that the effect of the telescope delivered by His Majesty Roland was far better than that of the old-fashioned stargazing gear, what the Astrology Association needed to do was to recalculate the positions of the stars in the existing constellations and draw the stellar map once again. Since the arrival of these six astronomical telescopes, they had found tens of Dark Stars which were unobservable before.

Dispersion Star swept through the area that he was responsible for as per usual. The constellation would form different images as the seasons changed. It may be difficult for the beginners to comprehend, but for Dispersion Star, the brilliant rays of the constellation were as familiar as the wrinkles on his own face.

After finishing observing the first constellation, a ray of negligible light came into his eyes as he prepared to move the telescope.

For an instant, Astrologer of Dispersion Star felt his blood curdle.

Holding his breath, he focused his eyes in that direction.

That was not an illusion...

A dim glimmer of light hid between Hexagram and Blazing Star, looked as if the glimmer of light would extinguish at any time. However, what was different from the stars around it was obvious.

It was red.

Chapter 602: Star Omen

With his hands trembling, Astrologer of Dispersion Star thought it was not the right time to make the news public.

"When the scarlet star, or the Bloody Moon, befalls, the world will fall into a disaster beyond redemption."

He admittedly understood the meaning of this prophecy.

Taking a deep breath, the chief astrologer raised his head meticulously, for fear that the hard-won star would lose due to his unnecessary movement of touching the astrolabe.

Even though he could find the position of the star once again with his eyes closed.

"Write it down, East 3 Area, early summer, between Hexagram and Blazing Star."

"Yes," Yun replied, groping for his logbook, and then drew a circle at the corresponding position. That meant another star was included in the stellar map. "What's the name of the star?" he asked.

"No name now."

"Master?" Yun startled slightly and said.

"Just do as what I've said, and there's no need to write the name down. Besides, gather the astrologers in the observatory and ask the apprentices to leave... right now!" Dispersion Star said.

His last sound sounded like a growl.

"I'll do it at once." Shocked by the growl of Dispersion Star, Yun ran to summon the other astrologers.

"May the deities in the heaven bless us!" Dispersion Star thought.

Soon, all the astrologers flocked together around the chief astrologer.

They seemed to realize something from his solemn look. The rumor about Star of Extinction was not a secret among the astrologers anymore since Roland had paid his visit to the Astrology Association. The young king had even suggested the chief astrologer show the patrimonial gold plaque to other astrologers, as it could enable them to feel responsibility and honor in their jobs and would encourage them to focus more on observing the stars. At that time, Dispersion Star somehow had felt that His Majesty had made light of the doomsday.

"Chief Astrologer... Do you?"

"I found a scarlet star," Dispersion Star nodded and said.

The astrologers all gasped out upon these words.

"But I'm not sure whether it's a light spot or just an illusion... Such a phenomenon is common in star observation, so..." Dispersion Star waved his hands and said.

"So you need us to re-check," Void Star said.

"That's right," Dispersion Star nodded and said, "and let's start with you."

...

An hour later, eight astrologers completed the stars observation. To rule out the instrument problem, twice changes in telescopes and the one time change in the old-fashioned astrolabe were made.

All the astrologers had got a clear look at the dim light no matter which telescope was used, except the old-fashioned astrolabe.

Maybe a blurred vision or an illusion would occur to one people, but it was impossible that eight astrologers were all in blurred vision.

The Astrologer of Rose Star, one of the eight astrologers, whose eyesight was the most excellent, even claimed she had caught the sight of star profile.

There was no doubt about the existence of the "scarlet star".

Subsequently, a moment of unusual silence pervaded in the Astrological Station.

Was it the blessing or the punishment of the deities? It was a question. What Dispersion Star could make sure was that all their efforts, from the day they joined the Astrology Association, were aimed to find Star of Extinction, which heralded the misfortune and disaster. Yet when they really found it, a burst of fear struck them.

Their hard work was paid off. To know beforehand about the disaster could save tens of thousands of lives. It was the moment that the Astrology Association had totally outmatched the Alchemist Workshop. The significance of the event could not even be measured by the gold royals. Their warning, however, was also tantamount to the most vicious curse to some extent.

Doomsday prediction would be a profound responsibility for those astrologers.

"What should we do next?" Someone asked afterward.

"Under the normal circumstance, we should report it to the king."

"Do you mean Prince Roland Wimbledon? Will he believe us?"

"The star won't disappear even if he doesn't believe us."

"No! I mean he won't believe in the prediction on the Star of Extinction."

"Anyhow, it's worth a try. It was he, after all, who delivered these instruments to the Astrological Station. It was impossible that he would turn up his nose at our words."

"Who knows? He's famous for his stubbornness in King's City."

"He wouldn't leave us if he was as stubborn as he's said in rumors."

"Stop! Just keep the message about the scarlet star confidential, we still need some other days to observe." Dispersion Star raised his hands and interrupted the discussion.

After looking at each astrologer around, Dispersion Star said, "It's far from enough to only know about its existence. We need to learn about the scarlet star's operational orbit, speed and the possible time to befall the world. The more clues we can collect, the more convincing our prediction will be. Understand?"

"As you wish, Chief Astrologer," All the astrologers made bows together and said.

...

Dispersion Star felt that the scarlet star was increasingly fathomless after one week's observation.

It should be motionless.

All the stars moved inevitably, which, sometimes, was in parallel with the skyline, and then raised in the mid-air; sometimes, they would fade away after midnight. Such changes were of regularity. Otherwise, the statement about the orbit could not hold water.

However, no signs of movement about Star of Extinction could be captured.

Hexagram tilted slightly in 7 days. As the autumn fell, the 6 transverse lines would change into 6 vertical lines, and the scarlet star would be moving away from the center between Hexagram and Blazing Star.

By contrast, Dispersion Star realized that the scarlet star did not move as if it was not a star but something fixed on the background of night.

Now that it could not move, it was impossible that the scarlet star would get close to the four kingdoms.

As the prediction revealed, Star of Extinction must befall into the world. In other words, the disaster would strike only when all the people could observe the star with their naked eyes. Did it mean the doomsday would never fall if what engraved in the gold plaque was true?

Besides, the light of the scarlet star kept changing.

This conclusion was drawn by the Astrologer of Rose Star, whose logbook revealed that the star was brightening gradually.

When the Astrologer of Rose star had first noticed such a phenomenon, Dispersion Star had not taken it seriously given the stability of the stars. A star would not constantly change its shape and luster like the moon. In the seventh day, however, the Astrologer of Brightsky Star who had just recovered from illness had put forward the same idea. Given that the Astrologer of Rose Star and the Astrologer of Brightsky Star were of the most excellent eyesight among the astrologers of the Astrology Association, their points of view had finally caught Dispersion Star's attention.

After a heated discussion in the night, the whim of the Astrologer of Rose Star, a female stargazer, made all the astrologers shiver with fear.

"If the advent of Star of Extinction refers to being seen by the people, is there a possibility that the scarlet star will come into people's eyes even though it keeps motionless all the time? Will the increasingly brightening light make it surpass Phosphorus and become a torch hanging over the sky?"

Like a thundering roar, her remarks struck into Dispersion Star's mind.

The ordinary people did not know how to identify the constellation, but that did not mean that they could not see the stars.

The brightness of some stars was a match for crescent, which could be easily seen on the night of the sunny day.

How about the star being of unique eye-catching color?

The answer was clear.

"I'll write a letter to His Majesty Roland now, hoping it's not too late," The chief astrologer said with cold sweat dripping.

Chapter 603: Prelude to Battle

Zero stood on the top floor of the Tower of Babel and peered down at the bustling Holy City of Hermes.

The number of church believers who came to the highland this year had doubled from the previous year, so had that of the new Judgement Army. The Kingdom of Everwinter alone supplied close to 20,000 people to the church. This allowed the manpower lost in the battles against demonic beasts and the Kingdom of Wolfheart to be quickly replenished. In fact, the numbers now exceeded that of before the war.

In a way, the only right decision that His Holiness O'Brien could make now was to unify the four kingdoms. Should Kingdom of Graycastle and Kingdom of Dawn fall into the hands of Holy City, the church would undoubtedly reach greater heights than ever before.

However, this was not enough for Zero. She felt that while the church would be more than capable of governing the secular kingdoms, it would still not be able to compare with the Union, which owned fertile plains.

The church will have to do more if it desires victory in the Battle of Divine Will.

"Isn't it supposed to be Isabella's turn?" Zero suddenly heard Tayfun's voice from behind her. She turned around and saw the three archbishops enter the hall.

"His Holiness has sent her to Kingdom of Dawn on a monitoring mission." She bowed slightly to pay her respects. "I'll be hosting the meeting in her place today."

"Is Supreme Pontiff really so busy?" El shrugged her shoulders. "No time to see us even?"

"Be careful with your attitude, El." Soli Daal frowned. "His Holiness has his own plans. You have no right to question him."

"I wasn't being serious."

"Considering his position, he's indeed very busy." Tayfun laughed. "When His Holiness O'Brien was still around, I often heard Mayne and Heather complain like this too."

"Indeed so." Zero beckoned to the three archbishops to follow her. Then she walked over to the small table in front of the window and said, "Let's hold the meeting here."

"Not in the secret chamber?"

"The church's situation is fantastic right now. Who would dare to eavesdrop on us and divulge what we say?" Zero replied calmly. "Even the most obstinate nobles know which side to pick."

"But there will always be people who like to go against the flow." Although Tayfun did not really approve her explanation, he did not insist on going to the secret chamber. Neither did the other two seem to mind.

"Are you referring to the fourth Prince of Graycastle?"

"Who else could I be talking about?" The old man sat down, drank a mouthful of tea, and grumbled on. "Our attempts to surround the Western Region have failed. Not only the pure witches but also the priests, have all come to run back to Hermes. This is utterly absurd!"

"It was His Holiness who allowed them to return," Zero explained assuredly.

"You mean... Mayne?" Tayfun was surprised.

"When one step is slow, the other steps will be slow too." She nodded. "Ever since Silverstrip was killed at Fallen Dragon Ridge, we've fallen behind Roland Wimbledon. As we only received the news three months after it happened, it was obvious that it would be too late to send out reinforcements. So, there's no need to blame the pure witches. If they remained in Graycastle, they would have easily been targeted by Roland."

"Is there really no need to punish them? I would have liked to take this opportunity to hone Emma's temper." Soli raised his eyebrows. "She's always questioning my orders."

"That means your orders have a lot of errors and contradictions for sure." El quipped. "We all know that it's very difficult for a Judgement Warrior to use his brain."

Before Soli had the chance to retort, Zero quickly chimed in. "It would be beneficial for you to listen to her questions. As for how you discipline your pure, I shan't comment as long as you don't be too harsh on her. Every pure witch is a precious asset of the church."

"Yes, Lady Zero."

"However... why did Roland seize the God's Stones of Retaliation?" Tayfun mumbled. "Could it be because of Silverstrip and Storm that he detected the pure witches' presence?"

"Or, maybe, he knew long ago." Zero did not provide a definite answer. "We now know that he started recruiting witches very early on, and also built up relations with the people of Sleeping Island. Witches



have all kinds of strange and powerful abilities, and thus it's not surprising if they found out information about the church."

"After seizing such a large amount of God's Stones, there's no sign of him putting them up for sale. This doesn't bode well."

"Nothing is certain." She thumped the table so as to gather everyone's attention. "This is the reason why His Holiness has asked you to come today. The intelligence agency of the Pivotal Secret Area has recently discovered that there have been unusual patterns of grain purchases in Coldwind Ridge lately. Furthermore, the number of ships passing through the north of Redwater City is unprecedented. It's reported that at least one or two ships are sighted every day. Yet, our lookout in Silver City has not seen these ships sailing towards King's City or Sanwan River."

"..." The three archbishops looked at each other in puzzlement. "Where did those ships go?"

"The three of you have been busy reclaiming the war supplies deployed at Kingdom of Dawn. Hence it's perfectly normal if you haven't been paying attention to the situation in Kingdom of Graycastle," Zero said plainly. "After eliminating the east and west sides, there's only one place they can go—Deepvalley Town in the Northern Region. That place has the only tributary connected to Redwater River. It's also the nearest town to Coldwind Ridge in the north of Kingdom of Graycastle."

By tapping on the Queen of Clearwater's memory, she perfectly understood the distribution of cities and towns in Kingdom of Graycastle. "In other words, Roland Wimbledon is amassing his resources in the Northern Region. I don't have to tell you what he wants to do."

None of the three archbishops were fools, and they quickly understood what Zero meant. However, understanding and believing were two different things. "Wait a minute, do you really think Roland is intending to invade Hermes?"

"It's not what I think. It's what the intelligence agency concluded from its analysis, and His Holiness has agreed with this conjecture. It's understandable that Roland is feeling confident after his victory in King's City and thinks he can do the same in Hermes. While it's true that his snow power weapons are far superior to Timothy's weapons, we aren't ill-prepared. That's why His Holiness has permitted the church's personnel in Kingdom of Graycastle to retreat temporarily." Zero shrugged her shoulders. "The nobles there are completely unable to prevent him from clearing out all of the churches in his territory now that he's ready to publicly declare us his enemy."

"He's mad!" Soli muttered under his breath.

"The entire Wimbledon family is a bunch of lunatics." El swallowed her saliva. "Garcia was like that, now Roland's like that."

"This information is of great significance. We should further confirm it." Tayfun said, and meditated for a moment before he continued, "How about I send my pure witches to Coldwind Ridge to find out more?"

"There's no need for that." Zero shot down his suggestion. "We'll invade Graycastle sooner or later, so it actually saves us trouble that Roland is gathering his troops. This way, we don't have to attack city after city, like what happened in Kingdom of Wolfheart. We just have to defeat Roland and the war will be over." She glanced toward Tayfun. "How long more will the preparation of supplies take?"

The old bishop answered in a deep voice, "Around two weeks."

"How if we dispatch an advance force of roughly 1,000 men? Together with 300 God's Punishment Army soldiers."

"We can dispatch a force of this size tomorrow."

"Great." Zero got off her seat. "Rather than wait for Roland to trouble us, it's better that we target and seize Coldwind Ridge preemptively. Isn't he amassing grains over there? Perhaps we could even make up for our loss of God's Stones. Soli Daal, you shall be in charge of this advance force. I want you to take down Coldwind Ridge within three days."

However, she did not receive an immediate reply.

The three archbishops seemed to ponder for a moment before Tayfun asked, "Is this your idea or His Holiness Mayne's?"

"..." Zero suddenly felt a surge of anger well up in her heart. "These idiots." As the true heir recognized by O'Brien, and the legitimate successor of the Union, she felt insulted to be doubted by a few mortals. She did her best to suppress her anger and pretended to be unconcerned. Laughing, she replied, "Of course it's His Holiness' decision. You may ask him personally if you have any questions. But, there's a lot of work to be done in the Pivotal Secret Area. Unless there's something truly important, it's best that you don't disturb his work there."

"Yes, we humbly abide by His Holiness' wishes." The three archbishops placed their hands on their hearts and declared.

Chapter 604: Anna's Determination

...

Lightning flew into the castle's office and passed the last bird's eye view map of the snow mountain to Roland.

"You've worked hard." Roland caressed the young girl's forehead. "Do you have any new discoveries?"

"There was only snow and more snow." She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling. "Don't talk about demons and beasts, I didn't even see any large animals."

"Is that so? Looks like I imagined too much." Roland took out the previous maps and examined them together thoroughly—although they were only drawn in sketch form, and were not as detailed and accurate as Soraya's "photographs", he could at least make out a full view of the snow mountain.

The body of the mountain was extremely large, and its height was approximately 4,000 meters. Standing on the mountaintop, one could clearly see the sea of clouds. The mountain peak was not as steep and sharp as Roland expected. Instead, it was a vast and flat area, and the middle portion was slightly concave, like a huge volcanic crater. The only difference was that the concave portion was filled with a frozen lake, whose entire surface resembled a spotless mirror. According to Lightning, she could see flowing water beneath the thick layers of ice.

"What did you imagine there would be at the peak?"

"Ruins, blackstone pagodas, remains of a town... these won't be surprising." Roland laughed. "I find it more surprising that it's completely bare." He pointed at the newly-drawn map. "Is this the source of Redwater River?"

"Yes." Lightning turned her head and took one look at the map. "It's within the clouds. If it wasn't for the sound of rushing water, I wouldn't have noticed it. There are many cracks on the mountain's body, some of which are amazingly large. Their widths could be two to three hundred meters long. When near, the sound of falling water is comparable to that of thunder."

"Did you attempt to enter these cracks?"

"Uh..."

"Be honest."

"I did try, but I couldn't." The young girl pouted her mouth. "The cracks were surely big enough, and their heights were sufficient to accommodate half a castle. The problem was that the mist created by the rapids was too dense and thus I couldn't see anything. It was also accompanied by strong winds which pushed me back very quickly."

"Don't try something so dangerous in the future." Roland glowered at her. "Do you remember what you promised me?"

"I promised to ask for your permission before doing any kind of exploration." Lightning drooped her head low.

"That's right. I'll forgo the homework punishment this time. Go play with Maggie."

"Aye... how about the snow mountain?"

"We'll halt the work for now." He stacked the maps neatly and kept them in a drawer. "We shall wait until Sylvie returns before we talk about deeper explorations. I have to place my focus on the war with the church."

"Alright." Lightning nodded and flew out of the window.

"What do you think?" Roland looked behind him.

"I'm here, Your Majesty." Nightingale appeared on top of the desk, where she sat cross-legged. "The snow mountain is freezing cold. Who would choose to set up a camp in that kind of place?"

As she was not wearing shoes, Roland could not help taking a few more looks at her feet, which were cutely wrapped in white socks. "Eh... do you also think that the Megamouth Beasts are hiding within the snow mountain?"

"It's only a guess. If they are as skillful at burrowing as we believe, it won't be difficult for them to build dens in the mountain's body, and furthermore..." Nightingale seemed a little hesitant.

"What?"

"I was wondering, could there be a connection between them and the holes in the Impassable Mountain Range?"

...

Roland continued to ponder over Nightingale's words until it was night time. No matter how he looked at it, it was a truly terrifying conjecture.

If these bunches of scary monsters are everywhere and aren't restricted by natural barriers, how am I going to destroy them?

Something else puzzled him greatly. "If the Megamouth Beasts could reach the edge of Land of Dawn, then there should be signs of their activity in the fertile plains. Why didn't the Union leave any records of them?"

Unfortunately, the present situation prevented him from pursuing further exploration. The church had to be completely defeated for City of Neverwinter to have a future to speak of.

After more than a month of shipping, he had already transported close to 4,000 soldiers to the Northern Region, together with a corresponding amount of military supplies and rations. According to intelligence from the frontline, the field defense lines were being established according to plan, while the routes from Coldwind Ridge to the interior of the kingdom had all been cut off by the First Army. Soon, the final batch of soldiers would be setting off. Roland would be following them to the Northern Region to command this war, in which failure was not an option.

Right at this moment, he heard someone knock on the bedroom door.

Roland opened the door and discovered that it was Anna who was standing outside.

"I've seen Wendy's expedition roster, and my name isn't on it." She walked into the room with no trace of emotion on her face. "Pardon me, but I can't accept that, Your Majesty."

Had Anna stormed angrily into the room and started an argument with him, Roland would have known what to do. Instead, Anna's expression made him feel a little afraid. It was as though she had already made up her mind on something, and life and death did not matter to her anymore. Ever since he rescued her from jail, he had not seen her look this way in front of him.

Roland pulled her to take a seat at the bedside. After a long period of silence, he finally spoke, "I understand how you feel. However, the military production in the Border Area needs you. Whether it be the components of the heavy machine gun or the fuzes of the howitzer, your processing skills are required... and these are crucial to our victory."

"Not because the frontline is dangerous?"

"Although there's a definite amount of danger while fighting against the church, we'll definitely emerge victorious. So, you don't have to worry too much... It's a more appropriate choice for you to remain here."

He did not attempt to persuade Anna based on the perspective of war safety, as her expression had already made clear her attitude. The only way to convince someone as conscientious as her was to draw

upon higher-level reasons, such as explaining to her how the military production played a key part in the outcome of the war.

"If that's the case, I can do the processing in Deepvalley Town as well." Anna remained unmoved nevertheless. "There's iron and copper production in the Northern Region too. I'm sure Miss Edith won't be stingy with their ores. Lucia has also agreed to follow me, and thus the refining won't be a problem. As for the issue of transportation, while the ships had to transport complete weapons initially, they only have to transport parts now, and the assembly can be done in the Northern Region. This will only increase our efficiency." Anna's reply was clear and irrefutable. It was obvious that she came prepared for this.

Roland was at a loss for words.

"Your Majesty, I can't accept being separated from you at a time like this." She reached out her hands and clasped his cheeks. "This is different from our separations in the past. You know clearer than anyone that the war with the church is the biggest challenge you've ever faced. Either Hermes gets completely destroyed, or the First Army perishes. I'll never avoid what I need to do or deceive myself. If you lose, there's a chance I'll never see you again. Furthermore, if I wait in City of Neverwinter, I'll only hear the news two or three months after anything happens. I don't want to wait in torment for such a long time only to bid farewell in the end."

Chapter 605: Exchanging Promises

What followed was a long period of silence.

Anna's eyes were not as tranquil as Roland had thought. As the couple gazed silently at each other, he saw the surging undercurrent beneath the cerulean surfaces. It was comprised of anxiety, fear, but above all, resolve. This was the reason why her expression was always looked so steely.

As time slid away quietly, the feeling became more and more intense.

Roland finally realized that he was not going to change her mind.

He closed his eyes and exhaled a long sigh.

"Alright, but you must agree to one request."

"Say it."

"You must never go on the frontline. You'll always remain in the rear."

"Promised."

"If something happens on the battlefield..." Roland wet his lips. "I'm saying, in case, I..."

"If something like that really happens, I'll leave the Northern Region immediately," Anna said without reserve.

Roland seemed stunned for a moment.

"Are you worried that I'll try to avenge you and end up giving away my life needlessly?" She stroked his cheeks gently. "Only Nightingale and Ashes would do something like that. As for myself, I'll return quickly to the Western Region, bring all of your loyalists to Sleeping Island and settle down there, while continuing to resist Holy City. Your Majesty, although I'd like to follow you into death, I know that you'll never be agreeable to that." As she talked about this, she paused for a moment before continuing, "I promise you that I'll walk your path for you until your ideal world becomes reality, where witches and normal people can live together freely."

Roland did not respond—there was no need to. Anna's growth had exceeded his expectations. This was already the best reward he attained for coming to this world.

She reached out her hands to unbutton Roland's shirt.

Nothing else needed to be said.

The couple kissed as they flipped onto the bed.

Blackfire pulled down the curtains, while clothes and blankets were tossed to one side. In this moment, Roland's and Anna's fates were firmly connected, with the stars in the sky serving witness.

...

Two days later, Roland delivered his final speech before setting off in the square.

The people who came after hearing the news crowded the square until it was almost watertight. After a year and a half of development, Border Town of old no longer existed and was replaced by the prosperous and bustling City of Neverwinter. This had brought about massive changes to the lives of the people. This also meant that Roland's reputation and popularity scaled to unprecedented heights.

"Good morning, my subjects." As he went on stage, cheers rained down on him overwhelmingly.

"Long live our king!"

"Long live Your Majesty Roland!"

The people needed neither encouragement nor echoes to boost their volume. They consciously and enthusiastically cheered with respect for their king and waved their hands in the air.

The furore only gradually subsided after a full seven minutes.

"All of you should already know." Roland looked around at the countless pairs of revering eyes below the stage, and spoke in a deep voice, "Our kingdom is about to fight a war of self-defense against an invader. The enemy is none other than the Holy City of Hermes, which has already annexed Kingdom of Everwinter and Kingdom of Wolfheart! Today, of the four kingdoms, only Kingdom of Graycastle and Kingdom of Dawn remain. Right now, they're targeting us!"

"I know that some of you used to believe in God and the church. There's nothing shameful about that! Your kindnesses were made use of and your hopes were cheated. Do you think I'll blame the victims instead of the liars and robbers? Of course not!" He raised his fist. "The church shall have to pay! Just by selling the God's Stones of Retaliation, they're able to make more than 100,000 gold royals per year—this money should belong to all of you!"

"Why? The reason is simple. The nobles were unwilling to fork out an extra sum of money to buy the God's Stones, and therefore this portion of expenses was transferred onto you through tax increases, property confiscation, and daylight robbery! And it's not only the God's Stones, but also the building of churches, the maintenance of resident priests and the holding of baptism ceremonies. I believe that none of you are unfamiliar with these things!"

The things that the masses most easily understood and hated were exploitation and oppression. The church's methods were not as flagrant as the nobles', but in the eyes of the highly-experienced Roland, it was not difficult at all to lay bare this thin layer of fig leaf while at the same time smearing the name of the church.

"The church promised that this sum of money would be exchanged for God's blessings, but what happened in the end? Before I came to this town, the people had little to eat and wear, and as such, famine and severe cold came during the Months of Demons every year and took away the lives of many. As for those who survived... Is it really because of the church's or God's aid? No, they did nothing!" Roland raised his voice a notch. "The only thing they're interested in is sucking your blood dry!"

The natives saw these things happening with their own eyes, while most of the refugees from other cities had similar experiences. The square erupted into an angry uproar as everyone attributed all of their past sufferings to the church.

"So, I'll never surrender, and more importantly, I won't lose to these bloodsuckers!" Roland waved his fist in the air and declared loudly. "The First Army will pulverize them so that nobody will dare to rob my subjects ever again. You won't ever have to worry about paying money to build churches or to 'atone for your sins'! These bullsh\*t taxes won't exist in the new Kingdom of Graycastle!"

"Facts have proven that without the presence of the church, City of Neverwinter will become an even better place, and so will the other cities!"

"Everything that you have has been created by your own hands and your spirit, not those illusory things. That's why I have repeatedly emphasized the glory of labor! Only labor can create wealth, and you people are the most glorious of laborers. You should be proud of this. Without you, there won't be today's prosperous City of Neverwinter!"

He pressed his hands down as a gesture for the subjects to pause their cheers. "The First Army has set off for the Northern Region, and they'll be fighting against the church. If we're defeated, we'll lose everything that we own and return back to the impoverished times of old... Tell me, are you willing to return to the past?"

The answers he received were self-evident.

"No, Your Majesty, we'll fight the church until the end!"

"Kill all of them!"

"Chase them out of our kingdom!"

"I'll protect Your Majesty with my life!"

There were all kinds of responses, but their expressions were impressively identical—they were willing and ready to defend everything that they had that was hard-earned.

"Well said. I don't need you to engage the enemy in battle. That's the responsibility of the First Army. Neither do you have to pay extra taxes to support the war—that's what the enemy does to its people. All you have to do is to continue living your lives, and continue to participate in the construction and production of this city. This would be the greatest aid your kin fighting on the frontline can receive from you." Roland placed his right hand on his chest and saluted. "We must attain victory! Long live the Kingdom of Graycastle!"

"For victory!"

"Long live this kingdom!"

The people repeatedly chanted these two phrases, even long after Roland had made his departure.

In the afternoon the same day, the last batch of soldiers boarded the paddle steamers. "The Roland", serving as the flagship, tooted to signal the beginning of the journey.

The destination was Deepvalley Town!

Chapter 606: Father and Daughter

Edith had already waited in the hall when Duke Calvin walked into the Castle of Jadeforest.

"My dear daughter..."

She interrupted him ruthlessly. "Why are you so late? I wrote to you a month ago, telling you to cooperate with the First Army in assembling and war preparation. We need to meet all their requirements as much as we can."

"Yes, I notified Earl Haier in Deepvalley Town immediately, and then sent our butler to supervise the matter. Isn't it enough?" the duke said with his open arms poised in mid-air.

"Of course," folding her arms across her chest, Edith said disagreeably, "it can show our sincerity better if you come here in person. Besides, the war against the church is very important. We can't take it more seriously."

"But after all it's Earl Haier's domain..."

"Come on father, the nobles are going to disappear, and you're still fussy about the issues of domains and feudatory. I thought you'll be more decisive after the rebellion of Hawes and Lista families."

Duke Calvin was embarrassed and said, "I thought my daughter would at least give me a hug and say she missed me, instead of talking about the business before we sit down."

"Really?" Edith laughed. "So you didn't lose your temper in the study, calling me a bastard, and said I was an ungrateful bastard who bit the hand that fed her. If I'm right, you must want to smash something but stopped because it's too expensive."



The duke choked. "I..."

"Damn it, who told her?" thought the duke.

Before he figured out how to respond, Edith had already walked toward him and wrapped around him with her arms. "Welcome to Deepvalley Town, father. Satisfied?"

His anger dissipated instantly. A mixed feeling struck him when he stroked his daughter's hair.

Sometimes he just did not know how Edith became such a talented, beautiful lady today. She was his first wife's daughter, but Edith's personality was quite different from her biological mother's and his. He almost doubted if Edith was his own daughter if it was not the resemblance she bore to his late wife.

When they hugged, however, the duke again felt that they were related by blood. She was still the Pearl of the Northern Region who was raised by himself.

After a while, Edith dreadfully pushed him away, saying, "You stink. I suggest you should go to get a shower first. I bring some scented soaps from City of Neverwinter. Try one. It's better than cassias."

"There's no hurry about that." Calvin looked around. "Right, where's Earl Haier. Why didn't he greet me in the hall?"

"I told him to go back to his mansion in the suburb."

"What?" The duke looked at his daughter in shock.

Edith shrugged and said, "He cares nothing about His Majesty's will or your orders. If I didn't arrive there in time, he might have pissed the advanced troops off. Not everyone can see clearly their present situation. Some of them may not even have the nerve to open their eyes or minds. For them, I won't waste a second. The wiser option is to drive him away."

"But he just handed over the castle and towns obediently?"

"Of course not, but I have the First Army." She smiled. "And it conquered King's City in one day, so what do you think a dozen of knights can do about them?"

"I don't know whether it's an illusion or not, Edith has changed a lot in the last two months. Her smile is more sincere, not the kind of the noble's fake smile which she puts on in public. And there's a glow in her eyes, which I haven't seen it for many years since she grew up," Calvin thought.

He realized that she loved her life now. At least she was happier here than in the Northern Region.

The change made him a little envious, accompanied with complicated feelings.

Maybe just like what his daughter had said, they did lose some of their rights after being deprived of their status as nobles, but it also freed them from their territories.

Now there was a great future in front of her. She could go to places other than the Northern Region and experience a different life.

After returning to the study, Calvin drank up two cups of black tea and let out his breath. "So now we should stay here and wait for His Majesty?"

Edith opened her notebook and said, "Not exactly, there's a lot we need to do. We need to deliver all the materials, such as food, horses, fabrics, herbs and all other necessities for the war to Deepvalley Town. And I received a new ciphered letter from His Majesty. He said the iron ingots and copper ingots have to be delivered here too. The more, the better."

"So he wants to loot the whole Northern Region," the Duke thought secretly. "Do you really believe His Majesty Roland can beat the church?"

"He may not be able to attack Holy City of Hermes and eradicate the church totally. But it's not a big deal for him to stop the church entering the kingdom from Coldwind Ridge." She paused for a while. "What His Majesty needs most is time now."

"Time?"

"You haven't seen his factory, so you don't understand how powerful City of Neverwinter is," Edith looked at her father and said, "and no matter who you are, a knight, a mercenary, the Judgement Army or a fervent believer, everybody shows no difference in front of bullets. Factories keep producing these bullets. Besides, it only takes a few minutes to teach a citizen how to use firearms and bullets to kill enemies. After one month's training, they can become a soldier and go to the battlefield to kill enemies. And three months, they'll become the indestructible First Army."

"What... is your point?"

"Father, the production speed of bullets is much faster than the growth rate of human beings. It's different from swords and armors. A blacksmith with ten apprentices can make ten suits of armors, 30 swords in one year. But one factory can produce thousands of bullets in one day. After killing the knights armed with swords, they can give the extra bullets to those who want to be a knight. The next day, these bullets can be sent to citizens; One month later, the amounts of the bullets can turn this city into a ghost town.

Calvin opened his mouth but did not know what to say.

"It's normal that you don't believe me. After all, these things may sound a little absurd. But I saw how they deal with their enemies with my own eyes when I participated in the First Army's Tooth Extraction Campaign," Edith said slowly, "so His Majesty will win sooner or later as long as the First Army can hold the defensive line. Three months later, City of Neverwinter will train a new army and produce the weapons they need. But the new Judgement Army may not be able to learn how to hold their sword in such a short time."

"..." After a little while of silence, the duke opened his hands and said, "Well, I'll believe what you said. But why do you not reply to my letters if you have such a good view towards His Majesty? I mean... to marry him."

Chapter 607: Lighting the Beacon

Besides giving Roland Wimbledon a formal reply, the duke also sent a private letter to Edith which embodied his ideas enthusiastically. Since Roland had yet to marry, if her daughter could marry Roland, it would bring him peace of mind.

There was no true love in a political marriage, or at least it did not play the main role in such marriages. The Pearl of the Northern Region knew this clearly. The duke believed this was a great opportunity, especially when all of the territories of the nobles would be taken back later, which meant the king would be the only noble in Kingdom of Graycastle. His queen's position would be extraordinary.

Calvin believed his daughter could understand him.

However, neither His Majesty nor Edith replied to him.

"Don't tell me it's because you don't like him," the duke poured himself the third cup of black tea and said, "I haven't seen you like anyone before, and it doesn't matter... You considered marrying Timothy, why can't you consider marrying Roland?"

"No, it's different, father."

"What's the difference? Aren't they both kings?"

Edith closed her notebook and said, "No, Timothy needed a reliable ally or subordinate in the Northern Region. The only way to ensure that was marriage. If I said no, he would kick the Kant family out and find another more obedient family. In other words, our family's position would be untenable if I could not be the queen. There would have been nothing we could do. So I have to drag this marriage in case... If Roland and his Western Region fail... I would play my role marrying Timothy. But if Roland wins, I don't need to marry him."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Roland chose me only because I'm capable, not because of my family, territory or wealth. All those things that're behind me aren't important in his eyes." His daughter stroked her hair. "Since the noble and rules won't exist anymore, why should I obey those old regulations?"

"You know," She continued talking, "few officers who help him manage City Hall in City of Neverwinter come from noble families. They're all common people who took the jobs after several rounds of examination. I have to admit they act badly in many ways, but when it comes to their own work, they don't lose to any noble."

"This is His Majesty's new rule. You don't need to worry about losing your position as long as you complete the work assigned by him. So you should get rid of the old rules as soon as possible, and get used to the new policy which is issued by City Hall so as that you won't hold me back."

"Even so, you could still be the queen. It's harmless to you." The duke did not want to give up, saying, "You could show him how capable you are and give birth to a prince... so the Kant family would be his inseparable ally. Your brother's future would be secured too."

"I..." Edith hesitated for a while. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Why?"

"His Majesty Roland... he seems to believe in love."

"So he already has someone in mind?" The duke winced.

"Yes, a witch."

"What?" He did not believe what he had heard and wondered if his hearing was playing up.

"Scroll said His Majesty Roland will marry a witch." Edith confessed. "Scroll is also a witch who works as a Minister of Education in City Hall."

"So it's a political marriage?" Calvin could only think of this answer. "But it's too absurd. Witches can't have children."

"It's not a political marriage. He only wants to marry her because he loves her." She leaned back in her chair and played with the quill in her hand. "Yes, love plays a big role in this upcoming marriage. This may sound impossible, but after one month's contact with him, somehow I just believe what he said."

"Why?"

"You'll understand when you see him. Among all of the noble that I have seen, he's the most unlike one," his daughter said with a little smile that twitched upon her lips.

"What about the heirs?"

"They'll find a way to solve this problem." Edith shook her head. "But it's not our concern. We shouldn't get involved in this."

\*\*\*\*\*

Iron Axe was patrolling in the criss-cross trenches with a group of officer corps.

The primary use of these trenches was to evade thrower attacks and other ranged attacks from enemies. According to His Majesty's orders, the trench was divided into several paths. The distance between each path was 20 to 30 meters and longitudinal grooves interconnected the cross trenches so the soldiers could walk forward and backward. There were wood piles and barbed wire on the surface, preventing the enemies from conquering this place quickly. Machine gun castle was located on both sides of the battlefield. There was a low bunker in the front with a tall tower at the back, forming a well-proportioned firing network.

Behind the trench, was the artillery position. There were 50 field artilleries standing side by side. Going back, it was the shooting area for the 152mm Longsong Cannons.

To ensure the project schedule, Iron Axe specially applied to His Majesty for Maggie's express transportation and sent Lotus to Deepvalley Town in advance.

Just seeing the layout of the battlefield, the First Army's Commander Iron Axe felt victory was in sight.

This group of people walked to the end of the battlefield, gazing out over the tan-colored mountains far away.

This place was located at the foot of the Impassable Mountain Range's Big Gap, which was also the only way to go down the mountain. They could see the steep Impassable Mountain Range less than one meter ahead.

Coldwind Ridge just stood on the hillside.

Its strategic significance, same as Border Town, was to supervise Hermes. Once the signal fire was lit in the town, many of the villages in the Northern Region and the nearest Deepvalley Town would see the warning.

It was a day and a half's march from Coldwind Ridge to the ambush place, so the First Army had plenty of time to prepare themselves for confronting the enemy.

"Can't we just evacuate all the citizens in Coldwind Ridge in advance?" Brian who followed him to check the battlefield just could not help asking, "Holy City may turn them into the first batch of enchanted people to charge the front."

"If we do so, it'll alert our enemies that we've set a trap here. We can't take this risk before we finish the layout of the battlefields," Iron Axe said with little emotion, "Coldwind Ridge could only act as a bait rather than the main battlefield for it's too close to Holy City."

"Besides, no one would believe us," Van'er added, "You see, if someone run to the village and told those locals 'the war is going to begin, you should get out of this place as soon as possible, and please go to the foot of the mountain'... Who would believe him? Unless we force them to leave. But then Holy City would know our true intention if we did so."

Brian signed. "I know that, but..."

"Don't worry. We can finish our work here within three days," Iron Axe said in a low voice, "and then we can tell people to evacuate. According to the spy's information, the Holy City's large forces are still stationed in the campsite, so we still have enough time to evacuate the citizens."

"I hope so..." Brian said with his eyes widened abruptly, "Wait. What's that?"

Iron Axe's heart sank slightly while seeing the mountains far away from that Brian's eyes were fixed on.

A wisp of smoke rose from the back of the mountain, a black line against the gray cloudy sky.

Chapter 608: Coldwind Ridge

...

Soli Daal satisfactorily went through the broken castle gate and entered the castle of Coldwind Town.

Just three days to take Coldwind Ridge? Apart from the two days he spent on the road, it only took him several minutes to break through the little town's city wall. Of course, that muddy fence could hardly be called a city wall. The few guards just fled without making any official resistance after two of them were slashed by the Judgement Army and fell to the ground.

Is this the town guarding the border area?

Kingdom of Graycastle is nothing more powerful than that.

The only thing that upset him was when the church army was only halfway down the mountain, smoke came out of the Beacon Tower below as if they had known the church army was coming to attack the town.

Although sooner or later residents in the other domains of the Northern Region would be alerted, what made Soli angry was the disrespect the townsmen held toward the church—they had treated the army from Holy City as enemies beforehand, which showed their long-held sacrilege. Soli dispatched a squad of Judgement Army to head to the Beacon Tower, in order to arrest some soldiers for interrogation before hanging them.

"This way please, my lord." The knight leading the way said in a trembling voice. With swords putting on their necks, those knights did not show any courage, nor did they try to protect their lord. Instead, they instantly knelt down and pledged alliance to the church.

Those soldiers without a belief are just ugly, weak, and hapless. They're nothing compared with the Judgement Warriors who fight for the deities.

After killing several guards on the way, the Judgement Army broke into the study of the Lord of Coldwind Ridge and sealed every window which might serve as an exit, although Soli did not think the lord had the courage to escape through a window at all. Soli slowly walked into the study, looking at the lord gradually slump on a chair with a pale face.

"Good afternoon, Lord Kevan Matten."

"How, how dare you break into Coldwind Ridge... Does Holy City want to make enemy with Kingdom of Graycastle openly?"

"He's done," Soli thought, "Fear has completely possessed him." Through the decades of defending against demonic beasts at Hermes, the archbishop had developed a unique ability, which was to relish fear. Some people could convert fear into the desire of survival, while others would only be devoured by fear. Converting fear into the desire of survival was regarded as the essential quality for a Judgement Warrior to be promoted to a member of the God's Punishment Army. Those who were devoured by fear would be eventually obsolete in the endless atrocious wars.

Kevan was obviously among the latter.

"That's right. Haven't you known it long before?"

"What? No! I don't know what you mean..."

"It's too late to regret, my lord." Soli interrupted him. "You offered high prices for grains and forbade merchants to go to Holy City. Don't tell me you did that on a whim. The King of Graycastle wants to turn Coldwind Ridge into an outpost for the war against Holy City. So, naturally, you can't blame us for an early counterattack."

"This is a groundless accusation." Kevan shook his head repeatedly. "I didn't do any of what you accused me of. The king has never sent ambassadors to Coldwind Ridge, not to mention to launch an attack against Hermes!"

"It's OK that you don't admit. Supreme Pontiff has his method to find out the information he wants in your head. It'll do you no good if things have to go that far. So, you'd better tell me everything you know now."

"I, I really didn't do that. You can't wrongfully accuse me." He shrunk his obese body a bit and said, "I'm the Lord of Coldwind Ridge, an Earl of Kingdom of Graycastle! What you did has violated the 'Agreement on the Months of the Demons'!"

"Enough. You deserve it."

Soli Daal waved his hand in dread. The Judgement Warriors immediately dragged Kevan out of the study.

After the archbishop sat on the lord's chair, he vaguely felt something was wrong. "The lord has obviously been destructed by fear, why did he refuse to confess? Is he so loyal to Roland Wimbledon that he would rather be interrogated in Holy City than disclose the king's plan?"

At that moment, a chief justice went into the room. "Milord Bishop, Pitsos has sealed the granary, but..."

"But what?"

"There isn't much food there, probably only enough to last the townsmen for one or two months. There is no way it could sustain a large army."

"Are you sure?" Soli frowned immediately.

"Pitsos searched every corner of the granary and asked the keepers. They said recently there was not a large amount of grain coming in and the wheat there was just the stock from last year," The chief justice reported in full detail.

"Why was there news about offering high prices for grains in the town?" Soli meditated for a while. "Go ask the merchants."

"Yes." The chief justice nodded. "Besides, we did a thorough search of the garrison camps in the west of the town. Most of the rooms there are empty. The surrendered knights said since the border army was completely annihilated at Hermes, no new soldiers have been recruited."

"That means Coldwind Ridge isn't ready for a war, which contradicts the information that Zero supplied." The archbishop's brows deepened. After a long silence, he ordered. "There must be believers of the church in this town. Call them together and ask about the changes in Coldwind Ridge in the last two months in detail. Question the local Rats and those who voluntarily submitted to the church. I want to know what's going on as soon as possible!"

The chief justice bowed and said, "I'll go ask them right away."

Soli leaned back on the chair and deeply sighed. The plan of attacking Kingdom of Graycastle had been made a long time ago. The process and the result did not matter, but yet he did not like any accidents.

What went wrong?

The next day, the chief justice put a report on the archbishop's desk, which was full of information he collected.

Soli opened it and went through the testimonies on the first page. "Two local merchants offered high prices for grains. Did they hoard wheat as much as 5,000 pecks?"

"That's only the two merchants' testimony." The chief justice said in a low voice. "After getting the information, I searched their houses right away. I did find a large quantity of grain, but it sufficed to requirement of only one person. In their basements, there are merely 100 pecks of grain in total. Besides, there was no one in their houses. I guess all fled after they saw the beacon fire."

"Do you mean... collusion?" Soli immediately got what he meant.

"Yes, my lord. Only when they collude with the peddlers outside the town, pretend to sell grains to those pedlers then secretly transport the grains back, could they create such a false image."

"Where do these pedlers come from?"

"From all the other towns in the Northern Region, such as Deepvalley Town, City of Evernight, Wuthering Castle... The purchase at high prices started a month ago. At first, not many people paid attention to it. Later on, the trade volume increased so much that it drew merchants' attention. We've put all the pedlers in the town into custody, but failed to find those who were in charge of transporting the grains."

If they're in collusion, there is a small chance of capturing them. Yet... what did they do this for? Just to draw the attention of Holy City to make Supreme Pontiff attack at an earlier date?

Soli skipped to the last few pages of the report, and then a piece of information caught his eyes.

"Are the patrollers on the Beacon Tower... dead?"

Chapter 609: Entering the Battlefield

"All three died in a shack at the foot of the Beacon Tower," The chief justice nodded and said, "and the guards on the Beacon Tower take their shifts once a week. So when they were found dead, their bodies had become stinky."

"Alright. It seems it was not them that kindled the beacon, but some others." Soli punched the desk angrily, and then burst into laughter. "Are they deliberately teasing us or provoking Holy City to wage a war?"

"The specific reason is not clear. But Milord, one Rat's testimony is interesting." The chief justice pointed to the report. "I deliberately wrote it on the last page."

Soli turned the report to the last page and hastily skimmed through it. "Two weeks ago, people set a barrier on the road beneath Coldwind Ridge, forbidding anyone to go to the Impassable Mountain Range, but allowing people to leave there?"

"Exactly. The Rat had planned to take his chance in Deepvalley Town, but he saw some merchants who should have headed for Hermes were stopped by soldiers."

"It seems the lord really didn't do this," Soli thought. "Wait a moment... two weeks ago? When was the last time the group of pedlers who sold grain appeared?"

"Three days ago."



The archbishop's face instantly clouded over. "That's to say, those pedlers were allowed to pass the Impassable Mountain Range which was alleged to be inaccessible?"

The answer was clear as daylight.

"They're accomplices," the chief justice said, "at least they look like so."

"How many were guarding the barrier?"

"The Rat only dared to take a quick glance from afar. He estimated there were several hundreds of them."

"As long as we spot their weak point, we're fine," Soli Daal stood up and said, "Order the Judgement Army to gather here right away!"

"Milord, do you intend to go down the hill?" The chief justice was surprised, but he quickly explained. "Supreme Pontiff ordered us to station in Coldwind Ridge after seizing it, to ensure the road is clear and wait for the main army to come... If you want to inquire more about the situation, ask a small detachment to capture a few enemies for interrogation. That'll be sufficient."

"Not only will I catch a few of them for interrogation, but I'll also crush their barrier. This is the price they have to pay for making fun of Holy City." Soli waved hand impatiently. "If we start off now, by the day after tomorrow I'll be able to see their heads overhung above the city gate. This won't affect the Holy City's attacking plan, so His Holiness won't blame us."

"But if this is a trap the enemy set..."

"A trap?" Soli glanced at him. "I used to lead an army and attack Broken Tooth Castle of Kingdom of Wolfheart. It was a very tough battle. They took advantage of the geography and set up numerous traps. However, traps set up by commoners could only bring limited trouble to God's Punishment Army. So, what a trap set up in the open field at the foot of a mountain can do to us? Any attempt to ambush God's Punishment Army will be in vain. On the other hand, I kind of hope they have the courage to fight instead of fleeing." The archbishop paused, and then said, "Now you've understood it. Go and do what I ordered."

"... Yes, Milord!"

Looking at the back of the chief justice, Soli Daal sneered. "I'll never pardon these blasphemers."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Is there a large troop taking off from Coldwind Ridge?" Iron Axe asked, looking at the fluffy pigeon which just flew into the tent.

"Around 1,000 soldiers, coo!" Maggie said while flapping her wings, "and there are no vehicles shipping grains or a militia. They're all armored. Some of them are carrying big shields and short spears, coo!"

"Big shields?" Iron Axe said in surprise, "How big are they?"

"Um..." Maggie looked at Iron Axe while tilting her head. "About the same size as yours, coo."

"I see. Well done." Iron Axe handed over the pigeon a piece of dried meat as usual, and then called for the guard who was standing outside of the door. "Ask Gun Battalion commander Brian and Artillery Battalion commander Van'er to come to my tent for a meeting. The enemy is in action."

...

After hearing the information provided by the witches, Brian could not help frowning. "How can they come so soon? It takes two to three days for His Majesty to reach Deepvalley Town. The Longsong Cannons aren't in place yet..."

"The church indeed reacted faster than we've expected, but whether His Majesty is here or not, we need to stick to our posts and never step back," Iron Axe calmly said, "and no matter what, the enemy mustn't cross our defensive line at the foot of the mountain."

"Yes!" Brain and Van'er said in unison.

"Good. Here is my battle arrangement." Iron Axe licked his lips. "It'll take the enemy at least one day to arrive at the foot of the mountain, which gives us enough time to prepare. We have over 2,000 pieces of God's Stones of Retaliation. Assign them to as many soldiers as possible at the front rows. The machine gunners need more protection than anyone else, so they must wear God's Stones too." He roughly explained the plan he'd been conceiving. "In addition, I'll arrange 10 good gunners and a machine gun team to protect Miss Sylvie. They'll follow Miss Silvie's instructions based on her investigation of the scene to take care of the enemies who pose greater threats. Other soldiers will act in accordance with the instructions set out during the maneuver.

"I have a question," Van'er said in hesitation. "In the enemy's team, can the soldiers carrying big shields be..."

"They're most likely God's Punishment Army." Iron Axe nodded. "Judging from Miss Maggie's description, commoners won't be able to march carrying shields of such a size."

"Can a bullet penetrate it?" asked Brian.

"We won't know it unless we try," Iron Axe answered without hesitation. "If a flintlock can't harm the enemy effectively, your people just try to stop the God's Punishment Army marching forward and leave them to the artillery to take care of."

"Yes!"

"Eventually you have to rely on the artillery to solve the problem," Van'er said smilingly. "Leave it to me, Your Excellency."

\*\*\*\*\*

Two days later, Danny jumped into a trench in the early morning, holding his beloved rifle.

According to the instructions yesterday, he quickly came to his spot—the right wing of a trench in the center of the battlefield. The shrubs and bushes in the surrounding areas had all been cut, leaving an open space for him to overview the entire battlefield and aim precisely.

Danny picked up a few stones from the ground, created a small rack on the side of the trench, put his rifle on the rack, and aimed at the front.

Through the sights, Danny saw dewdrops suspending on leaves above the ground, a spider clinging to a wire fence, a red clay road full of horseshoe prints, and the Impassable Mountain Range at a distance.

An excellent sniping position.

He opened the bolt, pushed the first bullet into the chamber, and waited for enemies to appear.

As a hunter, Danny had always been patient.

Since he joined the Militia in response to His Majesty's conscription, he had participated in a series of battles, such as the defense battle in the Months of Demons, the operation against the Duke of Longsong Stronghold, the attack of King's City, etc. The weapon he used had updated from flintlock to the newest bolt rifle. In terms of combat experience, he must be one of the most experienced soldiers in the First Army. If he had not insisted on staying at the front, he would have been most likely an officer of the Gun Battalion only second to Sir Brian.

Compared with commanding others, he preferred the feeling of hunting a prey.

Ever since the day he laid hands on a flintlock, he had deeply been in love with such a weapon.

It was handy and powerful. One only needed to have a good eyesight and a little bit of gift to master it.

Holding a gun in hands, Danny could feel the power surging from the bottom of his heart.

Chapter 610: The Hunter

While Danny was waiting, a short guy ran toward him along the trench.

"Captain, you're early." He panted, took the sack off his shoulder, and put it at Danny's feet. "Here's your ammunition."

"If I was hunting in the mountains, I'd have come back by this time already," Danny said carelessly. "How much ammunition for me?"

"30 bullets."

"So few..." Danny murmured. "Bloody machine gunner."

The short guy was the youngest soldier in the army, only 16 years old. His name was Malt. He came to "protect" Danny.

Every sharpshooter was paired with a protector so that when enemies drew close, they could quickly suppress the enemies and won themselves time to run away or switch to bayonets.

Danny did not think that he needed a protector, especially not an underaged one. The reason he accepted Malt was that he could not turn down Karl Van Bate's implore. He had been neighbors with this Minister of Construction for years, and they had lived in the same street of the New District. Naturally, he understood that Karl viewed all the kids graduated from Karl College as his own children.

Since the sharpshooter's position was usually at the back, the protector was actually at a safer place compared with the soldiers at the front line. Danny knew that His Majesty hated his employees covering up or colluding with each other, so taking Malt as his protector was one of the few things that he could do without offending His Majesty.

Looking at Malt who was squatting there picking bullets, Danny could not help asking, "Have you thought of changing for another job?"

"Leaving the First Army?" Malt answered without raising his head, "No, I like it here very much."

"But this isn't a game," Danny said, raising his eyebrows. "We could be killed at the battlefield anytime. You don't have to take this risk. As a Karl College graduate, you're totally qualified for a job in City Hall. There you can work quite decently and earn more than here in the army."

"But I don't like running errands for the officials every day. I just want to hold a gun to protect His Majesty." Malt put the 8 mm bullets he picked before the trench. "Besides..." He suddenly paused and seemed to be blushing.

"Because of Miss Nana?"

Malt did not reply, yet his cheeks reddened.

Danny could not help bursting into laughter. "At least half of the soldiers in the First Army admire Miss Angel. I don't think you even have a chance. Besides, her father is a baron. Even he currently doesn't have lands, his daughter isn't someone you can dream of."

"I, I'm not thinking like that," Malt said, craning his neck. "I'm satisfied as long as I can see her every day."

Danny shook his head and stopped persuading Malt. He knew how strong or stubborn one could be once he was in love. He himself was no exception.

Whenever he had time, the image of a green-haired woman would appear in his mind as soon as he closed eyes.

If she had not reached out to save him, he might have lost his life in the forest.

But at that time, she was still a minion of the demons', the embodiment of evil. Danny buried his affection deep in his heart and dared not to tell anyone. Unexpectedly, the second time they met, witches had been proved to be innocent. Consequently, she had moved into the Witch Building in the castle area and opened up various experimental fields in Misty Forest.

He could not enter the castle area as he wished, so whenever he was on a vacation, he would always pick up his bow to hunt in Misty Forest. He even decided that when he no longer served as a soldier, he would apply to the City Hall for the forest ranger job and take Misty Forest as his new home.

"Woo... Woo...!"

At that moment, he heard the blare of the horns.

It signaled the arrival of enemies.

Danny stopped his wandering thoughts and fixed his gun holder.

No matter what, he was still a warrior at the moment. He should fight to protect His Majesty and overthrow the church who was hunting witches.

...

As the sun rose above his head, a troop with shimmering armors appeared at the foot the mountain.

In order to siege the only road leading to the mountain, their defensive line was less than one kilometer away from Hermes. The moment the enemies went off the mountain, they had stepped into the First Army's cannons' shooting range.

Danny knew full well that Iron Axe would not miss any chance to strike the enemies.

As if to prove his thoughts were right, a series of dull roars burst behind him, which sounded like thunders coming from far away. Danny vaguely saw lines of shadows flying over his head towards the enemies.

The battle started without a sign.

From a distance, Danny could clearly see the landing points of shells, where dust was sprung up like bunches of wildflowers. The enemies which were marching like a line of ants instantly went into a panic. That was a normal reaction, considering it was the first time they were stricken by opponents whom they could not even see. If it were for the mercenaries or militia, their morale could probably totally collapse after a few rounds of shooting.

But the troop of the church did not retreat. It began to accelerate. The soldiers seemed to be not as neatly lined as before.

By the time they got closer to Danny, they had suffered three rounds of cannon attacks. The combination of 50 field artilleries was enough to bombard continuously, which was a torturous experience to the enemies. Without war horses, they had to trod on this hellish road on foot.

The God's Punishment Army, which was said to have prodigious strength, held big shields upright and advanced in the front row. They formed a gray iron wall 500 to 600 meters away from the First Army's first trench.

But it did not mean much in front of bullets. As soon as a bullet hit a big shield, it would break the shield into pieces and threw the shield holder on the ground.

"This isn't good," Danny said while shaking head. "I'm afraid they would be destructed before they even reach the first trench." He understood the First Army's fire arrangement: first, they took care of the enemies from 1,000-1,500 meters away with cannons; then when the enemies gathered before the wire fence, they swept the battlefield with machine guns; if the enemies got within 200 meters and began to rush forward, they used revolving rifles in close range combat.

"Why is it not good to destroy them?" Malt peered over the trench, standing on his tiptoe.

"Well, because then there'll be nothing for me to do." Danny collected the bullets he laid out into the waist pocket, lifted his gun, and prepared to leave.

"Where are you going?" Malt hurriedly pulled him.

"I'm going to the trench in the front row." Danny got rid of Malt's hand. "You stay here."

"I'll go with you."

"Don't follow. This is captain's order"

With these words, Danny bent over to walk along the communicating trench.

The sounds of landing shells got louder and louder. At every dull crashing sound, crumbs came off the trench walls and fell into his collar.

He then knew that he was approaching the forefront bit by bit.

After crossing three rows of trenches, before a new round of shells landed, Danny stuck out his head to watch over the trench, regardless of the fact that other team members were looking at him confusedly. He could clearly see the big shields of the God's Punishment Army, and even hear the enemies' desperate shouting and yelling.

He was about 300 meters away from the enemies.

This is close enough.

Taking a deep breath, Danny set up his rifle, aimed the sights at somewhere a little over a shield, and pulled the trigger.

Accompanied by a crisp sound, some blue blood spilled behind the shield, which, together with the shield holder, fell to the ground, revealing the bewildered Judgement Warriors hiding behind.

Danny pulled open the bolt, took off the steaming bullet shell, and pushed the bolt back again.

The loading sound thrilled and exhilarated him.

"The first one," Danny thought.