

Witch 861

Chapter 861: The Redwater Plot

On the 10th day of the expedition, they were at Redwater River.

Roland was in quite a heroic mood as he stood at the front of the shallow water gunboat, looking at the sparkling river in front of him.

Behind him was a huge fleet, and despite the fact that some of the ships had turned eastward three days earlier, the remaining ten steam-driven paddle steamers remained a rare sight on the river. The chimneys, standing like a forest of iron, were painted in a striking snow white color, and the black smoke that erupted created a "dark cloud" over the river.

After entering the Central Region of Graycastle, there were significantly fewer vessels, which meant that the Kingdom's trade center was moving westward. However, the influence of several major cities in the central region was present. Compared to the many single-masted boats in the Western Region, most of the sailboats that were found here were more exquisite and beautiful.

All the merchant ships that they encountered along the way kept their distance. Bold sailors would lie on the ship's side, and point to the flagship of steel exclaiming endlessly. The captain or businessman who recognized the High-Tower and Spears flag would even bow and salute the vessel.

Roland was very satisfied that he could amass so much after three years. But he was even more gratified about these young officials who were brought up by the City Hall.

They did not have a lineage of 100 years nor did they have a rich and powerful family background. They just had a short-term universal education and a mastery of literacy. If this was the past, at best, they could only work for the nobles by doing some miscellaneous administration for a living. But in Neverwinter, they gradually became the backbone of all the departments.

Because of the lack of patronage, the new generation of officials fully supported Roland—other than him, no one else would use normal civilians that had no status.

Because they had never held any management posts, they would act cautiously in accordance with the rules and regulations. When they encountered any problems, they would make the effort to ask their superiors for help and would not be arrogant or conceited like the nobles.

As they were selected from ordinary subjects, they were used to carrying out tasks on their own. The Ministry of Agriculture officials led the farmers to grow wheat and the officials of the Ministry of Construction demonstrated the characteristics of cement to the new workers. This scene was a common sight in the city. A powerful, centralized government needed to have strong control over the people at the grassroots level in order to exert its fast and efficient potential. This action by the civilian management was exactly what was needed.

Of course, the civilians that jumped to the management level did not come without flaws.

Just like a poor man who had never owned property and suddenly came into fortune, it was easy to fall into the trap of greed and shortsightedness. The level of education at Neverwinter was not high, so they

probably would not possess personal standards and professional ethics. Fortunately, there were Nightingale and the internal review by the Security Bureau that could effectively curb this tendency. After several screenings and severe punishment, those who remained in City Hall had understood the limits of His Majesty.

The ever-growing number of young officials had become Roland's guarantee of expanding his own power. It could even be said that his plan to regain the kingdom was based on the number of officials available.

Now, he finally had the foundation for unifying the country.

"Notify the Adviser Department to go to the observatory for a meeting." Roland turned toward Nightingale. "How should we go about taking over Redwater City? It's about time that they come up with a plan."

...

In fact, it was not the first time that the Neverwinter fleet visited Redwater City. As early as six months ago in the Tooth Extraction Campaign, the First Army had visited this central city.

The Adviser Department's opinion was reasonable: "Your Majesty, Redwater, in terms of the Central Region, is considered second only to the old king's city. Not only does it own a vast territory, there are also many nobles. I'm afraid we can't force them to hand over their power like what we did with Willow Town."

Sir Eltek, Morning Light's father, further elaborated by saying, "Earl Delta, the lord of Redwater City, isn't an ambitious man. This can be seen from the city's tax revenue—he could easily request for more as he controls the intersection of the inland rivers. The Delta family had managed this area for several generations. Even if they gave up their manor, they would still have a comfortable life. As compared to rebellion, the Earl would certainly know how to make a wise choice."

"But this doesn't mean that the other nobles will follow suit. It's by no means easy to consolidate their opinions, especially the Tririver and Rock Ridge families. It's rumored they're not on good terms with Earl Delta." He pointed to the map and said, "And once your claim is officially proclaimed, it's likely that this will bring the opponents together similar to what had happened in the Western Region before, so we speculate that the First Army may have to fight and force them to surrender their power."

"Of course, this isn't bad. Destroying rebels can reduce the trouble for the management later on, and your great strength will certainly deter the rest of the misfits. So we suggest that you summon Earl Delta alone to convince him before announcing the decree—although those nobles should more or less already know about your intentions. If someone disobeys later on, you can just send troops to clear them out."

Roland nodded and silently looked at the map.

He did not mind using military action to persuade his opponent. The First Army was used to doing that. However Sir Eltek's words, "just like what happened in the Western Region before" gave him some concern. The time he had spend to eliminate the five big families took a lot longer than the seizing of Long Stronghold and king's city. The reason back then was that the area of a fief had been far larger than

that of a city. He had to take a few extra days just for a detour. Redwater City had an even larger manor around it compared to the Western Region cities. If he really wanted to clean it up, it would take more than two to three weeks, plus the subsequent placating measures.

"Isn't there a faster way?"

"Well, Your Majesty, faster means..."

"I don't want to spend too much time on this. Later on, there'll be several other cities. If they all require such measures, by the time we get to Coldwind Ridge, half of the summer would have passed."

"This..." The Earl and the others were silent for a moment.

"There's a method but it might be detrimental to your reputation," muttered Edith suddenly, "bring them together and announce to everyone on the spot."

"Oh?" Roland looked at her. "Go on."

"I've encountered a similar problem, but it was even worse," said Pearl of the Northern Region and then she gave a detailed account of her plan to eliminating the Hawes Family and Lista Family. "I'm afraid that if I'd followed the tradition of the nobles, and had declared before taking action, the Northern Region would have still remained in their hands."

After listening to her plan, the staff of the Adviser Department could not help but gasp.

"Your Majesty, this..."

"It's hard to be convincing without evidence and trial!"

"If it gets found out, I'm afraid that it'll bring suspicion from the other nobles."

"Have you forgotten that there should be no other nobles in Graycastle other than His Majesty?" Edith said flatly. "No trial was needed when the former nobles dealt with civilians." She turned toward Roland and said, "But it depends on whether you want to carry it out, after all reputation—"

"Only the victor is qualified to write history," Roland interrupted her, "for example, if you don't say anything, no one will know you've done something like this. I have to thank you for your trust in me, and anyway, this matter won't be found out. As for the takeover of Redwater City, let's follow your idea."

He then saw a strange glimmer in the latter's eyes. At that moment, the Pearl of the Northern Region's breathing seemed to quicken.

However, she quickly masked her unease and bowed her head.

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

Chapter 862: Obstacles

In his mansion in Rock Ridge, Earl George Nery finally received the letter from the Western Region. He unsealed the letter and glanced over it, his face clouding over.

"What did it say?" Asked a restless Baron. On his chest, there was a kamon of God of River, indicating that he was from the Levitan family, whose domain was located at the intersection of river courses and was regarded as a fairly famous family in the local area.

There were over twenty nobles like him in the study room.

Nearly half of the feudal nobles around the Redwater City had gathered here.

Instead of answering him immediately, George glanced at him coldly and handed the letter to Guye Yurianne, the Earl of Tririver. After the latter read through the letter, George began to speak slowly, "Roland Wimbledon has taken away all the power of the Willow Town lord and occupied his domain as well."

"The new king... really did it?"

"Hell. So what does he want to do? To deprive us of our titles just as the news we received has suggested?"

"How can he do that? That title is passed down from my grandfather!"

Someone suddenly said, "Willow Town is too close to the Stronghold and it's very small. It doesn't mean that he'll do the same to Redwater City, does it?"

"I guess He didn't seize the entire king's city before is because he doesn't have the capacity. Maybe we should wait."

Hearing that, George could not help sneering in anger. He said, "To the Western Region, is Redwater City farther than the City of Evernight? Are your domains larger than the whole Northern Region? Are you blind or stupid? It's not news that Roland Wimbledon wants to take away the power of all nobles. You see what happened in the Northern Region. The businessmen have hinted it repeatedly, and now the Willow Town provides the best example. And now you're wondering whether you will be the next?"

"Please mind your language, Your Excellency."

His mean and rude remarks made the nobles frown.

"Let me explain," said Guye, waving his hand toward the Earl of Rock, "In fact, I believe everyone is aware that our new king is definitely not an ordinary person. Since he went to Border Town, everything he has done is beyond imagination. So it's meaningless to judge his actions by the old standards and your past experience. I have sent my men to the Western Region. Roland Wimbledon doesn't conceal his real thoughts. He plans to abolish the noble's feudal power and just reserve their titles... This has basically become his mission of his ruling, and the slogan has been openly put up in the city square."

His calming voice eased the mood of the nobles. He continued to say, "You may say that Redwater City isn't his domain. But the Longsong Stronghold wasn't his either, let alone the Northern Region. Roland Wimbledon will be the King of Graycastle sooner or later. When that day comes, even if he claims that the whole kingdom is his domain, what else can we do other than accept it? And that will definitely happen." After a short pause, Guye said, "If we lose our domain and subjects, what else do we own?"

"But what can we do?" Huth, another Baron, interrupted impatiently, "King Timothy was defeated, so was the church. Who else can stop him? Last time when the Western Region army came to Redwater

City, we saw how they fought. Within 60 meters, the snow powder weapon is irresistible, and even heavy-armored knights can't approach. How can we resist such power?"

Hearing that, the crowd chimed in.

"Of course there's a solution," George said in a cold voice. "Although the snow powder weapon is powerful, it has some flaws. It can only be used in an open space. The bigger space, the more powerful. But when in a confined environment, its power is limited."

"A confined... environment?"

"The Lord's castle, for example," he said word by word while glancing at the nobles who were present, "When Roland Wimbledon arrives at Redwater City, he'll definitely live in the castle. Only a few guards can live there, so as long as we can arrange more men there, we'll be in an advantageous position."

"Did Lord Delta agree to cooperate with you?" Levitan asked in surprise.

"You know his personality. It's impossible for him to do such a thing. Even if he was pointed by a sword to his neck, he would not resist." said George, shaking his head dismissively, "But he really did me a lot of favor. In the castle, there're lots of secret paths which lead to the outer city area. As long as we send our people in the castle ahead, they won't be found."

"How did you... know it?"

"Thanks to Earl Delta, he likes to dig here and there in the city, and I bribed the masons for the information. As the saying goes, a crafty person has more than one hideout. I don't know whether he's cautious or timid," George sneered and said, "I originally planned to kill him in this way, but I think it'll work just as well on Prince Roland."

"But this is treason..." Huth muttered, "And if Roland Wimbledon were killed, his army would likewise flatten us!"

"Who said we're going to kill him?" replied George, knocking on the table with displeasure. "As long as we seize Roland, we can have the situation under control. Since the new king is alive, his army won't dare to put his life at risk. Maybe we can even force his army to retreat. Once the news spreads, those nobles will definitely side with us. Don't forget, the Western Region is the only domain he's truly had his hands on. When that day comes, it's hard to say whether the Duke of the Northern Region will still support him."

"But after all, he is..."

"He hasn't been a real king yet, Baron Huth." Guye Yurianne interrupted him, "He hasn't held the coronation, nor did he proclaim himself as a king. We can select another Wimbledon, who believes in aristocracies and follows the traditions, as the king. We'll find such a man in the king's city as long as we try."

"By that time, maybe someone will stand out before we look for him." George lowered his voice, "And we should know how much we'll benefit from this. Losing everything or glorifying your family, what are you hesitating about?"

His words immediately caused a stir among the nobles. Obviously, they already knew what they should choose.

George Nery was not surprised by the result. The nobles he summoned had been in favor of Timothy before. Even if Timothy was dead, they would not choose Prince Roland with whom they had a conflict of interests. Further, the prospective benefits were enough to tempt this group of cowards to take a bold action.

However, their ability was limited. If no one led them, they were nothing but a rabble. He was the only qualified person to assume the post of the lord of Redwater City and run the Central Region.

After a moment, Levitan and his party seemed to have made their decisions. They asked, "What're we going to do next?"

"Put some of your reliable knights under my command... Then, just wait," George said with confidence.

Chapter 863: A Prelude

Two days later, the fleets of Roland Wimbledon arrived at the pier of Redwater City.

Earl Delta, who had received the message earlier, took the matter very seriously. At his command, the pier was not only thoroughly cleaned, but was also decorated with eye-catching satin and banners. On the day when Roland arrived, Earl Delta led the nobles outside the city gate and greeted Roland in the suburb. He was much more enthusiastic than he had been upon the arrival of the First Army earlier.

As the great nobles in the Central Region, George Nery and Guye Yurianne were naturally among the greeting crowd.

He had to admit the new king's presence was indeed impressive. It was not the first time for George to see the steel ship named after Prince Roland. However, after seeing it again after half a year, the ship still shocked him in the same way as it had done before. Following it, concrete ships were neatly lined, much more than last time. Their snow-white chimneys and heavy smoke seemed to reach to the sky. When he saw the soldiers who wore uniforms of the same color walk down the pier, he could not help admiring it. If he had such an army to serve for the Rock family, it was not impossible for him to fight for the throne in the royal palace of the king's city, not to mention Redwater City.

"This fool. I really don't know how he's smartened himself up." George spat and said, "When I was in the king's city about five or six years ago, he was obviously the stupidest one. He was totally incomparable to his elder brothers. Even his little sister, who had scarcely been out of the shell back then, was much better than him."

"Doesn't that mean that Prince Roland is the most sophisticated one?" said the Earl of Tririver, shrugging, "Since he can develop the border to such a degree and overshadow all of his siblings, he's definitely not a fool. Remember to smile and show your hospitality."

"Of course I know," George replied carelessly. "After all, he's a member of the royal family. Even if he's a fool, I'll do my best. Rest assured."

"That's great."

At this moment, a loud horn sounded in the direction of the pier and a stir was aroused in the crowd. He knew that Roland Wimbledon, the ruler of the Western Region, or the new king of Graycastle, showed up.

"How's your preparation going?" George asked under his breath.

"I've already sent 51 men to the castle," said Guye, who remained still in his position, pretending to be eager to see the arrival of His Majesty, "In two days, I can send the rest of them."

"Me too," said George, smiling faintly, "so we still have lots of time. Then we'll have a bigger chance."

He had talked with Guye several times what Roland would do after he entered Redwater City. Roland was most likely to reach an agreement with Earl Delta before he announced to forfeit their feudal power. After all, Redwater City was a large city and there were lots of nobles with domains around it. Therefore, it was impossible for him to act as quickly as he did in Willow Town.

Since Delta was indecisive, it might cost him several days to make up his mind. And then it would take another few days before the news spread and the other nobles responded to it. During this time period, George could fill the secret paths with a sufficient number of his people without being noticed.

Then when the bell at midnight tolled, their men would rush into the castle altogether. The snow powder weapon would be useless. Since they had more people they needed and they were in a favorable geographical position, it would be impossible for Roland Wimbledon to escape.

"He's coming," Guye reminded George.

George immediately put on a smile and stepped forward. Among the greeting group, the first row was the family members of Earl Delta, and the second row was great nobles like him.

Earl Delta stood beside the new king and was introducing the nobles with a flattering smile. When George saw his round face with his broad grin and quivering double chin, he could not help having a bad turn in his stomach.

He still remembered that the Earl had been the same obnoxious toady when Timothy the second prince had led his army into Redwater City.

"Your Majesty, this is the lord of Rock Ridge, Earl George Nery." Delta finally walked to him.

"I'm greatly honored, Your Majesty," said George with his most cordial tone, pressing his chest with his right hand and bending deeply, "Rock Ridge has the most fragrant tea and fruit wine. It'll be my great honor if you can pay a visit."

"Really?" The reply from Roland took George by surprise, "Where's your domain?"

"As a ruler, shouldn't he say that the honor is his and that he would pay a visit at his convenience?" George thought, but he quickly replied, "Just on the east of Redwater City. Two kilometers to the east and behind the first mountain you see is the domain of the Nery family."

"It sounds like a nice place. I hope you'll treasure it," said the new king, who patted him on the shoulder and smiled.

Treasure it? What does he mean?

George frowned without Roland noticing it. Without betraying his suspicion on his face, he replied, "Yes, Your Majesty."

Nothing out of normal happened during the greeting ceremony. After everyone met Roland, Earl Delta announced that he would hold a grand banquet at the Lakeside Villa. Then he ordered the knights to clear the road ahead and escort the king to the city.

Everything went as planned and even a little exceeded his expectation. The new king's army did not rush into Redwater City. Instead, they were stationed in the pier area in the suburb. Roland was followed by less than 100 guards. When they lived in the castle, about 20 guards would be able to guard outside his bedroom.

He was certain about the result.

However, he felt a little restless out of no reason. Roland's smile seemed to be weird... He could not tell the reason, but he could not help feeling an ineffable chill looming over his heart.

George shook his head and put all the thoughts behind. "Maybe I was wrong," he thought, "Even if he's brooding on something, they'll be meaningless the moment he entered the castle. When he's in my hands, I'll talk with him about what happened earlier."

By that time, I won't have to try to please him, and he'll not be in a mood to show such a strange smile.

The night fell.

Everyone in the city knew that the last prince of the Wimbledon family was in Redwater City. As he was most probably the king of Graycastle, the whole city celebrated it. The vast Inner City was as bright as the day, so was the Lakeside Villa. It had always been the place to entertain distinguished guests, and the dining hall, which was built above the lake, was linked with Redwater River and supported by dozens of hundreds-year-old larches. A trestle-like corridor led to the shore and there was even running water in the hall.

To please the new king, Earl Delta spared no effort in bringing all the seasonal gourmet food in the surrounding area to the table, and some of them were something George first laid his eyes upon.

However, he did not pay much attention to the food.

In addition to Roland Wimbledon's action, he had to also keep an eye on those nobles who supported the Lord of Redwater City.

After the new king showed up in the dining hall, George could not help frowning.

All of those guards around Roland turned out to be women.

Chapter 864: An Announcement

George silently counted and found that there were altogether 10 women. The number did not exceed what the royal family was allowed to have. Among them, six were guards, wearing short robes and

leather pants for convenience. As soon as they entered the hall, they scattered and each took a position at a corner.

It was not surprising for a lord to keep some female guards. Actually, George also kept two in his mansion. He did not really expect them to fight but just had them for fun, especially when he went hunting in the wild. It always aroused him when he took off their seductive leather armor and cleaned their feet landing on top of them.

But it was weird to bring them on such a formal occasion.

In terms of physical strength, women were born to be weaker than men, and the gap between them was insurmountable. Therefore, most outstanding guards and knights were men. Except for having fun, no one would bring those women guards who were mere eye candies.

Not to mention the appearances of these women were... so unbearable.

George was not picky, but he believed that these women would be kicked out even in some low-grade brothels in Redwater City.

From their homely faces and rough skin, he guessed that they were about 30 or 40 years old. Wrinkles and dark spots spread nearly from their foreheads to chins. They had a slender figure due to long-term exercises, but their faces really turned any men off.

Did Roland Wimbledon have such a special taste?

However, when he turned his eyes to the woman holding the new king's arm, he immediately repudiated his previous assumption.

That was a gorgeous young woman who looked perfect from every angle. Her lake-blue eyes were like crystal gems and attracted anyone who looked at them. No doubt they were the most beautiful eyes George had ever seen.

Once she entered the hall, the crowd fell into silence for a moment. Even the appearance of Edith Kant, the Pearl of the Northern Region, had not created such a stir. If the girl had not stood beside the new king, she would definitely have been surrounded by most of the nobles in the hall.

The last two women were veiled. It seemed that they did not want others to see their faces.

That was rare at a banquet, though acceptable. If you did not want to be seen, you could choose not to attend it. Dressing in this way would attract more attention.

"Have a drink?" Guye came over with two glasses of wine at the moment.

"Thanks," he took the glass, followed him to a corner of the hall, and asked, "Did you notice anything?"

"The woman beside Roland is... a little weird," whispered the Earl of Tririver. "Don't you think she's too gorgeous?"

"Did you notice that too?" George touched the God's Stone of Retaliation in his pocket and whispered, "I guess... she's probably a witch."

"I also think so. If she were from any noble family, it's impossible that we had never heard of her."

If was not a secret that Roland recruited a lot of witches. News of this kind spread from the king's city to Redwater. At first, the news only spread among the Rats, but then after the king's city was occupied and the church was defeated, more and more people talked about it. The new king did not publicly proclaim his attitude, but people gradually stopped persecuting witches, as no one dared to go against the new king regarding this matter. However, few nobles took the "recruitment" seriously.

In their opinion, a witch was like a woman guard. She would be kept for appreciation, and be used when they had special needs. After all, witches were renowned for their beauty. Even during the period when the church and Timothy were hunting down witches, some people would hide witches at risk of their lives.

Nevertheless, it was not understandable as to why Roland brought a witch to the banquet.

Did the constant victories make the new king lose his head and start to act recklessly in his private life? Or was he really serious about the woman...

George immediately denied his second guess.

Witches were infertile. That alone made it impossible for her to be his wife. Perhaps he brought her to the banquet on a whim.

However, that was good. When Roland was in his hands, this was undoubtedly excellent "evidence" of his crime.

He could blame Roland for ignoring the noble traditions, and even for insulting the ladies who came to the banquet with the nobles. Of course, the criticism would not affect a royal family member much but would definitely incriminate that witch. As for how to punish her, of course, it would be decided by him.

Earl of Tririver apparently also had the same thought. He grinned and said, "You can't have her alone."

"Of course I won't forget you, old friend," said George, raising his glass, "I'll surely let you take the first shot."

They looked at each other, and could not help laughing after a moment.

The banquet went well. After drinking a toast with the new king, the nobles with similar titles gathered together. The men talked about their recent hunting, harvest and affairs, while women talked about their delicate silk garments and luxurious jewelry.

George Nery was also surrounded by lots of nobles. At least it appeared that his supporters were no less than that of the lord of Redwater City. Some people who had been on the fence also started to approach him, as they had apparently heard the rumor that the king was prepared to abolish their feudal power. George had more confidence now, and his previous inexplicable uneasiness gradually faded away.

That was right. He had enough time.

Roland Wimbledon, after all, was an outsider, and he had to make exponential efforts if he wanted to make any changes. However, the Rock family had been living here for hundreds of years, so he was naturally at a geographical advantage. This advantage became even more palpable when Roland appeared to be reckless and arrogant. Now George even believed that they could directly capture the

new king just with the guards of his and those of the earl of Tririver's, as well as Levitan and other nobles.

However, after thinking for a moment, George gave up this idea. After all, the Lakeside Villa was an open space and was hard for them to hold. They also have difficulty in transferring troops, so it would be more appropriate to carry out his plan when Roland lived in the castle.

Just after two days, the young king would be a caged bird.

"Please be quiet." Just then, Earl Delta suddenly clapped his hands and drew everyone's attention to the center of the hall. He said, "His Majesty wants to tell you something."

George put a piece of juicy spareribs into his mouth and thought, "Is he going to make the closing speech? Finally, the banquet is over."

"First of all, I would like to thank Earl Delta for preparing this sumptuous banquet. I'm also pleased to see so many people be invited here," said Roland, looking around the hall with a smile, "If I remember correctly, nearly all the nobles around Redwater City have come?"

Seeing his smile, George could not help feeling a chill. He thought, "It's that smile again... A fake smile. His smile simply hanged his lips... What's he thinking?"

"Except for two who are ill, the rest of the invitees are here, Your Majesty," Delta nodded.

"Well, I'll take this opportunity and tell you directly," said Roland slowly, with his hands behind his back, "From now on, Redwater City and the domains around it will belong to me, the king of Graycastle. It won't be conferred in the future. In other words..." He paused and said, "None of you will be hereditary nobles any longer."

Chapter 865: Mind Reading

"Wh—at?"

George blinked. For a moment, he couldn't believe his own ears.

Looking at Earl Tririver next to him, he saw that the Earl was bewildered too. At that moment, all the nobles' expressions resembled Guye's. The room was shocked into silence, so much so that you would have been able to hear a pin-drop in the room.

This... wasn't a part of the plan!

Could this mean that Roland Wimbledon has already persuaded Earl Delta?

He then looked at the Lord of Redwater City and his assumption was immediately dismissed. The Earl was no calmer than the others, and with his eyes wide open, he looked at the new king with disbelief. Obviously, he did not expect the new king to have this plan up his sleeve when he himself was the one who invited the guests over to the banquet.

To Delta, it was only routine to be attending the banquet in Lakeside Villa.

As was the same for the others.

This is just Roland's selfish move!

Is he... mad?

"I think most of you have noticed that the feudal system has severely hindered the flow and specialization of personnel, which in turn has restricted the development of our nation's productivity. Considering that Graycastle... and even the entire human race may soon fall into a major crisis, I have to make this tough decision, which is to take back all the land and power in your hands so that people in the Graycastle can work as one."

"Specialization of personnel? Productivity? Major crisis? What the hell is the guy talking about? Who understands those things?" George thought and swallowed hard.

Yet the new king seemed not to care about the nobles' opinions. He kept on talking as if there was no one present, "For the moment, I believe that this decision is both right and necessary. Take The Western Region and the Northern Region of Graycastle as examples: the disappearance of feudal nobles didn't cause chaos in the two regions but instead brought them order. The unified Neverwinter decrees, planning, and deployment of policies have propelled the city into the industrial age, with large factories taking over from household workshops as the workhorses of production. At the same time, a large amount of wealth has been created, and people who actively participated in this process have benefited greatly. These are undeniable facts, and I think you can all see it."

"With that said, I don't mean to eliminate the entire noble class. I just want to tell you that losing your manor and the title doesn't mean you'll lose everything. In this new system, you will gain better, more abundant opportunities. Imagine a cake the size of your palm. Although you might be able to barely satisfy your hunger if you swallow it all, if you were to enlarge that cake to the size of a table, you will have more than enough even if you only get a slice of it. Since this reform is beneficial to both you and your subjects, it shouldn't be hard to understand why we want to make it a comprehensive reform across the kingdom. Many of you must have heard of the reform, right?"

"Indeed, many nobles know what you're up to, but they didn't expect you to be so impatient." George thought quickly. After the initial shock, he gradually regained his composure. To his surprise, he found that this accident was not necessarily a bad thing, and it might even be favorable for him!

It was almost impossible to reach a consensus with the amount of nobles present. On the contrary, it would aggravate the preexisting conflicts between them and the new king. George was happy to see that the king's talk actually saved his effort to make himself look good in front of all those present. After all, compared with making his move after persuading the Redwater City Lord, what the new king did was too reckless. This could quickly push those who previously wanted to support Earl Delta to his side.

As expected, when the nobles came to their senses, one of them said, "Your Majesty... I'm not too familiar with the situation in the Western and Northern regions. Would Your Majesty be so inclined to give me a couple of days to decide?"

"Yes, this matter is of utmost importance and would decide the fate of my house. I can't make the decision on my own."

"Your Majesty, can you guarantee that each of us will get more wealth?"

"What if the reform fails? If we lose our lands, doesn't it mean that even the original small cake would be lost?"

"Your policy must be wise and brilliant, but... I'm not a merchant, Your Majesty!"

"That's right. There we go," George gloated. The more questions they throw towards the new king, the more insightful he himself would appear. If Roland were unable to assure the nobles of his reformation plans, he would be stuck in quite an awkward spot.

Roland, however, kept his unwavering facial expression. After the crowd rambled on for a while, the King raised one hand and silenced the room. "You seem to be misunderstanding something—what I just said was not a suggestion but an order—did you think that you had any say in this to begin with?" His tone turned less friendly and colder. "I don't even need your consent. I'm fully aware of who'll stand on the wagon of progress and join me, and who'll act as the stubborn rocks blocking the wheels just to be crushed into dust."

"How... do you know that?" Earl Delta said with surprise.

A smile crept up Roland's face. "Because I can read minds."

"What... did you say?"

"When faced with things beyond your comprehension, it's normal to be suspicious." Roland turned over, signaled to Edith, then said, "In that case, I'll demonstrate it to you."

The Pearl of the Northern Region nodded. She smiled to the nobles and said, "His Majesty's ability can be easily proved. As long as you repeat every word that I say, you'll understand it instantly. No lie can escape the detection of His Majesty's mind reading. The Wimbledon's rule of Graycastle depends on the mastery of this ability. I want to make it clear that anyone who doesn't repeat after me will be considered as one of those rocks to be crushed."

"Nonsense! This is absolute nonsense. There's no such a thing as mind reading. It would have been more credible if a witch had said that." George Nery retorted in his heart. Wearing a God's Stone of Retaliation, he was not afraid of the bewitchment of any evil force.

He wanted to call for the other nobles to help him put a stop to this farce, but he found that many nobles in the crowd looked like they were going to go along with Edith's suggestion. Many believed that they would have nothing to lose even if they tried, so they were actually waiting for Edith to continue speaking. George was not sure whether they were waiting for the King to make a fool of himself or were afraid of openly offending the King.

Edith smiled. "Everybody, please listen carefully. The first sentence is—I completely agree with His Majesty's new policy, and I'm will willingly cooperate with the officials dispatched from Neverwinter."

The nobles repeated carelessly; a few even failed to hold their laughter, feeling that what they were doing was rather ridiculous.

"None of you are telling the truth." Roland gave his judgment. "Although a little regretful, it's actually understandable. If it were me, I guess I also wouldn't have easily believed in the king who had stayed at the border area of Graycastle the whole time. Please continue."

"Wait a minute... Something's wrong." George frowned. "Would any king accept this result so calmly?" Being the Lord of Rock Ridge himself, although he was aware that not every one of his subjects was sincerely obedient to him, he never would want to hear that right to his face. "Shouldn't he be embarrassed and annoyed? Why is Roland Wimbledon so calm?"

"The second sentence—Although I don't understand what His Majesty wants to do, the feudal power isn't something I can't live without. I am willing to cooperate as long as the opportunities for me to acquire more wealth exists." Edith licked her lips and said in high spirit. "Please repeat after me word for word. Do make sure to speak clearly."

Chapter 866: Smashing a Glass

Things took a sharp turn after Edith's second question.

Four nobles were escorted out of the crowd by the new King's guards.

The crowd began to stir.

"Your Majesty.. what..?"

"Hmm, you guessed right. The four of them were telling the truth," Roland said with his hands laid out. "Their courage and their willingness to try earned them the qualification to come aboard my wagon. What we need for a reform, is people who dare to try" He then turned to the chosen nobles, "Do your best. Don't waste this opportunity that has landed in your hands."

"Yes, yes... Your Majesty!" the four nobles said, feeling somewhat flattered.

"Nonsense!" George could not help but growl in his heart. "Courage? Qualification? You must be kidding! Those guys are nothing but Barons who are on the verge of going bankrupt. They are title to nothing but barren lands with pathetic yield, poor management, and a lack of manpower. The output of their lands can barely make ends meet. So of course, they won't have a problem giving up on their lands. The lands under these "nobles" are but symbolic. Upon losing the lands, they won't even be invited to the banquet. People like them actually got the new King's special attention? Or... perhaps they've colluded with Roland Wimbledon to put on this absurd show?"

"Wait a minute..." He suddenly recalled an unsettling story that came from the King's city not too long ago.

There were only a few witnesses to this story about Prince Roland. It was said that after taking over the King's city, the Prince held a trial in the holy palace for those great nobles. Judging from the result, almost all the nobles who had controlled real power in the King's city had been swept away. Even Timothy was not spared. He had been sentenced to death. Rather than a trial, it would be more fitting to call it a purge.

The proceedings of the trial were extremely bizarre.

He heard that Roland had convicted the nobles with a Q&A game.

The nobles had been asked to answer ten questions. If they responded to any question incorrectly, they would be sent to prison—it was said that this seemingly ridiculous rule was due to mind reading.

Back then, George didn't heed this rumor any mind and had considered it a story fabricated by the nobles who had luckily escaped punishment to conceal their guilt and cowardice. He firmly believed that this so-called mind reading was just Roland judging the nobles based on his personal preference as he would never spare the former king's ministers.

But now, George was not so sure about his original judgment anymore.

"Could... the rumors be real?"

"Here comes the third sentence. Listen carefully," Edith's voice sounded once again, "I have no intentions of giving up my land and power, but in front of overwhelming power, I wouldn't want to lose my life over them either." She gestured to the crowd. "Now your turn."

The atmosphere in the hall changed.

Those who initially repeated after Edith carelessly were now filled with mixed feelings after they saw the first batch of nobles being escorted out the crowd after earning the new King's recognition.

This time, even the timing of the responses were off.

Yet the guards still picked out more nobles.

To George Nery's surprise, Earl Delta was also among them.

"What's going on?" Guye quietly moved to George and asked with a low voice. "Does this mean the new King has persuaded them?"

George did a head count. Altogether, 21 nobles had been chosen, among whom a few actually discussed with him the plan to fight against Roland not long ago. Without those nobles and their servants, the crowd was downsized a half.

"Im-Impossible. If Roland had contacted so many of them, I would have noticed." George gritted his teeth. "They must have been chosen on the spot."

"Then... why didn't they say so?" Baron Levitan also scooped closer to George. "That guy Huth was still with us in the beginning!"

"What?" George glared at him. "'My lord, you have wronged me. My lands are more important than anything else. I'd rather die for it'. Would you say something like that?"

"Um, I..."

"What an idiot." Georgy thought angrily. "The point here isn't the nobles who are being chosen, but those left behind. Roland Wimbledon could just close his eyes and pick anyone as his follower, then suppress those who are left behind. But how could he make sure those who support the Lord of Redwater City instead of himself aren't left behind?"

If he chooses wrongly, it will only push those who have supported him to the opposite side. Such a trick has no other meaning than giving the nobles a warning. Or, could he just wanted to show off his mind-reading skill?

Looking around, once again George made sure that the new king only took six guards with him. Even though only one or two nobles were left behind and the new king wanted to punish them as a warning to the others, these six guards most likely would not be enough to control the crowd.

At least, he and Earl Tririver would not sit idly by and do nothing.

"Submitting before power is nothing to be embarrassed about," smiling at the second batch of chosen nobles, Roland said. "Since ancient times, the powerful have ruled the weak. Being able to size up the situation correctly and act correspondingly is no less commendable than having courage. Your ancestors were able to take over a spot for themselves in Graycastle and even continued their bloodline instead of getting forgotten through the passage of time. This achievement alone is a proof of their capability. I'm glad to see that you all have inherited their wisdom. Moreover, I promise that you won't be treated differently from the previous batch of nobles. I only hope you remember what you said today. When you have to make similar decisions in the future, just make sure to keep in mind the might of Neverwinter."

Then he looked at the Pearl of the Northern Region. "Next sentence."

Edith nodded. "The fourth sentence—I don't want to give up either of them and I don't know which to choose."

This sentence was very short. However, from amongst the remaining nobles, only five or six of them repeated it; most of the others chose to be silent, perhaps because they had noticed that they were being differentiated.

Among those who repeated, the guards only chose three.

"Ahem. Your Majesty, we believe that you can read minds. So let's call it off now."

"Yes. After all, this is a welcome banquet. You see..." Earl Delta and Earl Tririver tried to appeal to the King one after another.

"There are fewer neutrals than I've imagined." But Roland acted as if he did not hear them. "Being irresolute and hesitant can't actually be counted as positive characters, especially so when facing the tide of reformation. But you still belong to the category that is reformable. Why don't you guys stay here for now? You will probably change your mind in a moment."

He paused, then said to the remaining nobles, "Here comes the last sentence, but I'm guessing that you already know what it is about. In this case, I'll spell it out for you myself—"

"No matter what, I'll not hand over my lands or power. For this purpose, I am willing to take a risk—as long as I can defeat the King, my house and fortune will live on!"

In a split second, the hearth seemed to sway without any wind.

Nobody in the hall dared open their mouth. The air felt icy cold.

"It doesn't matter even if you don't speak. As I said before, this isn't a suggestion but an order," Roland spoke slowly. "People who don't repeat will lose their qualification to get on my wagon. Your road ends here."

"What do you mean?" George scowled. "How can you convict us without any evidence or a proper trial?"

There were still 27 nobles remaining, which was far more than George had expected. According to their titles, each had two to four attendants with them. So altogether, there were more than 60 people left, some of which were probationary knights. "What good would it do for the new king to corner us like this?"

Doesn't he worry about backlash from the nobles?

"Your Majesty, if you're just kidding, I think it's already gone far enough." Guye still managed to keep his kind face and said patiently, "Your last sentence carried the joke too far. We can't say it out. How can you be sure that's what in everybody's mind? At least I myself will never betray the Wimbledon Family."

"That's true... I'm wronged. I've never thought about anything like that!"

"Your Majesty, please reconsider your words!"

The nobles were shouting out their pleas one after another in loud voices.

"You know what? Mind reading works in such a way that the more you talk, the better it becomes" Roland was not swayed. He took over a crystal glass from Edith. "You can save your words for the shovels and ores."

"O-Ores?"

"That's right. You'll be escorted to the North Slope Mine to labor for 20 years in punishment for your conspiracy—after all you haven't actually acted against me," the new king then spoke in a dangerous tone, "but... if you resist my verdict in any way, your conspiracy will become treason. When that happens, you'll be sentenced to death."

Roland drank the wine in his glass with one gulp, then tossed it.

The glass traveled along an arc before it fell at George's feet, where it shattered into pieces.

"Arrest them!"

Chapter 867: A Meaningful Smile

Insane, this guy is... absolutely crazy!

George Nery could hardly believe that the relation between the Redwater nobles and the new king would deteriorate to the present state. He just could not understand why the king would assume that the nobles would allow themselves to be seized without putting up a fight.

The new king brings only six female guards to fight against more than 60 people. Does he really believe that his guards are as hard as nails?

Though he's supported by the witches, they can't guarantee victory in front of the nobles that are wearing the God's Stones of Retaliation!

Immediately after Roland gave an order, one of his guards went to the door while another one stayed with him. The remaining four all drew their daggers and approached the nobles step by step.

All the nobles and their men unsheathed their swords. None of them wanted to put down their weapons and surrender to the king when they themselves significantly outnumbered the king's guards.

"Your, Your Majesty!" The lord of the Redwater City looked pale. "Everybody calm down. If you've any issues, we can discuss it!"

Unfortunately, it was too late. George exchanged a knowing look with Guye. They decided to change their plan and fight in this villa!

Although this place was hard to defend, it was still good for them to take action here since most of the Redwater nobles were gathered in this villa today. George believed that seizing Roland here would quickly swing them to his side—just like Prince Roland had said, strength decided everything. But unfortunately for the prince, the Redwater nobles were the more powerful side in the Lakeside Villa.

"I can't accept it!" Guye shouted and then walked out of the crowd, holding his sword in his hand. This seemingly amiable man looked irritated now. "I can't say anything if this is a judgment based on valid evidence. Please excuse me for being blunt. Nobles should never be trifled with. Even if King Wimbledon III himself had asked me to do this, I would have refused him! Your Highness, you forced us to act this way!"

All the four tall guards following Earl Tririver held their heads high, stood unyielding and unafraid in front of the new king. They seemed to be more impressive than the king's attendants.

"Well done. Being a noble himself, the royal prince can't deny this high-sounding rhetoric. It's both inspiring and provocative. Now, all we need to do is catch Roland and we will have the final say!" George thought to himself.

The new king would surely not have expected that this old man with gray, grizzled hair would turn out to be an excellent fighter.

Guye Yurianne was born with supernatural strength. At the age of 15, he had led two knights and managed to eliminate a band of robbers based near the river estuary. When he had reached young adulthood, he had mastered all kinds of weapons and had been unrivaled in the fighting matches between the nobles. Some people called him "Guye the Giant" and firmly believed that he would have been remembered as one of the strongest knights in history if he had not been born a great noble.

Moreover, each of his four servants qualified as a probationary knight. If they were engaged in combat with the king's guards, Roland Wimbledon would not be able to escape from Earl Tririver by himself.

"Go and help him, and keep an eye on Miss Edith," George told his attendants.

"Yes." A few more people stepped out of the crowd.

Guye strode toward Roland who smiled even more merrily now, seemingly undisturbed by the ongoing tension. The earl could not help but clench his fist and thought, "Go ahead and laugh. This is your last chance to be arrogant. Next, you'll be so shocked that you can't even cry out your fear!"

"Attack!" Guye dashed forward and struck his sword at the female guard beside Roland when the earl and his men were only ten steps away from the new king.

His strike was so powerful and fast that people around even heard the whistling sound of the sword cracking through the air.

No one could dodge this attack. It could only be blocked!

Once the guard evaded it as they had expected, Roland would be left unprotected.

"Clang—Sizz—"

George heard two consecutive sounds. The former was a clear, melodious collision sound of metal weapons, and the latter sounded like a blade cutting through flesh. A piece of broken sword shot into the air while spinning and then got thrust into the wooden floor.

Soon the head of Earl Tririver hit the ground too.

It slid smoothly to one side and then fell from his neck, bouncing twice on the floor before stopping. The blood from the wound left a bright red trail behind it.

What... happened exactly?

Did someone just behead Guye the Giant and break his sword in half with just one strike?

How's it possible?

Before George recovered from the shock, the crowd began to stir. Clashes of swords and awful screams were everywhere—the broken sword was like a signal for the four female guards to simultaneously launch their attacks from different directions and start this bloody fight. George was terrified when he realized he could hardly follow those guards' movements through the naked eye. Their strength was very impressive too. Anything in their hands could be used as a lethal weapon. They were nothing like human beings and could even hurt people with just their fists and fingers. The nobles felt as if they were fighting steel warriors!

"Monsters. They're a group of monsters. No mortal body can be that strong!" he screamed in his heart.

"But... if you make any rebellious action, your conspiracy will become concrete facts. When that happens, you'll be sentenced to death instead of ending up in the mine."

He suddenly remembered the new king's words.

It was like a bolt of lightning flashing across his mind.

Maybe he was waiting for this moment?

He turned his head with some difficulty to look at Roland Wimbledon.

An unstoppable chill crept from the soles of his feet up to his spine—at this moment, he finally understood the meaning behind that smile.

This is definitely a trap!

The new king deliberately left the First Army outside the city except for about 100 guards and took only six guards to this banquet. He pretended to be tough and uncompromising only to lure us into attacking him!

He threatened to send us to some mine. No... he lied and had no intention of letting the remaining nobles live. He would have been really disappointed if we had decided to surrender.

That's it... that's a smile of expectation.

He was waiting for us to walk into his trap step by step and was amused to see us digging our own graves. This is a vicious smile. That's why I can't sense even the slightest bit of happiness in this cold face.

"Spare our lives..."

"Your Majesty, I surrender!"

"Me too. The Levitan family pledges their allegiance to you!"

"I'll give you whatever you want! Please spare me!"

The situation was deteriorating rapidly for George. Though the remaining nobles still significantly outnumbered the king's four female guards, they knelt down to beg for mercy as they were the ones that seemed to be at a disadvantage.

George dropped his sword helplessly. The nobles had already exposed their intention to rebel and overthrow the new king the moment they had drawn their swords.

Disobedience, discontent, fear and anger kept going back and forth through his mind, and then all the feelings dissolved into nothingness when a long sword struck him on his back.

The sounds of fighting and begging faded away. The last scene he saw was a sloping hall and a pool of blood that rushed toward him.

Chapter 868: The Black Pearl

"This feeling... is so great."

Edith took a deep breath while savoring the tang of blood in the air.

She was intrigued by the panic spreading among the crowd.

The God's Punishment Witches were rapidly tightening the ring of encirclement. The so-called resistance lasted only for a short period of time. For the Taquila survivors, these nobles were no different from the common people that had no titles, and they would never hesitate to kill these self-satisfied common people who had no magic power.

Edith was clear that they killed those nobles because another common person ordered them to do so.

She was also confident that under the influence of this common man, these God's Punishment Witches would also follow her commands, even though she was just a common person like him.

This was the charm of power.

Through bonds and negotiations, a common person could manipulate people's interests, goals, desires and aspirations to create a force which was much more powerful than his or her own strength.

When the last rebel was struck down, No. 76, Phyllis, dropped her sword which had many breaches now and reported to Roland. "Your Majesty, the filtering procedure is completed."

The floor was littered with over 60 corpses. Their blood solidified into dark red blocks, looking like red wax in the flickering light of the bonfire.

There was a dead silence. All the remaining nobles clenched their teeth and were afraid to make any noise. None of them wanted to become the next corpse. All the three "unsteady" nobles had already collapsed to the ground and were trembling with fear.

Even without Nightingale, Edith herself could guess the replies of the remaining nobles if they heard the same question again at this moment.

Fear was a guarantee of loyalty.

And none of the nobles killed in the filtering procedure was innocent. During the first half of the banquet, Isabella had wiped out all the effects of their God's Stones of Retaliation in order for Nightingale to use her lie-detecting ability. By doing so, she could make those nobles believe that Roland had a mind-reading skill.

The biggest mistake of the dead nobles was that they had overestimated themselves.

These great nobles who had wielded absolute power over thousands of subjects turned out to be vulnerable in the face of greater power. The new king took back over half of the domains around the Redwater city through this fight. As compared to such a great achievement, Edith thought her success in eliminating the two great noble families in the City of Evernight was not worth mentioning.

Fortunately, this plan worked. His Majesty had shown her enough trust, and the witches had followed her commands. The king had even adapted all the five statements she had composed without changing a word.

The only thing different from her original plan was the glass cup he had tossed.

She did not understand why His Majesty had insisted on sending the signal by dropping the glass. Judging by common sense, she believed that this step would have been unnecessary, since this action would have been noticed by the enemy and the sound of it would have been drowned by some other noises. She had doubted this decision and had considered the preparation of the wine and glass as a waste. However, together with the lie about Roland's mind-reading ability, she realized that smashing the glass had indeed constituted a mystery atmosphere which had really scared the nobles.

She had to admit that the king was better at tactics.

She licked her lips in excitement.

Choosing to serve Roland Wimbledon was really a right decision.

With this thought in mind, she could not help looking at the king and was hoping to share with him the joy of success. However, she failed to find any excitement in his face and could even see a vague attitude of exclusion and boredom in his eyes.

"Is there any other banquet hall in this villa?" Roland asked in a deep voice.

"The-There's one next door," said Earl Delta, swallowing hard.

"Let's move next door. I've something to say." He nodded. "As for these insurgents, please ask your men to count and make a name list for me. I want to see this list, tonight."

"Yes, Yes... Your Majesty!"

"By the way, please open all the doors and windows in this hall and get rid of these dead bodies as soon as possible. This smell of rust is really disgusting."

"I'll send my servants to take care of these things right now!"

"I see." Pearl of the Northern Region thought in her heart. "The king was not looking forward to this massacre. What he desires is a city managed by a well-operating City Hall when the nobles relinquish their power. For the king, killing is just a more effective way to intimidate the bystanders as compared to sending the rebels to the mines. Now it seems that he doesn't like killing and even gets disgusted by the smell of blood."

Her excitement suddenly died down. She even started to doubt herself...

Was my plan too cruel?

If I had killed half of the rebels inside the hall and the other half outside, would it have looked any better?

Though it was largely a matter of personal preference, she was still afraid that such a difference in attitude between her and the dominator with regards to killing would block her advancement in Roland's government.

When everyone moved to the hall next door, the new king finally stopped knitting his brows. He cleared his throat and said in a cheerful voice, "Don't worry. Only the insurgents would be severely punished and their rebellion has already been suppressed. Now the top priority is restoring the order of the Redwater city and I need your help to do this."

"Your Majesty, please let us know what you want us to do!"

All the nobles knelt down together.

Roland nodded with satisfaction. "Please get up. This is the first task I am giving you. Now that you've returned your manors to the kingdom, it'll be meaningless for you to stay in your previous domains. I hope you'll gather in the Redwater City. This includes letting your freemen, serfs and their livestock immigrate to the city, and not just the members of your mansions."

"But... Your Majesty, where can we find enough food for those people if they all move to the city," Earl Delta felt that he had no choice but to voice his objections. "And we don't have that many fields around the city, if you're planning to make them work the land. I'm afraid that we may cause famine and riots if we drive them into the city..."

"First of all, you'll get new wheat seeds called 'Golden Twos'. The yield of this kind of wheat is ten times higher than that of normal wheat. Secondly, what Redwater city can't accommodate can be moved to the Western Region. I'll take in all of them, no matter how many they are."

All the nobles gasped in astonishment.

"Ten, Ten times higher?"

"Is there really such a kind of wheat?"

"But our subjects..."

Roland interrupted, "When you give up the fiefs, those people will naturally no longer be your subjects. They can decide to stay or leave by themselves. The efficiency of land usage in the past was too low, and all your lands were sparsely populated. A domain which was nearly 7 square kilometers could only support several thousands of people at most. Such a widely dispersed population is extremely inconvenient for the implementation of policies. Therefore it's inevitable to compress and move the people into certain big cities. I know you're still uncertain about the reform, but I can tell you it's the exact reason for the prosperity of Neverwinter. Don't worry if you still don't know what to do. I'll send some people here to teach you how to profit in the upcoming change."

"Teach... us?" Earl Delta stuttered.

"Yes, some officials who've been well trained in the City Hall of Neverwinter will come to build a new administration system here to replace the former lords and manage these regions for me. You can join them to gain power and status, but by doing so, you can only get limited salaries. Alternatively, you can seek opportunities in the development of mass production to create endless wealth for yourselves, but if you choose to do so, you won't be allowed to interfere in government work and will have to follow all the government decrees and finish all the tasks given by City Hall." Roland explained slowly. "You don't need to make a hasty decision. This managing department will be set up tomorrow. You can consult them first before making a decision, but keep in mind that whichever choice you make, you'll achieve much more than the value of a piece of land."

Half an hour later, the nobles started to leave the hall.

Roland heaved a sigh of relief. "Now the situation in the Redwater City is stabilized."

"And next, we're going to the Silver City and the old king's city. We've finished the filtering procedure in the latter, so all we need to do is send some officials to manage it," said Edith.

"I wonder how everything's going in the Eastern Front." He looked out of the window and saw a bright moon hanging in the sky and the glassy surface of the lake shimmering with silver light. "If nothing goes wrong, Iron Axe will arrive at Valencia tomorrow."

"Ugh... probably," said Edith. When thinking about what she had told Iron Axe before the battle and how the king had reacted to the bloody killing today, she felt her heart suddenly skip a beat. She was somehow unsure of herself now.

"I hope that everything goes well." Roland shrugged. "Go back to the Adviser Department. You still have lots of work to do tonight."

According to the plan, after getting the name list of the insurgents, the First Army would go to clean up these rebels' domains at night as quickly as possible. That was why the troops had been stationed outside the city.

"Yes... Your Majesty, I'll excuse myself." Edith replied absent-mindedly.

"By the way," he suddenly spoke when she was at the door of the hall, "your plan was very clever. Good job."

Good... job?

Did I hear that right? His Majesty didn't mind what I did.

At that moment, Pearl of the Northern Region felt an unprecedented sense of gratification.

She suddenly realized that her worries were completely unnecessary and this was actually a correct choice for her to gain greater power. As His Majesty did not like these devious plans and tricks, he needed someone like her to do this stuff for him.

This was exactly the part she was adept at.

Edith bowed her head to salute the king and then quietly walked into the darkness.

Chapter 869: The Eastern Front Offensive

"That's Valencia?" Iron Axe adjusted his telescope and was observing a city which looked gray and brown in the distance.

"It should be Valencia according to the map. After all, there's only one Sanwan River. We can't get it wrong," said his lieutenant, Bearpaw. Like Iron Axe, he was also a former hunter living in Border Town and among the first batch of Roland's militia soldiers.

"It looks a little weird..." Iron Axe frowned.

"Why?"

"Valencia is a major city in the Eastern Region and a well-established trading center of Graycastle. Together with the old king's city and the Eagle City, they formed the most thriving Central Region of the kingdom. I heard about its name even back in the Southernmost Region," said Iron Axe, "but don't you think it's weird we've seen very few merchant ships here these days?"

"I've no idea about this," Bearpaw shrugged his shoulders and said. "The previous pirate attacks might have terrorized the merchants, so they might not dare to come here to do business again."

"The attack happened two years ago. No matter how much damage it caused, the merchants should have recovered from the shock by now."

The city wall looked mottled and bloated. It seemed to have been thickened recently, but probably because of the lack of stones, they just plastered up the original brown wall with some red mud mixed with a lot of gravels and wooden materials, making it look like the early rubble wall in Border Town. In addition, the surface of this city wall was covered with a layer of glittering things. Because of the distance, Iron Axe could not clearly discern what they were.

However, it was obviously not a comprehensive reconstruction of the city wall. The plastered wall sections now were twice as thick as the old wall, but some other parts still remained the same as before. Looking from a distance, it seemed rough and bumpy and looked nothing like a construction of a city famous for its wealth.

"Who cares. No matter what, we must occupy this city." Bearpaw fished out a fire lantern fruit and threw it into his mouth. "His Majesty ordered us to capture the whole Eastern Region, so we have to seize every city we see in this region, even if it's not called Valencia."

Hearing that, Iron Axe helplessly shook his head. Bearpaw was still a short-tempered person as he had been in the past. Once he had set his target, he would go for it with a javelin in his hand, and when he had returned with his capture, the other hunters would still be busy with setting traps and sending hounds to stalk their preys. It had been said that even the most ferocious animal in the forest, the black bears, would have been reluctant to confront him. That was how he had gotten his name Bearpaw.

Iron Axe believed that Bearpaw would have been promoted to a position higher than a lieutenant if he had learned to use his brain. Even Van'er was already the commander-in-chief of the Artillery Battalion.

Bearpaw continued. "But what matters isn't the battle itself but how to restore order after it. If we mess up the Eastern Region, City Hall will certainly find fault with us. However, if we don't resort to violence, it'll be hard for those officials to control the situation here. Did His Majesty tell you how to deal with these cities?" Iron Axe was a little surprised by Bearpaw's thought.

"No, His Majesty just entrusted me to make decisions depending on the situation."

"That's a real headache for you. But you're the boss here and I'll follow your instructions." Bearpaw grinned.

Iron Axe was intrigued. "Oh? What do you mean by this headache?"

"You really don't know or are you just testing me?" Bearpaw leaned his palm against his brow. "You're definitely going to have a headache when you have to think about how to deal with those nobles. They've held this land for such a long time, waiting for a chance to fight back, but only get to see His Majesty getting stronger. The situation here is complicated. When you seize a city here, most of the nobles will surrender, but without Lady Nightingale, how are you going to make sure they're telling you the truth?"

"Continue." Iron Axe nodded and realized that Bearpaw was not totally mindless.

"Hey, you've really never thought about this?" Bearpaw glared. "This Eastern Front Army doesn't have many soldiers. We can only station a limited number of them in each city we capture, and they can

barely take care of the inner city, but this region used to be Timothy's domain! It'll be alright if the nobles are willing to cooperate with us, but what if they're malicious and still think about seizing back the power? Even if there're only a small number of such people, we'll still have no peace from them. Once we leave a city, they'll make City Hall a puppet or even kill the officials we send here. They've many ways to achieve this, such as poison, assassination and bribery. These problems can't be prevented by flintlocks."

"Do you have any suggestions?" Iron Axe asked curiously.

"Boss, that's your business." Bearpaw rolled his eyes and spat out the seeds into the tumbling river.

"Let's assume that now you're the commander-in-chief of the Eastern Front Army. Come on, let's just talk about it hypothetically."

"Well..." Bearpaw thought for a long time and then heaved a long sigh. "There's no perfect solution to this problem. If Lady Nightingale can't come to help us, we can only count on time to solve this issue. Or we can hire more Rats and take some preventive measures. We can follow the example of Neverwinter and build a police team to preserve the order. Meanwhile, we must use as less local nobles as possible until the end of this war."

"Sure enough..." Iron Axe whispered.

"What?"

"No, nothing." Iron Axe put the telescope away. "Now you can go to inform the people on the other boats to get ready to land. We're near the suburb's wharf."

"Got it!" Bearpaw was thrilled to hear that a battle was coming. "I've been floating on the river for too long. Now, I'll finally get to be in combat here!"

Seeing his lieutenant leave excitedly, Iron Axe exhaled relaxedly and leaned over the porthole in the command room, lost in thought.

He could not help but recall the scene where Edith had had a talk with him before he had left Neverwinter.

The place Edith had arranged for this talk had been a private room in Evelyn's tavern, which was not a place for formal discussion. Iron Axe had expected that Edith, an official of the Ministry of Defense, would have congratulated him beforehand on the success of this military action, trying to build a good personal relationship with the army. However, when he had come into the room, he had seen no one else but Pearl of the Northern Region herself and had heard from her something totally beyond his expectation.

What they had discussed was exactly the problematic thing mentioned by Bearpaw.

Iron Axe still clearly remembered everything Edith had said.

Back then, he had been stunned by her first sentence. "Do you know why His Majesty let you command the Eastern Front Army?"

"I only obey his orders and never ask for the reason."

"But orders don't include all the details for an action, especially those which could not be exposed." Pearl of the Northern Region had said slowly while sipping her Chaos Drink. "You thought you were chosen because you were the most suitable one. But is it true? You know the guys in the Eastern Region better than me. Any well-trained regular army consisting of 500 or 600 soldiers can defeat them like crushing dry weeds and smashing rotten wood. In other words, any regular battalion commander will be enough to cope with the battle in the Eastern Front. By contrary, the Western Front Army has to fight against the Holy City of Hermes. The combat there will be more complicated and dangerous. If it had not been for something special about you, the king would have asked you to help him in leading the Western Front Army and found someone else to command the Eastern Front Army."

"..." Iron Axe had been lost for words at that time but had somehow agreed with Edith in his heart.

Edith then had explained further. "As for this special thing about you, it's simple. That's your attitude toward the nobles. As a Mojin man, naturally, you won't fear or tolerate the Graycastle nobles, and dealing with the rebellious nobles is the key to recapture the Eastern Region."

Just like Bearpaw, she had also analyzed the situation for him. Her analysis was so detailed and convincing that he had to agree that ordinary methods could not stabilize the situation in the Eastern Region.

His Majesty needs resources of people and materials, and he doesn't have so much time to deal with this bunch of scum.

The only problem is... His Majesty didn't give a clear order for it.

He had raised this question to Edith and she had replied by saying, "His Majesty is a merciful lord and can't give any clear order for this, so he needs us to take care of this thing for him. Besides, he did hint about it. This time, City Hall will send 265 officials to the Eastern Region together with you. His Majesty has spent a lot of money and effort training these officials and plans to send them to manage the region for him. There are more than twice the number of Eastern Front Army soldiers than the officials in this region. You should know the reason for this."

Iron Axe remembered that a bolt of lightning had flashed across his mind at that moment.

Edith had reminded him in the end. "Don't disappoint His Majesty."

Suddenly, a report interrupted his thought. "My lord, the First Army is ready to land. We can come to the dock anytime!"

Iron Axe took a deep breath, and ordered in a deep voice, "Let's land and camp. Get ready for battle."

Chapter 870: Siege

The sounds of brass trumpets came from afar and broke the silence of the noon. The birds in the courtyard stopped tweeting, which seemed like an omen. At this moment, this hall in the castle looked solemn and dull.

Duke Wilion Berger knew that it was the time for the decisive battle.

He moved his eyes from the portrait of the former king Timothy to a set of delicate full armor, which was inherited from his grandfather. He had repeatedly patched and polished it. Each piece of it was soaked with grease which formed something like a skin on its surface.

His family's motto engraved on the right arm armor read "Undying loyalty".

In this set of armor, he had caught the rebellious old duke alive on the battlefield in a rain of arrows. For this brilliant achievement, Timothy had bestowed on him the title of Lord of the Eastern Region.

Although Timothy was gone, the duty of a lord would not be interrupted by this incident.

He made up his mind to keep his honor.

"My lord, Prince Roland's army is approaching Valencia. They didn't carry any big firearm with them." A servant walked into the hall and reported to him.

"Good." Wilion nodded. "Tell the others to get ready. I'll come over very soon."

"Yes!"

He took off his coat and walked to the armor. "Help me put on the armor," he said to his Chief Knight, Galina.

"Yes." She rolled up her sleeves and started to help him change his clothes. Her hands were rough and calloused but now moved slowly and gently whilst removing his clothes. It was hard to believe that these hands could also hold a spear to penetrate armor and stab her enemies on the battlefield.

Whenever he saw her killing whilst in combat, he would be enchanted by that scene.

"Do you... regret it?"

"Of course not, my lord," Galina replied calmly. "The moment you decided to make me your Chief Knight, I made up my mind to stay with you forever. No matter what happens, I'll do my duty."

"But this time, the enemy is stronger than ever. If it's possible—" The duke was interrupted by the belt suddenly tightening around his waist.

"So why did you refuse to ally with King of Dawn, if you think that our opponent is that strong. You even openly kicked his messenger out of Valencia. When the envoy sent this information back to Dawn, the king must have blamed you for being unable to appreciate a favor."

"Tut, I highly doubt whether the City of Glow is able to resist the attack of Prince Roland's troops, and Appen Moya really crossed the line to ask me to provide him harbors and permanent military bases." Wilion curled his lips in contempt. "Is there any difference between him and Roland Wimbledon? The former king granted me the Eastern Region. If I had promised Appen, I would have failed my king."

"So my answer is still the same," Galina said without any hesitation. "The Berger family is not alone in rating loyalty as the top quality, so my lord, please don't say that anymore. It's an insult to me."

Wilion fell silent. A moment later, he said, "Unfortunately, most nobles have forgotten this point... I see, let's go to war together. Although the enemy is powerful, I won't let them seize Valencia easily. I've been waiting for this battle for a long time."

"Yes, my lord." The female knight smiled.

"Bale!" He shouted out his Clerk's name. "Come here!"

Soon, a bald middle-aged man came into the hall. "My lord, what can I do for you?"

"Write down what I say. After a whole night's rest, the kingslayer Roland Wimbledon's minions plan to officially launch an attack at Valencia today. Duke of Valencia, Wilion Berger, determines to defeat them in the name of the former king, and his brave, loyal Chief Knight, Galina Wynne decides to go with him to the battle with resolution. May the deities bless them." Willy paused. "Surely... if you think this record seems too subjective, you can omit the last sentence."

Bale nodded while rapidly noting down what the duke said on his notebook with a charcoal pen. "I think that it'll be alright if I write down the last sentence, my lord. There's no absolutely objective record in this world. Since I'm Clerk of Valencia, it'll be totally acceptable if my favor goes to this city. This is also a part of the reality."

"So keep it there, but no matter what happens next, you have to faithfully record the outcome of the war, understand?" Willy emphasized. "It's your mission to record the reason and the whole process of this war."

"Please be assured, my lord." The Clerk bowed. "I'll let the people remember this event."

Without a word, Wilion picked up his steel sword hanging on the wall and went out of his castle without looking back.

...

When the duke and his Chief Knight climbed up to the lookout tower on top of the city wall, the bonfire had already been lit up. Oil was boiling in the pot and emitted a pungent smell. The duke's soldiers were busy going up and down, mounting stones and logs on the city wall.

He had known from the war in the king's city that Roland's most powerful firearm in a siege battle was a snow powder weapon called cannon which could shoot much farther than a mangonel. Unfortunately, Timothy had been unable to produce a similar weapon to compete with it to the day when the city had fallen. But on that day, the former king had managed to send his right-hand man to give the duke the formula for making snow powder and the design and manufacturing process of the weapon. Timothy's purpose was self-evident.

Wilion had invested a lot in this new weapon and meanwhile had also found many weak points in this kind of firearms. First, it was very heavy and needed to be placed on a flat ground to give full play to its strength. Second, it was slow to set up and thus this assembling process needed to be covered by flintlocks. In general, it was more a defensive weapon than an offensive one.

He had done everything in his power to get well-prepared for this war. He had thickened the city wall and installed barbs on it. He had also sent his men to destruct all the roads in the suburb and make all the farmland marshland by flooding them with water from the river. He had erected many hidden stumps in the Sanwan River, making it hard for any big inland river ship to travel in this waterway. These measures he had adapted had totally changed this place in the past two years. Now, it was inconvenient to carry any heavy thing into the city using manpower, let alone carriages drawn by horses.

These war preparations cost him dearly. Without convenient connections to the other places, this city of trade could not be prosperous anymore. The destruction of the farmland had led to a sharp reduction in the population. However, the duke firmly believed his measures were correct, as now he could not find any cannon in the approaching enemy troops.

They must have realized that they could never drag their cannons here if they did not build a road first.

Next, it was time for a tough battle.

Though Roland's soldiers were equipped with highly efficient flintlocks, they could not hide themselves at the foot of the wall or climb up this wall with barbs on the surface. Furthermore, the duke had set four mangonels and two cannons in the city, which could hit target 1000 steps away. Now it was difficult to tell who was winning.

"They're coming," Galina warned.

A group of soldiers dressed in brown stepped out of the enemy troops, steadily heading toward the gate of the city. They did not move very fast but their steps were exceptionally firm. Soon they seemed to be unable to stay in formation on the muddy ground and then split into groups of two or three, starting to work in the fields like old farmers. They carried on their backs dark gray long spears and barrels as thick as thighs. The duke thought that something so light was obviously not a kind of cannon.

Wilion estimated the distance, raised a red flag and waved it to the soldiers behind him.

"Huge rock cannon, fire!"