

Witch 871

Chapter 871: An Extraordinary "Cannon"

A thick tendril of dark gray smoke rose from either side of the city wall, accompanied by two huge booms that shook the entire floor of the lookout tower. After the loud noise subsided, a gale of cheer came from the bottom of the wall. Apparently, their first strike significantly boosted their soldiers' spirits.

But Wilion knew that was all that the first round of firing could make.

Judging from the locations of mud splash in the field moments later, he knew he had missed the target. Neither of them had hit the enemies, but they actually landed pretty far away from the default landing spot set in the previous exercise. The shell bounced up after its landing and rolled over for a few meters, leaving a ten-meter shallow groove in the muddy battlefield.

As it was a breezy day today, he had to have a few trial shots before he could accurately hit the target with the huge rock cannon.

Wilion knew very well that the culverin in Roland's army was way better than Valencia's cannon, although the latter cost a ton. The gap between them was even more unbridgeable than that between the flintlocks.

The biggest defect of the huge rock cannon was its non-portability.

The cannon barrel had cost all the bronze wares they could find in the city, and they even melted the ancient bell on the bell tower to prevent the cannon from exploding. After numerous experiments and tests, they forged a cannon with a barrel wall as thick as a man's arm, so heavy that no wagon could support its overwhelming weight. They had no choice but to build a specific turret to place the cannon. A strong rope was used to control and adjust its firing angle and direction, and it took them at least 15 minutes to load the weapon.

What was worse was that the spherical shell made of granite did not create as much damage as Roland's cannon had done when he had attacked the king's city. Wilion had tried shells filled with snow powder, but their performance fluctuated. As the outer part of the shell was made of iron, the production rate was low as well. He wondered where Roland found so many materials.

So the Duke had decided, from the beginning, to do their best to prevent his enemies using cannons.

He believed that as long as they forced the enemies to approach the city, his cannon would eventually manage to hit them.

Roland's army halted after their first firing, appearing to be shocked by Wilion's expected attack. They started to retreat until they were about 100 paces away from the shell's landing spot.

"What're they doing?" Galina asked, puzzled.

Wilion raised the telescope, through which he saw the enemies, about 100 men, who had taken their equipment off their backs and started to dig in the ground. It seemed they intended to create an empty space in the field.

"I guess they must be afraid and plan to reorganize the troops to have a prolonged battle." A viscount who watched the battle at the lookout tower with them said, "It's rumored that Roland Wimbledon abandoned all the knights and has formed an army of uncivilized farmers. He did not suffer any setbacks in the previous wars because of his fine firearms. But now he must be very hesitant to launch an attack at our defensive line. You turned soil into mud. What a nice move, my lord."

"But our incomes have reduced drastically, and we lost many squires as well," another man said, frowning. "Many people fled in the Months of Demons of this year, abandoning half the workshops in the city. I suggest it'd be better to negotiate a truce with Roland Wimbledon."

"We have to win an equal position before jumping into a negotiation. Let's just win another battle first."

"Shut up, all of you," Wilion said agitatedly. "I'll never bend to the kingslayer. If you would like to sacrifice your noble titles and betray King Timothy, I'll lock you up with the nasty mob in the cellar first."

That silenced everyone instantly.

Such a great price had Valencia paid to prepare for this battle. The former trade center had not only converted to a stronghold, but Duke Wilion had also bent his rules as well. However, in his opinion, all the sacrifices would pay off. If Prince Roland had decided to form an alliance with nobles to rule Graycastle in the first place, he would have been defeated long before. In fact, the prince intended to overthrow the entire feudal system and have full control over the kingdom, a monstrous decision that would outrage the whole high class. This bold move actually gave him a perfect reason to resist.

If he could thwart Roland's army this time, the other nobles would change their minds and support him in keeping in charge of the Eastern Region. Meanwhile, more protesters would emerge in Graycastle. He would say that it was not only a battle for King Timothy but also a defense for the feudal system.

"Huge rock cannons are loaded, my lord," a servant reported.

"Are we going to keep firing?" Galina asked.

"No, hang on... it was hard for our cannon to hit the enemies now unless we add snow powder." William shook his head. Now he regretted his proactive strategy a little. He had thought that an early firing would help to finish the adjustment earlier, but he did not expect the enemy to halt after seeing their first firing. Now the sight of the enemies busy in mud gave him a disturbing feeling.

The 100 men, dividing into a dozen teams, shoveled and created an empty space that could merely accommodate two people. It was unlikely that it was prepared for camping. After the cleaning, they started to fiddle with those green long barrels.

Through the telescope, Wilion could spy the enemy's every movement. It seemed that the long barrel was only a component supported by a tripod beneath it and was padded with a concave iron plate at the bottom. Other than that, a few sticks were strangely attached to the barrel. All the parts were separately carried by a different person, but it only took those men less than 15 minutes to assemble all of the components. How ingenious the design was!

However, the Duke almost could not believe his eyes as he saw what happened next.

A spindle-shaped can was put into the barrel before a puff of white smoke ejected out of the mouth of the barrel.

As the nobles were wondering what that thing was, all of a sudden, a dozen dark red fireballs blasted on either side of the city wall, followed by a series of thunderous booms.

As the houses close to the inner side of the city wall had been replaced with all kinds of traps and obstacles, the explosions did not cause much damage, but the mighty scene gave Wilion an ineffable shock.

At that moment, there was only one voice left in his mind.

"That is a cannon? Really?"

How can it be?

The Duke had not witnessed Roland's cannon troop, but he had heard so much of it. The cannons they equipped could be categorized into two types based on their lengths: one portable type that could be placed on a wagon, and the other must be transported by boat. Neither was, however, light enough to be carried by ordinary men.

It took all the craftsmen and materials in Valencia, and two years to forge the two cannons that barely worked. Wilion admitted that it all attributed to the lack of techniques and experience, but he believed that the principle they had applied was no different from Roland's. He was confident that with a few more years, his craftsmen would surely be able to make similar weapons.

But what happened in front of him totally blew his mind.

How could such barrels with such thin tubes bear the enormous pressure generated by the explosion of snow powder?

"It doesn't make any sense!"

"Replace the rock shell with half a bag of snow powder!" Duke turned around and growled to his servant. "Fire right after you finish loading. 10 gold royals for one man you shoot down."

The servant was a little uncertain. "Half a bag? My lord, that may destroy the cannon..."

"If we let them strike our wall without any defense, the huge rock cannon will be useless!" Wilion grabbed the servant's collar and said, "Do as I say! Now!"

That was when another cloud of white smoke rose from where the enemies were stationed.

"How could they fire again within no more than 30 seconds?"

This time, Wilion heard a soft buzzing, like birds' singing or the whistling sound when arrows pierced the air.

"Whew——"

The next moment, several blazing fireballs soared on the top of the wall. Scalding heatwaves spread and knocked down the bonfires and the oil basin. Within a blink, the wall was ablaze.

Chapter 872: The Last Charge

In the end, these huge rock cannons never managed to fire for the second time.

The Duke had built these six tall firing platforms within the city walls to provide a clear view for the cannons and the mangonels. As long as the platforms were higher than the walls, no enemies will be able to escape the weapons' firing range.

It should have been a sound strategy, for such a commanding view would not only improve the accuracy and the range of projectiles, but it would also provide overwhelming pressure to the besiegers.

But faced with the might of Roland's army, these imposing platforms served no other purpose other than being live target practice for the opposing army's cannons.

These fifteen minutes felt like an eternity for Wilion.

The thunderous sounds of explosions never ceased on top of the wall.

Just as Wilion's men finally managed to load the snow powder, a cannonball from the enemy landed on the platform right next to them.

At that moment, it was as if a radiant sun emerged on the platform, growing in size as it engulfed the huge rock cannon as well as over the 20 unfortunate men who were by its side. The blazing flame then spread out in all directions, and the shockwave swept throughout the city. Dust clouds rose up and blew everywhere.

A large chunk of bronze was blown away by the explosion and crashed onto the stone wall of another platform before falling directly on top of a group of workers who were transporting rocks. The weak and fragile human bodies were instantly pulverized into a cloud of red mist. The bronze chunk rolled twice after it hit the ground, running over those who were lucky enough to survive the initial crash, leaving a thick trail of flesh and blood behind. The victims who only had their limbs scrunched still lingered on with their last breath of life, letting out agonizing cries, hoping for the mercy of a quicker death.

However, Wilion's attention quickly moved away from the tragic scene below.

The lookout tower upon which Wilion and the nobles were standing on equally stood out in the enemy's line of sight, and since the enemy's first barrage turned the city wall ablaze, those nobles no longer dared to watch on and immediately evacuated. This was obviously the best move, as the enemy's rate of fire was far beyond their expectations. It took the enemy no more than 30 seconds to reload, and each shot was more accurate than the last, turning the areas near the city wall into no-man's land.

At first, the fireballs were only impacted the outside of the city, but soon they started to go off within the walls. The explosions engulfed the tall platforms and the city gate. The air inside the city was dense with smoke, cannonball fragments, and dirt, while the constant blasts combined with sounds of wailing made the situation in the city resemble a scene from hell.

By the time the enemy stopped firing, the six platforms had been completely destroyed, and the city gate was breached.

The Duke's men should have, as had been planned, immediately put down the iron barriers or lowered the heavy stone gates to block the passage and prepared to hold the line. But after witnessing such horrifying firepower, it was impossible to continue to have them stand their ground. The flames spread everywhere as it followed the oily liquid, and charred bodies began to litter the city wall. Even if someone had managed to survive the downpour of fire and explosions, their courage would have already been thoroughly crushed. As for the civilians who were hastily drafted? They were simply out of the question.

Those who were still capable of escaping were long gone, abandoning the rest who were either frightened out of their wits or severely wounded.

Although Wilion had thought of the possibility of defeat, he did not expect it to happen so quickly.

Their defense line crumbled before they even had a chance to touch the enemy. "What... has Roland been doing in the past two years?" He could not help but wonder.

"My lord, there's... no way for us to fight back..."

"We'd better surrender."

"Indeed my lord. Surrendering does not mean we are giving up forever. There will always be other opportunities as long as we stay alive."

"He's right. We could bide our time and rebuild our forces as long as they stay in the Eastern Region."

"Even King Timothy wouldn't blame you if he was here. You've done your best, and the enemy was just too overwhelming."

Wilion remained silent for a moment, before turning to look at Galina.

The woman's face was streaked with two black marks, and part of her hair had been burned by the flame when she had tried to block a burning beam that crashed down to protect Wilion during their evacuation. Even so, her eye shone with the same kind of brightness that she has always had, without the slightest trace of frustration or embarrassment. "I'm at your command, my lord," She said.

The Duke took a deep breath before saying, "You all should surrender."

"My lord... What about you?"

"I did not prepare for these two years just so that I can surrender in the end," Wilion said slowly. "I will have Roland understand that his almighty army cannot conquer everything, and I need to show him that King Timothy's feudatories are not all cowards who would bow beneath a tyrant. Galina, where are my knights?"

"They're all standing by in the second ambush area," Chief Knight said decisively.

"There's no need for an ambush. summon them to the city gate." Wilion gave the command. "Viscount Ariburke, disable all the previously placed traps."

"Disable them? But why?" the nobles asked in surprise.

"Those simple tricks aren't going to help us hold back the enemy. We might as well let them in and confront them fair and square. Things have already come this far, and someone has to face the consequences." The Duke had not expected himself to be so calm in his final moments. However, what he was going to do would be recorded down in the annals of history, and he would then be able to face His Majesty with pride.

...

Half an hour later, Roland's army finally showed outside at the city gate. A small team was first sent in to remove the debris blocking the entrance and also to take control of both sides of the city gate before the main force marched into the castle. As soon as they entered the city, they started to set up a rough perimeter in the middle of the long street. Within a short amount of time, they finished their work and placed two peculiar flintlocks in front of the fortress.

Wilion no longer cared about what the enemy was doing. He softly flicked the reins and led the knights around the corner of the street and formed a single line across the street.

Seven knights and 15 squires—his last counterattack.

At this final moment, these warriors who dared to stand alongside him further convinced Wilion that the system of nobility was essential and superior.

Only the nobles who understand the meaning of loyalty, honor, and duty were brave enough to charge towards the enemy under such unfavorable odds.

Seeing more and more invaders gathering and preparing on the street, he pulled down the visor on his helm, held up his spear, and let out a long breath.

"We may have lost the battle today, but history will remember us. For our names will be recorded in verses and sang in songs. Muster your courage, stand strong, and fight until your last dying breath! Knights of House Berger, on me!"

"To victory!"

Wilion flicked the reins and sent his destrier into a gallop and sped up in the long street, leading his men in this final charge.

Clouds of smoke and the lingering flames around them had perfectly painted the battlefield, forming a scene so serene that for a moment the Duke thought that he could ask for no better place than here to finally rest.

Soon he was halfway to the enemy, and he reached his top speed, but he did not hear the drum-like patter of the hooves that was supposed to come from behind him. As he looked back, Wilion was shocked. The over 20 men that started the charge with him now were now gone with the exception of Galina who rode close after him.

This street was not closed but intersected with many smaller roads and alleys. In that moment, Wilion understood what had happened.

"What... happened?"

He wanted to ask the knight who was charging fearlessly behind him, but when his eyes landed on Galina's eyes that were filled with meaning and emotion, it seemed as if nothing else mattered to him now.

An end like this seemed not too bad for him.

"At least I have you by my side."

Wilion laughed and pointed his spear towards the nearest enemy soldier.

Before a hailstorm of bullets rained upon him.

Chapter 873: Nobles and Prisoners

As Iron Axe entered the once proud city of Valencia, he was surprised by the devastation that the new weapon had wrought, but he did not let this emotion show on his face.

Even though he had participated in many drills with the mortar, witnessing these weapons in a live battle was a completely different experience.

It was unfathomable how this mobile device that can be easily carried by a group of five people could cause such havoc even with just a limited number of rounds.

He knew that the mortar's rate of fire was much faster than the previous field artillery, and he knew that they can cause large-scale destruction if dozens of them were to fire at once. But it seemed that he had much underestimated this new weapon now that he witnessed it in action.

Even though a single shot of the mortar cannot compare to that of a Longsong Cannon in sheer firepower, the mortar was easier to control, more mobile, and could be transported without the witches' help. Furthermore, its shooting trajectory allows it to attack enemies who are hiding behind walls. With sufficient ammunition, the weapon could give the enemy a barrage so devastating that even the highly disciplined First Army might not be able to withstand if they were the ones on the receiving end instead.

"No... it is only normal to flee under this circumstance. Who wouldn't piss themselves if a rain of fire were to descend upon them?"

Iron Axe finally understood the confidence His Majesty had shown when he threw all those seemingly sophisticated field artillery back into the Furnace Area. To be honest, those weapons that shot out solid rounds at the enemy seemed useless compared to the mortar.

Well, in the end, probably only King Roland could afford such a firearm in the entire Graycastle.

It was said that each shell cost around three to four gold royals, so what the First Army used earlier by bombarding the city with hundreds of shells was as good as throwing away solid gold. Moreover, the shrapnel used by the Longsong Cannons were far more expensive. By the time they confronted demons,

will the gold royals in the Neverwinter's coffer be enough to sustain the First Army until the end of the Battle of Divine Will?

Fortunately, he did not need to worry about this problem.

That hard nut was for Barov to crack, as for the army, their only obligation was to obtain victory for His Majesty.

Iron Axe and his men passed through the long street that was filled with the smoke of gunpowder.

They soon arrived at the center of the city square, where the First Army had rounded up all the surrendered nobles.

Iron Axe's eyes moved over the captives whose appearances were in complete shambles. Before he could say anything, a nobleman stood out and said, "I'm Shipbay Lord, Earl Kasyn. May I ask where King Roland is?"

Valencia was built on a piece of land that was surrounded by water, and many nobles had named their lands with bays and beaches. Iron Axe dimly remembered that Shipbay was a large piece of land sandwiched by Valencia and Seawindshire. A family that held such a superior place should have been admired and awed by his subjects. However, at this moment, the nobleman's raised chin and pretentious manner looked ridiculous to Iron Axe. "His Majesty is too busy to handle the business in the East Region. He entrusted me with full responsibility over this front." he answered.

"You?" Earl Kasyn frowned.

"Is he joking? He is obviously not a person from Graycastle."

"Roland Wimbledon would let a man from the Sand Nation manage his army?"

"How could he not personally lead his army on an expedition as large as this? Was he not afraid that his men would scatter and flee?"

Shipbay Lord was not the only one in doubt. The other nobles were also questioning the new king's decision.

"His Excellency Iron Axe is without a doubt the commander-in-chief of the Eastern Front Army. We can all testify," Lieutenant Bearpaw could not help but cry out.

"Eastern Front Army? What's that?" Kasyn asked.

"It is the army sent to recover the Eastern Region, of course—"

"Bearpaw!" Iron Axe interrupted sharply. The lieutenant, suddenly aware of his mistake, hastily covered his mouth with one hand.

Lady Edith was right. Even though His Majesty was hell-bent on having the nobles relinquish all their feudal power and abolishing nobility once and for all, those nobles still had an influence on the people. Bearpaw, who used to be a hunter, might not look servile in front of the group of nobles but he was obviously affected by these nobles' titles, or he would never have made such a basic mistake.

It seems only Iron Axe can maintain indifference in front of these highborn.

Iron Axe then said in a low voice, "Believe it or not, the truth won't change. Why are you the one asking the questions? Where is the Duke of Valencia? Isn't he the person in charge of the Eastern Region?"

"The Duke has sacrificed himself in the battle," Kasyn shook his head with a look of grief. "He insisted on leading the knights in a head-on charge. We couldn't stop him."

"So the rider who was riddled with bullets was the Duke!" Iron Axe raised his eyebrow. "He's definitely qualified to be called a warrior." He looked at the nobles who were still armored and asked, "But my men only reported two defenders. Where's the so-called knightage? How could it be that there's only one knight serving the Warden of the Eastern Region?"

"Well, this..." Kasyn was speechless for a moment.

"Stop concerning yourself over those irrelevancies. Now that we know you're the head of the army, we will just tell you our request." Another nobleman stood out and said, "We would surrender and serve Roland Wimbledon only if he meets us personally, or if His Majesty is too busy to be here, we could also send messengers to him."

"And you are?"

"I'm Viscount Ariburke," he said impatiently, "Till then, we hope to be treated properly. If it's a ransom you want, simply say the amount."

"But what you've done is treason," Iron Axe said, emotionless. "Even your titles won't spare you from a trial."

"First of all, Duke Wilion Berger was the one who committed treason, and he has already paid for it. We didn't ask to be here, and according to the law, our crimes should be less severe."

"Exactly, we're not his feudatory, but we're just under his jurisdiction." Kasyn seemed to have come to and echoed, "Secondly, His Majesty should be the one giving us the final verdict. Don't tell me you are planning to sentence us yourself?"

It did not take long before Iron Axe realized why those defeated nobles still put on airs. When they noticed that Roland Wimbledon was not here himself, they became less interested in negotiating. It was common practice for the punishment of the defeated to be given out by the King. In their opinion, the so-called sentence was less of a punishment but more of a business transaction. In general, those who failed to pay up would be eliminated, and those who could pay would be able to get off relatively scot-free.

It was probably not their first time facing a defeat, so these nobles were confident that they could offer up something of interest to the King as ransom.

Unfortunately, the King Iron Axe served is no ordinary noble.

Iron Axe shrugged before saying, "You're right. I don't have the authority. But be as it may, you are still traitors who have committed treason. Before His Majesty reaches a decision, I will have to detain you until my King has summoned you."

"How long will it take?" Shipbay Earl said unpleasantly. "And just as we said before, we haven't done anything that could be called betrayal in the eyes of the law unless you can show us some concrete proof."

"At most a month considering the speed of carrier pigeon." Iron Axe gave a rare laugh, ignoring the Earl's second half of the sentence. "Rest assured, the food and clothing will all be up to the standards that you deserve."

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Late at night two days later, Bearpaw, panic-stricken, dashed into Iron Axe's tent.

"Something happened, my lord! The castle's dungeon is on fire!"

Chapter 874: Men of Sin

Despite the fact that there were numerous functioning wells around the castle, the servants were still unable to control the flames. The fire started without any notice, and by the time people outside realized that something was wrong, thick columns of smoke already filled the whole interior of the dungeon and held back any potential rescue attempts.

The First Army promptly retreated out of the castle and sealed off the area. The fire lasted for hours, and by the time most of the smoke had finally dissipated, there was already nothing left of the prisoners previously held inside.

Without delay, the First Army started to clean up the scene and investigate the incident. The officers who came with the army set up a temporary City Hall and began to take over the administration of Valencia.

Soon they found out the cause of the fire: a group of Rats had sneaked into the dungeon through a secret passage and ignited the stacks of wheat on account of their resentment for Duke Berger who turned this once prosperous trade city into a husk of its former self.

Therefore, this was an egregious arson, a significant threat to the order of the Eastern Region, and an act of open defiance to the First Army of Neverwinter.

Apart from propagandizing the investigation result, the First Army and the City Hall started a city-wide operation to root out the Rats; leniency to those who confessed, punishment to those who resisted, silvers for those who reported, grains for anyone with information. Moreover, the food liberated from the mansions of the nobles was recirculated back into the market and was also used to succor the starving. The previously near-dead city now regained its vitality.

The night the command to exterminate the Rats was given, Bearpaw entered Iron Axe's tent once again.

"Chief, we've spotted some signs of the evacuation of the big families. A dozen carriages exited through the West City Gate, seemingly heading for Seawindshire. Some of the furrows left behind by the carriages were particularly deep, so I think they must be loaded with..."

"Gold and jewelry." Iron Axe put down the quill in his hand. "I've made myself clear at the start that I will only want their food, so they can take anything else as they wish."

The commander-in-chief was not at all surprised when he heard about the nobles' hasty evacuation.

The moment the dungeon was on fire, any trust between the First Army and the nobles had crumbled. At that point, fleeing this place was, in their opinions, the only way to survive. A noble family could bear losing its lords and some knights, for the title could be inherited, and more knights can be accoladed, but they have already lost the courage to confront the First Army directly.

Instead of staying here to wait for their inevitable demise, they had much rather take the remaining family members, servants, and fortune to somewhere far away in hopes of new opportunities. Their lands were very important, but naturally, they much more cherish their lives.

Also, to prepare for battle, Wilion Berger had gathered all the nearby resources to Valencia, thus leaving the surrounding lands in such a sorry state that it would take at least two or three years of hard work before they were of any value again. Otherwise, those nobles would not have made up their mind to turn tail and run away so soon.

"Chief, I have one more question..." Bearpaw paused, his next words frozen on his lips. This was very rare for the simple-minded lieutenant.

"Go on," Iron Axe said seriously.

"Were you the one who set the dungeon on fire?" Bearpaw hesitated for a long moment before he asked this under his breath.

"What makes you say that?"

"The secret tunnel was designed with a partition door made of solid iron that was far beyond a few Rats' skills to open. Also, I don't think our stationed brothers were so lax that they would be completely unaware of the arsonists. I've checked the dungeon, and the burning marks suggested that the fire was more likely to have started in the corridor rather than in the cells. Lastly, from the look of the burnt wreckage, I believe the blaze was fueled by oil."

"You're right. The fire was set under my command." Iron Axe nodded.

Bearpaw, who was startled by his boss's unreserved confession, was stunned for a while before he found his voice again, "Why?"

"I think it's better that these kinds of things are left for me to handle. The more people that know of the plan means a bigger chance for something to go wrong."

"That's not what I mean." The lieutenant shook his head. "I mean... didn't they already surrender?"

"I see..." Iron Axe meditated for a moment and said, "To be frank, I don't have the time to discern whether or not they were sincere in their surrender, nor does His Majesty has time to judge one by one. This is why His Majesty had given me full control over the Eastern Front before the army left Neverwinter."

"But..."

"Are you going to tell me that a sentence without a trial may kill the innocents among them?" Iron Axe said brusquely, handing his lieutenant a book on the desk. "Have a look."

"Is this a... demographic report?"

"Yes, we found it in the library." The chief nodded. "Five years ago, 220,000 people were living in Valencia and the surrounding lands. It was the most prosperous area in the Eastern Region. But by this year, the population has dropped to a mere 60,000. The refugees we've taken in from the Eastern Region are about 30,000 to 40,000 people in total. If we round it up to 40,000, the deficit still stands at about around 120,000 even without considering the growth in population. I believe you are aware of the cause for this."

Bearpaw gasped. "The farmlands that were ruined by floods..."

"And they have also distorted Valencia beyond recognition." Iron Axe arose and walked up to the candlestick, his hands on his back. "Wilion apparently called up all the people who lived nearby to work for him. They were sent to block the roads and reinforce the walls. He alone should never have been entitled to this kind of authority. This would never have been possible unless he was backed by someone more powerful or, even worse, assisted by the other nobles. As a result, the massive dislocation of people had severely interrupted trade and left much of the crops unattended to. In other words, all those nobles are accomplices of the Duke. Now, do you still believe that His Majesty will accept their allegiance?"

Bearpaw was dumbfounded for a moment.

"But they did not lie about believing in their innocence," Iron Axe continued, "For all they care, what they've done was no big deal. Even with half of the farmlands ending up being devastated, their mansions were still crammed with food, and even... human. After all, meat can save for longer than wheat when properly stored."

Bearpaw's pupils suddenly contracted.

"To put the cherry on top, what they've done critically hinders the progress of His Majesty's plan. Our king values the population more than any other resource, but they squandered their human resources wastefully. Can you imagine how the battle would have turned out if we didn't have the mortars with us? You know how difficult it is to move the field artillery in the mud. We would have had to resort to storming the city or prolonging the battle. I don't think the nobles would have yielded before they used up all their people had we not have come prepared." Iron Axe turned around. "Any other questions?"

For a long moment, Bearpaw kept his head down. Finally, he glanced up. "You're right. It would be too merciful to let them just burn to death... But His Majesty didn't give this specific command, did he? What if he hears of..."

"What do you mean 'what if'?" Iron Axe raised his eyebrow. "Do you think that I'll hide this from my King? No, he'll know. I've included everything that has happened in Valencia so far in the report for him, and I'll take full responsibility regardless of the outcome."

Chapter 875: Objective History

The chaos that he had expected in Valencia did not come in the end and the situation completely exceeded Bale's imagination.

Having worked as a clerk for several lords, he naturally knew what the breaching of the walls meant—plunder, massacre, disorder, exile... whether the intruders were knights, mobs, or pirates, it did not make much of a difference. That was the case with His Majesty, Timothy, and also with the ascension of the new Duke.

The city's food and wealth were the best rewards for intruders. This had always been the norm, just like nobles who were born to be superior to the common people.

This was recorded in the history books numerous times, proving its credibility.

However, this time the situation was completely different. Roland's army not only spared the city people's lives, but also tried to comfort and calm them. The piles of wheat that were found in the Duke's castle were cooked into oatmeal and distributed to the hungry people. A large number of job offers were posted in the main square, which stated that the participants could not only get food but also salary! Didn't Roland's soldiers mind giving out what originally belonged to them to a bunch of people they did not know? Did Prince Roland come all this way to conquer Valencia only to squander his own treasury?

Within the records of all kinds of books, Bale had never seen such a behavior before.

Still, all this just made him a bit surprised. But there was something else that actually made the Clerk feel a deep fear.

And that was the castle fire several days ago.

The rumor that the fire was set by the Rats had many loopholes. Bale had served three Dukes and lived in the castle for more than 20 years, yet he had never found the entrance of any secret path.

When it came down to life or death situations, the design would have been very secretive and safe. This way, even people on the inside would not be able to discover it, not to mention those from the outside. If those rats actually had the ability to discover something like that, they would have never degraded to Black Street Rats in the first place.

That fire must have been set by Roland's people.

Once he realized that, Bale felt a sudden grip on his heart.

For the first time, nobles were no longer more important than common people. Their lives had the same value as those who lived within the city walls, without any insurance anymore.

Maybe in even more danger.

As for the big families that had also realized that and had not yet been apprehended by Roland, they swiftly reacted and escaped Valencia. They probably even left the Kingdom of Graycastle.

So, what would happen next?

Would something like that also happen to him?

In the past few days, the clerk had lost a bunch of hair and the bald spot on his head had grown bigger.

His fear was not without reason because, in the past 10 years, he had been called a noble without a title, or more accurately, the closest a civilian can be to a noble. He had served several lords, had plenty of experience, knowledge, and had read many more books than normal people. It was exactly because of that, whether it was Garcia's sacking or Eastern Region's change in power, he had safely survived both. Even if the people in the city were killed like the straw being cut in the field, he still observed and vigorously recorded those events.

But now, he was too afraid to even fall asleep.

Even though the formidable army had not acted against any non-noble so far or even against those common people who had worked for the big families, he still was not certain whether they would not do anything in the future.

He could not ask those families to take him with them since he was a common man after all, but he also did not want to just stay and wait around. He felt he had to do something.

Under the swaying candle, the Clerk's gaze turned to the unfinished history book about Valencia.

Thinking about all the stuff he wrote, Bale couldn't help but feel a chill down his spine.

That's right, I almost forgot that...

He quickly turned to the last page, tore it into pieces, and burned them until each and every one of them had become ash.

No, this is probably not enough.

Bale thought for a moment, then took out a quill and prepared to write.

"No matter the consequences, you must record the truth. Do you understand?" Duke William's words sounded echoed throughout his mind.

Of course, he would record the truth, even now.

This was a Clerk's duty.

But in this world, nothing was absolutely objective. He was now living in a city governed by Roland. So, being a little bit biased was not strange. In other words, this was also part of being objective.

Bale took a deep breath and started writing.

"The ambassador sent by the great King Roland Wimbledon arrived in his loyal city of Valencia today..."

Outside of the City of Redwater, at the camp of the First Army.

"Your Highness, there is a secret letter from Eastern Region."

Nightingale jumped out of the Mist while holding a grey Goshawk in her hands. The latter tugged its claws towards Roland and grunted with dissatisfaction as if complaining about the letter being too

heavy. There were six notes tied on its paws, almost covering both of its feet. Only when Nightingale handed out a bunch of grilled fishes, did the carrier pigeon finally calm down.

Well, this could not be considered a secret letter anymore.

Roland opened the six densely written notes one by one and had a quick look at them. They were sent by Iron Axe and they were mainly focused on the post-war summary and the situation reports.

The first part was exactly the same as he had expected. The Eastern Front Army had easily occupied Valencia. During the battle, the mortar's effect was significant. Faced with the firepower of the twelve-pound field artillery, even though it was a siege, the enemy still had no chance to fight back.

But when he read the last part, Roland was a bit surprised.

"What happened? Did something happen there?" Nightingale asked.

"Well... not really a problem, it's just a bit strange." He passed the fifth note to her. "Look here."

"Burning the dungeon where the nobles were imprisoned?" Nightingale immediately found the key point after a glance. "This wasn't your order?"

Roland shook his head, "No, I told him that he has full authority at the battle of the Eastern Front."

"So... what's strange then?" she asked confusedly. "Since he has full authority, any measure he takes should be acceptable, right? Not to mention that those people had ulterior motives anyway. They still haven't surrendered to you after so long, so apart from sweeping them up, we could also use this chance to clear the Rats. Seems like a double win."

"You're right..." Roland said while stroking his chin with his hand. Deep in his heart, he still felt this approach was too soft. The Eastern Region was the Second Prince's home for a long time. Seizing the city was only the first step. The following political battle with the surrendered nobles would be a key point in achieving full control of the city. It's for this reason that he had arranged over half of the novice officials trained in the City Hall to go to the east and had appointed Iron Axe, who was from the Sand Nation, to be the commander of the Eastern Front Army and deal with the complex intricacies of the relationships with the nobility.

He believed that after occupying Valencia, in order to eliminate the enemies, Iron Axe would almost certainly use his interrogation techniques to the fullest. When it came to the Mojins' torture, even the High Priests of the church were not able to resist, not to mention those weak nobles. Through bloody trials and executions, he would destroy their power step by step and establish a new order.

However, setting a fire directly was not Iron Axe's style at all.

Roland thought for a while and decided to leave this matter alone for now. Once the two armies met, he would find out more about it—after all, just like Nightingale said, the result of this fire was far too good. It made the nobles fear for their lives, leaving the territory en masse without caring about their lands anymore.

At this speed, Seawindshire and the rest of the domain would be under the complete control of the City Hall within a month. At first, he had thought that the Eastern Front situation would last for a while but, unexpectedly, it had even surpassed the Western Front's progress.

Chapter 876: Silver City

Roland shrugged, it seemed that he had to work harder. Being overtaken by his own subordinates was never something to be proud of.

Thankfully, Redwater City was now back to normal. Out of the remaining filtered nobles, 70 percent had decided to continue doing their previous jobs while the rest wanted to try their luck at the City Hall even though the basic requirement to apply for the administration exam "literacy of sentences" was easy for them. Roland still believed that after the final tests, these people would not have too much of a chance to become official members.

After all, it was hard for nobles to change their habits.

But certainly, becoming a normal clerk was much better than losing your head.

There were even three nobles who wanted to join the First Army. They were knights originally and when being observed by Nightingale, they did not conceal any evil thoughts. However, he still stood by his original decision and refused their applications.

Having solved the issue of the feudal power, the work efficiency of Redwater City and the surrounding areas had greatly improved. In just over a week, more than 20,000 people had boarded the ships for Neverwinter, whilst more and more people continued to arrive at Redwater. At first glance, abandoning the small towns and villages seemed to decrease the amount of land they could control, but in fact, it drastically increased his capability to control the City Hall.

In such an age where even roads were scarce, the implementation of government decrees in the countryside was something he could only dream of. Arranging a few leaders within the course of a year was rather doable, but asking them to go around implementing the decrees was quite difficult. Barov had asked him more than once why he persisted in sending people to Neverwinter, instead of unifying the kingdom and leaving everything as it was. He had never fully answered him.

It was because the City Hall Director could not imagine how many people could actually be absorbed by the compounded industry of coal and iron, nor understand how much energy and time it actually took to build such an industry.

And the most important part was that those remote territories could not operate effectively and thus, from the perspective of resource utilization, keeping them would just be a waste.

Thus, it was more suitable for the current situation of Graycastle to gather the population in several major cities with convenient transportation.

It was from that moment of land reform that Roland finally acquired jurisdiction of the Redwater area.

As for his next target, that was Silver City.

Compared to the huge City of Redwater, the old king's city district was much easier to deal with. It was originally a common city, not much different from the several cities encircling the king's city. However, its existence became more special when the first silver mine was discovered there. As more and more precious mineral veins were being excavated, the city became busier and busier, and eventually reached its current size.

Considering the great importance of Silver City's output to Graycastle's economy, the latest Lords were only appointed by the family of Earl William, the "good old man" who was loyal to the Wimbletons. In addition, their power was also restricted and in the next couple of years, the city was almost never allocated to other nobles.

In other words, as long as the lord of the city declared it, Silver City would always be a thing.

Roland believed that "persuading" the other side was not a difficult task, considering he was the descendant of King Wimbledon III and the most suitable heir to the throne.

However, he was somewhat concerned about the fact that the city, which was built on mineral veins, was Nightingale's hometown.

Every time he asked her about it, he would get the same answer "I have cut my ties with the Gilen Family, so you don't have to worry about my feelings." He still felt Nightingale was hiding something, but because of his busy government affairs, he did not have much time to think about it so he could only leave this be for now.

Four days after receiving Iron Axe's secret letter, the First Army of the Eastern Front Army entered the Silver City territory through the canal.

...

It was almost the same with the trip to Redwater City. Earl William led his platoon out of town to greet them and after a warm greeting, he followed up with a dinner invitation. The difference was that in Redwater City, they were welcomed by the city's nobles while in the old man's platoon, there were more merchants, including their old acquaintance Hogg.

That evening, the Earl's opening speech set the tone for the feast. He was willing to hand over his feudal power and fully supportive to His Majesty Roland's new government. A warm applause sounded immediately at the meeting and the latter swallowed back the words that he had prepared to say.

And through Hogg's efforts, the feast became a business fair.

"Aren't you always asking me how the machine in my mine operates?" He talked proudly in front of a bunch of merchants. "Its real inventor is currently standing in front of you—it's His Majesty Roland himself! This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. You don't even need to go to the Western Region. You can get the answer directly here in Silver City!"

The merchants immediately swarmed over.

"Your Majesty, could you tell us why its power is so strong?"

"If you're willing to sell more rail systems, the Daymond's Chamber of Commerce is looking forward to working with Neverwinter."

"Your Majesty, do you remember the Fastsail Association? Two years ago, we provided you with several sailing ships to transport refugees from the Eastern Region—in terms of trade strength, we're definitely one of the best Chambers of Commerce in the Central region. If possible, the Fastsail Association wishes to buy a complete set of the manufacturing equipment for a steam engine. And naturally, at a very generous price!

Remembering the "good news" the female merchant Margaret had revealed to him, Roland did not know whether to laugh or cry— "Hogg will bring a large number of merchants to the Western Region". Unexpectedly, he had actually met them beforehand.

The world would have been such a nice place if everywhere in Graycastle was like Silver City.

After satisfying the merchants' curiosity, he finally found a chance to speak privately with the old lord.

They walked through the hall and went to an open air balcony, temporarily putting behind the buzz of the party.

Roland held his wine glass and after staring at the city for a long time, he finally said, "To hand over your city power like this, aren't you feeling any regret?"

"It was never actually mine to keep, so what's to regret..." Earl William smiled. "Your father, as well as his father before him, though they never said it clearly, they would have never allowed Silver City to have its own cluster. And it's a rule for the William family to never have their own cities. As far as I'm concerned, this power isn't so important." He paused for a moment. "Not to mention that I don't actually need this power."

"You don't need it?" Roland could not help but ask curiously.

"The actual reason for the city a province is to expand and consolidate your power to prevent others from looking down on you. But Silver City does not have this risk—anyone who wants to attack this city will blatantly provoke the authority of the Wimbledon royal family. So as long as my family stays loyal, I don't need to worry about getting attacked." The Earl had a sip of wine and continued, "In turn, feudal power is also in a sense a weakening of your own power—through it, one has to allocate part of his own resources to others in order to gain their allegiance. Compared to giving out these resources to other people, I'd prefer to manage them by myself. Do you know how much the output of Silver City has increased in the past 20 years?"

Roland shook his head.

"As much as 16 times, after all, I put most of my energy into it..." The old lord said with high spirits, "At first, it was just an open-air silver mine, but right now the excavated mineral veins have reached more than 10 different kinds. In addition, at first there was only an excavation team sent by the royal family, but now, not only are there all kinds of ore and jewel merchants, but also many auxiliary industries have been developed through mining, such as oil lamp, mining shovel manufacturing, etc. Your steam engine can also be considered as one of them, am I correct?"

"Indeed," Roland said with a smile.

"This feeling is like raising a child and watching it slowly grow up. Why would I be willing to split and share it with others? That's why I don't need such a power." After saying that, the Earl sighed. "Your Majesty, do you wish to let me continue managing this city of shimmering Silverlight for you?"

"Of course, if you wish to." Roland lifted his wine glass towards him, they smiled at each other and then touched their glasses gently.

"Oh right," Roland changed the subject after finishing his drink, "do you know about the Gilen Family?"

"Gilen?" Earl William pondered for a while before raising his eyebrow. "I think I remember them but not very clearly—after all, it's been for a long time for a new noble family to appear in Silver City. All those families were here before the discovery of the silver mine. If I remember correctly, the last Gilen must have changed his family name two years ago and his land now belongs to the Somi family."

When he said those words, Roland instantly felt Nightingale's grip on his arm.

Chapter 877: The Long-Forgotten Hometown

"He changed his family name? What happened?" Roland frowned.

"Probably because it's easier to merge with another family than to manage the territory all by himself." William was surprised that Roland was paying particular attention to some petty noble. "It requires a huge amount of money to live a decent life. If one isn't really capable of managing domestic affairs, his domain would be a burden rather than an asset."

"Could it be possible that he was compelled? For example, somebody wanted to take his land by force?"

The earl replied meditatively, "Not... very likely. I've seen them attend some banquets before, although I didn't really talk to them. That Gilen, who changed his surname, seems to be pretty happy with the Somis. I don't see he was forced by any means. If you want to know about this, I can send for Viscount Dott Somi..."

"That's fine." Roland interrupted him after receiving Nightingale's whispery instructions. "I was just curious. Not a big deal. But it appears that the Gilen didn't show up this time?" He thought that Nightingale should have recognized him if his brother Hyde had attended the banquet.

The senior lord clapped his hand over his chest and said apologetically, "That's my fault. I usually stick to our tradition when sending out invitations."

Roland immediately understood what he meant. Even though the Gilen had changed his name and become a branch of the Somis, he was still not considered for a place on the invitation list. Although the booming mining industry in Silver City stimulated commerce and trades, making the city more or less similar to City of Glow in terms of its livelihood and style, people in here apparently attached greater importance to wealth and power than titles and reputations. William's answer, in a way, also reflected that the glory and pride of the Gilen Family had almost diminished and faded out of people's memories.

Roland knew Hyde had inherited his father's viscount title after the departure of Nightingale.

It was really pathetic to see him be reduced to such poverty.

Roland returned to the campsite. As soon as he shut the tent curtains, Nightingale revealed herself and explained voluntarily, "Your Majesty, you must know that I have no interest in prying into Hyde's business. Ever since I left Silver City, I've severed all relationships with the Gilens. Please trust me... I was just, just a little surprised at that time."

Roland could barely suppress the urge to tease Nightingale when he saw the latter try to convince him with a look of absolute honesty. Nevertheless, he soon changed his mind at the thought of Nightingale's

incredible obstinacy, for he did not like to seek trouble. As such, he simply coughed and nodded airily. "I know. You never lie to me in this regard."

"You don't believe me... Nope, you don't believe me at all!" Nightingale retorted immediately.

Apparently, his reply was not quite convincing, for Nightingale had discerned the mocking tone of his remark with her ability. He thus took a deep breath and cleared his mind. Then he looked into her eyes and said more seriously, "I believe you."

This time, it was Nightingale's turn to feel abashed. A rosy blush rose to her cheeks. She immediately looked away. "I was just surprised. I have nothing to do with the person who betrayed me."

Although Roland wanted to tell her that it was normal to show some concerns for her brother, he felt it more advisable to tag along in this situation. So, he asked, "Why were you surprised?"

"The Somis once had a good term with my father..." Nightingale replied in a low voice. "After my father passed away, they often came to see me at the old Gilen mansion. However, after my family knew I'd become a witch, old Gilen forbade me to see them. I didn't expect that Viscount Somi would adopt Hyde."

Roland, who had lived in this world for so many years, instantly understood the underlying implication. If the two families did have a good term, the Somis should have helped Nightingale's brother revive the house after the decease of old Gilen. Indeed, it was common for a noble to help an heir of a diminished family regain its power. The latter would then return his benefactor with incessant wealth and even further a union through the marriage of their children. It was a kind deed people loved to talk about.

Yet to ask the sole heir to change his surname would be a totally different story.

That meant the end of the Gilen bloodline as well as their viscount title.

Since Roland had determined to forfeit all feudal rights, the noble status did not matter anymore. However, from the point of view of a traditional noble, having an heir change his family name was far worse than stealing his property. It did not sound like something that a family with whom the Gilens had a good relationship would do.

"If you sense something unusual, look into it." Roland sat back at the desk and unrolled a stash of parchment to review the statistics of the local population and the financial status of the local government, a routine task that he always did when visiting a new city. "Sylvie and the God's Punishment Witches will protect me here. I'll be perfectly safe at the campsite, so you don't have to stick around all the time."

Nightingale hesitated for a moment. "But it's the business of the Gilen Family. I have nothing to do with them..."

"It's your father's domain essentially, so you're more or less involved. Plus, the mansion where you grew up is also within that domain, right? Since we've already arrived here and that the church is no longer coming after you, just take this opportunity to revisit your old abode." "Although all the land now belongs to the kingdom," Roland remained the rest of his words unsaid.

Nightingale appeared to be persuaded by the notion of "the old mansion where she grew up". After a long silence, she made her decision. "OK, but you have to promise to summon me when you want to leave the campground. It would be a quick trip. I'm not going to do anything."

"You got it." Roland shook his head in amusement. He had this weird feeling that he was forcing Nightingale to return to her native town, but he believed the historical issues of her family would only be solved after she confronted them with courage. Avoidance would never help with the problems.

If truth be told, Nightingale was still a little... too young to understand the philosophy of life.

Nightingale left the campsite at dawn. She headed to the east of Silver City along the main street.

She remembered it was a grand mansion. There was a farmland close to the two-story building, vast enough to hide all footprints. A brook, which originated from the depth of the forests, wrapped around the farmland, where she used to hunt for crabs in summer. In the farther east lay a deep ravine, which was where her families had believed a gem mine was hidden. Her family had once promised that they would pick the biggest gemstone down there as her dowry.

Nightingale had not known that her family's domain was actually the smallest among nobles until she had left Silver City with the Witch Cooperation Association. Their land was pretty much of the same size as the domain of an ordinary knight if compared to nobles in other towns. Since their only water source was this brook, the expansion of the farmland was greatly limited. The so-called gem mine down the ravine was probably a pure dream of her families'. Even if the mine did exist, they would not have enough gold royals for further development and operation.

This place did not change much during her prolonged absence. Although the bushy farmland both appeared to have shrunk a little bit over the past several years, the reminiscence of her childhood seemed to have brought life back to this place, making it as fresh and vivid as ever.

Nightingale somehow started to understand the underlying meaning of Wendy's words, "erasing the nightmares of the old days doesn't mean abandoning the past".

When Nightingale approached the mansion, however, she was astonished.

She had thought the deserted house would be dilapidated, but to her dismay, it was not only refurbished but had also expanded a great deal on top of the original building. She walked through the yard fences and saw many people inside, all poorly dressed, some of them even as shabby as beggars. Several servants were passing porridge to the crowd, and the crowd, from time to time, expressed their gratitude to their benefactor.

Nightingale wondered if they were distributing relief food.

Over the crowd at the end of the yard, she noticed a man standing at the entrance of the mansion, smiling back to the grateful peasants. His attire and every act of demeanor revealed that he was a well-bred aristocratic gentleman.

As Nightingale had expected, the man was her long-forgotten brother.

Hyde Gilen.

Chapter 878: Nightingale's Investigation

Based on the description of the lord of Silver City, the fallen Gilen Family should not have the financial capacity to support peasants. In other words, Viscount Somi was the real philanthropist who had not only helped with the extensions of the house but had also supplied warm porridge to the poor.

Nightingale didn't understand why they had chosen to take Hyde in rather than offer him aid and assistance in the revival of House Gilen as what nobles were normally encouraged to do. Nevertheless, Viscount Somi did not seem like a bad man, she thought. A person who was willing to provide food to people in destitution should be, overall, generous and kind in nature. Further, Hyde, in a way, had also benefited from such a benevolent act.

Even if Hyde was currently in a desperate situation, she would not interfere.

She just wanted to visit her old home and... indulge herself a little bit in nostalgia.

When Nightingale was about to depart for other places, a strange feeling suddenly struck her.

She came to a halt. "Hang on... what's exactly wrong here?"

She surveyed the yard and frowned at the ragged peasants, the servants maintaining orders, the mansion guards, and the noble hosting the event...

Hyde was not wearing a God's Stone of Retaliation, not even the kind of the worst quality.

Through the Mist, she could clearly see Hyde's physical appearance and his clothing. When she rested her eyes on the guard at the entrance, however, she could only spy the scabbard at his heel, since a big black hole in front of his chest blocked her vision.

Now Nightingale perceived the aberrancy: it was absolutely abnormal for an heir of a viscount not to wear any God's Stones of Retaliation.

Even the guards were wearing one!

She wondered whether it was because Hyde now held an impartial and unprejudiced view of witches, but she soon denied such a possibility. She still remembered the abhorrence with which his brother had said over a decade ago, "I'd rather not have you as my sister. All witches should go to hell and be in company with demons." Even though she could not tell truth from lies with her ability back then, she knew Hyde had meant it. His eyes had betrayed everything.

Nightingale then assumed that Hyde probably could not afford a God's stone. It might happen to a fallen noble, but since Hyde had joined the Somi Family, he should be able to purchase one.

After a moment of hesitation, Nightingale turned around and walked toward the yard.

The moment she passed the mansion gate, she overheard two guards' conversation. Both of them were speaking in a suppressed voice.

"Nobles are so horrific creatures. He's no better than us but just a pup used to please his lordship. Who would know he would turn into a completely different person once splendidly dressed? Is it what his lordship usually refers to as the bearing of aristocracies?"

"Stop the nonsense," the other guard hooted. "His lordship is in the house right now. If somebody overhears us and tells him what you just said, you'll lose your salary this month."

The previous person shrugged. "No need to worry. I have good ears. I'll know when somebody approaches. Plus, I didn't lie. He's truly a pup. Everybody, both downstairs and upstairs, has heard his lordship bellow at him in a hot red rage."

"You know his lordship is somewhat faulty in regard to temper, and you still try to irritate him." The other guard grunted. "No matter how ill-tempered his lordship is, he's still a noble. What about you? Are you related to anyone who bears a relatively prominent family name? Even the foreman in the neighboring village is more distinguished than you. If your uncle didn't ask me to look after you, I wouldn't have given a damn about what you say."

"OK, OK. I'll shut up... What the heck?" The first guard suddenly stiffened.

"What's the matter?"

"I somehow feel someone just passed us..." He looked around and then murmured. "Probably I'm just being paranoid."

...

Ignoring the guards, Nightingale directly walked through the wall and soon located the viscount's room based on the domain of God's Stone. Normally, the higher one's status was, the better quality one's God's Stone would be. Nightingale had often used this method to locate her target when she had been employed as an assassin, and her method had rarely failed.

When she learned that Dott Somi was in here, she was dimly aware that the food distribution in the yard might not be as simple as it appeared to be.

Apart from the viscount and a fully-armed knight posed as his guard, there was an old man in a robe standing in front of the desk. He looked like a scholar from the old king's city.

"Lord Dott, you shouldn't have yelled at Lord Hyde yesterday. He did submit to you, but your occasional generosity and kindness will help him play his role better."

Dott Somi, who sat in a high backed armchair, whacked the desk in vexation. "I know, but I can't control myself! It took me decades to get what I have. I was only this close to obtaining the two lands in the east, but a random order from Roland Wimbledon just shattered everything! Did you hear what that old fool said? He's willing to hand over his feudal rights and fully support His Majesty's new policy! Has it never occurred to him that other people may need those rights that he doesn't think he needs? That really pissed me off!"

"Smile, Your Lordship... smile. You vented last night already." The scholar stroked his beards. "Since you're so reluctant to implement the new policy, why don't you refuse to hand over your feudal rights on the spot?"

"Um..." Dott was at a loss for words for a second. He then replied resentfully, "Do you think I'm in a position to defy the king? Even Timothy's royal knightage was defeated by Roland. Do you want me to die on the spot?"

"Therefore, your complaints don't help with anything but only worsen the matter. Such being the case, do you still want to continue with this meaningless grumble?"

"... damn!" The viscount cursed under his breath after a long silence.

"As His Majesty has forfeited nothing but feudal rights, you can follow the example of Earl William. As long as you properly manage your current domain, you won't suffer great losses."

"But without the executive power over the jurisdiction, those greedy patrol team will sooner or later come here. How am I supposed to stop them by then?" Dott shook his head vigorously. "You know what I sell. Once they find out, no doubt I'll be sent to the gallows."

"Then abandon that business," the scholar answered immediately. "I've told you this isn't going to last long. Since you've already raised enough capitals and that the church no longer imposes any restrictions on you, you can now turn to some regular businesses. Why did you put so many efforts in gaining control of the Gilen Family in the first place? Didn't you want to expand your territory and your authority to be in a more secure position?"

The viscount was apparently having some difficulties in washing his hands of the whole matter. After hesitating for around seven or eight minutes, he finally gave a nod with a flash of heroism. "I see. This will be the last food distribution. After Hyde is done, I'll talk to him personally."

"Don't just suspend the business all of a sudden, as that'll raise unwelcome suspicions. You can still do it for a short while but just tell them not to come pick up orders again."

"Alright. I'll do what you said." After resolving to leave what the scholar called a "shady business", Dott was completely alleviated. He leaned backward in the armchair and laughed aloud. "The two Gilens must have no idea what they've missed. Since they don't know about anything, I obviously become the perfect person to take care of the Gilen Family. I bet Hyde still thinks his parents died in that refugee riot, doesn't he? Hahaha..."

The words enraged Nightingale so much that her pupils suddenly contracted in anger.

Chapter 879: Excuse For Betrayal

Why did Dott Somi mention the riot?

It was true that many years ago, a tragic mine accident had resulted in hundreds of deaths among mine laborers. Since at that time the mine owner had only been willing to indemnify the losses for freemen, his indifference toward those underpaid refugee workers outraged the victims' family members, which had thus led to a huge riot in Silver City. Swarms of refugees had escaped from the mining area in a fury, looting and plundering every residence coming into sight. After an extensive pillage, the riot had finally been quashed by the knightage in the king's city, and peace and order had been again restored.

That was the last time she had seen her parents. It was until she and her brother had been escorted to the old Gilen mansion that they had learned the death of their parents.

But now it appeared that it had not been the case, based on what the viscount had just said.

Nightingale did not expect she would overhear a completely different side of the story decades after the accident. If the viscount was indeed telling the truth, she would have to investigate something other than the relationship between Hyde and the Somis.

Nightingale exited the room quietly. She reached the basement floor and turned on the Sigil of Listening she took with her.

The Sigil was initially to facilitate the communication between her and Roland in the event Roland wanted her immediate return. She did not anticipate that she would use it on such an occasion.

"It did seem quite fishy," After hearing the account at the other end of the line, Roland replied. "So you want to stay at the mansion a little longer?"

"Yes, I plan to ask Hyde in person at night... Perhaps he knows something." Nightingale hesitated for a moment and then apologized. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I..."

"No need to apologize." Roland quickly interrupted her. "I'll wait for you at the camp while you're conducting your investigation. Don't worry, it's very safe in here. As long as I stay in, I'm not breaking the promise. You need to take care of yourself and stay safe. Don't act rashly. No matter what you discover, you have to report to me every four hours."

Nightingale felt the warmth of Roland's words wash over her. After a moment of silence, she replied in a soft voice, "Yes, I understand."

...

When the moonlight faded away outside the skylight, Nightingale left the cellar for Hyde's room. She had confirmed the location of her brother's room earlier. The slant of the moonlight indicated it was a quarter past midnight, a perfect time for her to take action, for most people were in a deep slumber at this hour, and even vigil guards sometimes dozed off in the dead of the night.

Hyde's bedroom was on the first floor of the mansion close to the backyard, a place usually for servants or insignificant guests. This room arrangement further corroborated the testimonies of the two guards. It not only showed that Viscount Dott did not take the heir of House Gilen very seriously but also suggested that all the kindness the Somis had perpetrated in the past was feigned.

Due to Hyde's low status in the household, the entire hall and the hallway were unguarded, which provided Nightingale ample time to escape in case of an emergency.

After entering the bedroom, Nightingale dragged her brother out of bed straight away. Before Hyde completely woke up and realized what had happened, he felt the chill of a dagger around his throat.

"Any screams, cries or wailings will bring you an instant death. You got it?" Nightingale whispered behind Hyde.

Hyde nodded immediately.

"Very well. Now turn around and look who I am."

Hyde soon submitted to Nightingale's order. His pupils dilated instantly after he figured out who the assassin was in the dismal moonlight. If it was not because of the dagger to his throat, he would have shrieked.

But he managed to keep silent.

Nightingale slowly withdrew the dagger after making sure that her brother was tranquilized.

"Why... why are you here?" Hyde could barely suppress the tremor in his voice. "Didn't you die a long time ago?"

The moment Hyde spoke, his words resurrected all the thin threads of her old bitter memories. For a second, Nightingale felt as though she were in the old Gilen mansion again. The revived pain of the betrayal from her own brother and the agony of being abused and used by her remote relatives blurred her vision and perturbed her mind.

This is the person who exposed the most tender part of her heart to vicious strangers.

Nightingale bit her tongue to let the smell of the blood disperse the multitude of thoughts in her head. She asked, "Why did you say that?"

"Because, because..." Hyde swallowed hard. "Timothy searched the entire king's city and the surrounding towns. He announced that all witches were executed. But Veronica, I mean, sister... I don't want you to die. I was shocked at the news at that time as well. I thought if you didn't leave by yourself, you probably wouldn't have been persecuted."

"Veronica..." thought Nightingale. It was a name she had not used for years. However, after years of self-improvement and personal training, she was no longer as gullible as she used to be.

The tremulous magic power inside her body had told her that the latter half of Hyde's speech was a complete lie.

"Why are you with Viscount Dott Somi?"

"Well..." Hyde paused for a second. "After the death of old Gilen, there were constant disputes within the family. I didn't know much about the details, but by the time I was about to inherit the title, there were not much savings in the household. It was at that time that the viscount called on me. He basically didn't leave me many choices." [lying]

"Did he force you to join the Somi Family?"

"Yes. He said if I didn't agree, he would weed me out..." [lying]

"Then what're you doing for him at present?" Nightingale asked nonchalantly. "Are you helping peasants?"

"No." Hyde gritted his teeth. "He's just using me to sell Dreamland Water! There're Rats disguised as peasants coming here to pick up orders. I didn't discover his scheme until very recently!"

The first half was true, while the second was still a lie.

Nightingale found she was not annoyed but actually quite relieved. This was the exact feeling when she normally communicated with strangers. Lies and truth always went together, and people were always treacherous and weaselly. Sometimes, even a blood-related tended to be unreliable and deceitful. Ever since her awakening, Nightingale had been used to the caprice of human nature. Over the past few years, she had developed the ability to grasp the truth out of a bunch of lies through threats and coaxing while remaining unperturbed at the same time.

As such, she actually felt uneasy to speak with Roland sometimes, for the latter rarely lied to her.

Now, the Shadow Killer who had once made nobles in the Central Region tremble returned.

"What's your plan next?"

Hearing these words, Hyde suddenly prostrated to the floor and implored Nightingale, "Please help me, sister!"

"Help you?"

Hyde crawled forward. "I know I was wrong... but I'm your brother! The viscount never views me as a real noble. You've seen it. He puts me in this servant's room. The renovation of the mansion is just to fool the public. If I continue to stay here, he would sooner or later kill me!"

"So you want me to get you out of here?"

"Get out of here? Then I'll lose everything, won't I?" Hyde shook his head in a fright. He then pronounced his words through his teeth. "You killed old Gilen, didn't you? I don't know what ability you've employed, but you can easily get in here, so you must know how to enter his bedroom. Sister, kill him! Once he's dead, I'll have a chance to become a real noble of the Somi Family. After, after that, you can kill the other successors one after another. By that time, I'll own this domain... and all the properties of the Somis!"

Nightingale looked into his eyes. When Hyde could no longer bear the awkward silence, she ventured. "Before that, I want to ask you a question."

"Sure, sure..." responded her brother instantly.

"Why did you betray me back then?" Nightingale stressed each word with due strength.

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The answer came faster than she had anticipated.

"Why..." Hyde did not reply immediately. "Just because you're a witch..."

There was no reaction of the magic string, which indicated that Hyde was telling the truth. In a second, Nightingale seemed to understand many things. The notion that witches were Devil's minions and the representation of the Fallen was so permeated among the public that people no longer viewed a person as a human being once she turned into a witch. The dehumanization process had thus further given rise to an alienation between the brother and sister. The so-called betrayal was simply an automatic self-

protection mechanism. Perhaps, Hyde still believed he had done the right thing, and that was why he could blurt out his response so naturally.

Afterwards, Hyde said something else. He reproached himself for his ignorance and claimed that he had not known the rumor about witches was a fabrication created by the church. He also said he had truly repented for his sin and hoped that Nightingale could forgive him. Nightingale, however, could not really register his words, for she was still absorbed in her own thoughts.

So she shouldn't blame Hyde because everyone would have made the same decision under the same circumstances?

For Hyde, he was not betraying his own sister but a demon who would sooner or later lose all her attachments to humanity. Since he thought she was a demon, there was no trust between them whatsoever.

But... is it really true for everyone?

Nightingale thought of another person, although she was currently confronting Hyde.

That person was also a noble. If exposing a witch was a matter of course, he should have sent Anna, a witch to whom he was not related and had never met before, to the gallows a long time ago.

He did not fear witches, nor did he hate them, but was simply curious. His eyes were always so clear that she could always easily see through his mind. He had remained open to her even when she had held a knife to his throat.

All the memories came flooding back. Nightingale then remembered that snowy day.

It was the first winter after their encounter.

"... I don't think she'll die during the Months of Demons."

"Why?"

"She said she wouldn't lose to the Demonic Torture, and I believe her."

"You even believe a witch. We're cursed by demons."

"Really? I believe you, too."

The pictures in her head faded away.

Nightingale took a deep breath and pulled herself back to the reality. "Wait here. If anybody comes to look for you, do what you normally do like I've never shown up."

"Hold, hold on... Where are you going?"

She put the dagger back to her waist and stepped into the Mist. "To do what I should do."

...

Nightingale knew Hyde was right. She could easily invade Viscount Dott Somi's bedroom and threaten him to spit out all the truth with a dagger. Most nobles would lose their minds at the sight of a sharp

blade and automatically disclose everything without further coercion. Some stubborn ones, however, might insist on their silence for a while, but would eventually pour their hearts out after she denailed their ten fingers. This was a theory she had developed after years of assassination experience.

If the death of her parents did have something to do with the viscount, she would definitely make him pay with his life.

Yet Nightingale did not want a brutal revenge at this moment.

Especially after she confronted Hyde.

She was now no longer alone.

She had a person she could trust her life with and a person who equally trusted her.

Compared to the traditional method employed by her as a Shadow Killer, Nightingale intended to solve the problem in an alternative way. She believed if it were Roland, he would definitely not want to see her cause so much bloodshed.

Nightingale walked out of the Mist and entered Dott's study. Several pitch-dark black holes, which resembled inky spheres, appeared in the black and white world. Ignoring the dozing guards at the door, she rested her eyes on the domain of God's Stone next to the bookshelf.

Nightingale slowly walked to the wall, and the wall soon twisted and distorted. The outline of the wall curled up like dry, tangled hair, revealing what was hidden beneath.

Through the distortion, Nightingale could perceive the details that eyes of ordinary people could not penetrate. She saw a metal rod hidden in the wall, one end connecting to the bookshelf and the other attached to a "black ball".

It was a very common trap.

Nightingale broke the bell hung below the trap effortlessly. She then picked an ordinary-looking book and pushed it. Without a sound, the trap door was open.

The secret vault was embedded with God's Stones of Retaliation, but that did not pose an issue to her. Before she had entered her adulthood, old Gilen had hired a Rat leader to teach her all the skills that should be possessed by an experienced, cunning thief. After years of training, she had learned every deft trick of burglary, including how to open various lock catches with a copper needle.

After breaking open three or four iron vaults, Nightingale found what she wanted.

It was a recent ledger that kept a record of all the Dreamland Water transactions, including the order number, the name of the purchaser, and the quantity of the stocks for each transaction. As she had expected, nobles tended to hide important stuff somewhere they believed was most secure.

Both the ledger and the stocks in the mansion would provide solid evidence of the viscount's crimes.

Nightingale returned to the basement and reported everything to Roland.

The following day when it was scarcely past dawn, the First Army who had received instructions surrounded the whole mansion.

...

Three days later, when Hyde was just released from the prison, Nightingale came to him again. His frame was emaciated and his countenance expressed a deeper despondence. Wan and lost, he looked like a walking dead. It was the presence of Nightingale that finally brought some color to his cheeks.

There was a tinge of anger and hatred in his eyes.

"Viscount Somi is going to be hanged. His family members were sentenced to 20 years of hard labor. The two domains of his were subject to civil forfeiture. This is what you want me to have?" After they entered an empty alley, Hyde could not contain himself anymore. He growled at Nightingale, "You snatched everything from me and left me nothing!"

"You should feel fortunate that you haven't been treated as a member of the Somi Family." Nightingale said placidly, "Compared to the viscount, you're at least alive."

"That's because you want to see me continue to suffer, to live as laughingstock! You ruined my life eight years ago, and you did it again now... Do you know what life I had after you killed old Gilen? I finally got a chance to obtain the Somis' lands, and you ruined it! I was a fool to believe you would help me!" Hyde clenched his fist. "Now, I've no title, no land. Are you happy now? You've never forgiven me, Veronica! You're such a liar... you just want revenge! I should have known it long before!"

His hysterical hollering, in the end, yielded to a suppressed sob. He curled up his body and started to weep. "I've got nothing... nothing..."

Nightingale was silent for a while before she spoke, "You're right. I've never forgiven you, and I never will. A betrayal from a sibling is more intolerable than one from a stranger." She paused for a moment and then continued, "But you do have something. At least, I've given you freedom."

Hyde looked up, his face covered with dirt and snot.

"Nobody, neither old Gilen nor the Somis, can manipulate you now. Whatever path you choose in the future, whatever you're doing, they'll be solely on your own decision. You'll no longer live like a puppet as you did in the past. Whether you think it's a punishment or a torture, I don't care. That's your own choice — we're officially done as of today."

With these words, Nightingale turned around and headed to the end of the alley before she disappeared from Hyde's sight a minute later.