

## **Witch 881**

### Chapter 881: A Hundred Times Yes

The sun gradually sank behind the mountains and forests, gilding the surrounding clouds. The color of the sky was shifting slowly from blue to white then to red. In the end, the last drop of sun cast a crimson shadow on the thick grassland.

At the end of the Gilen Family's domain, there was a bulging slope. Standing on top of it, Nightingale could see her family's houses, farmlands, and forests adjacent to the mountains. When she had been little, she had liked to sit on his father's shoulders and ascended the slope to see the complete picture of their property. When her parents' bodies covered with bruises and wounds had been sent back and her servants had asked where she had wanted her parents to be buried, she had chosen the slope without hesitation.

At the time, she had been extremely upset at her parents' death and had had a hard time believing they were actually gone. She had wished at some point her parents could open their eyes. In that way, they could see her and her brother, no matter where she and her brother were in the mansion.

Now she once again visited her parents' tombstones, but with a totally different attitude.

There was not much dust on the tombstones. Obviously, somebody had been constantly dusting them. Bending over, she put a pile of neatly folded white paper in front of the two tombstones.

It was Viscount Somi's judgment.

Faced with the indisputable evidence, the viscount soon collapsed. After Roland promised his underaged children would not be punished for the crime he had committed, he had admitted his crime of smuggling Dreamland Water and had also confessed the entire process of taking the Gilen Family's properties.

It turned out, beneath the valley that between the two families' domains, there really are buried treasures, although it was not a gem mine but possibly a gold mine.

The one who had discovered it was a farmer working for the Somi Family.

Due to the different geographical positions, what the Gilen Family referred to as "valleys" was actually at the ground floor of Somi's domain. Farmers of the Somi Family had often fetched water and bathed downstream. One day, a lucky guy had found gold dust in the spring water coming down. He had then asked others to help further search for more gold, which had thus attracted Dott Somi's attention.

Instantly, he had prohibited them from spreading the news and sent his men to search for the origin of the gold dust.

Yet the result of the search had greatly disappointed him.

His men had indeed found more gold upstream and they had speculated that the coarse golds in the river had been a result of the sag of rocks caused by constant water erosion and seepage. However, an

increasing amount of evidence had shown that the gold ore might be close to the Gilen Family. As such, they had had no choice but to suspend the exploration.

Due to the special status of Silver City, the numbers of knights and supporters local nobles were allowed to own were more or less limited, so Dott could not just take the gold mine. Seeing that he really wanted this huge treasure, he had laid his eyes upon Viscount Gilen.

He had started his plan with old Gilen, a distant relative of the Gilen Family.

He had a simple yet ruthless plan. Considering old Gilen had no title nor manor, he had tempted old Gilen to cooperate him and promised he could make old Gilen the master of the Gilen Family under the condition that old Gilen would give him a piece of land. Old Gilen could not resist the temptation of becoming a real noble, so he had agreed to help Dott.

Dott bribed the Rats to kill Nightingale's parents during the refugee riot then old Gilen took the chance to take in Hyde and Nightingale and helped to manage their domain. Old Gilen planned that when Hyde entered his adulthood, he would force Hyde to waive his manor and title, which was as easy as pie—after all, an heir without parents was just as helpless as a bird in a cage. If any other nobles had a problem with it, they could only blame old Gilen for being too greedy.

His plan would have been completed, but Nightingale's awakening had sabotaged his plan—on the day of her adulthood, she had killed old Gilen and disappeared into thin air. Old Gilen had never got the title he had dreamed of even in his last moments.

Dott Somi had to alter his plan—he could win old Gilen over, but he could not get everyone's support from the Gilen Family. After all, he had only had one bargaining chip—the title. He had to make the best use out of it.

Ironically, he had turned to Hyde in the end.

When Nightingale had first heard about it, she had found it ridiculous—the thing that was meant to be Hyde's was used as a bargaining chip for Hyde to earn; yet Hyde was naive enough to believe Dott would help him. So he did not hesitate before agreeing to Dott's proposal, the man who had murdered his parents.

With the Viscount's support, Hyde stood out from all his relatives, who were contending for power and wealth, and successfully kept his title of nobility and became the official heir of the Gilen Family. According to their agreement, he would merge with the Somi Family. He had done so not because he had wanted to keep his promise, but because he had had no other choice—after going through internal strife, his family's industry was on the verge of collapse and most of his subjects had left.

After plotting for 10 years, the Viscount had finally gotten what he had wanted. He had even saved enough capital to exploit the mine little by little by smuggling Dreamland Water. Once the mineral vein was located, the wealth that the Somi Family could gain would last for centuries.

But Roland destroyed his ambitious dream.

For a likely gold mine, Dott had murdered fellow nobles, making several families fall apart... A vicious scheme, which led to the death of nearly 20 people, ended with a noose around his neck.

From beginning to the end, he had not been able to take a glance at the gold mine.

Taking out the flint, Nightingale burnt the judgment paper.

She had heard, from Roland, of an ancient way of mourning, which was to shape paper into the appearance of the item one wished to deliver, burn it, and then the deceased would be able to receive the present. Since a fire could connect spirits, smoke and fire with special wills had a chance to pass through the gate connecting the worlds of life and death, especially at dusk when the two worlds were the closest.

Through this ritual, Nightingale wished to deliver the message that the murderer had been executed to the spirits of her parents. Although Roland also said that he actually did not agree with the idea of the worlds of life and death, she did not care that much.

She was not so much comforting her parents as she was comforting herself.

By the time she walked off the slope, the sky had turned completely dark.

Roland was waiting for her not far away. The moment she saw the familiar figure, she felt relieved and safe.

"Is this really okay? Letting him go unscathed?" Roland twitched his mouth. "I've been longing to teach him a lesson."

"Oh? As who?" Nightingale asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Ahem..." Roland coughed twice. "Of course as a king."

Nightingale shook her head, smiling. "It's over. I'm done with him. If you really want to teach him a lesson, you can send men to take him back and beat him up again."

"Since you've dropped the matter, I'll let him go," Roland said, spreading out his hands.

"Em, right..." Nightingale suddenly stopped walking, knelt down, saluted with her hand across her chest as she did when she had pledged her fealty for the first time. She said, "Your Majesty, could you allow me to always stay by your side and serve you?"

"Why do you suddenly mention this?" Roland was startled. "Haven't I agreed?"

"Because I want to hear it again." Nightingale insisted.

Roland shrugged helplessly, walked to her side, stroke her head, and said, "Listen carefully—em, Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes... 100 times Yes. Are you satisfied?"

The magic string did not vibrate. Instead, it was as peaceful and soft as the earth under the curtain of night.

I'm so lucky to have met him.

Nightingale curled her lips into a smile and said, "As you wish, Your Majesty."

Chapter 882: The Return of the King

The king was coming!

Since Roland Wimbledon's troops were stationed in Redwater City, the discussion over this event filled the streets and alleys of the old king's city and reached its peak when the Lord of Silver City submitted to Roland. Although a fraction of people repeatedly emphasized that Roland did not ascend the throne, compared to his previous titles as rebel king and invader, most of the civilians still believed that the future King of Graycastle was none other than Roland. A coronation was probably the exact purpose for this trip.

The new king did not seem to be in a hurry as he stayed in each one of the cities for several weeks. By the time he made his way toward Redwater City, it was already mid-summer.

The increasing temperature did not decrease people's enthusiasm, however. Taverns were still full of voices talking about Roland's inauguration; main streets were decorated with colorful ribbons, houses over two stories near the palace were all leased out. The desolate old king's city seemed to have been restored its former glory. Perhaps only during such occasions the citizens in the city were reminded of the style and features a king's city should have.

It had been over a year since Roland last stepped onto this piece of land.

The moment he walked through the city gate, pedals collected by the local girls covered the sky; cheers from the audience instantly ignited the city—they were not praising the new king's wisdom and benevolence, it was merely a habit of the people here.

Nini and Pod were among them.

The two of them happened to live in a tower building close to the main street, which offered them the best seats that overlooked the entire scene. Their parents were too busy serving potential tenants to stop them, enabling them to freely climb to the top of the tower, lie on the red-brick roof, and watch the grand occasion of the army going into the city.

"Here they are... Is that His Majesty standing in the carriage? He looks so much younger than the Second Prince," Nini shouted with surprise. "Wow, look! He's waving at us! Lord Timothy would never do that!"

"He's waving at everyone in this direction." Pod shrugged. "We climbed so high. There is no way for him to see us."

"We're also included in everyone, am I wrong?" Nini said righteously. "Judging by his appearance alone, he looks much nicer than the Second Prince."

"So the nice king hanged a big batch of nobles, including His Highness Timothy—his biological elder brother. The temporarily constructed gallows are still standing in the square. He must be the ruler who has killed the most people in the king's city, even if you include the Rats."

"Hey, why do you always talk contrary to me?" Nini glared at Pod.

"I don't like him," Pod said with a pouted mouth. "He's never taken this city as his home. He advocates that in Western Region, there are more working opportunities and encourages people to go there, but

what about us? Nowadays the number of customers that come to father's tavern has reduced by half. Isn't he the one to blame?"

"So who do you like? The Second Prince?"

"I disliked him too. In order to catch witches, he caused turmoil over the entire city... The old king is the best, at least he wouldn't—"

"God! Look at the girl next to His Majesty!" Before Pod finished talking, Nini had put aside the topic they were discussing. Pointing at the carriage the king was standing on, she cried out, "She's turning back. Oh God, she's so beautiful!"

Pod had no choice, but to sigh.

Her discovery seemed to have attracted the crowd's attention—if one could ride on the carriage with the king, the significance of that person was self-evident. Discussions in the streets got hotter. Obviously, people were full of interests toward this strange yet pretty girl.

Suddenly, Nini and Pod heard a clear, peculiar roar.

Before they realized it, a gray figure, like an arrow shot from a bow, dashed in front of them and went directly into the tower building. Downstairs, a series of sounds followed as panic shouting, someone falling on the ground, and wine glasses smashing to pieces filled the air.

"What was that?" Nini asked in surprise.

"I've no idea, but it seems it came from our home!" Pod hurriedly stood up. "Let's get back and take a look."

"Ok!"

They climbed down the brick wall, the same way as they went up, and hopped into the tavern from a window. To their surprise, several armored warriors were surrounding the guests. On the floor, there was sprayed alcohol, water, bowl and cup fragments, and a few feathers everywhere.

The first thing that came into Nini's head was that Pod's complaint about His Majesty was overheard by somebody, and she wanted to muffle Pod's mouth, hide somewhere, and make no sound no matter what they saw.

Yet she could not manage to do that.

In actuality, when Nini and Pod came in from the window, the warriors had noticed these two "uninvited guests". The warriors did not come to arrest them. Instead, they smiled at them. After a few minutes, the warriors went out one after another, leaving Pod's astonished parents and the guests behind. A man who seemed to be the head of the warriors even took out 10 silver royals and put them into Pod's father's hand.

Waiting until the warriors all left, Nini hesitantly went to her parents and asked, "What happened?"

"It was unbelievable," out of excitement, her father answered with exaggerated body gestures, "when the king's honor guards passed by the street corner, a guest suddenly took out a loaded crossbow and aimed at the king!"

Nini could not help but gasp in astonishment. "And then?"

"We were frightened. If that arrow had been shot, all of us would have been in trouble. Luckily, at that moment, a bird, no, a person flew in and stopped that guy!"

"A person?"

"Not exactly. When she flew in she was a bird, but when she hit that guy on the head she became a person—a little girl about your age." A guest then said, "We didn't come back to our normal selves until the crossbow fell to the floor. We went and tightly pinned down the assassin, then those warriors broke down the door."

"Are you sure about what you saw?" Pod asked doubtfully, "That bird, no, the person who can transform into a bird, where is she? Could it be that you secretly drank Dreamland Water and were hallucinating?"

"By the time we had subdued the assassin, she had already left." Pod's father raised his palm and slapped at the back of Pod's head, which made Pod stagger. "You dare doubt what I said. You're in for punishment!"

The crowd burst into laughter.

The feathers attracted Nini's attention—they had similar colors to ordinary Goshawk's feathers but were much wider and softer. She carefully collected those feathers, pinned them to her head, and looked up and down at herself.

She felt she could fly too... Her heart was full of satisfaction, thinking she could use them as a headpiece.

This seemingly thrilling assassination did not draw much attention. Soon enough, people began to talk about the king and his followers. They were not aware of it but at least ten such incidents had already happened.

Fortunately, with Sylvie on guard, all the individual assassinations that relied on luck ended up in failure. Furthermore, the patrol team silently caught most of the criminals before their plans could be carried out.

"Well done." While constantly waving towards the audience, Roland took a second to nod and said toward the carriage behind him, "I didn't expect that there were still so many remnant factions left in the old king's city. It seems the situation isn't as stable as we imagined."

"My pleasure, Your Majesty," Sylvie replied.

"Since you knew it wasn't stable, you shouldn't have chosen to enter the city this way," Agatha said coldly—not sure whether it was age related decision, Roland felt her temper had become more and more similar to Scroll when it came to the matter of security. "Common people like you are too fragile. Sometimes an obscure wound can kill you," Agatha said.

"I'd stop any attack," next to Agatha, Anna said calmly. "Besides, Nana Pine is also among the security team."

"You are spoiling him."

"Ahem..." Roland hurriedly cut in. "In order to improve myself in the eyes of the people, such a risk is worth taking. After all, as a new king, I need to become acquainted with my subjects."

In the carriage, there was Sylvie, Agatha, Isabella, Phyllis, and Zooey. Additionally, the elites of the First Army were in the surrounding area. Theoretically, such a powerful combination of guards could guarantee zero chance of an incident occurring.

"That's irrelevant. You could have chosen a safer way, such as standing on a platform in the palace and speaking to your subjects."

Indeed, he did this for no other reason than to enjoy the fun of making an inspection tour. If he could, he'd prefer setting up two voice tubes in front of the carriage and greet his subjects with words like "Hello, my people...".

"Your Majesty, we're arriving at the palace," his guard said, which also had the effect of stopping Agatha from complaining anymore.

Roland sighed in relief. Through the redecorated inner city gate, he saw a group of nearly 100 men standing respectfully, waiting for his arrival. Some of them were the Western Region's old officials, such as Theo and Barov's disciples, some were new officials who were originally surrendered small nobles, but most of them were newly enrolled scholars and civilians.

Since the completion of the previous reform, the entire Central Region of Graycastle was officially in his control. When the Eastern Front Army took over the Seawindshire region, Graycastle would basically be an integrated kingdom.

When the carriage stopped, Roland lifted his cloak in high spirit, got off the carriage step by step, and waved toward the audience behind him.

"Let's go. Follow me to the palace!"

Chapter 883: A New Generation of Officials

"Respects to Your Majesty!"

Following the ceremonial officer Blanche Orlando's lead, all of the officials knelt down in unison such that they formed a low human wall along both sides of the palace.

"Respects to Your Majesty!"

Next to follow were the servants and maids who took charge of the palace's daily cleaning and routine matters. As Roland swept his eyes across the hall, he saw that everyone's heads were lowered, and their facial expressions were filled with both respect and fear.

"Respects to Your Majesty!"

Last to follow were the soldiers of the First Army, who knelt down behind him. Their voices were the loudest of the three groups, sounding almost like an unceasing succession of tidal waves.

Roland had thought that he would be unmoved by such a scene, having observed numerous large crowds and spectacular military parades in his time. Yet, at the moment of experience, he realized that it was invariably heart-warming to be revered by so many people, no matter how many times it had happened before.

As the crowd continued to cheer loudly, Roland walked up the steps toward the core area of the old King's City - the Holy Temple of Double Towers.

After he had sat down firmly on the throne, the officials made their way into the hall one after another and arranged themselves in three rows in front of him. Roland could not help feeling a little emotional as he observed these nearly 100 people. The City of Dawn was indeed worthy of being the Kingdom of Graycastle's former center - it had taken only a year to recruit all of these officials, who were already equipped with literacy skills. Even more commendable was the fact that most of them were from humble backgrounds. This level of education was perhaps only rivaled by Neverwinter City.

"Your Majesty, this is your scepter." Blanche respectfully handed him a shining gold staff. Exquisite patterns were engraved all over it, while a translucent blue sapphire was embedded on its tip. "It's forged by a goldsmith who specializes in making these things. Every king's scepter is furnished with its own unique features."

Roland was normally uninterested in such meaningless symbols of power. He felt that people might get the impression that he was a young upstart if he acted overly unceremonious and rude. However, he quickly discovered that the artifact was not simply for display. After all, it was not easy to gather everyone's attention in such a large and spacious hall.

And the scepter was the best tool for this purpose.

He raised it up high before tapping it on the floor. With that, the crowd became quiet at once.

"All of you know who I am already, so I shall skip the introduction." Roland scanned the entire hall and spoke at a slow pace. "My goals for this expedition are simple. The first is to eliminate threats, and the second is to put things back in order. My definition of 'threat' isn't confined to military opponents, but includes anyone who hinders the implementation of the new policies, whether he be a noble, merchant, freeman or a rat. These people shall be dealt with no differently from rebels."

"To achieve the second goal, an administrative system similar to that of Neverwinter City will be put in place. By now, all of you should've heard that anyone who becomes a City Hall official shall receive generous rewards and benefits, while promotion won't be based on ancestry or family background. In other words, based on ability, a commoner can rise to the ranks of a minister or even the Prime Minister!"

A flurry of whispers and murmurs arose in the crowd at once. Before this announcement, even the minor nobles, let alone the commoners, could not imagine attaining such lofty positions even in their wildest dreams. The story of Barov, who rose from being a treasurer's apprentice to becoming a figure only second to His Majesty in power, was already well-known in these parts. Everyone's eyes began to sear as they contemplated their chance of becoming a minister one day.



"Of course, not everyone will be admitted into the city hall. You'll need to pass the examination first." Roland continued calmly.

The discussions grew even louder.

"Your Majesty, what'll be tested?" Someone from the crowd boldly asked.

"Questions that seek out the individual's reliability. This is no different from that done in the Neverwinter city hall," he explained with a smile. "A candidate shan't have to get every question right to pass, but there'll be a minimum score that has to be met. The specific contents of the examination shall be announced just prior to it."

In truth, the question set was adapted from the Ten Questions of Loyalty compiled by Scroll, plus a few more questions concerning the candidate's work attitude and expectation. The main purpose of the test was to ensure the purity of the administrative team, albeit it was not called a loyalty test as that might scare off people who thought too much. During this era, disloyalty was considered a terrible sin and could take several forms. For example, insulting the monarchy in one's mind, or discussing the king's deeds and misdeeds over drunk conversation, were considered acts of disloyalty by law. Yet, which citizen had never complained in private before? Not to mention the nobles. If people knew that loyalty was being tested, many would certainly stay away from the examination.

Of course, when the scale of recruitment expanded in the future, Nightingale would be unable to examine every candidate thoroughly. However, at this preliminary stage, Roland hoped that the dependability of the administration could be ensured as much as possible. After all, many of those handpicked at this stage would eventually become stalwarts of the administration as long as they could adapt to the new system.

"Anyone who's recruited into the city hall will have to relinquish their businesses," he added. "No official shall be allowed to have dealings with merchants, or they'll be heavily punished if caught. I hope that everyone will consider this point carefully."

These words had the effect of a pail of cold water, and the hall became somewhat quieter at once.

Unlike Bordertown, most people in the old King's City held long-term jobs, and thus it was a difficult choice for them to forsake all that they had built up and commit to a new job.

However, this was a necessary measure to promote the concept of professionalism. Perhaps, some people would simply hand their businesses to their distant relatives or hire other people to run their businesses for them, but nevertheless, it was important to maintain this policy on the surface at least. Roland fully knew that genuine "officials" did not exist in the Four Kingdoms; ministerial appointments were granted to nobles whom the king trusted, and as such, working for him was viewed as a form of glory instead of duty. And when their glory was not under threat, they would consider their personal interests first.

Through professionalization, the selected personnel would be bound to their jobs, and they would be held accountable for their departments' success such that it would be impossible for them to seek fraudulent benefits. The only way for them to obtain more benefits would be through the increasing prosperity of the kingdom.

By separating business and politics, it would also help to prevent situations where an individual was a competitor and an arbiter at the same time.

"My final point is, I shall personally record the name of every city hall official, regardless of his position." Seeing that the mood had dampened, Roland decided to throw out the sweetener he had long prepared. "Your position, as well as the benefits it warrants, won't only be effective in this city. All territories under my rule shall recognize your authority."

This was the biggest draw of a professional bureaucracy.

The significance of becoming a bureaucrat was self-evident. It was not only a form of recognition but also offered the greatest security. Though the people in the hall might not be aware of its entire scope of benefits at the moment, they would understand the wonderful taste of "eating national food" over time.

As the old King's City had already been through several screenings, the noble class had all but disappeared, and thus the city was much easier to reorganize than the previous few cities. Many people retained doubts about the proposed plan, but nobody came forth to openly oppose it, while many more were willing to give the examination a go. A long queue quickly formed at the registration area after the convention ended.

Roland returned to his study and was about to invite Theo, Yoriko, and other old pals over for a private chat when a guard hurriedly entered the room.

"Your Majesty, we've just received a report from the unit stationed in the Northern Region. They've caught sight of the Kingdom of Dawn's army to the west of Hermes."

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#### Chapter 884: The Impact of War

"How's the situation in the west?"

As soon as Nail and Uncle Sang entered the central tent, "Eagle Face", the commander of the garrison in the Northern Region, inquired about the state of the war.

"They're still increasing." The veteran administered a military salute and briefly reported the findings of his observation over the past week. "I was indeed surprised. I never thought there'd be such a great force in the Kingdom of Dawn."

"How many of them?" Eagle Face poured two cups of tea for them, looking completely unperturbed. "8,000? 9,000?"

"I'm afraid it's over 10,000." Uncle Sang drained the cup. "There's a nearly one mile stretch of encampments, along with more than 20 banners whose names I can't tell. I have no idea where they've found so many people that are willing to cast their lives away."

"Over 10,000?" Eagle Face stopped his writing.

"Ask the unit leader if you don't believe me." Uncle Sang pointed to Nail next to him. "In order to get an estimate of their number, we went very close to the old Holy City under the risk of being discovered. The entire suburb is filled with troops commanded by the nobles from the Kingdom of Dawn. They've blocked the path that connects Hermes and the kingdom. Most refugees have retreated toward the Kingdom of Wolfheart and the Kingdom of Everwinter. I bet they've also deployed forces at Coldwind Ridge as well. At least, I've seen several detachments of more than 100 people on the way back."

"That's true," Nail added with a nod. "On the part of the Kingdom of Dawn, they're now waiting for the rest of their troops to get there whilst enhancing their defense of the surrounding areas. I suggest that our scout team not get too close to the old Holy City in the future, lest they're discovered by their patrolling knights."

Ever since they had noticed the unusual situation in Hermes, the garrison in the Northern Region had started to slowly proceed to the plateau area with the assistance of Duke Kant, not only to gather more intelligence but also to prepare for the upcoming battle. However, His Majesty did not approve Eagle Face's probing and attacking plan, only asking him to instead stay alert and continue to scout. With morbid disappointment, instead of waging a great war, the deputy battalion commander instead picked some capable soldiers from the garrison, instructing them to disguise as refugees to monitor both the new and the old Holy Cities in a rotation. In the meantime, he continued to update Neverwinter on the progress of the investigation.

Nevertheless, Eagle Face had still made a few accomplishments over the past few months. After he had confirmed that the deployment of corps in the Holy City was not a trap, the garrison in the Northern Region had retrieved Coldwind Ridge.

As for the army of the Kingdom of Dawn, they had only appeared two to three weeks ago.

"Sir, do you fear that those people will impede His Majesty's plan?"

"Hahaha, how is it possible?" Eagle Face burst into laughter. "Even if their number doubles, they're no more than some waddling targets. Even the God's Punishment Army failed to break the defensive line under the bombardment of machine guns. How can they possibly approach His Majesty? I'm actually happy to see they have tons of people. Let them attack the city wall of the Holy City first so that they'll know how fortified the church is. I really hope that the fight would bleed off strength from both of them. By then, I'm sure His Majesty will agree to my proposal." Eagle Face paused for a few seconds and then said, "Good job, scouts. You can take a rest now."

"Yes, sir." Uncle Sang saluted.

Nail, however, did not leave immediately. After a moment of hesitation, he asked, "Can't we... beat them off now?"

Both Eagle Face and Uncle Sang were stunned. "What?"

"His Majesty doesn't allow us to attack Hermes on our own, but it doesn't mean he doesn't let us fight against the army of the Kingdom of Dawn." Nail bit his lip. "If we wait until they launch an attack on the Holy City, the villages at the foot of Mountain Hermes may have already been razed to the ground."

The veteran sighed.

"Did you see something?" Eagle Face frowned.

"Pillage and massacre..." Nail clapped his hand over his forehead, reluctant to revisit the intense and inhumane scene. "They didn't enter the old Holy City but simply encamped outside. Soldiers have mounted nearby residents on sharpened wooden stakes and used them as the parapet of the battalion. They treat women even worse..."

"Enough." Eagle Face interrupted him. "This is common in a war! Both the church and the Kingdom of Dawn are His Majesty's enemies. It's better for the enemies to consume each other than we doing it for them! Also, don't forget we're soldiers, the swords of His Majesty! It's our duty to kill."

"But that's different!" Nail persisted. "We fight to help His Majesty achieve his goal, but they... they kill just for the sake of killing. Those villagers aren't believers, but they're treated worse than animals."

"Sir, Nail is just overreacting a little." Seeing Eagle Face's face cloud over, Uncle Sang explained immediately. He then turned to Nail and reproached. "Seriously? Do you know what you're talking about? As long as the church is still there, we can't cross the Hermes Plateau. How can we stop the army of the Kingdom of Dawn if the church is in our way?"

The New Holy City, which functioned as a great stronghold, connected all the flat areas of the plateau together. The four city gates in the outer part of the city were facing the four paths leading to the four kingdoms. Although the gates, currently unguarded, were accessible to refugees, it did not mean the church would allow the First Army to drive straight in, pass the Holy City, and enter the territory of the Kingdom of Dawn without any resistance.

Nail certainly knew that. He took a deep breath and said, "Actually, there's an alternative pathway."

"A pathway?"

"I talked to some of the refugees on my way back. One of them told me that there's a path wide enough for two people to walk abreast in the steep cliffs on the outer side of the plateau. The road will be blocked by snow and ice in winter. However, when the snow melts, the path is again accessible, and you can directly cross Hermes without intruding upon the Holy City."

Eagle Face gazed at him for quite a while and shook his head. "Forget about it."

Nail dropped his head and fell silent.

"You also know very well that this isn't a reliable plan... no, it's an unachievable plan I should say." The deputy battalion commander was surprisingly patient. "First of all, it's questionable whether this passageway exists or not. Also, even if it does, and it successfully leads us to the old Holy City, we can't defeat a force of 10,000 people at once. His Majesty said very clearly during the night session that logistics always comes first before any operation. It would be hard to transport supplies on a path only wide enough for two people, not to mention machine guns and ammunition. Besides, there're only 500 people stationed in the Northern Region. The ammunition we're currently equipped with isn't enough to conduct a prolonged war. Once we're routed, we'll be defenseless. It's likely that the whole army would be wiped out!"

Eagle Face rose to his feet and walked up to Nail. "I want to fight a battle of annihilation more than you do, but that's just my personal opinion. As His Majesty and Sir Iron Axe have entrusted the army to me, I

have the obligation to first think about the issue of safety and seek the best interests of the army when it comes to decision-making, whether it's regarding the current decision or the previous one with respect to the refugee settlement. Do you understand?"

"... Yes, sir." Nail clenched his fist but at length performed a military salute.

"Off you go."

When the two were about to retire, a soldier lifted the curtain and entered. "Sir, a reply from His Majesty."

"Really? Give it to me." Eagle Face unfolded the encrypted letter in a haste. No sooner had Nail and Uncle Sang left the tent did he stop them. "Wait a minute!"

"His Majesty has new instructions?" the veteran asked.

"Yes. The First Army has set off from king's city by boat and is now heading to the Northern Region at full speed. They'll be arriving at Coldwind Ridge in about 10 days."

"That'll be too late... after 10 days." Nail lamented within himself. The army of the Kingdom of Dawn could reach the old Holy City anytime and turn the villages at the foot of Mount Hermes into an earthly hell within a couple of days. For a moment, he seemed to see the lady who had struggled under musket fire again, denouncing what he had done.

"Before their arrival, His Majesty wants us to take action immediately to prevent the army of the Kingdom of Dawn from entering the old Holy City. At least, we have to prevent them plundering the monastery."

Nail raised his head abruptly.

"Can we... manage that?" Uncle Sang scratched the back of his head.

"It's going to be very hard. That's why His Majesty has dispatched special reinforcements who will arrive in the Northern Region tomorrow night." Eagle Face closed the encrypted letter. "Only the witches can get here that fast." He then turned to the two men. "Call a meeting with all the unit leaders! By the way, what's the name of the refugee who knows the secret pathway?"

Chapter 885: The Unlucky Tradesman

Tangen thought himself very unfortunate.

He was merely an ordinary tradesman who traveled between the City of Evernight and Hermes, selling furs and flannels produced in Graycastle to the church and bringing amulets or sculptures dipped in the holy water back to Graycastle. It had taken him nearly 10 years to finally establish himself and survive the fierce competition among his peers.

Tangen had decided to use the extra money he had to expand his business. Therefore, he had purchased a residence with an additional warehouse at the skirt of the new Holy City to store his inventory. When he had been about to launch his business, however, the situation in the north had suddenly taken a turn

for the worse. A great conflict between the new king of Graycastle and the church had broken out, which had resulted in a rapid decrease in the need for tokens of faith like amulets. As a consequence, he had not profited anything from the sale and instead had suffered a loss of around 20%.

Nevertheless, Tangen believed he could still earn something by selling furs. As the tension between the church and the king increased, the price of furs actually went up. At that time, he had firmly believed that the church would gain the eventual victory. As a frequent visitor to the Holy City, Tangen knew how fortified the church was. Even the most skillful knight in the kingdom might not be able to compete against a Judgement Warrior, who was subject to the most intense training in Hermes.

However, to his dismay, the church was defeated and it was a miserable defeat. His business had thus totally failed. Although he had reduced the price by 30%, nobody made a purchase. It was only until the Holy City had descended into a state of chaos and that his inventory had been stolen that Tangen had finally realized that the Holy City was no longer safe.

In fact, he had had an ominous feeling ever since the collapse of the cathedral. However, unwilling to abandon his entire business that he had developed and been working on for so many years, he had taken a chance to stay. The arrival of the army of the Kingdom of Dawn at the foot of the Mountain Hermes, unfortunately, was the last straw. It was obvious that those soldiers had come here for the wealth that the church had accumulated for centuries. Tangen was sure that with intense avarice, those soldiers would have not only have robbed his furs but also taken his life if he continued to linger.

After making the difficult decision with a flash of determination, Tangen had headed to the south with many other merchants. Through toils and snares, they had, in the end, arrived at Graycastle a few days later. They were treated fairly by the garrison troops at the border, asked some simple questions by the soldiers, and taken to a campground specifically for refugees. Afterwards, they were told that a fleet sent by the Duke of the Northern Region would take them back to the city in two days.

Although his life work had been cast to the wind, Tangen was much more fortunate than his rival "miser" Socas who had died on the way. After all, he was alive and still had a place to live in the City of Evernight, where his wife and children were waiting for him. At this thought, Tangen felt much better and thought all his misfortunes had finally come to an end.

But his heart soon sank when two soldiers sent by the new king found him and took him out of the campsite. He tried to bribe the pair for some information with a few silver royals but failed miserably.

Do they want to take advantage of me when I'm most helpless and strip all my money?

Tangen clasped his money pouch over his chest. This was the last bit he had. If he lost it, he would not be able to survive.

Yet he was too scared to refuse these soldiers' request, for he was certainly not strong enough to resist the ferocious army that had even crushed the church. If he infuriated these monsters, he would probably suffer a more painful death.

Tangen wailed in silence as he walked. "Why am I the misfortunate one? Why did they pick me rather than anyone else? Am I now cursed by the Gods because I dumped all the overstocked amulets and sculptures into the ditch?"

Filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and lamentation, he did not hear the question posed by the deputy battalion commander until a moment later.

"Wh-what... pathway?"

The deputy commander did not fly into a rage but repeated his question patiently. "One of my soldiers told me that you know a pathway that would allow us to take a detour around the new Holy City and directly reach the foot of Mountain Hermes. Is it true?"

"The one you told me about. You said some tradesmen often use that pathway to smuggle valuable goods. You did it a few times with them as well." Another person put in.

"Hold on... So they aren't coming for my gold royals?" Tangen stole a glance at the person and found it was the young soldier he had met on his way. He remembered his name was Nail. Since Nail looked like a pretty nice guy, Tangen had had a little chat with him and had also attempted to impress Nail by disclosing that he had once evaded sales taxes imposed by the church by using the pathway. He never expected that it would bring him such trouble!

But there was no point regretting it now.

"Well, there's indeed a pathway. The locals call it Cloud Ladder." Tangen forced an answer. "But it only appears after the snow melts, and it becomes inaccessible when it's rainy or foggy. It's rumored that the pathway leads to different directions, but I only know the one to the Kingdom of Dawn.

"Very well." The commander nodded. "You show my men the way. If they successfully reach the foot of Mountain Hermes, I'll reward you for your service."

"Mercy, sir!" Tangen went to his knees immediately. "I don't want a reward but just to go home after it's done."

"Unfortunately you can't." The commander's reply sent a chill down his spine. "To make sure everything goes smoothly, you must stay with us for the next few days until we no longer need you."

"But, but sir..." Before Tangen could finish his sentence, the commander tossed him five gold royals.

"This is the deposit. There'll be another five after the mission is completed." The commander interrupted him. "You should know very well what 10 gold royals can afford in most parts of Graycastle."

Tangen swallowed hard. 10 gold royals could afford a life. After doing business for so many years, his entire cash flow was merely a little over 30 gold royals. It was obvious that the commander intended to buy out his life with 10 gold royals, and there was no ground for him to negotiate.

"Will... you really let me go?" Although Tangen already knew the answer, he still asked.

"Naturally. As long as you work hard as a guide, I assure you that you'll be escorted to the City of Evernight."

...

Tangen left the campground apprehensively and found the two soldiers who accompanied him were the young man named Nail and an elder soldier.

"You really cooked my goose." Tangen smiled dryly. From the look of the two people, Tangen learned that it was simply a coincidence rather than a deliberate frame-up.

"How is it possible?" Nail knitted his brows. "10 gold royals isn't a small amount. As long as you act with utmost good faith, you don't need to worry about running into any dangers."

"Rest assured. Our commander is a man of his word. If he says you can go, you definitely will." The elder soldier put in. "Plus, 10 gold royals for just showing the way? I'd be more than happy to do that."

"Sir, you're..."

"Just call me Uncle Sang. You don't need to address me with such formality. If you really insist, do it to Nail. He's the unit leader, my superior."

"R-really?" Tangen looked a little embarrassed. He had thought the young man was just a soldier of the lowest military rank.

"Just Nail." Nail waved his hand casually.

"Can either of you tell me what the mission your deputy battalion commander referred to... exactly is?"

"We have to go around the Hermes Plateau and stop the army of the Kingdom of Dawn at the old Holy City."

"Unit leader!" Uncle Sang reminded Nail.

"It's OK. He'll stay with us in the next couple of days. Plus, he won't go making any random and blind conjectures if he's informed of a little bit. This will help us complete our mission. Besides, I'll shoot him down immediately if I find him plotting something."

Tangen shivered at Nail's words, but his attention was drawn to the former half of the speech, which sounded even more inconceivable...

"To stop the army of the Kingdom of Dawn?" Tangen's eyes were wide open. "That's impossible. The pathway is scarcely wide enough for two men to walk abreast, and some parts of the road have collapsed. One misstep you'll fall off the cliff." "Even if you walk from dawn to dusk, you can only transfer several hundred people in a week. How are you supposed to fight against those knights? It's also probable that the church will attack you from behind!"

"We aren't fighting alone," Nail answered placidly. "His Majesty's reinforcement will be arriving at Coldwind Ridge soon. You'll see just how the First Army does battle."

Chapter 886: Weapons and Arts

"Reinforcements? Did he understand what he was saying?" Tangen thought to himself while twitching his lips. "It would be useless if the reinforcements could not cross the pathway. Or did he mean reinforcements that could instantly pulverize Hermes to the ground and stride across the ruin of the Holy City? If that were the case, they would need at least a dozen days to get prepared for the strike."



Noticing that Nail did not have any intention of speaking more on the matter, Tangen decided to drop the topic.

One of the entrances to Cloud Ladder was on a cliff, not far away from Coldwind Ridge. They entered from a cave that was barely visible from the outside. When they could see the sky above their heads again, they found themselves seemingly in midair. The air was wet with clouds and fog filling the road. They suddenly understood why this passage was called Cloud Ladder as they felt like they were climbing to heaven.

Despite the dangerous road, as long as the weather was good, the path was reliable. Tangen had exaggerated how unsafe Cloud Ladder was, to prevent the First Army from going there. He didn't tell Nail that a couple of merchants reinforced the stability of the cave and strengthened the road with planks and wedges so that they could continuously use the pathway to evade taxes. As a result, the rumors of the dangerous road were false.

Within half a day, Tangen had led Nail and his men up and down the path three times. Without any mountain roads or passes set up by the Holy City, the pathway had shortened the distance considerably. It was more efficient for light infantry to travel via the path than via the main road.

Tangen noticed that Nail was repeatedly making notes in a small book. Apart from the everyday language widely used throughout the continent, there were also some unfamiliar symbols he had never seen. Tangen was surprised that a soldier could not only read and write but also had knowledge he couldn't understand. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he probably wouldn't have believed it.

Tangen had joined a Chamber of Commerce to learn bookkeeping and how to record transactions. He had spent a whole gold royal dedicated to just his primary business education. Tangen did not understand that if Nail could read and write, why he had still selected such a high-risk career, working as a soldier and putting his life on the line. Although Roland Wimbledon's army was impressive, there was no war without death. Nobody could guarantee that he was not the next.

However, during their conversation, Tangen learned that reading, writing and map drawing were not considered "advanced skills". It appeared that every member of the First Army possessed such skills.

"What are they all thinking?!"

Tangen was even more confused.

By the time they returned to the campsite, it was almost nightfall. There was quite a buzz around the tent. Tangen saw a group of soldiers excitedly discussing something. All their eyes were locked on the bonfire in the center of the campground.

"It seems that the reinforcements are here." Nail grinned.

"I think so, too." Uncle Sang smiled. "I wonder which familiar faces we will see this time."

"Miss Lightning and Miss Maggie must be among them." The unit leader accelerated his paces. "Let's go take a look."

Wh-what... Miss?

The reinforcements they've been waiting for were ... women?

Tangen followed at their heels. He picked an open space, stood on his tiptoes, and looked in the direction of the crowd. Upon seeing the "reinforcements", he felt like he was going to pass out.

What the hell? They're the reinforcements?!

These are just a bunch of kids!

Especially the one whose hair nearly reached the ground. Judging from the kid's round face and bright, sparkling eyes, Tangen thought she couldn't be more than ten years old!

The others were only a bit older. They all looked frail and tiny; whose legs and arms were not even as thick as Tangen's fist. He thought they would not be of any use on the battlefield, for they probably couldn't raise a sword.

"This is ridiculous — Wait..." Tangen paused for a second and suddenly became a little uncertain.

One of the reasons for his uncertainty was the physical appearances of those girls. They looked much prettier than ordinary women. Tangen had not noticed their unique beauty at first, but when a group of them stuck together, he immediately came to realize that they were probably witches.

Witches were not as horrible as people thought them to be. If it were true that they were as powerful as demons from hell, they would've destroyed the church and the worldly kingdoms long before. As an experienced, well-informed tradesman, Tangen knew that with a God's Punishment Stone, even a knight could easily kill several witches at a time. Witches weren't stronger than ordinary people when their power was rendered useless.

But everything became trickier when another person's influence was factored in.

Tangen held his breath and rested his eyes on another green-haired lady.

He had seen her once... at the celebration ceremony in the City of Evernight. Although she was not the most beautiful girl among the group, she was more attractive than anybody else he had seen at the celebration. Nobody would ever forget an elegant lady with such a strong and distinctive character.

It was Edith Kant, the daughter of the Duke of the City of Evernight, who was also known as the Pearl of the Northern Region.

She could be charming and enchanted in daily life but also valiant and fearless enough to behead her enemies on the battlefield with her longsword. It was rumored that her skill in fencing was as stunning as her appearance. What people feared most, however, was her unpredictable and even slightly eccentric work style. All the people who had once scorned her had paid a steep price for their insolence. When it came to anecdotes regarding the Pearl of the Northern Region, the residents in the City of Evernight could ramble on and on for several nights.

It appeared that Duke Kant had sided entirely with the new king; otherwise, he would never allow his beloved daughter to come to the barracks alone, unguarded. Further, from the respectful attitude with which the deputy battalion commander treated Edith, Tangen judged that she would not disgrace her title "Pearl" even if she were out of the Northern Region.

The new king's army was so powerful that they could even defeat the church.

Combining the assistance of the witches and Edith Kant with his invincible army, the new king would probably cause great trouble for the Kingdom of Dawn's army.

Apart from the "reinforcements", Tangen was also intrigued by something else.

He saw a strange-looking iron frame next to the bonfire. The symmetrical structure looked like a shoulder pole at first glance, with one basket attached to either end of the pole, each containing four rows of metal cylinders. All the cylinders had pointy tails and fat heads. Tangen could not immediately figure out what they were made of.

He somehow felt a little disturbed at the sight of the metal objects.

After studying them for quite a while, Tangen finally understood from where his anxious feeling came.

The nine cylinders, which were as tall as a full-grown man, were almost identical. From their fat heads to their pointy tails, all of them had the same smooth curve!

This discovery made his hands sweat. Tangen knew that as the hardest material in the world, metals needed to be repeatedly smelted and hammered before being beaten into shape. All the blacksmiths he knew had told him that it required a great amount of skill to forge nicely-shaped, smooth-surfaced ironware.

What a fantastic technique it is to be able to shape a five-foot iron shard into a smooth curve!

And to use that same technique to make nine replicates?

If he told this story to any of the blacksmiths in the City of Neverwinter, they would mock him for his ignorance.

It would be more understandable if all nine cylinders were refined art pieces, but surprisingly they were not.

Tangen knew from their grayish color and the sloppy way they were stored that these cylinders were not expensive, delicate pieces of art.

They were likely some unique weapon since they had been transported here to the barracks by the "reinforcements".

Nevertheless, these sturdy and durable weapons somehow gave a particular aesthetic pleasure as if they were pieces of art. The intense shock brought by this sheer contrast was unprecedented and indescribable.

Tangen swallowed hard and realized that he probably could not label himself as "well-informed" anymore.

For these people, war seemed to have become something else.

A realm beyond his imagination.

Chapter 887: Bomber Action

At this time, in a big tent located at the center of the Northern Region Garrison's camping ground, everyone was busy preparing for the upcoming battle.

Eagle Face was astonished by Edith's plan. "Leave the entire front to the witches? I trust their abilities, but there are at least 10,000 people in the army of the Kingdom of Dawn and many of them wear God's Stones of Retaliation. If the witches fell into a bitter fight there, it'll be hard for us to save them."

"Those were my initial thoughts of this plan." Edith smiled. "In fact, it's not the Adviser Department's plan but His Majesty's idea."

"Do you have a formal record of this?" asked the deputy battalion commander.

"Here you are." The Pearl of the Northern Region gave him a confidential letter marked with a red seal. "By the way, you can see that in the last part of the letter, the king has temporarily given me the power of commander."

In accordance with the rules of the First Army, any pre-war combat strategy must have a paper record which should be audited and signed by officers at a corresponding level, and a plan signed by His Majesty himself must be unconditionally executed.

After confirming the validity of the signature, Eagle Face promptly stood straight and made a military salute. "The Northern Region garrison promises to fulfil the mission!"

"Good." Edith smiled. "But remember, your purpose is to give the enemy a destructive blow when they retreat in disorder. Please note the prerequisite. If they're not fleeing hurriedly, you should consider it a sign of failure and backtrack to Cloud Ladder. No unauthorized military action is allowed. You must clearly explain this order to every soldier."

"Backtrack? Do you mean... retreat?" Eagle Face was stunned. "Isn't His Majesty sure about whether this plan is feasible?"

"We've never tried this before, so who knows? If it doesn't work, we must consider other strategies... That's why His Majesty sent me here." The Pearl of the Northern Region said straightforwardly.

"What about the witches?"

"They won't be in any danger even if they fail."

"Got it. I'll go prepare for this task. Our troops will set out tomorrow morning." Eagle Face saluted again.

"This operation is named Bomber Action and once your troops are in place, the battle will begin." Edith made a military salute to him. "Well, go."

"Yes!"

Although Eagle Face did not really know what "bomber" meant, he had faith in this thing. He was firmly convinced that all the kings' new inventions were extraordinary, just like the steam engine.

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After two days of waiting in the camp, Lightning finally received the order to take action.

Sylvie's voice came through a Sigil of Listening in her hand. "Margie has transported all the people into place. You can set off now. The Kingdom of Dawn's soldiers have taken down their tents and packed. They are beginning to form up for battle. Hope you can catch up with them."

"Don't worry. We'll be there soon." With these words, the little girl turned back and waved to Maggie and Hummingbird. "Come on. It's time to go!"

In the past two days, she had flown in the sky to check the map of Cloud Ladder and survey the situation of all the surrounding areas. His Majesty's plan was not complicated. The six witches were divided into two teams. One was in charge of transportation and logistics and thus mainly relied on Margie's Magic Ark to complete their task. Sylvie and Lily were also in this group. The former was able to detect distant enemies to ensure that they could seize the initiative on the battlefield. The latter could prevent the church's demonic plague in case the church got desperate and spread it to kill the Kingdom of Dawn's soldiers who broke into the old Holy City.

The other team was the heart of this military operation.

"Oh!"

"Coo!"

Hummingbird sat in the bomb carrier and held the connecting rods on both sides of her seat. She made her magic power constantly circulate throughout this iron structure which Roland named "The East Wind". Soon, the weight of this bomb carrier and the eight bombs it carried was reduced by 99% and was just within Maggie's carrying capacity.

The white-haired girl transformed herself into a big beast and leaned over the bomb carrier. Lightning went to tie the cloth straps and ropes, binding Maggie and "the East Wind" together.

As Hummingbird's ability could not effect on the living things, Maggie was actually carrying a witch and "the East Wind" which was now as light as the witch. As long as Hummingbird could maintain the weight-reducing effect, Maggie would be able to perform precision strike missions for a long time.

Roland had used the hydrogen balloon to bomb the king's city and had achieved remarkable success. Based on the post-war reports of that attack, he had made a few improvements.

Maggie's role in this mission was to replace the balloon since she flew faster and moved much more flexibly. More importantly, she could swoop before dropping bombs, which would save Lightning the trouble of revising the direction and allowed her to focus on detection and navigation.

Limited by her magic power, Hummingbird was unable to sustain the weight-reducing effect for "The East Wind" throughout the day. Though her power had increased a lot since she had started to practice carrying cannons, she could only manage to lift these bulky, heavy bombs for half a day at most. After all, most of the time, the bomb shells, warheads, and ammunition were transported separately.

Fortunately, the Kingdom of Dawn's army was not far away. Half a day was enough.

"The road is clear. You can take off. Repeat, you can take off!" Lightning put on her goggles and leaped up into the air.

"Ah... it's coming again." Hummingbird sighed.

"Ow ow ow!"

Maggie, now in the form of a giant flying beast, flapped her broad wings and took off, casting a huge shadow on the ground. The tents in the camp had begun to shake due to the airflow caused by her wings, which was as strong as a howling gale. She adjusted her direction and headed for the Hermes mountain.

An hour later, the three witches were in the sky above the old Holy City and easily spotted their target, an army of over 10,000 people. As seen from above, this army resembled a stream outside the city but inside it, the soldiers dispersed. They seemed like colorful ants creeping around slowly and nibbling the old Holy City's territory away.

Lightning did not like the church at all and felt no pity seeing it suffer from this plundering. However, she also knew that countless people inside the city were innocent, especially those orphans who had been taken to the monastery by the church.

She thought they should not be buried here together with the old Holy City.

The little girl inhaled deeply and kept ascending until she felt some breathing difficulty. She opened her arms and dived along the middle of the stream of people, moving in the opposite direction to the army of the Kingdom of Dawn.

This sharp descent made her feel as if all her internal organs were moving backwards. It was not a pleasant feeling but she was still thrilled by the high speed.

She did not look back for she was sure that Maggie must have been closely following her. After spending these years together, they could cooperate flawlessly.

The people and things on the ground rapidly became clearer and some knights apparently also noticed the shadow falling from the sky. She could even see the scared looks on their faces.

When the girl and the beast flew down to the middle part of the stream of people, the girl suddenly flew up while shouting. "Now, drop the bombs!"

Hummingbird, who was sitting in the bomb carrier, immediately pulled the switch.

Chapter 888: Heavenly Divine Retribution

With a clicking sound, the bolt loosened. Two bombs, each as heavy as Nightingale, slid out of the bomb carrier and fell toward the crowd due to their inertia.

After leaving the East Wind, the bombs instantly regained their weight while maintaining their high speed. This change gave them great momentum. As they sailed through the air, they made a friction sound which was like a strange whistle or the howling sound made by a gust of wind blowing through a cave. People on the ground simultaneously looked up at this incredible scene.

At this moment, the nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn felt relieved.

They thought these two things falling from the sky were nothing compared to the big flying monster. In their view, though these things dropping from that height were able to crush anything they hit on the ground, they could, at most, kill three or four unlucky guys.

They believed this would not be a problem for such a large army. Hearing Appen's call for an expedition to the west, both great nobles such as dukes and lesser nobles like the new knights had been actively preparing their horses and eagerly recruited servants. Numerous people joined this expedition, hoping to get a share of the profits from the church that was already on the verge of collapsing.

Having an army of over 10,000 people, the nobles would not care at all if several guys or even 30 to 40 people got killed by the things falling from the sky.

They still thought of the formidable Devilbeast as a genuine threat. Once it dived into the crowd to bite and stomp, it would easily slaughter over 100 people, let alone the casualties and loss that would occur when the panicked serfs began to run away. Given that, they firmly believed that as long as the monster did not land, they did not need to worry too much.

They also reckoned that the enemies in the sky, who were probably witches, did not have enough courage to openly fight against the army of the Kingdom of Dawn. Since they came here to rob the church of its treasures, all the nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn wore God's Stones of Retaliation and brought many weapons specially made to fight witches.

At this moment, many knights put down their longbows and Magic Stone arrows and bet with each other on whose soldiers would be hit by the black stones.

No one on the ground moved out of position. No one lied down to cover themselves from the coming explosion. They just watched the two bombs flying towards them like two arrows and kept advancing steadily.

A moment later, two scarlet flames broke out in the middle of the stream of people!

People within the bombs' landing zones were instantly turned to ash. The heated air rapidly expanded, forming hot, strong blast. Everyone that bumped into it felt as if they had hit a steel wall and quickly got blown to smithereens. Soon, broken limbs and internal organs were littered everywhere.

The blast quickly died down and could not tear apart people that were 100 steps away from the center of impact, but this explosion was not the only destructive thing.

The Kingdom of Dawn's troops could hardly find any shelter, since unlike the king's city, this area connecting the Kingdom of Dawn and the old Holy City was a vast and open plain. When the bombs exploded, the defenseless people became easy targets for the explosion waves, debris and numerous iron balls shot out of the shells. They traveled through the crowd at a speed several times faster than that of the sound. Each iron ball could pierce through a dozen of people before it stopped, and the steel shell fragments were even more destructive.

Due to the terrain advantage, the bombs caused damage over a wide area.

The witches in the sky saw the black smoke rise in a flash and form something like a high wall, which choked off the movement of the stream of people on the ground.

Before the nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn recovered from the shock, Lightning had already ascended to the highest point possible, ready for the second round of diving.

"The East Wind, launch the second attack!"

Maggie immediately closed her wings and followed closely behind the little girl, falling all the way from the sky with a loud howl.

"Ow ow ow—!"

They had loaded four bombs on each side of the bomb carrier, so they could choose to carry out four bombing raids or drop all eight bombs at once. In order to achieve the best effect, Lightning intended to dive four times to throw bombs into the middle and the rear parts of the stream of people.

Beyond her expectations, during the third round of attack, the army of the Kingdom of Dawn totally collapsed.

For those who were still alive, these explosions were more like divine retribution coming from heaven. Places struck by god's thunder were all scorched and littered with corpses. Neither the serfs without protective clothing nor the fully armored knights could escape from these hellish, raging flames. This seemingly endless catastrophe made them feel desperate, and the deafening explosion noises and screams of the seriously wounded crushed their spirit.

The biggest crisis for them was that in this inconceivable series of attacks, they could do nothing except praying that the black stones would not land near them. They had no chance of hurting the giant flying monster either since it kept hovering or swooping beyond the range of their arrows.

This kind of battle was totally beyond their understanding.

The nobles came for the wealth, but never wanted to risk their own lives in the process. No matter how much money they got from this city, they would not be able to enjoy it if they died here. They could not even carry the wealth back home if all their servants got killed in this attack.

With this thought in mind, they made a swift decision to escape.

Seeing the nobles, who had strictly prohibited the serfs from running away, turn their steeds to flee the battlefield one after another, the whole army quickly slid into chaos. As more and more people joined the fleeing knights, the stream of people started to move again, but this time, it was heading in the opposite direction. The people outside the city that had marched orderly in the beginning now stopped entering the city and started to escape in disorder.

The nightmare for the army of the Kingdom of Dawn began at this moment.

When they swarmed to the main road, the First Army's soldiers hiding in the fields on one side of the road calmly pulled their triggers

This was a typical flank attack.

The panicked nobles just wanted to leave this dangerous place as soon as possible and completely forgot about detecting enemies and protecting their flanks. Five squads of the Northern Region's garrison lined up along the road and shot the soldiers of the Kingdom of Dawn with revolving rifles and



heavy machine guns. As their targets were within 300 meters, they did not even need to think about accuracy. They just kept firing, trying to shoot out all the bullets in their guns as quickly as possible.

Before sunrise, Eagle Face's troops had already hidden themselves away in the fields where the wheat-straws were waist high. With the help of Sylvie, they could hide here without being spotted by the enemy's scouts and remain informed about the enemies' movements.

Obviously, there was a huge gap in information gathering technology between the two factions.

'Crack!' The moment the first shot rang out, the nobles of the Kingdom of Dawn were astonished to find that they were ambushed by some enemy forces hiding in the fields. If this had happened when they had been marching toward the city, they would have concentrated their forces to fight back. However, now the situation was totally out of control. The soldiers of the Kingdom of Dawn were hurriedly running for their lives and wishing that they could grow extra legs to rapidly move as far away from the bullets as possible. The nobles sent their mounts rampaging through the crowd, squandering their subjects' lives.

The wide road turned into an avenue of death.

Chapter 889: A Key Person

Tangen, who had been compelled to follow the First Army, found that he had seriously underestimated this army's strength.

During the battle, they never fought in hand to hand combat against the army of the Kingdom of Dawn, and Tangen did not see a shower of arrows nor any brutal fighting scenes in this 500-meter-long front. The First Army soldiers just kept firing at their enemies and the people in the army of the Kingdom of Dawn kept falling down at the sound of the guns.

This scene seemed like a flashy show to him.

But the loud, shrill cries from the main road reminded him that it was an extremely fierce battle. This easy victory of the First Army clearly demonstrated its strength to him.

He finally understood the combat method of The First Army that Nail mentioned.

He had never seen such an well-organized, disciplined army in the past and thought that the First Army soldiers were as outstanding as their lethal weapons. In this army, hundreds of soldiers acted in unison as if they were one person. They moved quietly in the darkness to get into position and got ready for the ambush before daybreak. They silently lurked and launched an attack according to their plan. Even with no supervisor overseeing the fight, the five squads still worked closely together. The commander, Eagle Face, also came to join the ambush rather than staying in the camp. Every soldier was highly concentrated and attentive to his duty. Each order was promptly executed. He believed that if it had not been for these excellent soldiers, the First Army would have not been able to achieve such great success solely relying on their fierce weapons.

After witnessing the battle, Tangen could not help but feel glad that he had chosen to leave Hermes in time.

He thought that if he had stayed in the Holy City, a merchant like him probably would have been accused of financing the enemy when the First Army seized the city.

He secretly sighed. Well, it's really dangerous to do business in the outside world. If I can return home safely this time, I'll never leave the city of Evernight in the future.

I can carry on business within the city. Although I won't earn much money that way, I'll still be able to raise my family.

And my Fier in the "Paradise on Earth". She must miss me very much.

I really had hoped to get home earlier. Tangen was absorbed in thought.

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Towards the evening, Eagle Face stepped into a temporary tent for a meeting. He saluted Edith and handed a report to her. "The battlefield has been basically cleaned up. Here are the reports from each squad. I've briefly summarized them."

"Thank you for your hard work." The Pearl of the Northern Region received the report and roughly glanced through it. Just as she had expected, the casualty figure for the First Army was zero. As for the army of the Kingdom of Dawn, more than 1,000 people were found dead and about 600 were wounded. This fight was estimated to reduce the number of Dawn's soldiers by 20%. Most of them were killed in the explosions of the bombs and the panic-stricken stampede. The guns and bullets had greatly increased the turmoil but had not directly killed many people.

This result corresponded with the Adviser Department's predictions. The garrison of the Northern Region did not have many soldiers and the Magic Ark could only carry a limited amount of ammunition. Without effective methods to pursue and wipe out the enemies, they could only let most of them run away, but as long as the garrison managed to drive them away, this action could be considered a success.

At the end of the battle, more than 1,800 people had dropped their weapons and surrendered and 25 of them were nobles. The one with the highest rank was an earl who claimed himself to be the lord of Bloom, but Edith was more interested in a baron named Remin Payton. According to the reports, all the nobles had promised to pay the ransom and demanded preferential treatment, except this baron. Remin had repeatedly emphasized that he had known a distinguished official of Graycastle for a long time and was a friend of the king.

"Did he really say that?" she asked Eagle Face while shaking the pamphlet in her hand.

"I assumed that it was just nonsense. Or perhaps, this guy still thinks the king is Timothy Wimbledon," the deputy battalion commander frowned and said. "What are you going to do with these nobles?"

"It's impossible for us to let their families ransom them, so throw them into the dungeon." Edith thought for a moment. "They may be useful for us in the future. As for the civilian captives, release them now. We don't have the extra food to feed them."

"Yes."

"Did you find the King of the Kingdom of Dawn, Appen Moya?"

"We've checked all the corpses and found no one that looked like him." Eagle Face shook his head. "During the interrogation, a captive said he had seen Appen and his knights fleeing the battlefield. According to him, Appen and his men changed clothes and brought with them no flag or anything bearing the coat of arms of the royal family, and the others who wanted to join them to escape were all stopped by the king's knights. However, he also admitted that he was not sure about this for he saw this from a distance and at that time, the army of the Kingdom of Dawn was in chaos."

"Where did this captive see this?"

"Inside the old Holy City."

"There's a strong possibility that it was Appen." Edith shrugged her shoulders. "It's imperative for him to personally lead such a large army and if he was marching with the army, where do you think he was?"

"Ugh... at the head of the procession?" Eagle Face expressed some uncertainty.

"To be accurate, he should be behind the vanguard units," she answered. "As the old Holy City has no walls, the first one getting into the city will collect the most trophies in the robbery. In order to make sure that he was the first to be there, he must have made his own knightage the vanguard to eliminate threats and ensure his own profits."

"Do you mean that he and his knights were already inside the city before the Bomber Action started?"

"Well, yes. That's why Appen survived the air attacks launched by Maggie and Hummingbird and had enough time to identify the situation and choose the correct direction to escape. I have to say, he was quite wise to put aside his dignity and act decisively to escape in disguise." Edith slightly raised the corners of her mouth and quickly licked her lips.

"Damn it! We let the big fish escape," Eagle Face said angrily. "If I had arranged another group to chase..."

"No, it's of no use," she interrupted. "On such a broad plain, it's not easy to catch him unless you know his escape route in advance. We succeeded in the ambush on the main road just because we took full advantage of their retreating habit and herd mentality. If they had chosen to escape to the wheat fields on the other side of the road, we would not have achieved such an easy victory."

"..." The deputy battalion commander did not refute this but still looked very vexed at his failure to catch Appen.

"You don't need to blame yourself for this. It's not necessarily a bad thing for us." Edith smiled.

"Why?" Eagle Face raised his head in interest.

"It's complicated to explain. You only need to know that fear is contagious and when the people of the Kingdom of Dawn realize how formidable we are, they'll never belittle His Majesty's warning." The Pearl of the Northern Region paused. "Appen Moya will have a difficult time."

Knowing that she did not want to explain further, Eagle Face stopped pursuing the matter. "So what should we do next? Directly go to occupy the old Holy City?"

"No, it's impossible. The five hundred people we have are far from enough to fulfill this task." Edith denied his suggestion without hesitation. "Let's wait. Miss Maggie has gone to pick up a key person for this task. With her help, we may be able to seize this city effortlessly."

Chapter 890: Your Holiness... Isabella

Isabella was overwhelmed by her emotions when she saw the city again.

Unexpectedly, in only a year, the church, who had been the only hope of humanity to defeat demons, became a barrier to the human race's success in the Battle of Divine Will.

She had lived here for a long time but was not sentimentally attached to the church. The teachings of His Holiness O'Brien, kept ringing in her ears and reminded her that the result was always more important than the process. She was certain that if humanity could not defeat the demons, all their efforts would be meaningless.

She followed out O'Brien's instructions all her life. She had chosen to support Zero instead of Archbishop Mayne since the soul swallower had shown more potential in defeating the demons. After Zero had lost to Roland Wimbledon, she had chosen to serve the king. If even now, she could find a leader more powerful than Roland, she would choose the more capable one again without hesitation.

She did this for good reason.

In her view, the continuation of the human race was far more important than any personal interests.

Despite that, she still could not let go of some strange regret deep in her heart. She did not understand why she felt this way until she returned to the old Holy City.

She discovered that she had been feeling sorry for Zero all this time.

Back then, the Pure Witches had believed that the gulf between them and Zero, who had lived for hundreds of years, would have been exceptionally wide and many of them had secretly complained about the soul swallower's sudden change in moods. However, Isabella had gotten along well with Zero. She found that, in comparison to the other Pure Witches, who had planned to follow their personal interests throughout the Battle of Divine Will, Zero was much more straightforward and strong-willed.

She believed that Zero was not very different from herself except that she was more accustomed to being an assistant while Zero was used to being the leader.

She was afraid that it was not Zero's nature but an inevitable choice for an experienced witch who had lived for more than 200 years.

She guessed that the Holy City would have looked very different if Zero had been able to meet Roland ten years earlier.

Unfortunately, everything had happened too late.

After circling the sky twice, Maggie landed in the camp outside the city.

"We're here. Let's get off," said Agatha, who was behind Isabella.

Isabella nodded and leaped off the beast. Some soldier that was waiting around immediately came over. "Lady Edith is waiting for you in the tent. Please come with me."

Roland had asked Maggie to bring the Ice Witch with Isabella to the old Holy City and had explicitly told Isabella that she had to act under the watch of another witch during her "prison term". She had willingly accepted this condition. For her, this was already unexpected preferential treatment. She did not have to wear any God's Locket of Retribution or shackles on her hands and feet. Even her clothes were brand new.

After walking into the tent, she saw a woman who stood behind a desk with a smile on her face. "I'm Edith Kant, a member of the Ministry of Defense and temporary commander for the Holy City campaign."

"A great-looking common woman," Isabella thought. "I thought you would control the Hermes Plateau first and then seize the old Holy City."

"That was the original plan, but the army of the Kingdom of Dawn moved faster than we expected." Edith gave a rough explanation of the situation. "His Majesty's order is to ensure the safety of the monasteries, which isn't a problem. The real problematic thing is how to orderly evacuate the orphans from the monasteries. If I remember correctly, they are all nurtured and brought up by the church. I'm afraid it'll hinder our plan if we have to force them out. I think you may have a solution to this problem. After all, His Majesty assigned this task to you before the expedition."

Isabella could not help but frown. "Wait... you said you came here through Cloud Ladder?"

"Yes, is there something wrong?"

"That place is of great importance and is usually heavily guarded. How come there was no one protecting that passage?"

"Is that so?" Edith's voice got deep. "But the merchants thought it was just a little-known, secret passage and Sylvie didn't find anything special about it."

"The church has been based in this place for the past several hundred years and is meticulous about everything here. It's impossible for the church's people to neglect such an important path into the city, which isn't under the control of the city wall." Isabella shook her head. "They just intentionally let the smugglers pass freely and planned to use this passage against the Coalition of the Four Kingdoms during the Months of Demons. Its sentry posts were hidden in natural limestone caves in the mountain. That was why the merchants didn't see any guards there."

"This passage is left unprotected now. Is it because of the breakdown of order in the Holy City?"

"Cloud Ladder is guarded by forces outside the city wall. Theoretically, its sentry posts won't be affected by the situation inside the city. If it's okay with you, I think it's a better idea for me to go to Hermes to have a look." With that being said, Isabella was quite stunned by this situation in her heart. She thought to herself, "Does this look like a breakdown of order? No, it's more like giving up the city and escaping."

"Let's address the issue of the monasteries first," Agatha said. "Is it possible for us to investigate the situation inside them from the sky?"

"Yes, Miss Lightning has examined all three of the main monasteries and found a big issue. It seems that the orphans are organized by someone and are determined to defend their homes to death. That's one of the reasons for us to delay this action." "All my soldiers were unharmed during the battle against the army of the Kingdom of Dawn. I don't want to see any casualties inside the city." Edith said with her hands laid out.

"Somebody organized the orphans?" Isabella pondered for a moment. "Let me go in and talk to them."

"By yourself?"

She was about to say yes but soon realized something was wrong and swallowed her words. Instead, she said, "No, Agatha will go with me."

...

"La-Lady Isabella!" Seeing Isabella, Margie suddenly stood upright and put her right hand on her chest unconsciously.

"I've told you countless times. You're not required to use the courtesy title anymore. Just call me by my name," she said with a straight face. "We're no longer Pure Witches."

"Yes, my lady!" Margie hurriedly nodded.

Isabella secretly sighed. His Majesty had only limited her movement but did not restrict Margie or Vanilla. These former Pure Witches still kept to their old habits from the monastery and occasionally came to the Foreign Affairs Building to talk with her about the interesting things they discovered in the Witch Union. Fortunately, Agatha did not mind it.

"Take us into the city." She pointed to the city that was not far away.

Margie summoned the Magic Ark and turned back to look at Edith, who came to see them off. "The First Army isn't going with us?"

"They won't go into the old Holy City until you make sure that it's safe."

The ark quickly sank into the ground and the soil above their heads turned into a transparent ceiling. Through it, they could see Lightning who flew in the sky and showed them the way.

There were four monasteries inside the old Holy City, but they could be thought of as a unified institution. They were built around the Reflection Church, linked together by underground tunnels and connected to Secret Temple inside the mountain through a secret path. New witches could be easily sent to the incarnation ceremonies through these underground passages, but they were sealed since a newly awakened Extraordinary had burnt down one of the monasteries.

The Magic Ark quietly sneaked into the outermost monastery, the Western Zone Monastery. Just like Lightning had said, no one was in the huge courtyard except for two skinny girls. They stood at the lobby entrance with spears in their hands, which were much taller than themselves.

"Here we are. Go up now," said Isabella.

"Don't you need to slip in to check first?" Margie asked in surprise.

"No, there are too many hidden God's Stones inside. We don't have to take the risk." Isabella was certain that in important sites such as the monasteries, the church usually placed giant God's Stones, whose power could reach up to 100 steps away and she was unable to eliminate their effects.

The ark swiftly popped out of the ground, causing panic among the guards. In their eyes, these two women seemed to appear out of nothing.

A shrill whistle immediately rang out. All the closed windows were opened one after another and a dozen of nuns that leading a group of orphans swarmed into the courtyard, holding swords, wooden shields, short bows, and hand crossbows. Agatha summoned her Ice in her hand and planned to cover Isabella with it if they began to shoot arrows.

"Wai-Wait! Stop!" Suddenly, the leading nun shouted loudly.

"Are you... the Pure Witch beside the Supreme Pontiff... Lady Isabella?" Another nun asked with a shaky voice.

Hearing this, all the people stopped.

"Yes, it's me." Isabella nodded calmly.

Seeing that these nuns still remembered her, she thought that the task given by His Majesty could be completed smoothly.

However, the next moment she was caught off guard by the abrupt change in their attitudes.

"You really are Lady Isabella! That's great. We're saved!"

"Lady, no, Your Holiness Isabella! Your Holiness, please help us!"

"Supreme Pontiff! Please don't leave us!"

More and more people dropped their weapons, knelt down, and chanted loudly, "Your Holiness."