

Winter 431

Chapter 431: I'm Going to Be a Father?!

The night envelops the Axe-Fragmented Highlands, a cold wind blows into the camp from the mountain hollow, swirling the ashes of dying flames.

In the center of the camp, the tall pole bearing the "Angry Flower" flag flutters fiercely in the wind, the blood-red and black patterns resemble the eyes of a fierce beast, making one dare not look directly at it.

Barbarian elder Olten stands on a high slope, draped in a heavy horned hide cloak, overlooking the entire encampment.

On the edge of the camp. Another circle of chaotic silhouettes gather, within the flickering firelight, the flash of knives appears suddenly.

It's the young men of the Redstone Tribe, fighting again in the middle of the night.

Punches, kicks, biting, roaring furiously, utterly devoid of clan rules, like a pack of wild dogs ignited by gunpowder.

In the past few months, it's become countless times, and more often than not it ends in death, yet strangely no one stops it, as if tacitly approved.

This tightens Olten's heart, yet he can't pinpoint what's wrong, he is not a coward, but these nights, he feels increasingly unable to sleep.

It's not just external, that sense of irritation and brutality seems to be quietly growing inside him too.

Lately, he's prone to anger, often yelling at young warriors, even the cries of a kin's baby can make his teeth itch unbearably.

He knows it's abnormal, yet he cannot control it.

This emotion seems to have started spreading after Titus waged war against the Axe-Fragmented Tribe.

After that battle, on this gradually silent barbarian land, the old totems were burned bit by bit, turned to ash, buried in the soil.

Replacing them is that newly erected black-bottom angry flower banner.

With thorns as stems, blood-red angry flames as petals, standing tall at the center of the Axe-Fragmented, Redstone, Blazing Tooth, and Dark Horn tribes' camps.

In merely a few months, Titus has integrated the four major tribes, controlling a force nearing ten thousand.

On the surface, each conquest resembles a traditional tribal war, the first battle fierce, blood flowing profusely.

But strangely, the flames of war do not last long, the day after the battle, the enemies begin to "voluntarily" surrender.

And the surrenders often come with an inexplicable heightened emotion, as if it's not surrendering to an enemy, but to something higher and purer.

Olten initially thought it was simply the awe for the strong.

But now he's not so sure, this isn't mere conquest, this feels more like an infection.

It's like an emotion bred from anger, bridging tribal bloodlines and customs, like a branding iron, burning into everyone's bones.

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Deep within the snowfield, a valley intertwined with eternal white bones and layers of ice.

This is the sacred ground of the original Blazing Tooth Clan, the "Bone Snow Valley", and at the center of the valley, the original totem pole has long been smashed and burned, replaced by a high platform wrapped in deep red vines and iron stones.

And at the altar's center, a massive shadow is roaring and struggling.

It's a dying, yet still conscious Frost Giant, with jagged bone armor, its whole body encircled by dozens of black iron chains, each link engraved with burning scars, slowly seeping residual heat into the gray snow.

Its eyes are tightly bound by thick black cloth, it can only raise its head and howl, its throat emitting mountains' reverberations, the shockwaves causing the snow accumulation at the valley bottom to continually slide and shatter.

Titus stands on the altar stone platform, bowing his head to overlook the giant, his face stern as iron, yet in his eyes flickers a wildly abnormal gleam.

His right hand slowly rises, a deep red vine unfolds from his palm, like a hungry eye, constantly squirming, as if yearning for a host.

"Become my weapon..." he whispers, his voice carrying a chilling softness, as if soothing a lover, not commanding a beast.

The giant below him still struggles, roaring ancient words in defiance, pain, and with remnants of lost divinity lingering.

The lieutenant stands to the side, his expression grave, but still tries quietly: "King... this giant's wild nature is untamed, should we wait until the chief priest stabilizes?"

Titus's gaze shifts slightly, then slowly turns his head.

"...No need." he says.

His voice is extremely light, but in that moment, the scorching main vine seems to obey, winding out swiftly, piercing the flesh beneath the giant's collarbone, blood splattering amidst the tremor of the flower crown, greedily beginning to devour, parasitize, expand.

In the instant "Scorching Main Vine" pierced like a spear, the Frost Giant's body convulsed violently, blood mixed with frost gushed out of its wounds, quickly freezing into jagged scarlet ice spikes on the ground.

He roared skyward, yet that roar lasts only for a fleeting moment.

"Ka—ka, kachak..."

Following, the giant's back skin abruptly bulges, as if something inside struggles, twists.

Skeletal joints jaggedly rise beneath muscle and frosty skin membrane, accompanied by a nauseating ripping sound.

Thick vines burst from its shoulder blade, spine sides, branching over limbs, wrapping around its entire body.

Original smooth as ice, the giant's forehead now reveals a strange burn mark.

It's the flower crown's insignia, like scorched branding iron totems, in the cold wind, strangely emanating a scarlet brilliance.

His roar suddenly halts.

Replacing that savage scream is a sort of muffled and hoarse low growl.

Indistinct, suppressed, nearly a murmur, the language unclear, yet faintly echoing compliance and response.

Those eyes once blue as glaciers, now filled with bursting blood threads, pupils glowing red, gaze lifeless and hollow.

He slowly turns, movements heavy yet firm, as if pulled by invisible strings, slowly bowing his head towards Titus on the stone platform.

Titus quietly watches this scene, a god's oversight upon his hand-forged creation.

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He leaned slightly, his voice low and gentle, like a lover's whisper: "Good... you can hear the rage."

When the parasitized Frost Giant finally knelt down in a roar, vines climbed up its back, and a floral crown pattern appeared on its forehead like a hot iron.

The surrounding barbarian warriors were momentarily at a loss, but quickly, their fear turned into reverence, and they all knelt to the ground.

Titus stood on the high platform, shouting, "We will have a giant army!"

A cheer erupted through the valley, a mix of fear, fanaticism, and weeping.

But no one questioned why the Frost Giant's eyes were hollow and its steps stiff.

All doubts were completely overshadowed by the noise and excitement of the "miracle."

Yet amid this clamor, Titus's gaze turned momentarily blurred.

He once again heard that low sound, like the rustling of vines moving beneath the skin, as if mocking him.

Suddenly he grabbed his lieutenant's chest armor, lifting the man off the ground, eyes burning with nearly frenzied firelight.

"Are you... laughing at me?"

The lieutenant's face turned pale, terrified, denying, shaking his head repeatedly.

Titus stared at him for a few seconds, then suddenly sneered, throwing him aside: "Very well. Go capture more Frost Giants. The more, the better. I want the entire Northern Territory to kneel before me."

The order was issued, and the tribes of the barbarian race set out under the blood-red banner.

They surged into the depths of the snowfield like a storm burning with rage, hunting down every remnant of the ancient races.

Not just giants, the first batch of "blessed" exotic beasts appeared in the camp one after another.

Ice Wolves, Snow-horned Deer, Ice-digging Apes, Night Foxes... none were spared.

Their skin cracked, strange vine veins pulsed beneath their flesh, and from their mouths and noses spewed a corrupt red gas, eyes burning with unwanted rage, carrying an extremely unnatural ferocity and deformity.

Chained throughout the camp, the sound of clanging chains, roars, and uncontrollable madness continued.

Like living curses, they struggled between the iron cages and stakes.

However, not a single barbarian warrior avoided them; instead, more and more people approached these monsters.

Some watched, some offered blood, some even approached barehanded to fight them, as if testing their own strength.

They laughed as they crawled up from in front of the cages, even if their faces were covered with blood, without complaint, just to vent the endless rage in their hearts.

And these exotic beasts had long lost their minds, yet seemed to share some invisible will.

Their cries mingled with pain, anger, and an indescribable longing, as if the entire camp's heartbeat trembled violently with them.

The roars were deafening, disturbing the whole night, yet no one felt fear.

Instead, more and more warriors approached the cages before dawn, echoing and imitating the roars and even starting to vaguely mimic the poses and cries of those exotic beasts.

They no longer distinguished the boundary between themselves and the beasts.

Some people's eyes were bloodshot, some grew tiny thorns on the tip of their tongues, and some knelt silently in the middle of the night, murmuring words no one could understand.

Like sleepwalking beasts, or slaves chanting prayers in a dream.

Until one night, when the first roar sounded, it was not only the caged beasts that responded but also the living people.

And no one noticed, or rather no one wanted to notice, this was actually a spreading sacrifice.

.....

Deep winter finally descended upon the Red Tide Territory.

The red rooftops on both sides of Red Tide City's main street were piled with thick snow, heavy yet tidy, as neatly arranged as carefully decorated pastries.

Early risers on the streets were already shoveling snow with wooden shovels, the swishing sounds continuous.

People by the roadside were winding pine branches and red ribbons around the lampposts, a tradition they had only recently restored in the past few years.

Children laughed and ran past snowdrifts, wrapped in thick cloaks, with joyful faces.

This winter was no longer as hard as in previous years.

The distribution of food from the people's warehouse was orderly, with firewood, petroleum, and medicine powder distributed as needed.

Even the market held every seven days offered fresh cured meat and salted fish for sale.

Many households rarely cooked meat soup in their pots during winter, emitting a fragrant aroma.

People often said, "Thank Lord Louis, I never thought we could have hot meat during such a cold time."

And for Louis himself, perhaps this year was finally a rare chance to take a breather and rest for a while.

Sunlight streamed through the bedroom window, falling on the dark red curtains and carpet.

Emily and Sif had long since gotten up, the lingering scent of their dresses had dissipated, leaving him alone nestled under the covers.

He exhaled lightly, having a rare lazy sleep.

For the sake of procreation, last night... he had indeed exerted himself a bit.

Flipping over and getting up, Louis raised his finger, tracing a line in the air, and a semi-transparent intelligence interface immediately opened up before him.

[Daily Intelligence Update Completed]

[1: A group of Ice Armor Bears has been spotted in the northern part of Mai Lang Territory.]

[2: Titus controls a Frost Giant with Burning Pain Vine Court's main vine; the giant's rage is uncontrollable, kneeling and obeying orders.]

[3: Emily is pregnant. Expected to give birth to a son for Louis Calvin in ten months.]

The first piece of information caught his eye, and a look of indescribable joy appeared on Louis's face.

"...Finally found it."

He murmured, a glint of light flashing in his eyes.

The Ice Armor Bear, a magical beast considered a rare wonder of the northern plains.

Two years ago, he personally led the knights to hunt a group; it was the most important battle during the early days of the Red Tide Territory's establishment, a time of scarce resources.

That Ice Armor Bear nearly became the cornerstone for early resource accumulation.

He remembered clearly, the bear meat was carefully cured into grilled meat that enhanced Fighting Energy. The bear claws and fangs were crafted into a batch of extremely sharp cold steel weapons.

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And the most precious of all is, of course, the blue-silver crystal cut from the crystal spine on its back, containing immense energy, a top-tier material for alchemy and magic.

Louis used those few pieces of crystal back then to make a Magic Explosion Bullet.

He still remembers the moment it detonated, the air-shattering explosion, that instantly turned hundreds of Snow Swearers to ash.

"...One of the best core materials for a Magic Explosion Bullet." He tapped a place name on the intelligence report with his fingertip, a smile at the corner of his mouth, yet his expression sharp as a blade.

Moreover, Red Tide Territory is no longer what it used to be, with Frost Leaf Vine potion and a well-trained Beast Knights Order, it has long been capable of capturing and taming Ice Armor Bears at scale.

This isn't prey, it's an opportunity.

In his mind, he quickly pulled up a list of candidates, deployment routes, and taming trial plans, even which alchemists to partake appeared in his thoughts.

Then the second item: Titus controlling an Ice Frost Giant using the main vine of Burning Pain Vine Court...

Louis' gaze sharpened, the joyful smile hanging at his mouth froze instantly.

"Ice Frost Giant..." Louis squinted his eyes, his voice barely audible.

It's not like he hasn't encountered such monsters, in fact, he has slaughtered them.

They are strong, extremely strong, but dumb. As long as you have brains, they're not too difficult to handle.

But what if they're no longer dumb?

What if Ice Frost Giants had command, tactics, cooperation...

And the one making this possible is that barbarian, increasingly resembling a "new king"—Titus.

This name has appeared more and more frequently in intelligence over the past few months.

From the initial barbarian chief, to gradually integrating the four great clans: Broken Axe, Red Rock, Blazing Fang, and Black Horn, with forces exceeding ten thousand, military discipline shaping up instead.

This gradually made him anxious, and now... added a few more layers of genuine threat.

Louis leaned back on the chair, exhaling a breath of white air.

"This is no ordinary barbarian unrest..."

He realizes that if Titus truly mastered the method of controlling giants, it is tantamount to having an active battering ram, a force resource not restricted by conventional combat techniques.

If these Ice Frost Giants were to be controlled in batches, the Northern Territory may well face a real "war trample."

He knows he'll have to carve out some time for studying countermeasures.

What is more dangerous is the name behind it: Burning Pain Vine Court.

His pupils contracted slightly, his mind quickly surging with past collected fragments of information from the system.

Burning Pain Vine Court... isn't recorded in the known Mage Forest magical canon, nor like conventional curses or witchcraft.

It seems more like a kind of eroding magical ecology, possibly a kind of organism, or perhaps something between a plant and a curse...

Somewhat similar to Nest... he even suspected if it was something researched by that Desperate Witch.

His expression completely darkened.

If even giants can be tamed, then... who's next to be infected?

Will there come a day when the entire "new barbarian race," driven by anger and madness, sweeps over Red Tide's borders, along with those magical monsters?

This thought briefly chilled Louis' gaze for a moment.

Can't wait until that day to act. Must prepare an emergency plan in advance.

Only himself isn't enough.

He's already written in advance to Duke Edmund, selectively reporting some of the intelligence he's "accidentally obtained."

Choosing words carefully, emphasizing warning the other to heighten vigilance, and reinforce defenses.

These thoughts flashed through his mind in mere seconds.

Then Louis' gaze swiftly shifted to the third piece of intelligence.

"Emily is pregnant. Expected to give birth to a son for Louis Calvin in ten months."

At that moment, the icy chill was seemingly dispersed by the spring breeze.

His mind went blank, then he suddenly sprang up from the bed, his voice filled with disbelief yet overflowing with joy: "I'm going to be a father?!"

Chapter 434: War Council

In the study room of the castle, the fire lightly flickered, casting a warm glow on a corner of the stone wall.

Outside the window was a street freshly after snowfall, where the commoners were methodically shoveling snow and tidying up, maintaining orderly conduct.

Thanks to thorough preparations, this winter was particularly calm, with almost no major incidents occurring.

Louis sat at the long table and finished the last report, exhaling a long breath.

During the winter, he usually remained in the study to work, no longer venturing out for inspections.

This was not merely because he was lazy but also because he knew the foundation he had laid was enough to sustain a peaceful winter.

At this moment, the door was gently pushed open.

Sif walked in, draped in a thick woolen cloak, with a smile in her eyes: "Would you like to take a look at the greenhouse? We've... cultivated something quite different."

She smiled mysteriously, her tone unconcealing a hint of playfulness.

Louis was taken aback, already having some suspicions in his heart.

But he feigned ignorance, gently closing the pages of his book, unable to suppress the smile at the corners of his lips: "Alright then, now that the work is done, let's consider this a bit of relaxation."

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Inside the greenhouse, a faint scent of mint and soil permeated the air, radiating warmth.

This greenhouse was personally transformed by Emily, used for indoor flower cultivation, with flowers and trees interspersed and vines growing along the framework—it was also her little world.

Emily stood in front of the flower rack, holding a small bundle wrapped in plush cloth. She appeared unusually nervous, lightly pressing her lips together as if awaiting some "correct response."

Upon entering, Louis played dumb completely: "What's happening? Did you really cultivate some new variety of flower?"

Sif chuckled, moving aside the potted plant beside her: "Why don't you open it and see for yourself?"

Louis took over the bundle, his eyes showing a cooperative performance of confusion.

Upon gently unveiling it, he saw a baby embroidered square towel, a pair of plush soft boots, and a hand-drawn paper note.

The paper depicted the silhouette of a family of four, with a small question mark drawn on the baby's head.

Emily's voice was as soft as a whisper, but her eyes were filled with gentle light: "We're... going to have a child."

Though he had foreseen this prophecy, hearing Emily say it still stirred his emotions vigorously.

A second later, Louis suddenly lifted Emily entirely, spinning around in the greenhouse like a triumphant youth returning home.

"What did you say? Say it again!"

Emily blushed as red as a ripe apple: "I'm pregnant... it's true."

He was so excited that he was almost incoherent: "I, we, you... this is wonderful, truly wonderful!"

After putting her down, Louis maintained a light protective gesture over her belly, his eyes red.

Sif stood to the side, originally intending to make some jest, but upon meeting those reddened eyes, her smile paused.

Suddenly, Louis pulled her into his embrace too, holding both of them tightly.

Sunlight penetrated through the glass dome of the greenhouse, cascading onto their shoulders.

Outside the winter, spring had quietly planted its seeds.

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Louis didn't make a big deal of the child's news.

He only informed three people, the first two being Duke Edmund and Duke Calvin.

Mainly to announce the continuation of family blood and to see if he could secure some gold coins.

The third person informed was Bradley, the old butler, to arrange some related matters.

Louis was more aware than anyone that behind this joy lay a heavier responsibility.

He was no longer just an administrator, a fighter, but now also a father.

The world had finally birthed someone he must protect, no matter what.

Yet, as the Daily Intelligence System continuously updated, the situation in the North became increasingly clear and more unsettling.

He compiled and categorized weeks' worth of intelligence, finally outlining a portrait of the core figure: Titus Frost Fierce.

Originally the leader of the Frost Fierce Clan, he ascended through a bloody coup, forcibly integrating the Broken Axe, Red Rock, Blazing Tooth, and Mystic Horn four major barbarian tribes.

He has formed the "Frostfire Legion," with manpower conservatively estimated between thirty to forty thousand.

The troops are characterized by extremist faith, highly centralized, with a strong military style and high combat will and emotional appeal.

This kind of efficient recruitment and "legionized barbarians" with transformative capabilities is unprecedented.

Moreover, he seemingly acquired unknown spiritual powers—the "Burning Pain Vine Court" support, capable of influencing subordinate mental states.

The intelligence concerning it is still somewhat scant, pieced together only by the content of multiple intel reports...

It resembles an ecological structure, nourished by emotions, spreading with anger, gradually eroding the minds and beliefs of creatures.

Manipulating emotions, infecting exotic beasts, commanding Frost Giants...

The more Louis read, the colder his expression became.

Between spring and summer, a true large-scale war was certain to unfold.

Perhaps Titus would charge straight from the frost plains into Empire-controlled regions, disrupting what remained of order in the Northern Territory.

Regardless, Red Tide Territory must protect itself.

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In the stone-built operations room, the brazier burned with the scent of pine resin and wolf oil, casting flickering shadows under the candlelight.

In front of the long table covered with sheepskin maps, Louis was using a feather pen to mark and outline on the rough map.

"...They're itching for action."

He straightened up, speaking in a deep tone, scanning the captains and lieutenants of the Red Tide Territory army standing on each side.

"Most Northern Frost Fierce tribes have completed integration. Broken Axe, Red Rock, Blazing Tooth, Mystic Horn... all have been incorporated. Based on intelligence estimates, the Frostfire Legion already has more than forty thousand troops."

At this point, he set down the feather pen, pressing heavily on the northern border of the map.

"This can't possibly be a common barbaric raid." He slowly looked at everyone, "It's war, a long-prepared full-scale war."

Chapter 435: War Preparations Meeting (Part 2)

Silence spread through the room. Just after a good year, war returns unexpectedly.

"Are you saying..." Lambert frowned, "they're marching south?"

"And possibly initiating once the spring snow melts next year," Louis nodded, "We don't have much time."

He pointed to the intelligence reports nearby, where rough black ink arrows sketched possible attack routes of the Barbarian Race.

Louis paused, his gaze cold, "According to reports, they have acquired some ability to incite rage, frenzy, and even control the Frost Giants."

"Frost Giants?" Lambert repeated softly, the wrinkles on his face deepening.

"Exactly," Louis replied.

"What we must do," he said, swiping a quill across the sentry defense lines of the Northern Territory, "is to keep them out, prevent their first collision, and not crumble."

The crowd remained silent, as the flickering fire made the air seem heavier.

"I suggest extending the wolf sentries and hidden lines," Northern Army Corps Commander Heller spoke first, his knuckles tapping the table, "The scouting range must expand, not missing a spot in the northern treeline or Windcut Gorge."

"I advocate for establishing three lines of Fire Wall horses early," Southwest Army Deputy Corps Commander Lesha echoed, "Especially around Freezing Spring Gate, if breached, the entire supply line will become as fragile as paper."

Louis nodded slightly, as the recorder jotted down their words on parchment.

"And the Scarlet Leaf Ridge," Southern Army Tactics Officer Tull stood up, a slight, unnoticed agitation in his voice.

"We originally only set up a sentry, but if they send Rage Giants, even one could uproot the cliffside post. I suggest deploying at least two Magic Explosion Crossbow Towers equipped with high-altitude magic bursts."

"Scarlet Leaf Ridge is too far, the supply line stretches too long," Eastern Army Deputy Commander Weir countered, "The production of magic explosives is already tight; diverting more there will deplete the main city's reserves."

Tull did not back down: "Without early deterrence, how many more will die when we fight?"

Weir snorted coldly but said no more, staring at the map with knitted eyebrows.

"In the southwest, I suggest deploying mental shock bullets," North Army Forward Commander Ranjie suddenly spoke, his voice heavier than his usual playful tone.

"Infected ones cluster quickly in that area; we need to disrupt their emotional core. Even a few seconds of chaos will buy us breathing time."

The crowd offered their suggestions babblingly, but without coherence or organization.

"I have noted all your opinions," the recorder obliged, quickly gathering several pages of records, his wrist sore but daring not to stop.

Louis glanced over at everyone at the table, his voice turning low yet powerful: "Your suggestions are all good, now let me talk about my own deployment."

The room suddenly fell silent.

Lesha rolled up a half-spread map and sat upright, Heller touched his chin, saying no more, and Lambert pushed aside a glass with a quill, nodding slightly...

Firelight cast over Louis's profile, illuminating his unwavering eyes.

He stood up, tracing the Northern Territory border with his fingertips, before firmly landing on a crossroad marked in dark red on the map.

"Within a hundred miles of the Red Tide Main City, no Frost Giant shall take a step closer."

He switched hands, laying out a simplified deployment sketch on the table, circling with a charcoal pen.

"We will construct a three-tier interception zone," he spoke methodically, his gaze sharp as a knife.

"First, the outer defense line," he tapped lightly in the northwest direction.

"Deploy magic explosive minefields, paired with folding horse barriers and ember firewalls to ensure maximum chaos and casualties for the enemy's first charge."

"Second, the middle ring," he took a small flag from the table and placed it behind the defense line.

"Heavy crossbow towers and magic explosion projectile cavalry will suppress Frost Giants and Mutated Beasts, prioritizing kills."

"Third, the inner circle, our last line of defense."

He stated each word clearly: "Platforms of Steel Beasts, hook spear formations, and multi-point linkage of magic explosive projectiles must form a net of firepower to tear apart any invading Exotic Beast army here."

He spoke slowly, as if unraveling a simple puzzle.

Yet with each word, everyone's hearts steadied a bit more.

"Our greatest trump card remains the magic explosion bullet," Louis turned to them, "Optimize the configurations of all explosive bullets; I don't care if it's flame, freeze, shock, or toxic, every type must be used."

He spoke, his fingers twitching slightly, moving a column of small wooden markers wrapped in twine towards the mountain pass and valley at the map's northern end.

"Special units shall also preempt. The Frost Howl Unit ambushes Snow Ridge Pass to disrupt enemy rhythm and prioritize beheading their leaders.

The Fiery Breath Unit, in teams of three, handles fire line patrols, ensures no gaps between defense zones; if we can hold, we can seal.

The Crimson Frost Unit reassigns heavy ammunition, absolutely breaking the enemy's backbone in one strike."

He stopped, exhaled a long breath, finally sitting back in the chair, looking at the map, then slowly lifting his eyes.

"We don't fight for attrition," he said, "We're aiming for a decisive blow, not allowing a single step beyond our line."

There was no one speaking in the room.

Silent, yet not oppressively so, more like a final stand before the drums of war.

The previously tense legion commanders now bore clearer senses of purpose on their faces.

Heller sighed softly, a barely perceptible smile at the corner of his mouth.

Lesha tapped her nails lightly, humming: "... Then what are we waiting for?"

Lambert muttered, "This battle, we must fight in a way that they dare not look south again next time."

All eyes fell silently upon the map's dense markers, lines, and heavily inked defense lines.

Their gazes hesitated no more, for the great Lord had made everything ready.

Inside the war room, the candlelight flickered, casting serious or determined outlines on every face.

The recorder put away the final page of notes, nodding quietly to indicate he had written everything down.

When the pen tip landed, it felt as though it concluded the meeting.

Thus, the border war of the Red Tide Territory quietly took root within a lantern-lit war room.

"Alright," Louis put away the pointer, his voice steady yet firm as always, "This meeting is hereby concluded."

He scanned each legion commander, his tone softening slightly but remaining sharp: "Remember what I've said. Next, it's your respective battlefields."

They all responded in unison, "Understood."

Then rose, paying a solemn knight's salute in sequence, expressing their loyalty.

Under the firelight, figures in fur armor and thick cloaks gradually left the war room, pushing doors open, welcoming the snow-laden wind, yet none retreated.

As their footsteps faded, the sturdy wooden door slowly closed amid the cold wind, leaving silence within the war room.

Only Bradley and Louis remained at the long table.

The old butler bowed slightly, pouring a cup of warm wine, speaking softly, "Sir... will the Spring Festival be held as usual this year?"

Louis paused, gazing at the map atop the table, and after a moment gently nodded, "Indeed. People have been striving hard constantly, without a festival for respite, it won't do. It's time to reconvene everyone, unifying their spirits."

Bradley let out a reassuring smile, nodding respectfully: "I will organize it as per your intentions."

He then bowed and exited, gently closing the door behind him.

The firelight continued to flicker, casting Louis's silent silhouette in contemplation, pondering the impending crisis beyond the distant snowstorm.

Chapter 436: Weir's Spring Festival

Weir stood in front of the bronze mirror, rare as he tidied up his collar.

Today, he wasn't wearing his usual silver-white knight armor, but instead wore one of his few sets of casual clothes.

Gray-blue trousers, black leather boots with silver buckles, and a dark cloak draped over.

He looked both spirited and a bit... as his mother would say, "dressed like a southern bumpkin nobility."

At fifteen, he was already the youngest high-tier elite knight in Red Tide Territory, having served as Louis's personal guard for three years.

This status made him quite significant within various corps, yet last night he asked his lord for a day's leave for the first time.

He muttered vaguely, while Louis just gave a knowing smile and directly approved.

At the door, his mother was carrying a basket, donning a cloak as she reminded him, "I'm going to the fish farm to help with fish slaughtering today, won't be home for lunch. You'll have to manage yourself."

Weir nodded vigorously: "Got it, got it!"

As he stepped out the threshold, her familiar nagging voice followed, "Fifteen years old and still so restless!"

Weir pretended not to hear, hastened his pace towards the market outside the Artisan District.

Today marks the Spring Festival, the busiest holiday in the Red Tide Territory's spring, and one of the few occasions for the entire community to celebrate together.

Even though it's morning, the place was bustling, red cloth and streamers adorned between wooden pillars and stalls, the air filled with the aroma of stewed beef ribs, children chased windmills back and forth, everywhere exuding a lively atmosphere.

And in that bustling market outside the industrial area, Lilya was already waiting at a stall.

She was a year older than Weir, joined the apprentice knights in the same batch, now also a mid-tier official knight.

Though she didn't possess Weir's astounding talent, she was still one of the top young geniuses in Red Tide Territory.

Unlike her commanding presence at the training field, today she wore a clean light gray dress, waist belt neatly tied, half ponytail clipped up, eyes bright, looking even more radiant.

Weir halted his steps, suddenly feeling a bit awkward, stammering: "Goo... good morning."

Lilya looked at him, softly smiled: "Good morning."

That smile seemed to dispel the last chill of spring.

This year's Spring Festival was different; due to the growing population in Red Tide Territory, various districts handled their respective roles, the main city no longer organized the festival in a unified manner.

A basic set of regulations was issued, and the specific plans were delegated to various communities, industry guilds, and village groups to organize celebrations, easing the logistical pressure while showcasing the creative spark of the folk.

And the area Weir and Lilya were in was precisely the festival organized by the Industrial District's Craftsmen Association.

Thus, the festive stalls looked especially hardcore.

All the stall frames handcrafted by carpenters and blacksmiths, robust enough to serve as temporary fortresses, rows of grills lining the roadsides, robust men sweating profusely flipping ribs and whole fish on iron nets, firelight and smoke weaving into a blazing festive atmosphere.

Some even created a stone-thrower style tossing game, kids playing gleefully.

Every detail showcased the craftsmen's ingenuity and roughness.

Weir, munching on oily charcoal-grilled beef skewers, followed Lilya through the bustling Craftsmen Street.

The air mixed with scents of sawdust, grease, hot iron, and charcoal, as furnaces on the street sides roared, hammer blows rose and fell like an uninterrupted metal symphony.

Rows of stalls displayed gleaming blade blanks, shining iron ingots, uniquely designed tools, and stones emitting a subtle glow, the whole block exuding a practical romantic essence.

While they were engrossed in their stroll, a sudden burst of noise erupted ahead, a large crowd formed a circle, cheering loudly.

"What's happening?" Weir asked a middle-aged man next to him holding a pot while he chewed.

"Don't you know? It's the Sword Forging Competition! Only three hours on-site creation, let's see whose blade is both swift and fine!" The man added mysteriously, "Rumor has it that Lord Louis himself came up with the idea."

Weir raised his eyebrows, suddenly intrigued, since anything devised by Lord Louis was bound to be worthwhile.

The host onstage was Mike, president of the Red Tide Craftsmen Association, his voice booming as he both commanded and explained, "Three teams, fair competition, materials standardized, skill above all!"

Flames splashed on stage, looking like the contest had been ongoing for quite a while.

The first team was the Three Brothers Workshop, coordinating seamlessly, specializing in "Segmented Steel Layering."

They operated like a precisely working assembly machine, forging sword billets from raw iron within mere dozens of minutes.

The second team was a silver-haired old craftsman and his grandson apprentice, specializing in the ancient method "Blade Burning."

Their movements were steady and elegant, like performing a segment of an ancient melody, the charcoal fire reflecting in their focused eyes, inspiring reverence.

The third team drew the most attention: young blacksmith Sarah and her mother, one calm, one fiery.

The swords they crafted had unique shapes, edges jagged, sharp and lethal, eliciting gasps from the crowd.

Weir and Lilya stood in the outer circle of the crowd, thoroughly enjoying the spectacle.

"This kind of competitive event..." Lilya whispered with a smile, "is even more nerve-racking than our Knight Camp's riding contests."

Weir nodded while chewing on the meat skewer, keeping his eyes glued to the forge, ears carefully listening to Mike's professional commentary, finding the craftsmen's myriad skills particularly fascinating.

Chapter 437: Weir's Spring Festival (Part 2)

As the forging reached its final stage, Mike casually scanned the crowd and suddenly caught sight of something that made his eyes light up, shouting loudly:

"Yo?! Isn't that Knight Weir, Lord Louis's personal guard? How come you're not by Lord Louis's side today? Why don't you come up and be the sword testing officer?"

Everyone immediately turned to look, countless curious gazes focused on Weir's face, which instantly flushed red, wishing he could find a crack to crawl into.

Lilya covered her mouth with laughter, giving him a push: "Go on!"

"I, I..." Weir stammered an excuse or two, but facing the surrounding laughter and Lilya's encouraging look, he finally gritted his teeth and stepped up on stage.

"I'll... just test it out."

So, under everyone's eyes, he ran over to the three newly forged swords, while the test target was a wild boar carcass made into a thick leather target.

The swords from the Three Brothers workshop were heavy and solid, but upon chopping, they appeared somewhat blunt and dull.

The longsword from the old blacksmith and apprentice was sleek and swift, slicing down with one cut, the skin split open, incredibly sharp.

When it came to the sword from young blacksmith Sylva, the audience originally held high expectations, but as soon as it was chopped halfway, with a "click," the sword blade unexpectedly broke, the break emitting steam, leaving Sylva stunned and her eyes instantly red.

The audience fell silent for a moment, the scene slightly awkward.

Weir looked at the broken sword for a moment, also standing still, unsure of what to do.

Meanwhile, Lilya couldn't contain her laughter below the stage, laughing so hard she doubled over, her hand desperately covering her mouth.

Finally, President Mike announced the result of the competition: "The first prize goes to the ancient burning blade technique of the master and apprentice blacksmith! Awarded with a Sun Gear badge from the Blacksmith Association!"

The audience erupted into warm applause, even Syla forced herself to cheerfully acknowledge the old blacksmith.

The competition concluded, and Weir lightly jumped off the stage, his ears still hot.

He walked back to Lilya's side, and she winked at him, chuckling lightly: "You were pretty impressive chopping the sword!"

The two exchanged smiles, turning to leave the bustling craftsman street, heading towards the not-so-distant festival square.

On the west side of the square, with the sound of drums echoing, the crowd cheered, ribbons flying.

The area was bustling, encircled by rings, the children excitedly screamed, and the adults laughed together.

This was one of the most popular entertainment activities at the festival: the obstacle course race, similar to the folk competition "Boys and Girls Charge Forward."

The course was composed of mud pile jumping, drum barrel bridges, bouncing vine walls, and sling crossings, with a considerable difficulty level, testing both physical strength and skill.

The entrants were mostly ordinary children and young people from Red Tide City, with a few young craftsmen taking off their aprons to join in the fun, the scene vibrant with enthusiasm, laughter constant.

A round-bodied little chubby kid just jumped onto the first mud pile and immediately lost his balance, with a splash of mud, causing the onlookers to laugh together.

Yet he stubbornly climbed back up, jumped, fell, bit his teeth through the whole course, and instead won the full house cheers.

Lilya clapped her hands while laughing so hard she bent over, tears in her eyes.

Next to her, Weir watched, holding back his laughter, a glimmer of excitement in his eyes.

"This kind of competition is really interesting," he said in a low voice.

At this moment, the host stood on a high platform, holding a megaphone and joking: "Oh, this stage isn't something just anyone can play, any knights want to try? Why not let us civilians see your Qinggong?"

A burst of laughter erupted below the stage.

The host was actually just joking, as it was common knowledge that this was a celebration program prepared for civilians, and according to the rules, knights were actually discouraged from participating.

Because the difficulty level was trivial for knights, moreover, it was crucial to maintain the independence of civilian celebrations.

But Weir was watching with too much interest at the moment, simply couldn't resist.

He raised his hand high, blushing, and asked, "Can I try... without going on the podium, is it okay?"

The host froze, seemingly not expecting a knight to respond, and after seeing this young face, the host's expression turned peculiar for a moment.

Isn't this the high-tier knight from Louis's side?

"This, isn't it... uh, forget it anyhow!" The host chuckled and beckoned, "Register your name, an exception for once! Everyone, welcome or not?!"

The crowd suddenly cheered, "Welcome!" "Let the knight roll in the mud too!"

Weir took off his outer clothing, tightened his cuffs, and stood at the starting point, focusing with every breath, the air of the training ground bursting forth unstoppably.

As the drumbeat fell, he flew out, jumping the piles quickly and steadily, darting over the drum barrel bridge, kicking off the vine wall, and leveraging to flip over... the whole course was almost like a seamless performance.

In just over ten seconds, the young man landed like a swallow, dust flying, barely tainted by mud.

The crowd was in a frenzy, with not only children clapping and cheering but even the stall owners whistling.

Lilya was so amused she couldn't help but burst out laughing, tears almost coming out.

As she was laughing, she suddenly heard a little girl beside her tug gently on her dress, looking up to ask:

"Sister, is that your brother?"

Lilya paused, her cheeks flushed like apples, stammered for two seconds before gently shaking her head, lowering her voice to reply: "...Not a brother."

Weir flipped over from the side of the course, splashing some mud points, walking towards Lilya with a face full of still-unsettled excitement.

She still stood outside the crowd, her smile lingering, though her cheeks carried an unmistakable blush.

"Why is your face red?" Weir leaned in, tilting his head to ask softly.

Lilya turned away: "...your face is red too."

The young man was rendered speechless, instinctively touched his own face, indeed hot, probably too excited just now.

"Nothing much, let's go." Lilya broke the brief awkwardness, reminding him, "Lord Louis's evening banquet is about to start, we shouldn't delay."

The pair walked side by side, leaving the bustling craftsman street, heading toward the castle.

Nightfall settled deeply, the main square of Red Tide was already ablaze with fervor.

The celebration reached its peak, the communal banquet was brightly lit.

More than a hundred round tables were neatly arranged according to villages and neighborhoods, with bonfires standing at the center of each table, illuminating the faces of people clustered together, chatting merrily.

Roasts sizzled, stews steamed with heat, the aroma of freshly baked pies mixed with laughter, the scent of wine and song, rising into the night.

Meanwhile, outside Red Tide Castle, another grand banquet was quietly unfolding.

Seated here were the pillars of the Red Tide community: legion commanders, outstanding craftsmen representatives, reform contributors, and knight representatives among others.

Identity and status were temporarily shuffled, replaced by the term "contribution."

No distinction between hosts and guests at the table, communication was free, raising glasses to toast, the very embodiment of the Red Tide's spirit of "honor belonging to the builders."

Weir had changed back into solemn formal attire, with a composed demeanor he entered the banquet along with the Knight Order.

His age was distinct amongst the crowd, yet none questioned his qualification.

The young man sat steadily, immersed in the teachings of Louis, his manner already displaying the bearing of a general.

Not far away, at another table, Lilya sat poised, dressed in a formally colored gown, her gaze inadvertently falling on Weir.

Their eyes met, she gently raised her glass, smiling tenderly.

Weir momentarily lost his focus but soon reciprocated, the light in his cup flickering, like a spring breeze passing through.

At the far end of the platform, seated at the head, Louis sat in the main seat, his expression as usual.

He did not speak much, only after everyone was seated he rose to toast, delivering a brief speech:

"Another winter has passed. It's your efforts, unity, and vigilance that brought about this peace and tranquility. Spring is here, let's continue working hard this year, Red Tide's honor belongs to each one of us."

Everyone raised their glasses in unison, cheering thunderously.

Sitting beside, Emily and Sif also raised their glasses in celebration, the lights reflecting on their bright faces.

At this moment Louis's gaze fell on a certain spot among the crowd.

He looked at Weir and Lilya, holding hands and whispering.

The young man seemed calm, the girl's eyebrows were smiling, it was a youthful laughter, a sight of peace.

A hint of smile appeared on his lips, yet it vanished swiftly.

Emily noticed that faint smile, which hid a subtle heaviness.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly.

Louis held the wine cup, barely noticeable, nodding slightly, his voice like whispers of a cold night:
"...The Barbarian Race, has moved south."

The banquet continued to be lively, the bonfire burning high, laughter persisting.

Yet under this enthusiastic spring night, a new storm was impending..

Chapter 438: The Barbarians March South

Night before spring begins, gray snow falls like rain upon the barren wilderness.

And this vast plain lies just outside the canyon defense line north of the Empire.

At this moment, a ferocious army is quietly assembling on this desolate snowfield.

In the air, dark silhouettes are circling.

They are not ordinary birds, but mutated scouts infected long ago—Vine-feathered Crows.

Their wings drag tendrils, spiraling silently through the air, as snow lands on them and is instantly shaken off, revealing feathers gray and white as bone.

A series of heavy, dull resonances rise from the ground.

It's the sound of drums, ritual war drums made from enemy bones, the sound heavy and reminiscent of some beast's panting.

With each drumbeat, the massive battle array before us swells like the tide, as if it were a living organism slowly breathing.

This army's formation is strict and bizarre.

Standing at the front are the wild and savage battle-slave beast packs.

They're mutated beasts such as ice-digging apes, ice wolves, and snowfield boars...

These magical beasts differ from ordinary ones; beneath their skin are tangled vines, their eye sockets glow with green phosphorescence, some shoulders are embedded with wooden veins, some limbs bear vine thorns, yet all are fierce, all insane.

In the center is the largest contingent of mutated barbarian soldiers.

These Barbarian Race warriors are no longer human in shape, their exposed skin crawling with the pattern of "Torment Vine," as if flames burn beneath.

They wield large axes and giant hammers, their pupils are red, their arms unnaturally swollen, their entire being seething as if ready to erupt any moment.

On either flank stand hundreds of Frost Giants.

Each towering over four meters, with deep purple Flower Crown marks on their foreheads representing complete domination.

Behind them are the command corps and priest corps draped in gray cloaks.

They stand silently behind the drum formation, vines entwining their wrists, murmuring softly.

And that towering ritual war altar seems like a throne risen from Hell, standing upon the lifeless snowfield.

It's built from stacked vines and white bones, grotesque yet holy as if constructed from the remains of sacrificed souls, a temple.

Standing atop this altar is Titus.

His cape deep red, reaches to his ankles, billows in the wind like wings unfurling in a bloodstained night.

His eyes deep red, pupil-less, as though the Torment Vine itself resides within, shimmering with a certain radiance.

His right hand bare, wrist bone slender, beneath the skin small vines creepily wriggle like parasitic worms.

Yet he seems unconscious to this, as if these things have long been part of him.

Titus's voice rises amidst the snow, initially low as a whisper: "From this night onward..."

He slowly surveys the surroundings, his gaze piercing the snow curtain, the battle array, seemingly penetrating the Empire's very land.

"Let the Northern Territory of the Empire! Become our garden!"

Silence prevails, followed by a roar from the army.

It's not a uniform military shout, but a beastly, gale-like howl.

Amidst this fervent emotion, the marching ritual unfolds slowly.

The vine altar stands at the center of the battle array, formed by entwined vines, atop which rests an as-yet-unopened "Rage Flower."

Scarlet petals slightly spread, as if awaiting some crimson catalyst...

Three mutated giant wolves crouch before the altar, their eyes crimson red, breathing heavily.

The priest steps forward, slashing the throat abruptly, blood spouts in silence, transforming into gasps, the fresh blood flows along the vine altar, seeping into the root of the Rage Flower.

Moments later, the Rage Flower suddenly bursts open.

The entire flower expands amidst intense pulsations, its core emitting ring upon ring of red light pulses, enveloping the whole battle array like a heartbeat.

This is "Rage Sharing."

It's the resonance mechanism among the infected, the initiation of emotional synchronization and anger diffusion.

Where the red light reaches, the Barbarian Army falls into a frenzy.

The front-row barbarian soldiers pound their chests as if on fire, some even draw short knives and stab into their own shoulders and arms, using searing pain to ignite their rage state, their faces reddened by blood, eyes filled solely with killing intent.

In the rear, battle-slave beasts roar as they rush out of their cages, a snowfield bear kneels with forepaws on the ground, looking up at Titus on the altar and roaring to the sky, then suddenly rising, charging to the front lines, trailing vine thorns like whips.

The massive Frost Giants also march with the drumbeat, each step trembling the ground, ice layers fissure, vines grow rampant.

This isn't a military departure; it's an outbreak from Hell's stasis.

Titus stands atop the vine altar, silently overseeing it all.

He's unable to discern whether he's awake or lost in this moment.

The aura of the Rage Flower has long seeped into his very marrow.

He can't resist, nor does he wish to resist.

As long as it brings this limitless power, he's willing to succumb.

He slowly closes his eyes then leaps downward.

The cape unfurls in mid-air like a blood curtain, landing on the Frost Giant's shoulder, amidst the wind and snow he stands like a king, becoming the core of the entire Rage Army.

Vine drums shake heaven, war flags rise, their banner bearing inverted Rage Flowers and entwined Vine Crowns, red as evening blood, rustling fiercely.

Titus raises his wand high, wrapped entirely in Torment Vine, its top the Rage Flower opened like an evil eye.

He shouts the command that shakes the entire battle array: "Let them tremble in the fires of rage!"

Instantly the Frost Giants step forward, their legs like pillars shatter the icefield, cracks extend like spider webs, rumbling endlessly.

Pursuing them are the rampaging battle-slave beast pack, each strike on the ground sends snow flying, vine thorns piercing the earth, as if the entire snowfield has become a flesh organ of vine thorns, writhing southward.

The sky gradually reddens, snow refuses to stop, red mist rises.

Chapter 439: Barbarian Race Marches South (Part 2)

The tide of blood and fire descends from the north like a flood of enraged flowers sweeping in.

The scene slowly draws away, revealing a figure draped in a red-black cloak, standing on a giant's shoulder, eyes burning and bathed in snow like a divine statue.

From this moment on, the Northern Territory of the Empire will greet its darkest spring.

.....

As early spring arrived, the boundaries of the endless snowfield began to loosen, ice and snow melted away, and the mountains exposed mottled rocky bones.

Deep in the valley, a babbling stream trickles over the stone bed eroded by ice and snow, occasionally, remnants of ice from high above collapse, shattering and echoing in the canyon like whispered portent.

This is the critical passage leading to the heartland of the Northern Empire—Windflame Valley.

Above the valley, a large-scale military camp is built along the terrain.

Watchtowers stand densely, chevaux de frise neatly arranged, catapults and crossbow carts distributed suitably, five fortresses form a complete defense line, the center being the Main Castle, with a tall tower on each wing, integrated with the mountain body.

A regular legion of nearly ten thousand people, including about three thousand Knights, along with craftsmen, crossbowmen, and beast-powered transport teams.

By rights, this is a defense line as solid as gold and stone, but the atmosphere in the camp is far less tense than its arrangement.

Sentinel patrols mostly go through the motions, standing guard while often chatting in pairs or groups.

Knights leisurely sun their armor, feed their horses outside the fort, some even gather to play dice and compare who can drink more.

Inside the Main Castle, the revelry goes on night after night, music never ceases, and the air is rich with the aroma of wine.

Rather than being the defense line of the Northern Empire, it seems more like a tourist spot made fat by complacency and military expenditure.

And the central figure of all this is indeed the commander of the Seventh Legion.

Rudolph, tall and thin, always standing upright like a pine, with a silver-rimmed monocle on his nose, paired with a deep purple military uniform and gold-embroidered epaulets.

Viewed from afar he looks more like a conductor of the Imperial Capital's symphony orchestra, rather than a general.

He's a highly seasoned High-tier Extraordinary Knight, hailing from an old noble family, once known as a battlefield artist in his youth.

Unfortunately, his reputation has now long been supplanted by decay and decadence.

At this moment, he's lounging in a high-backed chair on the Main Castle's balcony, a brazier warming by his side, a fine wool blanket draped over his legs, a cup of warm wine resting at hand.

A few dancers nearby, in gauzy dance dresses, spin to the rhythm.

They were specially summoned by him from the Imperial Capital, one of them said to have performed in the palace's noble hall, here tonight specifically to celebrate the opening of spring in the Northern Territory.

Rudolph lazily remarked, "Slower, slower. We're not Northern Barbarian wild dogs, dancing and warming by yelling."

He chuckled softly, occasionally casting a look towards the canyon outside the fort, his gaze filled with lazy contempt.

"Northern Barbarians?" He snorted, glancing with a sneer at his adjutant beside him, "They all should have frozen to death in the winter.."

The adjutant named Sarian, also a young knight from nobility, still retaining youthful innocence on his face.

Holding a roll of secret dispatch, he stood with a slightly nervous expression before Rudolph, quietly reminding:

"Sir, this is a secret report personally sent by Duke Edmund. He says the Northern Barbarians have made a move, suggests immediately strengthening valley patrols. I think at least..."

"Enough." Rudolph raised his eyes, as if looking at a child: "Edmond, that old conservative, every spring starts yelling 'the Barbarian Race is coming.'"

More annoying than a crow, how many times has he sent this month already, and hasn't anything actually happened?"

Then he raised his cup and took a sip, jokingly said, "This secret report I'll just use as a bookmark, fitting to clip in 'Secrets of the Palace.'"

The dancers chuckled lightly, whether in agreement or flattery.

Rudolph continued: "My dear Sarian, you should learn to enjoy garrison life. Rarely do we have such snow scenery, warm wine, and beautiful dancers... Guarding a canyon is no big deal, no need to be so serious, haven't you seen it's been 'calm and quiet' this entire year?"

Sarian opened his mouth, wanting to say more.

But seeing Rudolph lazily reach out and bring one of the dancers into his embrace, his fingertips playfully touching her chin, he whispered jestfully.

The firelight reflecting on his lecherous smile.

The young adjutant ultimately only dropped his eyes, silently put away the secret report, and withdrew.

In the following fortnight, nothing happened, seemingly truly as Rudolph said, "calm and quiet."

Soldiers lazily sun their armor, feed horses, gamble dice, occasionally even joke about "the Barbarians are coming."

Until that dusk.

The light dimmed, fog lingered, suddenly a rush of hooves sounded from below the balcony.

A knight galloped in, his armor bearing traces of wind, snow, and scratches from Vine Thorns, his face pale as paper, eyes full of incredulous terror.

He almost plunged into the Main Castle gate, rushing to the balcony where Rudolph stood, shouting hoarsely: "Report!! Barbarians! Barbarians coming south!! Already six hundred miles outside the canyon!"

Rudolph frowned and lifted his eyes, his wine cup trembled slightly.

Sarian turned sharply, quickly stepped forward, grabbed the knight's shoulder: "How many?!"

The knight's whole body trembled, as if struggling to speak clearly, but finally squeezed out only a few words: "...endless."

Fortunately, this time, Rudolph hadn't drunk much.

He only paused for a few beats before suddenly rising, wrapped his cloak, his voice sharp as winter steel: "All hands on battle readiness, line up at the valley entrance, immediately!"

Windflame Valley rapidly entered emergency status.

War drums beat, horns blared, the entire camp completed defensive arrangements within two hours.

Three thousand Official Knights were deployed to the valley entrance, forming three-tiered cavalry formations, armed with long spears and shields, positioned on the east, center, and west wings.

Nearly ten thousand soldiers arrayed behind the cavalry formations, reorganized by groups, crossbow units ascended the arrow towers and precipices, engineers urgently erected anti-charge stake arrays.

Six "Magic Burst Catapults" were deployed atop the mountain cliffs on both sides, their disc tracks adjusting angles, aimed at the valley entrance exit.

Rudolph donned armor, ascended the Main Castle gazing at the distant rising dust, his gaze calm, regaining the old-school blood-and-iron steadiness of an Imperial Army officer.

"I have three thousand Knights, ten thousand soldiers, and six Magic Burst devices... the advantage is mine."

He muttered to himself, his tone restoring to arrogance, even carrying mockery, "To turn the tide? Dream on."

Windflame Valley has long been known for being "easy to defend, difficult to attack."

Seventy years ago, three hundred Imperial Knights here held off five thousand Barbarians for two days, still a textbook battle example at the Imperial Capital's military school.

And as long as they hold on, there'll be endless reinforcements coming to support.

He's the commander of the Empire's Seventh Legion, the branch general of the Third Legion, a High-tier Extraordinary Knight. How could he be defeated?

But when the first wave of "vanguard troops" appeared, even the battle-hardened Rudolph couldn't help but hold his breath.

In the swirling snow fog, dozens of five-meter-high Exotic Beasts first rushed out of the valley fog, tusks exposed, their spines covered in writhing vines.

Next came hundreds of Barbarian "cavalry," not traditional light cavalry, but charging troops riding on mutated beasts, semi-vine parasitic mounts.

Their ranks spread like a beast tide, with swift, two-meter-level predator beasts, and seven to eight-meter-high heavily armored collision beasts covered in bone spikes and flower crown vines on their shoulders and back, like living walls crushing forward.

In the sky circling were infected battle eagles "Vine Feather Crows," red vine filaments dangling from their wings, emitting uncomfortable whistles.

Most shocking were those appearing on the mountain trails on the flanks.

Dozens of Frost Giants.

But they were different from ordinary Frost Giants, their bodies more twisted, some arms mutated into vine-like tendrils, their bodies embedded with anger flower nodules, white flower crowns growing at the top.

They advanced slowly, each step trembling the valley.

The battle flag had appeared, red background, black vines, a blossom of enraged flower hanging inverted at the center.

As soldiers saw those mountainous giants and beasts closing in, they couldn't help but gasp, their weapons trembling slightly.

"Truly... monsters." Sarian muttered.

But a faint smile curved on Rudolph's mouth instead, as a commander he must not panic at this moment.

He slowly donned his gloves, raised the Command Flag, shouted coldly: "Form ranks! Let me see just how skilled these beasts truly are!"

Chapter 440: Fall

Wind Flame Valley, the winding and treacherous gorge, lay silently on the edge of the Northern Territory's heartland.

On both sides, towering cliffs rose like gateways to the heavens and earth.

Watchtowers stood upon the cliffs, with stone projection platforms and magic burst arrays already in place, while the banner of the Third Legion fluttered in the morning breeze.

At this moment, as the sky began to brighten, the dense fog had yet to dissipate, white frost still clung to the rock walls, and the entire gorge was shrouded in a layer of pale moisture, appearing especially silent...

Like the deathly silence before the arrival of a storm.

Suddenly—Boom! Boom! Boom!

From afar came resounding heavy thuds, deep and muffled, as if some giant creature was stepping in the distance, yet rhythmic and patterned, like a roar from the underground.

This was the drumming of the Barbarian Army, reverberating through the valley in the morning, each drumbeat causing soldiers' hearts to tremble.

Immediately following, the ground began to shiver as heavy-armored magical beasts appeared in the fog.

Their massive forms resembled bulls and bears, yet covered in dense, plant-like scales, with each scale entwined in red vines.

Some spewed red mist, some had multiple legs, moving like fortresses; as they ran, they made the earth seem to groan.

They did not howl, only the thunderous stomping of hooves and claws, approaching silently like living battering rams.

Behind them, the Northern Barbarian Knight Army emerged.

They rode not on warhorses but mutated steeds.

Fanged lizard horses, armored ice wolves, and even half-plant, half-beast hybrids, each rider carrying rage and strange phenomena.

Knights donned rough battle armor, their shoulders and helmets marked with flower crown insignias, eyes flickering with fighting energy, emotion radiating like a pulsing glow.

They emitted low growls, akin to a pack of beasts about to roar, charging like arrows at the frontline.

At the mouth of Wind Flame Valley, before the Empire's defensive line, the battle was about to break out.

Yet, General Rudolph was not merely a pen-wielding noble; he was the commander of the Empire's Seventh Legion, a high-tier Extraordinary Knight, having participated in both the "Smoldering Ash Hills" and "Tarlin Cross" bloodbaths, having ascended through sheer ability.

He slowly rose, downed the wine in his cup, wiped the corner of his mouth, and revealed a slight smile.

That sneering, contemptuous grin as if looking at a bunch of country bumpkins.

"Finally, they've arrived." He hummed softly towards the distant direction of the valley entrance's drumbeats, then turned to don his military uniform, fix his epaulettes and cape, while casually ordering:

"Sound the war horn, prepare for battle. Push the magic burst projectors to high positions, sniper platforms ready, inform the vanguard to form ranks!"

He spoke calmly, with unhurried pace, as if arranging a spring hunt instead of preparing for a do-or-die battle.

The young adjutant Saeriyen, despite tension, was excited: "Shall we have the knights ready to charge?"

Rudolph raised his hand to stop him, grabbing a monocle with ease, putting it on and gazing at the valley mouth shrouded in morning mist, coldly commanding: "Magic burst array, all fire!"

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom——!

Six alchemical projectors simultaneously activated, mixing alchemical petroleum with explosive crystals, and with long tails of flame, they crashed into the beast hordes.

The air suddenly filled with scorching, pungent smoke from the explosions.

The explosive fire rain dyed the frontline crimson, massive exotic beasts blasted away.

They twisted in agony within the inferno, collapsing like charred embers, four hooves flailing amid the scorching tumult.

Rolling stones and petroleum poured down the slopes like an avalanche.

Heavy stones smashed into the charging beasts at the forefront, with the entire gorge echoing with bone-cracking sounds.

"Release the arrows!"

With the command, the Empire's archers quickly formed ranks, drawing bows and readying arrows, the arrow rain like sweeping night wind, precisely reaping the survivors in the chaos.

The knights' fighting energy arrows streaked through the air, leaving trails of blazing light, the magical beasts amidst their death cries transformed into piles of corpses.

A few heavily armored assault beasts, clad in thick vine armor, struggled to escape, yet were consumed by flames, falling with mournful howls.

The frontline soldiers erupted in thunderous cheers, the horn atop the watchtower blaring triumphantly, seemingly already seeing the dawn of victory.

Rudolph stood on the command platform, raising his binoculars towards the frontline, only to see the valley mouth ablaze with towering flames, beast carcasses piling up, the offensive momentum temporarily stalled.

A slight sneer appeared at the corner of his mouth: "The Northern Barbarians are nothing more than thick-skinned beasts. Burn their hides, and they're nothing."

Behind him, the messenger stood waiting, he waved dismissively: "Go, invite the dance troupe to the central camp, beat some drums, perform a dance. Victory requires ceremony."

He turned to sit back in his chair, smoothing the folds in his cape, as if the smoke and death were just a speck of dust before the feast.

Yet just as Rudolph sat down, and before his tea cup was lifted, from the distant mountain pass direction at the frontline, suddenly an earth-shattering roar erupted.

Shortly after, several colossal objects sliced through the sky, crashing down like meteors.

Boulders, giant logs, and other massive objects, accompanied by whistling wind, tore through the mist, crashing heavy into the valley defenses.

Above the main castle, a watchtower was instantly snapped in half, rocks and wood splintered, several archers screamed as they plunged down.

Another flying log cut across the edge of the stone throwing platform, knocking down half the equipment, igniting two yet-to-evacuate petroleum soldiers and the gear alike.

These projectiles lacked precision, and their force fell short of the Empire's regular artillery but... there were too many, like a calamity raining down from the heavens.

The frontline suddenly descended into chaos, the military formation forced to retreat and reorganize.

Following this, was a series of tremors rolling like thunder from the mountaintop, the ground shuddering.

From the mountain pass side, a giant charging squad composed of dozens of Frost Giants, towering five to ten meters, rampaged forward!