

Winter 61

Chapter 61: The Gift

Zachary lowered his head, took a small sip of wine, a glint of calculation flashing in his eyes.

He sighed, feigning helplessness, "Perhaps. After all, Calvin seems not to understand the importance of respecting others. If it were me, I would've personally come to pay my respects to you, Count."

Count Fos knitted his brows tightly, anger beginning to surface on his face.

The chatter of the banquet seemed to be drawn to these words, and the atmosphere turned somewhat heavy.

Count Fos remained silent for a moment, then struck the table, "This Calvin needs to be disciplined. He must understand that the Northern Territory is not a place without rules."

"For the subsequent operations, I want him to go to the most dangerous places, to charge at the very front!" Count Fos thought, a cold gleam in his eyes.

The plan goes smoothly.

Zachary smiled slightly, but inside he was filled with a twisted pleasure.

Count Fos's decision was exactly the result of Zachary's carefully laid plan.

Ever since Louis embarrassed him at the banquet, a fire of anger had been building in Zachary's heart.

Particularly Louis's disdainful gaze, it had dealt a severe blow to his self-esteem.

"Who do you think you are?" Zachary sneered in thought, "Just a family castaway, yet you dare to look down on me?"

Exploiting Count Fos's ignorance, he could easily place Louis in the most perilous position.

And Louis's arrogance would make him pay the highest price.

Of course, Zachary also knew when to stop.

As long as prejudice was planted in Fos's heart, the rest was left to time to ferment.

He quickly shifted the topic, talking about his interesting experiences while hunting in the South.

The nobility gradually relaxed, and the atmosphere began to warm up.

The banquet returned to its expected liveliness, seemingly closing on a note of "an unforgettable evening."

However, as the banquet neared its end, an attendant hurried into the hall, whispering a report to the head table.

"To report to the Count, Baron Calvin and Baron Harvey are already outside the door."

At hearing this name, Count Fos's brows immediately furrowed.

"Baron Calvin?" he repeated, displeasure evident.

Standing next to him, Zachary's lips curled into a subtle smile.

Unexpectedly, that unlucky Louis had delivered himself to the doorstep; it was as if heaven was aiding him.

He lowered his voice just enough for the Count to hear, "It is indeed Louis Calvin, a scion of the Calvin Family."

Count Fos snorted coldly, a clear displeasure flickering in his eyes.

"Let him in," he said coldly, "I want to ask what performance he intends to put on by showing up just as the banquet ends."

Soon, the hall doors opened slowly, and all eyes turned to the entrance.

Louis and Yorn made a grand entrance.

Following them were two knights who had removed their armor, each carrying a large, slightly putrid sack over their shoulders.

Completely out of place at the luxurious, elegant banquet.

The nobility stared at this unusual scene, some curious, some shocked, and the previous laughter and conversation vanished without a trace.

Count Fos, seated at the head, saw this scene, his expression growing increasingly stormy.

Especially upon seeing those two bags, his heart filled with rage.

He stood up abruptly, a disdainful smile on his face, and rebuked, "Louis Calvin, you truly disappoint me.

Arriving late to such a banquet and showing such disdain, do you not understand the most basic noble etiquette?

What do you think the Count's Mansion is?"

His gaze swept over the bags behind Louis, his expression growing more displeased, "Look at those bags; what's that about? This is a noble banquet, not a street gathering!"

The banquet hall's atmosphere became silent, and the nobility began whispering among themselves.

Some pioneer nobles from the South started to show schadenfreude smiles, as if they had long been waiting to see Louis make a fool of himself.

Zachary stood by, continuing to whisper provocatively, "Count Fos is right, a noble banquet is the face of the nobility, and everyone must adhere to the rules.

Do you think Count Fos is unworthy of someone as noble as you? Intentionally humiliating the Count?"

As soon as these words were spoken, the laughter among the surrounding nobles grew louder.

"Truly a person who doesn't know the rules; does he really think he is someone significant?"

"Look at this scene; it barely resembles a noble banquet. How can Count Fos tolerate such an ill-mannered person here?"

"A scion of the Calvin Clan, yet so lacking in poise and upbringing, not even understanding the most basic respect, daring to disrupt Count Fos's banquet in this manner."

Their voices were filled with disdain, as if already concluding that Louis was arrogant and disrespectful.

Zachary delighted in the misfortune, knowing his words had placed Louis in a predicament.

Count Fos heard these words, becoming increasingly incensed.

He glared at Louis coldly, seemingly decided not to extend any noble courtesy to him.

He would teach him a harsh lesson, make him understand who the master of Snow Peak County was.

The laughter among the surrounding nobles grew more unrestrained, and the atmosphere seemed to become even tenser.

Yet Louis remained calm as ever, seemingly unaffected.

He slightly bowed his head, performed a noble's salute, and then politely spoke, "My lord Count, I indeed had an urgent matter, causing my delay. As for the bags, they contain gifts I specially prepared for you."

As he spoke, he gestured for the knights to gently lower the bags.

Zachary let out a cold laugh, "Oh? Gifts? That's a bit unexpected.

But as the son of Duke Calvin, you shouldn't bring such a crude gift, should you? Could it be some wild chickens or rabbits from your domain?

Why not show us directly, what's so valuable inside, worth displaying here."

Each of Zachary's words carried mockery, clearly intending to mire Louis further.

Count Fos, hearing Zachary's words and already harboring great bias against Louis, had a glint of disdain in his eyes.

"Since it's a gift, then let's see it. We Northern nobles are not ones to make things difficult intentionally."

Count Fos ordered lowly, "Open them, let's see what's inside."

Louis subtly signaled the knights to open the bags.

The moment the bags were opened, several heads of Snow Swearers rolled out, blood dripping onto the floor.

The banquet hall immediately plunged into dead silence, with all the nobles frozen in place.

Count Fos stared blankly at the heads on the ground.

His chubby face distorted in fear and anger, the corners of his eyes' fat trembling slightly.

He seemed to want to bellow something, but the sudden shock left him at a loss for words.

"What... what is this?!" he finally squeezed out, his voice filled with panic.

Chapter 62: Severed Heads

The sack was pulled open.

More than thirty bloody heads rolled to the center of the banquet hall, making a dull "thud" as they hit the floor.

One of the heads had a ferocious expression, eyes wide open, unwilling to die with such injustice.

The air froze instantly, and the entire banquet hall fell silent.

The originally noisy nobles seemed to have been paused, unmoving, staring at the scene on the ground.

Count Fors stared blankly at the pile of heads, his throat moved: "What... what is this?!"

Meanwhile, the smile on Zachary's face froze instantly, as if he'd been whacked over the head.

He instinctively stepped back half a pace, his face looking extremely displeased.

Louis remained calm, as if he had just brought a few ordinary gifts.

"White Feather Canyon, annihilated the Snow Swearer elite squad attempting to invade the South. All cleaned up, their heads are here."

Zachary snapped back to his senses, gritting his teeth, forcing a sneer: "Just these? A few barbarian soldiers' heads, is this worth interrupting the Count's banquet for?"

His tone was aggressive, as if he had caught some kind of flaw.

"Or are you trying to pass off as having some kind of battle achievement with these things and sneak by?"

Count Fors's face darkened, and he snorted coldly in agreement: "This is no military camp. It's outrageous to bring some bloody things here to show off."

The surrounding nobles began to whisper, casting doubtful and disdainful glances at Louis.

"Fake, right?"

"The Calvin Family really knows how to put on a show."

Mocking voices arose all at once.

Louis did not explain himself, but merely smiled faintly, standing still.

At this moment, Yorn stepped forward boldly, shouting angrily: "I saw it with my own eyes!

These heads were all taken at White Feather Canyon! They were the elite assault team of the Snow Swearers, clad in heavy armor, their combat power far beyond ordinary enemy soldiers."

He looked at those still incredulous nobles, gritting his teeth to add: "We almost died there. While you're here drinking and joking, Baron Calvin was staking his life against the Snow Swearers!"

The murmuring died down for a moment, but then quickly resumed.

"Ha, like a hero."

"This act has gone on long enough; time for the curtain to fall?"

At this moment, a gray-haired Northern lord slowly stepped forward.

He squinted his eyes, staring intently at that shriveled head, his expression suddenly changed dramatically.

"This... this head is Haskell!"

His voice trembled, containing a trace of unstoppable excitement and hatred.

"That old hound who hid in the Snow Forest for years, skilled at night raids! Three years ago, he led a night raid that burned half of my estate!"

Another gray-clad noble also cursed in a low voice: "My uncle was beheaded during a surprise attack led by him, our entire family annihilated... this man should have died long ago!"

Hearing the name "Haskell," many nobles in the banquet hall from Snow Peak County changed color.

Some quietly cursed, some gasped, and some even teared up on the spot.

Haskell was not a famed Northern powerhouse, but he was cunning and ruthless, good at night raids and surprise attacks.

For over a decade, he continued to harass the territories of Snow Peak County, known for guerrilla warfare, murder, and arson as if it were routine.

Being so slippery, several encirclements had failed, only making him increasingly rampant.

Could such an old scourge really be dead?

"It's definitely him... that ugly face, I remember it clearly!"

The Northern lord gritted his teeth, almost delighting in personal vengeance, fixating on that head.

The nobles around, who had initially doubted Louis, fell into silence.

Even Count Fors instinctively straightened, the doubt on his face slowly faded, replaced by a bit of shock.

"Haskell... is truly dead?"

"Was it really this young man's doing?"

"So young, yet achieving so much!"

The nobles who had been harassed by Haskell now wore complex expressions, a mix of shock, admiration, and even gratitude.

Yorn seemed to have waited a long time for this moment, immediately stepped forward, and shouted loudly:

"Exactly! Louis led the team to raid the enemy, killing dozens, personally beheading Haskell!

The whole process was clean and decisive, refusing to retreat despite injuries!"

His voice grew louder, his tone more impassioned, his exaggerated gestures resembling a spontaneous battlefield reenactment.

"He charged into the enemy lines, cut down three men with a single sword, and dragged Haskell alive off the hillside, a scene I'll swear I'll never forget all my life!"

"Yorn." Louis spoke mildly, reminding him.

Yorn immediately shut up, saying no more.

Louis' face showed not the slightest pride, just a slight smile: "I merely did a bit of insignificant work, unworthy of mention."

The old indigenous Northern nobles looked at him again, with entirely different eyes from before.

No longer with disdain waiting for a laugh.

But seriously, respectfully, even with a bit of gratitude.

On the other side, the Pioneer Nobles from the South also began to whisper.

"This young man really has something up his sleeve."

"Zachary has always said he was a debauched son, and yet..."

Someone quietly glanced at Zachary, then at Louis, a hint of hesitation flashing in their eyes.

Zachary stood on the periphery of the crowd, his expression changing repeatedly.

He could feel that the Pioneer Nobles who leaned towards him were now, quietly, shifting their attention to someone else.

"Damn..." he muttered through gritted teeth, silently clenching his fist.

He hadn't expected that today's scene, originally set up for humiliation, would turn into the other party's solo performance.

And he had become the slapstick clown.

But Zachary did not speak again, only quietly retreated into the crowd, waiting for the next opportunity.

Count Fors appeared both shocked and furious.

He didn't care who Haskell was, what kind of damage he had brought to the Northern Territory, or how remarkable it was that Louis had wiped him out.

All he knew was that Louis hadn't saved him face, and instead stole his limelight.

And just as he was about to erupt in anger.

Louis suddenly looked at him, saying respectfully: "Actually, this victory mainly owes to Count's strategic deployment and intelligence support.

If not for your scouts sent before the battle to warn us, and your command deployment, we wouldn't have had this beautiful counter-ambush."

The entire room fell silent, the nobles looked at each other.

Count Fors was stunned, his lips parted: "I... I sent what?"

He truly couldn't recall sending anyone, Louis was even someone he met for the first time.

But as military achievements, glory, admiration from everyone... advantages passed through his brain.

The Self-Memory Modification Technique quietly activated!

In just two seconds.

His eyes lit up again, a smile of gratification appeared on his lips.

His mind filled with memories of "personally dispatching scouts," he could even recall some details clearly.

"Hahaha!" Count Fors suddenly laughed.

"Yes, indeed, it's my arrangement!" He slapped his thigh, raising his voice with pride, "You didn't let me down!"

Chapter 63: Count Fos Is Doomed

Louis shared the credit with Count Fos for his own strategic considerations.

Before arriving at Snow Eagle City, he pieced together Count Fos's character from information obtained from the Daily Intelligence System.

Weak, vain, self-centered, and eager to claim glory without contribution.

A typical case of narcissistic personality disorder.

Such a person thrives on flattery and fears isolation.

Therefore, rather than letting him scheme secretly, it's better to proactively share some of the war merits to earn favor and convenience.

After all, anyone with eyes can see who actually did the work.

More importantly, according to the Northern Governor's Military Department's summons, the various armies of Snow Peak County are under the command of the Fifth Legion.

And the nominal commander of the Fifth Legion is Count Fos.

This means that without Duke Edmund's directive, no matter how much merit Louis achieves, he has to operate under this fool's command in the end.

Although unreasonable, that's the reality.

Louis is not ignorant of the rules among the nobility; he was born into one of the Eight Great Noble Clans of the Empire.

He grew up accustomed to the skirmishes at banquets and the sight of insincere flattery.

The art of sycophancy among the nobility is something he mastered long ago.

If a few smiles and words can secure him more authority, he doesn't mind playing along.

The music resumed, servants discreetly cleaned the bloodstains from the floor, but the cold and ruthless atmosphere lingered in the air.

The Southern Nobles who had been mocking Louis earlier now donned smiles, holding their wine glasses as they approached.

"Master Louis, such achievements at an early age."

"The battle of White Feather Canyon, just hearing about it is thrilling."

Their words carried compliments, but caution hid in their eyes.

This young man, previously disregarded, now threw out a bag of heads, catching everyone off guard.

They had to guard against him, yet also please him.

After all, for now, Louis appeared to be the strongest among these Southern Nobles, making it wise to unite around him.

Unlike the Southern Nobles' flattery, the Northern Nobles were more straightforward and candid.

An elderly gray-haired nobleman in simple attire raised his glass: "Back in the day, I lost an entire scout team because of Haskell."

He looked at Louis intently: "Thanks, Sir Calvin."

Another middle-aged noble nodded: "He died well, you've rid us of a great threat."

They spoke little but with genuine tones.

Unnoticed, the night deepened, and the nobles left in a drunken stupor.

Louis stood by the window, watching the mountains gradually swallowed by the night sky.

Tonight was just an appetizer; the real feast begins tomorrow morning.

For tomorrow is the designated day for formal gathering.

The Empire's Fifth Legion will complete its assembly by dawn, with Count Fos presiding over the announcement of the comprehensive strategy against the Snow Swearers and troop allocations.

Along with the military merit reward system Louis was most concerned about.

...

In the morning, muffled voices of soldiers and the clashing of knights' armor were heard outside the tent.

The entire camp was beginning the preparations for a new day.

Louis opened his eyes and sat up. Having sipped only a few drinks last night, he felt clear-headed without any headache.

He donned his coat, yawned, and habitually called upon the Daily Intelligence System.

A faint blue light flickered in the air, and lines of intelligence slowly emerged:

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

[1: The Snow Swearers are gathering forces, and it is expected that they will deploy two thousand six Blood Boiling Warriors for a large-scale raid on Snow Eagle City in seven days, leaving their rear vulnerable.]

[2: Ten days later, Snow Eagle City falls, Count Fos is captured alive, and subsequently executed as a sacrifice.]

[3: There is a secret passage at the edge of the Qingyu Mountain Path that can bypass the frontline and directly penetrate the rear camp of the Snow Swearers.]

[4: Viscount Fisher is secretly providing intelligence to the Snow Swearers to protect his own fiefdom.]

[5: There are seven Governor's Secret Envoys in the Fifth Legion, covertly observing the nobility's conduct, including Bond, Kulan, Aizer...]

Today, five updates at once, all relevant to the war, and all immediately applicable.

"Tsk, as expected from the Intelligence System, it's quite handy at times like this."

Louis's gaze swept through the intelligence content line by line.

However, upon seeing the first line, he immediately frowned.

Seven days later? Two thousand six Snow Swearers?!

This is not a harassment-level small-scale operation; this is a large-scale action aimed at swallowing the entire city.

He had no time to think further before the second line of intelligence seemed to seal his fate.

The city was breached on the third day of the raid!

This confirmed his judgment last night: this city is rotten to the core.

With upper echelon command chaos, nobles hindering each other, uncompleted city walls, and a muddled supply chain, not even a god could salvage it.

However, holding for just three days was beyond Louis's expectations.

Once the city falls, not only military merits but even his life could be in jeopardy.

"Holding will only lead to dying with these fools; I need to find a way out."

He knew well that he wasn't a saint. Even if the people of Snow Eagle City cried for help, he wouldn't throw his limited troops into a burial ground.

While his mind was swiftly calculating an escape, his gaze moved to the third piece of intelligence.

"A secret passage exists at the edge of the Qingyu Mountain Path that can bypass the frontline defenses and strike directly at the Snow Swearers' rear camp in Snow Peak County."

His eyes lit up as he leaned forward.

A path to survival! And an opportunity!

This secret passage means he can secretly maneuver to the enemy's stronghold and launch a decisive raid from behind as they descend upon Snow Eagle City!

"Their rear is vulnerable... so that's the answer."

His mind began simulating the future battlefield:

Seven days later, the enemy attacks; ten days later, the city falls.

If he dispatched troops in advance, slashing into the enemy's rear via the secret passage, he could strike precisely when the enemy is most exposed.

By delaying a bit, pretending to be slow on the march, the fall of Snow Eagle City would have nothing to do with him.

And he would become the hero who executed a brave raid behind enemy lines, albeit not timely enough to save the city but worthy of great merits!

As for the second piece of intelligence mentioning Count Fos being sacrificed...

"That's a real pity." He shrugged, showing not a trace of sympathy on his face.

"I'm here to lead soldiers, not to be a Savior. With my current strength, I can't save an entire city.

If Snow Eagle City falls, the blame naturally falls on that pig.

On the contrary, I can retreat honorably in a 'timely counterattack and full military withdrawal' stance."

He then looked at the fourth line; Fisher had some impression on him, appearing honest and sincere, yet concealed deeply.

However, if the opportunity arises, perhaps he could be baited into usefulness.

Finally, the fifth line, seven Governor's Secret Envoys. His eyes flickered slightly.

"Inspectors? That's fine." Louis chuckled softly and snapped his fingers.

"I'll put on a good show for you, to show you what a young hero truly capable of turning the tide looks like."

Chapter 64: Pre-Battle Conference

Louis closed the intelligence panel, got up to wash and prepare to attend the battle meeting.

He changed into a noble attire with dark gold embroidery, a sword slung diagonally, and his boots polished to a shine.

In such occasions, one must dress appropriately, at least appear like a young hero.

He pushed open the tent flap and headed straight towards the camp's central area.

Along the way, many knights and young officers saw him, their expressions either of awe or curiosity, nodding their heads in salute.

After all, the feat of him killing the elite warrior of the Snow Swearer the previous night had spread throughout the Fifth Legion.

A moment later, Louis arrived at the central tent.

The guards outside stood solemnly, with two rows of military flags bearing the emblems of various noble families of Snow Peak County on either side. Faces both familiar and unfamiliar were continuously entering.

The inside of the tent was spacious, with a round sand table filled with tactical maps and models in the center, surrounded by circles of high-backed wooden chairs that were almost completely filled.

Due to his remarkable performance yesterday, Louis managed to secure a spot in the innermost circle.

At the forefront, Count Fos was slumped in his chair, his face flushed, eyelids drooping as he dozed.

It seemed he had enjoyed last night's drinks too much.

Replacing him to preside over the meeting was a spirited old man with a head of silver hair.

He wore an old-style noble military uniform with a black base and blue patterns, stood robustly, hands clasped behind his back.

He was Viscount Webster.

The oldest and most dominant vassal of the Forrester Clan, a true Northern Lord.

He was also the only Extraordinary Knight in Snow Peak County.

Although he was now aged, he was still considerably stronger than the elite knights.

As soon as he appeared, the atmosphere of the meeting instantly became more solemn.

"Nobles, officers, secret envoys, welcome to this pre-war meeting of the Fifth Legion for the extermination of the Snow Swearer."

The nobles present were distinctly divided into factions, the older Northern Lords wore cold and stern expressions, whereas the pioneering southern nobles whispered amongst themselves.

There were also officials and military advisors mingling in the crowd without a clear purpose.

Louis recognized a few from the Governor's secret envoy delegation, silently observing.

Viscount Webster scanned the room, his gaze falling on each noble and officer before unrolling a scroll and reading aloud:

"Duke Edmund has specially established a military award system for this Snow Swearer campaign.

Anyone who kills an enemy leader or annihilates the main force will be awarded a first-class military merit. Rewards: five thousand gold coins and three hundred square kilometers of territory in the Northern Territory."

For a moment, the tent was dead silent.

Webster's tone remained unchanged, continuing to read:

"Capturing enemy strongholds or killing important leaders will merit a second-class military achievement. The reward is two thousand gold coins and one hundred square kilometers of land.

"Effective support on the main battlefield or scout operations will earn a third-class military merit, rewarded with five hundred gold coins, armor, and a warhorse, with priority supply rights.

Of course, there's also a special award which will depend on merit, though that's not something to consider right now."

At this point, his voice grew colder:

"And those who shrink from battle or act deceitfully will have all military merits stripped, possibly resulting in accountability and the confiscation of their fief."

As soon as he finished speaking, the tent was silent again.

Soon after, a murmur of whispers spread along the meeting table.

"Three hundred square kilometers of Northern Territory land, that's practically a Baron's Domain."

"Five thousand gold coins could fund a Baron's domain for a year."

"The Duke is truly willing to bleed for this, he seems to mean serious business this time."

Many nobles' eyes gleamed with greed, evidently having already focused their thoughts on the post-war merits and lands as if they were already within grasp.

Louis sat in his seat, fingers lightly tapping the armrest, maintaining a composed expression.

Yet his heart was already stirred.

With three hundred square kilometers, the Red Tide Territory could double in size.

If he could execute a successful surprise attack and create a formidable situation...

That would start with at least a second-class merit, and after a series of additional battles, a first-class merit would likely follow.

Viscount Webster laid down the scroll and slowly stated, "Next, we have the intelligence on the enemy."

He gestured towards the sand table on the desk, showing the map of Snow Peak County.

Three locations were marked in red on the map, standing out significantly.

Viscount Webster tapped the sand table with his finger:

"These rats... no, these cockroaches, have always operated in the shadows.

When you find one, there are likely many more. Once you show any weakness, they crawl out of their cracks to bite."

His tone was calm, but the metaphor was unsettling.

"Currently, it's confirmed that within Snow Peak County, there are three major areas of enemy activity."

He pointed at the three red spots on the map, located in the northern deep mountains, northeastern ridges, and near the northwestern mines:

"The first is near the Snow Shadow Highlands, in the mountains, though their exact hideout is unknown.

The second is in the Qingyu Ridge area, where scouts frequently go missing.

The third is near the Ice Tooth Ore, where an old mine started experiencing unusual phenomena six months ago."

He scanned the room, "This is the general intelligence we have on the Snow Swearer."

"The Snow Swearer doesn't operate openly like us; they manage to survive in caves and tree hollows and are relentless.

Although there's no sign of a large-scale offensive, they are active at night, pretending to withdraw during the day, luring enemies in deeper.

"To put it bluntly, they aren't many, but they hit where it hurts.

Also, because they utilize deadly skills, each warrior is significantly stronger than an Apprentice Knight, with a few approaching Extraordinary Power."

"If it came to a life-or-death battle, it's uncertain who would truly suffer more."

He slowly surveyed the room, lowering his voice: "If you're expecting them to line up for an honorable battle, you better prepare a coffin for yourself first."

After the Viscount finished speaking, the tent was silent for a moment.

A few older nobles, who had experienced the Northern Territory skirmishes, wore somber expressions, nodding thoughtfully, as if recalling unmentionable memories.

The younger nobles from the South seemed less convinced.

"Just some mountain bandits, acting all mysterious."

"Maybe they're scared to death? A grand legion, scared of a few lunatics popping up at night?"

But this dismissive attitude didn't last long.

Because sitting in the front row, Viscount Webster was scrutinizing each speaker with sharp eyes.

Those whispers immediately stopped.

In the ensuing silence, Count Fos's eyelids twitched, stirring slightly as if waking from a dream.

He lifted his head, groggily scanning around, still somewhat asleep, but trying to appear attentive.

Louis looked at the second location on the map, recognizing it as the one mentioned in the third piece of intelligence earlier that morning.

He already had a vague plan forming in his mind.

Qingyu Ridge is like a natural mountain pass, easy to defend and hard to attack.

But Louis could use concealed mountain paths to bypass a frontal assault, staging a flank attack on the Snow Swearer's base there, and ambushing any Snow Swearer units returning to defend.

Chapter 65: Commanding from the Rear

Just after Viscount Webster finished explaining the enemy stronghold's distribution and risks.

The atmosphere in the tent fell into a brief silence, with everyone waiting for the next step in deployment proposals.

Viscount Webster spoke seriously and gravely:

"Based on current intelligence, the terrain around the Ice Tooth Ore is relatively flat. We can consider eliminating this stronghold first, and then use it as a starting point to advance and defeat them one by one. This is the most reliable approach."

Several old-school nobles nodded, clearly agreeing with this steady and strategic deployment.

But before he could continue, a hoarse and slightly intoxicated voice suddenly interrupted him: "Old man, why are you so slow?"

Everyone abruptly looked towards the main seat.

Count Fors was seen holding onto the back of his chair, barely keeping himself upright, but his face was still heavily intoxicated.

He pointed towards the three red dots on the sand table: "Just attack them together! These three rat nests... clear them all at once! We gather five thousand troops—what's there to fear?"

The nobles present looked at each other, unsure what to say, silent for a moment.

Count Fors' military adviser coughed quietly and added: "What Fors means is that we can dispatch three troops to sweep all three places separately. If the progress is smooth, the war may end sooner."

But clearly, this was an excuse to cover Fors' drunken talk.

Viscount Webster's brows furrowed: "You're simplifying things. Troops are already limited; attacking separately equals cutting off reinforcements. Snow Swearers are accustomed to ambushes; each place is fraught with danger. How can you be so reckless?"

This statement completely ignited Count Fors' drunken fire.

He slammed the table and stood up: "Am I the commander or are you? You're a vassal, how dare you openly contradict your liege lord here?"

On ordinary days, he absolutely wouldn't dare speak to Webster like this.

This Viscount had been his father's right-hand man, the old minister of the Fors family.

Even though he now held the Earl title complete, with precedence in rank and law.

Nonetheless, when speaking of prestige, it's not him who could command strategy in front of these noble officers.

It's this elderly man with extraordinary power.

Fors knew very well.

However, today he was drunk, and the words spewed out under the influence of alcohol.

Webster's face turned iron-green on the spot, as if slapped publicly in the face.

Yet, he didn't immediately refute; he simply stood quietly, hands clasped behind his back with suppressed anger.

Because he was a vassal, and Fors was the liege lord.

Even though this liege lord was drunk and spouting nonsense, he couldn't let him lose face completely in this setting.

The entire war room fell silent and the atmosphere was quite oppressive.

"Since you lack the guts, let me decide!"

Fors stood up, staggered a few steps to the sand table, and heavily tapped his finger on the three red points: "We will occupy these three enemy points simultaneously."

"Choose a few from the Southern Pioneer Nobles and those war-loving nobles from Northern Territory. Let them do the vanguard. I will stay in Snow Eagle City to oversee command!

Deploying troops on three fronts will display our army's might!"

When he spoke the words "oversee command," his tone rose a few octaves, as if he truly placed himself in the position of strategizing and commanding from afar.

Silence filled the scene.

No one spoke, only a few awkward coughs and the soft crackling sound of candles burning by the sand table.

The nobility were no fools; who couldn't tell that clearly they were being used as cannon fodder?

Initially, even several Southern Nobles who were nodding in agreement slightly changed their expressions.

Louis leaned back on his chair, coldly watching the drunken Fors, recalling today's second piece of intelligence.

He had only one thought—dead men speak.

However, this turned out in his favor, as he was originally pondering what excuse to use to secure a chance to join the battle.

After all, it seemed abrupt for a young noble to rashly request to fight, risking drawing suspicion.

Now, Fors' reckless troop assignment inadvertently offered him a perfect stepping-stone.

"Lord Fors, Lord Webster." Louis suddenly raised his hand.

"If possible, I hope to lead my accompanying troops to the Qingyu Ridge area to scout terrain and probe enemy traces.

Qingyu Ridge has complex terrain and narrow roads, typical mountain valleys. In previous battles, I participated in similar terrain operations, with some experience, and understand how to set up vigilance lines and rapid retreat routes.

If we can determine enemy traces, and then decide whether to focus our forces for an advance, the odds of success would be more stable."

The tent fell silent.

Many turned their heads to look at him, their eyes stunned.

They clearly didn't expect this rising young noble to voluntarily step forward at such a moment, offering to delve deep behind enemy lines.

Doesn't he realize this is a death sentence?!

"Huh?" Yorn sitting in the back subconsciously raised his hand: "I will go too! Wherever Baron Calvin goes, I go!"

Several nobles behind them lightly inhaled, whispering among themselves.

"These two are mad, aren't they?"

"A place like Qingyu Ridge... isn't it court death?"

"At this critical juncture, dare to volunteer for deployment—didn't they see this was a trap?"

Under this situation, who couldn't see the danger level of this mission?

This isn't a vanguard; it's expendable.

Yet Louis chose to volunteer.

Viscount Webster silently stared at Louis, his eyes obscure.

He tried to judge: What was this young man really up to, was he just impulsive, or did he have another agenda?

Was he planning to run?

Impossible unless he's mad.

You can run as a monk but not as a temple, not to mention there's the Governor's Secret Envoy watching.

Fleeing would mean stripping of title, perhaps even execution.

Or was it youthful arrogance?

After killing Haskell, did he become overconfident, thinking himself invincible?

But anyway, even if he wants to die, it's a good thing.

If sacrificing several hundred men could bring Fors to his senses, it's worth it.

"Since that's the case," Webster spoke, his tone as calm as ever. "Let Baron Calvin and Baron Harvey lead troops to Qingyu Ridge. Remember: reconnaissance is the priority, do not act rashly."

"Yes." Louis bowed his head in agreement.

Then Webster casually pointed out a few Southern Pioneer Nobles without strong background.

He ordered them to lead team movements to feint reconnaissance at the other two strongholds.

Those appointed paled instantly, wanted to speak but hesitated to do so.

Everyone knew this wasn't reconnaissance; it was walking into a minefield.

But no one dared defy orders, and some even secretly resented Louis, thinking if it weren't for him volunteering, they wouldn't have been named.

The meeting didn't last much longer after that.

Viscount Webster briefly arranged several logistical supply matters, then announced adjournment.

The nobles got up one by one, their expressions varied, but none looked good.

After all, the command of the entire Fifth Legion was in the hands of a very unreliable count.

Chapter 66: Departure

Louis stood on the open ground on one side of the camp, looking at the troops lined up in front of him.

In total, there were twenty Elite Knights, fifty Official Knights, one hundred and three Apprentice Knights, and four hundred infantry.

This was all the military force he was taking to Qingyu Ridge this time.

The soldiers and knights from Red Tide Territory need no further elaboration; they were well-trained and high in morale.

After a long period of training, the average loyalty of this team to Louis was 150%.

The forces Yorn brought were surprisingly well-organized too.

His bright silver-edged light armor stood out among the crowd, behind him was a batch of well-equipped knights and infantry.

It seemed that Count Harvey had indeed invested heavily in this younger son, fearing that he might die inexplicably in the Northern Territory.

There were also some unfamiliar faces in the crowd.

They were all inserted by Viscount Webster, Louis knew at a glance.

Although they wore no badges, it was clear they were from the old Northern nobility.

Their duties were clearly not just to support; their true task was to supervise Louis.

What caught Louis's attention the most was an Elite Knight named Bond.

He was silent and cold-faced, his hand never leaving his sword hilt.

It's just that he was a bit ugly, and nothing like 007.

Although he looked plain and unadorned, Louis, armed with the Daily Intelligence System, was well aware that he was a secret envoy from the Governor's Mansion.

If Louis did anything to betray the Empire, he had the authority to act first and report later.

So Louis instructed Lambert and the other Elite Knights to keep an eye on him, in case he suddenly went mad and cut him down.

As Louis was organizing the ranks, Yorn sidled up to him.

He waved others away, lowered his voice, and asked, "By the way, boss, why did you voluntarily request to go to Qingyu Ridge?"

Louis certainly couldn't tell him directly about having the Daily Intelligence System.

"Reason?" Louis thought for a moment, but couldn't be bothered to fabricate a story, "Gut feeling, I guess. Feels like a chance to earn merit."

"I see..." Yorn had a look of understanding.

"You've really inserted a mole inside the Snow Swearers, haven't you?"

Louis was mildly surprised: "Huh?"

"See, you were able to save me that day because you knew where I was, right? Then you just happened to know Haskell would take the canyon, and now you've picked Qingyu Ridge."

Yorn got more and more excited: "As expected of you, boss, you've managed to plant informants inside the Snow Swearers, that's amazing."

Louis gave him a look that spoke volumes, but didn't explain further.

Yorn patted his chest in relief and said, "This time I might just ride your coattails to great merit."

The organization was nearing its end.

Troops were formed into four columns, iron helmets gleaming faintly in the sunlight, with fighting energy lingering in the air.

The sound of the horn echoed.

Louis mounted his horse, scanned the area, and raised his hand in a wave.

"Move out, target Qingyu Ridge."

...

Before dawn, the snow fog in the Northern Territory was thick, the vision engulfed in gray and white.

Snow Shadow Highlands lay in this silent vastness, with Snow Swearers from three strongholds gathered there.

A twisted black totem pole stood in the middle of the desolate ground.

Barnes stood on the totem platform, wearing an ice wolf pelt.

Red battle patterns extended from his forehead to his chest, a Cold Abyss Battleaxe stood by his feet.

He was among the remnants of Old Snow Country nobility, witnessing firsthand the night the Empire's iron cavalry broke through Snow Capital and the Snowfield was set ablaze.

His siblings all perished during the Empire's purge, he alone escaped alive.

Thus, he became one of the founders of the Snow Swearers, also one of the eight elders.

He currently commanded the Snow Swearers situated in Snow Peak County.

His loyalty to the Snow Swearers' leader Hiro was immense, seeing him as the last hope of the old royal bloodline.

This time, Hiro himself ordered Barnes to attack Snow Eagle City with full force, forbidding failure.

Barnes looked down at the thousands of warriors below.

These people weren't a disorderly mob; they were elite survivors from battles on the Snowfield.

They wore battle armor, some in rough animal pelts, others in gleaming iron plates.

Each piece was different but bore the marks of prolonged combat.

The front row held a phalanx of shields and spears, spears bound with animal bones glinted coldly in the mist.

The rear was occupied by Wolf Knights, their massive snow wolves silent on the barren land, blue eyes gleaming.

Most daunting was the Mad Wolf Team.

They were wrapped in black cloth and bone fragments, wielding short blades, faces marked with the blood symbols of the Ancient God of Cold Abyss, elite among the Snow Swearers.

The entire army had no banners, no unified command, yet maintained order.

They were waiting.

Waiting for the command that would unleash them like an avalanche over Snow Eagle City.

In front of the totem, the Cold Abyss Priest kneeled, chanting ancient words, the sound reverberating through the barren expanse, penetrating minds like a nightmare.

They cursed the Empire in the ancient Snow Country language, narrating the destruction of Snow Country.

"They burned our homes, they killed our brothers..."

Warriors pounded their chests and roared, their voices rising wave upon wave.

Barnes held the shattered old emblem, his gaze sweeping over the people scattered across the wasteland.

"You all know this," his voice was deep, "this is the emblem of Snow Country."

He held the emblem high and then let go, letting it fall onto the cold ground.

"We once had our own nation, with Snow Capital, a Royal Court, a name.

The Ironblood Empire destroyed it all, burned our homes, killed our kin, trampled our dignity with their iron cavalry."

He paused momentarily, eyes cold.

"We are Snow Swearers, not rebels, but the displaced.

Now those Southern Barbarians are gathering troops again, ready to exterminate us completely."

"Very well."

He reached out and grasped the Cold Abyss Battleaxe, the axe blade pointing southward: "This time, we will strike preemptively, we will take Snow Eagle City.

We'll settle blood debts with blood."

With his words, the warriors cut their fingers, letting blood spill before the totem.

This signified their determination to overthrow the Empire.

Then the true sacrifice began.

Several nobility and knights in Empire attire were hung upside down over the ice altar.

With mouths stuffed with rags, they could only let out muffled moans.

They were injured, their blood dripped incessantly, pooling into the recesses of the altar.

The Cold Abyss Priest approached them, gently caressing the cold stone surface, chanting ancient incantations.

"Ancient God of Cold Abyss, grant us your blessing."

The ground trembled slightly, below the altar came muffled slithering sounds.

The mist thickened, as if the air was being drawn away.

The captives' bodies began to wither, blood drained from them, black blood seeping from their seven orifices, leaving only remains.

The totem pole erupted in an eerie blue flame, a deep, ominous sound emanated from beneath.

The priest translated the Ancient God's "words" aloud: "The god has granted permission."

The warriors erupted in cheers, shattering the silence.

Barnes raised his battle axe, the axe blade pointing towards Snow Eagle City: "Move out."

No flags, no drums.

The shadows surged forward like a black tide, silently advancing through wind and snow toward Snow Eagle City.

Chapter 67: Ambush

The cold night wind whipped through the valley, slicing across faces like a knife.

Louis led the team onto a path leading to Qingyu Territory.

The mountain path was narrow, with vertical rock walls on both sides, just wide enough for a single file of people to pass.

The horses could no longer proceed, so everyone dismounted, pulling the reins forcefully as they queued up one after another to move forward.

"How... how is there a mountain path here?" Yorn gasped, glancing at the deep valley below, his scalp tingling, "It's not marked on the map at all."

"It might be an old smuggling route," Louis responded casually, his expression calm, "An old hunter told me."

He didn't explain further and continued to lead the team forward.

Meanwhile, Bond silently observed the advancing team.

He was a secret envoy sent by the Governor, ostensibly to provide military advice but in reality to monitor whether the nobility was superficially compliant or betraying the Empire.

He had been observing this team all along the way.

Each soldier carried a spare weapon; the gear wasn't flashy, but it was clean and efficient, all designed for actual combat.

The formation was orderly, even the supply soldiers responsible for bringing up the rear showed no panic.

Whenever Louis gave an order, even the last soldier responded immediately without needing urging.

"It's like a well-trained army," Bond thought, "Not patched together temporarily, and certainly not like those noble troops from the south who only put on airs."

Of course, what surprised him the most was Louis himself.

Young, yet genuinely respected by his subordinates.

He always led at the very front without attendants swarming around him and with no unnecessary words, occasionally stopping to confirm the terrain, as focused as a hunter.

"To the left, there's a fork there." Louis personally led the vanguard down an even narrower slope.

Bond couldn't help but look up at Louis.

This noble scion didn't seem like someone new to this place, instead moving with a sense of mastery, as if patrolling his own backyard.

What was most surprising was the path they were on, which clearly was a hidden route almost nobody had found.

It wasn't marked on the military maps, and from the state of the weeds around, it seemed like no one had trodden it.

Yet Louis tread the path without hesitation, as if he had known every turn, every stone beforehand.

"If there's any flaw..."

Bond frowned, his gaze falling on the slowly advancing supply team at the end of the path.

The marching speed was noticeably slower, as if deliberately stalling.

At this moment, while stabilizing the team at the path's end, two scout riders galloped up.

"Report!" They dismounted hastily before Louis, saluting on one knee: "Three miles ahead we discovered a Snow Swearer outpost, approximately two hundred troops."

Louis merely nodded slightly: "Two hundred men... we can take them. I want details on enemy defenses, patrol routes, and surrounding terrain."

"Yes!" The Scout Knight mounted his horse again and quickly disappeared down the path.

Standing to the side, Bond's brow knitted unconsciously.

"He really found a Snow Swearer outpost," he muttered to himself.

This outpost had existed for a long time, controlled by the Snow Swearers, always a thorn for the Governor of the Northern Territory.

Because its location was extremely crucial.

The mountains between Snow Peak County and Ice Sea County were crisscrossed and complex, with Qingyu Ridge being one of the few shortcuts.

Controlling this place was tantamount to seizing the throat of the Snow Swearers' retreat and reinforcement routes to the north.

There had been several military attempts to eliminate this place.

However, the outpost was too well-hidden and easy to defend but hard to attack, leading to multiple failed attempts.

If Louis could truly capture this place, it would merit serious recognition, starting with at least a first-class merit!

But the question was, he hadn't requested reinforcements, hadn't observed the situation, not even a hint of hesitation.

Just a simple "we can fight" and he intended to take it directly?

Such audacity...

Bond watched the silhouette of the young man walking ahead, his heart in turmoil.

But he quickly realized something else.

How could such an important outpost at Qingyu Ridge have only two hundred men?

That number, it seemed off.

This strategic location, the Snow Swearers couldn't possibly have only two hundred troops.

Where were the other forces?

Bond suddenly had a foreboding feeling.

.....

Night fell, and within the banquet hall of Snow Eagle City, the candles burned brightly amidst scattered cups and plates.

A winded Order Knight burst through the main gate, almost stumbling as he rushed to the main table:

"Report! Scouts from the front lines report a large force of Snow Swearer cavalry approaching Snow Eagle City, seemingly... over a thousand strong!"

Count Fos's hand trembled with the wine cup, spilling it over himself.

"A-a thousand?" he asked again, thinking he misheard.

"A large force of Snow Swearer cavalry approaching Snow Eagle City, about a thousand men." The Order Knight repeated.

"Impossible... how can that be!"

He almost staggered to his feet: "Weren't we supposed to send troops to eliminate the Snow Swearers? How did it turn out they are attacking us?"

Before he could finish, another Order Knight hurriedly pushed the door open: "My lord, Viscount Webster is on the city wall, he asks for you urgently!"

The night was descending, and the city walls of Snow Eagle were lit only by scattered torches.

Viscount Webster had long stood atop the wall, draped in a thick cloak, gazing out over the snowy field.

Amidst the undulating snow, a dark tide rapidly approached.

Those weren't ordinary cavalry; they were Snow Swearer Wolf Riders.

Snow wolves ran like shadows, their footsteps silent but stirring up a blizzard of snow.

The riders were clad in furs and scale armor, gleaming silver and exuding an aura of menace.

Each mount was muscular, with glowing blue eyes and exposed fangs, as if ready to pounce on prey and tear it apart.

Their insane momentum was suffocating.

"Snow Swearer Wolf Riders," Webster spoke in a low voice.

A young knight beside him instinctively tightened his grip on his weapon, frowning: "Just a few hundred..."

Webster shook his head, his gaze steely: "This is the vanguard. There must be more behind them."

He tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword, his tone somber: "They're intent on laying siege."

Footsteps echoed as more nobles hurriedly arrived, crowding onto the city wall.

Count Fos ascended the steps, panting, and upon seeing the black shadows in the snow, his face changed drastically: "What on earth is happening here?"

The noble assemblage on the wall descended into chaos.

"How did it come to them attacking us?"

"Why wasn't there prior information?"

"Can the city hold?"

Various nobles spoke over each other, their faces pale and on the brink of collapse.

Especially Fos, clutching the parapet, his voice trembling: "Ah! Wha-what should we do now..."

But Webster remained standing amidst the wind and snow, his gaze steady.

"Concentrate the archers and spearmen on the north wall and bring over a few hundred knights," he commanded, "Hold the line against the first wave."

Chapter 68: Arson and Murder

The Barnes forces arrived at the outskirts of Snow Eagle City, and in just one night, they had encircled Snow Eagle City.

They sealed three sides, leaving only a gap on the West Gate side.

However, they did not immediately attack the city; they seemed to be up to something.

...

In the same military tent, the nobility of Snow Sealed County gathered once more.

Unlike the last meeting where there was a farcical ease, the hall now was enveloped in a heavy atmosphere.

Count Fos, who had previously made a drunken scene at the meeting, was now silent.

He huddled in his chair like a quail, not daring to breathe too heavily.

Viscount Webster sat in armor, with a grave expression on his face.

"The Snow Swearer comes aggressively, estimated to number around two thousand, but the advantage is on our side," Webster began, his gaze sweeping over everyone.

"The garrison of Snow Eagle City numbers two thousand, with over a thousand knights capable of fighting. A direct confrontation still offers a chance of victory.

But I recommend being cautious and defending the city."

He paused: "I have already sent a plea for help to Duke Edmund, but it is estimated that the army will take ten days to arrive here.

However, we have enough provisions, the city defenses are strong, and as long as we hold out, reinforcements will arrive."

The crowd nodded slightly in agreement, as there was no better plan.

"Next, we'll adopt zoned defense." Webster spread out a map of Snow Eagle City.

"Although the southern wall is old, its terrain is wide. If the enemy dares to launch a full assault here, we can annihilate them in one go.

I suggest that the Southern Pioneer Nobles guard it, as your people are new and horses fast, making you well-suited to hold this area."

His tone shifted as he looked at several Northern Lords: "The north and east walls lie close to the granaries and inner city, requiring those familiar with the terrain to defend them.

Veteran family private soldiers are most familiar with these areas, and they are easy to mobilize."

His words were logical and impeccable on the surface.

But the Southern Nobles exchanged glances, their expressions immediately changing.

This was clearly giving them the most dangerous and thankless positions.

On the side of the Northern Lords, no one spoke.

They seemed to have an understanding, quietly nodding and accepting the Viscount's favoritism.

Several young Southern Pioneer Nobles opened their mouths to say something, but ultimately swallowed their words.

The tent fell silent for a moment.

Everyone understood, yet no one spoke up.

Count Fos, seated at the head, pretended not to hear, bowing his head deeper.

The meeting continued.

Viscount Webster assigned other defense details one by one:

"Crossbows in the arrow towers need recalibration, and should be checked at least twice daily."

"Molten oil and rolling stones need to be prepared in advance, handled by experienced hands, no mistakes allowed."

"Increase the frequency of shifts on the city walls, especially near the West Gate."

...

With the last order given, the meeting finally concluded.

Outside the hall, the cold wind howled.

Several Southern Nobles exited the tent together, their faces ashen.

"What does it mean by 'new people and fast horses'?" one of them sneered, "Such nice words, but anyone can see they're thrusting us into the flames."

"Those old foxes from the Northern Territory are all guarding themselves closely, tsk... truly treating us as outsiders."

"Heh, we're just here, but we have to watch our lives too."

The words were biting, but the tone couldn't be too loud, venting their frustrations in the cold wind.

But that very night, people from many noble households quietly started to move.

At the stables, someone secretly inspected saddles and reins.

The guards who were changing shifts on the city walls were slipped a few gold coins.

Even near the secret passages by the city gates and the sewer openings behind the fort, people began to investigate.

They were preparing escape routes for themselves.

As the Snow Swearer laid siege, Snow Eagle City had not yet fallen, but its defenders were already harboring their ulterior motives.

...

The night fell silent and deep.

"Move."

Louis commanded softly.

Over a hundred Red Tide Knights quietly rose, using the mountain path cover to approach the Snow Swearer camp from behind.

The scouts had already mapped out the enemy's patrol lines, and Louis picked a vulnerable point to break through.

The vanguard squad infiltrated the camp and started fires as a distraction, pouring petroleum and unleashing fire arrows.

Several tents were instantly engulfed in flames, and as the flames leapt, the rear of the enemy camp fell into chaos.

From the rear of the camp, a red streak dashed in like a meteor.

Lambert led the charge, with ten elite Red Tide Knights following closely.

Their fighting energy intertwined into a scarlet channel, piercing directly at the Snow Swearer's central command tent.

Inside the tent, the Snow Swearer's garrison commander awoke with a start, hearing the chaos outside, furrowing his brow, he grabbed his war axe and charged out at once.

"An enemy attack? Impossible! How did they find..."

Before he finished speaking, the sword edge had reached him.

In an instant, he parried with his axe, fighting energy sparking, forcefully meeting Lambert's strike and forcing Lambert and his horse to retreat several paces.

The surge of fighting energy shook the tent, flipping the tent cloth, enough to show his formidable strength.

Unfortunately, it was of no use.

Ten elite Red Tide Knights slipped in silently, the firelight reflecting off their armor, resembling death.

The commander roared and swung his axe, the icy axe wind pushing back two enemies.

But the Red Tide Knights cooperated seamlessly, their attack impenetrable, advancing relentlessly.

Lambert steadied his body and stabbed out with his longsword once more, which the commander struggled to parry.

As he tried to counterattack again, two knights slashed his shoulder and arm from the sides, blood splattering.

Immediately after, a glint of cold steel flashed from behind, a lance piercing his chest.

The axe fell to the ground, the Snow Swearer commander eyes wide, filled with disbelief even in death.

Outside the tent, the fire illuminated the valley, screams rising.

The Red Tide Knights divided into several squads, flowing through the enemy camp like streams of flame emerging from the night, starting fires everywhere.

Of course, they weren't setting fires indiscriminately; places like the granary and treasury were guarded rather than burned.

As the flames rose, the enemy force descended into utter chaos.

The Snow Swearers were wholly unprepared; the commander was dead, and the deputy was beheaded without warning.

Warriors fled in the night and firelight, some armored, some barefoot, shouting all around.

"Enemy attack! From where!"

"From the rear! No, the north side too!"

The shouts were mixed, and no one could clearly define the number or origin of the attackers.

The Red Tide squads kept infiltrating and retreating, attacking for just a few moments before changing targets.

Before the enemy could organize a counterattack, the next camp was already ablaze.

Very soon, the battle line was completely torn apart.

The main force of the Red Tide Knights finally struck, in squads of thirty, charging from various points in the woods.

A single round of charge shredded the densest camp area.

The Snow Swearer barely organized a defense, only to be shattered by hooves, pierced by lances, and burned by fighting energy.

Some squads tried to form a battle array but were completely suppressed before they could even start.

Ordinary soldiers fled, fell, screamed, trampling over each other's bodies as they ran to the woods.

They were cut down in the forests by Red Tide Knights lurking in the shadows.

The entire camp seemed consumed by hell, the ground stained red by fire, mud mixed with blood flowing beneath their feet.

"The hunt has begun."

Louis stood by the burning archery tower, the red glow reflected in his eyes, faintly arrogant.

Chapter 69: Endings and Beginnings

The night over Qingyu Ridge remained deep and dark, with remnants of fire flickering among the mountains, illuminating the bloodstained snow.

The battle had ended.

The Red Tide's division tactics proved entirely effective, forcibly tearing the Snow Swearer forces into isolated, unsupported groups, which were then individually eliminated.

This was slaughter, not battle.

Although the knights brought by Yorn lacked combat experience, under the guidance of the Red Tide Knights, they were assigned to the outskirts to specifically deal with enemies attempting to escape.

They patrolled the battlefield's edge in echelon, intercepting and killing any enemy trying to flee with a single sword strike.

But the Snow Swearers were ultimately not common soldiers.

They roared, ignited their internal fighting energy, and forcibly entered the "Blood Boiling Frenzy" state, still causing significant casualties.

A few managed to escape, fleeing north and spreading news of the bloodshed.

But that could not change the outcome.

Qingyu Ridge had fallen.

And Louis's side suffered minimal casualties, losing only eighteen knights, while the Snow Swearers were nearly wiped out.

The entire battle was precise, swift, like a textbook night attack annihilation.

Of course, without that small path, and the cover of night, even with three times the troops, Louis would have been dragged into a quagmire by the Snow Swearers.

Bond stood in the remnants of the tent, staring incredulously at the now-pacified Qingyu Ridge.

He looked down at the mottled blood on the battlefield, then up at the ranks of Red Tide Knights forming up and reorganizing.

"Is this... how it was taken?" he murmured.

Qingyu Ridge, a stronghold that Duke Edmund couldn't resolve over several years, was a constant thorn in his side.

Yet now, in one night, Louis had taken it.

Cleanly and swiftly, without a prolonged tug-of-war, without disorderly sieges, without even a proper frontal battle.

Bond looked at that young silhouette.

Louis stood at the high point of the mountain path, instructing several knights on the aftermath, his expression calm.

As if all this should have been so.

"A true young hero," Bond said softly.

Yorn stood beside Louis, barely able to suppress a smile.

"Does this mean I've earned merit?" he asked quietly, excitement barely hidden in his tone, "Will the military report to the Governor include my name?"

He barely moved, just leading the knights to block a few waves of escaping soldiers.

He won somewhat by muddling through.

He rubbed his hands excitedly; clinging to the boss's thigh indeed brought great benefits.

After clearing the battlefield, the soldiers began to tally the spoils of war.

Several camps and caves were thoroughly searched, filled with grain stores, leather, dried meat, and arrows.

There were also looted valuables — gold, silverware, gold coins, woolen cloth rolls, and some old currency from Snow Country.

There were even several thick tactical manuals, all sealed in moisture-proof oilcloth, well-preserved.

It seems the Snow Swearers were not ordinary bandits, but also knew to strive and improve.

But the most unique item was that mirror soldiers carried out from behind the tent.

The shattered mirror embedded in an obsidian round frame, with cracks like a spiderweb, reflected an eerie blue light.

"The Hidden Mist Mirror." Bond recognized it, his tone complicated, "No wonder every cleanup was for naught... It was thanks to this."

Louis glanced at him, reaching out to touch the edge of the frame, asking, "What is this thing?"

"From afar, it can only show illusions, but closing in within dozens of meters reveals its secrets, lasts only for a little over ten minutes, and cannot cover too wide an area."

Louis's gaze fell on the mirrored surface full of cracks, contemplating for a moment.

Something like a mirage?

"Truly an unexpected good find," Louis said softly.

Bond listened nearby, noticing Louis's calm demeanor, but a dangerous glint flickered in his eyes.

"They will soon realize Qingyu Ridge has fallen," Louis continued, "then, they will undoubtedly send someone to scout and attempt to retake the stronghold."

He turned his head, looking at the valley where the battle had just subsided.

"If we can use this mirror to disguise this place as ruins... and ambush a force here."

He paused, a barely noticeable curve on his lips.

"I'll wait for them to walk into the trap."

The soldiers wrapped up the Hidden Mist Mirror, packing it into an iron box.

.....

The snow night had deepened, the campfire flickering dimly.

Bond sat in the tent, pulled his cloak around him, spread a piece of parchment on the table, and began writing.

This was the formal victory report to Duke Edmund, detailing the recapture of Qingyu Ridge, the defeat of the Snow Swearers, and the performance of that young noble lad.

In the letter, he detailed how Louis led the forces in a detour surprise attack, how accurately he divided the enemy, and how the Red Tide Knights coordinated in battle.

Even the Divine Artifact that could obscure the camp's aura, the Hidden Mist Mirror, was recorded in the report.

He also cautioned that although Qingyu Ridge had been reclaimed, the Snow Swearers would undoubtedly react, possibly already gathering forces for a counterattack.

This place is crucial to eradicating the Snow Swearers, earnestly requesting the Duke send reinforcements promptly to consolidate the victory.

At the end of the letter, Bond broke convention with a personal evaluation.

"This battle demonstrated Baron Calvin's command ability and insight, far surpassing his age and experience. With further cultivation, he could become a pillar of the future Northern Territory."

He sighed softly, stepped out of the tent, and tied the letter to a Gale Bird.

This was a messenger beast widely used by the Imperial Nobility and military, small in size but extremely fast, capable of evading regular tracking and magical interference during flight.

It chirped softly, seemingly aware of the task's importance, immediately folding wings and launching into the sky, disappearing in an instant.

.....

Viscount Webster was recently troubled.

The first day the Snow Swearers laid siege, they utilized fog and night to launch a probing offensive. They didn't seem eager to attack, more like disrupting the defenders' morale.

He kept vigil on the wall all night, nerves tense, but what truly vexed him was not the enemy, but his own men.

Noble forces from all over had no sense of coordination.

They didn't follow orders or directives, reinforcements were sluggish, he lost his temper a few times for it, but to no avail.

The few old nobles from the Northern Territory at least followed his command.

But those pioneer lords from the South agreed readily but hesitated or perfunctorily when it came to troop deployment.

He knew he wasn't suited to be a commander.

Back when Count Old Fors was in charge, he was only responsible for charging into battle.

At that time, he could earn merit by wielding his battleaxe without much thought.

But it was different now; Old Fors's heir was too weak, unable to hold the situation.

He was forced into a role not meant for him, yet could not step down.

He stood on the wall, gazing at the dim distant horizon, feeling equally bleak inside.

Chapter 70: Rout

Late in the deep of the second night, a sharp horn blared from the direction of the southern city.

Followed immediately by screams and flames.

Viscount Webster had never slept. He donned his battle armor and rushed out of his tent, his face grim.

The area was defended by a small order of knights from the nobility, not many in number and poorly equipped. He had thought they could hold for a few days, never expecting trouble so quickly.

By the time he led his men to the scene, the entire stretch of the city wall had become a slaughterhouse.

Blood flowed down the stone steps, mingling with the remnants of armor and severed limbs.

Bodies hung upside down from the parapets, eyes still open, faces frozen in terror.

Not a single survivor.

"Kill!" Webster shouted, charging with his blade swinging.

His warblade was heavy and fierce, felling several attacking Snow Swearer warriors with a single sweep, his fighting energy blazing like fire.

The knights followed closely, fighting desperately, inch by inch reclaiming the city wall in chaos.

By dawn's approach, the remaining fires still burned, the air reeking of scorched flesh and blood.

Webster leaned against the damaged battlement, his armor splattered with fresh blood, a cut on his forehead dripping down his chin.

His gaze fixed forward, chest heaving heavily.

With such difficulty defending even on the second day, what next?

As the sky lightened, the news spread within the city.

"The southern city's garrison is wiped out."

"The Snow Swearers have already breached."

"They say that petty noble fled the battle, defecting long ago..."

Rumors spread, creating panic in the streets, and shaking the soldiers' morale.

Viscount Webster wasn't allowed much rest; that night, the main force of the Snow Swearers mounted pressure.

They didn't assault immediately, but aimed their catapults at the North Gate.

"Whoosh—"

The first black projectile traced the sky, trailing thick smoke as it fell.

With a thunderous explosion,

a black fog burst forth, spreading a foul stench, engulfing half the arrow tower.

"Ahhh!!"

The soldiers on the wall covered their noses and mouths, retreating, but some still fell with screams of agony.

"Don't touch it! That's a Curse Bullet!"

The soldiers panicked, the black mist clinging to the armor, sizzling with corrosive sounds, and even the wood boards showed signs of decaying pits.

Then came the second, the third.

The Snow Swearers seemed prepared, launching dozens of Curse Bullets at the North Gate, the thick mist spreading over the entire defense line.

Archers collapsed from poisoning, the wall corroded, even the corpses began to melt.

"Fall back, retreat for now!"

"We can't retreat; if we do, this gate is lost!"

Confusion in command, morale shattered.

An Elite Knight shouted, "Cover your noses with wet cloths! Fall back means total ruin!"

But only a few Knight Teams from the Old North remained at the ramparts.

They stood, clad in damaged armor, eyes bloodshot, enduring the toxic fog, even as the ground beneath was a flowing poison, even as comrades around them fell one by one.

Viscount Webster swiftly arrived on the scene.

He climbed atop the battlements, his wounds still unhealed.

Standing on an arrow tower shrouded in toxic mist, he gritted his teeth and ordered, "Reinforce with knights from the East Wall and South Wall! The North Gate can't hold!"

The Commander dashed out, sending one batch after another to various fronts.

Less than half an hour later, they returned, faces stiff.

"Reporting, Viscount, such-and-such refused to assist, claiming they must hold their own line."

"Such-and-such Lord states heavy casualties, unable to spare forces."

...

Webster stood motionless, staring at the rolling black fog ahead.

The wind lifted his cloak, disheveling the blood-stained hair on his forehead.

There was a brief silence on the wall, only the sounds of coughing and painful groans floating in the air.

He understood.

The nobility had long been calculating their escape; they never intended to hold out till the end.

Just then, a guard stumbled up the battlements, face stained with blood, voice trembling:

"Vi, Viscount, sir, there's a breach at the West Gate..."

Webster whipped his head around: "What?"

"They say someone saw no enemy there and thought they could escape..."

Before he could finish speaking, another Order Knight arrived, nearly rolling off the horse in urgency, shouting hoarsely:

"The West Gate is a trap! They've let them out, luring deserters, with ambushers waiting outside!"

"Hundreds just exited and got encircled! All slaughtered!"

"Those idiots!" Webster roared, his voice hoarse, "Getting themselves killed is one thing, but dragging the whole front down with them!"

He slammed a fist into the stone wall, blood seeping through his fingers.

Half an hour earlier, a report from the West Gate mentioned a breach in the defense line there.

The Pioneer Nobles from the South immediately saw an opportunity.

They gathered their knight orders in secret, sidestepping the battle lines, heading straight for the West Gate.

No one attempted to stop them.

"If not now, when?"

"These northerners don't consider us as their own anyway; whether the fort stands or not isn't our concern."

They spoke with righteous conviction.

Preserving their own strength was what mattered most.

It was what the nobility had been taught since young.

So, hundreds moved at night, the clatter of hooves and iron armor echoing on the stones as they charged out the West Gate.

The distant dark wasteland lay silent, appearing devoid of enemies.

As they crossed the defense, stepping onto the cold wasteland, a row of red dots ignited out of the darkness.

They were the eyes of the Snow Swearers, gleaming like those of night beasts.

In the next moment, horn blasts sounded from all directions, the snow erupted, and countless ambushers leaped from the snow, converging from everywhere.

"Enemy attack!"

Before they could finish shouting, the leading knight was pierced through the helmet by a rain of arrows, falling straight off the horse.

A turmoil erupted at the rear, as the horses attempting to turn crashed into each other.

But the Snow Swearers gave them no chance to react.

They plunged into the masses, releasing bursts of fighting energy, axes and swords like the wind, cutting down the noble guards one after another in the melee.

The leaders wore thick beast armor, eyes glowing red, their bodies encircled by deep blue fighting energy, surging like the tide.

Each swing of their axes left a shadow, splitting men and their armor alike.

Some were Wolf Knights, the elite of the Snow Swearers.

They charged across the battlefield on giant wolves with snow-white fur and fierce eyes, tearing armor with claws, crushing throats with fangs.

Those who had barely escaped the ensuing chaos were quickly torn apart before they could regroup.

Blood quickly dyed the ground, the ferrous scent rising like mist in the air.

Some knelt, begging for mercy; others shouted surrender, but the Snow Swearers' eyes showed no compassion.

They only killed relentlessly, as though cleansing with blood, erasing all shame.

Warhorses neighed and fell, crushing men, spears piercing armor, pulling out blood and bits of flesh.

The cries faded quickly, eventually vanishing in the wind and snow.

This breakout became a massacre.

Fewer than ten escaped.