

Winter 71

Chapter 71: Fallen in Battle

"Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!"

A few curse bullets hit a corner of the city wall, and the magic corrosion spread like vines, finally causing a section of the wall to collapse with a crash.

A breach has appeared!

"Charge! Seize it!" Barnes roared, his voice penetrating the battlefield.

The Snow Swearer's troops poured in through the breach like a flood.

The knights defending the city immediately engaged, trying to plug the gap.

But they soon found that the advancing formation of the Snow Swearers was flawless.

An Official Knight raised his sword to charge, only to be pierced through his armor by a spear the next second, thrown off his horse.

He struggled to get up, but was immediately stabbed through the chest by a second spear, pinning him to the stone slab.

As the battle line continued to advance, screams echoed from the flanks, as the Wolf Cavalry cut in from the side, tearing through the defenses in the alleys.

The knight forces trying to protect the streets attempted to resist at the alley entrance, but within minutes they were crushed, leaving only the sound of wolf hooves trampling over corpses in the fiery streets.

The most intense fighting was on the east side of the main gate.

An old Northern Knights Order stationed there fell into a melee. Initially, their formation was solid enough to organize counterattacks.

But the next wave of enemies was a group of incredibly fast Snow Oath Warriors, like wild dogs springing from the darkness.

No commands, no formations.

They moved silently yet synchronously, tackling, slicing throats, dismembering.

A knight had just struck the enemy down when, turning around, he was stabbed in the back by a short blade, unable to utter a sound.

"Keep your formation! Those are Mad Wolf Warriors!" a seasoned captain shouted with exhaustion, but no one heard clearly.

More were pinned at the street corner, dragged into the shadows of the flames.

Screams on the battlefield increased, yet they were all brief and swift.

As if those knights never existed at all.

Within minutes, the entire position was cleared, blood soaking the ground with a pungent stench.

The last resistance at the city gate extinguished.

The Empire's knights began to flee.

And the Snow Swearers continued to advance, like silent reapers, inch by inch from the fog.

In the firelight, the Empire's banner finally fell.

"Hahahahahaha!"

Barnes stood at the edge of the ruins, watching the tattered golden-red fabric consumed by flames, laughing in exhilaration.

The Imperial Army's defense line couldn't hold for an hour.

Resistance burned briefly like paper, only to turn to ashes.

With the main street breached and the inner city defenses collapsing, Snow Eagle City was officially declared fallen.

The knights, losing their command, fled in panic, and the nobility even more so, undignifiedly scrambling to escape the city, even trampling over their fallen confidants in their flight.

"Don't stop me! I'm a Viscount! I'm Imperial Nobility!"

"I can pay! I have gold!"

Lamentations and shouts mixed with blood and fire, but the Snow Swearers stayed silent, only bent on slaughter.

In front of a ruin, Viscount Fisher stumbled forward, his face ingratiating, blocking Barnes' path.

"My lord! It's me! Fisher! It was I who sent out the defense map of Snow Eagle City!"

He patted his chest, speaking urgently, "That map, I sent it out myself! Without me, how could you have succeeded so smoothly?"

Barnes squinted at him, a nearly joyful expression on his face.

"So it was you!" he laughed, placing a hand on Fisher's shoulder, "A good dog indeed."

Viscount Fisher, hearing this, his eyes filled with wild joy, his body stopped trembling.

"Deserves reward," Barnes said with a smile.

Fisher was about to respond when a flash of silver suddenly swept by.

"Reward you with a good end."

The long knife had already fallen.

The Viscount's head rolled into the pool of blood, his face still bearing a smug expression, forever frozen there.

Meanwhile, on the other side, at the western alley of the city, Baron Zachary led his remaining knights scrambling out of a side gate.

Though his knights were barely one in ten.

After crossing the last line of defense, he finally mounted his horse, looking back at the burning city.

The fire consumed the tall towers of Snow Eagle City, billowing thick black smoke, and screams audible from afar.

"As long as the green hills remain, there will be no fear of firewood. Being alive is good enough."

He heaved a sigh of relief, carrying the joy of surviving the calamity, as he galloped away into the distance.

Afraid that if he ran any slower, he would be cut down by the Snow Swearers.

Elsewhere, the blockade outside the city had long been set up.

The Snow Swearers blocked the alleys, city gates, sewers, and even set ambushes at the secret passages.

A few of the noble families' guards broke through, but more were directly cut down in the chaos.

Cries, pleas for mercy, and blood mixed with dense smoke and smoldering embers.

The entire Snow Eagle City became a slaughterhouse.

The city could not be defended.

On one side of the battlefield, Viscount Webster, wearing damaged plate armor, stood amidst the ruins, blood flowing from his forehead, dripping onto his cloak.

He looked at the tide of enemy forces surging ahead, his hand on the sword hilt, eyes as heavy as iron.

Issuing the final orders to the remaining knights:

"First unit, escort Little Fors and break through as far as possible."

"Second unit, ignite the granary and treasury, let those bastards get nothing."

"Third unit!" He paused, gazing at the Mad Wolf Warriors charging from afar, "Follow me, block those wild dogs."

The knights spoke no further words, mounting horses, drawing swords, each breaking out in different directions.

And Webster gripped his war knife tightly, taking a deep breath, he suddenly stepped forward.

In the next moment, the ground shook violently, stones flying!

Fighting Energy erupted suddenly, a striking azure glow tearing the mist, forming a chasm in the night sky.

Webster unsheathed his sword, his figure becoming an azure streak, instantly slicing through the bone armor and throats of three Mad Wolf Warriors ahead.

"Follow me to kill!!!"

The Personal Guard Knights roared, closely following behind.

But he was too fast, like a blue thunderbolt slashing alone into the enemy ranks.

The Mad Wolf Warriors were fierce and crazy, yet in his presence, they fell like straw.

Someone thrust a spear at him, he turned and slashed off the arm.

Several lunged with chaotic blades, he repelled them with Fighting Energy, countering with one strike to cut three in half!

Sweat and blood mixing, he fought over a dozen continually moving forward, like a dying yet proud lion.

He even once broke through the Mad Wolf Formation, closing in on where Barnes was, the sword light approaching.

But as time passed, the Fighting Energy of this aged Extraordinary Knight continually weakened, wounds accumulating, blood drenching.

Until the final blow severed his knee, he kneeled on the shattered street.

Behind him were the burning granaries and fallen streets and alleys.

Before him was the dark tide of the Snow Swearers and the roaring screams that echoed to the sky.

He gazed up at the Imperial Dragon Flag trampled into the mud, his chest heaving heavily, blood trickling from his lips.

"Old comrades... I'm sorry..." he murmured, voice faint as the wind, "May that child... escape..."

His eyes slowly shut, the last of his Fighting Energy quietly extinguishing on his sword.

Chapter 72: Fall of the City

At the same time, on the other side of Snow Eagle City, deep in a street that had long been breached, Count Fos was already kneeling in the rubble and blood.

The silk robe on his body had long been burned through by sparks, and the magic crystal rings on his hands had fallen off during his escape.

All around were the corpses of knights who had died fighting to escort him out of Snow Eagle City.

"I, I am a count of the Forrester Clan!" Fos wailed incoherently, his cheek pressed against the cold stone slab, like a dead dog.

He tried to crawl forward on the ground, but a Snow Swearer warrior's boot stomped hard on his back, pressing him down with a sharp cry of pain.

"Spare me, my lord... I have money, I have mines, I have castles... I can give them all to you, just please, don't kill me..." he pleaded for mercy.

The warrior stepping on him laughed and said, "If we kill you, won't all of that be ours anyway?"

Hearing this, Fos panicked immediately: "I'm willing to be a slave for life, work like an ox or a horse... I can even, even be bait to lure other Northern Lords!"

At this moment, Barnes appeared from afar, cloaked in gray and white, his face stained with the enemy's blood, yet his expression was as leisurely as a beast returning from a hunt.

He looked down at the groveling and wailing figure, slightly raising an eyebrow: "Are you Count Fos?"

Fos lifted his head, with snot and tears streaming, his face deformed with crying: "It's me! It's me, my lord! I beg you to spare my life.

I will pledge my loyalty to you, no, no, no, from now on I am your dog! Just don't let me die! I'll do whatever you say!"

"Enough."

Barnes, seeing his shameless demeanor, lost interest in taunting him.

He waved his hand coldly, his gaze as if looking at a crushed insect.

"Break off his limbs, take him back as a sacrificial offering for the blood sacrifice."

He said lightly, turned around, and left, not even bothering to give another glance.

"Wha- what... no... no!! Ah!!!"

In an instant, his hands were twisted and broken, and Fos screamed, struggling to retreat, like a fish rolling on a display board.

A Mad Wolf Warrior stepped forward, quickly and deftly breaking his legs.

The sound of cracking bones spread in the night wind, accompanied by Fos's heart-wrenching wails.

"Ahhhhh!! No!! Help!! I don't want to die!!"

His cries echoed among the ruins, but they stirred no ripples.

After all, this was only a small part of the tragedy happening in the city.

The Snow Swearers took over the entire city like a tide.

Once they entered the city, they were like beasts that had completely broken free of their chains.

The noble mansions had long turned into dens of their prey.

Those who had not fled, the once haughty nobles, were dragged out in public, knelt, and beheaded, their blood splattering on the white walls, while their wives and daughters... their screams pierced through the entire street.

The Snow Swearers showed no mercy.

They seized jewelry, burned portraits, laughed while crushing ivory chairs, and threw crying children into the fire just because their cries were annoying.

Some warriors dragged captives onto the city walls and forced them to shout "Long live the Snow Country", cutting them down if they couldn't shout.

Even those who did shout were laughed at and had their tongues cut out: "Fake, not sincere."

Civilians had nowhere to flee.

Fire raged through every wooden beam on the street, and blood mixed with mud smeared the street corners.

No matter their age or gender, anyone blocking the Snow Swearers' path was torn apart.

Women knelt to plead for mercy, only to be humiliated, and then the long knives fell.

A boy holding a stick to protect his sister was kicked over, his arm crushed underfoot, and that sister ultimately couldn't escape a tragic fate.

Some were skinned alive, others used as targets for throwing, some had only a head left, stuck on a lance, hanging at the nobles' doors.

The Mad Wolf Team was the most bloodthirsty and frenzied, burning captives alive before the bonfire, gathering to howl and dance primitively to the cries of victims.

This was the victor's feast.

They vented, ravaged, branding Snow Eagle City with the Snow Swearers' mark with slaughter and flames.

And the conquered city could only endure these pains in silence, even if most did nothing.

The only consolation was Viscount Webster's final order that destroyed the granaries, leaving them blackened and no grain was left.

And although the treasury was not completely destroyed, the piled-up gold and jewels were of no help to the war situation.

Barnes stood on the city wall, gazing into the distance.

The flag of the Old Snow Country flew high above his head, the white cloth tainted with red, fluttering in the wind.

It quivered violently in the wind, as if the slumbering will of a fallen nation was awakening.

And beneath his feet was the Empire's dragon crest banner, already fallen in a pool of blood, its pattern indistinct.

Barnes knew clearly that the city was ablaze, cries echoed continuously, and the slaughter in the streets did not cease.

But he did not order a stop.

"The warriors need to vent." He said to his guards, "If I were a few years younger, I would only be more ruthless."

"Anyway, later I might find a noble lady to rest with." He leaned on his blood-stained long knife, laughing wildly, "Hahaha!"

Yet just as he was immersed in this victory, a flurry of urgent footsteps interrupted his ecstasy.

A Wolf Knight brought a blood-soaked soldier rushing up the city wall.

"Lord Barnes!" The soldier collapsed to the ground, panting heavily, his face filled with fear, "Qingyu Ridge... Qingyu Ridge has fallen!"

Barnes froze, the smile on his face solidifying into frost.

"What?" he asked in astonishment, completely incredulous.

The knight beside him quickly added, "He's not the only one; several warriors who escaped from Qingyu Ridge say the same thing!"

Barnes frowned tightly, looking at the severely wounded soldier, "How did it happen? How many enemies? Where did they come from?!"

"Night raid." The soldier murmured in a low voice, "We don't know... very few people, only two hundred? But... but..."

"But what?"

"We didn't see anything clearly... and it was over..."

Silence spread over the city wall.

Barnes whispered sternly: "Impossible! Qingyu Ridge is easy to defend and hard to attack, even if it's a night raid, it couldn't have fallen so quickly!"

For the first time, rare anxiety appeared in his eyes.

The granaries of Snow Eagle City had long been reduced to ashes.

Now he had almost no supplies here.

And the supply line could only rely on the Snow Swearers' base in Ice Sea County.

But between Ice Sea County and Snow Peak County, mountain ranges crisscrossed, and passes were treacherous.

Qingyu Ridge was the most critical throat connecting the two places.

If Qingyu Ridge was truly lost, it would mean Snow Eagle City had become an isolated city.

"Damn it!"

Barnes looked towards the mountains shrouded in the southern night, speaking coldly through gritted teeth: "Even if it's a coincidence, we can't gamble."

He immediately ordered: "Dispatch eight hundred Wolf Cavalry and cavalry to circle around the eastern mountain path, recapture Qingyu Ridge immediately! We must regain it as quickly as possible!"

To swiftly recapture Qingyu Ridge, he dispatched the majority of his mobile forces.

Chapter 73: Intelligence

Duke Edmund was sitting behind his desk, reviewing thick war reports while listening to the low voice of the military officer reporting.

"The Snow Oathholder outposts had been purged smoothly, with five of the seven outposts in Bingnan Ridge already cleared..."

He nodded lightly, not surprised, only feeling it as a matter of course.

Exterminating the Snow Oathholders was a plan he personally devised, mobilizing all of the Northern Territory to cooperate with the strategy wholeheartedly.

He even led a team a few days ago himself, beheading a Snow Oathholder elder, whose head still hangs on the city wall to this day.

Everything was under control.

"These wild dogs are finally going to be wiped out."

Just then, a Gale Bird with blood-stained wings flapped its wings and crashed onto the window ledge.

Along with the letter, came a strong smell of blood.

He frowned as it was a letter from Snow Eagle City.

"Snow Eagle City? Didn't they just send a distress letter before? Saying they were surrounded by two thousand Snow Oathholders, hadn't I already sent reinforcements? How can it be again..."

A sense of foreboding rose in Duke Edmund's heart as he unfolded the letter.

Upon reading the third line, he suddenly stood up, his face changed dramatically, and the glass in his hand shattered to the ground.

"Snow Eagle City has fallen, Count Fors has perished, and the defending troops have been completely wiped out..."

As Duke Edmund read this, he was silent for a moment, then let out an angry roar.

"Are you f*cking kidding me! Three thousand men defending the city, just three days?!" He slammed the table with anger.

"Even three thousand pigs piled there would take three days to kill, yet they couldn't hold it?! What the heck was that old Fors doing!"

The military officer beside softly reminded, "Sir, the old Count Fors passed away two years ago, the current Count Fors is the old Fors' son."

"Hmph, no wonder..." Duke Edmund held his forehead, turning his anger into a cold sneer, "If we don't send aid back, the Snow Oathholders will use Snow Eagle City as a springboard to continuously invade southward, it will be very troublesome then."

The strategist said gravely, "But a strong attack to retake it would require at least five thousand troops, and once the main force is mobilized, other battlefields will be left vulnerable."

"I know." Edmund gritted his teeth, "But we can't completely give up, we have to figure out a way."

He tried to plot several reinforcement routes and then crossed them out one by one, none seemed reasonable.

"Three thousand defending the city, fell in just three days, this group of useless are not even as good as a bunch of dogs." Unable to figure a way out, Edmund cursed again.

At this moment, an eagle's cry came from outside the window and another Gale Bird descended into the courtyard.

He turned his head to look, his expression tense, "Another urgent letter?"

He grabbed it and unfolded the letter to read immediately.

He was stunned, then his eyes flashed with a gleam, ecstatic with joy.

"Qingyu Ridge has been seized?!"

The letter clearly stated that a young noble, Louis Calvin, led over two hundred men on a surprise attack on Qingyu Ridge, smashing through the Snow Oathholder defense line, beheading two hundred warriors, and taking the strategic point!

"Louis?" he murmured the name, having some impression.

Wasn't he the kid who traded fish for a knighthood?

"That Calvin family kid, not with high cultivation, so young to accomplish such a big feat! Truly a talent!"

Duke Edmund clenched the letter in his hand and laughed wildly, "Hahaha! Well done, boy!"

At that moment, he had already made a decision.

"Since Snow Eagle City can't be kept, then we don't want it either! Let them be trapped there!"

We'll encircle but not attack, cut off their supply lines! As long as Qingyu Ridge stands, no supplies can get through, and the Snow Oathholders will eventually starve like dogs!"

"Send this letter to Bond." he instructed his attendant, "Let that Louis kid defend the passage at all costs! Don't retreat even half a step!"

First, mobilize fifteen hundred knights as the vanguard, let Gibson lead and head to Qingyu Ridge to reinforce as fast as possible."

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Bond received the letter from the Gale Bird in the early morning.

It was an urgent military order personally signed by the Duke.

After tearing open the seal, when he unfolded the letter, his eyes changed sharply.

Snow Eagle City had fallen, Count Fors had perished, all three thousand defenders were exterminated.

Moreover, the enemy forces were advancing aggressively towards Qingyu Ridge, intending to reclaim it.

"How could this be..." he murmured lowly, fingers trembling slightly.

He understood very well what this meant.

Qingyu Ridge had already become the last stronghold to block the main forces of the Ice Sea County Snow Oathholders.

It was conceivable how fierce the fighting would be in this place next!

He took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm down, and quickly walked towards the central tent.

Inside the tent, Louis was writing and sketching something on a map.

"Sir, I need to speak with you alone." Bond said in a deep voice, his eyes heavy.

Louis dismissed the others, turning to him, "Speak."

Bond handed out the letter, speaking in a low tone, "I am a secret envoy sent by Duke Edmund. I was ordered to observe you, and now officially deliver the Duke's battle orders."

He paused, his voice growing heavier.

"Snow Eagle City is overrun. Now it has become the only barrier blocking the main forces of the Ice Sea County Snow Oathholders.

The enemy is redirecting their main forces towards here. Sir, the Duke's order is to defend Qingyu Ridge at all costs."

He stared into Louis's eyes, his heart full of anxiety.

He knew the nature of this order.

To have a young noble lead over two hundred men to withstand the elite counterattack of the Snow Oathholders...

It was almost a death sentence.

But Louis merely glanced at the letter before setting it aside on the table.

He nodded, his tone calm, "Understood."

Bond was stunned on the spot, momentarily forgetting to speak, "Ah? You... are not surprised? Worried?"

"Worrying won't help." Louis turned around, his demeanor unruffled, "As long as we hold them, right?"

"You're not asking anything else?" Bond couldn't help but inquire.

Louis shook his head slightly, "No need."

Bond gazed at him, a storm surging in his heart.

What on earth is up with this person?

With Snow Eagle City just fallen and enemy forces attacking, the situation was extremely perilous.

Yet this young man was calm throughout, not even a single eyebrow frowning.

As if hearing something he already anticipated.

Is this arrogance, or confidence?

Of course, he couldn't know that just yesterday morning, Louis had already foreseen the entire course of the battle through the "Daily Intelligence System."

Including the mobilization directions of the Snow Oathholder main forces, and intelligence that Qingyu Ridge was about to become the new battlefield.

Even the exact number, path, and arrival time of the enemy movements were clear to him.

Moreover, he had already prepared all the battle tactics.

So since yesterday, Louis began setting up ambushes, deploying scouts, marking ambush points, and planning retreat routes...

And when Bond brought the "urgent military report," he was already reviewing the details of step seven in his plan.

Eight hundred Snow Oathholder elites, such a scale of enemy forces, indeed put some pressure on him.

But Louis did not intend to clash head-on with the enemy here, nor did he plan to gamble on luck waiting for reinforcements.

He did not want to squander his soldiers and knights needlessly here either.

Because he had already found an opportunity.

An opportunity to wipe out the eight hundred Snow Oathholder elites in one fell swoop.

Chapter 74: One, Two, Three, Boom!

In the dark night, Bond and Louis crouched behind a high slope shielded by dense forest, below which lay a makeshift ruin.

The knights hid on both sides of the slope, and the archers were already in position.

But at this moment, Bond couldn't calm his uneasy feelings.

He looked at the silent mountain path and lowered his voice, "Baron, I advise you to withdraw."

Louis didn't respond, continuing to survey the terrain, confirming the reports from several scouts.

Bond frowned and continued, "We are not certain if the enemy's army will pass this mountain path, or when they will come.

Even if they do come, with just these over a hundred knights, can we really fend off the elite eight hundred Snow Swearers, even if the ambush succeeds?

If we lose this battle, not only will our entire force be wiped out, but we'll also hand over Qingyu Ridge, this critical choke point."

His tone was gloomy but carried a sense of urgency: "We should retreat to the fortifications, hold the passage, and wait for the reinforcements sent by the Duke."

"Enough." Louis finally spoke, his tone light but extremely calm, "I am the commander."

Bond was stunned.

The tone carried no anger, nor an emphasis on authority, merely stating a fact.

Yet it was irrefutable.

"You..." Bond wanted to say something but ultimately bit his lip and kept silent.

He watched silently at this much younger man, feeling both angry and helpless inside.

"He's overconfident, a young noble who's won a few victories and now thinks he can take on eight hundred elites?"

"He's going to bury this entire unit here in this wilderness."

Bond even had the reckless thought of killing him and taking command.

But he quickly dismissed that thought.

These soldiers and knights already regarded Louis as their faith; if he acted rashly, death would be his only outcome.

So Bond could only grit his teeth and stare into the distance below the mountain path, lost in thought.

A barely noticeable sound came from the forest path below.

Then came the continuous clatter of horses' hooves, the sound of metal clashing, and the rustling of leather armor.

Bond's entire body jolted, his pupils shrinking.

"They... they really came?"

He suddenly looked at Louis, a mixture of shock and inexplicable chill in his heart.

"Did he foresee this all along?"

He suddenly realized that this young noble might have had a grasp of the entire situation all along.

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Cold wind swept down from the ridge, raising dust from the ground.

Eight hundred elite Snow Swearers swiftly charged along the rugged mountain path.

Most were wolf cavalry or Snow Oath Knights, intent on reclaiming the Qingyu Ridge stronghold as swiftly as possible.

"Just two hundred knights. Is such a large movement necessary?"

Garrett, riding atop a Black Silver Battle Wolf, wore a slightly weary expression.

He was one of the few veterans among the Snow Swearers, surviving three annihilation campaigns, emerging a warrior from a sea of corpses and blood.

He thought he could finally rest a bit in Snow Eagle City.

Enjoy the company of those fair-skinned noble ladies, a little indulgence.

Yet, as soon as the orders came, he was urgently dispatched to war.

"Tsk, truly unlucky." He cursed under his breath, pulling the reins slightly, the battle wolf baring its fangs and striding forward quickly.

He wasn't the only one dissatisfied with the command.

Restlessness spread quickly through the entire vanguard.

The young Snow Oath Knights were all impatient, eager to end the battle quickly and return to Snow Eagle City to enjoy their spoils.

"Just a tiny mountain pass manned by two hundred people, yet it's like attacking the Imperial Capital." A knight clicked his tongue and complained.

"Indeed, such a waste of time."

"Sir, we are almost there." The aide reminded.

Garrett raised his hand to signal to slow down, his gaze fixed sharply on the end of the valley.

A charred ruin lay quietly in the valley.

Tent frames lay crooked on the ground, battle flags shattered, hardened animal skins frozen in the wind to form ripples.

"That's the place." He said softly, a cold smile forming on his lips.

The scene looked like an illusion conjured by the Hidden Mist Mirror.

Garrett had used such things himself many times.

"From afar it looks real, but get within tens of meters, and you can spot the flaws." He said, squinting, "Do they think they can trick us with this thing?"

He raised his hand with a wave, coldly ordering, "Accelerate! Circle from both sides, catch them before they react, and devour this nest of rats whole!"

"Yes!"

The wolf cavalry roared in unison, their battle wolves leaping forward.

Eight hundred Snow Swearer riders split into two wings, storming towards the campsite ruins like a chilling wave, accompanied by the heavy drum of hooves in the snow.

The vanguard entered the mouth of the valley, the rear wing followed closely, lines spreading into a "semi-encircling" formation.

They believed it would take only a few minutes to consume that ruin in a bloody storm.

They were less than a hundred meters from the ruins.

In the snowstorm, those tattered tents, toppled stakes, charred earth, it was all... too real.

"Something's wrong!"

Garrett suddenly pulled the reins abruptly, his gaze tightening, his brow wrinkling instantly.

This isn't an illusion!

This isn't the hologram of the "Hidden Mist Mirror," but an actual ruin.

An intentionally laid out, meticulously camouflaged illusionary trap!

They were deceived!

But that instant of realization came too late!

At that moment, standing in the shadows of the cliff, Louis slowly raised his right hand.

"One, two, three." He gently waved his hand down, "Detonate."

The next second, the air seemed to be suddenly evacuated.

BOOM—!!!

The explosion roared like a howl from the depths of hell, ripping apart the silence of Qingyu Ridge.

The chain explosion of magic explosive bullets buried in the belly of the mountain unleashed a terrifying storm and raging flames!

The wolf cavalry in the valley hadn't even had time to react before they were engulfed.

First, a dazzling blue light flashed suddenly!

The extreme cold air swept across like a blade, freezing the air instantly.

Dozens of knights in the front ranks didn't even have a chance to scream before being frozen in their sprinting stances, knights and battle wolves like twisted ice sculptures, instantly being drawn into the explosion center by the suction!

Followed by the Demon Marrow igniting in an explosion!

The blue frost transformed into flames, torrents of fiery waves surged like tornadoes, engulfing large swaths of warriors.

Scorching flames and explosive shockwaves rampaged in the valley, tearing red-hot fissures across the snow's surface.

The battle wolves caught fire, knights' armor cracked and burst, each tumbling, howling, becoming fireballs engulfed by flames.

"Awooo—!!!"

The burning battle wolves screamed and fell, limbs fluttering, flesh turning to charcoal in the fire!

The final wave, toxic corrosive mist rose steadily.

The black mist spread silently yet lethally.

The knights who inhaled first convulsed, vomiting blood, collapsing while howling in agony.

"Cough, cough ahhh!!!"

The knights rolled on the ground, their skin inside the armor quickly corroded and peeled off, bloodied and raw!

But it wasn't over yet.

With rumbling, the valley's structure collapsed, the explosion's tremor finally triggering a terrain shift!

"Retreat quickly!"

The Snow Swearers who hadn't approached the center were just about to turn their horses when they saw the slopes on both sides shaking violently, large rocks rolling down like rain!

Rumble—!!

Massive rocks roared down, carrying snow and debris, crashing into the cavalry lines like divine retribution.

A battle wolf was struck directly, its spine snapped, knight and steed flying several meters, crashing heavily into a companion, the sound of bones shattering mixed with wails echoed across the valley.

"Ahhhh! My leg!!"

"Help... help me...!"

Severed limbs flew, horses whinnied, and beasts roared.

The once fierce elite wolf cavalry of the Snowfield were now like ants swallowed by a storm.

Disgraced, miserable, utterly powerless.

Inside and outside the valley, there was nothing but horrifying wailing and the nauseating stench of burning flesh.

Chapter 75: Harvest

After the explosion, the gorge returned to a brief silence.

The next moment, wails intermittently emerged from the depths of the ruins.

"Help... help... uh..."

"My leg... ah ah ah!!"

"Stay away from that black mist! Cough, cough..."

Voices filled with heart-wrenching fear drifted in the thick smoke, echoing in the hollow valley.

The air was filled with the smell of burning, blood, and a stench like a mix of sulfur and rotting flesh.

Some knights' armor was corrosively pitted with blood and flesh sticking to it, and they couldn't even scream, just opened their mouths to spit out foam and blood.

Someone tumbled to the ground, desperately crawling upwards, half of their body charred, half frostbitten, skin peeling off in chunks, revealing bloody muscles and stark white bones underneath.

A war wolf had half its body blown apart, intestines dragging in the snow, yet it still twitched unconsciously, paws scrabbling, as if still searching for its already charred master.

The whole valley seemed to have been dragged into hell.

And this was all a result of Louis's prior planning, the outcome of foreseeing information and precise calculations.

Bond stood on high ground, looking at the valley below, his throat tightened, his mind went blank.

He had participated in many wars, seen battlefields piled high with corpses.

He had also seen with his own eyes the scene of a stronger Magic Explosion Bullet detonating on the battlefield.

But this was the first time he saw this kind of Magic Explosion Bullet used in conjunction with traps, precise, efficient, thorough, with almost no survivors.

"Is this... hell..." Bond murmured.

This wasn't an explosion; it was a meticulously planned execution.

As if every corpse's falling place had been planned before the war started.

Bond turned his head to look at the instigator beside him.

That person stood calmly, just quietly watching below, with a slight smile in his eyes.

Like a playwright appreciating his own work.

"What is this..." Bond struggled to speak.

Louis turned his head, blinked: "Magic Explosion Bullet."

His tone was light as if introducing a favorite toy: "I call it Ice and Fire Two Realms."

Bond's Adam's apple rolled, he swallowed: "What an incredible Ice and Fire Two Realms."

As he said this, his eyes were still fixated on the burning scorched earth in the valley below.

A young man who seemed rather gentle could do such a thing.

This young noble is truly terrifying.

Bond was not the only one who was fearful and shocked.

Yorn stood in place, unmoving for a long time.

He stared wide-eyed at that dead silent valley, seemingly unable to accept the reality before him.

Eight hundred elite Snow Swearers obliterated with no remains in just a few minutes?

"This, this is too outrageous..."

He murmured, his throat dry, cold sweat running down his back.

But after the shock, a strong sense of relief welled up.

Fortunately!

Fortunately, he followed Louis.

Yorn thought of the tragic state of Snow Eagle City, those mountains of corpses and seas of blood, the heads hanging on the city walls, and countless cries...

He hadn't seen it with his own eyes, but just hearing about it gave him nightmares for several nights.

If it weren't for Louis, if it weren't for him mindlessly raising his hand then and following Louis to Qingyu Ridge...

Now he would probably already be a corpse in Snow Eagle City, right?

Yorn looked at the figure not far away, his heart shook violently.

"I can never repay the boss's kindness in this lifetime..." he said lowly, his eyes more determined than ever.

He must cling tightly to Louis's thigh!

The surrounding knights and soldiers were also silent, the look in their eyes towards Louis had quietly changed.

No longer was it simple obedience, nor just ordinary respect.

It was immense reverence.

It was an emotion that only arises after witnessing a "miracle".

As the poisonous mist dissipated slightly, the thick smell of burning still lingered in the air.

Louis stood at the edge of the valley entrance, looking down at that snowfield devoured by war.

He seemed calm, his tone steady: "Knight Order, put on protective leather masks and clean up the battlefield. Beware of remaining poison gas and any escaped fish."

"Yes!"

The Red Tide Knights swiftly took action, each wearing protective masks made from beast hides and herbs, forming ranks and stepping into the outskirts of the valley with long-handled weapons.

The ground beneath their feet had been blasted to pieces, charred and bloodstains congealed into a layer of pitch-black muck, stepping on it felt like entering a rotten swamp.

The sweep was very smooth.

This elite force of eight hundred Snow Swearers was originally known for high mobility and strong collaboration.

After witnessing the scene of hell, they were no longer well-trained warriors, just a group of panicked beasts.

Now barely a hundred could stand up, all broken in spirit and physically exhausted.

Although a few escapees tried to counterattack.

Several remaining Snow Swearers staggered together, trying to muster one last ounce of morale, wielding battle blades, charging at the Red Tide Knights' defensive line.

"Charge!!"

"For the swear—"

Before their shouts could fall, they were pierced by spears, their voices drowned in the sound of throats being torn, consumed by blood.

Without unified command, without the will to win, how could they withstand the Red Tide soldiers?

The uncoordinated counterattack before the tight formation of the Red Tide Knights was like an egg hitting a rock.

"Don't kill me! I surrender!"

"I beg you..."

Cries for help echoed in the valley, but no one responded.

The Red Tide Knights continued to advance calmly, like death itself, reaping the last remnants of resistance.

Many enemies had also gone mad from the Magic Explosion Bullet.

They sat paralyzed on the ground, hair disheveled, curled up in a ball, muttering to themselves, eyes vacant.

Toward these enemies, the Red Tide Knights showed no mercy, directly beheading them, giving them a swift end.

With the final charge of the Red Tide Knights, the battlefield returned to silence.

After half an hour of slaughter, the last enemy soldier collapsed with a crash, blood soaking the valley earth.

"Clean-up complete!"

"Enemy forces completely annihilated!"

Hoarse and fervent shouting erupted from the dust and fog.

The soldiers raised their weapons high, emotions suppressed for long finally bursting forth.

"We won!!!"

"Long live Lord Calvin!!!"

They surged excitedly toward Louis, their gazes filled with respect and fervor.

Originally, they thought this was a battle to the death.

Eight hundred elite Snow Swearers against two hundred defenders, even fighting to the death might not hold.

In their hearts, they were prepared to sacrifice their lives for this battle.

But unexpectedly, this brutal battle they internally anticipated...

Ended so easily.

The enemy died too fast, so fast it felt surreal.

But the remains on the ground and the poison mist not yet entirely dissipated told them: this was real.

They survived, and won effortlessly.

And the one who brought this all — —

Was that young baron standing calmly on the valley, eyes indifferent.

Louis Calvin.

Chapter 76: Reinforcements

Gibson rode on his horse, the cold wind hitting his face, sharp as a knife.

The knights behind him marched in formation, the sound of hoofbeats heavy.

"Faster! Even faster!" he urged in a deep voice.

They had been rushing for five days, using Fighting Energy on the road, with hardly any rest.

Because he understood the importance of this operation, and knew that the situation at Qingyu Ridge was not optimistic.

Two Barons, a little over a hundred men, resisting eight hundred Snow Swearer cavalry; lasting a few days was already a miracle.

"Hurry up!" Gibson growled, "If we're late, we won't even be able to collect the bodies!"

The war horses were panting heavily, white foam coming from their mouths, with even blood splattering from their hooves.

He did not stop, just kept charging.

But when they finally arrived at Qingyu Ridge, the scene before him made him pause slightly.

The camp was orderly, fires were burning, soldiers were patrolling, everything was as calm as usual.

No enemies.

No corpses.

Not even traces of battle were visible.

"What's going on, was the intel wrong?" Gibson frowned, dismounted.

He had rushed for five days, racing through the night, only to see such a scene, and anger surged in his heart.

The guards saw that he bore the heraldry of Duke Edmund, and immediately stepped forward to salute: "Are you the reinforcements sent by Duke Edmund? Lord Calvin has instructed me to take you over."

Suppressing his fury, Gibson nodded, and followed the guard into the main tent.

Louis was standing in front of the battle map, looking focused.

Hearing the commotion, he turned back with a faint smile: "The journey must have been hard for you, sir."

"Where is the enemy?" Gibson couldn't hold back, his voice cold and hard, "Didn't you face an attack? Or is the intel false?!"

He stared intently at Louis, his tone full of anger.

Five days of relentless travel, if it was all a hoax, he really couldn't swallow it.

"We encountered them," Louis nodded, "but they've been dealt with."

"Dealt with?" Gibson was stunned, "You mean, those Snow Swearer Wolf Riders, you annihilated them all?"

Louis didn't explain, just waved his hand: "Come with me."

The two climbed over a ridge and came to the valley side of Qingyu Ridge.

As they approached, a pungent smell hit them.

Gibson frowned, instinctively covering his mouth and nose.

The mist hadn't dispersed, pale yellow poison smoke lingered in the valley.

Rotten, scorched, and bloody smells mixed together, flowing slowly in the cold wind like an invisible snake flicking its tongue.

Looking down, the whole valley seemed to have been scorched once.

Charred corpse remnants piled into mounds, some corroded to mere vague human shapes, bones exposed, like offerings thrown from Hell.

Standing still, Gibson's pupils constricted, and his throat moved, but he couldn't speak.

He had imagined the most brutal battlefields, but this scene went far beyond his imagination.

"How... was this achieved?" he finally asked, his voice hoarse.

"A simple trick, nothing worth mentioning," Louis said stuffily.

Gibson turned to look at him, carefully observing the young noble for the first time.

Louis's expression was calm, showing neither pride nor pity.

Yet beneath his feet lay the bodies of a full eight hundred elite Snow Swearers.

.....

The night wind was biting, as a Gale Bird broke through the air and arrived.

"A battle report has arrived, from Qingyu Ridge," the attendant quickly handed over an envelope.

Duke Edmund, draped in a military cloak, stood before the map. Upon hearing "Qingyu Ridge," his brows furrowed immediately.

"Qingyu Ridge?" He reached for the envelope, saying softly, "Gibson's reinforcements just set out, why is there a message so soon?"

An ominous feeling crept in his heart.

Could it be that the pass had already fallen?

He sat down in a deep voice, tore open the envelope, and quickly skimmed the contents.

The next moment, his expression changed drastically.

From confusion, to shock, then to astonishment and ecstasy, took only seconds.

"Enemy of eight hundred, annihilated in ambush? Magic Explosion Bullets, Hidden Mist Mirror... battle resolved in minutes?"

He repeated in a low voice, as if unable to believe his eyes.

The letter wasn't verbose, only a concise report:

The enemy misjudged a decoy base, fell into an ambush, was overwhelmed by multiple Magic Explosion Bullets and a landslide, immediately followed by a Red Tide Knight Order assault; no enemies survived.

Qingyu Ridge was safe and sound.

And leading this battle was a young Baron lacking combat experience.

"What a remarkable young man."

He suddenly laughed, clapping the battle report shut and commanding: "Order! Send another thousand knights, six thousand soldiers, to arrive at Qingyu Ridge within eight days! Order Gibson to seal the valley tightly!"

"Yes!"

"Also, the nine thousand previously gathered, don't stop, immediately gather toward Snow Eagle City!"

"Understood!"

In fact, even before receiving this battle report, Duke Edmund had decided to adjust the strategy.

It was impossible to completely eliminate the Snow Swearers within the year.

That group of rats was cunning, scattered, elusive, and several large-scale sweeps failed to clear them out.

The army was showing fatigue from consecutive battles, and with the autumn harvest approaching, the Northern Territory needed to prepare for winter food storage.

He had ordered a shift in the combat approach:

Abandon advancing on all fronts, concentrate forces to eradicate the Snow Swearer remnants within Empire's controlled areas.

Then gradually compress, drive them, forcing them into Ice Sea County and Snowfall County.

That would be the main battlefield for next year's decisive battle.

And the victory at Qingyu Ridge undoubtedly marked a good start for this plan.

"Well done, Calvin family's boy," he praised softly, a smile curving his lips.

.....

Snow Eagle City had now completely fallen into the Snow Swearers' bloody playground.

The streets were full of torn flags and collapsed mansions, the grand banquet halls of yesteryear now only serving as entertainment for the Snow Swearers.

Barnes lay on a long chair lined with bear skin, drinking the remaining strong liquor, at his feet was a noble girl with her hands and feet bound, her eyes vacant, her body covered with bloodstains.

He wasn't worried about the besieging Imperial Army.

As long as Qingyu Ridge fell, reinforcements would come from the rear endlessly.

And for now, he only needed to enjoy the aftertaste of victory.

However, a disheveled, dazed-eyed Wolf Cavalry stumbled into the hall.

"Report... report!!"

"Who told you to come in like this?!" Barnes waved impatiently.

But when he heard the news he brought, Barnes's face instantly changed.

"Qingyu Ridge wasn't taken... eight hundred brothers, completely wiped out!"

"What did you say?" Barnes stood up abruptly, the cup in his hand falling to the ground.

"They... they used some strange thing... the ground cracked open, fire! Poison gas! Everything vanished!!"

"Are you insane?!"

That cavalryman cried and laughed, kneeling on the ground: "I saw it with my own eyes... one by one... they burned, twisted... I... I don't want to die..."

"Shut up!!"

Barnes overturned the table in front of him, cold sweat dripping from his forehead, his fingers lightly trembling.

Eight hundred Wolf Cavalry, completely annihilated.

How could it be, they were supposed to be his most elite strike force!

Worse still, the best timing for an attack had passed, the Empire's reinforcements were arriving continuously.

And Qingyu Ridge, that place, was notoriously easy to defend and hard to attack.

He could only hope that Ice Sea County would quickly launch a large-scale offensive.

Otherwise, he would be doomed here.

Chapter 77: Endgame

The road was filled with swirling dust, and the sound of horse hooves was constant.

Wave after wave of reinforcements arrived at Qingyu Ridge, and the main force of the Northern Territory finally took over the battle line.

The soldiers pitched tents and began to build defenses around the valley entrance: watchtowers, trenches, arrow towers, and even catapults and heavy crossbows were brought up.

In just a few days, Qingyu Ridge transformed from a simple Snow Swearer outpost into a veritable barrier of the Northern Territory.

Of course, the Snow Swearers had no intention of retreating just like that.

They mobilized small elite units from the direction of Ice Sea County, attempting night raids, arson, and supply cut-offs, and even some launched curse bullets at the outpost.

But all failed.

They were either discovered in advance or ambushed and annihilated.

Gibson commanded seamlessly, his maneuvers and battle formations were impeccable.

But he knew very well that the reason he managed to be one step ahead at several critical junctures wasn't because he was so god-like.

It was because of the Baron sipping tea behind the scenes.

Louis had long delegated tactical command after Gibson took over.

His contributions were already substantial; any more accolades would just be icing on the cake, so he preferred to preserve his strength.

He lived in an independent tent in the back camp, basking in the sun by day, brewing tea and writing reports by night, with the attitude of a retiree.

Of course, he wasn't completely idle; he would shrewdly offer Gibson some advice based on the Daily Intelligence System.

For instance, once, when Gibson was troubled about the enemy's direction.

Louis suddenly pointed to the map and said, "This mountain path might see enemy movement in a few days."

"How do you know?"

"Just a hunch."

That night, indeed, a team of two hundred enemy troops passed through there, only to be ambushed and wiped out before getting close to the main battle line.

Lately, Louis would occasionally remind Gibson of the enemy's tactics too.

Each prediction came true, as if he had a celestial eye, seeing the opponent completely.

Gibson found it increasingly hard to contain his rising respect.

In his heart, Louis was already a prodigious war genius.

Qingyu Ridge gradually stabilized.

The Snow Swearers were understaffed, and their attacks grew weaker.

The final strong onslaught did not even form a proper formation before being routed by the Imperial Army.

Unwilling yet powerless, they could only retreat bit by bit to the north.

The strategic bottleneck of Qingyu Ridge in the Northern Territory was finally firmly defended.

.....

Snow Eagle City could finally hold on no longer.

After a month of siege, the Snow Swearer soldiers were starved beyond endurance, their faces gaunt and limbs weak, even the war wolves were mere skin and bones, unable to make a sound on the snow.

They had no more food.

Nor any "people".

In the city, apart from the Snow Swearers themselves, there were no living people left long ago.

Flesh became the only food, charred bones piled up around the fires under the city walls.

This was no army but a pack of beasts driven mad by despair.

Barnes stood on the damaged high platform, gazing at the thick clouds afar, awaiting not reinforcements but complete silence.

Finally, he understood—no one was coming.

The reinforcements from Ice Sea County were mere figments of his imagination.

So, he ordered a breakout.

"Whoever hesitates for a second, I'll cut him down myself!"

That day, he personally killed two personal guards attempting to flee.

The Snow Oath Army's morale was momentarily cowed by this madness before being driven to a dead end.

They charged out like ghosts from within the city, shouting hoarsely, stumbling and rushing outward.

But just a hundred meters out from the city gates, the Imperial ambush revealed itself.

The archers on the flanking cliff walls had long been in position.

"Release the arrows!"

The rain of arrows descended like a downpour, cold glimmers falling from the sky.

Already starving, the Snow Swearers couldn't hold on, scattering after only a few steps.

Some even dropped their weapons and fled for their lives.

Barnes was still shouting, "Hold your ground! Anyone retreats..."

Before he could finish, an arrow pierced through his thigh.

Then his shoulder, chest, and abdomen.

He fell into a pool of blood like a rag doll, trembling hands trying to pull out the arrows, but his body wouldn't obey.

The blood dyed the ground a deep crimson; his mouth twitched as he stared unflinchingly at the northern ridge.

That was the direction of the reinforcements he had hoped for all month.

He died, died like a dog.

Without command, the breakout turned into a one-sided slaughter.

The Imperial Army had already set formations, the ambush on the flanks closed in like a tide; after three waves of arrow rain, more than half of the Snow Swearers lay on the ground.

The remaining ones tried to charge, tried to break out, but the war horses couldn't move, the infantry couldn't run fast, the whole squad like an insect swarm struggling in a mire.

Unable to hold for ten minutes, the entire Snow Oath Army fell into complete defeat.

The Imperial Army hesitated not, expressionless as they harvested each struggling enemy.

The blood turned the earth red, severed limbs strewn everywhere, stepping on it, one could hear the crunch of broken bones.

This was a reckoning.

Every cry from Snow Eagle City was remembered.

Now it was time to return it in kind.

Half an hour later, the Imperial Army launched a full assault on Snow Eagle City.

There was no resistance inside the city, they pushed open the battered city gates directly.

Most of the Snow Swearers died during the breakout, and those who remained had long given up in despair.

The Imperial soldiers entered Snow Eagle City as if walking into a purgatory.

The streets were littered with charred yellow bones, charred wooden houses still smoldered, the air reeking with the stench of decay and blood, sickening to the stomach.

Anger, resentment, and malice, in this moment, burst forth.

"Kill them all!"

Thus, there were no prisoners, no interrogations.

The Snow Swearers were completely purged.

In the aftermath, Snow Eagle City was left a wasteland.

.....

The Snow Swearers suffered a crushing defeat, the situation took a drastic turn.

Aside from maintaining tenuous control over the northern Ice Sea County and Snowfall County, the rest of the territories were almost entirely cleared of the Imperial Army.

Numerous outposts were removed, supply lines severed, main forces successively obliterated in various places.

The fall of Qingyu Ridge and Snow Eagle City meant the entire southern campaign had utterly collapsed.

Elder Grom slammed the stone table with a heavy hand, glaring fiercely: "I warned you not to be too arrogant! That Northern Barbarian Witch..."

"Shut up." Hiro stood before the statue, voice grim: "You were right; they are too tough to handle, so now we must hasten."

"What... do you intend to do?" A chill settled in Grom's heart.

"As long as the Ancient God of Cold Abyss revives, everything will be solved," Hiro whispered.

He raised his hand slightly, and the personal guards immediately surged forward.

Grom widened his eyes, struggling as they pressed him down heavily.

"Stop! I am the elder!"

No one responded.

He was hung upside down on the cold altar, alongside several bound captives.

The sacrifice began.

Blood slowly flowed from their seven orifices, as if drawn by some invisible force, dripping onto the altar's stone slab.

Their skin shriveled, bones twisted, eventually leaving nothing but a heap of shattered remains.

A muffled abnormal sound came from deep underground, as if something was awakening.

Chapter 78: Recognition and Rewards

The northern war finally paused slightly in the autumn wind.

With the Empire's army advancing step by step, Duke Edmund had achieved his strategic objectives.

Eliminate the remnants of Snow Swearers within the Empire's control zone, consolidate the northern defense line, and gradually drive the enemy to Ice Sea County and Snowfall County.

Those two counties will become the main battlefield for the decisive battle next year.

And now it's time to summarize the achievements and confer honors.

All dukes, generals, and noble lords gathered at Frost Halberd City to put a period on this two to three months-long war.

Louis arrived at Frost Halberd City a day earlier than scheduled.

As soon as he entered the city, he was summoned directly to the conference hall of the main castle.

This was his second meeting with Duke Edmund.

The last time was half a year ago when he came here to register territory information and followed protocol.

Back then, Edmund had only entertained him casually.

In his heart, he just thought of this young noble as an ambitious little guy, only slightly better than those useless offspring from the South.

But this time, the atmosphere was completely different.

Even though the lad in front of him hadn't changed in appearance, and his cultivation was still low.

But when he stepped into the hall, Edmund smiled with satisfaction, "The battle at Qingyu Ridge was beautifully done."

He personally walked up to Louis, rare as it was, and patted him on the shoulder.

This gesture was something he usually reserved only for legion commanders or trusted advisors.

"Leading over a hundred knights, you launched a night raid on a stronghold, annihilating eight hundred Wolf Riders. They were the elite of the Snow Swearers.

Luring the enemy, setting ambushes, using Magic Explosion Bullets, collapsing mountain bodies, your tactics are more ruthless than the other."

He said this with a bit more laughter in his tone, "It's not something typical of someone your age."

And in the face of such praise, Louis did not display any excitement or show the exuberance common among young people.

He merely bowed slightly, "If Qingyu Ridge were lost, the rear would surely descend into chaos. I only did what was necessary."

His attitude was humble, but the confidence in his bones couldn't be hidden.

This aspect made Edmund even more satisfied.

"Bond and Gibson both praised you in their letters as 'the future pillar of the Northern Territory.' I originally thought they were currying favor.

But now I admit," he nodded slightly, his expression turning serious, "even if I were in your position, I might not have done better."

Edmund paused for a moment, a smile accompanied by a tinge of reflection tugging at his mouth.

"It seems my old eyes are really going blind, almost lumping you in with those pompous soft-boned nobles."

"Baron Calvin—this time, you've truly been a great help to me."

Saying this, he once again reached out and patted Louis on the shoulder, "I think you'll like the reward I've prepared for tomorrow's recognition ceremony."

.....

The banquet hall of Frost Halberd City is splendidly arrayed today.

All around the walls hang the war banners of the major Northern nobles, fluttering in the air, silently proclaiming their respective glory and heritage.

The sound of the horn echoed, the hall doors slowly opened.

Silver Armored Knights filed in from outside, marching in unison into the hall, pushing the atmosphere to the peak with their solemn rhythm.

Duke Edmund walked into the hall under the gaze of the crowd, his tall figure like a city wall.

He slowly ascended to the main platform, and everyone instinctively stood to salute.

The recognition ceremony officially began.

And in the front-row seat below the platform, a young man sat quietly.

Louis Calvin, a Baron of Expansion from the South.

The only young noble in the front row of the hall who does not belong to the Northern Noble Families.

Amidst a group of veteran nobles, counts, and viscounts with large territories and extensive qualifications.

Thus Louis seemed exceptionally conspicuous.

"Who is that? A kid from the South?"

"An Expansion Baron? Can he sit there?"

Whispers flowed like dark tides among the seats.

Some Northern nobles cast measuring glances.

Some were contemptuous, some were skeptical, and some even bore a hint of undisguised disgust.

They were unwilling to admit that a young man with no foundation in the North was arranged to sit on equal footing with themselves.

However, facing all the attention and murmurs, Louis's expression did not waver in the slightest.

He merely sat there quietly, without any ostentation.

Edmund stood on the high tier of the main platform, his voice echoing through the banquet hall:

"In the name of the Empire, in my capacity as Governor of the North, I thank every commander, every soldier, every citizen who has never retreated.

With blood and iron, you defended the Northern Territory."

He slowly advanced, his tone gradually rising in intensity.

"The Snow Swearers have torched cities and looted people, slaughtering the innocent, attempting to awaken the dead of Old Snow Country, tear the borders of the Empire.

But they were wrong, it was you who told them with swords and blood that the Northern Territory would not yield!

It is you who, through unity and battle, continue to make the Empire's banner fly on the snowfield.

I'm proud of you!

Next year we shall end them completely in Ice Sea County and Snowfall County!

And today we must remember those who were brave, debate merits and issue rewards.

Because the Empire will not forget the warriors who fought for it!"

As Duke Edmund took his seat, a military officer stepped onto the steps, unfurling a long scroll of parchment, loudly announcing:

"According to the military review committee of Frost Halberd City, we now declare the phase recognition list for the campaign to exterminate the Snow Swearers!"

The hall immediately became quiet, everyone held their breath, eyes turning toward the main platform.

The military officer loudly declared: "First merit—Count Albert.

Led the 3rd Corps to eradicate Snow Swearer guerrilla forces along the southern line, annihilating 3,700 enemies, breaking through three enemy strongholds, consolidating the Wind Cape Canyon defense line...

Specially awarded the 'Shield of the North' Medal, a reward of thirty thousand gold coins, an additional fief of two thousand square kilometers, and 1,600 warhorses..."

The forty-something, burly Count Albert rose from his seat, expressionless as he climbed the steps.

He knelt on one knee, as Edmund personally pinned the Shield of the North Medal on his chest.

The entire hall fell solemn, and no one questioned his achievements.

Because he utilized as many as four thousand people, sweeping the remaining enemy forces, his contributions were magnificent.

Then the military officer continued to announce: "Second merit—Count Grant.

Cooperated with the local army and the first border corps to eliminate the Snow Swearer forces lurking in Wusong County, destroying seven enemy strongholds, capturing twenty-one traitors...

Specially awarded the 'Shield of the North' Medal, a reward of fifteen thousand gold coins, an additional fief of fifteen hundred square kilometers..."

This time it was an elderly nobleman with snow-white hair who stood up, his expression solemn as he slowly ascended the steps, bowing to receive the honor.

He is highly respected in the Northern Territory, having personally mobilized a county's forces to stabilize the northwestern front.

Be it in terms of qualification or merit, his place on that step was well-deserved.

The room erupted in applause.

Just then, the military officer raised his head and uttered the third name.

Which left everyone in the room astonished and confused.

Chapter 79: Merits

"The third merit — Baron Calvin, Louis Calvin."

As soon as the adjutant's voice fell, the entire banquet hall seemed to have a magic explosion bullet thrown in.

The previously somber atmosphere was shattered, and the low whispers spread like an avalanche, quickly engulfing the entire hall.

"Him?! What a joke!"

"How old is he? Eighteen? Nineteen? How can he be listed as the third merit?"

"Did he... use some backdoor?"

"Don't forget his last name is Calvin, which is one of the Eight Great Clans of the Empire."

"He hasn't even rooted in the Northern Territory for half a year and he gets a medal? Who buys it?"

"Black box operation, it must be a black box operation."

Even though no one had spoken outright, the suspicion and hostility in their eyes were almost like a rain of arrows, shooting towards Louis seated in the front row.

However, the young man remained calm and composed throughout.

Until a shout of anger exploded in the hall: "Silence!!"

This was the voice of Duke Edmund.

All whispers and murmurs immediately came to an abrupt halt.

But he did not say another word, only raised his hand slightly, signaling the military commander beside him to continue.

The military commander cleared his throat, unfurled the battle scroll, and read aloud:

"Baron Calvin, ordered to scout Qingyu Ridge, discovered enemy movements, and took initiative.

At night, he stealthily advanced fifty miles, leading 130 knights to capture the enemy stronghold and seize Qingyu Ridge.

Then he set an ambush, using magic explosion bullets combined with mountain ambush tactics, inflicted heavy losses on 800 elite Wolf Riders, annihilating them completely without a single casualty on our side."

A gasp echoed through the hall.

Many nobles widened their eyes in shock.

"One hundred thirty against eight hundred? And not a single casualty?"

"Elite Wolf Riders? Isn't that the elite unit of Snow Swearers?"

"He only brought one hundred thirty men?"

The military commander paused not, and continued to declare: "In the Battle of Qingyu Ridge, he successfully held the key pass to Ice Sea County, causing the enemy's plans to completely fail.

This directly kept the main enemy forces out, stabilizing the northern defensive line.

According to the military department's evaluation, although the results were not as large-scale as those of the previous two noble counts,

Under extremely scarce resources, lack of manpower, and no reinforcements, Baron Calvin achieved the most extraordinary success of the campaign."

Nobles exchanged glances, many showing complicated expressions.

They put themselves on that battlefield, in the shoes of the young noble.

Honestly, if it were themselves, it might be far from achievable.

Gradually, the whispers changed in tone.

"...He's truly skilled."

"Being ranked third is deserved."

"Though young, his courage and judgment... are remarkable."

"Indeed, if Qingyu Ridge were lost, the entire campaign would have been even longer."

More and more nobles looked at the young man standing in front, with a bit of respect in their eyes.

And those who were previously disdainful quietly closed their mouths, changing to smiling faces.

Calculating in their minds, should they try to approach this young baron proactively at the ball later?

After all, a truly capable noble is welcomed anywhere as long as there's no animosity.

However, a few still mumbled sourly.

"Hmph, it's ultimately just good luck," a young noble coldly chuckled, "If I had this chance, I might have fought even better."

But before he could finish, an older Count beside him cast a cool glance, "Stop boasting, would you dare to lead your hundred men to charge Snow Swearers?"

The young noble turned red and dared not say another word.

As the crowd quieted down a little, the military commander continues to proclaim loudly:

"Baron Calvin, for demonstrating extraordinary bravery and strategy in the Battle of Qingyu Ridge, the Duke awards the following —

A 'Shield of the North' military merit medal.

Twenty thousand Imperial Gold Coins as prize.

An additional one thousand square kilometers of fief, near the existing territory.

Eight hundred war horses, one thousand five hundred infantry standard spears, five hundred heavy shields..."

This announcement left the entire hall in silence.

Even those who had witnessed the rewards for the previous two counts couldn't help but gasp.

"That's way too much..."

"A new fief of one thousand square kilometers, that's a scale even a Viscount might not have."

"And the Shield of the North? At this age, he gets this?"

Standing in the front, Louis listened to the rewards being read out, outwardly calm as water.

But under his sleeve, his hand quietly clenched.

A fief of one thousand square kilometers, that's three times bigger than his Red Tide Territory, practically a potential Viscount starter pack.

As for the gold coins, warhorses, and weapons, they directly formed an elite force for him in terms of combat capability.

And that Shield of the North is no ordinary war trinket.

It's awarded only to the nobles and leaders with outstanding battle achievements.

The family flag of the recipient would be hung in the Northern Battle Banner Gallery, remembered forever.

It's a coveted honor symbol for all Northern Lords and officers, one of the highest honors in the North.

Its actual effects are notable too; holders of this medal can directly attend the war-time Noble Council in the North, even having a say, with treatment akin to that of a Count-level advisor representative.

Simultaneously, the Empire will provide military supplies to their fief as a priority.

Besides, each year they'll receive an annuity of two thousand gold coins from the Empire's finances, for fief development or personal use.

Perhaps it's of little use to the two previous counts but to Louis, it represents the highest honor and reward.

Even though he was mentally prepared, he couldn't help but admit, this reward was indeed too heavy.

No matter how turbulent Louis's heart was, as he stepped onto the podium, his expression remained calm and composed.

Among the back seats, some nobles seeing him for the first time couldn't help but exclaim softly.

"So young?"

"He actually looks younger than my youngest son."

"How did he manage it?"

Seated in the front, Lord Jorn listened to these whispers, a few gleams of pride on his face, "Baron Calvin is nineteen this year."

The expressions of those around subtly changed.

Nineteen years old, and he's accomplished such merits...

On stage, Duke Edmund personally placed the 'Shield of the North' medal on Louis's chest.

The silver-blue shield-shaped badge glistened under the lights.

"Well done, Baron Calvin." Edmund patted him on the shoulder, "You've proven yourself with this victory."

He paused then added, "I've submitted a title reward application to His Majesty the Emperor for you, requesting a Viscount title."

Upon hearing this, the hall fell silent again.

Louis bowed slightly, "Thank you, Duke."

He didn't show much emotion as if it all was just as it should be.

Chapter 80: Worlds Apart

Duke Edmund's promotion of Louis was not merely because he fought brilliantly; there were deeper considerations involved.

In this campaign, too many Pioneer Nobles from the South died, arousing dissatisfaction among the Southern nobles.

Everyone knew well that those dandies came to the Northern Territory merely to fulfill a task and seek lands.

But when a bunch of them dies all at once, it's hard to explain away, inevitably making others suspect that the Northern Lords were deliberately "using a borrowed knife to kill."

Promoting Louis, a Baron of Expansion from the South, was the best response.

It's not the North being exclusionary; it's that you are too incompetent.

If you had half his skill, you would have survived and achieved merits long ago.

Instead, Louis picked up the slack from others.

So, Louis calmly stepped down from the high platform.

His stride was unhurried, as if what he had just received wasn't the medal and glory eagerly sought by the nobility, but rather some inconsequential daily ceremony.

Yet wherever he passed, the nobles gazed at him, their eyes filled with undisguised envy.

No one now dared to underestimate this nineteen-year-old baron.

The awards continued.

The names of the awarded nobles were called out one by one, but they were all names unfamiliar to Louis.

Basically, they were all old nobles from the Northern Territory; Pioneer Nobles from the South were very few.

Until the military officer's voice rang out again: "Baron Jorn Tahavi, second-class military merit."

Sitting in the back row, Yorn almost jumped from his chair, snapping to full alert, his face written with "I too got something!?"

"Reward of two thousand Gold Coins, with an addition of one hundred square kilometers of land..."

Yorn patted his thigh while being moved to tears, "Hugging the boss's thigh really is the smartest choice in life!"

Though his journey was just tagging along, hiding at the back as a cheerleader, without even touching the real battlefield.

But his knights truly contributed in the battle at Qingyu Ridge.

Who would have thought he could sponge off military merit and earn such a big reward?

He felt like he had just casually bought a lottery ticket and ended up hitting the jackpot.

Yorn gave himself a thumbs-up in his heart, not disappointing his astute choice in picking the right thigh to hold onto.

After the director finishes reading the long commendation list, the military officer flips over the parchment, his tone suddenly cold:

"Commendations concluded. Next, a report on those who failed their military duties."

The hall instantly quieted down, even the nobles engaging in low-voiced conversations closed their mouths.

Iron Armor knights paced slowly in, escorting several officers in noble-standard uniforms through the rear door.

Their faces pale, still murmuring defensively, their eyes glancing around in fear.

Among them, Louis recognized one: a head of golden-brown curls, looking disheveled—none other than Zachary Diaz.

Many Pioneer Nobles from the South exchanged glances, their eyes flashing with surprise and subtle schadenfreude.

While Yorn, sitting in the back row, was already laughing uncontrollably, muttering, "Still want to compete with the boss? Now one is in heaven and one in earth, likes to play tricks, now the retribution is here."

He initially thought Zachary would just be fined, never expecting things to escalate to having his name on the disciplinary list.

The military officer announced emotionlessly in a cold voice:

"Zachary Diaz, former commander of the western line defense zone in Snow Eagle City. On the day the war broke out, fled in the face of battle, abandoned the city and fled. Verified truth by the Military Discipline Department, unforgivable crime, sentenced to death."

With the words spoken, Zachary suddenly struggled backward, his eyes full of fear and despair.

"No! I wasn't fleeing! It was... a tactical retreat! My father is Duke Diaz! I'm from the Eight Great Clans! You can't kill me! I'm willing to pay the fine... I'm willing to..."

Before he finished, a heavy slap landed on his face, knocking him to the ground with blood seeping out of his lips.

Below the stage, the people mumbled coldly:

"Still think you're in the South? That stuff doesn't work here."

"Eight Great Clans? In the North doesn't mean anything."

"Deserter... dying also saves face for the family."

Zachary continued to scream and cry while being dragged away, his voice filled with complete breakdown.

His once proud and handsome face, now twisted like a stray dog, lost any semblance of noble dignity.

Yet Louis, sitting in the front row, simply watched silently.

He sat upright, the Shield of the North Medal symbolizing glory displayed proudly on his chest.

Two pioneer noble sons from the Eight Great Noble Clans from Snow Peak County.

One was dragged to the execution ground, crying and begging.

One was personally awarded a medal, crowned with honor.

A world apart.

Finally, Duke Edmund stepped onto the platform: "I'll be brief; this campaign, we did very well.

Next year we will advance further, won't passively defend anymore, the Northern Territory will actively attack the base of the Snow Swearers."

His voice was not high, but the determination was incomparable: "Snow Swearers must be completely annihilated!

Your military merits, I have noted. Next time, I want to see more names written on the achievement record."

With these words, the hall erupted in fervent responses.

The post-war celebration ceremony officially ended.

Louis didn't leave Frost Halberd City immediately, as there was a banquet at night.

Socializing with other nobles was his necessary task; his foundation in the Northern Territory was really weak, he had to seize this chance to befriend useful nobles.

And for a young noble who had just made great achievements, tonight was destined not to be quiet.

Sure enough, as the banquet just started, Louis hadn't even picked up his wine glass when he was already surrounded.

The first to approach was a middle-aged noble dressed impeccably, with neatly trimmed sideburns.

From his accent, it was obvious he was a Pioneer Noble from the Southwest of the Empire.

With a hint of familiarity, he said, "Duke Calvin's son, indeed a tiger father with no dog son. To earn such military merit in the Northern Territory, truly admirable."

He proceeded to introduce himself as a Baron of Expansion from a small noble family in the Southwest.

Like Louis, he was among the first batch of noble scions to respond to the expansion decree and come to the Northern Territory.

"To be honest, life isn't very good for us Southerners here," he whispered, "If the lord is willing to lead the brothers, everyone definitely won't let you lose face."

That phrase "lead the brothers" sounded almost like a plea, with a tone of eagerness and a bit of flattery.

Louis maintained an impassive expression, yet felt a slight stir in his heart.

He wasn't oblivious; the baron's implication was clear: Southerners ought to band together, with Louis as the leader.

Truthfully, the idea was somewhat tempting.

But having just established a footing, forming factions too early would easily provoke jealousy.

Not to mention the baron's background and his actual capabilities and character, which were all unknown.

"You've spoken well. The Northern Territory is ablaze with war; we are in the same boat." Louis raised his glass with a smile, skillfully deflecting, "Should there be a chance, we will certainly conspire for development."

Sounded warm, but without any real commitment.

The middle-aged baron wanted to say more, his mouth just opened, and his grip on the wine glass barely steady.

Then other nobles continuously crowded forward.