

Winter 741

Chapter 741: Battlefield Situation

The twilight light poured onto the watchtower of Silver Creek Mines, illuminating the exquisite pipe seized by Count Albert.

He gently stroked the pipe's patterns, gazing beyond the tower eaves, toward the mine's plaza below.

Two armies were transitioning their defenses.

One was the legion formed from the fusion of the Red Tide and Northern Army, their black uniforms appearing like the Death God in the sunset.

Albert watched this scene, a feeling he couldn't quite describe surged within him.

A few months ago, he worried that the rigid nature of the Red Tide would grind away the fighting spirit of the Northern men.

But as they fought through battles, what he saw was not a tamed beast, but a pack of wolves that understood discipline.

This change brought him comfort, yet it also involuntarily reminded him of that rainy night ten days ago, their first battle.

Only then he realized the true strength of Louis's team.

Rain fell like a waterfall, crashing down from the sky.

When lightning illuminated the sky, Albert remembered standing in the mud outside Black Pine Fortress, looking skeptically at Lambert beside him.

Louis letting a naive youngster command? Too reckless.

The terrain of Black Pine Fortress couldn't be captured without sacrificing lives, let alone achieving zero combat losses.

He had even decided that if Lambert commanded improperly, he would immediately take over and lead the charge.

Yet, Lambert didn't give him that chance.

The young man merely glanced at the letter written by Louis himself in his hand, then raised his hand and pointed at an inconspicuous section of the northwest wall of Black Pine Fortress.

Soon, a few knights, like shadows conjured up in the night, silently climbed the wall.

Albert remembered clearly, only a few dull crossbow thuds were heard, followed by a thunder-covered "boom."

As the flames lit up, that section of the wall was already cracked, stones rolling down.

At that moment, he was stunned.

It was as if Louis had disassembled the fortress beforehand, knowing which section of the stone was of the poorest quality, and which guards would slack off on a rainy night.

Albert had a near absurd thought: "If it were me defending the city, I wouldn't even know how I died."

More shocking than breaking the fortress were the actions of the Red Tide Army after the breach.

The treasury door was blasted open, the wage boxes scattered everywhere, a golden spectacle.

The Northern knights instinctively rushed to snatch money.

He didn't find it wrong, after all, in the harsh Northern Territory, exchanging life for money was not disgraceful.

However, he would never forget Lambert's silhouette.

Before a mountain of wealth, the young legion commander, without any hesitation, simply raised his hand.

The Red Tide Knights walked past them; no one reached out to touch even a single coin.

Albert was stunned in place at the time, his chest felt like it was struck by a blunt object.

What he believed was Northern pride, at that moment, felt like peeling away the skin of disguise.

What Louis trained was a different kind of army that could remain calm in the face of a mountain of gold, though he later learned of the treatment of the Red Tide Knights, and wasn't so surprised.

He opened the Gray Rock map, a quarter of the Gray Rock Province had already been washed with the color of the Red Tide Legion.

A chill crawled up his spine.

He imagined an extremely dangerous hypothesis: "If I were Raymond's vassal... or if there were a civil war in the Northern Territory, and I chose the opposing side of Louis..."

Scenes flickered in his mind:

He knew very well what it would be like once he stood on the opposite side, intelligence couldn't be hidden at all, all deployments laid out like paper on the opponent's table.

Those hidden tactics wouldn't hold for long before being exposed.

The city walls couldn't even sustain the first alarm against the Magic Explosion Bullet, and as for those knights of his, they probably wouldn't have time to react before being crushed by the iron tide.

Albert's throat tightened, coming to an undeniable conclusion: "Wouldn't hold for a day. No... wouldn't hold for half a day. My head would hang on the flagpole."

The tobacco in the pipe burned his fingertips unknowingly, making Albert shiver and come back from his memories.

"Count," Lambert pushed the door open, carrying the smell of smoke, "Silver Creek Mines have been cleaned up. As usual, the porridge tent has been set up, and the tyrannical mine owners are under public trial. Your knight order... did a very good job this time."

Albert couldn't help but smile, surprised that he'd be so happy to be complimented by someone of humble origin and half his age.

Suppressing the chill in his heart, he said to Lambert, "Lambert, where's the next target? Is it Red Leaf Town ahead, or White River Crossing? My knight order requests to take the lead."

Lambert didn't directly deny, but walked to the map, picked up a red pen, and lightly marked crosses next to several frontline strongholds.

His tone was steady and polite: "Count, if it were customary times, I'd surely support you leading the charge. But Lord Louis reminded me that the current situation has changed."

Albert frowned: "Several towns around are as empty as the bottom of a barrel. My men can randomly pick one to charge and directly occupy it."

"Precisely because of this, the enemy won't be careless anymore." Lambert pointed at the densely packed red dots on the map. "Previous victories were based on intelligence blockades. They didn't know where we came from, nor where the next blow would fall. That's different now."

He traced down the main road of Gray Rock Province: "According to Lord Louis, our entry information into Gray Rock Province has already returned to Gray Rock Castle."

Kael Remont's reaction must be very quick; all vassals are converging toward the center. They burn grain, shut gates, drive laborers into the fortress, and turn those peripheral outposts into hollow shells but filled with traps."

Chapter 742: Battlefield Situation (2)

He turned his head and looked at Albert, his tone still courteous: "This is the judgment given by Lord Louis; trying to rely on a light assault will only crash into their prepared iron formation."

Albert pondered for a moment: "So it's step by step? Taking one fortress after another?"

Lambert shook his head, with a clearly respectful expression: "Lord has another strategy."

He took out a sealed order stamped with the Red Tide Territory's wax from his coat and placed it on the table: "The whole army rests in place for two days, feed the horses and count ammunition. Then converge on the middle route."

Albert was stunned: "Middle route? Gather to where?"

Lambert's finger moved past all the outlying strongholds, like erasing irrelevant noise, finally landing on the grand stone fortress in the center of the map.

"Grey Rock Castle." He confidently conveyed Louis's intention: "Lord will meet us in front of Blackstone Canyon. All heavy firepower will be assembled. Then directly capture Grey Rock Castle."

Albert's heart leaped violently.

Directly capturing Grey Rock Castle, that is the stronghold of the Remont Clan, operated for hundreds of years, the symbol of pride for the Western Territory.

In his world, that place has never been touched by any army.

Albert stared at the straight march route, feeling something ignite in his chest cavity.

The blood started to boil; after all, he is also from the Northern Territory; the battle intent in his bones was awakening.

He murmured: "Frontal assault?"

Lambert straightened his posture, like a real officer: "Yes. Head-to-head. This is the Lord's order, and something we can achieve."

Albert laughed heartily, his laughter filled with bravery: "Great! Don't stop me then, I'll be the vanguard!"

...

The sky over Grey Rock Castle was dark as if a lead block was pressing down, yet the gathering place of military intelligence was brightly lit, the sealed stone chamber stuffy to the point of suffocation.

A giant map of the Gray Rock Province hung on the wall, densely packed with colorful flags occupying the roads and towns.

Half a month ago, they were the symbol of order under the Remont Clan's control; now they're like a skin being gradually sliced open by knives.

Kael Remont stood in front of the map, his face pale and bloodless.

"Report—!" The heavy iron door was pushed open, a messenger stumbled in.

He knelt on one knee, gasping for breath, his voice hoarse but desperately trying to stay clear.

"White River Crossing has fallen! The Northern Army didn't set up bridges; they constructed floating bridges overnight! The garrison didn't even sound the alarm, captured whole during dinner!"

The chamber filled with whispered murmurs.

The section of the river at White River Crossing was turbulent; by common sense, anyone wishing to cross needed to gather wood, nails, craftsmen in advance, making the marching route easily discernible.

Yet the Northern Army seemed to have grown a road right on the river, silently reaching the shore unnoticed.

Kael's Adam's apple moved, he said nothing, just raised his hand and pressed firmly on the family flag representing White River on the map.

The flag swayed gently, and he seemed to hear the sound of something collapsing.

"Report—!" The second messenger crashed to his knees, his voice tense, "The Baron of Redleaf Town... opened the city gates and surrendered."

Kael lifted his gaze, ice-cold: "Reason for surrender?"

"The Northern People attacked the Baron's Mansion at night, didn't harm a hair on him, only tied up his only son... in front of him."

The messenger swallowed hard, "The child was hung on the city wall for the whole town to see. The Baron broke down immediately, and voluntarily handed over the gate keys."

Someone gasped audibly, this wasn't a brutal massacre; it was finding the softest part of a city's bone and snapping it for everyone to see.

Kael's fingers rubbed on the scepter, the texture of the wood raw against his fingertips.

He whispered: "Remove the flag of Redleaf Town... as well."

"Report—!"

The third call almost drowned out everyone's heartbeat.

"The Iron Wall Knight Order encountered the enemy vanguard on the plains." The messenger supported himself with both hands on the ground, his voice dry, "The enemy army is pushing forward with a smoke-spewing iron monster.

Our knights just started to charge, yet to engage, and they were blasted into pieces... even a complete piece of armor is hard to find. This wasn't a battle; it was... a massacre."

A moment of deathly silence, only the faint crackle of embers in the fire pit.

The Iron Wall Knight Order was the signature of the Gray Rock Province, one of the few aces left by the Remont, heavy armor, thick shields, never suffering losses in frontal assaults.

Now, however, they were shredded on the plains from afar.

Kael slowly raised his head and looked at the entire map.

The small flag at White River Crossing was removed. The mark next to Red Leaf Town was smeared into a patch of lifeless gray, and the plains beside where the Iron Wall Knight Order was stationed were heavily circled in red ink.

The circles of red swayed under the candlelight, as if something was seeping upward from beneath the paper.

His finger paused at the center of the map, trembling slightly at the tip.

"How could it be like this..." Kael murmured hoarsely.

The enemy's steps were not erratic but followed an invisible thread, cutting off communication, seizing the crossings, and destroying mobile forces step by step.

It was as if they were already familiar with the land, aware of every supply line, every warehouse, every cavalry's habits.

Suddenly, he felt the illusion of being overlooked from a height.

All his defenses, hidden grain depots, standby retreats that he thought were concealed were not hidden at all from those invisible eyes.

"We have traitors inside, and many." Kael raised his head, feeling a heavy pressure in his chest, "Exactly when did the infiltration begin?"

We thought we had control of the province. But in his eyes, it was just a ripe wheat field. Which part to reap first, which part to leave for later, had already been decided."

The messengers remained silent, no one daring to respond.

Kael slowly stepped back, gazing up at the map riddled with holes, feeling a coldness unrelated to the battlefield.

It wasn't fear of the enemy's swords but of their almost omniscient control.

Louis Calvin.

The name rolled repeatedly in his mind, each time increasing the pressure.

He clenched his fist, only to find himself unable to discern upon which part of the map to strike.

Then, the only thing that could move... was the terrain.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and when he opened them again, there was no hesitation, only the cruelty borne out of desperation.

"If we can't stop this wolf, then make sure its footing falters."

Kael's voice was low yet carried a cold decisiveness: "Steel monsters are strong, but they are heavy and reliant on roads. Mud can swallow cars, corpses can slow them down. Just turn that road into a swamp and a graveyard... and they cannot pass."

The adjutant froze: "Young Master, you mean..."

Kael suddenly raised his head, slammed his fist onto the table with such force that the map trembled: "Burn down all the northern villages! Then they can have no supply."

The flame flickered in his pupils.

"Then drive all the refugees onto that must-pass road, regardless of the old, the weak, or women, push them all onto it! Make that road... become a swamp hell."

The adjutant's face went pale: "Young Master, that would cause massive civil unrest..."

"Then kill!" Kael roared, "Anyone who dares defy, kill on the spot! I don't want order; I want time!"

He pointed to the wide road leading to the hinterland on the map, gritting his teeth: "I want tens of thousands of people's flesh and blood, luggage, livestock, shattered belongings to fill that road. Make it rot, make it slippery, make it stink so bad the Northern People find it hard to breathe!

I want Louis's steel monsters... to struggle in the corpse-ridden mud sea."

The adjutant shrank back, too afraid to argue any further.

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After the orders were issued, Grey Rock Province began a purgatory-like migration.

The rooftops of villages were set ablaze, the fire forming a terrifying red line across the night sky.

The cries of the driven people filled the air, mixed with the wails of infants, the groans of fallen elders, and the screams of frightened livestock.

The road was blocked into a river of flesh that could no longer flow.

And Kael stood on a high platform, coldly watching everything, as if checking whether a brutal but effective weapon had started to operate.

"Louis." He murmured coldly, "You caused their deaths."

"Dare to march south, and I'll dare to bury the entire Grey Rock Province. Come, let's see your Northern King, whether you dare crush ahead... or get dragged down in my sea of mud."

Kael stared at the distance, his chest feeling like it contained a burning lump of iron, scorching him to the point of breathlessness.

He ignored the tragedy below in the valley, turning to look at the nearby Grey Rock Fortress, if absolutely necessary...

The Grey Rock Fortress hadn't been breached in over six hundred years, he must defend it at all costs.

Chapter 743: Intelligence on the Battlefield

The morning in the Gray Rock Province carries a damp, cold smell of iron rust.

The relentless torrential rain pounded on the marching carriage, producing a dull and consistent sound, like someone constantly tapping a rhythm.

The carriage slowly moved forward on the muddy official road, its wheels moving through the puddles, transmitting slight jolts one after another.

In this familiar swaying, Louis woke up.

He didn't immediately sit up, just opened his eyes and raised his right hand to gently wave through the air.

"Buzz——"

A faint humming noise spread within the narrow carriage.

A translucent light blue screen unfolded like a thin curtain, quietly suspended in the air.

[Daily intelligence update completed]

[1: Upheaval in the Imperial Capital. The Second Prince, Kaelin, has captured the Imperial Hall and proclaimed himself Emperor.]

Louis's gaze lingered on this line for just a moment: "Faster than I expected, he didn't proclaim himself Regent King but Emperor, how interesting..."

Internally, he felt little turbulence, only calmly making a judgment.

Kaelin ultimately couldn't wait any longer.

He didn't take the regent path, didn't seek to involve the attitudes of various nobles, nor attempt to maintain the fragile facade.

He directly skipped all the intermediate steps, placing the crown on his own head.

That's fine too, at least for Louis, this isn't bad news.

If the Empire had a Regent King with real power, the situation would be more troublesome.

Instead, it would be a rope binding direct action.

"As expected." Louis whispered in his heart, "A mad Emperor, a minister holding troops. The waters of the Imperial Capital are truly muddied, making my next actions more justified."

Then he shifted his gaze downward.

[2: Kael Remont burned dozens of villages and cities in the north, expelled tens of thousands of refugees to block the main road of Blackrock Canyon, and deployed supervision teams at the rear, intending to use civilian bodies to delay the Northern Army's mechanized advancement.]

The blue light of the screen reflected in his eyes but failed to stir any emotional waves.

"Kael..."

Louis's fingers tapped lightly on the carriage's armrest, producing a low and clear "da, da" sound.

Burning villages, expelling people, blocking roads, using hunger and fear to force crowds to pile forward, then using the supervision teams to block the retreat.

This approach is truly beastly.

And while seemingly cruel, it is actually lazy, substituting human lives for thinking and strategizing.

"Treating people as mud to use." Louis's gaze cooled slightly, "You've inherited your father's innate arrogance and that beastly nature."

Were it another general, faced with such a situation, there'd be few choices.

Withdrawing troops would mean yielding initiative.

Forced advancement would mean treading over thousands of civilians, reputation aside, the most important is Louis himself simply couldn't do it.

This is the deadlock Kael prepared for him.

Unfortunately, this deadlock is for an opponent who can't see the whole picture, but for Louis...

Louis continued to look down.

[3: Five tons of black fire powder have been buried in the rock walls on both sides of Blackrock Canyon. Due to the rain, alchemical ignition rates have decreased, forcing a switch to physical fuse detonation. All fuses converge at the cliff top's left side Eagle's Beak Rock, where five Death Knights are responsible for manually triggering.]

His gaze stopped on this piece of intelligence, then his lips moved very slightly.

Due to the rain, alchemy failed, switching to physical fuses, concentrating all detonation points in one location.

"For others, perhaps a good idea, but unfortunately it's me they're facing." Louis smiled and made a conclusion in his heart.

[4: The refugee tide completely blocks the main road, preventing Kael's logistics convoy from returning to Grey Rock Castle. 300 tons of winter military grain forcibly unloaded at canyon entrance's left side, 3rd abandoned mine pit, serving as supervision team rations, with only rudimentary camouflage and protection.]

Louis's gaze finally became focused, this batch of grain may be vital intelligence.

The screen lightly trembled in the air, then slowly faded away as if it had never existed.

Louis closed his eyes, leaned back on the seat, quickly dissecting and reorganizing the intelligence in his mind.

A complete thread rapidly emerged, first allowing refugees to be driven into the canyon.

Narrow terrain, mud post-rain, tens of thousands squeezed together, could neither advance nor retreat.

They would become the most natural blocker, making the entire passage completely impassable.

Then, waiting.

Waiting for him to be forced to halt advancement, for supply convoys forced to stretch the battle line, for heavy troops to fall into chaos mixed with mud and crowds.

Finally, triggering the detonation switch.

Five tons of black fire powder simultaneously falling from both side rock walls, stones and flames sealing the front.

Not just refugees crushed.

There are also the Northern Territory knights and armies forced to the frontline, even steam war vehicles not yet fully deployed, trapped in the canyon, facing rockfalls and flames, with no difference.

An apparent enemy blockade, in essence, using civilians and their own supervision knights for a desperate extermination.

Louis gave an evaluation in his heart.

Foolish, vicious.

Refugees stuck in the canyon due to hunger, also fear.

Fear, from the explosives on the cliff, supervision knights from behind.

And hunger... Louis's thoughts stopped here.

That 300 tons of winter grain, buried not far from the canyon entrance.

Just under the eyelids of those who've been starved for days.

Chapter 744: Battlefield Intelligence (2)

As long as that fear loosens a bit, temporarily filled by hunger, the situation will plunge into complete chaos.

Louis slowly opened his eyes.

Outside the carriage, the rainstorm continued to pour, and the distant Gray Rock Castle loomed faintly in the rain.

A bold yet precise plan quickly took shape in his mind.

It wasn't a gamble, nor did it require a miracle.

Just a single cut, along the gap that Kael himself had left, to slice down steadily.

He turned his head, looking at the Knight escorting the carriage, who maintained a constant distance from it: "Weir."

Weir immediately rode closer, lowered his head, and responded, "My lord."

"Have Thomas come here," Louis said calmly, "now."

Weir didn't ask more, just nodded shortly, then turned his horse around, and rode towards the back of the team through the rain.

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The raging wind, with rain perched like peas, slammed hard against the rock wall.

Rainwater coursed down the crevices like uncontrollable streams, drenching the whole cliff face to a cold, slippery sheen.

Visibility was reduced to less than five meters, and the thunder rolled and echoed through the canyon, swallowing all subtle sounds in its roaring chorus.

Thomas clung to the rock wall, fingertips tightly gripping onto a protruding ledge.

Rain dripped into the corners of his eyes along the edges of his goggles, only to be blinked away. He didn't lift his head, just adjusted his breathing slowly along the rock surface, bringing his heartbeat back to a controllable rhythm.

This weather, conversely, gave him peace of mind.

The Lord's intelligence never erred, and the current downpour corroborated those calm judgments one by one.

In this humidity, the precise alchemy fuses acted like dampened matchsticks.

Not to mention stable ignition, even ensuring a reaction was difficult.

If Kael truly wanted to detonate those five tons of Fire Demon Explosion Bullets, the only way was to resort to the most primitive means: manpower, rope, and iron.

Thinking of this, the corner of Thomas's mouth almost curled into an inappropriate smile, but he quickly suppressed it.

Thomas was not acting alone on this mission.

The twenty or so figures climbing along this cliff all belonged to the White Night Knights.

This was a special knight squad personally formed by Lord Louis.

No code number, nor were they part of any regular Knight Order.

Their existence was solely to carry out those missions that couldn't afford to fail.

Each member was the most elite selection from several knight orders under the Red Tide, with even the lowest possessing powers above an Extraordinary Knight.

Thomas is the captain of this squad.

More than explosive strength and Fighting Energy levels, he excelled at judging timing, dismantling predicaments, and completing a mission successfully in the shortest time.

At this moment, they were dispersed across the rock face, with no apparent formation, yet maintaining precise distances from each other.

The soft armor on them was drenched in rain, clinging tightly to their bodies, with all metal fasteners wrapped in leather, even their breathing intentionally hushed.

No Fighting Energy was unleashed, not because they couldn't, but because they dared not.

At this range, even a trace of excess energy could be captured like a spark.

The White Night Squad climbed upward along an abandoned herb gatherer's mountain path.

This path, originally only secretly used by thin mountain villagers, was known to few, and now nearly obliterated by the rain.

Yet the White Night Knights seemed to remember every foothold; each hand movement, each change of feet was an instinctive reaction honed through countless drills.

Like a group of geckos clinging to a precipice.

Unknown how long passed, the slope of the rock wall finally relaxed.

Thomas raised his hand to signal, and everyone halted simultaneously.

He first peeked half of his body over the cliff edge, instantly lowering his center of gravity, lying flat on the cold wet rock surface.

The rain was harsher here, but also more noise-filled.

He looked up, spotting the sentry post fortress set up by Kael, ablaze with lights in the distance.

But their target wasn't there; Thomas's gaze slowly shifted to the left.

About a kilometer away in the darkness, a massive rock protruded outward like the curved beak of a predator, embedded tightly on the cliff edge – that was Eagle's Beak Rock.

Below the rock, a faint, steady alchemy light shone through the rain, cut into intermittent spots.

Thomas squinted, lying a bit lower to improve his line of sight.

It was a heavy black iron winch, firmly anchored to the rock base.

The winch's structure was rough but solid, with several hefty steel cables coiled around the drum, their surfaces greased, allowing rainwater to glide over without penetrating.

These steel cables spread downward like a web, disappearing into the fissures below the cliff face.

Thomas didn't need to see to know what lay at their end.

Five tons of Fire Demon Explosion Bullets.

Guarding the winch were five Death Warriors from Gray Rock.

They stood evenly spaced, without talking or making unnecessary movements.

Each one looked like a statue nailed to the ground, only slightly adjusting their balance when necessary to combat the fierce wind.

Not Extraordinary Knights, Thomas quickly assessed in his mind.

Indeed, such a task requires no power, just pressing down the lever at the last moment.

Bringing in an Extraordinary Knight to detonate is indeed a waste.

His gaze finally fell on one of them.

The knight stood directly beside the winch, his right hand already clasped tightly on the safety pin, yet steady without a hint of trembling.

As long as he presses down, the winch will loosen, the sledgehammer will fall, and the primer will ignite, blowing the entire canyon sky-high.

Thomas took a slow breath.

Rain dripped from his chin, striking the rock and being instantly swallowed by the wind.

He raised his hand, making a short and clear gesture behind him.

The White Night Squad's movements came to a silent standstill at that moment.

Everyone was waiting for his next instruction.

Then, Thomas raised his hand and made several short, clear gestures in the rain.

Ignore the others, prioritize taking care of the winch handler.

It must be a one-hit kill without giving him even half a second to press the safety pin.

The gesture flickered in the darkness, yet was accurately captured by every White Night Knight.

Twenty silhouettes swiftly responded with hand signals, quietly adjusting their angles from their original positions, each locking onto a target.

Their breathing was suppressed to the minimum, their Fighting Energy still dormant within, without leaking out in the slightest, merging completely with the rainy night, leaving only calm and focused gazes.

At this moment, the clouds in the sky churned violently.

A blinding flash of lightning tore the night sky, illuminating Eagle's Beak Rock and that black iron winch in a ghastly white.

Immediately after, thunder echoed deep within the clouds, gathering force.

Thomas knew the time had come, counting silently in his heart.

Three, two, one.

"Boom—!!!" Thunder exploded above the canyon.

At the instant the thunder drowned out everything, Thomas moved.

His Fighting Energy suddenly surged, his figure transforming into a pale blue afterimage, using the thunder to cover the explosive sound of trampling the muddy water, spanning several dozen meters in an instant.

The Death Warrior pressing the winch seemed to sense something in the lightning, instinctively turning his head.

But his reaction was ultimately a beat too slow.

"Choke."

The dagger pierced upward, directly passing through his palm, pinning the hand clutching the safety pin onto the wooden handle of the winch.

The scream hadn't even been uttered when another cold light swept across.

The blade sliced through the rain, cutting accurately across the throat.

The blood was quickly washed away by the rainstorm as the knight's body tilted forward, slamming heavily onto the winch, silent forever.

Almost simultaneously, the other four Gray Rock Death Warriors were also approached.

The glint of blades flickered briefly through the lightning and rain.

No roars, no collisions.

Four bodies fell one after another in the rain, sliding softly onto the rocky ground without a chance to sound an alarm.

These Elite Knights were ultimately no match for an Extraordinary Knight, dispatched within a single encounter.

The crisis was averted.

Thomas kicked the corpse away from the winch, his gaze falling on the taut steel cables.

This was Kael's most powerful card and also his most insidious plot.

He retrieved the alchemy hydraulic scissors from his waist, clamping them onto the guide wire.

"Snap." The first steel cable broke.

"Snap." The second one followed.

"Snap." The third one.

The tensionless steel cables snapped sharply, quickly dropping like several severed dead snakes, retracting into the darkness beneath the cliff.

Sufficient to destroy everything, the five-ton Fire Demon Explosion Bullet had been rendered completely inert.

Thomas put away the tool and glanced up at the sky.

The thunderstorm hadn't ceased.

Thomas stood on the edge of Eagle's Beak Rock, letting the downpour wash over his armor and the bloodstains, looking down into the pitch-black canyon below.

There, tens of thousands of refugees huddled in the narrow passageway, shivering in hunger and fear.

And farther away, Kael was expectantly waiting to press a button... that no longer existed.

Chapter 745: The Demon of the Northern Territory

The command car was filled with a blend of smells.

The sharpness of low-quality tobacco, the stench of wet sheep wool soaked by rain, and the damp cold brought in by iron boots stepping on the muddy ground, all compressed in the narrow space, making one's chest feel heavy.

Several older Northern Territory commanders leaned against the sides of the carriage, smoking pipes with lowered heads.

Smoke rolled slowly under the dim light of the oil lamp, like an indelible mist.

The sound of the rainstorm hitting the car roof was continuous, crackling, dense, and urgent, as if countless shards of stone were being poured down from above.

The car door was suddenly pushed open from outside.

Cold wind along with rainwater rushed in, as a drenched scout stumbled into the compartment, leaving a trail of muddy water.

He was barely able to stand, yet forcefully held on, without saluting, he just gasped quickly a couple of times.

His fingers were pale from the cold, but his movements didn't stop.

The scout took off the waterproof oilcloth cylinder from his back, roughly tore open the seal, and pulled out a hastily sketched drawing with charcoal pencil, along with a report soaked and creased by rain, spreading them on the table.

The paper slapped onto the oak tabletop with a dull thud.

"Report." His voice trembled, "Blackstone Gorge... The road is blocked."

The compartment fell silent for a moment, several commanders simultaneously leaned in.

The sketch was very rough, with chaotic lines, but it clearly conveyed its meaning at a glance.

The narrow canyon entrance was filled with dense human figures, charcoal lines stacked into a chaotic black mass.

Those people wore no armor, just old clothes, deliberately drawn small and chaotic.

Behind them were several heavy strokes representing chevaux de frise and temporary sentry posts.

Further back were a few shadows holding knives, standing scattered, yet noticeably taller.

The scout pointed to that area, speaking quickly: "The number exceeds fifty thousand. Kael Remont ordered the refugees to be herded into the canyon, saying it was to arrange winter shelters for them."

He paused, his Adam's apple bobbing, "Once everyone is squeezed in, the road is sealed. The supervisory team is right behind, anyone who retreats dies."

After a brief moment of dead silence, a loud noise broke the quiet.

"Bang!"

Count Albert slammed his fist into the sheepskin map on the oak table, the surface shook violently, the ink bottle wobbled twice, almost tipping over.

This old noble who had fought battles his entire life in the Northern Territory stood up straight, his beard trembling from exertion, eyes bloodshot.

"Beast!" His voice was deep, yet suppressed with anger, "Kael Remont is a skinless beast!"

He took a deep breath and continued cursing: "We Northern People are rough. Used to not seeing serfs as humans, being ruthless in collecting grain, because everyone needs to survive!

But we never used the old, weak, women, and children as cannon fodder! That's not war, that's..."

The old man's words stopped, because he couldn't find a way to describe such beastly behavior.

A burly Northern Lord couldn't help but cut in, his tone urgent and hard.

"I used to fight the Barbarian Race for territory, battled until blood was drawn, but never did such heartless deeds!"

"Driving tens of thousands onto a dead end road? What the hell kind of nobility is this?" He spat, his face extremely sour, "That's throwing the dignity of nobility into the mud to be trampled!"

A low voice of agreement echoed in the compartment.

These men usually spoke roughly, acted fiercely, believed in the law of the jungle, but had a tacit line - not to use the old, weak, women, and children as shields.

Kael's approach stepped right on this line, crushing it hard.

Someone gritted his teeth and whispered, "Gray Rock Province claims to be the center of civilization. Unexpectedly, their heart is blacker than ours, the 'savages'."

After speaking, no one responded, the heavy rain sound filled the gaps again.

Lambert slowly exhaled, his face was also gloomy, but his emotions were deliberately suppressed.

He reached out and picked up a pen, drawing a striking red line across the spread-out map, slicing through Blackstone Gorge.

"Charge through." He did not raise his head, but his tone was exceptionally clear, "If our steam war vehicles roll over them, it's not a push, it's a slaughter."

The charcoal pencil landed heavily on the red line.

"Plus fifty thousand people. Beneath the tracks are people, inside the track seams will be all minced meat, making it financially impossible."

He looked up, facing everyone: "Besides, the Northern Army's reputation for not killing civilians will collapse completely in fifteen minutes."

No one objected.

Lambert's fingers pointed to the side of the map, densely drawn with contour lines.

"Bypass. Take the western side's winding mountain paths, where heavy war vehicles can't pass, only disassembled and transported. At least ten more days."

He paused, his voice lowered somewhat.

"Gray Rock Castle has these ten days to complete the defense line. Then we're not attacking, we're hitting a wall, and winter is coming, we'll be out of supplies..."

The pen was placed back on the table, the compartment fell completely silent.

Only the rain beat the roof, along with the oppressive breathing of everyone.

This was a deadlock.

Kael was merely placing conscience in the middle of the road, forcing you to step over it yourself.

Count Albert's hand had been gripping the sword hilt, knuckles white. His chest heaved a few times, but ultimately he released it.

But even if Kael was torn to pieces, it wouldn't solve this canyon.

Just then, the wooden door of the command car was pushed open once more.

Chilling wind wrapped rainwater gushed in, making the oil lamp flicker.

Louis walked into the compartment.

He wore a neat black military dress uniform, the collar buttoned meticulously, and his boots barely stained with mud.

Chapter 746: Demon of the Northern Territory (Part 2)

Compared to the full carriage of smoke, anger, and humidity, he appeared excessively clean.

In his hand, he still held a freshly brewed cup of black tea.

White steam slowly rose from the cup, distinctly visible in the cold air.

He scanned the room, his gaze sweeping across several tense faces, finally landing on the crumpled charcoal sketch on the table.

"What's wrong?" he asked casually, "Early in the morning, everyone looks like a withered eggplant."

He looked at Albert, his lips moving slightly, "Count, your mustache is almost reaching the sky."

Albert immediately approached, unable to suppress his urgency in his voice.

"My Lord! Have you seen the scout's report? That madman Kael... he's using refugees to block the road!"

Louis raised his hand, signaling him to stop.

He lowered his head, blowing at the foam in the teacup as if checking the water temperature, his tone as indifferent as if commenting on the day's weather, "I saw it. It's just a few tens of thousands of people and some explosives, isn't it?"

For a moment, the carriage fell into a terrifying silence.

Several commanders instinctively looked at each other, even thinking they had misheard.

Louis walked to the main seat and sat down, placing the teacup on the table, tapping the tabletop lightly with his fingertips, "There's no need to discuss detours anymore."

Lambert frowned, unable to hold back from speaking.

"My Lord, that's tens of thousands of people... we can't really just roll over them."

Louis looked up.

His gaze passed through the carriage as if already piercing the rain, looking at the Black Stone Canyon dozens of kilometers away.

"I know. That's why there's no need for you to think about it." He paused, his tone still calm. "While you were slamming the table, I had already sent someone to handle it."

After this sentence fell, no one spoke again.

If it were someone else, saying "it's solved" lightly in this situation, anyone here would question it on the spot.

But the one speaking was Louis, the lord who had walked out from the winter step by step, never tasting defeat.

And Louis no longer kept them guessing, leaning forward slightly, he whispered a few of his plans.

The carriage seemed to be holding its breath.

Several commanders instinctively stood straight, taking a deep breath, but no one spoke up.

They suddenly realized, this deadlock, doesn't really exist.

After Louis finished speaking, he picked up his teacup again, "Prepare as I said."

.....

The people crowded in Black Stone Canyon came from different places.

Three major towns in the north and more than a dozen villages were pushed here layer by layer by torrential rain and cold winds.

Some dragged carts with broken wheels, some carried comatose elders on their backs, and some brought nothing, wearing only the tattered clothes soaked white by the rain.

Before retreating, Kael's army destroyed everything that could sustain life.

Houses were set ablaze, beams collapsing into the fire.

The granaries were smashed open, grains trampled into the mud.

Wells were either sealed or filled with rotten meat and toxic ashes.

With winter approaching and torrential rains unending, the civilians were left in the wilderness.

And before the driving began, another voice had already spread.

Propaganda officers were dispatched to every town and village entrance, wearing neat armor, standing on wooden crates or well edges, reading proclamations.

They repeatedly emphasized one thing, that the Northern People were heading south.

Those people were depicted as monsters.

They eat people, leave no survivors, and specifically target women and children.

They vowed they've seen Northern war chariots crush villages, tracks covered in broken bones.

They said Northern Knights would nail people to door panels for amusement, each word spoken as if witnessed with their own eyes.

Subsequently, another path to survival was presented to them.

Behind Grey Rock Castle, a winter sanctuary had already been established.

There was hot soup, there were tents, there were doctors.

As long as they evacuated their homes swiftly and passed through Black Stone Canyon, they could avoid the Northern massacre.

To make it seem real, the propaganda officers distributed paper certificates bearing emblems on the spot.

"Gray Rock Citizen Certificate."

They told everyone, this was the only credential for entering the sanctuary, also a marker distinguishing good citizens from Northern spies.

Without this paper, one would be treated as an accomplice.

Fear and hope were simultaneously thrust into the hands of the crowd.

The thin paper, repeatedly rubbed and smoothed by countless hands, was then tucked into personal places.

It was worthless, yet more important than life.

So the people were herded forward, like sheep driven into a pen, gradually forced into this only passage to "life."

For tens of thousands of people, Black Stone Canyon was not wide.

When the first batch reached the midway point, the ground underneath had completely turned into a quagmire.

Sewage reached their ankles, mixed with excrement, rotten food, and blood.

Each step required effort to pull out their feet, and once stopped, they would be pushed out of balance by those behind.

The rain was ice-cold and piercing, yet the crowd squeezed together, their warmth steaming into a layer of gray-white fog in the canyon.

The fog bore a sour stench, clinging to their faces, and with each breath, it was as if dirty water was flooding into their lungs.

They believed it was only a temporary congestion, that within a day or two they could enter the so-called winter sanctuary.

There was a checkpoint ahead, supposedly verifying identities.

To prevent Northern spies from infiltrating, each had to be checked one by one.

Yet as time ticked by, the line hardly advanced.

Each hour, very few were let through.

Those at the back didn't know what was happening in the front; they only saw sparingly someone disappearing into the rain, thus pushing even harder forward.

Those in the middle of the canyon were pressed so tightly that they couldn't stand straight nor fall down.

There was no clamor.

Only a continuous low hum.

The sound of chattering teeth, suppressed sobs, and the gasping breaths of those near death, echoed through the canyon.

In the dim rain, people pressed against each other.

Some elderly had already died yet didn't collapse, their bodies wedged among the living, swaying with the crowd, heads tilted, eyes open, long unfocused.

Martha was among them.

She used to be a tailor in a small town, somewhat esteemed, but now couldn't even stand steadily.

One hand fiercely guarded her three-year-old child in her arms, the other gripped her chest.

It was a rain-soaked, disintegrated "Gray Rock Citizen Certificate."

She remembered trading her last bag of grains at home for it.

The officer signing it didn't even look up, just muttered, "With this, the child can have milk."

Martha lowered her head, whispering into her child's ear, repeating again and again.

"Just hold on a bit longer, the checkpoint is ahead, once we pass the checkpoint, there will be milk."

It was as if she were weaving a bedtime story for the child or tying herself to this phrase.

She didn't dare to look at the child's face, nor did she realize the little body had become unnaturally light.

Suddenly, commotion arose at the front of the line.

A grizzled old blacksmith pushed to the very front, he stood high, and could see clearly.

It wasn't an identity verification at all.

Hurdles were laid horizontally, shields stood upright, behind were soldiers with bowstrings already drawn.

"You're not checking!" the old blacksmith roared, his voice ripping through the canyon, "You're preventing us from passing! Liars! There's no sanctuary at all!"

The crossbow string vibrated.

"Thud."

An arrow pierced from the side, penetrating his throat.

Blood sprayed into the rain, quickly washed away.

The old blacksmith's body was kicked aside, rolling into the roadside ditch, face down, never moving again.

The battle commander on horseback looked down at the crowd, his tone cold and unwavering.

"Attempt to force the checkpoint! This man is a Northern spy! Everyone step back, and anyone who dares to speak out will end up the same!"

People at the front were pushed back by blades.

Those at the back, thinking "we're about to pass," pushed forward even harder.

At that moment, the ground began to tremble.

"Thump, thump..."

Heavy and rhythmic.

Like some gigantic beast slowly approaching.

Panic erupted from behind.

"The war chariots..."

"Northern's cannibal war chariots are coming!"

In front was their own army's blades and blockade line.

Behind was the legendary metal beast that crushed everything.

In between, only suffocating bodies and empty starving stomachs remained.

Finally, someone understood.

The so-called hot soup never existed from the start.

Duke Kael had not prepared a place for them to overwinter.

He merely stuffed them into this narrow canyon.

As meat sandbags in front of the monsters.

And now they had no room even to flee.

Chapter 747: Open Fire on the Refugees?

Inside the tower, the fireplace crackled, the warmth slowly spreading through the stone walls, with the cold wind barred by the heavy window frames, leaving only the dull sound of raindrops hitting the glass.

Kael Remont draped in a heavy fur cloak, stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling window.

He held a glass of red wine in his hand, the deep color of the liquid resembling a slow-flowing layer of blood in the firelight.

He pressed the high-powered binoculars against his eyes, gazing beyond the rain to the Black Stone Gorge several kilometers away.

It was a hellish scene.

The entrance to the gorge was packed airtight, tens of thousands of refugees squeezed into the narrow passage, bodies sticking together, slowly wriggling in the mud.

The torrential rain washed away the filth, with occasional bursts of cries and screams shredded by the wind and rain, reaching here only as a persistent, low hum.

Kael's lips curled slightly.

In his eyes, it wasn't chaos, but a highly accomplished piece of work.

The binoculars pushed the view further out.

Outside the Black Stone Gorge, Louis's steel torrent indeed halted.

Steam battle cars lined up at the mouth of the gorge, their heavy steel outlines faintly visible through the rain, like a pack of beasts forced to a halt.

Faced with that barrier made of flesh, they remained motionless.

Kael put down the binoculars and gently swirled the wine in his glass: "Look, what a perfect defense line."

His tone carried a hint of satisfaction.

"No need for bricks or stones, just a bunch of useless mouths stopping the sharpest fangs of the Northern Territory."

A knight stepped forward, handing a hot towel to Kael.

"Young Master..." He paused for a moment, his tone still respectful but deliberately lowered, "Louis is indeed blocked. But... that is, after all, tens of thousands of civilians."

These words were spoken so lightly, almost drowned out by the crackling of the fireplace.

Kael cast a sideways glance at him.

The knight immediately changed his words, his tone becoming smooth: "Of course, this is precisely subduing the enemy without battle.

If he rolls over them, his reputation will stink. If he stops, these tens of thousands of mouths will soon drag him to death, not to mention our army is returning to aid."

Kael did not respond, only humming lightly.

Everyone in the tower smiled, though some smiles were unnatural, more like intentional flattery, while also gauging the attitude of those around them.

Several knights exchanged glances, with someone opening their mouth slightly but ultimately swallowing their words, knowing this was not the place to raise questions.

There was an invisible and subtle tension in the air.

Kael seemed to sense it too, but he didn't care.

He stepped to the map, pointing at the location of Black Stone Gorge, his expression turning serious again.

"According to my analysis of Louis, with his style, he will definitely try to rescue people." Kael raised his head, his gaze calm and determined.

"Once he starts distributing food, his march will slow tenfold, winter will complete the rest for us, and tens of thousands of Northern Army will either go back home in disgrace or be trapped here."

Of course, there's another possibility, Louis rips off his hypocritical mask and rolls over the civilians directly.

For this, Kael had another contingency, though he suspected there was a mole in his decision-making circle, hence only a few people knew, and he couldn't reveal it.

Outside, the rain grew heavier.

In the distance, Louis's camp lit up with some scattered lights, appearing vague and indistinct in the night.

Kael assumed it was just the glow of campfires, paying it no mind.

He turned around and raised his glass high: "Everyone, here's to this damned storm, to these useful refugees, and to forging a path out of desperation!"

"Cheers to the Young Master's wisdom!"

"Grey Rock Castle is solid as a rock!"

The tower resounded with responses, crystal glasses clinking together, making a crisp sound.

Kael's glass of red wine had just been raised, the celebratory words still stuck in his throat.

A few kilometers away, a sudden, short and blinding flash lit up the Red Tide camp.

It was the fireworks of heavy artillery leaving the barrel.

In the next moment, a deep and thick roar rolled over following the rain.

Like a colossal entity shoved hard from a distance, the air compressed and then bounced violently.

"Boom—!"

The sound rolled along the ground, repeatedly colliding between the mountain bodies, before belatedly hitting the tower walls.

The window frame gave a slight shake, the wine rippling with small waves in the glass.

Kael's body suddenly tensed, he almost crashed into the window, grabbing the binoculars.

The torrential rain lashed against the tower's walls, raindrops bursting on the glass, sliding down the panes in sheets, the view segmented into countless swaying, distorted fragments.

He couldn't see anything clearly, only the blurred flames flickering in the distant rain, unable to discern where the flames landed.

But this didn't hinder his judgment, as to Kael, there was always only one answer.

"Did he fire?" His voice carried a hint of loss of control, "Fire at the refugees?!"

Following that, came another roar.

"Boom—!"

Closer than before, and more real.

This time, everyone in the tower clearly felt the stone slabs beneath them quiver slightly.

"Madman..." Kael's breathing became rapid, but his tone unconsciously heightened.

"He's actually chosen to blast tens of thousands of civilians to open the way?!"

In this situation, if it were him, he would certainly fire at the refugees.

As long as you press forward, as long as there are dead, the path will open on its own.

So he naturally assumed Louis Calvin would do the same.

However... Kael's mind raced.

Treasure reputation, win hearts, refrain from slaughter.

All fake?

But just as anger and stupefaction surged, an almost dizzying excitement welled up from deep within.

As long as the first shell landed in the crowd, Louis's reputation would be ruined.

The righteous Count of the Red Tide?

Hmph, just a thin veneer.

And he couldn't enter the canyon nor retreat, while he himself held the final switch.

Kael put down the binoculars, a smile on his lips, one that confirmed his hypothesis.

"Watch," he pointed out the window, his voice echoing in the tower, "this is the true face of that hypocrite."

His thoughts had already moved beyond the present.

Even if Louis went mad and forcibly advanced at the cost of his reputation—five tons of Fire Demon Explosion Bullets had already been planted.

As soon as the vanguard entered the mid-section, as soon as he pulled the switch.

Tens of thousands, along with that iron torrent, would be buried together in the canyon.

This was all Louis's fault.

And history of war would not remember civilians, only victory and defeat.

.....

"Whoosh——!!"

It was a long, piercing sound of something slicing through the air, like the screech of some metallic beast skimming the night sky.

It was faster than thunder, sharper than the sound of rain.

In the Blackstone Canyon, almost at the same moment, everyone realized one thing: something was falling.

Fear did not spread; it exploded directly.

The crowd suddenly collapsed inward, people instinctively held their heads, someone opened their mouth but couldn't make a sound, someone was pushed down into the mud, struggled with outstretched hands, soon to be trampled again.

The cries lasted only a moment, then were compressed into intermittent whimpers.

The stampede began...

The mud churned, worn shoes and luggage were trampled into the mire, and those who fell quickly disappeared into the ever-advancing wall of people.

Martha stumbled as the crowd bumped her, clutching her child tightly, pressing the child's face into her chest.

She closed her eyes, waiting for the Sword of Judgment to fall.

The world seemed muted at this moment, but the expected explosion didn't erupt nearby.

Those shells trailing orange-red tail flames zipped over the heads of the crowd, so close that it felt like the heat wave lifted their scalps.

The airflow swept away the rain, tearing open a temporary vacuum corridor, as if some force intentionally made way for them.

"Boom——!!"

Not the Magic Explosion Bullet targeting flesh, but the high-explosive Magic Explosion Bullet meant for demolishing fortifications.

Precision hit.

Behind the Grey Rock Battle Commander's unit, the number 3 mine pit, covered by a camouflage net, was overturned in the firelight.

The shock wave, like an invisible giant hand, shattered the defensive measures with one punch, ripping the camouflage net to shreds.

Bags of flour piled like mountains exploded in an instant, fabric, ropes, and wooden crates hurled into the night sky.

Tons of food were lifted by the shock wave, shooting a hundred meters high.

Burning projectiles ignited them mid-air.

The dust exploded in the heat, illuminating the entire night sky as a massive golden-red fire cloud rolled and expanded above the depression, only to be constantly pummeled by the rain.

Immediately, the unburned grain began to fall.

In the pitch-black rainy night, Blackstone Canyon experienced a bizarre, golden flour rain.

It wasn't the scene that was truly lethal, but the smell.

The high temperature instantly scorched some of the wheat and ignited the oil seeping from brined meat barrels in the mine pit.

The aroma of toasted wheat, the rich scent of meat, and the greasy scent of heated oil mixed in the explosion's heat wave.

Riding the northwest wind long calculated, this smell, like an invisible hook, yanked into the canyon.

Drilled into the nostrils of tens of thousands who hadn't eaten for three days and nights.

The scent of survival!

At the very front of the battle supervision unit, the battle supervision knight with a face full of flesh froze.

The white flour landed on his helmet and shoulder armor, plastering his face.

In that moment, he suddenly awoke.

And the previously numb crowd began to stir.

Countless pairs of eyes glowing green bypassed him, staring fixedly at the burning granary behind.

"Stop!" The Battle Commander waved his long knife, his voice altered by fear, "That's military rations! Who dares to move!"

"Bang!"

A crisp, decisive explosion answered him.

On the Red Tide's front, a modified heavy sniper crossbow simultaneously fired.

The upper half of this Battle Commander exploded in the firelight, like a watermelon smashed by a heavy hammer, flesh and armor fragments flying together.

His shout abruptly ceased.

Immediately following, the second, third... explosions sounded in succession.

"Bang!" "Bang!" "Bang!"

The hunters in the forefront of the Red Tide began shooting.

They didn't shoot the panicked refugees, nor did they chase the fleeing soldiers.

They only targeted those knights still holding swords, attempting to maintain order.

One after another, the battle supervision knights fell in the firelight and rain curtain.

As if an invisible blade was calmly and accurately slicing through the chains binding these refugees one by one.

Chapter 748: The Ignited Fuse

Among the refugees, there was a brief moment of silence.

An old man with white hair trembled as he raised his hand to catch the food falling from the sky.

Dazed, he looked at his palm and then hesitantly put the piece of meat into his mouth.

Suddenly, he lifted his head sharply.

Behind him, those massive steel monsters stood silently in the rain, their barrels still smoking, yet no ammunition fell among the crowd.

Looking ahead, the Battle Commander who had been brandishing a long sword and forcing them to retreat now lay in the mud, leaving only a mutilated corpse.

The old man's breathing suddenly became rapid.

A simple and direct thought reassembled in his sluggish mind.

The monsters behind them were not killing them.

They only killed those who wouldn't let them eat.

Silence lasted only a moment.

The next moment, it was unclear who first croaked out:

"That's our food!"

"Grab it!!!"

The instant the cry erupted, reason was completely torn apart.

Hunger, fear, and the humiliation of being driven to a dead end surged simultaneously.

Survival became the only thought.

They no longer feared death because it was already right in front of them.

So, they began to fear another thing, the fear of being a step too slow.

The sound ignited like a fuse and exploded in the canyon.

.....

And in the tower, the color drained completely from Kael's face at that moment.

The wine glass in his hand slipped and fell, smashing onto the carpet, the dark red wine spreading rapidly like a pool of spreading blood.

"Impossible...This is absolutely impossible." His voice was dry, as if squeezed out from his throat.

Kael pointed at the distant chaos of fire and crowds, his tone losing control.

"This place is four kilometers from the valley's mouth! Through the pouring rain, across tens of thousands of people...how could they precisely hit the grain depot hidden in the hollow?!"

Moreover...the power of that bombardment, actually capable of blasting open the defenses, turning the food into that kind of rain..."

Kael's brain was working frantically, but he couldn't find any applicable experience.

In his understanding of war tactics, catapults couldn't reach that far, and ordinary cannons didn't have such precision.

This was no longer a matter of firepower, but a mode of attack that exceeded range and understanding, something he had never encountered before.

A thought pierced into his mind without warning.

No, it's not just about the cannons!

Kael's breathing suddenly hitched: "How could they possibly know..."

His gaze fixed intently on the still-burning hollow, his voice low to the point of inaudibility.

"How could they know I hid the food there?"

The location of the No. 3 mine was never in the public supply records.

It was a temporary unloading point he personally marked, only used for the Battle Supervision team's food supply.

Camouflage nets, fake markers, patrol routes, all were temporarily replaced.

Outsiders could not have known, unless...

Kael's pupils suddenly constricted.

Over the past half month, all those anomalies he forcibly suppressed surged up at once.

The supply teams were intercepted too accurately.

The patrol gaps were stepped on too tightly.

The actions of the Northern Territory always seemed to have foreseen his deployments.

"There's a traitor..."

These three words had been echoing in his mind for the past half month, a chill running up his spine.

He didn't even know whose back those eyes were hiding behind.

Fear finally pierced through reason.

Kael watched helplessly as everything he painstakingly arranged began to collapse.

The human defense line he prided himself on didn't even properly function before two cannonballs turned it into a fuse that backfired.

Those commoners who never even dared to look directly at the knights, at this moment, like beasts driven to the edge, used their teeth, their nails, their bodies to charge at the Battle Supervision team.

By rights, this shouldn't have happened at all.

The Battle Supervision Knight was ignited with Fighting Energy, he was a well-trained Official Knight, usually capable of taking down thirty ordinary civilians face to face with no trouble, let alone these starved people who hadn't eaten for three days and nights, barely able to stand.

But now Fighting Energy lost its meaning...because it wasn't one or two people charging, it was an entire mass of humanity, a vast swarm.

A Battle Supervision Knight roared and wielded his spear, thrusting the Fighting Energy-tipped weapon through a refugee's chest, but in the next instant, a dozen people pounced simultaneously, dragging him off his horse.

The Fighting Energy exploded on him, quickly swallowed up.

To snatch the bag of flour behind him, soaked in mud and water, that armored body was soon trampled into the ground by countless feet, without even a chance to struggle.

Such was not an isolated case.

People did not care whether the blade hit them; someone pierced by a long spear had yet to fall before those behind them trampled over, someone with an arm severed still clung tightly to a knight's leg armor with their other hand.

The battle line collapsed entirely in a very short time.

Either a crossbow from the Red Tide's position scored a precise hit, dropping a knight before combat even began, or they were overwhelmed from the front by the rushing black wave of people, with Fighting Energy and armor losing all meaning.

"Mad...they've all gone mad..." Kael's teeth chattered uncontrollably, "all gone mad..."

That wall of sighs he personally built up had collapsed.

And it had collapsed right towards him, with a loud crash.

Watching the flood of people surging towards the granary, also towards the flank of Grey Rock Castle.

The terror in Kael's eyes quickly settled, turning instead into a kind of cold and pure malice.

"Since you all want to eat..." His voice was hoarse and piercing, "then go to Hell and eat there."

Chapter 749: The Lit Fuse (Part 2)

Kael abruptly turned around and pulled an alchemical signal gun from the weapon rack on the wall.

His hand was shaking with a kind of excitement on the brink of losing control, like a gambler finally touching his last chip before going broke.

He still had a trump card—five tons of black fire magic burst.

Just trigger the cliff, and millions of tons of rocks would avalanche down, burying thousands of out-of-control mobs along with Louis's vanguard troops in the canyon.

Kael rushed onto the terrace.

The torrential rain hit him in the face, and the wind roared in his ears.

He aimed at the pitch-black night sky and fiercely pulled the trigger.

"Boom——!!"

The black signal flare shrieked into the sky, exploding into a thick black smoke in the rainy night.

It was the agreed upon signal of destruction.

"Explode!" Kael screamed towards the left cliff, his voice almost tearing his throat, "Blow it all up!! Bury them all!!"

He stared intently at the direction of Eagle's Beak Rock.

In his anticipation, at this moment the mountain should have cracked, flames should have soared, and huge stones should have rained down, completely filling the canyon.

He held his breath.

One second.

Only the sound of rain.

Two seconds.

Thunder rolled in the distance.

Five seconds.

Nothing happened.

Ten seconds.

The cliff still stood silently in the dark, cold and indifferent, like a giant watching from high above.

No flames, no explosion.

Not even a single piece of rock fell.

Kael's expression froze.

He seemed to have lost his mind, frantically pulling the signal gun's trigger, but the gun only clicked empty, "click, click."

"Why?!"

A bone-chilling coldness surged from his feet to the top of his head.

"Impossible..."

He murmured, his brain futilely spinning rapidly.

"Alchemical failure? Impossible! I anticipated tonight's torrential rain long ago, and had people cut off the alchemical fuse, replaced it with the most primitive and reliable physical guide cord.

Human error? Even more impossible! Guarding there are Death Warriors I've raised since childhood. Their families are in my hands, even if it costs them their lives, they'll pull the switch."

"Position exposed?" Kael abruptly shook his head, "That's Eagle's Beak Rock, a sheer cliff! There's no road up there!"

Unless... his thoughts suddenly halted.

"Moreover..." Kael's voice began to falter, "it's top secret. Apart from me and those few individuals, no one knows where the detonation point is.

How could Louis possibly know? And how could he, amidst the interference of tens of thousands of refugees, precisely target my throat?"

The signal gun slipped from Kael's hand and fell to the ground as he clasped his head with both hands, staggering back a few steps.

At this moment, he finally realized that something more terrifying than defeat had emerged.

It was a presence that seemed omnipresent, watching.

The other seemed to stand in this tower, behind him, observing every arrangement, every adjustment he made.

His seemingly seamless double insurance was fragile like a layer of transparent glass before those eyes.

"Louis..." Kael's voice trembled, "Are you human or ghost?"

.....

At the top of Eagle's Beak Rock, the torrential rain washed over the rock surface, also washing over the five corpses on the ground.

Thomas stood at the edge of the cliff, his cloak flapping wildly in the wind.

He glanced down at the crowd surging in reverse below, then lowered his head and played with the thick physical guide cord that had just been cut in his hand.

Meanwhile, at the bottom of the mountain, the granary exploded, triggering short-lived and fervent hope, yet also immediately drawing in disaster.

The canyon did not become clear as a result. On the contrary, in the scramble for the food in the recess on the left, tens of thousands of refugees completely lost control, like a pot of boiling water overturned.

Stampede erupted in the chaos.

The strong trampled over the bodies of the elderly and women to push forward, the people behind pressed against those in front, someone fell into the muddy water, almost instantly stomped silent by countless feet.

Crying, cursing, and the dull sound of bones breaking mingled together, soon swallowed by the sound of rain.

The main road remained deadlocked.

Those unable to push through, the injured lying on the ground, and those pinned in place by fear piled up layer upon layer.

Louis's vanguard was still blocked by this wall of flesh and panic, unable to pass through the canyon.

In the command vehicle, Reg was almost pasted against the observation window looking, "Lord! At this rate, they'll trample half of themselves to death! And still the road won't be cleared!"

Louis did not immediately respond.

He gazed through the rain-blurred glass at the rolling sea of people. The fighting, crying, falling and trampling - everything was repeating.

"This is inevitable." His voice was low yet clear, "The chaos is not because of hunger but because awe has not been established within this group."

Louis turned, his gaze fixed on Reg's face: "Then help them establish it."

He raised his hand without hesitation: "Order, turn on all headlights, blast the steam whistles, advance steadily."

The order was relayed one after another.

"Woo— —!!!"

Dozens of steam tanks simultaneously sounded their whistles and cleared the way.

The sound was not sharp but deep like a roar squeezed from within the mountain, rolling along the canyon.

The piercing searchlights turned on at the same time, thick beams penetrating the rain, like cold, hard swords slicing directly into the chaotic crowd.

The crowd's reaction was almost instinctual.

When the low rumble approached from behind and the vibration from the tracks crushing muddy water transmitted through the ground, the urge to grab food was suppressed by a more primal fear.

They did not need to understand orders.

Just knowing that remaining in the road meant being crushed was enough.

The crowd blocking the main road began pressing against the canyon walls on either side.

Even without gaps, they used shoulders, ribs, and bodies to forcibly squeeze out space.

The tank's speed wasn't fast, but it never stopped.

People knelt trembling in the mud, stuffing muddy wheat into their mouths, while others were pressed so tightly against the cold rock wall that breathing was labored.

Louis opened the window, the cold wind mixed with rain rushing in.

He saw a child by the roadside get knocked down, repeatedly trampled by the crowd, yet stubbornly clutching a piece of black bread.

Louis did not give the order to stop.

He could not save those beyond saving; he aimed to save only the living.

"The rescue team will arrive soon," he ordered, his voice amplified by the wind and rain, "set up pots near the granary, tell them, snatching is useless. Those wanting soup, line up along the road on their knees."

The order was relayed, and soon the knights' voices overpowered the rain.

"Kneel and line up!"

"Lord offers hot soup!"

"Runners will be killed!"

The words "hot soup" elicited reactions in the crowd faster than swords could.

Those competing for raw flour in the mud noticeably hesitated for a moment.

To survive, for that sip of hot soup that wouldn't choke them, chaos began to be subdued.

The crowd no longer surged forward but trembled, retreating to the sides.

One after another, they knelt down.

Only kneeling made them appear obedient enough, avoided being crushed by the tracks, ensured they'd be remembered and given soup.

The stampede halted, and shouting transformed into suppressed gasps.

The main road in Black Stone Canyon was finally opened.

Down the center of the road, Louis's steel torrent advanced steadily through lights and whistles.

On both sides of the road, refugees knelt densely across the ground.

They were covered in mud, clutching yet-unswallowed raw flour as they gazed upwards at the army moving through them.

Albert stood by the vehicle window, remained silent for a long time. He had fought all his life and never seen such a scene.

Tens of thousands knelt like believers, clearing the road.

"This..." Albert's throat moved, he couldn't describe the scene.

The Red Tide army passed through the flesh-lined corridor unscathed, bursting out of the canyon.

Behind, logistics had indeed set up the marching pots.

White steam rose in the rain, mixed with the aroma of meat, slowly spreading.

That wisp of cooking smoke gathered what little uncollapsed civilian morale remained in Gray Rock Province.

"Don't stop! Full speed ahead!" Louis's gaze stretched beyond the valley, landing on the lonely, towering silhouette of Grey Rock Castle in the distance. I am not

Chapter 750: Flowers Blooming in the Mire

The steel flood of Louis has already moved away.

What remains in the canyon is not the cheer of victory, but a fear that hasn't yet cooled.

Refugees kneel in the mud, their hands still tainted with flour.

Some clutch their injured legs, biting on cloth to silence their cries, while others stare dazedly at the distant flames, as if still not awakened from the madness.

They originally thought they would be abandoned here.

But before long, a second wave of people entered from the canyon entrance.

They were not cavalry there to harvest, nor phalanxes to clear the field.

They were the logistics and medical team.

Hundreds of soldiers carried bulging march bags, their steps steady and quick.

Their uniforms were uniformly colored, a glaring grey-white, as if designed to stand out in the mud and gore.

Their faces were concealed by bird-beak masks and layers of gauze, revealing only pairs of weary but alert eyes.

On their arms, the sun armband was particularly eye-catching in the cold light after the rain.

Dozens of alchemy glow sticks were planted into the ground, their ghostly white light unraveling the darkness of the canyon into a straight corridor. Chaos was forcibly cut through.

The refugees instinctively wanted to shrink back, yet the team did not pounce on them.

They pitched tents first, then established quarantine lines, and set up cooking pots.

Only then did someone stand at a high point.

She wore light armor of the Red Tide Standard, rainwater cascading off her shoulder guards.

Behind her was a greatsword almost as tall as she was, its handle wrapped in dark leather.

When she removed her faceplate, it revealed an excessively youthful face, with a faint scar left by an old wound on her forehead.

Mia, the team leader of the third logistics brigade of the Red Tide Knight Order.

Her voice cut through the damp chill after the rain: "Don't push! Line up according to color! Red Tide will not abandon anyone who follows orders!"

She didn't need to explain what following orders meant.

The earlier steel flood had already drilled the answer into everyone's bones.

Mia raised her hand, pointing to the colored flags planted in the mud.

"Red zone, the injured. Yellow zone, those with fevers and coughs. Green zone, those who can walk, go get porridge!"

She paused, her eyes sweeping over those who had just crawled out from the stampede: "Anyone defecating indiscriminately will have their rations canceled."

The order was as cold and hard as iron.

Yet it was this rhythm that made the crowd, having just escaped from madness, instinctively begin to comply.

Martha knelt in the muddy water, her child in her arms too weak to cry.

In the recent scramble, she had barely managed to grab a handful of raw flour, but now only despair remained.

She mixed the flour with dirty water, her hands trembling as she brought it to the child's mouth.

"Eat a little... please, eat a little..."

The child's face was turning blue, his breathing almost imperceptible.

Mia was maintaining order from on high, but caught sight of this scene from the corner of her eye.

In that moment, her steps halted.

The sound of the rain, the shouting, the echoes of metallic loudspeakers, all seemed to distant.

An untimely image flashed through her mind.

The ruins of White Stone Village, snow falling as if trying to crush the sky.

A man knelt inside a broken house, clutching a young girl unconscious with fever, his lips pale, crying as if trying to cough up his lungs.

Eight years had passed, yet that despair hadn't changed.

Mia leapt down the dirt slope, splashing through the mud and water towards them.

Martha was just about to shove that lump of raw dough into the child's mouth.

A hand clad in an iron glove suddenly clamped onto her wrist.

"Stop!" Mia shouted, "Do you want to kill him?"

Martha trembled, looking up at the greatsword, thinking she had encountered the Northern Territory demon from the knights' tales.

Her lips trembled: "My lady... I didn't..."

"Eat raw flour and dirty water after starving for a long time, and the stomach will explode," Mia spoke quickly, as if racing against time, "Give him to me."

She bent down, her movements unexpectedly gentle, the child as light as a kitten, his forehead burning, his breathing thin as a thread.

Mia held the child steady and shouted towards the crowd: "Medical squad! Grade one critical! Life Potion! Steam tent!"

Several masked medics immediately rushed over, a stretcher trailing behind them, their movements as though perfectly rehearsed.

Martha reached out to grab her child, but Mia gently nudged her away with her shoulder.

"Follow me." Mia said in a low voice, her tone softened a bit from before, "Don't wander around. If you fall, he won't survive long either."

Martha numbly rose and stumbled along behind.

The medical tent was warm, unlike the outside world. Steam pipes hissed in the corner, the air tinged with the scent of medicine.

The child was placed on a clean white sheet, and the medics took over.

As the needle pierced the tiny vein, Martha let out a shriek, throwing herself forward.

Mia held her shoulder down, not with great force, but steady as a nail.

"Watch." She locked eyes with Martha, "That's the water of life."

The pale golden medicine dripped slowly.

The child's bluish complexion began to lighten, his chest rising and falling more evenly.

A few minutes later, he frowned slightly, letting out a faint hum from his throat.

Martha collapsed as if emptied of bones, sobbing breathlessly, "Thank you... thank you, my lady... thank you, Goddess..."

"I'm no goddess." Mia crouched down, handing her a bowl of steaming minced meat porridge.

The bowl was hot, causing Martha's hand to shake, nearly dropping it.

Mia didn't let her kneel: "Drink first. You're on the verge of collapsing yourself."

Martha looked up, choked with emotion, catching sight of Mia's face after she removed her helmet.

That wasn't the refined coldness of a noble lady, nor the superior arrogance of a knight lord.

It was a face shaped by training and good nourishment, healthy and firm, with a sense of determination in the eyes.

"Eight years ago," Mia suddenly spoke, as if to Martha, or to herself, "I was like him, almost dying in the snow."

"My father back then... was the same as you, grabbing whatever he could, shoving anything into my mouth."

She paused, a shallow curve at the corner of her mouth.

"Then someone picked me up. He said the knights of the Red Tide were here to save people."

Martha was stunned: "You... you're also..."

"Yes," Mia nodded, "I used to be a refugee, now I am also a knight of the Red Tide."

She pointed to the sun badge on her light armor: "In the Red Tide, as long as one survives and is willing to work, there's food to eat. Later on, learn to read, learn the sword. Even a mud-stained can wear armor."

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Outside the tent, the order of the logistics camp was unfolding inch by inch.

Getting porridge wasn't about snatching.

Everyone had to go through a narrow passage first.

The pungent smell of lime water mixed with alchemy disinfectant mist wafted over.

The knight shouted: "Wash your hands! Rub ten times! No washing thoroughly, no eating!"

Some gritted their teeth and complied, others tried to slip through, only to be pushed to the back of the line.

Those showing symptoms of fever or coughing were immediately taken out of the crowd and sent to the quarantine area.

Only then did it come time to eat.

Everyone received the same wooden bowl.

What boiled in the pot wasn't just clear water, but salted minced meat and cooked oatmeal, thick and warm.

An old farmer held the bowl of porridge, his hands trembling greatly, the steam hitting his face, with tears falling into the bowl.

He had lived sixty years, never had any lord cared whether his hands were dirty, nor cut up meat to cook for him.

The feeling of being treated as a human stunned him, not knowing how to respond.

Not far away, the sappers were dealing with bodies.

Those dead in a stampede, or killed by the overseers, were neatly laid together, sprinkled with fuel and alchemy powder.

"There will surely be a plague after the rain," the Red Tide knight explained briefly, "For the living, they must be cremated."

When the flames rose, the refugees stood afar watching.

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Mia's news quickly spread within the camp.

"That female officer saving lives... was once a refugee."

"Really? She said it?"

"The child she carried away with her own hands was nearly gone."

The crowd's view of Mia changed.

The previous awe remained, an instinctual fear of steel and guns.

But beneath the fear, something else began to grow.

Aspiration.

If she could crawl up from the mud, could their children too?

When dawn broke, the rain finally stopped.

Black Stone Canyon no longer looked like a devouring deep well, but rather an emergency field hospital rapidly set up.

White tents formed a continuous line, with smoke rising slowly in the cold morning air.

Martha sat by the tent, the child in her arms sleeping deeply, now with a rosy complexion.

She's wrapped in a dry blanket, holding a half-bowl of unconsumed meat broth.

Mia walked past the tents swiftly, yet paused briefly before Martha: "He will survive."

Martha's throat choked up, only squeezing out words after a long while: "I... what can I do for you?"

Mia nodded towards another part of the camp: "Go over there. The logistics team needs people to move boxes, the medical team needs bandages washed, we pay daily wage and food."

Martha looked down at the child in her arms, then towards those queuing in the camp.

She wiped her face, stood up, rolled up her sleeves.

"Ma'am... I can mend clothes."

"I'm able to work."

Soon, more people stood up.

Hand after hand raised, trembling in the morning light, yet firm.

At the camp's furthest edge, a hastily erected wooden board held simple, nearly crude rules written in charcoal.

No cutting in line. No hoarding food. No beating others. No hiding illnesses.

Below were additional rules in slightly heavier writing:

Violators, food rations cut off, forced labor, until recovery or departure.

These words held no elegant rhetoric, yet were as nails, firmly embedded in everyone's eyes.

Red Tide soldiers didn't maintain order by repeated yelling, they relied on certainty.

Every violation brought clear consequences, every compliance exchanged for predictable rewards.

When a strong man trying to take an extra bowl was dragged out of line, had his bowl taken, and was pushed to the dirtiest and most exhausting loading area, there was no commotion, but rather a calming silence among the crowd.

When a young man hiding a high fever and trying to sneak into the green zone was caught, sent directly to the quarantine tent, yet really received medicine and hot water two hours later, suspicion was also quelled.

There was no indebtedness here, only system.

No forgiveness based on mood, nor privilege based on identity.

It was precisely this cold and nearly ruthless handling that made the crowd, just freed from insanity, start to understand the Red Tide wasn't sustained by goodwill.

Unlike the nobles who casually distributed porridge, it relied on a set of rules that wouldn't waver because someone cried or shouted louder.

And the Red Tide's porridge was to keep the system running.

Once people realized this, obedience was no longer just forced but a rational choice.