

Winter 101

Chapter 101: Red Tide Territory Castle

Mike patted the corner stone of the wall, his tone filled with a solid sense of pride.

"Lord, to be honest, it doesn't look that 'noble'.

But it can block the wind, withstand the cold, prevent bandits, stand up in battle, and endure the snow."

He pointed to the edge of the castle gate: "I had people wrap the base of the walls with three layers of stone bricks, very solid. The castle gate was also reinforced with thick cold iron sheets, it won't deform even if rammed several times."

Then he nodded towards the roof: "Those red tiles are mainly decorative, at least from afar, it doesn't make the place look like an animal pen."

Listening to Mike, Louis recalled the drawings he had made and almost burst into laughter.

Mike continued, "As for those wooden beams and carvings... hey, I had a few apprentices carve them for three days and nights, not much use but impressive."

He spoke nonchalantly, but couldn't hide a little smugness in his tone.

"You've done well, I really like the exterior," Louis praised directly.

Mike scratched his head and grinned.

"Come on, Lord. Let me show you the genuine interior," Mike said as he led Louis inside.

As soon as he entered the castle, Louis felt a warmth rush towards him, contrasting the biting cold winds outside.

The air here was warm and pleasant, making one naturally relax.

The temperature inside the castle seemed to keep the severe cold of the Northern Territory at bay.

All this was thanks to the special geothermal system design.

Mike explained, "Lord, this is that geothermal system you designed. It's truly amazing."

He pointed at the geothermal pipes and the warm walls around them: "By introducing hot spring water to heat the underground pipes, it ensures the entire castle stays warm and provides hot water to every room.

In our Northern Territory, this is practically a divine artifact, not only combating the severe cold but also enhancing living comfort."

Mike's tone was full of admiration for Louis, his eyes brimming with respect.

Louis, hearing this, couldn't help but feel a bit proud.

Although he hadn't initially expected his design to be implemented so successfully.

But seeing how warm the castle was now, he couldn't help feeling gratified.

Then Mike led Louis through the first floor of the castle, introducing each room as they walked, his voice full of pride.

"First, this is our foyer." Mike walked ahead, seriously pointing to two flags hanging on the wall.

One was the Calvin Clan's crest, elegant and ancient in design.

The other was the Red Tide Territory's red flag, simple and powerful, seemingly radiating heat.

Louis nodded, finding it just right without unnecessary opulence.

Then the two of them walked through the corridor into a storeroom filled with wooden crates.

"This here stores the stuff we depend on for winter." Mike patted a sack of grain, "There's dry food, stone bricks, timber—everything to eat and burn."

The air carried a faint wheat fragrance mingled with the scent of pine wood.

Beside the storeroom was the kitchen.

Walking in, warmth greeted them, with a few cooks bustling around a large pot.

Steam bubbled in a pot over a stone stove, and half a wild boar's leg was slowly rotating on a spit.

"I personally supervised the chimney system for three days and nights," Mike puffed his chest with pride, "Great ventilation, no choking while cooking."

Louis glanced around, finding it indeed tidy and orderly.

A kitchen where cooks can work peacefully is a good kitchen.

Lastly, Mike led him to a heavy stone door: "This is what I'm most proud of."

As the door opened, warm steam rushed out.

The stone tiled floor glistened, and the air was humid, as if stepping into another world.

Hot spring pools steamed gently, with the sound of trickling water.

"This part was specially designed for you." Mike said, his voice tinged with excitement, "Among the Northern Lords, you're the only one with such luxury."

Louis looked at the pools of hot water, suddenly tempted.

Outside, others were still wrapping themselves in quilts against the cold wind;

But he? He could soak in a hot spring while enjoying warm wine—simply delightful.

It was like driving a Maybach while others were still on bicycles.

Louis almost couldn't help but laugh.

Mike had a look that said "only such luxury is worthy of the Red Tide Territory's Sun."

Louis took a deep breath, restraining his urge to immediately dive into the hot spring.

"There'll be plenty of chances later." He comforted himself, stepped forward, and continued with Mike to the second floor.

The path upstairs was a spiraling staircase.

The steps were built with thick logs and stones, firm and strong underfoot.

Each step was appropriately wide, allowing even two armored knights to pass securely.

Handrails lined the sides, made from polished oak, feeling warm and solid.

"Sturdy, durable, safe, this is how the main staircase should be." Mike patted the railing.

Of course, this was the main staircase meant for lords and honored guests.

According to him, in alternative corners, there were vertical ladders intended for emergency movements, enabling soldiers to move up and down rapidly and be sealed off during an attack.

The second floor didn't have much to see.

"It's just the living quarters for soldiers and servants." Mike casually mentioned.

The dormitories were snugly arranged, with rooms lining both sides of the hallway.

Each room had wooden beds, blankets, and a simple wardrobe.

Though simply furnished, everything was tidy, enough to shield from the wind and cold for the night.

Louis casually pushed open a few doors and glanced in.

They were all much the same.

He didn't linger on the second floor, continuing up the main staircase.

The third-floor main hall was an important reception space prepared for the lord.

Nobility visits, treaty signings, official audiences... all took place here.

The entire space was very high-ceilinged, supported by sturdy oak beams,

with a few iron hooks remaining on the beams for hanging chandeliers at night, lighting the room brightly.

A Red Tide Territory flag was hanging high on the wall, crimson with a golden sun in the center, symbolizing order and honor.

On another side, several large oil paintings depicting the Calvin Clan's historical glory were displayed.

The largest one depicted Louis' ancestor riding into battle alongside the first Emperor of the Ironblood Empire, heroically armored and charismatic.

"All of these were specially ordered by Bradley from the South." Mike explained, "Commissioned from well-known court painters."

Louis nodded, satisfied.

Using the Calvin Family's glory for bluffing, not bad at all.

Future negotiations could carry more weight.

They went through the main hall, and Mike pushed open a thick wooden door.

"This will be your future office, though it's still empty now and needs your design later."

The room was still empty, footsteps echoing clearly on the wooden floor.

A large table was placed alone by the window, the surface clean and smooth, with just a blank document and a quill pen on it.

On the other side was an empty bookshelf, yet to be filled, with the scent of the wood still lingering.

Chapter 102: Baron Vira

"This building is mostly just rooms apart from the office and reception lounge." Mike pushed open a door, revealing an empty room inside, "Although they haven't been decorated yet, do you want to design them yourself?"

The rooms were much larger than those on the second floor, clearly intended for important people or guests of the territory. The master bedroom, where Louis stayed, was particularly outrageously large.

Louis waved his hand lightly, "There's no need for it to be too complicated, as long as it's livable and usable, simple is better."

Mike nodded, "Alright then, I'll go with the standards of the Northern Lords."

While speaking, Louis suddenly turned his head and looked at Sif beside him, "By the way, you have to come here to work frequently, why not just move in? It'll save you the daily commute. I'll leave a room for you on the third floor."

Sif was slightly stunned and instinctively wanted to refuse.

But when she spoke, she said, "...Ok."

Her voice wasn't loud but was very clear, and a slight unnatural redness crept onto her cheeks.

She mentally justified: It's just for the convenience of work, and... it's really warm here... not for any other reasons.

Mike coughed nonchalantly from the side, silently shifting his gaze away.

Then, the group continued up the stairs.

The wind on the fourth floor hit their faces instantly, carrying the unique chill and openness of high places.

"This up here is our Red Tide Territory's last line of defense." Mike patted the stone wall beside him with pride in his voice, "No matter who comes, they'll hit a wall here."

He raised his hand to point at the top of the wall, offering a subtle compliment, "These arrow slits, they're the angled structures you designed, invisible from the outside.

But on our side, the view is clear. Before the enemy gets close, they'd already be hit by an arrow. It's a genius design."

Louis just lightly waved his hand, but his eyes were obviously pleased.

"This way." Mike led the group around a corner, pointing to a few wooden frames, "These are the pre-set positions for siege engines. They're not installed yet, but I've left spaces ready, so when they're placed, it'll be ready to engage."

Then he walked to the edge of the roof and pointed at several concealed pipe interfaces under the eaves.

"These are the boiling oil outlets from your draft designs. Once the enemy gets close to climbing the walls, we'll pour hot oil down and let them know what regret means."

Louis glanced at the inconspicuous pipe outlets, a hint of satisfaction in his eyes, "Looks good, even more refined than the original drawing."

"Besides," Mike pointed at wooden beams lining the stone walls, "we can temporarily mount crossbows here, or even roll stones."

Then he gestured downward, "Look down, the southern mountain path and the northern tree line are all visible.

If the wind rises and snow falls, we can hang windbreak curtains and cold-resistant covers. We can hold this position for ten days or half a month without shivering."

Finally, he looked at Louis, full of pride, "Rest assured, my Lord. As long as a hundred men guard this building, even thousands can't breach it."

The wind whistled through the stone walls.

But standing on the top floor of this fortress, everyone felt an inner peace akin to a mountain.

After making a complete circuit, Louis already had an answer in his mind.

This new fortress was even better than he had expected.

Safe, comfortable.

A stable heat source in winter, and good ventilation in summer.

The sturdy walls and watch posts formed a complete defense line, while the inner living area was warm and tranquil, like a sanctuary in the snowfield.

Moreover, the aesthetics of this fortress suited his taste, simple yet not crude, solid yet not oppressive.

Louis strolled along the highlands of Earth Tower Castle, his gaze sweeping over layers of thick stone walls, surrounding hot water pipes, and the patrol posts glimmering cold in the distant forest.

From these arrangements, one could see the dedication of Mike and the other craftsmen.

"Very good, very good, safe, comfortable, and perfectly to my liking." Louis sincerely praised.

Mike, standing by his side, had been somewhat tense waiting for the evaluation, and upon hearing this, finally let out a long sigh, as if a stone had hit the ground.

"It's my great honor to meet your satisfaction, and we merely tried our best to execute your vision. The real brilliance is your design and concept.

From channeling hot springs for geothermal regulation to the overall layout, it's simply a genius design."

Louis chuckled and patted his shoulder, "Don't be too modest. Without you and your men laying each brick, the best ideas are just empty talk."

"It's what I should do." Mike straightened his back.

Louis then spoke sternly, "Don't slack on the final touches, polish the details. I'm planning to move in a few days."

Mike nodded repeatedly, "Understood! I'll personally supervise the work, check over everything again, and not leave a single flaw!"

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Autumn was deepening, the wind carrying a bone-chilling cold.

A group of several dozen riders moved along the winding dirt road through the woods, their hoofbeats steady and leisurely.

At the front was a young knight dressed in a black cloak.

He had handsome features, but couldn't hide the smugness at the corner of his mouth.

He was the newly-appointed Baron Vira.

Originally, he was just the Villa Family's third son, and an illegitimate one at that.

He couldn't even appear at the territory's banquets, and the family's servants regarded him as thin air.

So Vira simply abandoned those tasks and lived idly in Frost Halberd City.

But who could have expected this?

The great battle of Snow Eagle City took his father's life, along with his first and second brothers', leaving not even bodies to be found.

For most, it was a devastating disaster, but for him?

It was like a dream.

The title, the lands, the family, the treasury, all fell into his hands alone.

"Hahaha! The heavens really have eyes this time!" Vira suddenly burst into laughter, startling a horse nearby into a snort.

In excitement, he couldn't help patting his flask by his waist, then shouted back to the group of knights behind him, "When we return, I'll knight you as my territory knights, with cushy positions, plenty of booze, and women, nothing will be lacking!"

"Ah, we must thank Lord Baron for your generosity!"

"Hahaha, then we'll each have a house, eat meat every day, and sleep with women!"

The group was full of laughter, drinking, boasting, swearing, it was very lively.

"Hey, old Vira, is your dad's young wife still around?"

"Hehe, I don't know..." Baron Vira's lips curled, his gaze drifting, "That woman... sigh, she's quite a beauty. A slim waist and long legs, just makes one feel tense all over."

"Aren't you a bit nasty, even thinking about your father's wife?"

"My father's dead, so what? Now he's gone, and taking care of a stepmother is what a filial son like me should do."

He laughed lecherously, his body tensing, utterly failing to hide his thoughts about the "stepmother."

The group behind erupted into laughter, crude jokes flying everywhere.

But no one noticed the few figures silently gliding through the unremarkable forest depths.

The wind slightly intensified, leaves swirling in the air.

Chapter 103: Ambush

In the next second, a few crows swept past the branches, startling a sharp screech through the air.

The neck of the leading warhorse in front exploded, blood gushing like a fountain, and it fell heavily to the ground with a whinny.

"An ambush!!"

"Grab your weapons!"

But they had only half-drawn their short swords when the attacks from the forest swept in like an ice storm.

Several figures shot out from the underbrush like arrows, glints of blades flashing continuously.

Someone hadn't even reacted when they were pierced from behind by a spear, falling into the leaves, still twitching.

One tried to jump off his horse to escape, but a flying rope caught his ankle, dragging him into the trees, leaving only a bloodstain.

"Ahhhh!"

"Don't kill me!"

The screams of horses and humans mingled chaotically.

In just two minutes.

The ground was littered with Baron Vira's "brothers", dead or unconscious.

Baron Vira hid behind a pile of saddles, trembling and muttering to himself, "Nobility... I am nobility... You cannot kill nobility..."

A scar-faced Snow Swearer walked over, dragging a large sword, mocking, "Hehehe! It's the nobility we want to kill!"

Another Snow Swearer chimed in, "This bastard... just kill him, for Barnes' sake!"

"Wait." A voice, as cold as snow, said.

It was the leader of the Snow Swearers, wearing a black cloak, bow still in hand, eyes sharper than blades.

She was incredibly beautiful, but with no warmth, like a meticulously carved ice sculpture: "We're not here for revenge; we're here for a sacrifice."

"Can't we just catch a few commoners? Why go to so much trouble?" someone retorted.

"You don't understand." The leader's gaze swept over them, "Only the blood of the damned can awaken the Ancient God."

She approached Baron Vira.

He was so scared he wet himself, a puddle of yellow water between his legs, stuttering, "Don't kill me... I have money... I have land... I can..."

"Let's make a deal." Her voice suddenly softened, yet it sent chills down the spine even more.

"Find us five iron-blooded nobles, and I'll let you go."

Baron Vira, as if receiving a pardon, kowtowed while scrambling, "That's easy! I know! I know where lots of nobles are! I'll take you there!"

His face was full of obsequiousness and the greed to survive, like a dog seeing a bone.

The Snow Swearers laughed again.

But this time, they looked more like they were watching a pig awaiting slaughter.

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The battle at Snow Eagle City swept through the entire upper echelon of Snow Peak County.

Almost all of Snow Peak County's old nobility perished.

And the few who were lucky enough to survive were mostly executed on Duke Edmund's orders, along with their families.

What was left were just scraps.

Side branches, married-off daughters, and a few heirs whose mouths were barely fully grown were hastily pushed to the position of Patriarch.

They inherited the lands, but most lacked real power.

But soldiers? Defeated.

Grain? Running out.

Power? Ha, a joke.

Some fiefdoms were experiencing famine, with subjects so hungry they were eating iron pots, while others were occupied by refugees, with the city gates manned by them.

There's even talk of some secretly defecting to the Snow Swearers.

Strangely, these new nobles weren't too panicked.

Instead... they seemed a bit excited.

Not being the legitimate heirs and now becoming Lords was no loss.

As long as they held the Northern Territory titles, there was a chance to rise again.

A single war turnabout could transform dogs into wolves.

Yet there was one thing they just couldn't swallow.

The order for Snow Peak County's new Prefect had arrived.

The new Prefect was named Louis Calvin.

He indeed had merits, which everyone acknowledged.

But a Prefect? A young Baron from the South? Ruling all of Snow Peak County?

This meant that all these newly appointed Patriarchs would be under the control of this Southerner.

And become his vassals?

What a joke, they'd been taught since childhood that these Southerners were all sneaky and cowardly wimps.

But no one dared to speak their mind.

Because at the bottom of the appointment letter was a heavy Fire Lacquer Seal.

That was Duke Edmund's authority seal.

Everyone understood the implication: even if you were displeased in your heart, you had to smile as if you were congratulating your own father on becoming the Prefect.

So before officially visiting the "New Prefect", the new nobility of the Northern Territory secretly gathered to discuss how to face this new Prefect.

The one who convened this secret meeting was Viscount Fos.

He was the nephew of the late Count Fos, and although the Governor stripped away the Count title, the Viscount title naturally fell to him.

And from bloodline to seniority, to former prestige, he remained the most significant among this group of "new nobility."

Even though the Forrester Clan was now severely weakened, other nobles still showed him some respect and fear.

After all, many of them had benefited from the Forrester Clan, some even being vassals of it.

Viscount Fos, draped in a dark gray cloak, sat in the main seat, his expression solemn.

"The numbers are about right." He surveyed them, his tone low, "Except for Baron Vira, no one else came yet?"

"He said he would come with us before setting off, but then vanished, probably held up on the way."

"Ha, maybe he's off enjoying himself somewhere." Someone sneered, a tone of disdain.

"He got really lucky," another young noble squinted, "Originally not even qualified to be in the family registry, now he's a legit Baron... luck can be so enviable sometimes."

The crowd laughed, but the laughter quickly turned cold.

No one continued the conversation.

The atmosphere of this little gathering was awkward and somewhat oppressive.

They all knew the real purpose of this meeting.

Before officially visiting the new Prefect, Louis Calvin, to unify their stance and band together.

"Let's all say something." Viscount Fos finally spoke, his voice hoarse, "The current situation is clear to all of us."

He looked at them, his gaze icy, "If we don't unite, we'll just be left to be picked off by the Southerners one by one."

After a moment of silence, the first to speak was a baron with a slightly yellow complexion and thin frame.

"First, how should we deal with this 'Southern Prefect'? Show respect? Or maintain our stance?"

He tapped his fingers on the table from time to time while speaking, his eyes carrying a hint of probing: "We are the true masters of Snow Peak County; we have been for generations."

Another newly appointed Viscount sneered: "But according to the appointment letter, he's the Prefect of the entire Snow Peak County, meaning, theoretically, we're all under his jurisdiction."

With these words, awkwardness filled the room once more.

No one wanted to admit this reality, but that document bearing Duke Edmund's seal was like a thorn, piercing everyone's heart.

At this point, Viscount Fos slowly stood up, surveying them, "Precisely because of this, we need to unite our stance even more."

Chapter 104: Wiped Out in One Go

Viscount Fos sneered, "We are the true masters of Snow Peak. We've been managing here for a hundred years, and everyone remembers our benevolence.

As long as we endure this winter, as long as we raise our arms, everything will return to us."

His eyes swept around the room and rested on the faces of some hesitant new nobles.

"A southern kid who snagged his noble title through luck, what does he know about governance? His so-called Baron's Domain... smaller than my family's stable."

Several people couldn't help but laugh, and one added, "I heard that he comes from an illustrious family, but he's just a discarded piece sent to the Northern Territory."

"Just had good fortune, born to the right family, picked up some military merit, and then a Prefect title."

"But luck is something that will eventually run out."

Viscount Fos waved his hand, his tone becoming more relaxed, "I think feigned compliance is the most prudent approach.

We listen to what he says. As for following through? There's plenty of reasons like refugees, military chaos, and bitter cold.

We are local nobility of the Northern Territory, who would dare to truly blame us? The Northern Lords have intermarried for years, we are practically family now.

If he dares to touch us, let's see how many people will turn against him."

All the nobles present nodded, agreeing this was indeed the reasoning.

With the conclusion reached, laughter in the room quickly grew lighter, a sense of triumphant fullness exuded in the air.

"Come, let's toast for the true future masters of Snow Peak!"

They swapped cups and laughter grew increasingly boisterous, entirely unaware of the subtle chill creeping in through the wind outside the house.

Outside the manor, a group of figures quietly lurked.

The leading woman donned a black-feathered cloak, bow and arrow in hand, her expression calm as ice.

Baron Vira crouched, pointing toward the brightly lit mansion in the distance, his voice quivering, "That's it, there are many Northern Lords gathering tonight."

He tried to muster a smile to please the cold-faced woman, "I'm keeping my word, aren't I? Five? There are at least ten inside, all with titles, are you satisfied?"

The woman looked at him indifferently, remained silent, and merely waved her hand lightly.

Several Snow Swearers darted out like phantoms.

At the manor outskirts, only a dozen knights loitered, drinking wine, dozing against the wall.

With only a few muted thuds, several arrows silently pierced throats.

The remaining few hadn't yet reacted before getting strangled unconscious from behind.

"These ones can be used," the woman said softly, "Bring them back, they can be sacrificed, don't waste."

Then in the shadows of the night, dozens of dark figures suddenly leapt out, storming into the banquet hall.

Someone had just raised a glass and got knocked out with a palm strike.

Anyone who dared draw a sword in resistance was slain on the spot, blood splattering on the tablecloths and silverware.

"Enemy attack!!"

"Guards, guards!!"

Screams erupted, chaos reigned in the hall, the nobles fled in a panic.

But they had long been dulled by alcohol, their vigilance relaxed, no one could organize an effective resistance.

A few brave ones tried to charge toward the door, only to be hacked down face-to-face by Snow Swearers as soon as they opened it.

"Leave them alive," the woman reminded again, "Anyone who can be captured alive, take them all."

She walked step by step into the hall, watching the nobles struggling and wailing on the ground, her eyes devoid of sympathy.

"These are the nobles of the Ironblood Empire? Truly ridiculous."

Baron Vira hid behind the leading woman, hunched over like an old dog gasping for air, his mouth unable to hide its upward curve.

"Tsk tsk... blaming me for your downfall."

He watched the terrified, disheveled nobles being dragged out of the hall, each crying, begging, with even their pants wet.

Vira couldn't help but lick his chapped lips, his eyes full of lewd delight.

He had already begun imagining how to rearrange the manor, inventory the treasury, and plan for a few concubines once back at his domain.

Until a cold voice fell, "These people are not enough."

"...Huh?" Vira shivered suddenly, like someone poured a basin of snow water from his head down.

"What—what are you saying?" His voice trembled, and his body involuntarily shrank back.

The leading woman slowly turned to look at him, her gaze like a frozen blade lightly gliding across Vira's neck.

"These people," her voice was cold, "cannot exchange for your life."

The air suddenly froze.

Vira only felt his legs give way, and with a thud, he fell to his knees like an old dog caught by the neck.

"I—I—I can take you to find other nobles! Truly!" He crawled toward the woman, voice trembling with sobs, "I know, I have a list!"

No one responded to him, the Snow Swearers just looked on coldly at this pathetic performance.

"For example... for example, that 'Prefect'!" He lifted his head sharply, his voice rising as if grabbing onto a lifeline, "Louis! Yes, it's that southern kid!

He's the newly appointed Prefect, all the Snow Peak County nobles need to visit him, you can wait for them there!"

The woman squinted slightly, as if finally taking some interest in his words.

She stepped closer, looking down at the man lying on the ground.

"...Are you sure?"

Vira nodded repeatedly, his head turning red from the bumps, "I can lead the way! I know where he lives, I can pretend to visit, I have a domain, I have a reason to approach him!"

"Don't kill me... don't kill me..."

His face was smeared with snot and tears, yet the corners of his mouth still couldn't suppress a distorted smile.

Just give me one more chance, I can sell anyone out...

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The first ray of morning sunlight shone through the red copper windows into the room.

Louis sat up from the wide yet simple bed, rubbed his forehead, his head still a bit heavy.

Last night was his first night spent in this fortress.

The room wasn't extravagant, but it was far from shabby.

The floor was made of polished oak boards, warm and comfortable underfoot.

A row of low bookshelves stood against the wall, the table held ink and parchment brought from the South, with a silver-inlaid pen stand beside it.

In the middle lay a large animal skin rug from a giant winter bear, grayish-white, soft and silent underfoot.

The fireplace had already gone cold, yet the room remained warm.

Heat rose slowly from stone troughs in the floor and wall corners, driven by hot spring flows, a winter's blessing even the nobles of the Imperial Capital might not enjoy.

Compared to the luxurious bedrooms of the Royal Capital adorned in gold and silver, Red Tide Castle lacked opulence but had stability and attentiveness.

Louis squinted his eyes slightly and murmured, "Not bad at all."

But even with a change in environment, his first morning action remained unchanged.

He yawned and casually activated the "Daily Intelligence System," a translucent screen floated before his eyes, quickly displaying a few lines of text.

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

Chapter 105: Daily Intelligence Update

A semi-transparent light screen floated before Louis's eyes, with a few lines of text quickly jumping on the panel.

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

[1: The remnants of the old Northern Territory nobility secretly gather under the call of Viscount Fos, attempting to unite against the new Prefect Louis. Each noble has their own hidden agenda.]

[2: Under the coercion of the Snow Swearers, Baron Vira led thirty-five old subordinates in a raid on Fors Manor, capturing twelve attending nobles alive.]

[3: Forced by the Snow Swearers, Baron Vira leads thirty-five Snow Swearers southward, planning to attack Red Tide Territory today, intending to capture Prefect Louis alive.]

[4: An epidemic "White Sleep Fever" has appeared in the Northern Cold Fir Territory. If not promptly addressed, it will quickly spread throughout Snow Peak County, with unimaginable consequences.]

This time, the intelligence updates from the Daily Intelligence System were all heavyweights.

Louis, originally leaning against the headboard, sat up straight upon seeing the first item.

The old Northern Territory nobility group joined forces to resist him.

"They're trying to isolate me..." he murmured softly.

Originally, Louis thought that since Duke Edmund appointed him as Prefect, he should take responsibility.

And now, as Snow Peak County is in ruins and needs rebuilding, the lords should communicate and support each other through the tough times.

But these people... actually colluding secretly, attempting to overtly comply while covertly disobeying, to sideline him?

"Truly, the human heart is malicious."

He quickly thought of a countermeasure, but couldn't help but laugh upon seeing the second piece of intelligence.

Baron Vira raided Fors Manor, and twelve nobles were captured alive for sacrifice.

"So they've all been caged by the Snow Swearers, saving me a lot of trouble," Louis laughed softly.

Thank the Snow Swearers, thank Baron Vira.

However, before he could finish laughing, his face darkened upon seeing the third item.

Vira led the way, with a new target on Red Tide Territory, intending to capture him.

"Damn traitor," Louis cursed, completely forgetting that just a moment ago he was thanking this turncoat.

Thirty-five Snow Swearers isn't much.

But in the current Snow Peak County, where the Snow Swearers' regular corps has withdrawn, only some stragglers linger, those able to move freely in Snow Peak County are undoubtedly the elite troops of the Snow Swearers.

Without the Daily Intelligence System, he might have really been caught by them as a "sacrifice" without any preparation.

Eating the Empire's grain and still wanting to toss Imperial Nobility into the pot of the Ancient God?

The thing he hated most was these traitors.

Baron Vira already had a death path laid out!

"Too bad, I have the Daily Intelligence System," Louis said in a low voice, but with a hint of coldness: "So now the identities of hunter and prey have to swap."

With the intelligence system, he quickly thought of a countermeasure.

Then Louis looked at the fourth item, and this time all the laughter was gone.

A plague, "White Sleep Fever," has appeared in the Northern Cold Fir Territory.

Louis stared at this intelligence, his brow slowly furrowing.

White Sleep Fever is a highly contagious, high-mortality epidemic.

The Northern Territory experiences an outbreak every dozen years. Once it appears, death and chaos follow.

Because of its strong sleep-inducing and lethal cold reactions, it's popularly called: "Snow Spirit Curse."

Early on, it's just drowsiness, confusion, like a minor illness from long-term fatigue.

But three days later, the body temperature will plummet, and the patient will open their eyes, murmuring to themselves.

They will recount scenes from dreams, speaking of vague and strange "future fragments."

On the fifth day, they start to sleep deeply, with a weak heartbeat, and tear ducts secrete ice-water-like liquid.

The sixth day brings a sudden high fever, as if a raging fire burns inside.

By the seventh day, they're most likely dead.

If uncontrolled, this disease could induce panic and collapse order throughout Snow Peak County, even the Northern Territory.

Louis closed his eyes, his mind rapidly analyzing: this is not a curse, it's a disease.

More specifically, it should be a cold-activated magical fungal disease.

"The spores likely invade through the moist cold wind, entering through the skin or nasal cavity, ultimately colonizing the brain, affecting the nervous system.

Drowsiness, hallucinations, hypothermia... also align with magical fungal infection symptoms."

Surprisingly, the solution is quite simple.

As long as the patient is exposed to an environment of more than fifty degrees Celsius for half an hour, the fungi can be effectively killed, preventing further deterioration.

The patient will naturally wake up, escaping danger.

It sounds almost like a joke.

But the problem lies in this "simple" approach needing timing.

If the opportunity is missed, and the fungi root into the brain, with the patient asleep too long, not even high heat can save them.

Most troublesome is the speed of transmission and onset are too fast.

Many lords find out the issue only after their domains are already filled with those fallen.

Moreover, creating a sauna-like environment in the Northern Territory's harsh weather is daunting.

In a place where soon even water must be acquired by ice crushing, how could an entire room be raised to fifty degrees, sustained for half an hour? Impossible!

Louis quickly thought of a way: steam.

Sauna, steam room, geothermal steaming are all feasible methods.

And Red Tide Territory happens to have hot spring resources.

But in the next second, he shook his head: "No."

Red Tide Territory is the core area of his domain, a granary, a fortress, the starting point for everything in the future.

He wouldn't allow even the slightest virus to be brought in.

Additionally, it takes at least four days round trip from Cold Fir Territory to Red Tide, which is too late.

"People can't be brought in, only the heat can be sent over."

His mind quickly ran through the latest intelligence, thinking of countermeasures.

Suddenly, he remembered an old piece of intelligence.

The geothermal core of Red Tide Territory is home to a group of Fire-backed Turtles.

A glint appeared in his eyes.

The Fire-backed Turtle is a geothermal creature, inhabiting the crevices of hot springs and magma.

The energy blocks on their backs can store massive amounts of heat.

Once the temperature reaches a limit, it erupts as steam.

Instant high temperature and humidity, like a natural sauna room.

"White Sleep Fever... just so happens to fear this."

The Fire-backed Turtle is practically a tailor-made nemesis for the epidemic.

High temperature, steam, humid air, and magical heat energy.

Build a small house, place a turtle, and treatment, purification, quarantine, can all be covered.

His original plan was to tame them.

Take things slowly, build trust, and let the geothermal turtles become the winter guardians of Red Tide Territory.

But now... there's no time for "slowly."

"Sorry, turtle," Louis said apologetically, "for the entire Cold Fir Territory, I'll have to kill a few for now."

He knew what this meant.

The turtle shells are one-time use; once removed, the heat can likely only be retained for one or two days before it's gone forever.

Fire-backed Turtles are scarce; hunting one means one less.

But now he couldn't concern himself with that.

Turtles could be bred over time, but the dead can't be brought back.

Chapter 106: Vera Visits Louis

There was a lot to be done, too much.

Louis dressed, quickly washed his face, fastened his cloak, and with urgent steps, walked into the office.

The door hadn't fully closed when he spoke: "Call Lambert."

As his words fell, the attendants immediately rushed off.

Mere moments later, Lambert strode in quickly, and before he could speak, Louis issued his orders:

"Take a hundred Red Tide Knights and ambush outside the main gate of the Red Tide Territory. The enemy is the Snow Swearer Elites."

He squinted, his voice as cold as a blade: "Find the right moment, overwhelm them with sheer numbers, leave a few prisoners for questioning, kill the rest without exception."

Lambert's heart shuddered, but he didn't hesitate: "Yes, my lord!"

The second order was immediately given: "Then, call three Knights, plus two physicians, take these guidelines, and head to the Cold Fir Territory immediately."

The attendant took the few handwritten drafts he tossed on the table, even the handwriting was quite sloppy.

"The most important thing is isolation," Louis pointed to the first order on the draft, "allocate manpower in Cold Fir Territory to immediately build a batch of airtight rooms that can trap heat.

Anyone showing symptoms of drowsiness must be concentrated there for management, ensure isolation, no running around, no hiding, violators to be killed without exception."

What he had just thrown out was his temporarily written "Guidelines for Health and Hygiene Operations."

For example, the "Boiling Water Method" should be implemented for all territories, drinking water must be boiled thoroughly.

Everyone is to be given a piece of grass cloth to cover their mouth and nose. No matter how rough, it must prevent droplet transmission.

...

The guards, upon receiving Louis's orders, immediately proceeded to assign the tasks without stopping.

The third order was quickly issued from Louis's mouth: "Summon some Hunters and Knights, prepare to set off. The target is the Fire-backed Turtle, located in the geothermal zone of the Red Tide hot springs.

If you can catch them, catch them, if not, kill them. Their shells are of great use, six or seven will do."

The attendants gave a short acknowledgment and each quickly went on their way.

Just as Louis issued the last order, intending to take a small breather.

A guard briskly pushed the door open, slightly out of breath: "My lord, a team has arrived outside."

"Hmm?" Louis raised a brow.

The guard quickly added: "The leader claims to be Baron Vira, saying he's here to visit you."

Louis was taken aback for a moment, arrived so soon?

At this moment, he suddenly took a slight interest: "Let him in, but only allow two people with him. Also, tell Lambert to take action as soon as those three come in."

The guard bowed and swiftly retreated.

.....

Ten minutes earlier.

Outside the Red Tide Territory, a carriage slowly came to a halt.

Baron Vira, dressed in noble attire, wore a smug smile on his face.

But as soon as he got off the carriage, he saw several fully armed Red Tide Knights blocking the road ahead, their swords horizontal, and their expressions unkind.

"Stop." The lead knight said sternly, "State your name, what business do you have?"

"Heh." Vira lifted his chin, his tone arrogant, "I am Baron Vira, here to visit Red Tide Lord Louis."

The knights exchanged glances, and one immediately turned and ran into the city to report.

Soon after, that person returned, breathless: "Report! Lord Louis agrees to see you!"

Vira nodded in satisfaction.

"However," the knight's tone paused, "Only three of you can enter. The rest must wait outside the city."

Upon hearing this, Vira's face didn't look good but he held back, gritting his teeth: "Understood, I'll go discuss this."

He turned his horse around and led his entourage aside to whisper.

When facing the Snow Swearer, the arrogance on Vira's face vanished, replaced with a fawning smile, his waist almost bent like a bow.

"Rest assured, my lords," he said obsequiously, "I'll lure Louis out, then when action is taken, it's a sure catch, not even needing to fight the town."

The female Snow Swearer, clad in standard armor of a noble knight, had a cold and sharp gaze.

She pondered for a moment, then lightly nodded, "Alright."

She then selected a Snow Swearer Knight who looked the most composed, to follow behind Vira.

Vira rode with his head held high, his eyes filled with disdain for the Red Tide Knights.

The three of them rode slowly towards the gate of Red Tide City.

However, not long after they left, the Red Tide Knights, hidden in ambush, surged forth like a tide.

About a hundred fully armed Red Tide Knights quickly encircled the unsuspecting Snow Swearer.

After a brief skirmish, the ground was stained with blood.

These Snow Swearer elites fought fiercely, but under the overwhelming force, all resistance was futile.

The Red Tide Knights intended to leave at least a few alive, but the Snow Swearers, realizing escape was impossible, initiated the Blood Boiling Frenzy to try and take down more.

But the numerical gap was too great, they were worn down to death.

Moreover, a group of bound nobility was timely rescued amidst the chaos, twelve in total, suffering from frostbite and fright but still alive.

Meanwhile, with Vira among them, the trio were leisurely making their way through the town streets under the escort of Red Tide guards.

They were completely unaware that the team behind them had already perished in the cold wind, and the earth was stained with fresh blood.

And the guards beside them were not ordinary attendants, but all Elite Knights.

Appearing respectful and guiding the way, they were actually constantly on guard, ready to act swiftly and kill at any sign of unease.

On the streets, smoke curled from the chimneys, people dressed neatly, their steps light and brisk.

Children's laughter echoed, old folks sat by their doorsteps basking in the feeble winter sun, occasionally passing youths and maidens would respectfully salute the knights.

Watching the smoke and smiling faces on the street, Vira felt a strong surge of disgust within.

He couldn't stand seeing these commoners living good lives.

In his eyes, these lowly people should be struggling in the mud, not like the people here, dressed cleanly and smiling at the sun.

Their smiles stung his eyes.

Vira sneered internally, thinking Louis was an incompetent lord who didn't know how to utilize his subjects.

But on the surface, he maintained a facade of indifference, following the Red Tide guards onwards.

And the female Snow Swearer leader beside him also slightly lowered her head, a flicker of disgust and distortion in her eyes.

As a Snow Swearer, she wished she could kill everyone here.

Finally, they were brought to a castle.

This castle was far beyond their expectations, with massive cylindrical columns standing tall, constructed of rough and simplistic stone materials, ugly yet exuding a heart-stopping oppressive feel.

To attack such a place would undoubtedly cost dearly.

The female leader couldn't help but grit her teeth, her mood growing heavier.

She resolved that if an opportunity arose, she would kill Louis at once, in case he was not lured out.

Chapter 107: Master Calvin's Kind Heart

The guards didn't give them much time to linger, directly leading them into the castle, ascending all the way to the banquet hall on the third floor.

A young figure sat in a high position, his presence calm as water.

That was Louis, younger and more handsome than they had imagined.

Vera had a flash of jealousy and malice in her eyes, but outwardly she wore a full smile, just about to exchange pleasantries.

But before she could speak, she heard a guard say, "Attack!"

Almost simultaneously, over a dozen Red Tide Elite Knights burst out from within the hall, the roof, and the surroundings, moving as swiftly as beasts long poised to strike.

The female leader's heart tightened sharply, instinctively reaching for the dagger hidden at her waist.

However, just as her hand touched the hilt, her left wrist suddenly throbbed with pain!

It turned out a short sword flashed coldly, accurately hitting her hand joint, rendering her entire arm numb.

At the same time, three elite knights pounced from left and right, knees heavily pressing against her rear knee joints, throwing her completely off balance and pinning her to the ground.

Another Snow Swearer was also unwilling to be outdone, struggling with a low roar, but just as he moved, a hand strike hit his neck, rendering him limp on the floor.

As for Vera, he didn't even have time to speak before his wrist was twisted with a cracking sound, being pressed directly against the cold stone floor, unable to move.

In just three seconds, the three were completely subdued, kneeling before Louis.

Pinned to the ground, Vera gritted his teeth and shouted angrily, "Lord Louis! I'm here to give you a gift! A big gift, right outside the city! Why are you doing this to me?!"

The voice echoed in the empty meeting hall, sharp with a tinge of hysteria.

Louis looked down at him, smiling faintly, "A gift? Do you mean... those thirty or so Snow Swearers?"

At these words, Vera's heart clenched hard, his face turning ghastly pale.

Louis continued unhurriedly, "Don't worry, I've already received them. But my knights personally went to collect, no need for you to deliver it by hand."

Those simple words pierced Vera's heart like knives.

He could no longer maintain his composure, his pupils contracting violently, and he asked in a trembling voice, "How, how could it be...?"

He subconsciously looked towards the female leader of the Snow Swearers, suspecting it was a betrayal from their side.

The female leader also looked at him coldly, eyes full of mockery and suspicion.

The scene was momentarily frozen.

Louis leaned back in his high-backed chair, smiling slightly, "Don't guess, it was the Dragon Ancestor who told me in a dream yesterday."

Vera froze in place, his mind buzzing.

He quickly realized that the Snow Swearers were already wiped out.

Otherwise, Louis wouldn't be here chatting and laughing with them.

Shaking, he hurriedly knelt, kowtowing heavily, "Lord Louis, Lord Governor, spare me! I was coerced! I deliberately led the Snow Swearers into the trap, truly! I am loyal to you!"

Before he finished, Louis waved his hand, "Gag him, too noisy."

The Red Tide Knight stepped forward, grabbing Vera's hair and roughly stuffing a cloth into his mouth.

The meeting hall finally returned to quiet.

Louis then turned, looking at the cold and beautiful female leader, "I want to ask you something, if you answer, I might let you go."

The female leader stared at him coldly, saying nothing.

Louis wasn't angered, asking the question he'd been wanting to know, "What exactly are you Snow Swearers sacrificing to?"

The air seemed to freeze.

Shock flashed in the female leader's eyes, but she remained silent.

Louis waited a few seconds, then slowly stood up, tidying his sleeves.

"Seems you won't answer either," he said lightly, as if finalizing a verdict, "Drag them all outside and execute them. Don't dirty the newly renovated castle."

The knights respectfully complied, beginning to drag the three.

Vera's legs struggled wildly, leaving marks on the ground as he was dragged.

He tried to make a plea for mercy, but his mouth was blocked, leaving him to only helplessly gaze at Louis.

But Louis didn't look at him, only turning to look at the scenery outside the window.

Alas, Master Calvin was kind-hearted and couldn't bear these things.

The three were quickly dragged out and taken outside the castle.

Blood splattered on the frozen ground, and after a brief scream, the world returned to silence.

Having dealt with this little farce, Louis decided to personally check on the capture of the Fire-backed Turtle to prevent any mishaps halfway.

However, he still felt a bit regretful, as he had originally wanted to extract intelligence from the Snow Swearer female leader, but unfortunately, he failed.

The intelligence system occasionally had information about nobility being taken as sacrifices by the Snow Swearers, but the goals of the sacrifices were never detailed.

Louis had always been curious about this, but alas, he couldn't find out this time either.

"Oh well, perhaps next time I encounter the Snow Swearers," Louis sighed slightly, stepping forward toward the capture area of the Fire-backed Turtle.

But just a few steps out of the castle, he saw Lambert hurriedly approaching with a group of people.

And upon closer inspection, it turned out to be those noble captives.

Leading them was Viscount Fos.

Seeing Louis appear, these disheveled nobles hurriedly knelt, grateful and repeatedly shouting, "Thank you, lord, for the lifesaving grace!"

Louis frowned, not expecting this group to be directly captured by the Snow Swearers and, moreover, not one died.

It was somewhat troublesome, but fortunately not much.

He casually ordered, "Just deal with them."

As the words fell, the air seemed to freeze for a moment.

The faces of the captured nobles instantly lost all color.

Some turned pale, kneeling and desperately kowtowing for mercy.

Some shouted angrily, cursing Louis with their status and titles.

And others just stared blankly at Louis, eyes filled with disbelief.

They simply couldn't comprehend that this young lord would really say such a thing.

They thought they misheard.

But Louis had already stepped away, taking a few more steps before suddenly stopping.

Viscount Fos's eyes lit up, thinking Louis was merely scaring them, wanting to see them make a fool of themselves.

This Southern Barbarian was very wicked.

But in the next moment, Louis said blandly, "Oh, and clean it up well, make it look like the Snow Swearers did it."

The words were as calm as asking a cook to kill a chicken.

The nobles finally understood.

Louis wasn't joking, not trying to intimidate them; he truly wanted them dead, as if the lives of these nobles were worthless.

He! How dare he!

Despair washed over their faces like a tidal wave.

Some collapsed to the ground, endlessly pleading, while others cursed madly...

Lambert nodded, saying, "As you command, I will handle it well!"

So behind Louis, the sound of intermittent screams soon rose.

Alas, Master Calvin was kind-hearted and couldn't bear to hear these things.

He quickened his pace.

Chapter 108: Poor Turtles

Louis urged his horse forward, heading deep into the geothermal area of the Red Tide Territory.

However, as soon as they stepped into the outskirts, his warhorse began to grow restless, letting out anxious whinnies.

"Can't go any further?" Louis tightened the reins, dismounted, and continued on foot.

Though autumn was upon them and the northern lands should have been icy cold, in this area, the ground temperature had already exceeded eighty degrees.

Even the thick-soled riding boots couldn't block the burning sensation, as if walking on a scorching iron plate.

He took off the heavy wolf fur coat, wearing only a light shirt.

The fighting energy surged within him, forming a thin protective barrier against the incoming high heat.

Yet even so, he still felt as if he were being steamed, with sweat nearly soaking his back in an instant.

Before him lay a red-brown fissured area, with hot steam rising between the rock cracks, and over a dozen fire-backed turtles half-buried in the geothermal zone lazily and warily exhaling heat, occasionally raising their heads with shells glimmering a faint red.

This was the nesting place of the fire-backed turtles, the core of the geothermal eruptions, and the foundation of the Red Tide Territory.

Louis took a deep breath of the hot air and stepped toward the core area.

The Red Tide Knights had already been in the geothermal area for a while.

Without fighting energy protection, ordinary hunters could only offer some advice from the outskirts, leaving the actual action to the knights.

Their faces didn't look good, indicating the operation wasn't very successful.

"Report, my lord!" A knight hurriedly stepped forward, panting, "These fire-backed turtles are really tough to handle!"

Although they aren't aggressive, they're highly alert, withdrawing into their shells at the slightest approach... Their defense is comparable to city walls, coupled with the high surface temperature, making it impossible to start!"

Louis fell silent for a moment, then made a decision: "Let's pause for now, observe them first, and don't provoke them."

The knights nodded in agreement and went off to rest.

Louis stood on the scorching ground, carefully observing the fire-backed turtles.

He knew he must come up with a smarter method, and time was running short.

After half a day of observation, Louis finally noticed something unusual.

The fire-backed turtles were entering the mating season.

In the scorching geothermal area, a few scattered female turtles were surrounded by groups of male turtles.

The agitated males were breathing heavily, with eyes full of pent-up desire.

Whenever they got close to a female, they would tap their heads against the female's shell, creating a crisp sound, which was the fire-backed turtle's direct courting signal.

If a female was interested, she would lazily rub the ground twice, emitting a faint friction sound.

If not, she would retract into her shell, emitting scorching white mist, effectively warding off suitors.

But the females here were quite clever.

They neither nodded nor refused, just giving off a "there's still a chance for you" attitude, keeping the males running in circles.

Some would rub the ground twice and then shrink back into their shells, letting the males hit nothing.

Others would show half their tails, attracting a group of males to fight each other, then casually spew a mist, leaving them rolling on the ground.

The savvier females simply extended their tongues, pointing at the ground, clearly indicating: bring food.

So the male turtles dragged their bulky bodies across the area, scavenging for charred lizards or shriveled stone fruits to pile in front of the females.

The females ate while being picky, leisurely chewing the delicacies the male turtles painstakingly gathered.

After filling their belly, they shook their shells slightly, leaving a hint of suggestion before continuing to dangle the males along.

Louis squinted his eyes, feeling the scene was somewhat familiar.

The sexual frustration of the males was reaching its peak.

They were restless, anxious, almost about to lose control.

A brilliant, devious plan sparked in Louis' mind: "Perfect, let's do something dirty. Operation Codename: Turtle Trap."

He immediately ordered the knights to start collecting female turtle urine.

During the mating season, female turtle urine had a strong, acrid smell, like fire-roasted sulfur mixed with rotting mud, causing tears to flow.

The knights turned pale, but with the lord's orders, they had no choice but to comply.

They pinched their noses, held bottles, and began cautiously collecting the urine.

To amplify the effect, Louis called on alchemists to mix other liquids with it, instantly magnifying the scent several times over.

The entire camp seemed covered with a thick stench, overwhelming even the bravest knights into fits of coughing.

Meanwhile, he also ordered craftsmen to weave some simple fake turtle shells from reeds.

Inside the fake shells, a few real small stones were suspended.

A slight swing could produce a sound similar to a female turtle rubbing against the ground.

With everything prepared, the plan commenced.

In the following day, Louis and the knights hid behind the hot rocky area, targeting those males who were tortured by sexual frustration.

These unfortunate creatures had their shells rubbed shiny, eyes almost on fire,

some even clutching rocks to relieve their loneliness, a pitiful sight to behold.

After confirming a target, Louis pulled out the fake turtle coated in the pungent female urine as bait.

A gentle tug on a thin vine, and the fake shell wobbled on the ground, emitting a suggestive rustling sound.

Coupled with the overwhelming "scent of love," the effect was catastrophic.

The restless male stretched its neck, nostrils flaring, eyes almost popping out,

assuming a stance where even his mother wouldn't be recognized, only his "wife."

It let out a series of strange, deep growls, charging thunderously at the fake turtle,

Opportunity!

Louis immediately signaled.

Several knights, already prepared, moved swiftly, looping thick ropes soaked in the same female urine precisely around the male's neck.

Vines pulled hard!

Accompanied by a deafening thud, the enthusiastic male was forcibly dragged into the cold iron cage.

The cold iron cage, heavy and sturdy, not only withstood full-force impacts from the fire-backed turtles but also isolated the high-temperature mist they spewed in fury and thirst.

Capture successful!

Within just two days, under Louis' direct command, they consecutively captured four of the most restless, mindless, and hopeless male fire-backed turtles.

Though they continued to thrash around in the cages, letting out mournful, thirsty calls, ultimately their fervor was left unfulfilled.

"Poor little turtles," Louis whispered to the firmly confined fire-backed turtles.

He didn't waste time and immediately arranged for personnel to escort the fire-backed turtles to the Cold Fir Territory.

Even though these fire-backed turtles were far from being truly tamed, Louis aimed to transport them back to the Cold Fir Territory safely without excessive violence, laying the groundwork for future domestication.

The journey would take about four days.

To prevent any uprisings from the fire-backed turtles along the way, Louis specifically designed a simple mobile protection device.

He also had physicians concoct gentle herbs to lightly sedate the fire-backed turtles, keeping them in a semi-conscious state during the journey.

Amidst the autumn winds of the Red Tide Territory, Louis stood atop the Red Tide Castle, watching the distant transport team, hoping they reached their destination soon.

Chapter 109: Snow Spirit Curse

Ian curled up in the narrow isolation room.

The space was small, only able to accommodate a few tattered straw mats and a couple of stiff blankets.

The air was mixed with dampness and decay, like the scent of death lingering.

Darkness enveloped the surroundings.

Repressed sounds constantly echoed in his ears.

Someone coughed, someone groaned, someone cried softly.

Others mumbled gibberish, whispering nonexistent names, or repeating bizarre dreams to themselves.

This was already the late stage of the illness, Ian guessed the other might not live much longer.

Ian wrapped the ragged blanket around himself, trembling all over.

Despite the air being hot and damp, he felt as though he was lying naked in the snow, every inch of skin tingling with cold.

His head throbbed violently, like a sheet of paper being slowly torn to shreds.

Even moving a finger became an extravagant hope.

Ian knew it wasn't an ordinary illness; this was the "Snow Spirit Curse."

This was the Northern Territory's long-standing nightmare, a death tide that inevitably swept through every few decades.

Ian closed his eyes, trying to focus, but it was too cold.

Every breath felt like inhaling shards of ice.

Blood seemed to stop flowing, even his heart felt frozen and sluggish.

Suddenly, in the blurry darkness before him, he saw Erin.

She was his wife.

That familiar and gentle smile stood at the isolation room's door, gently waving at him.

"Ian..." she called to him.

The voice was ethereal like a dream, yet heartbreakingly real.

Ian's eyes warmed, almost making him want to crawl towards her.

But reason held him tightly.

No, this was not real.

All of this was an illusion from the "Snow Spirit Curse."

Just yesterday, in the isolation area next door, someone saw the apparition of a deceased relative, and then died the next day.

Ian clenched his teeth, drove his nails into his palm, trying to use the pain to pull himself back to reality.

But his body was too weak, even the sense of pain dulled.

Pain, like a hand, slowly yet ruthlessly clenched his throat.

He was afraid, but not of death.

He feared he might never see Mia again.

His daughter.

The small figure chasing after fallen leaves in the autumn breeze.

The little girl smiling widely by the campfire.

The child who once cried from hunger, now finally able to sleep soundly.

Clearly, Mia was still so young.

And life had just started to improve.

A few days ago, they even had a small hut for just the father and daughter.

Mia could sleep peacefully there, no longer waking in the middle of the night.

Work was tough, but with hard work, they could earn work points to exchange for food and clothes.

Most importantly, Mia had made friends, other rescued kids like her, who always played in the camp's center.

In those times, Ian always stood at a distance, quietly watching.

Seeing that long-lost smile brought a warmth that almost melted his heart.

It felt like... finally, he could believe that the future would slowly get better.

But now.

The damned plague, like a merciless lightning bolt, shattered it all.

If he were to die just like this...

What would happen to Mia?

Would she, too, be swallowed by this epidemic?

Ian's breathing grew faint, a severe dizziness rose to his head, as if he was being swept into a cold abyss.

He was being consumed bit by bit by cold and despair.

Outside the isolation room, night felt frozen thick.

.....

The spread of the White Sleep Fever was terrifyingly fast.

Almost everyone in every corner showed symptoms.

The isolation zone where Ian was located was completely sealed off.

Doctors and soldiers executed Lord Louis' orders one by one, without any leniency, without any hesitation.

Everyone understood that the situation was already beyond the point of no return.

Under orders, everyone had to wear protective gear and drink boiled water daily to reduce virus transmission.

The infected were isolated in batches, each household was separated by canvas sheets and wooden doors, dividing the camp into isolated islands.

Even so, the effect was minimal.

Everyone was well aware.

The spread of this epidemic moved as fast as an out-of-control flood, leaving people almost no chance to struggle.

All efforts, all defenses, were as fragile and powerless as dry branches in the wind.

Watching as the situation crumbled bit by bit.

Terror and despair, like dense fog, seeped silently into every inch of air in the camp.

Suddenly, in this boundless despair, came the urgent sound of hooves outside the isolation area!

Clop-clop-clop-clop-clop!

A knight, covered in wind and snow, staggered in, his face flushed, shouting loudly, "Lord Louis has caught a Fire-backed Turtle! It's on the way! Is the Steam House ready?"

For a moment, everyone froze.

The logistics officer's eyes turned red, nodding vigorously as if clinging to a lifeline, trembling as he shouted back: "Ready!!"

The next morning.

A dozen knights arrived on horseback, pulling the heavy Cold Iron Cage, finally transporting a few giant Fire-backed Turtles over.

The Fire-backed Turtles, with their thick shells and dark red energy blocks on their backs, were the key to salvation.

But at the moment, due to the Unconsciousness Potion, the turtles were all unconscious.

Someone shouted aloud, "The Fire-backed Turtles are here!! There is hope!!"

The entire isolation area erupted in cheers.

The long-repressed sorrow and despair shattered like a clap of spring thunder.

The crowd thanked the great Lord Louis, embracing and crying with joy.

In those dark days, the first ray of dawn had finally arrived.

The Fire-backed Turtles were carefully transported into the refurbished steam room.

However, they remained immobile, and people were at a loss on how to awaken them.

Knight Mario stepped out from the crowd.

He remembered the task given to him by Louis; the Fire-backed Turtles needed to be "activated."

Mario took a deep breath, and fighting energy roared through his body, infusing his entire being.

Then he stomped heavily on the shell of one of the Fire-backed Turtles.

"Thud!!" A dull sound echoed.

The unconscious Fire-backed Turtle shuddered suddenly, the energy block on its back lit up with a crimson glow.

Then, "Hiss—!!"

They all awoke, arching their shells, spurting out scorching white steam.

The billowing heat quickly filled the entire steam room, dispelling the cold and deathly air.

The doctors quickly sprang into action.

They shouted orders as they carried the most critically ill patients into the steam-filled room.

The moist, warm air enveloped every icy skin, seeming to forcibly reclaim people from Death's grasp.

Patients were brought one after another into this warm space, and their furrowed brows finally relaxed slightly.

The shadow of death, at this moment, was pushed back by the steam's heat wave.

Chapter 110: Your Kindness Etched in Our Hearts

Ian was carefully lifted and carried into the steam chamber by medical staff.

He was now in the late stages of White Sleep Fever, and without treatment, he might not survive the night.

So the doctor had him sent into the steam chamber as part of the first group.

Ian was too weak to open his eyes, only vaguely hearing the chaotic footsteps and feeling himself being moved.

Was he already dead? Were they moving his corpse? He wondered.

Then something warm wrapped around his cold, stiff body.

The air was thick with steam, warmth seeping into his numb limbs like a tide.

Breathing became easier too.

"Hang in there! It will be okay soon!" someone shouted in his ear.

In his dazed consciousness, Ian felt like someone submerged in the ice lake, finally surfacing.

He felt his blood starting to circulate again, sensation returning to his fingertips.

Aching and painful, yet so real.

He struggled to open his eyes slightly.

What came into view was blurry steam and busy figures.

A scorching tear rolled down from the corner of his eye.

Ian could hardly believe his body was slowly recovering, that someone would save him no matter the cost.

In this world, refugees like them were worthless and could be abandoned at any moment.

Yet now, someone had exerted so much effort to save them.

It must be Lord Louis!

Only he would save a commoner with no value like himself.

As he slowly recovered, the temperature also rose higher.

The high heat scorched his skin, every breath felt like inhaling flames.

Too hot, too painful.

But he had never felt so excited.

Not because he was a masochist, but because he knew he was saved.

In his heart, Ian used the last of his strength to sincerely thank the great Lord Louis.

And throughout the entire territory, Ian wasn't the only one waking from unconsciousness.

Other patients, the pale residents, too, were slowly crawling back from the shadows of death.

Everyone couldn't help but let out painful groans, but accompanying these were greater joys.

The pain in their bodies clearly told them they were alive, living in this steaming warmth.

Some residents opened their eyes in a daze, seeing steam and busy doctors around them.

They mumbled, "Am I... still alive?"

It was a confirmation of crawling back from the gates of hell, filled with immense astonishment.

The nearby medical staff softly replied, "We all survived, Lord Louis saved us."

A simple sentence, yet filled with endless gratitude.

Tears welled in the eyes of those lying in the steam chamber, touching their still faintly beating hearts, softly thanking, "Thank you... thank you, Lord Louis."

They didn't have much strength to say more to express their gratitude for escaping death.

But every patient, every resident, knew clearly that their lives weren't abandoned.

Their lord had done everything possible to pull them back from the brink of death.

Lord Louis was like the radiant sunlight, warm and brilliant.

The temperature in the steam room continued to rise, yet it didn't suffocate.

Everyone was immersed in this indescribable warmth.

As if sunlight had reached cold lands, warming each person like spring sunshine.

With Louis's help, Cold Fir Territory finally saw the dawn of life again under the shadow of death.

.....

Louis sat in his study, holding a letter sent from Cold Fir Territory.

He tore open the envelope, slowly unfolding the letter to review the latest intelligence about Cold Fir Territory, praying no other incidents would occur.

The handwriting was somewhat sloppy, evidently written in haste.

"Dear Lord Louis, Cold Fir Territory has passed the crisis of White Sleep Fever, the fire-backed turtle's steam treatment was successfully effective, the spread of infection was swiftly contained.

Most patients have recovered, and even those critically ill have awakened.

Thank you for sending the fire-backed turtle in time, which brought hope of life to us, the residents are overwhelmingly grateful to you.

During the difficult days of fighting under your guidance, we only lost twenty-six villagers and five young children, which is a sad thing.

However, most people have still persevered, and we're thankful for all you've done for us.

We hope you continue to take care of yourself, and we will engrave your kindness in our hearts."

Louis put down the letter, bowed his head and pondered for a moment. Twenty-six, five children, it sounds like a significant number, but compared to his original expectations, it actually seems fortunate.

He sighed softly, his gaze unconsciously drawn to the gray sky outside the window.

He had done everything he could, as for those who didn't survive, it could only be blamed on their bad luck.

After all, this was an uncontrollable disaster.

The pain it brought cannot be ignored, but at least most people pulled through, which also proved his efforts were indeed successful.

The role of the fire-backed turtle was also fully displayed in this crisis.

Moreover, the capabilities of this magical beast extend far beyond treating White Sleep Fever.

Firstly, the high-temperature steam from the fire-backed turtle can provide a lasting and stable heat source for the entire territory.

Once the temperature accumulates to a certain degree, it naturally releases high-temperature steam.

But in the cold Northern Territory, having such consistent and stable warmth is undoubtedly an extravagant treasure.

The steam can be directed to greenhouses to cultivate crops.

It can also be sent to residences to help people withstand the harsh winter.

Although the Red Tide Territory has geothermal energy that doesn't need it, the other territories could use it.

But occasionally going to the geothermal area for recharging might be a bit troublesome.

More importantly, the steam from the fire-backed turtle not only addresses the issues of a harsh winter.

Regular exposure to this hot steam seems to also bring subtle improvements to people's health.

The heat and humidity of the steam is like a natural sauna.

It can stimulate blood circulation, help expel toxins from the body, and enhance immunity.

For an Apprentice Knight, it might have special effects.

"I need to find a way to completely tame this kind of magical beast... and even raise the next generation," Louis secretly planned.

At this moment, there was a hurried knock on the door from outside.

A guard entered, reporting in a somber tone: "Report, my lord, Baron Harvey requests to see you."

Yorn?

Louis was sorting through the documents on the fire-backed turtle when he heard this, pausing slightly, then showing a faint smile.

He casually put on an overcoat and neatly buttoned up his collar.

"Let's go see him."

Louis strode forward, leading the guard through the hallway, heading outside.