

Winter 111

Chapter 111: Red Tide Territory's Distinction

Louis draped in an overcoat, walked out of the castle's main gate.

The compacted dirt road underfoot stretched outwards from the central square.

Houses clustered tightly together, while campfires and chimney smoke swayed in the cold wind, sketching a lively scene.

This was no longer just that simple camp.

The residential area of the Red Tide Territory expanded outward from the castle like ripples, with streets, markets, warehouses, workshops...

Everything was growing rapidly.

He could clearly sense that this place was faintly taking the shape of a town.

Perhaps with further development next year, it could be called Red Tide City.

And as the population grows, the territory's prosperity might also attract potential coveters.

Perhaps it was time to start building a simple city wall.

He silently noted down this plan in his heart.

From afar, Louis saw a cloud of dust rising, with a team of knights approaching.

Leading them was a chubby youth on a black-maned horse.

"Boss!!" Yorn waved excitedly, nearly falling off the horse.

The knights escorted several heavy-laden carts, piled with sacks and wooden boxes, so heavy they almost broke the axles.

Louis hurried forward to greet them, "What brings you here?"

Yorn leapt off the horse, grinning like a child, and patted the grain cart beside him, "My old man was afraid I'd starve over the winter, so he especially sent a bunch of food over!"

He puffed out his chest with pride, his eyes sparkling with the pure glow unique to the sons of the wealthy.

"Especially since I won second-class merit on the front lines this time, the old man is ecstatic, he spoiled me with supplies, and you deserve ninety percent of the credit. Passing through your territory, I thought I'd drop by to see you!"

Yorn patted his chest, "Boss, want some? I have enough food for now, sharing a bit is no problem!"

Louis smiled and shook his head to refuse, "I've also spent money to buy a lot and still have some stocks, so there's no shortage for now."

And just like that, the two walked side by side in the cold wind, heading towards the castle.

Along the way, Yorn widened his eyes, looking around like a child entering the city for the first time.

The Red Tide Territory was completely different from other parts of the Northern Territory.

The faces of the people walking the streets were adorned with smiles.

Not the forced, stiff smiles, but genuine, heartfelt ease.

A row of semi-underground communal dwellings lined the road, crude but considered luxurious in the Northern Territory, all arranged neatly and orderly.

The roads were also cleaned spotlessly, not immaculate perhaps, but at least free of the usual mud and stench found elsewhere in the Northern Territory.

The most astonishing thing to Yorn was that whenever Louis passed by, the people would pause their work, stand straight, and bow with respect.

Some people shouted loudly, "Lord!"

Some children waved excitedly, shouting, "Good morning, Lord Louis!"

Faces alight with genuine smiles, warm as flames in the cold wind and snow.

Moreover, those gazes held not a trace of fear, only heartfelt respect and trust.

Yorn rode his horse with his mouth slightly agape, wearing a look of disbelief.

Everything here left him stunned.

His fief was a little north of Red Tide Territory, not far from here, but the situation was much worse.

The streets were muddy, the people's ramshackle houses were cobbled together haphazardly.

And his own food supplies and such were supported by his Count father far in the South.

Smile? Most were worn and morose, even too weary to speak.

Previously, he thought this was normal, the Northern Territory was too harsh for anyone to live easily.

He even suspected his 'fief' was simply a pile of junk and troublesome land.

But he had seen other lords' territories, and actually, the situation was similar, or some were even worse.

Especially after recent wars, everywhere had burned houses, broken fences, and hardly a stick of decent firewood to be found.

People wore numb expressions, tattered clothes, faces filled with the dazed and hopeless look of survivors.

In such a Northern Territory, in such times, he thought all places bore a scene of ruin.

But seeing all this before him...

Yorn swallowed hard, unable to hold back.

"Hey, Boss..." He pulled the reins tight, turning his head with a complex gaze at Louis,

"We both arrived in the Northern Territory around the same time, how did you manage this? How... how did you get the territory to be this good?"

Upon hearing this, Louis smiled smugly, as if this flattery struck him right in the heart, but he didn't answer immediately.

He raised his head to look at the people busy on the streets in the distance.

People carrying timber, repairing houses, children dressed in rough cloth robes chasing and playing nearby, the air filled with the scent of happiness.

Then he softly said, "It's actually very simple."

Yorn widened his eyes, ears perked, as if awaiting some heavenly secret technique.

"Just treat the people as real people."

"..." Yorn sat on his horse, mouth slightly open, stunned.

"That's it?" Yorn came back to his senses, looking at Louis with complex eyes.

"Yes."

Yorn's mouth twitched slightly, speechless for a long time.

This, this is too simple!

Yorn only felt that Louis was speaking the obvious truth.

Yet looking at the orderly surroundings again, he couldn't help but ponder the deeper meaning in these words.

As Yorn marveled, they rode leisurely forward on horseback, and soon the castle's gate came into view.

As he saw the castle, Yorn's eyes widened once again.

The castle of Red Tide Territory, rugged and massive, akin to an armored beast quietly crouching in the cold wind.

The earthen and stone walls seemed to grow naturally from the earth, exuding a primitive sense of oppression.

No gaudy decorations, no tall towers and carvings common in the South, only a stark, practical, and faintly wild strength, emanating the essence of the Northern Territory.

Yorn's expression nearly froze; he had never seen such a type of castle.

Louis... had already built the castle?!

While he still dwelled in a wood house, though carefully built, it couldn't possibly compare to a castle.

This gap was wider than the distance from Red Tide Territory to the Royal Capital.

"How is it?" Louis looked at him smugly, his tone carrying a hint of unconcealed boastfulness, "Not bad, right?"

Yorn, glancing up, swallowed hard.

After a while, he squeezed out a comment: "Astounding... but... built a bit ugly."

"..."

"What do you know!" Louis immediately retorted, "This is hardcore industrial style!"

Yorn looked at those thick and large columns, his mouth twitching slightly.

If this was industrial style, then the pile of rough wood planks he lived in must be rural art?

Chapter 112: Hot Spring

After eating and drinking their fill, the two of them walked along the wide stone steps, all the way to the depths of the first floor of the castle.

Pushing open the heavy wooden door, a wave of white hot steam rushed towards them.

"This is..." Yorn instinctively stopped, staring unblinkingly at the scene before him.

It was a crude but fully equipped hot spring pool.

The surroundings were tamped earth with stone bricks laid around the edge, devoid of any luxurious decorations, just the most practical construction.

The pool water was heated by natural geothermal energy, rolling with fine steam that permeated the entire hall, and a faint gurgling sound of water could be heard.

The air was mixed with a faint mineral aroma and a warm, moist sensation.

Outside the castle was still howling with cold wind, yet inside it seemed like another world.

But in a place like the Northern Territory, being able to soak in a hot spring?!

It's simply more enviable than owning a gold vein!

"Boss..." Yorn lamented while taking off his coat, his tone full of sourness, "Your territory actually has such a good place?"

Louis stood to the side, lazily smiling.

"Just lucky, just lucky." He casually brushed it off, though his face was full of undeniable pride.

Yorn had already stepped into the hot spring pool, almost sighing comfortably: "Ah! This is truly living..."

The warm spring water seeped into every inch of his frozen muscles, evaporating the coldness bit by bit, warming even his bones.

Though it was not as luxurious as the ornate and fragrant bathhouses in the Imperial Capital.

This primitive and rugged hot spring had its own unique charm.

"Ha... It would be nice to soak every day, this is what noble life is about..." Yorn leaned against the edge of the pool, half-closing his eyes, so comfortable he almost started to snore.

Louis glanced at Yorn and suddenly spoke: "Why don't... you stay here this winter?"

Red Tide Territory has plenty to eat, warm clothes, and hot springs to soak in; life is much better than over there."

Yorn was slightly stunned upon hearing this.

He looked at the misty stone hall, the neatly stacked firewood outside the pool, and the steaming aroma coming from the distant kitchen.

To say he wasn't tempted would be a lie.

But he quickly bit his lip and pushed down that tempting thought.

"No."

He shook his head, but his eyes were now more determined.

"I still have my own territory to guard. Even if the place is rotten and the houses are broken, it's still my domain, I have to endure the winter myself, and besides, there are so many subjects waiting for me to protect them."

Louis looked at him in some surprise; it seemed Yorn had grown to be a more reliable lord after this half-year of training.

After saying this, Yorn wiped his face, as if afraid the atmosphere would turn awkward, quickly coughed to change the topic: "Boss, you're the new lord of Snow Peak County now, aren't you?"

Louis shrugged, lazily soaking in the water: "I suppose, thanks to the Governor's trust."

Yorn advised: "In my opinion, you should secure your position as soon as possible, preferably by holding a ceremony. Although there is a tax exemption period after the war, the Prefect's powers...

still allow you to exercise some authority, right? If those old Northern Lords were to intervene, it would be troublesome."

Louis sighed: "Of course I've thought about it. But with winter approaching and the aftermath of the war, there are not many territories in the Northern Territory that can operate normally.

Frankly speaking, there aren't many nobles left either. Organizing a formal succession ceremony at this critical time is unlikely."

"True..." Yorn muttered a bit dispiritedly.

Speaking of the nobles of Snow Peak County, Louis suddenly remembered the twelve Northern Lords who were recently killed by the Snow Swearer.

Although their deaths had little to do with him, Louis still wrote a letter reporting the matter to Duke Edmund.

The Duke merely sent back a brief reply, not asking for details or placing blame, just telling him that by next spring, replacements for those vacancies would be arranged.

It was as indifferent as counting livestock.

Louis' mouth curled into a smile, tinged with coldness.

It seems Duke Edmund doesn't care about those useless nobles at all.

In that case, there's no need to hold back in his future actions.

While Louis was lost in thought, Yorn had already shifted to the next topic.

"Hey, boss, I have a secret to tell you." He whispered, as if afraid of being overheard, "My dad recently sent word that the Empire is preparing to intensify the Northern Territory Pioneer Order."

Louis opened his eyes, raising an eyebrow: "Expanding the Pioneer Order?"

"Yes." Yorn nodded, "The Emperor plans to send another batch of noble offspring up here, and this time, the scope is wider, and the numbers are greater. I heard the selection criteria are stricter than before."

He paused, then continued in a lowered voice: "This time, they mustn't be anything substandard. They must be direct bloodline of the family.

Moreover, they must be Elite Knights, have at least one recorded war experience, and be able to lead a knight team of at least a hundred people."

Yorn rolled his eyes: "In other words, the Emperor is determined not to let the Southern Nobles send useless people up here to muddle through anymore."

Louis pondered what this information could mean: "Is the Emperor trying to weaken the Southern Nobles' power? Why else would he be aggressively sending Southern noble offspring northward all these years?"

"Who knows." Yorn shrugged, "I just feel there's something fishy about it; otherwise, His Majesty wouldn't suddenly be in such a hurry these past few years."

The two chatted quietly for a while longer, but with too little information, they couldn't deduce much despite their speculations.

The only certainty was that by next spring, a large group of new Pioneer Nobles would be coming from the South to the Northern Territory.

However, Louis had no reason to panic.

There are always strategies to counteract policies.

Even if the Emperor is determined to accelerate the process, sending batch after batch of so-called "Pioneer Nobles," who knows what kind of people will come?

Forget about "direct bloodline" or "Elite Knights," how many can truly withstand the Northern Territory's harsh winter, wars, and barrenness?

No matter how meticulously they are chosen, Southern noble offspring, used to a life of ease, are few and far between who can endure the hardships of the Northern Territory.

And even if the ones who do come are truly elites among elites, so what?

Louis wouldn't be completely afraid of them, as he has already established a foothold in the Northern Territory.

Red Tide Territory is also one of the few territories in the North that can sustain itself without relying on family support.

His army, tested by blood and fire, can fight and defend the homeland.

He is now the Prefect of Snow Peak County.

Even if those newcomers have some skills, they'll have to bow their heads respectfully before him.

Just wonder if any of Calvin's other brothers will be sent to this wretched place.

Louis' mouth slightly curved, revealing a faint, enigmatic smile.

Chapter 113: It's Snowing

Yorn stayed for a night and set off early the next morning.

He didn't forget to haggle with Bradley, exchanging some corn and spices for several baskets of smoked fish, happily adding them to his own supplies.

It seems he truly likes this rich-flavored and long-lasting specialty of Red Tide Territory.

Before leaving, he waved his hand nonchalantly, smiling as he said to Louis:

"I'll come again next spring, and we'll take a bath together then!"

The knights and accompanying soldiers around them were holding back laughter, their faces red and necks thick.

For a moment, a peculiar yet lively atmosphere filled the front of the castle gates.

Louis helplessly held his forehead, watching Yorn lead his large troop away, taking with him knights, provisions, and a cart of smoked fish.

...

The snow of the Northern Territory fell silently.

At night, the wind made no sound, silently brushing across the land.

At dawn, when the sky was just getting light, Louis stood by the window, gazing at the outside world turned white.

There was a moist scent in the cold air, and the villages, hillsides, and riverbanks of Red Tide Territory were already covered with a thin layer of silver-white.

Snowflakes fell like light veils, slowly enveloping the entire territory.

Outside the window, the rooftops of the village were faintly decorated with white snow, and the trees stood quietly in the cold wind, cloaked in silver robes.

It all looked incredibly beautiful.

Yet this also meant that the most challenging season of the Northern Territory had finally arrived.

For the lord of the Northern Territory, the hardest part was not the cold itself, but how to keep life going during this long winter.

Supplies, food, firewood, animal skins... everything was extremely important.

Fortunately, Louis was well-prepared.

The management model of Red Tide Territory was different from other territories in this world, following a feudal lord system unique to Red Tide.

Resource distribution was not just about survival but also about making everyone feel their importance in this territory.

For winter supplies, Louis adjusted the food distribution standards to minimize unnecessary gaps and ensure every family could eat their fill.

Every family, whether farmer, craftsman, or knight, received their due resources based on family size.

A family of three received 20 pounds of grain per week, enough to get through the low productivity winter without waste.

In addition to food, Louis specifically arranged for cold-resistant supplies.

Each family received a cotton coat and a wool blanket to ensure they could stay warm on cold nights.

As for heating firewood and charcoal blocks, they were distributed based on family size to ensure every household stayed warm in the winter.

Louis also established an additional reward system.

Those who contributed more could receive extra food or heating supplies as a reward for their efforts.

Like craftspeople, carpenters, blacksmiths, or managers like Luke and Mike.

As for the knights, it goes without saying, they ate what Louis ate.

These extraordinary warriors responsible for defending Red Tide Territory had special privileges.

Through this reasonable distribution, Louis ensured the smooth operation of the territory and strengthened people's trust in him.

The distribution based on labor made everyone feel like a part of Red Tide Territory.

Even the lowest labor slaves felt their contributions were valuable, receiving enough supplies to last the winter without fear of being abandoned.

And thus, order was maintained in Red Tide Territory during the winter.

...

Today's task was distributing cold-resistant supplies like cotton clothes, blankets, firewood, and charcoal blocks.

These were the most precious and important life-saving items in this harsh winter.

A cotton coat, a wool blanket, a bundle of firewood, a few charcoal bricks, and so on.

They determined whether each family could survive the long, cold nights ahead.

"Each person gets a cotton coat, each household a wool blanket..."

Louis stood in front of the warehouse filled with supplies, holding parchment, carefully checking each item to ensure nothing was embezzled.

He quietly confirmed with the distribution staff, personally checking that no name was overlooked and no number was mixed up.

When the distribution officially began, Louis walked directly to the distribution table on the square, standing beside the staff.

Seeing Louis there, the residents coming to receive supplies were momentarily stunned.

No one expected their lord to be there in person.

Their eyes seemed to turn moist all of a sudden.

No one shouted loudly, and no one cheered insolently.

The atmosphere held a cautious restraint, as if afraid to break this rare warmth by speaking up.

They simply stepped forward silently, whispering thanks to Louis when it was their turn to receive supplies, or exchanging a few quiet words as they held their blankets and coats.

Someone, upon receiving a coat, whispered, "Thank you, my lord... May God bless you with a long life."

Louis didn't say much, just nodded, his gaze gentle.

Occasionally, he exchanged a few simple words with the residents, being quite approachable.

A small child, holding a coat carefully, wearing tattered shoes, his nose red from the cold, looked up at Louis and mumbled, "I want to fight for you when I grow up, like a knight, protecting everyone."

Louis bent down, gently ruffled the child's hair, and smiled, "I'll wait for you to grow up."

The child's eyes lit up, gripping his coat tightly, his gaze determined.

Another woman, carrying heavy coal, walked with a limp, and as she passed by Louis, she discreetly placed a hand over her chest, making a prayer gesture and softly reciting:

"Oh Dragon Ancestor, please watch over Red Tide Territory, please bless the great Lord Louis."

...

The distribution continued, and the residents queued up one by one.

Some would say a few words of gratitude to Louis, while others, not good with words, just looked at him with gratitude.

What gratified Louis the most was that no one complained at all.

After all, in past winters, these ordinary residents were barely hanging on.

One meal a day, barely surviving in the drafty wooden houses, relying on weak firelight and warmth.

Many even had to burn furniture or tear down old doors for warmth just to get through the long ice and snow season.

But now they could wrap themselves in thick coats, gather around a fire for hot soup, and sleep peacefully at night with blankets.

Such change was almost a miracle in this harsh Northern Territory.

The residents knew that without Louis, there was a high chance they'd be buried in the snow on the vast icefield this winter.

Chapter 114: Shocking Intelligence

The cold wind outside the window carried the unique, biting chill of the Northern Territory.

When Louis woke up, the room was as warm as spring.

This was because hidden geothermal pipes under the floor were slowly sending out warm air, keeping the entire bedroom at just the right temperature.

Therefore, he only covered himself with a light wool blanket and could sleep soundly through the night, free from the cold's intrusion.

Louis slowly sat up and casually tidied his slightly messy hair.

The first thing he did after getting up was the same as usual; instinctively, he raised his hand, and a translucent light screen spread quietly in front of him.

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

[1: An adult Ice Vein Giant Snake has been found hibernating in the northern canyon of Red Tide Territory today.]

[2: Emperor Ernst August of the Ironblood Empire has officially agreed to the proposal of the Governor of the North, granting Louis Calvin the title of Viscount.]

[3: Grand Mage Jurgen Locke unexpectedly fell into a coma near the northern border of Red Tide Territory, current situation unknown.]

As soon as Louis glanced at the first piece of information, he immediately became alert and spirited.

In the Northern Territory, the Ice Vein Giant Snake is a magical beast ranked among the most valuable!

Its gallbladder may not directly enhance Fighting Energy, but it can cleanse impurities from the bloodline, increase talent, and accelerate cultivation progress.

For someone like himself, with mediocre talent, such improvement was more important than anything else.

Not to mention the nourishing snake meat, cold-resistant scales, and precious snake fangs...

One could say that the entire Ice Vein Giant Snake is like a treasure trove!

However, normally, hunting an adult Ice Vein Giant Snake is not easy.

Just coiled up, the body of an adult Ice Vein Giant Snake is as thick as a sizable house, like a giant monster of the icefield.

Moreover, this magical beast has a strong ice element within its bloodline, and a single breath can instantly freeze its opponent.

Not to mention, their scales are as tough as cold iron, able to withstand most weapon attacks.

Taking it down, even with the current military strength of Red Tide Territory, would require a very severe price.

But now, with deep winter approaching, the Ice Vein Giant Snake has entered hibernation.

Its alertness is extremely low, and it reacts slowly, making it the perfect time to strike!

Louis clenched his fist, eyes sparkling with irrepressible excitement.

Missing this opportunity might mean waiting several more years.

Must take it down!

Then Louis saw the second piece of intelligence, which made him even more excited.

His confirmation of being granted the title of Viscount!

A wave of relief swept through Louis's heart, even making the corners of his mouth lift slightly.

Though he already knew he had a great chance.

In the Northern Territory, appointments and titles below Count are almost procedural once supported by Duke Edmund, the Governor.

In theory, this was true.

But what made Louis anxious was the attitude of the Emperor himself.

After all, he bore the title of "direct bloodline of the Calvin Clan."

As the son of a target currently under intense scrutiny by the Emperor, being allowed to mingle in the Northern Territory as a Prefect, this despotic Emperor likely had reservations.

Even with Duke Edmund's strong recommendation, efforts could still be in vain.

"Thankfully, no unexpected events occurred," Louis breathed a sigh of relief.

At that moment, he finally felt the heavy stone in his heart was lifted.

The third piece of intelligence, however, left Louis almost speechless with shock.

Jurgen Locke, Grand Mage, unconscious in the northern part of Red Tide Territory.

"What the hell! Grand Mage Jurgen...?"

That name almost existed only in fairy tales and history books for him.

Mages are extremely rare in this world.

As a noble, he only saw them a few times within the family, shrouded in mystery.

Legends say that a thousand years ago, mages were active and numerous in the world.

But later, due to unknown reasons, a massive witch hunt erupted.

Since then, mages almost disappeared entirely from public view.

Rumors claim they collectively hid deep in forests, while others are sure they've been exterminated.

Of course, in this thousand-year history, mages occasionally appeared, but they were extremely rare.

And now, an unconscious Grand Mage appeared within the territory of Red Tide.

This alone was enough to be astonishing.

But what stirred Louis' heart even more was that name—

Jurgen Locke.

He had seen that name in his studies of imperial history, and it was very familiar.

A legendary mage who followed the first Emperor of the Ironblood Empire into battle — four hundred years ago now.

"Probably just a namesake..." Louis muttered to himself.

But if it were the person from historical records, it would be a storm capable of altering the entire Northern Territory, indeed the entire Empire.

Regardless of the truth, since this matter has appeared on the lands of Red Tide, he cannot sit idly by.

"Since the cause and effect have already entangled, it's better to face it head-on."

Louis murmured softly, gently closing the translucent intelligence panel.

"Lambert. Assemble the knight team and hunter squad, prepare to set off for the last hunt of the year."

Louis didn't offer much explanation.

But Lambert and the knights were accustomed to it.

The Lord would take a whim now and then to go hunting, and each time, he would always find some magical beast prey.

Thus the main force quickly gathered, and set out in a grand procession.

Sunlight streamed through the gaps in the gray clouds, as warhorses trotted through the snow.

Along the way, they caught quite a bit of game—wild deer, snow foxes, and even some wild boars, low-tier magical beasts from the wasteland.

The atmosphere was great, as the knights hunted and speculated about today's catch, laughter echoing in the wind.

Because they knew, according to the Lord's usual practice, most of the demon beast meat would be shared with everyone.

But Louis's true target was clearly not the meat of these low-tier magical beasts.

His gaze was fixed straight ahead, through the swirling snow, directly at that northern canyon.

That's where his true target lay.

Suddenly, a flurry of urgent hoofbeats interrupted the rhythm of the marching team.

"Make way! Quickly make way!"

A breathless hunter ran back from the front of the team, his face flushed and steam rising from his forehead.

Nearly stumbling and crawling, he rushed to Louis, one hand supporting his knee, breathing heavily.

He spoke quickly, "Cough, cough... My Lord! At—at the edge of the canyon ahead... there's a huge snake!!"

"A huge snake?" The knights paused in surprise, exchanging glances.

Louis straightened up on his mount, thinking it was finally here, and asked directly, "How big?"

The hunter, still catching his breath, stammered as he formed a circle with his hands, "Coiled up... much, much bigger than a house... We didn't dare go near, just ran back here!"

"Take me there." With a flick of his cloak, he was already at the forefront.

The knights immediately followed suit.

Chapter 115: Ice Vein Giant Snake

Deep in the valley, only the sound of the wind whispers.

The rock valley lies ahead, yet the ground suddenly dips, like a massive scar, appearing quite oppressive.

It seems as if a colossal creature once passed through here, leaving deep impressions on the ground.

Louis raised his hand to signal everyone to stop: "Do not make a sound."

Everyone immediately slowed their steps, not uttering a word, and slowly approached the gorge.

Amidst the ice and snow at the bottom of the valley, the massive outline appeared faintly, coils of the serpent's body piled up like a hill.

This was an Ice Vein Giant Snake, in deep slumber.

A thin layer of frost formed on its scales, reflecting an eerie gleam, sending a chill down one's spine.

The diameter of its body was as thick as a house, its length winding several tens of meters, coiled among the ice rocks, truly a giant in every sense.

The snake's head rested on a boulder ahead, and from the closed eye slits, deep blue patterns were vaguely visible, while its half-exposed fangs exuded a chilling aura.

Its breathing was extremely slow; each exhalation brought forth a layer of frost.

Even while in hibernation at this moment, it emitted a suffocating oppressive aura.

The instant the knights laid eyes on this massive creature, their breaths nearly halted.

Some stared wide-eyed, their spears trembling slightly in their hands; some instinctively stepped back, their faces turning pale.

Even Lambert swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing visibly.

But Louis, gazing at the massive figure, remained unusually calm, having mentally prepared himself beforehand.

Seeing everyone's mindset seemed off, he first softly ordered, "Everyone, retreat outside the valley."

With a wave of his hand, everyone quietly retreated from the valley as if relieved of a heavy burden.

Only when they returned to the valley's entrance, far from the slumbering magical beast, was the oppressive silence finally broken.

"That's the Ice Vein Giant Snake, isn't it? I saw a picture in the magical beast bestiary, not even a third of its real size."

"Such a monster really exists..."

"Oh heavens, if that thing was awake, with the number of people we have, we couldn't even scratch its skin."

Everyone whispered in hushed tones, growing more terrified yet carrying a hint of excitement.

At this moment, Louis raised his hand and gently pressed down: "Quiet."

Everyone immediately fell silent.

He squinted towards the valley: "This is an opportunity almost impossible to come by again.

You all saw the Ice Vein Giant Snake is hibernating, so we don't need to face its fury while awake.

As long as we strike fatally, we can claim a great hunt."

He paused, a confident smile curling his lips: "And once we kill it, everyone gets hot snake soup tonight."

The mention of "snake soup" slightly relaxed the tension that had been strung tighter than a bow.

The knights exchanged glances, unable to stop their mouths from curling upwards.

They didn't shout, fearing to wake the distant snake, but the excitement almost leapt from their eyes.

"This is no ordinary magical beast." A young knight beside said in a low voice, his tone filled with uncontrollable eagerness, "It's said to nourish bloodlines and enhance cultivation!"

"If I could drink a bowl of snake bone soup, I might even improve further," an older knight stated excitedly.

"Shh." Seeing the crowd getting restless, someone quickly raised a finger, "Don't cause a disturbance, do you want it to wake up?"

Therefore, the crowd quieted down once more.

But the brightness in their eyes had already quietly ignited.

It wasn't just a pure desire to hunt, but an instinctual thirst to surpass their own limitations.

After all, the Ice Vein Giant Snake, even in the Northern Territory, ranks among the top magical beasts.

Its scales, blood, bones, bile, meat... each part is worth a fortune.

The snake meat, almost every piece, is a great tonic for nourishment and strengthening the body.

And now, their Lord Louis said he would distribute the snake meat for them to eat, how could they not be excited?

Moreover, no one was surprised or doubted the lord's generosity.

After all, this was Louis, a lord who always followed through and never let his followers down.

Even despite the Northern Territory's lack of support, they could eat and drink their fill daily, with demon beast meat occasionally improving their meals!

This was something they never dared to dream of before coming here.

As if by following Louis, good fortune inevitably followed.

For this, don't mention the Ice Vein Giant Snake, even a Frost Giant Dragon, we'd charge in relentlessly!

Loyalty!

While everyone was visibly excited yet dared not make a sound, Louis subtly beckoned Lambert and a few elite knights.

They quietly withdrew to one side of the valley's entrance, huddled in a small circle for a secret conversation.

"We have only one chance," Louis said softly, "The target is the neck and head junction of the giant snake. Beneath the thin scales is the snake's nerve center."

As he spoke, he drew a dagger, sketching the snakehead's outline in the snow, and pointed at the rear neck.

"This spot can kill with one blow, and it must, else if it wakes up... it will be trouble."

Lambert, with a steady expression, nodded: "I understand. I'll take twelve of the steadiest brothers, quietly approach, then swiftly settle it."

"Very good," said Louis, looking at him, "And the other knights will deploy discretely. If we fail, they will immediately provide ranged suppression, preventing its escape or counterattack."

With that, he opened the accompanying black box.

Inside, twelve short-handled spears were neatly arranged.

The spear shafts were crafted from the dark gray bones of magical beasts, with spearheads embedded with magic crystals containing Demon Marrow.

"These are 'Armor-Piercing Flame Spears'. Though their power is far less than 'Ice and Fire Two Realms', once they hit, the magic marrow within the crystals will explode, generating high-temperature, high-pressure impact sufficient to break open its neck scales."

Louis spoke calmly, his gaze firm: "If you strike that spot, it won't last more than a few seconds."

The elite knights silently took the weapons, none of them backed down.

"After one strike, retreat immediately; even if we fail, preserve life first," Louis added.

This statement caused all the knights to tremble slightly, then they showed expressions of gratitude.

"Good luck," Louis said, finally.

The knights immediately bowed their heads in silent, solemn salute, expressing deep respect and affection for the young lord.

And their eyes glinted with nearly uncontrollable brilliance.

The chance to personally hunt an Ice Vein Giant Snake might only come once in a lifetime.

Then the team quietly dispersed, with Lambert leading thirteen elite knights, sliding down the valley like phantoms against the icy rocks.

The other knights quickly deployed around, holding their breath and waiting.

Deep in the valley, the large slumbering snake continued its slow breaths, frost quietly spreading across its snout, oblivious to the hunters' approach.

Lambert, leading twelve elite knights, stepped lightly on the snow.

Each step was taken with utmost care and full concentration.

After all, a one-shot kill, there's only one chance.

Chapter 116: Slaying the Serpent

Lambert led twelve elite knights, walking on the snow.

They took each step with extreme caution, not daring to make any sound.

As they gradually approached the lair of the Ice Vein Giant Snake, the air was filled with a suffocating sense of oppression.

The snake's breathing sounded like distant thunder, echoing deeply and rhythmically through the valley.

Each breath it took carried a special chill, dropping the temperature of the surrounding air noticeably.

Its massive body writhed slightly, as if even in sleep it could sense the approaching threat, making anyone watching feel an uncontrollable sense of dread.

Suddenly, a faint sound of cracking ice shattered the silence of the valley.

A young knight had stepped on a thin layer of ice, the slight noise almost imperceptible in other circumstances.

But in this quiet atmosphere, it was as jarring as an alarm bell.

"Hush." Lambert immediately turned back, eyes carrying a hint of sternness.

The knights immediately held their breath, as still as ice.

After confirming that the Ice Vein Giant Snake hadn't noticed the faint sound, Lambert nodded slightly, signaling everyone to continue forward.

Once more they moved slowly, this time even more cautiously, each movement as silent and weightless as a ghost.

The thirteen figures melted into the ice and snow like shadows, closing in on the enormous Ice Vein Giant Snake.

Although they slowed down to make no noise, the speed of these elite knights was still several times faster than ordinary people.

Before long, they reached the designated position.

Lambert nodded slightly at Louis, indicating everyone was ready.

At the distant mouth of the valley, Louis's hand fell slowly, like a horn in the snow, instantly transmitting to the eyes of every knight.

"Throw!"

The thirteen knights acted almost simultaneously, their spears leaving their hands and piercing the air.

Each spear carried the sound of breaking air, whistling towards the Ice Vein Giant Snake.

"Boom!"

The vulnerable part of the snake's neck suddenly exploded.

The shock wave scattered ice shards and snowflakes, with enormous scales raining down like a storm, an explosion so loud the whole valley seemed to boil in that moment.

The trembling Ice Vein Giant Snake began to struggle violently, its massive body seemingly resisting the arrival of death.

The entire valley shook from the snake's thrashing, even the rock walls splitting with the tremor, creating waves of shock.

"Retreat!" Lambert shouted, but his voice was almost drowned out by the roaring noise.

All the knights instantly turned and retreated swiftly.

Some knights had their skin scraped by flying ice shards, bleeding slightly, but none stopped, all quickly distancing themselves.

The Ice Vein Giant Snake opened its mouth and emitted a piercing hiss, cold air sweeping like a storm, instantly freezing several rock walls.

Its tail lashed the air violently, able to sweep down almost anything.

But its movements became slower and slower, eventually stiffening.

In fact, its neck had already been completely destroyed, the nerve center damaged, it was effectively dead.

These powerful counterattacks were merely instinctive struggles before its demise.

Finally, the Ice Vein Giant Snake fell in the wind and snow.

Its tail still tossed, but its life force was extinguished.

The enormous body lay quietly in the ice and snow, surrounded by white mist.

Because no one could be sure it was completely dead, the valley remained silent, the air heavy and oppressive.

After a while, several elite knights plucked up the courage to step forward, cautiously approaching the corpse of the Ice Vein Giant Snake.

Each step was extraordinarily careful, afraid of triggering a latent threat from the massive creature.

They gently prodded the giant snake's scales with their longswords, their eyes not leaving the slightly trembling colossal body.

When they reached the head, they looked down at the cold snake eyes, confirming that the signs of life had truly vanished.

He couldn't restrain himself from shouting towards Louis's direction, "Lord Louis! It's lifeless! It's already dead!"

This shout instantly shattered the oppressive atmosphere around them.

The knights erupted into cheers, their excitement like a suppressed flood gushing free of a dam.

"Haha! We did it!"

"It went so smoothly!"

"So easy, I can hardly believe it!"

Joyful laughter and jubilant shouts echoed through the valley.

Even Lambert's face showed a faint, unnoticeable smile, although he maintained a knight's composure, the pressure in his heart was liberated instantly.

"Glad not to let you down." Lambert saluted towards Louis.

Louis's expression was calm, but joy flickered in his eyes: "Lambert, well done."

This terrifying beast had been so easily vanquished.

But actually, what no one saw was that Louis had already made comprehensive preparations before they set out.

The armor-piercing flame spears, the weaknesses of the Ice Vein Giant Snake, even the surrounding terrain arrangements were all things he had investigated or arranged beforehand.

Of course, he knew well that against such a powerful magical beast, even with prepared measures, one must not become complacent.

That is why he brought so many knights, as a precaution.

As the cheers gradually subsided, Louis waved to signal everyone to calm down: "Now, start handling its corpse."

The moment he spoke, the knights immediately went into action, beginning to work together.

Most knights quickly checked the corpse of the Ice Vein Giant Snake, confirming it posed no further threat.

They began to skin and scale the giant snake, cut its meat, and extract the magic crystal and other useful parts.

Meanwhile, a few knights were responsible for clearing the surrounding environment, ensuring they didn't trigger another avalanche or any other mishaps.

The Ice Vein Giant Snake's corpse was enormous, handling it was time-consuming and laborious, but none of this deterred the knights.

They quickly dispersed and got busy.

The snake's magic crystal contained immense magical power, and extracting this crystal could bring vast resources to the territory.

It was also an extremely precious alchemy material, something to show Hillco to see if more bombs could be crafted.

The snake's hide, scales, meat, and other parts also held high medicinal, consumable, and equipment value.

Actually, that giant snake gallbladder held the most value for him; legend claimed it could greatly purify blood and enhance cultivation speed.

Especially for someone like him with inherently flawed talent, it might bring unexpected breakthroughs.

Seeing the snake gallbladder carefully extracted and meticulously wrapped in leather and cloth by the knights to ensure it remained unharmed,

he finally breathed a sigh of relief, turning his head to Lambert: "Get a few more knights to follow me to the north for a look."

Lambert didn't think much of it, assuming Louis was just bored and wanted to take a stroll.

Little did he know, Louis planned to head north specifically to find a legendary Grand Mage.

"Alright, I'll gather them right away." Lambert replied, turning to leave.

Chapter 117: The Dying Legendary Mage

Soft white snow layered over the slopes, between the trees and rocks, the world, a field of silver and white.

The thick snow underfoot was soft, leaving a trail of hoof prints as the horses stepped through.

Louis and his group moved forward slowly. On the surface, it seemed they were casually wandering the snowfield, like a relaxing stroll after a hunt.

But, in truth, Louis was secretly guiding the direction of the group.

The path they were taking led towards the north, where the Intelligence System indicated the Grand Mage was.

Suddenly, a Vanguard Knight galloped back from the front.

"My Lord, we found a corpse of an old man ahead, his appearance is withered... and his wounds are somewhat strange."

"A corpse?" Louis frowned, his heart sinking, "Let's go, take a look."

This wasn't right, the Daily Intelligence System clearly showed that old fellow was only "unconscious," not dead.

After riding for just a moment, they saw the mysterious corpse the Vanguard Knight mentioned.

An emaciated old man, draped in a ragged cloak, sitting cross-legged half-buried in snow, like an ascetic.

He bore no resemblance at all to the Grand Mage Loken depicted in historical illustrations, full of spirit, his robe sleeves fluttering.

What stood out the most was on his chest, the heart area.

It was a fist-sized crack emitting a dark glow.

The crack was slowly widening, the surrounding skin continuously deteriorating, and black lines were spreading outward.

"This isn't being unconscious..." Louis couldn't help but mutter to the system, "This damn well looks dead."

Just as he pondered if the system made an error, the "corpse's" mouth suddenly moved slightly.

"Um... uh..."

A knight exclaimed: "He's actually alive!"

Everyone looked at each other, their expressions frozen, could he really be alive in this state?

Louis stood five meters away, shielding the group, and gestured, "Go and listen to what he's saying."

A knight approached as instructed, placing his ear close to the withered lips.

His voice trembled slightly as he repeated: "He said... tell Saint John that someone has violated the original oath."

Louis was silent for a moment, a trace of doubt in his eyes: "Saint John? That name rings a bell somewhere..."

He frowned slightly, a thoughtful expression on his face.

The surrounding knights exchanged confused looks, none having heard this name, they too were trying to make sense of the sudden revelation.

But in the next moment, change struck suddenly!

The dying figure abruptly opened his eyes!

"Guh..."

Before anyone could react, a deeply strained moan erupted from the old man's throat, as if something was churning in his chest.

Suddenly!

"Shoo——!!!"

A mass of dark purple energy burst from his mouth, with an ear-piercing sonic boom, shooting straight at Louis five meters away!

"Watch out!!"

Lambert roared, flinging himself forward like lightning, his aura exploding, the snow beneath his feet erupted!

But it was too late!

The breath came too fast, without any warning!

"Puh—!"

The energy wave struck Louis' forehead directly, making a dull sound.

His body jolted violently, as if hit by lightning, falling back, landing heavily in the snow.

"Lord Louis!" Lambert's roar shattered the snowy silence, filled with uncontrollable shock and anger.

As the energy wave blasted out, the old man's eyes lost their last glimmer of life.

The crack on his chest, which was already like a curse, suddenly began expanding wildly!

"Zzz— Zip-Laa!!!"

The crack spread crazily like a spider web, the dark purple light spreading through his flesh, as if some ancient and strange force was tearing him apart from the inside!

The next second, his entire body was instantly engulfed!

No explosion, no scream.

Just silently vanished in front of everyone.

Leaving only a tattered mage's robe, falling solitary into the snow, slowly collapsing.

As if this person never belonged to this world from the start.

"Lord Louis!!!"

On the other side, all the knights, seeing Louis hit, their faces changed abruptly, and they rushed toward him.

Lambert was the first to kneel, lifting his body with one hand.

"How are you?"

The others quickly formed a circle, alertly watching the surroundings, the atmosphere tense as if facing a formidable enemy.

Consciousness plunged into darkness, Louis's mind seemed to be abruptly ripped open by some force.

Countless images surged like a tide.

He couldn't think, couldn't breathe, only forcibly injected with these unfamiliar memories, images, emotions!

But these pieces of information only surged past, without pause, and he could only capture a few fragmentary scenes—

A young man with black hair, sitting quietly on a stone platform.

Dozens of cross-legged figures around him, listening to his lecture.

He spoke of a certain strange breathing technique, unlike any Empire's cultivation system, with an inhale and exhale as if resonating with the universe.

The scene shifted.

A middle-aged man, smiling amidst the firelight.

In his arms, holding a baby, crow's feet etched at the corners of his eyes.

Another scene.

Eight hazy figures, surrounding an elderly man pinned to a stone slab.

Their faces blurred, chanting low incantations, engaging in some terrifying ritual dismemberment.

The old man always kept his eyes open, seemingly... looking at Louis?

.....

The images shattered, the consciousness space cracked like a mirror.

Louis's awareness was forcefully thrown out of the chaos by an irresistible force.

He opened his eyes.

Before him was a familiar gray and white ceiling and the interlaced beams of his home.

He was lying in his room at his estate, the cushion beneath him slightly sunken, the air faintly scented with herbs.

The first thing he saw was a fair face.

It was Sif, looking down at him, her white hair slightly disheveled, her eyes filled with joy and anxiety.

"Louis... you're awake!" she called out softly, her voice trembling slightly.

Footsteps sounded around him.

Bradley, Lambert... all gathered around, their faces full of concern and worry.

Louis slowly blinked, the fragments of memory continued to linger in his mind.

He was silent for a few seconds, suddenly his expression tensed, the memories before he fell unconscious gradually returned.

Grand Mage Loken, the purple energy wave, and that phrase "Someone violated the original oath"...

His voice slightly hoarse but calm: "Lambert, stay. The others, please step out."

The tone was not heavy, but everyone knew it was a signal for a private conversation.

Sif hesitated for a moment, although full of worry, she bit her lip and nodded, rising to leave.

Bradley gave Lambert a glance, silently patting his shoulder, and followed suit out the door.

Only Louis and Lambert remained in the room.

Chapter 118: Primordial Meditation Technique

The door closed, and the room immediately quieted down.

Lambert stood by the bedside, still carrying a hint of unease on his face, and spoke:

"My lord, how do you feel? Is there any discomfort?"

He had never seen Louis in such a state—hit between the brows, falling straight down, life and death uncertain...

To him, this was the most terrifying scene he had ever witnessed, accompanied by endless self-blame.

Louis raised his hand to rub his temples, feeling that everything was normal with his body.

But deep in his mind, there was a new heart-shaped imprint.

"I guess there's nothing wrong." He said in a low voice, "Can you tell me roughly what happened?"

Lambert immediately reported everything he knew in detail:

"We were heading north with you, and the scouts ahead found an old man collapsed in the snow, with strange cracks on his chest.

...

Then the old man was consumed by the cracks on his chest, disintegrating and disappearing, leaving only a robe behind.

You were unconscious at the time, so we immediately brought you back for examination... both your body and Fighting Energy were normal. I suspect it's some kind of curse."

Lambert succinctly recounted what he saw and knew, his expression full of worry.

Louis just listened, nodding slightly: "The first part... matches what I remember."

Yet it brought more questions to his mind.

If that mage was truly the legendary Jurgen Locke, then how could he have lived for so long.

Why was he in the Snowfield of the Red Tide Territory?

And why did he die so strangely?

What exactly was that lightwave that penetrated his mind?

Were the images he saw while unconscious... his memories? Or was it some information?

Questions arose one after another, pricking his mind like needles.

Louis frowned, reaching up to rub his temples.

"Forget it, let's take it one at a time." He shook his head, trying to suppress those stray thoughts.

"Who knows about this?" He looked up at Lambert.

Lambert nodded: "When you collapsed, many people saw it when we returned to the territory. But as for the mage's matter... only a few knights who traveled with us know about it for now."

"Keep it sealed." Louis's tone was calm, yet indisputable.

"Yes." Lambert immediately replied, "I will handle it properly."

Louis then asked, "By the way, how long was I... out?"

"Well... actually it wasn't long, about a day."

"I see..." Louis replied softly, thoughtfully nodding his head.

The atmosphere became quiet for a moment.

Louis then continued, "You've worked hard, take your leave, I want to be alone for a while."

Lambert nodded, bowed, and withdrew.

The room became quiet once again.

Louis leaned against the edge of the bed, his gaze deepening.

The questions in his mind hadn't lessened; instead, they weighed heavier and heavier.

"I hope within this... I'll find some answers." He slowly raised his hand, gesturing lightly in the air.

A semi-transparent interface appeared before him, rippling like water, as words rapidly flashed and arranged themselves.

Today's intelligence amounted to only two pieces.

[1: In seven days, Snow Peak County will completely enter a period of extreme cold, accompanied by an expected blizzard invasion.]

[2: Grand Mage Jurgen Locke has passed on the 'Primordial Heart' and 'Primordial Meditation Technique' to Louis Calvin, subsequently being devoured by a Void Worm.]

When seeing the first entry, Louis didn't even frown.

He had already made arrangements for this, with all cold-prevention measures in place.

Bradley could execute the plan accordingly without needing his concern.

His gaze moved directly to the second entry.

This was the part he was most concerned about now.

This brief system announcement threw out three completely unfamiliar terms: 'Primordial Heart', 'Primordial Meditation Technique', 'Void Worm'.

Among them, the 'Primordial Heart' was probably the heart-shaped imprint in his mind.

But what exactly was its use?

Was it a seed of power? A seal? Or some kind of inheritance vessel? Or a curse? He had no idea.

"Could this useless system stop being so cryptic?" Louis muttered under his breath.

"Would it kill you to be clearer? If it had been clear from the start, would I have ended up going over there to let that old man spit on me and knock me out?"

Yet no matter how much he complained, the system remained cold and silent, offering no additional information.

He secretly clenched his teeth, restraining the impulse to continue cursing the system, and instead focused his attention on the term 'Primordial Meditation Technique'.

These words faintly reminded him of a certain fragment in his dream.

Amidst those chaotic, unfathomable memories, only that scene was exceptionally clear.

Atop a mountain peak, a black-haired youth sat cross-legged amid the wind and snow, surrounded by dozens of listeners also sitting cross-legged.

His tone was calm, describing a cultivation method that combined breathing rhythms and awareness regulation.

"So... that was the 'Primordial Meditation Technique'?" Louis murmured softly.

He forced himself to calm down, recalling the youth's words, rhythms, and movements.

Then he tried to replicate them.

Unexpectedly, he succeeded on the very first try.

An indescribable sense of tranquility quietly rose within him.

His thoughts seemed to sink beneath a layer of transparent water, as the sounds of the outside world gradually drifted away, and the sounds of his heartbeat, breathing, and snow falling on branches all faded.

At the same time, the heart-shaped imprint in his mind subtly emitted a faint glow.

Unlike the Breathing Technique for Fighting Energy, the Primordial Meditation Technique was gentler, emphasizing guidance rather than training;

It was "leading water to the pool," rather than "digging mountains to store springs."

Although Louis had never received any education about magic,

he vaguely felt that this so-called Meditation Technique was essentially a key to activating a magic power inheritance.

It wasn't like the Fighting Energy Breathing Technique, which required forcibly compressing and integrating Primordial Energy into the body's bloodstream.

Fighting Energy was about tempering the flesh, using one's blood and flesh as weapons and bones as scabbards,

with practitioners channeling the "Primordial Energy" between heaven and earth into their bloodline, forging it into a power system that permeates the whole body.

But meditation was different.

It was a form of spiritual guidance, akin to threading consciousness like a fine string through the limitless tides of magic power.

Only when the mind is sufficiently focused and ethereal will the magic power hovering in the gaps of the world quietly approach.

It's not about forcefully pulling, but achieving "resonance."

Once the resonance is established, the magic power flows into consciousness like water,

being guided and shaped, ultimately becoming the foundation of techniques and the true source of magic.

Louis finally understood.

Fighting Energy is a power "seized" by the flesh.

The Meditation Technique is a power "listened to" by the consciousness.

These are two distinctly different paths, yet at the very beginning—at the level of "harmonizing breath and thought"—they bear a striking similarity.

Louis pondered: "Perhaps, they were originally techniques from the same source, only later diverging, evolving along different paths."

Thus, Louis made a decision.

In the future, aside from practicing the Tidal Fighting Qi Technique daily, he would also make time to cultivate the Primordial Meditation Technique.

Perhaps he could truly embark on a path of dual cultivation.

Perhaps one day, he not only would charge into battle with a blade but also command thunder and fire with a wave, becoming an Otherworldly Gandalf.

Chapter 119: Just a Simple Fall

Outside Louis's room, Bradley, Sif, Lambert, and several personal guards were waiting anxiously.

Although they had already seen Louis awaken,

in such sudden situations, even "waking up" doesn't completely dispel the worries in their hearts.

The few exchanged glances, but sensibly didn't intrude and could only wait at the door.

Luckily, they didn't have to wait long. About half an hour later, the door opened with a "click."

Louis walked out slowly. Although his figure still showed some fatigue, and his face was slightly pale, everything else was just as usual.

Everyone rushed forward.

"Lord Louis, how do you feel?"

"What exactly happened?"

"Is there any discomfort anywhere?"

He waved his hand, his tone as calm as ever: "It's nothing serious. Probably... just got distracted, tripped and fainted."

Everyone fell silent instantly.

Lambert's mouth twitched, wanting to say something, but finally swallowed it back.

Sif showed a "do you think I'll believe that?" expression.

Finally, Bradley sighed: "Anyway, as long as you're safe, my lord."

"Bradley, prepare a banquet tonight." Louis instructed, "Use that Ice Vein Giant Snake meat, let all the knights come, and eat as much as they can."

Bradley was stunned: "My lord, you just woke up, your body..."

"I'm fine," Louis interrupted him indifferently, "Besides, I promised them I would use the snake meat for a feast."

He paused, his voice lowering slightly: "Moreover, the news of my sudden fainting must have spread. Instead of letting them imagine things, it's better to show up and let everyone see."

Bradley was silent for a moment but eventually nodded: "Understood, I'll arrange it immediately."

Louis turned around, casually adding: "Right, every morning cut off a piece of the snake's gallbladder, make soup for me to drink."

"Yes, my lord."

This kind of thing that improves the bloodline... Louis wouldn't be generous enough to share it casually.

He was curious to see how much these snake gallbladders could improve his bloodline.

Seeing Louis looking normal, everyone breathed a sigh of relief, each returning to their post.

Except for Sif, who stood at the door, unmoving.

Louis noticed her, walked a few steps closer, a teasing smile on his lips.

"What, could it be... you were worried about me?"

Sif, as if her thoughts were suddenly exposed, blushed noticeably.

She hesitated for a moment but finally nodded gently: "Uh-huh..."

Then, in the next second, she turned and ran: "I-I'll go to work!"

Leaving Louis stunned for a moment, then chuckling.

"Huh? Not denying it this time." He shook his head, watching Sif's escaping figure: "Quite cute, actually."

Of course, how could he not have noticed?

Sif's hesitant actions, her tough yet tender reactions towards him, and those occasional glances...

It's long since surpassed a subordinate's respect for her lord.

"Well... a tsundere white-haired beauty, definitely my type." Louis stretched lazily, a slight smile on his lips.

.....

As night fell, the cold night wind beat against the window panes, but the banquet hall was as bright as day, with candlelight flickering on the chandeliers, dispelling some of the gloom.

Knights gradually took their seats, and the Ice Vein Giant Snake's meat was cut into thick chunks, cooked and smoked into various dishes by the chef, and placed on the table.

The air was filled with a hot and oily aroma, but everyone's spirits weren't lifted.

This should have been a lively celebration, but now no one could muster the energy.

"What's going on with the Lord?"

"It's said he was attacked by a magical beast..."

"Shh, don't say that, that's a rumor."

...

Whispers passed through the sound of clinking glasses.

Everyone forced smiles and compelled themselves to raise their glasses, but every cheer carried a hint of unease.

Sitting in a corner, Weir kept his head down, silent.

"If only I had been there that day." This thought kept flashing through his mind.

He only heard about Lord Louis's fainting after finishing training, carried back by Lambert and the others.

A sense of inexplicable guilt surged in Weir's heart.

If he had been there, could he have done something?

Just as a layer of unease hung over everyone's hearts, the door was suddenly opened by an attendant.

A tall young man walked into the banquet hall.

A black suit with red patterns tailored perfectly, highlighting him like a sharp blade about to be unsheathed.

Every step was steady and unflustered, without the slightest abnormality.

Naturally, it was Louis Calvin.

"The Lord is here!"

"Really... okay?"

The crowd suddenly stirred but quickly quieted down, all rising to attention as they watched him approach the main seat.

Louis stood on stage, glanced around at everyone, the corners of his mouth slightly raised.

"Today's banquet, delayed a bit. And indeed... made everyone worry."

He paused, then solemnly added: "After all, I... tripped and fainted."

The words fell, and after a brief silence,

"Pfft."

"Hahahahaha!"

Laughter exploded throughout the hall.

Even Weir, who had been sulking in the corner, couldn't help but smirk.

Everyone knew it couldn't have been just "tripped."

Their Lord, an Elite Knight, fainting from a trip?

What a joke.

But it was just such an unconvincing excuse that actually reassured everyone.

The oppressive atmosphere was swept away, everyone clinked glasses, finally accompanied by genuine laughter and clamor.

With Louis's arrival and speech, the mood in the hall finally relaxed completely.

The sumptuous snake meat shimmered hot on the long table, the grease glistening, beneath the crispy golden skin was the potent flesh of the Ice Vein Giant Snake.

Sliced, roasted, stewed, and spiced, it was mouthwatering.

"So this is... Ice Vein Giant Snake meat." A young knight looked at the hefty snake meat in front of him, eyes shining.

"Stop staring, eat! Then quickly adjust your energy! If you waste this opportunity, you'll regret it for life!" The old knight beside him had already devoured the meat in two bites, sat cross-legged, and began to regulate his fighting energy.

With everyone's blood surging, the essence of the demon beast meat was quickly converted into fighting energy, infused into every part of their bodies.

In the hall, a tall young knight suddenly shuddered, followed by a faint red glow on his body.

"A breakthrough!"

"Hey! Another one!"

Cheers erupted one after another.

Tonight, at least three young knights successfully broke through their bottlenecks during this celebration.

Thus, the celebration banquet concluded amidst the aroma of wine, hot meat, and the joy of breakthroughs.

Chapter 120: Sif Takes the Initiative

The night was deep, in the east side room on the third floor of Red Tide Castle.

The warmth from the underfloor heating kept the chill at bay outside.

But Sif on the bed curled up even tighter.

Wrapped in a thick blanket, she looked up at the ceiling, her cheeks slightly flushed, her deep blue eyes sparkling with a hint of confusion.

"Who would like a Southern Barbarian!" she muttered to herself, gritting her teeth, "Despicable, shameless, always smiling like a cunning fox..."

Yet no matter how she warned herself, that person's image just wouldn't go away.

In her mind, the scene replayed: the gentle, unhurried way he talked to people.

The careful yet confident manner when taming "Leng Feng."

And that one time...

He looked up at her and smiled, the sly curve at the corner of his eye made her heart skip a beat.

"Damn it..." Sif sat up sharply, fiercely threw the pillow to the floor, her silver hair falling messily on her face due to the motion.

"Damn Louis...!"

She cursed softly, a slight tremble in her voice.

The scene of Louis fainting that day, the feeling of standing helplessly outside the door waiting, also pierced her nerves repeatedly.

Sif's hand unconsciously reached for her chest, fingertips gently touching the cold silver pendant.

It was the only relic left by her mother.

Memories surged back like a tide.

That distant night, the firelight reflecting on her mother's face, as she sat in a fur chair, teasingly speaking of her and her father's youthful past.

"If a woman from Cold Moon is moved, she will hunt, like an Ice Wolf biting down and not letting go."

"Did you think your father could catch me? Ha, I kissed him first, and back then he jumped like a scared deer, even his face turned red."

Young Sif only found it amusing, laughing until she couldn't straighten up.

But now, she suddenly understood the meaning behind her mother's words.

She bowed her head, looking at the silver pendant between her fingers, softly muttering, "Is this... what it feels like to be moved?"

Her cheeks then turned red, as if baked by the stove, like an apple.

"Ahhh!" she exclaimed, diving headfirst into the blanket, covering her head forcefully: "No, it can't be... he's not my type at all!"

She clearly preferred the cold, silent men, those who are only gentle to her.

But Louis, that guy, glib, likes to put on airs, sometimes even childish...

Yet precisely detailed understanding and tolerance, humor, frankness, calm and reliable in situations, making one unconsciously dependent...

"I... I just see his potential!" she defended herself, huddled in the blanket, "I just need a reliable helper on the road to revenge."

But even she could hear how laughable this excuse sounded.

A few seconds later, the room fell into dead silence, as she still hid in the blanket, motionless.

Suddenly, Sif threw off the blanket, her movements as agile as a leopard.

She jumped off the bed, barefoot on the warm wooden floor, striding toward the wardrobe without hesitation.

"I can't deceive myself any longer." She stood in front of the mirror, raising her head to scrutinize carefully.

Her short silver hair was slightly messy, the pale skin accentuating her features, her deep blue eyes cold and clear, the close-fitting clothing outlining a delicate curve.

She knew she was the most beautiful woman in the Northern Lands.

She finally exhaled slowly, as if making some decision, then turned to walk toward the door, her steps decisive and firm.

Like a hunter stepping out of the snow, catching up with its prey.

Yet before exiting, she still stubbornly muttered under her breath: "I'm just going to confirm... confirm if he has the guts."

.....

The night was already deep.

Louis took off his heavy formal attire, changing into comfortable loungewear, and sat cross-legged on the bed casually.

In front of him was a dim little oil lamp, its warm yellow light casting the room in half-light, like shrouding it in a quiet dream.

He lowered his gaze, his breathing long and steady, focused on the flow of energy within, trying to capture that faint trace of magic power.

Just as he was getting into the state, a light knock came from outside the door.

"Knock, knock."

Following that was the slightly deep voice of the attendant: "Sir, Miss Sif requests to see you."

Louis opened his eyes, a hint of surprise flashed in them.

"So late?" He hesitated for a moment, then spoke, "...Let her in."

The door was pushed open.

A night breeze quietly slipped in, bringing with it the unique chill of the Northern Lands' night.

Sif was wrapped in a heavy cloak, her silver hair shining slightly in the firelight, her cheeks reddened by the cold night wind, her breathing slightly rapid, as if she had run all the way here.

"Sir..." she stood at the door, her voice very low.

The room fell silent for a moment.

Only the oil lamp made a faint "puff, puff" sound, casting two restless shadows.

"Is there something wrong to find me this late?" Louis spoke first, his voice calm and gentle.

Sif pursed her lips, glanced at him with a complex look, then quickly lowered her head, her hands tightly clutching the hem of her cloak.

"Is there something wrong?" Louis asked again.

Sif gathered her courage and said, "Do you think... I'm only here for business?"

Louis was taken aback, not understanding, and his Adam's apple moved instinctively.

The room was unexpectedly quiet, only the faint sound of the oil lamp flickering could be heard.

Sif took a deep breath, a complex light flashing in her eyes.

"Swoosh—"

She suddenly unfastened her cloak, and the heavy cape slid to the ground with a "thud".

Louis's pupils contracted sharply.

Because Sif was wearing only a close-fitting undergarment, her slender figure exposed in the warm light of the oil lamp.

The pale skin unique to the girls of the Cold Moon Tribe shone with delicate luster in the dim light, carrying a wild beauty but also a clear sense of shyness.

Her breathing seemed slightly more rapid than before, her cheeks so red they nearly bled.

"I... I like you!"

After speaking, she seemed ready to explode, turning her head sharply and clutching the cloak, struggling to breathe.

"Don't get me wrong! It's not because of how good you are... just... just because I..."

Louis was stunned for a few seconds, looking at this proud little wolf before him.

Usually calm and composed, she now carried a stubbornness close to despair as if using all her strength.

His mouth curled into a smile unconsciously: "So, you sure you're not here to hurry me for the winter supplies list?"

Sif's already flushed face turned even redder instantly, huffing coldly, glaring at him: "I really regret not bringing a wolf today... let it bite you and see if you can still laugh!"

Louis chuckled, finally standing up from the bed, his gaze growing more serious.

"Well... Xiaobai." He slowly opened his mouth, his eyes deepening, "Did you come today wanting me to respond?"

Sif took a deep breath, a stubborn blush on her face, but her steps did not retreat.

"I came to tell you." She gritted her teeth, her voice lowered, "I'm not the kind of person who waits for others to slowly come around.

If you do nothing... then I'll leave here. Then, you will never see me again."

Louis looked at her stubborn appearance, his heart warmed.

He lightly chuckled, the teasing in his eyes completely fading away.

Stepping forward, he slowly raised his hand, his fingertips lightly touching the silver hair scattered behind her ear.

"Sif."

The two were almost pressed together, able to hear each other's rapid breaths.

She did not back away, instead instinctively held her breath, her eyes evasive yet stubbornly raising her chin.

"Idiot..." she whispered tremblingly.

"Hm." Louis's voice carried a hint of laughter, low, yet extremely gentle.

He slowly pulled her into his arms, his hand lightly wrapping around her slender waist.

Lowering his head close to her ear, his tone with a slight smile: "Actually, I like you too... for a long time."

Then he lowered his head and kissed her.

This kiss was slow but firm, with no room for retreat.

Like a suppressed emotion for a long time, finally unabashedly pouring out at this moment.

Sif's eyes widened, her body slightly trembled.

She never expected Louis would kiss her so directly.

But soon, she also closed her eyes and trembled to return the kiss.

The movement was somewhat awkward, like a little wolf hunting for the first time, clumsy yet fervent.

Her mind was almost blank, her heart racing wildly.

Is this... what it feels like to like someone?

Her fingers tightly grasped Louis's collar, as if afraid he would disappear if she didn't hold tight.

Their foreheads touched, breaths intertwining.

"I was clearly the one who came first..." Sif murmured in complaint, her voice still panting, the tips of her ears so red they seemed about to bleed, "So... how did you become the one taking the initiative?"

Louis chuckled lowly, reached out to hold her tight, with a non-refusal force, pulled her to sit by the bedside.

"You know," his voice was deep and husky, carrying a suppressed emotion, "the next step... do you know what it means?"

Sif's heart raced like it would leap out of her chest, her cheeks burning. She bit her lip, her eyes flickering but did not retreat.

"It means I won't run away anymore." That voice carried determination, small yet incredibly clear.

Sif moved close to Louis's ear, her sapphire eyes sparkling.

"And it also means..." Her lips brushed Louis's ear, her breath slightly trembling, "...you can't think about running away either."

The air quieted down, leaving only their increasingly rapid heartbeats.

The fire gently flickered, flames dancing on the walls, casting their tightly pressed silhouettes.

At that moment, the chill of the Northern Territory was no more.

Leaving only their body temperatures, fervent breaths, and the feelings that could no longer be hidden.

They no longer tested with words, but exchanged their long-suppressed emotions through the most genuine touch, the closest distance.

The bed curtain slowly fell, shutting out everything from the outside world.

Tonight, the wind and snow of the Northern Territory, no matter how cold, could not melt the temperature that quietly rose in this room.