

Winter 121

Chapter 121: Sif's Decision

The embers of the fire were still gently flickering, casting long diagonal shadows.

Sif curled up in the thick quilt, lying on her side, quietly watching the man sleeping beside her.

Louis's breathing was steady, his brows relaxed, his sleeping face handsome, unlike the noble who always seemed full of thoughts.

His black hair was slightly disheveled, clinging to his forehead, with long eyelashes casting faint shadows in the firelight.

In his sleep, his boyish looks were heart-pounding.

Sif was somewhat entranced, the corners of her mouth gently curved, her eyes filled with indescribable satisfaction and tenderness.

She gently brushed his nose with her fingers, then quickly pulled back, like a mischievous child.

But her smile didn't last long; her gaze gradually dimmed.

The shadow of her past quietly reemerged in her mind, like a heavy storm pressing upon her heart on a snowy night.

The Cold Moon bloodline, the tragic deaths of her clansmen, her brother's end... nothing had changed.

She was still the lone wolf of the Northern Territory, burdened with vengeance.

"The current you... are still too weak." She looked at Louis, whispering in her heart, "Should I tell you..."

Sif's fingertips swept across his sleeping face, her touch as light as a feather: "Tell you that I am the last princess of the Cold Moon Tribe, someone who survived with blood debts and hatred?"

She hesitated for a long time, struggling within her heart.

But ultimately, she just sighed softly: "I'll wait until you are stronger."

She whispered, light rekindling in her eyes.

"I believe one day, you will be strong enough to bear my true name and destiny."

She gently placed a kiss on his forehead, sealing the secret.

"Goodnight, Louis."

Then Sif closed her eyes, leaning against Louis's side, like a snow wolf finally finding its resting place.

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In the office of Red Tide Castle, the fire was blazing, warm and serene.

Outside, the cold wind howled, heralding the first snow, while inside it was gentle like another world.

Bradley stood straight, his sturdy boots making no sound on the carpet, his cloak dusted with a little frost.

He perused the report in his hand while reporting to Louis seated at the head of the table.

"Reporting to the Lord, by yesterday evening, the fourth batch of winter supplies from Red Rock Warehouse has been fully packed."

His voice was steady and powerful, with a slight southern accent.

"As per your instructions, the distribution of supplies to all residents of Red Tide Territory is complete...

The personnel remaining at workshops and watchtowers have also received double rations and heating supplies, including limited winter apparel and boots...

The 'quick-grow vegetables' in the heated greenhouse have completed the first harvest, totaling sixty-seven baskets, enough to provide nutritional supplement before the snow seals off the land...

Additionally, the construction of the winter fishery has been initially completed, with some under-ice nets in use, and fishing tests show a stable catch of about thirty fish per day..."

His report was increasingly organized, unaware that behind the large desk, Louis listened attentively but covertly made a small gesture.

Louis's left arm naturally rested on the side of the chair, his fingers casually falling on Sif's leg next to him, slowly tracing the warm lines through her form-fitting black pants.

Sif, who had been silently sitting by his side, suddenly tensed.

She turned her head sharply to look at him, her deep blue eyes wide, her cheeks instantly flushed.

Yet, she did not pull away.

She gently bit her lip, discreetly pinched Louis's palm with her fingers.

Louis made no move to stop, continuing to slowly trace the curve along the outside of her thigh.

Sif showed a look of both shame and anger, yet was somehow helpless, even... secretly pleased.

She subtly shifted her body, as if wanting to escape, yet also seemingly allowing him to feel more definitively.

"Additionally, the last batch of grain purchased from the south has entered the Northern Territory..."

Bradley continued to read from the summary report with consistent composure.

Though his tone was calm, his experienced eyes discreetly swept over the two sitting at the table.

After all, as someone living on the third floor of the castle, how could he not notice the "progress" between these two?

Frankly speaking, in this world, young lords should have had a few concubines by now; Louis only just warming up to one was slow indeed.

However, steadiness and restraint have always been the young lord's style.

Bradley didn't comment, dutifully continuing his report.

"In summary, the residents of Red Tide Territory can enjoy an unprecedentedly stable and substantial quality of life this winter."

At this point, a rare hint of satisfaction entered his voice, "Most of the residents can not only endure the harsh winter but can live quite comfortably.

The situation in the other four new territories is slightly worse. Although supplies and resources are being continuously dispatched.

But their foundations are still weak, especially in Cold Fir Territory, where there was a previous outbreak of disease."

Bradley looked up at Louis: "But with the support of Red Tide Territory and the model you have established, even in the worst-case scenario...

I expect we can at least ensure the survival of most residents through this winter."

He paused, a tone of unmistakable pride in his voice: "This is an achievement unparalleled in other Northern Territories.

You should know, this year in the Northern Territory... more than half of the population might die, many places can't even be saved, especially since a war just ended this year, the death toll will only rise."

The air grew heavy for a moment.

Behind the desk, Louis withdrew his fingers from Sif's thigh, his face regaining calm seriousness.

He was silent for a moment, not continuing Bradley's topic, for he knew he was no god and couldn't save so many people, his goal was simply to reduce the deaths in his territory.

He then changed the subject, asking, "What's the current scale of the heated greenhouse?"

Bradley immediately checked the documents, answering, "The first batch completed 5 greenhouses, each approximately 200 square meters.

Agriculture officer Mike organized personnel for expansion immediately after achieving results in the first greenhouse.

In the past 30 days, 12 more have been added, bringing the total to 17, with a total area of about 3400 square meters."

"We can build more." Louis's voice was unhurried, "It not only supplements the winter vegetable supply but also allows for the cultivation of medicinal herbs...

Fresh greens can effectively prevent scurvy, which is particularly important in winter."

"Very well." Bradley nodded, "I will arrange it immediately."

Their conversation was swift and to the point.

On the other side of the table, Sif, although pretending to listen intently, occasionally stole glances at Louis.

Her cheeks still faintly flushed, her heartbeat seemingly not entirely steady.

Chapter 122: Turtle Charm Fragrance

The laboratory was filled with an indescribable smell.

There was a mix of urine stench, some kind of burnt herbal residue, and various other odd smells, blending into a peculiar hellish flavor.

Herb scraps, overturned potion bottles, and some dried, unidentified liquid traces were scattered all over the floor.

Pale yellow steam floated in mid-air, carrying a hint of humid and ambiguous warmth.

Hillco wore gloves, covering his nose, his face full of disillusionment: "Tch, this is just ridiculous.

I'm a genius alchemy apprentice recognized by the Jade Federation, the future Great Alchemist, and now I'm here refining turtle urine?!"

His face was full of reluctance, yet he had no choice but to carry out this arduous task.

A few weeks ago, Lord Louis, who seemed gentle but actually had perverse ideas, personally issued this baffling experiment directive:

"Formulate a potion that can soothe male turtles' agitated moods and channel their mating instincts to induce gentle heating."

When he heard the task, the first thought that popped into Hillco's mind was:

Is this guy out of his mind? Is the great alchemy meant for this?!

But Louis carefully explained the importance of the potion.

"Winter is approaching rapidly, the Red Tide Territory has geothermal support, but what about outside? No geothermal, no resources, burning wood for warmth is just not enough..."

Thus, Hillco gritted his teeth and endured seven rounds of failure.

Sometimes the cauldron exploded, sometimes the table got burnt through, and once he almost blew up the entire laboratory.

Until yesterday, he finally extracted an element with a slightly intoxicating scent from a ton of female turtle excrement.

It was made primarily from female turtle urine, supplemented by several common yet hard-to-mix herbs, and finally processed through complex extraction and neutralization.

It simulated the pheromone of female Fire-backed Turtles, mixed with a mild sedative.

It could trigger the male turtles' mating instincts to generate heat without draining their vitality, and it would also soften their aggressive nature.

He gave this concoction an embarrassingly ridiculous name: "Turtle Charm Fragrance."

"I must admit, although this method is a bit low, the effect should be... well, reliable."

Hillco mused, looking down at his stained robe, and sighed: "I shouldn't have stolen that damn formula back then..."

He took off his gloves and opened the laboratory window, letting the cold wind in, which finally diluted some of the nauseating odors.

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Outside the experiment field, the cold wind was biting, but the onlookers were enthusiastic, creating a particularly lively atmosphere.

"... It's finally starting." Hillco rubbed his cold-red hands, feeling unexpectedly nervous.

His gaze fell on the center of the field, where there was a large male Fire-backed Turtle, the subject of this experiment.

Its shell faintly emitted heat, and its sturdy limbs restlessly pawed at the ground.

On the other side, Louis was focused, hands behind his back, standing in the front row with Sif beside him.

The experiment officially began as several assistants slowly poured the "Turtle Charm Fragrance" into the distillation apparatus.

"Release the Turtle Charm Fragrance for the first round!" an assistant called, then quickly stepped back.

Soon, a faint yellow smoke slowly spread across the field, enveloping the massive Fire-backed Turtle.

A subtle scent instantly filled the air.

It was a mix of fishy, musky, and slightly strange herbal notes, causing people to frown.

"... Tch, this smell is disgusting every time I inhale it." Hillco wrinkled his nose, staring intently at the male Fire-backed Turtle.

Initially, the male turtle only slightly raised its head, seemingly confused.

But in less than half a minute, it suddenly became excited, stomping heavily on the ground and slowly approaching the fake female turtle set-up.

"It's coming," Louis said, full of anticipation.

The Fire-backed Turtle started circling around the fake female turtle, nostrils flaring with heat, its movements growing more frantic.

Finally, it leapt onto it and began...

Rubbing intensely, emitting a series of strange low growls.

"Ah...!" Sif covered her eyes, her cheeks flushed, yet she couldn't resist peeking through her fingers at this bizarre scene.

Then she sneakily turned her head, glancing at Louis from the corner of her eye.

But he was unfazed, completely unaware of the blush-inducing scene, as if he was merely watching a plain stone.

Soon, the Fire-backed Turtle's shell started glowing red, like roasted iron, faintly emitting heat.

"It has begun." Louis raised an eyebrow, stepping back.

Sif unconsciously stepped back a few paces, eyes glued on the working giant turtle.

The Fire-backed Turtle grew hotter, its shell shimmering with a dark red glow, twisting the surrounding air, with steam billowing in waves, raising the temperature of the entire experiment field.

"Standing too close can burn you," Louis cautioned in a calm voice.

The core temperature of the Fire-backed Turtle could reach seventy to eighty degrees, quite effective.

Sif bit her lip and nodded.

"Second exposure." An experimenter added a bit more potion.

This time the male turtle became noticeably more docile, resting quietly after rubbing instead of becoming agitated.

"This potion works faster than expected," Hillco couldn't help but grin, his eyes gleaming.

And after the third round of "Turtle Charm Fragrance" release, the steam release rate of the Fire-backed Turtle significantly decreased, and the heat released was not as strong.

"The gentleness... is indeed improving." Louis nodded slightly, a hint of satisfaction in his eyes.

He quietly instructed, "Try again, confirm if it allows close inspection."

A knight experimenter with Fighting Energy cautiously approached, and the male turtle only swayed slightly, showing no signs of aggression.

The experiment was a success.

"Very good, this experiment was very successful." Louis turned, looking towards the sneering Hillco in the crowd, "Hillco!"

"Here!" Hillco immediately straightened up, full of anticipation.

"I'll reward you with a hundred gold coins." Louis took a heavy pouch from the knight's hand and tossed it over.

"Ah!! It's so heavy!" Hillco nearly missed catching it, hurriedly exclaimed, "The Lord is wise! The Lord is generous! Hahaha, I'm set for this one!"

Complaints? What complaints? All forgotten!

Hehe, so sweet!

After a few days of intensive training, the twelve male Fire-backed Turtles of the Red Tide Territory were finally tamed and acclimatized.

The Red Tide Territory's Beast Taming Knight team quickly assembled, twelve tamed male Fire-backed Turtles lined up, their shell's deep red glow emitting faint warmth in the cold wind.

"According to the plan, assign three to each of the four new subordinate territories, ensure they arrive before the severe winter." Louis issued the instruction.

"Yes!"

The knights responded swiftly, beginning to load the Fire-backed Turtles onto special Cold Iron transport frames one by one.

Despite their heavy bodies and slow movements, even after being tamed, these behemoths were still somewhat "unruly."

According to the plan, each territory's Fire-backed Turtle will provide concentrated heating during the cold snaps, sustaining a warm environment for 3 to 5 days.

Once the energy blocks on their backs run out, they will immediately be sent back to Red Tide for reheating, then new turtles will be dispatched to replace them.

Although the method is a bit cumbersome, it is temporarily the best solution.

"It's really troublesome..." Sif couldn't help but mutter in a low voice.

Louis watched the turtles for a long while and said, "At least it can save many lives, but the numbers are still too few. The transport is cumbersome and breeding is not proactive... next year, we must increase the breeding efforts."

Chapter 123: Winter Harvest

After watching the Turtle Charm Fragrance experiment, Louis turned to leave the testing site.

Just as he took a step, he glanced back and saw Sif blushing, standing still, intently watching the male Fire-backed Turtle enthusiastically rubbing against the dummy female turtle.

Louis couldn't help but chuckle, "Alright, have you seen enough? I have to visit the greenhouse in the farm area shortly; you should come along to gain some insights."

"Ah?" Sif snapped back to reality, her face turning red all the way to her neck as she hurriedly said, "I-I wasn't watching!"

But her flustered manner made it clear she was caught in the act.

"Okay, okay," Louis laughed and waved his hand, "let's pretend you weren't watching."

Sif muttered softly, "I really wasn't watching..."

In the cold wind, the two rode horses towards the direction of the agriculture greenhouses.

In the distance, the outlines of over a dozen greenhouses began to appear against the gray sky, resembling warm embankments rising from the snow.

As they got closer, Sif caught a whiff of moist, warm earth and a faint... aroma of plants.

In this cold world, the smell seemed particularly surreal, as if it had sneaked in from another season.

The greenhouses were neatly arranged, seventeen in total at a glance, with clear numbering on each.

The exterior was tightly wrapped with animal hides and burlap, with traces of warm air seeping through the gaps as if gently breathing.

Louis stopped in front of the nearest one, lifting a curtain with his hand.

"Come, take a look."

A wave of warmth instantly gushed out, as if stepping from winter straight into early spring.

Inside was a lush green, with rows of quick-leaf lettuce lined up, glistening with a fresh sheen.

Further in, the leaves of winter radish stretched out, and the roots were rounded and puffed up, as if proudly showing off.

Sif blinked, noticing the silver-white bands wrapped around the greenhouse walls, like rough ribbons, glimmering slightly.

"What's this?" she asked, a little puzzled as she looked up.

"Reflective layer," Louis said succinctly.

Upon closer inspection, Sif saw that not only was the outer layer lined, but shining stone slabs were also propped up against the inner walls, almost reflecting people's shadows.

Even the corner burlaps were woven with fine threads of silver, faintly glimmering in the gloom.

"As long as there's a hint of daylight, these can 'drive' it all in without wasting a bit," Louis explained casually, pointing to the few twinkling mineral stones hanging from the greenhouse roof.

"These are mid-tier Light Stones bought through the merchants' guild, and we've made the entire tent a reflective box structure. That way, as long as a ray of sunlight comes through, it can be utilized."

Sif realized it must be Louis's idea, as his mind was always full of strange yet useful things.

She squatted down, gently touching a piece of tender green leaf with her fingertips.

Her fingers still carried the chill from outside, but what she touched was unmistakably real, living warmth.

"In this weather..." she murmured softly, her eyes filled with wonder, "you can actually grow vegetables?"

Louis was equally surprised. He had only suggested the idea, yet Mike executed it so well, truly a genius in agriculture as the system recognized.

At this moment, Mike emerged from another greenhouse.

He had patches of wet mud on him, but his face was brimming with an irrepressible smile, like the sole warmth in this cold sky.

"M-My Lord!" Mike quickly approached, smiling broadly.

His gratitude towards Louis was evident; once a slave, now not only freed but appointed as the Agricultural Official of Red Tide Territory.

He married a local widow with three children, living a stable life.

His wife was now pregnant again.

Louis gave him a once-over, teasingly, "Well well, Mike, you're living quite well, huh? How long has it been, and there's already a new member on the way?"

Mike's ears turned red in an instant, and he quickly looked down, laughing sheepishly, unsure of what to say.

Seeing this, Louis waved his hand, "Alright, why don't you give her a rundown of the situation here, so she can learn a bit too."

"Yes, my Lord," Mike then straightened up, stammering as he reported:

"Now... a total of seventeen greenhouses have been built, covering an area of three thousand four hundred square meters!

The rotation of quick-leaf lettuce has already completed one cycle, and the harvest exceeded fifty baskets.

Winter radish has also been sown into the soil, and in a little over a month... the first batch will be ready for harvest."

Although Mike still stammered a bit, he clearly explained each situation.

As Louis listened, he walked deeper into the greenhouse.

Underfoot was soft soil, and occasionally, a few drops of water dripped down, with the air inside filled with the damp, earthy smell and the fragrance of grass.

He squatted, pinching a leaf from the quick-leaf lettuce, gently rubbing it with his fingertips. The tender leaf was crisp, full of juice.

Then he reached to pull apart a radish sprout, revealing the shallowly swollen root, white and firm.

"Well done, Mike. Very well executed," Louis stood up, clapped the dirt off his hands, turned to Mike with a smile and nodded,

"Next, explore some medicinal herbs and cold-resistant grains... so our people can have fresh vegetables even in the cold winter."

His gaze swept across the rows of greenhouses as he added, "Build more of these, expand the scale."

After hearing this, Mike nodded quickly in response, "Yes, my Lord, I'll get it done!"

Leaving the greenhouses, Louis and Sif rode their horses slowly along the Red Tide River.

The north wind howled, with a stretch of desolate white along the river.

Sif tightened her cloak, her nose red from the cold, but her eyes were curiously looking around.

"Are they... fishing?" she asked in a low voice, pointing ahead.

Following her gaze, they saw sections of the river banked off by coarse ropes, with a few temporary tents erected here and there.

Fishermen, clad in thick leather apparel, busied themselves on the frozen river surface, occasionally echoing the sharp sound of ice-digging tools, slicing through the cold air.

"Yes, the winter fishery," Louis tugged the reins, leading the way closer, "come, let's take a look."

A few fishermen were seen gathered around an ice hole, skillfully pulling up fishing nets.

A flash of water, and silver, gleaming fish were flung onto the ice, flopping and scattering tiny shards of ice.

"Lord Louis, what brings you here personally!" Fishery Official Luke hurried over with a pleasing smile, "This must be a good omen; this year..."

"Less flattery, just tell me the current situation," Louis interrupted him.

Luke chuckled, rubbing his nose, "Yes! Reporting, my lord!"

He gestured to the nets by the ice hole, pride shining in his eyes, "The first phase of the winter fishery is complete; the under-ice fishing net system is officially in use. Now, each hole can stably produce about thirty fish per day..."

Louis glanced at the heap of lively jumping fish, nodding slightly.

The yield wasn't exceptionally high, but stable, with the key being sustainability.

"Not bad," he said softly, his tone carrying a hint of approval, "keep improving the network layout, don't slack off, and boost the efficiency."

"Understood!" Luke immediately replied upon hearing Louis's words.

Sif stood nearby, hands clutching her cloak, her gaze following each lively fish being flung up.

For some reason, an indescribable warmth suddenly surged in her heart.

She turned her head to look at the man standing in front.

Louis's figure stood tall and straight, his expression calm, speaking neither too quickly nor too slowly, meticulous even when dealing with the most trivial livelihood projects.

Sif's eyes quietly softened, and she couldn't help but murmur in a low voice, "Truly... incredible..."

Louis turned his head, his peripheral vision catching her deep blue eyes, sparkling and with a hint of flustered avoidance.

He paused for a moment, then gently pinched her cheek with a smile, "Let's go, back to the castle."

Sif's ears instantly burned, and she lowered her head, softly responding, "Okay..."

Chapter 124: A Different Domain

The north wind, laden with snow dust, blew all the way from the distant mountains, like a bone-chilling blade sweeping through every street and alley of Red Tide Territory.

Even though Red Tide Territory was considered a southern region of the Northern Territory, it finally felt the chill of deep winter.

Once stepping outside, the white mist exhaled was so dense it seemed as if it could freeze in the air.

Thin ice on the river's surface began to quietly spread out.

Occasional low growls came from the forest, all from beasts beginning to migrate southward.

The hunters of Red Tide Territory also seized this brief opportunity to catch a lot of game.

All of this indicated that the cold winter of the Northern Territory had truly arrived.

However, the arrival of winter did not disrupt the order of Red Tide Territory in the slightest.

Every household stuffed the distributed cotton cloth into door gaps to prevent cold winds from entering the house.

Straw was also spread at the door, making it soft to step on and less slippery.

"Here, quickly put it on!" A mother draped the new cotton coat distributed by Red Tide Territory over her child, carefully tying the belt tight.

Inside, the stove blazed red, hot soup bubbled and simmered, and children gathered around the stove, playing and laughing.

No matter how the snow fluttered outside, it couldn't penetrate this half-underground house.

"It's not scary even when it's cold." A child exclaimed excitedly, rushing into the snow with friends for a snowball fight in the white world.

In a street corner, several elderly people wrapped in thick clothes and blankets sat down to rest against a wall, gazing up at the street view and sighing with emotion.

"Originally... every year was just a matter of enduring." An old hunter sighed, his eyes grew dim, "Yet, many still froze to death. Unlike now... we have food and clothing, all thanks to Lord Louis."

A refugee hugged a new cotton coat tightly, eyes slightly red: "If it weren't for Lord Louis taking me in... I fear I would've frozen to death on the snowfield long ago."

Far away, slaves shoveling snow paused, looked up and exchanged glances.

"Yes." One of them said softly, "We too... are no longer afraid of being discarded like mere materials."

In everyone's eyes, there was a sense of belonging and hope, something never seen in past winters.

In every corner, at tables, beside the fire, everywhere in Red Tide Territory, people were grateful to the person who brought about such changes.

"Lord Louis... is our sun."

"Indeed, he's the only winter on this snowfield that won't freeze anyone to death."

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At the small square at the village head, the people's cheeks were reddened by the cold, and exhaled white mist drifted slowly in the air.

They stood huddled together, watching the stage.

A territory official wearing a thick cloak stepped onto the high platform, unfurling a document, his reading voice resonating clearly in the cold wind:

"Fellow villagers, please take note that Red Tide Territory is about to enter a period of extreme cold! This will be an unusually harsh winter; we must unite as one to overcome the difficult times."

He raised the parchment in his hand, his tone solemn, with a touch of fervor: "The great Lord Louis, with a compassionate heart, refuses to let anyone suffer alone!

He has ordered that regardless of who they are, whether poor, slave, or refugee, as long as they are in Red Tide Territory, they are citizens of Red Tide!

If there is any difficulty, it must be reported at the first instance; Red Tide Territory will never leave anyone isolated and helpless!"

In the crowd, someone had already started to murmur in admiration: "Truly a kind and great lord..."

The official's voice grew more impassioned, continuing sincerely: "The lord always keeps everyone's safety at heart! Elsewhere, disaster and cold are imminent, famine and freezing disasters rampant.

Yet in Red Tide Territory, we have smoked fish, granaries, winter clothes, and firewood!

We will become the only land in the Northern Empire where no one will freeze to death!"

At these words, the people burst into low cheers and chatter, faces full of pride and gratitude.

"Long live Red Tide!" Someone couldn't help but shout.

"Long live Lord Louis!" The calls quickly echoed, making the blood boil even amidst this harsh winter.

The official raised his hand to signal for silence, saying: "Remember, this is not a miracle, but the result of our unity and effort! As long as we follow in the lord's footsteps, we will surely overcome the winter and usher in a new spring!"

The crowd erupted into another round of applause and cheers.

In their eyes was a kind of light, filled with hope and trust, confident that Lord Louis would keep his word.

Just like the soft articles they wrote themselves, under Louis's governance, although the winter in Red Tide Territory was cold, it was orderly and steady.

Every household was brightly lit with firewood, and children could still chase and play in the snow.

Smoke drifted slowly up, smoked fish, rye, potatoes and other food filled the warehouses.

Yet other territories in the Northern Territory outside Red Tide were not as fortunate to have a lord like Louis.

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The wind blew in from the north, hurling snowflakes fiercely against the eaves.

This was Baron McKinney's territory.

Also located in the Northern Territory, but a region slightly further south than Red Tide Territory.

Yet not a single person was in sight on the streets, it was utterly silent, not even other animals were present.

A few dilapidated huts, the door gaps with large holes, allowed the wind and snow to freely invade.

Inside, several citizens huddled in corners, wrapped in tattered blankets that were almost transparent, their faces frozen to a bluish hue.

The child was so weak that even his cries couldn't be heard, just staring with dry eyes in a daze.

"...Hold on for a few more days, maybe the snow will stop, maybe we can go out and find some bark."
Someone murmured softly, a mix of numbness and a flicker of hope in their eyes.

But no one responded to his words; everyone was too cold, too cold to even nod their heads.

A broken wooden barrel was filled with snow, which was their water and food.

An old man huddled in the corner, breathing weakly, eyelids drooping.

Suddenly a gust of wind blew the door open, his body trembled slightly, but there was no other movement.

"Dead, dead..." someone whispered, voice trembling, unclear whether from cold or fear.

But no one paid attention because it was all too common.

These were still freemen, while in the slaves' dungeon, it was even more inhumane.

In the corner, a few emaciated figures lay slumped, covered in tattered sacks, like brittle branches that could snap at any moment.

The air was tainted with the smell of mold and rot, pressing heavily on everyone's chest.

In that smell, there was not only the scent of death but also a suffocating despair.

A few corpses lay against the wall, faces covered with a thin layer of frost, eyes wide open staring at the ceiling, as if still waiting for a shred of salvation before death.

But this was the place where the sun of the Red Tide Territory couldn't reach.

No one cried, nor was there any panic.

Only pairs of empty eyes silently watched, too weary to even move.

One dead? Or dozens?

It made no difference.

The dead slaves were thrown out into the snow, without even a proper pit, left for the wind to pile snow over their bodies.

This was their "final resting place."

In the corner, a middle-aged man leaned against the cold mud wall, holding his barely alive wife in his arms.

His lips were purple with cold, his voice barely audible: "Just endure it, live one day at a time, are we supposed to rely on that master to save us?"

He didn't finish, chuckling coldly.

The laughter was low and dry, like firewood cracking from the cold, chilling to the listeners' hearts.

No one responded, only a gust of wind swept by, making the tattered curtains flutter violently, as if mourning the dead silence here.

Yet the scene shifts.

Not far away, inside the mansion of Baron McKinney, was like another world.

The hall was brightly lit, the wooden logs in the fireplace burned vigorously, dispelling all the cold.

The long banquet table was piled high with food: whole roast lamb, freshly cooked suckling pig, greasy sausages strung together, baskets of fruit casually tossed aside.

Many were just bitten a few times before being thrown aside, rotting black.

The floor was strewn with large breadcrumbs, mixed with spilled wine, trampled mess by people's feet.

Baron McKinney was drunkenly half-leaning on a chair, holding a young maid in his arms, reeking of alcohol with every breath.

His fingers idly pinched the maid's snow-white skin, laughing wantonly, "Come, give me a kiss, bring some good luck to your lord!"

A few knights nearby, faces flushed from drinking, the cards on the gambling table scattered, piles of copper and silver coins stacked high.

"Haha, McKinney, your hand is terrible!" A knight laughed, throwing cards, grabbing a cup and downing it.

"Stop blabbering!" McKinney cursed, tossing away the wine urn, kicking it over, the strong aroma of the liquor spreading all over, slowly flowing across the stone floor.

No one cared.

After all, in this house, wine and meat are plentiful, women are plentiful, inexhaustible and never-ending.

Inside the house and outside the world were worlds apart.

McKinney was merely a newly appointed baron succeeding temporarily.

His elder brother died in the battle at Snow Eagle City, and he took advantage of his family's status to take the baron's position.

Though he had just been through a war, in reality, McKinney's territory had never truly suffered any Snow Swearer attacks.

Instead, due to its remote location in the mountains, it temporarily became a bed of comfort for his indulgence.

For him, war and famine were merely topics of conversation at the gambling table.

"Hey, come on, let's continue! Bring that bottle of good wine too!" McKinney laughed loudly, his eyes brazenly scanning the maids on the other side, "Come, come, come a little closer!"

Amidst the uproar and chaos, the butler walked forward cautiously with his head bowed: "Ahem, my lord..."

McKinney, holding the maid while drinking, glanced at him with bleary eyes, frowning: "What is it? Can't you see I'm happy here?"

Sweat beaded on the butler's forehead, and he whispered, "It's, it's about the granary... We just took stock and found... um, the reserves, the reserves might... not be enough to last the entire winter..."

"Hmph, if it's not enough, it's not enough, let those slaves starve to death. In spring next year, just buy new ones, a few worthless lives, who cares?"

The butler's face turned pale, his eyes moved slightly, finally gritting his teeth and softly reminding, "But... it's not just the slaves... even the baron's mansion's grain reserves... might not be sufficient."

As these words fell, the originally noisy hall fell silent for a moment.

McKinney slowly turned his head, a chill creeping into his drunkenness: "...What did you say?"

Chapter 125: Raiding the Grain

McKinney slowly turned his head to look at the butler, his face full of impatience, and a slight coldness in his drunken eyes: "What did you say?"

The butler's body shivered, his voice trembling: "It's true, sir... Although the granary looks ample, during this period, you... have been hosting banquets daily, consuming large amounts of grain and meat... At this rate... I'm afraid it won't last beyond the end of February..."

"Smack!!"

McKinney suddenly stood up, raised his hand, and gave the butler a slap with such force that the skinny old man fell to the ground.

"Nonsense! Are you cursing me to starve to death?!" McKinney roared through gritted teeth, his face grimacing.

The butler covered his face and knelt on the ground, trembling and remaining silent.

This baron hosted three banquets a day, slaughtering whole cows and sheep, with a cart of wine delivered each week, and two barrels of leftover food discarded daily...

Such extravagance could not be sustained even with ten granaries.

But he dared not speak.

The hall fell silent, with only the crackling of the fireplace.

Suddenly, McKinney's eyes shifted, and a greasy smile appeared on his face:

"Haha, this little issue won't stump this baron! I have a brilliant plan!"

The butler quickly stood up, eagerly flattering: "Your wisdom is unparalleled, sir! May I ask what this brilliant plan is?"

McKinney laughed heartily, took a swig of wine, and swaggeringly said, "Others stockpile grain for winter, I stockpile soldiers."

We just need to wait for those fools from Red Tide Territory to transport their grain to the neighboring Canglu Territory, and we'll raid them. Aren't they rich? Every ten days or so they make a transport."

"Oh, you are truly wise, sir!" A nearby knight immediately praised loudly, "This is what it means to be a Northern Lord! What good is painstakingly stockpiling grain? Just grab it, and it's all ours!"

"Exactly, exactly!" Another knight grinned, raising his cup: "Come, a toast to Lord McKinney! We won't starve this winter, thanks to your brilliant leadership!"

"Precisely!" A group of people laughed and echoed, making a noisy clatter of cups and plates, creating a lively scene.

McKinney, elated by the praise, hugged the maid closer, kicked away an empty wine jar, and boldly slapped the table:

"Alright! When more grain comes, we set out, but for now, you all eat and drink well, don't hold back!"

"Hahaha!! Thanks for the lord's generosity!"

The butler hesitated for quite a while, still biting his lip, and softly reminded: "My lord... this, this might not be appropriate... Canglu Territory is Baron Calvin's domain! Once we get caught out..."

Before he finished speaking, McKinney cut him off with a slap on the table.

"Fool!" McKinney rolled his eyes, raising his fat face: "Who said we'd rob them openly? Put on masks, change outfits, kill everyone transporting the grain, leave no trace, and who would know it's us?"

He laughed so hard his chubby face shook, his eyes narrowed into slits: "Only a fool would rob in broad daylight, a smart person does it and then leaves without a trace."

"Exactly! Exactly!"

"The baron is too shrewd!"

"This is... what's it called, tactical deception!"

The knights chimed in one after another, exaggerating wildly.

Even one who had too much to drink shouted with his wine cup held high, "Just say the Snow Swearer did it! Those guys kill and burn everything, perfect scapegoats hahaha!"

"Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant!"

McKinney laughed uproariously, hugging the maid tighter: "Look, look! This is what a smart mind looks like!"

The butler attempted one last intervention: "But... what if Lord Calvin..."

McKinney impatiently waved him off: "Stop yammering about Calvin, who are you trying to scare? No matter how capable he is, he can't intimidate me."

He downed a cup of wine in one go, roughly wiped his mouth: "Alright, stop the chatter, go give the order, have someone keep watch, as soon as there's more grain, act immediately."

"Yes..." A glimpse of unease flashed in the butler's eyes, but he could only leave the banquet hall.

The hall once again erupted in clamorous revelry.

The candlelight flickered over the table, casting bright faces full of smiles, forming an absurd spectacle on this deep winter night.

.....

The main transportation route from Red Tide Territory to Canglu Territory passed through a dense woodland and wound through a narrow gorge.

In winter, the deep snow and treacherous terrain made it an "ideal spot" for bandit ambushes.

Early this morning, Baron McKinney received information that the grain convoy from Red Tide Territory to Canglu Territory was passing through that very gorge today!

"What an opportunity!" he rubbed his hands together, eyes gleaming as if seeing a plate of rich meat: "I must witness such excitement firsthand!"

So McKinney decided to take the field personally.

Though his debaucheries had made him neglect his cultivation recently, he had once worked hard and reached the high-tier official knight level.

Almost all the able knights in the territory had been summoned.

But due to the heavy losses from the previous Snow Eagle City war, there weren't many knights left in actuality.

About ten official knights, one elite knight, plus over sixty apprentice knights, this was all the knights he commanded.

Considered few among the Northern Lords, but against a mere grain convoy?

A piece of cake.

"This is hardly a battle!" McKinney laughed heartily, "Just a bunch of grain escorts, a quick charge and they'll be scared off!"

Before setting off, the knights had another hearty drink within the territory, reeking of alcohol.

"To victory!"

"We'll feast on the looted grain tonight, hahahaha!"

.....

Snow fell on the mountains and woods, silent, as this gang of "bandits" treaded through deep snow, lying in ambush at the narrowest point of the gorge.

"Here they come, they're coming!"

Chapter 126: Raiding the Grain (Part 2)

McKinney crouched on the hill, squinting, so excited that his breathing became heavy.

Over on the other side of the valley entrance, a convoy escorting grain slowly made its way in.

Twenty or so knights led the way, followed by more than sixty soldiers, each one alert, guarding over a dozen grain-laden carriages.

The heavy wheels creaked as they rolled over the snow.

"Heh heh, we're going to be rich... There's more than I thought..." McKinney licked his lips, squinting at the convoy ahead.

Behind him, more than seventy knights wore rough black cloth masks, like a pack of bloodthirsty wild dogs, itching for action.

"Listen carefully!" McKinney lowered his voice but couldn't suppress his sheer excitement. "There are only twenty something knights on the opposite side; we have more men, and our equipment isn't lacking. With one charge, they'll break!"

"Hahaha!"

"Lord McKinney is wise! Watch you lead us to fortune!"

McKinney was immensely pleased, the deep blue fighting energy on him flickering faintly, his entire presence like a beast that couldn't be restrained.

He raised his longsword, taking a deep breath of the cold air, and growled in a low voice: "Brothers, it's time to make our fortune!! Charge!!"

In the next instant, the hillside erupted in bursts of fighting energy light; the knights charged down like a flood of deep blue, filled with excitement and murderous intent!

McKinney charged first, his eyes fixed fiercely on those slowly advancing grain carriages, already planning his evening's entertainment in his mind.

"Enemy assault!!"

Almost simultaneously, the knights of the escorting convoy sensed the anomaly.

Only to see a large group of knights charging out from both sides of the valley, wearing thick cloaks and rough black cloth masks, revealing only their sharp eyes.

"...Bandits?" the leading red-cloaked knight exclaimed.

"Something's wrong, this fighting energy..." the deputy exclaimed.

Among those "bandits," everyone had suddenly ignited deep blue fighting energy, charging forward with a suffocating oppressive aura!

The red-cloaked knight's face changed, and he shouted sharply: "Everyone be on guard! Protect the carriages! Soldiers, retreat first!"

"But, sir..."

"This is Lord Louis's order! Protecting lives is the top priority!"

Without any hesitation, the red-cloaked knight swung his sword sharply, and a blistering red fighting energy instantly exploded around him, rushing forward like ignited flames, with a scorching shock wave.

Dozens of soldiers immediately received the order, carrying shields, guarding the grain carriages, and quickly retreating towards the mouth of the valley.

"Don't let them escape!!" McKinney immediately saw through the opposite party's intent, and exploded in anger, "Charge! Seize all those grain carriages!"

McKinney charged into battle, deep blue fighting energy exploding with force. Sword energy tore through the air with a suffocating pressure.

The knights behind him yelled as they charged, fighting energy entangled in chaos, instantly turning the scene into a mess.

"Hold the formation! Cross-defend, cover the retreat!

Knights, follow me!"

The Red Tide Territory's red fighting energy spread out on the snow like flames.

The leading red-cloaked knight swung his sword and led the charge to block the advancing enemy.

They didn't recklessly engage in battle but maintained a defensive arc, guiding the enemy to both sides, fiercely guarding the escape route for the grain carriages.

Although McKinney's men had the numbers, they were impulsive and reckless after drinking, shouting and killing without any sense of order.

For a while, the fighting energies of both sides intertwined, with constant "bang bang" sounds of collision on the battlefield, the snow exploding into splashes.

"Die!!" McKinney roared, sweeping his longsword, the deep blue fighting energy surged like a giant wave, forcing back three Red Tide Territory knights.

But as he sought to pursue further, he found that the opponents had already pulled away, quickly regrouping to close in, guarding tightly, even killing a few of McKinney's knights.

"Damn it!!" McKinney angrily kicked over one of his fallen comrades' corpses, "Those bastards!"

A few of his knights began to clamour: "Sir, they retreated too fast, we only got half of the grain!"

"Shut up! Keep looting, load everything we can take!"

In the chaos, a few soldiers from the Red Tide Territory couldn't retreat in time and were swiftly cut down by the masked enemy knights, leaving streaks of glaring red lines of blood on the snow.

Even so, the Red Tide Territory knights maintained their footing, strictly executing their tactics, protecting the majority of the soldiers, and quickly retreating from the battle zone.

"Hurry, protect the grain carriages, retreat in batches!"

After a series of rapid commands, the transport convoy disappeared into the distance at the valley entrance, leaving behind only a few seized grain carriages and a lingering scent of blood.

"Hahahaha!"

McKinney, panting, stood before the seized grain carriages, with a look on his face that mingled glee with menace, staring at the sacks of grain with eyes flickering with greed.

"Hmph... See that? Even so, I made off with the goods, didn't I?"

He slapped the grain carriage forcefully, his voice carrying a hint of wild arrogance:

"What's Calvin anyway? No thorn is hard enough to stop Baron McKinney from looting grain!"

The surrounding knights laughed heartily, some waving their swords and hurling curses:

"Ha ha! Are Red Tide knights only this good? They run at the first sight of battle!"

"Exactly! If they didn't retreat fast, they'd be dead by now, ha ha ha!"

A few apprentice knights stood proudly by the grain carriage, like bandits drawing their long knives, with a few clangs they unfastened the ropes tied around the sack mouths.

"Come, come, let's see what goodies these Southern folks have sent!"

One of them squatted down, pulled open the sack, and a familiar smell wafted out immediately.

"Oh, we're in luck this time!"

His eyes brightened, reaching in to grab a fish: "Smoked fish!"

Another knight peeled open the sack beside it, loudly announcing: "There's dried vegetables here! And fresh vegetables too! Damn, where'd they get fresh vegetables!"

"Look at this barrel, smoked fish! Perfect with strong liquor!"

"Damn, there's cured boar meat too! A big piece, with this fat, it's definitely salted to perfection!"

They rummaged around the grain carriage like kids searching for treasure, mouths oily with delight.

Some even impatiently bit into dried meat, crunching noisily.

"There are just a few of us, this is enough to overfeed us till spring!"

McKinney also walked over and glanced, clicking his tongue twice: "Tsk, wine, meat, and smoked fish, these folks are living well... Now, all this is mine."

He said so, but the corners of his eyes twitched slightly, a ripple of uncontained unease flashing in his eyes.

Something's not right...

The initial plan was to kill off the escorts in the chaos, leave no one alive, and ideally burn the bodies clean.

That way, even if the Red Tide Territory suspected something, they wouldn't find any leads.

But this time, they only cut down a few minor soldiers, while most were protected by those damned Red Tide Knights who fled.

"Damn it..." he cursed inwardly, staring fiercely towards the valley entrance, gnashing his teeth.

If that group figured something out after returning and pointed the blame at me...

McKinney's mind flashed with memories of those knights' red fighting energy and the young prefect's reputation.

He knew very well that he was not a match for the Red Tide Territory.

The cold wind howled through the valley, making McKinney shiver instinctively.

But soon, he shook his head forcefully, as if to shake that unease from his mind, his lips curling into a sinister smile again.

"Ha... What's there to fear? I'm wearing a mask. How can they recognize a damn thing!" he said, raising his head, then suddenly shouted, "Load the carriages! Back to celebrate!!"

Cheering erupted once more, the looters laughing more and more arrogantly as the cold wind blew.

Chapter 127: Red Tide Knight, Strike!

After the supply convoy of the Red Tide Territory successfully escaped danger, the Red Cloak Knight immediately ordered, "Everyone hide! Don't make any moves until I get back!"

He waved his hand, signaling the remaining knights and soldiers to hide in a dense forest.

He took a deep breath, and the red Fighting Energy burst from his body, dashing out of the forest like a swift wind.

He sprinted along the path, heading straight for the Red Tide Territory.

"I must quickly inform Lord Louis!" he thought to himself, pushing his speed to the limit.

...

There was a rush of footsteps outside the door.

"Lord Louis!" The Red Cloak Knight entered, panting, and knelt on one knee, looking tense, "Something has happened! The supply convoy was ambushed while crossing the Canglu Forest, the grain was stolen—we suspect it's the Snow Swearer's doing!"

As he spoke, he observed Louis's reaction, thinking that upon hearing this, the lord would surely be furious.

However, to his surprise, Louis merely turned his head slightly, showing no sign of surprise on his face.

"Oh?" He leisurely set down his teacup, his gaze as calm as water, "Snow Swearers? Wearing masks?"

"Yes, my lord!" The Red Cloak Knight was sweating coldly, "Their Fighting Energy is dark blue, wearing black masks, they killed a few soldiers, but the rest of us have retreated safely."

"Hmm." Louis responded blandly, as if he already knew these details, not even bothering to raise an eyelid.

He lowered his head to straighten his cuffs, casually saying, "It's not the Snow Swearers at all."

"Huh?" The Red Cloak Knight froze, "But... they..."

Louis raised his head, a slight smirk appearing at the corner of his mouth, a cold glint in his eyes: "Snow Swearers never wear masks, they kill to make sure you know who did it."

The Red Cloak Knight's face changed: "Then... then who?"

"I know who did it." Louis interrupted him, lifting his head, a cold light flashing in his eyes, a mocking smile playing on his lips.

The Red Cloak Knight looked puzzled but dared not ask more questions.

In fact, Louis was fully aware of the entire situation; he didn't require the knight's report at all.

This morning, he had already learned this information through the Daily Intelligence System.

[1: Today, Baron McKinney will set a trap in the southern canyon of Canglu Forest, disguising as bandits, targeting the supply convoy of the Red Tide Territory.]

"Heh, someone dares to rob my supplies, kill my people..." A cold glint flashed in Louis's eyes, his voice as frosty as ice.

"It seems they're quite tired of living. Have Lambert come to the study immediately."

"Yes!" The guard responded and left.

Soon, urgent footsteps echoed from outside, as Lambert entered quickly, brushing off the snow: "My lord, you were looking for me?"

"Summon two hundred knights." Louis slowly rose, "I will personally lead the team to McKinney's territory."

Lambert was somewhat stunned, unable to resist looking up at Louis.

Though this young lord was decisive and harsh, he had always believed in restraint and reason, never easily taking the initiative to strike.

This time, he was actually going to lead troops himself?

But he did not ask further, merely bowed his head and replied forcefully, "As you command!"

Lambert immediately turned and left the hall, beginning to urgently mobilize the Knight Order.

Soon, the Red Tide Territory Knight Order swiftly gathered.

A full two hundred fully armed knights stood arrayed in the snow, cloaks of black and red flapped in the wind.

"In position!" Lambert shouted loudly, and the Red Cloak Knights quickly arranged their formation, their gazes as sharp as blades.

The castle gates slowly opened, and Louis rode out, his black and red cloak flying in the wind and snow.

"Move out."

Louis ordered coldly, swinging the horsewhip, riding forward first.

Beside him, Weir followed closely, unable to conceal his excitement; it was his first time going on a campaign.

The iron armor weighed heavily on his shoulder, the warhorse's breath puffing out hot gas, and Weir's heartbeat thundered like war drums.

He couldn't help but look up at Louis beside him, seeing the stern lord with an expressionless face.

"I must achieve something for Lord Louis!" Weir gripped the reins tightly, his eyes gleaming with a longing light.

Already in his mind, he imagined himself charging on horseback, cutting down enemy generals.

The procession was grand, the sound of hooves shaking the entire land.

The elite knights of the Red Tide Territory surged forward like a red-black iron stream in the cold wind, heading towards the impending reckoning.

.....

McKinney was lying on a wide lounge chair, raising a wine glass high, his laughter echoed in the castle's hall.

"Hahaha! Today was truly satisfying! Brothers, come, drink! These are the spoils we deserve!" he shouted, raising his glass, draining the strong wine, his face full of triumphant expression.

The knights beside him also burst into laughter, clinking their cups together.

Several even removed their armor, reveling with a few maidservants, the entire hall filled with a debauchorous and indulgent atmosphere.

"Hmph, they say the Red Tide Territory is formidable? Just lucky, that's all! That Baron Louis, what a joke!"

McKinney threw back a large gulp of wine, laughing mockingly, "Duke Edmund must be blind to have made him Prefect.

Ugh, just a little brat from the south, naive as hell! Someone like that won't last until next year!"

The knights beside him laughed in agreement: "Yeah, no one as tough as you, sir, today we played him for a fool!"

"Red Tide Knights? What a laugh, just a bunch of spineless cowards, if they hadn't run fast, they'd be dead by our blades!"

McKinney, smug and self-satisfied: "He'll eventually have to kneel before me and lick my boots!"

Suddenly, the hall's door slammed open with a "bang."

"What is it?!" he furrowed his brow.

Before he could erupt, his old steward, pale-faced, stumbled in, his voice shaking:

"Baron, something's wrong! A large group of enemies is coming, nearly at our castle now!!"

The wine glass slipped from McKinney's hand, shattering on the ground.

He sat up abruptly, disbelief in his eyes: "Is it the Snow Swearer?!"

"No... no!" the steward stammered, "It looks like... seems to be... the cavalry from Red Tide Territory!"

The air seemed to freeze for a moment.

McKinney jumped up from his chair, his voice trembling: "How can this be? We've been discovered? Isn't this plan flawless?!"

Not only McKinney, but the knights in the hall who had been reveling also suddenly changed their expressions.

The surrounding noise abruptly ceased, replaced by a deathly silence.

Coming to his senses, McKinney staggered to the side of the hall, pushed open the heavy wooden frame of the window, and peeked out.

Chapter 128: Breaching the City!

McKinney trembled as he pushed open the heavy wooden frame and peered outside.

In an instant, his whole body froze.

In the distance, on the snowy field, a cavalry unit in black and red was rapidly approaching the castle, their armor glinting coldly in the dim light.

Of course, most conspicuous were the flags fluttering in the wind, with red backgrounds and golden sun emblems.

These were indeed the flags of Red Tide Territory!

"This... this can't be!" McKinney's throat went dry, his eyes locked firmly on the cavalry unit.

"How could it be them... how could they have been discovered!" His voice carried a slight tremor, even his legs seemed to weaken.

At that moment, the hall was already in chaos, with knights scrambling to their feet, hurriedly grabbing weapons, creating a scene of utter confusion.

A flash of madness crossed McKinney's eyes as he cursed under his breath, "Damn it... this has blown up..."

As the cavalry from Red Tide Territory drew closer, McKinney finally reacted, gritting his teeth and waving his hand, shouting, "Raise the flag! Get everyone on the walls! Quick!"

Moments later, the tall tower above the castle raised a blue and gold flag symbolizing the McGinnis Clan.

The guards hurried to bolt the castle gates, hauling up the drawbridge, and frantically setting up defenses with bows and crossbows.

Meanwhile, McKinney, with a few of his personal guards, quickly ascended the walls, taking a deep breath, trying hard to make his voice sound calm and composed.

"Yo, isn't this my esteemed neighbor, Lord Calvin of Red Tide Territory!" He leaned out, feigning enthusiasm, "Coming for a visit, why didn't you send word ahead?"

No sooner had McKinney finished speaking than a knight urged his horse forward from the Red Tide formation below the castle.

He shouted angrily, "Baron McKinney! Stop pretending, your people stole our Red Tide Territory's grain, killed our Red Tide soldiers, and the blood of the supply convoy hasn't even dried! And now you dare talk tough?!"

He drew his longsword, the blade flickering with fighting energy, pointing directly at the top of the wall: "Lord Louis has personally led the force to make you pay this blood debt!"

As soon as the words fell, hundreds of Red Tide Knights behind him shouted in unison, their murderous intent soaring to the sky.

The army, in the black and red, advanced like a raging tide, causing the ground to tremble faintly.

Seeing this scene, McKinney's heart sank, he forced himself to reply loudly, "What supply convoy? I know nothing about this!"

Lord Calvin, you can't just accuse me without any proof! I am a legitimate Baron of the Empire!"

By the time he finished speaking, his voice had already changed tone, his eyes fixed firmly on the army opposite.

But this time, no one responded to him; the Red Tide Cavalry kept advancing, menacingly, with the pounding of hooves acting like heavy hammers on people's hearts.

"Quick, archers to the walls! Push the oil barrels up, block the southern gap!" McKinney quickly turned back and gave orders in a low voice.

His face looked so grim that it seemed he could drip water, cursing in his heart: Damn it, this posture is for real... but as long as we hold out for one night, they will have to retreat! We have to withstand it!

In fact, he still held out a slight hope.

We're all nobles of the Ironblood Empire, aren't we? Surely there must be some formalities, say a few words before the battle, put on a show, and then give a speech, maybe we can bluff through.

But he hadn't expected that Louis couldn't even be bothered to respond to him.

His cold eyes were like a butcher looking at a prey ready to be slaughtered, not showing any interest in replying.

Louis simply raised his hand and commanded calmly, "Attack the castle."

In just those two words, when they dropped, it was like a thunderclap!

"Yes!!" The Red Tide Knights roared in unison, their momentum heaven-shaking.

The orderly formation of knights spread out like a torrent, with dozens of knights in the front quickly loading magic explosion bullets made from demon marrow and petroleum onto the launchers.

"Fire!"

With a shout, the magic explosion bullets shot through the air like meteors, trailing flames as they hurtled toward the walls!

"Boom!!!"

The violent explosion seemed to tear the world apart, with fire and stones intertwining in the air like an apocalyptic scene.

The wall McKinney imagined to be impregnable was smashed open by this horrific impact, like a gaping bloody mouth.

Amidst the violent shock, McKinney clutched the battlements desperately, surrounded by the roar of explosions, his heart pounding as if it would burst from his chest.

"How... how could this be...!!"

He stared at the crumbling corner of the wall, frozen in place, cold sweat trickling down his neck, his mind blank.

This isn't a threat... this is an annihilation of me!!

Behind the gap, Red Tide Knights stormed in like a pack of enraged wolves, the thunderous sound of iron hooves smashing against the snowy ground, the cries of killing filling the air.

The defenders didn't even have time to organize an effective resistance before their lines collapsed, defeated like a landslide.

"Hold them! Quickly, reinforce the breach!!" McKinney's face turned pale as he shouted hoarsely.

But seeing the situation completely out of control, he stumbled, crawling and tumbling away into the interior.

He stumbled and crashed into the back hall, looking around in terror, finally diving headfirst into the castle's deep wine cellar.

He leaned against walls lined with barrels, shrinking terrified into a ball.

Outside the door, screams and cries resounded, mixed with the clash of weapons and the wails of despair.

These sounds were like a net of death, tightening evermore.

These knights, who usually only knew how to drink and revel, could not be a match for the disciplined and decisive Red Tide Iron Cavalry.

The sounds of battle came closer and closer, until the cellar door was violently kicked open.

"Ah! No! Don't come near! I, I'm nobility! I'm a Baron!!"

McKinney was seized by a few Red Tide Knights, who yanked him out of the shadows like a chick, throwing him onto the cold snowy ground.

He still tried to struggle, but was kicked over, his knees slamming heavily into the snow.

He lay sprawled, pressed down in front of Louis, with a cold blade resting against his neck.

"Uh... urgh..." McKinney shivered, hurriedly looking up, forcing a ghastly smile on his face.

"Lord Calvin... no, esteemed Red Tide Lord!" His voice trembled, on the verge of breaking, "This, this is all a misunderstanding! It's a misunderstanding!!

We're neighbors, allies! You want money? I'll give you however much you want! Women? As many as you want!

Just say the word and I'll share everything in my territory with you! We can talk, I promise, there will definitely not be a next time..."

McKinney's forehead thudded against the snow repeatedly, sneaking glances at Louis's expression.

Though he appeared frightened, inside he was sneering.

Hmph, acting all cold, this guy, no matter how arrogant, wouldn't dare really kill a noble.

McKinney bowed his head, a fierce glint in his eyes, as his mind already plotted his next steps for revenge.

Chapter 129: Numbness

"So, Lord Louis, why did we have to come to this point?"

McKinney saw that Louis kept a cold face without speaking, and felt more confident in his own thoughts.

He immediately lifted his head, revealing an extremely ingratiating smile: "I truly regret my actions! As long as you show mercy, money, women, land, resources, all of it is yours!

The Red Tide Territory and us have always been good neighbors, this little misunderstanding, there's no need for..."

"Behead him." Louis was somewhat annoyed, and directly uttered two words indifferently.

The voice was so calm it was almost devoid of a ripple, like announcing an insignificant notice.

"Ah? But I'm nobility! You, you can't just kill..." McKinney was instantly dumbfounded, the smile on his face seemed to be slapped away, stiffening in place, his eyes widened in shock.

But as soon as he spoke, even he felt the words were hollow.

He merely inherited the barony from his brother by luck, still young, no one had taught him how to govern or fulfill responsibilities.

He only saw the impressive demeanor of his father and brother, thinking that as long as he wore the nobility's skin, no one would dare touch him.

Bullying men and women, oppressing the people, never being punished for it, he assumed this was the privilege of the nobility.

Until today, until that even younger noble who carved out his domain on the battlefield stood before him, issuing the death sentence.

"Splat!"

The blade swiftly fell, blood spurted high and sprayed across the snow.

McKinney's head rolled onto the snow, his face still frozen in that look of extreme horror.

His mouth gaped as if wanting to argue one more time, his eyes wide open, staring dead ahead, as if he still didn't understand why even in death.

How could this be... This isn't according to the routine!!

The Red Tide Knight shook his blade, slinging off the blood, took a cold glance at the corpse, and then quietly withdrew to the side.

McKinney's head ended up at the feet of the remaining knights.

The pool of blood slowly spread, reflecting faces of utmost shock.

"This... this can't be..."

"He, he actually killed Lord McKinney!"

An older knight's throat bobbed, he hurriedly dropped his weapon and knelt on the ground: "I surrender! We are willing to submit to the Red Tide!"

"Lords of the Red Tide Territory! We... we surrender! We are willing to be loyal! We... are willing to serve you wholeheartedly!"

"Lord Calvin spare us! We were coerced!"

"Yes, yes, we were forced by McKinney! From now on we vow to be loyal unto death, my lord!"

At this moment, their eyes no longer held any so-called knightly honor, only endless terror and humble pleading.

But Louis merely glanced at them coldly, his eyes full of disdain.

These people were not qualified knights at all.

Their swords had long been corroded by indulgence, their spirits rotted by luxury and greed.

At present they seemed submissive, but given the chance they would undoubtedly backstab like venomous snakes.

Moreover, each one of them had wielded their hands against the grain convoys of the Red Tide Territory.

Such people, keeping them would only corrupt other warriors and plant the seeds of disaster.

"Leave none alive." Louis said with a tone as indifferent as stagnant water, raising his hand with a wave.

"Yes!"

The Red Tide Knights charged like a storm, blades flashing with a chilling gleam.

"Quick, run!" A knight under McKinney's command roared, his voice trembling.

Yet even before the words fell, a spear pierced his chest, lifting him high, blood spraying like rain.

"Ah!" Someone attempted to resist with a sword, but before he could swing, his head was cleaved in two by a heavy axe, not even given time for a scream.

More tried to flee with weapons, but they were already surrounded by the Red Tide Knights, blades entangled like the scythe of death, swiftly harvesting lives.

The sounds of hacking, bones cracking, and blood spurting mixed together, quickly returning to silence.

In the castle courtyard, seventy-odd knights lay in death, the thick snow dyed red with blood, releasing a sickly sweet, oppressive scent.

A reckoning, rapid and thorough, McKinney's remnants were wiped out completely.

The battle ended too quickly.

Weir sheathed his longsword, standing on the blood-stained castle square, looking at the corpses littering the ground, a trace of undisguisable disappointment in his eyes.

He had always dreamed of following Lord Louis into battle, fighting bloody wars.

Yet who could have expected, this so-called "campaign".

Besides standing guard, he hadn't even faced a decent enemy.

"Is... is it over?" Weir muttered, his heart filled with a sense of unfulfillment.

Louis glanced at him, casually said: "What, disappointed?"

"Ah... No, it's not..." Weir quickly collected his expression, but could not hide that bit of dejection.

Louis showed a faintly amused expression: "Come, if you haven't fought enough, accompany me on a walk."

Weir paused, then straightened his back sharply: "Yes! Lord Louis!"

The wind and snow howled, dense ice particles striking the armor with a crisp sound.

Louis walked slowly on the snow, his gaze sweeping over the desolate street.

While Weir followed silently beside him, vigilantly observing the surroundings.

This was the residential area of Baron McKinney's domain.

At first glance, the area around the castle was no different from other territories of the Northern Territory.

But the closer you got, the more the sickening stench of decay became stronger, infiltrating breaths, carrying a chilling aura of death.

By the roadside, a few dilapidated houses stood shaky, their door frames long broken, windows covered with thick frost.

Through the crack in the door, one could see a few shadows huddled inside.

They wrapped themselves in scraps of cloth, shivering in the corner.

Their eyes were hollow, vacant, staring straight at Louis as if looking at a passerby who had nothing to do with them.

But no one moved.

No one called for help, no one hid, not even a trace of reaction.

It was a gaze utterly numb to their fate, destined to live such a decaying life.

Even the presence of another stranger couldn't change anything.

This was the reality of the Northern Territory.

Other places might be slightly better, but not by much.

And the Red Tide Territory was different not because it was lucky, but because of Louis' presence.

Inside the house, a boy was cutting a dead rat, his technique clumsy.

Beside him, a clay pot boiled black water, with a ring of grease around the rim.

Behind him sat a row of smaller, frail children, their expressions equally numb, sitting blankly in the corner of the house.

Weir quietly watched everything before him, his fingers tightening around the hilt of his sword.

In those houses, huddled within, were merely walking corpses, souls long dead.

In another room, a broken wooden barrel held snowmelt and rotten vegetable scraps, which served as dinner for the residents.

Beneath the corner's wall, several bodies lay piled, stark naked, blatantly lying on the ground, without dignity.

A stray dog came over, tearing into one, the bare white bones exposed.

"This..." Weir whispered but didn't know what to say.

Something suddenly surged in his mind.

A memory from nearly a year ago, the days he and his mother were locked in the slaver's cellar.

The food was just mush mixed with snow residue and husks.

Every day was spent enduring the cold and hunger, every night hearing someone cry, wail, or exhale their last breath.

Back then, he also curled up in a corner, holding his mother, staring blankly into the darkness.

Not knowing whether he was waiting for a miracle, or for death.

He didn't want to recall it any longer.

But this land before him, these people, that numb and desperate gaze reflected his past exactly like a mirror.

If it weren't for Lord Louis...

He and his mother might still be in that place now.

Or they might have long frozen or starved to death, tossed by the roadside without even a grave.

"He pulled us out of that place." Weir took a deep breath, trying to control his emotions, but couldn't help feeling terrified.

He was deeply grateful to Lord Louis, who had pulled them out of hell.

Because Weir had gone through all this, he couldn't bear to see these sights.

He couldn't bear to see those people, like he once was, abandoned in earthly hell, silently waiting for the end.

Weir slowly turned his head to look at the tall figure beside him.

He didn't speak, but his eyes clearly asked: Surely you'll do something, right?

Louis stood in the wind, his eyes fixed ahead.

He saw those bodies exposed in the wind, the eyes numbly fixed, and the clenched fists of children and the unease in their eyes.

Even in the Northern Territory, such scenes were extremely rare.

Louis felt it was almost a pity to have directly killed McKinney.

He exhaled gently, knowing what he needed to do.

Then he turned around and began to pen a letter to Duke Edmund in the temporary tent camp.

The letter was simple, a mere few hundred words at most, summarized into three points:

McKinney conspired with bandits and attacked the Red Tide Territory's grain team, evidence conclusive.

He had come to seek redress, and McKinney resisted fiercely, dying in the engagement.

His territory's current situation is dire, with peasants like walking corpses; the Duke is requested to decide further measures.

Just writing out the misery truthfully, without excessive embellishment, was enough to furrow the reader's brow.

As for the phrase "died in engagement," Louis wasn't evading responsibility.

He never felt he had done anything wrong.

McKinney deserved to die, guilty as charged, died too late.

But Louis knew that among the nobility, one must be "acceptable."

Even if the other was an idiot, at least he was still a Baron, and couldn't openly claim "I took a dislike to him and killed him with one stroke."

So he gave a barely plausible reason.

Although there were still some holes, at least it gave Duke Edmund a reason to believe.

Whether the Duke believed it, was not his concern.

Finishing and sealing the letter, he walked out of the tent, summoning the accompanying Gale Bird.

Louis fastened the letter to its ankle, watching as it soared into the sky, disappearing into the gray horizon.

Chapter 130: Dongxi Territory

In less than half a day, the Gale Bird swept through the cold sky and landed steadily on Louis's shoulder with a reply.

He took down the letter, his eyebrows slightly raised, clearly not expecting such a quick response.

The reply was not long, and it didn't mention McKinney's death at all, as if the life and death of a small lord of this level were insignificant and not worth Duke Edmund's additional words.

The focus of the letter was in the last paragraph.

Without a direct bloodline heir, the territory is temporarily administered by Louis, with further arrangements to be notified separately.

After reading the letter, Louis smiled lightly, it was exactly as he guessed.

In Edmund's eyes, McKinney was just an insignificant pawn, and his death was of little consequence, not even worth investigating further.

Instead, he naturally gained an extra piece of land.

The so-called further arrangements likely won't ever materialize, as long as he governs it, it's tacitly his territory.

This unchallenged gain is precisely the outcome he desired.

New issues subsequently surfaced, what should be done with those emaciated, near-death freemen and slaves?

Louis stood in the center of the dilapidated plaza, his gaze coldly sweeping over the huddled, dying masses.

The best approach would be to let them gradually die out and then introduce new residents, the most resource-saving method.

Of course, this answer never appeared in his mind.

After all, he wasn't like McKinney, treating people like livestock, but rather the rising sun of the Northern Territory.

Louis immediately raised his hand and ordered, "Distribute the food."

The knights obeyed, dragging out the pile of food McKinney had forcibly seized.

The bags were ripped open, grains, smoked fish, and salted meat spilled onto the ground, and soon pots were set up to cook porridge.

Even shredded meat drifted in the porridge, the aroma spreading in the cold wind, making the crowd's eyes glaze over.

Initially, people just trembled and watched, filled with fear and doubt, swallowing saliva but not daring to step forward.

"This... is this a trap? It can't be... how could such a good thing happen to us?"

"Do they intend to lure us in and kill us all?"

"Don't... don't go over... this isn't real..."

But when they truly saw food being served to them, those emaciated, disheveled men, women, and children widened their eyes, making hoarse sounds like they were seeing a mirage:

"Isn't this a dream? Really... someone is giving us food?!"

"Can I really eat it, not a joke?"

"Oh my god... there's meat in the porridge... it's meat! I haven't had meat in three years..."

"Look, it's real! It's real! Someone's eating it!"

The knights distributing food loudly announced, "Listen up! All of this is given to you by your new lord, the great Lord Louis!

From today, you are under the jurisdiction of the Red Tide Territory, and Lord Louis is your true master!"

At that moment, all doubts, all hesitations were shattered by those words.

"He's... he's the new lord? He gave us such good things...?"

"People like us, do we really deserve to live?"

"He's not human, he's a messenger of God, a savior sent by the Dragon Ancestor!"

When steaming hot porridge was actually served to them, those numbed for so long finally broke down.

The cold wind still howled, ice and snow mercilessly smacking against the rundown eaves, the frigid air seemed to tear skin apart.

The freemen and slaves should have huddled in corners shivering, but at this moment, none of them cared about the cold anymore.

Each wrapped in tattered burlap sacks, moldy blankets, or just a few pieces of scavenged rags, without even shoes.

Barefoot on the frozen muddy ground, though shivering, they still rushed out madly.

"Food... there's food!"

"Really, it's real!"

Hunger trumped everything; even the icy wind making their bodies tremble couldn't stop their approach.

Some mothers tremblingly held their children while taking the first sip, tears mixed with broth streaming down their faces, cheeks reddened by the cold, tears instantly forming frost marks.

Some children sipped little by little, as if tasting the world's most precious holy water, stopping halfway to give the rest to a brother lying nearby.

Some elders knelt on the icy stone ground, trembling uncontrollably, eating while muttering, "Dragon Ancestor bless... Lord Louis... live long and prosper..."

A little girl clutched her bowl, laughing and crying, crumbs of rice sticking to the corners of her mouth, her cheeks reddened by the cold, refusing to set the bowl down.

White breaths rose in the air, mixing with the fragrant aroma of hot porridge and their heavy breaths, spreading across the plaza, creating the warmest scene.

This was the first true "warmth of humanity" they felt amidst the intertwining of death and cold.

The entire plaza seemed to tear open a rift from its frozen hell.

That steam, those tears, and that trembling gratitude interwove into an almost sacred picture.

And when Louis passed through the crowd again, the scene was already out of control.

Originally sobbing and trembling with gratitude, their gazes captured that youthful figure, freezing in place as if struck by lightning, followed by wails pouring out like a breached flood.

"Lord Louis...!"

"Savior!"

One by one, people knelt to the ground. At first, just a few scattered individuals, but in an instant, the entire sea of people bowed down simultaneously, their foreheads striking heavily against the cold stone slabs, producing a muffled "thump, thump" sound.

"It was he who saved us! It was he who kept us alive!"

"Great Lord, please accept our loyalty... even if it's repaid with our lives!"

They disregarded decorum, ignored the mud and rubble beneath their knees, and even when their wounds opened from the bows, they continued to prostrate over and over again.

Like believers who have witnessed a Divine Being descending from the heavens, they just wanted to get a little closer, even if only a little.

"Thank you, thank you... Lord Louis..."

They cried, shouted, and trembled, the scene was almost suffocating.

Standing beside Louis, Weir was already moved to tears, shaking with emotion at the sight.

He stood with his chest out, his voice exceptionally firm, "This is the man I follow, Lord Louis!"

These people were so agitated because they had never been regarded as "people".

During the years of the McGinnis Clan's rule, they were merely tools, livestock, living corpses whose lives were worse than death.

Even the most basic sustenance was a luxury.

Even a light word of comfort was something no one had ever spoken.

They lived only to make others' lives better, and their deaths, too, went unremembered.

These people had long given up on seeking redemption, had long learned to close their eyes, clench their teeth, living one day at a time.

But just when they thought everything would remain the same, the young lord arrived.

He ordered food distribution, porridge cooking, knights to maintain order, and even instructed people to carry the weak elderly and children out of the house one by one, serving them hot food.

There was meat in the porridge, oil spots, steaming hot, untainted by water or ash—a food that could genuinely save lives.

This was not a mere pretentious act of charity, it was a mercy they never dared to dream of.

Of course, they knew that Louis didn't have to do this.

He was the new lord; he had every reason to continue treating them as a "mess".

Like McKinney, allow them to die and then clear out a "clean" piece of land.

But the great Lord Louis did not.

He chose to save them, even though they were as dirty as soil, as thin as withered branches, almost forgetting what "living" felt like.

Hence, they knelt like this, cried out like this.

Not because of who Louis was, nor because they blindly worshipped him.

But because they finally believed that their lives mattered to someone.

They wailed for the loved ones who fell yesterday without anyone to collect their bodies.

They knelt for the late bowl of hot porridge today.

They cried out for a tomorrow where, no matter how bitter it may be, they could finally see a glimmer of light.

At that moment, they finally remembered that they, too, were originally "people," not just labor tools.

Of course, it wasn't just about distributing food; Louis ordered a thorough census of the population first.

Half a day later, the knight in charge of the matter reported a heavy number.

"In the entire territory... only a hundred and thirty-two people are left who can still move."

Standing in the cold wind, Louis gazed at the countless corpses on this lifeless land.

This was the number he could anticipate, given that winter had been here for some time. Even if the Snow Swearer hadn't harassed this place, under the wasteful governance, most people should have died anyway.

"We can't leave them here," he said softly.

Starting construction from scratch?

It's no longer possible.

The McKinney's territory had long rotted away, and now, in the midst of winter, rebuilding from scratch would only drag everyone to death.

Louis quickly ordered, "First, migrate them in batches, send them to the Canglu Territory, Ice Ridge Territory, Snowfield Territory, Cold Fir Territory."

These were the four camps newly established by Red Tide in recent years. Although order was just being established and resources were scarce, as long as he allocated more grain, there shouldn't be much problem.

As for the Red Tide Territory, he did not arrange for these people to settle there.

That place is the true core of Red Tide; should any unstable factors mix in, even a contagious illness, it could lead to irrevocable consequences.

Thus, a grand winter migration commenced.

Initially, there were concerns about being rejected.

But on the first day of arrival, someone took over the burdens on their shoulders and handed them hot porridge and clean bedding.

The people of Red Tide had long been accustomed to helping one another.

Because they, too, were rescued by Louis in their recent bleak lives.

So there was enough empathy to welcome new residents.

This was faith in Louis, not worshipping with bowed heads, but sharing the fire to help others in the snowstorm.

And this wasteland, Louis bestowed upon it a new name: Dongxi Territory.

"Symbolizing the first rays of light at the end of winter," he said.