

Winter 131

Chapter 131: Dual Cultivation

The former residents moved to the new territory and were settled into newly built semi-underground dwellings.

The space here isn't large, somewhat cramped, but warm and safe. Compared to that desolate wasteland, it feels like a whole new world.

There's even two meals a day, hot porridge and rye bread to fill the stomach, and it tastes pretty good.

This is already the best life they could imagine.

On the first night, a skinny old man handed over a bowl of hot soup, and the newly arrived man carefully took it, his hands trembling a bit.

"Th-thank you..."

"Don't thank me." The old man grinned, showing several missing teeth. "We just moved here not long ago... Everyone in the territory survives because of Lord Louis."

The man was stunned, lowered his head, looking at the hot soup in his hands: "He doesn't know us, yet he's willing to save us."

"Lord Louis never asks who you are," the old man said gently, "but whether you can survive."

Silence fell in the room for a moment, then soft sobbing followed, as someone quietly wiped their eyes.

"This is not a camp," he whispered, "it's heaven."

They never imagined that someone would be willing to lend a hand to those in hell.

And the name Louis Calvin is deeply engraved in everyone's heart.

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After resolving McKinney's mess, Louis's life returned to calm.

And as winter officially descended, even the Lord's duties became sparse day by day.

Snow-covered roads and frozen river surfaces have even put an end to the machinations between the nobility.

The Daily Intelligence System churns out content, where eight out of ten are trivial matters like "So-and-so's horse kicked someone's door" or "The warehouse rats are learning new tricks."

Though living in the frost and snow is indeed challenging, Louis had made ample preparations in advance, so there were no real difficulties.

As the old steward, Bradley managed the territory's daily affairs excellently, and most issues needed no intervention from Louis.

Thus, during this time Louis focused mainly on two things:

The first was cultivation, as he was now double cultivating Fighting Energy and Magic!

While it sounded impressive, double cultivating Fighting Energy and Magic was living a double workhorse life.

Like working all day and coming home to tirelessly write, serving the book lovers.

Louis himself knew that, in terms of Fighting Energy, his innate talent was just below average.

Under normal cultivation pace, entering Mid-tier Elite Knight would likely take three to four years conservatively.

But in just two to three months, he had already stepped onto Mid-tier Elite Knight's threshold.

All thanks to the Ice Vein Giant Snake's gallbladder.

It was the kind where drinking it felt like being reborn with a supreme supplement.

And Louis steadfastly drank a pot of snake gallbladder soup every day for half a month.

Though the taste... barely palatable.

But its effects in purifying blood impurities, enhancing physique, and improving Fighting Energy sense were almost immediate.

At this rate, in two months, Louis would be a Mid-tier Elite Knight.

The old cultivation method of sheer willpower is now nothing short of hair-raising to reminisce.

And now?

He only needed to drink soup daily, with some basic training, to visibly increase cultivation.

Grateful for Brother Snake's great contribution!

As for Magic cultivation, it was another story.

He naturally cultivated the Primordial Meditation Technique given to him by the Grand Mage Loken.

Sitting cross-legged daily to focus and gather magic power wasn't too difficult, even feeling quite smooth.

The problem was, he didn't know any Mages, lacked any magic knowledge, and didn't understand cultivation progress.

No guidance, no textbooks to read, and even ignorance of "what Magic a beginner should know."

As for "whether his talent is good," "whether his magic gathering is good," "is this meditation technique excellent" — he had no concept.

Simply mimicking, recalling the black-haired youth's meditation technique.

His magic cultivation process was like pouring buckets of water into a dark well.

Is the well filled? Unknown.

Anything at the bottom of the well? Unknown.

Thus, he could only sit inside and focus on meditation, accumulating magic power while secretly hoping:

"If only a wild Mage could stumble near my Red Tide Territory... Whether old or young, as long as they're alive."

The second point... could also be seen as dual cultivation.

Both Louis and Sif were young and vigorous, having tasted the forbidden fruit, the former restraint long discarded.

Once the blazing fire is ignited, it cannot be stopped.

Sif never refused, occasionally even initiated.

Cuddled in his arms at night, her blue eyes always seemed to carry a hint of deliberate provocation and affection.

Just a glance could set one's heart aflutter.

Thus, in the deep of the night, outside the wooden walls, not a sound could be heard aside from the crackling of the hearth and some rhythmic breathing and soft sounds.

They never broke the silence.

No promises, no plans for the future.

She knew her status, and Louis never proactively inquired.

Yet, like a mutual understanding, no one avoided that step.

But one winter night, she turned her back to him and said: "If there should be children... remember not to let them suffer too much."

Louis paused briefly, gently reached out to hold her: "They won't, they'll have a stable home."

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Winter is slowly fading away.

This is the end of winter, and the footsteps of spring are faintly approaching in the distance.

When Louis awoke from the bed, the day had just begun to brighten, and the light outside the window was a pale gray-blue.

He turned his head to see Sif quietly lying beside him, breathing steadily, eyelashes slightly trembling.

He extended his fingers, gently nudged her cheek.

"Hmm..." Sif muttered, frowning slightly but did not awaken, merely tilted her face slightly toward him as if seeking warmth in her sleep like a small beast.

Her silver short hair draped on the pillow, softening her cool face with a touch of rosy softness.

Her eyelashes cast fine shadows on her pale face.

Her physique, though still that of a combat-ready warrior, had quietly gained some curves.

The overly thin areas became gentle, with tension that filled the space between bones and skin with healthy vitality.

Through a whole winter's companionship and solace, her aura had gradually warmed both mentally and physically.

Louis blinked, a faint smile in his heart.

Too beautiful for words.

He refrained from waking her, carefully withdrew his arm, sat up, and waved his hand.

A half-transparent screen floated before his eyes, with lines of text quickly jumping on the panel.

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

Chapter 132: The Evil Spirits Are Stirring

The translucent screen rippled like a water surface, followed by the rapid emergence of three pieces of intelligence:

[Daily Intelligence Update Completed]

[1: A large-scale growth of Frost Leaf Vines has been discovered in the North Ridge of Rock Valley in the northern part of the Red Tide Territory. The best harvesting window lasts a week.]

[2: Emperor Ernst August of the Ironblood Empire has officially issued a new Northern Territory Pioneer Order.]

[3: The malevolent spirits raised by the Snow Swearer are restlessly stirring, threatening to sweep across the entire Northern Territory this winter, no less than the great rebellion two years ago.]

"Frost Leaf Vine?!"

Louis sat up straight in bed, causing Sif beside him to grunt and turn over in her sleep.

He couldn't care less, as excitement had already flashed in his eyes.

Frost Leaf Vine, that's no ordinary herb.

It's a rare plant with the properties of "soothing magical creatures' moods" and "stabilizing the agitation of low-tier magical beasts." When harvested properly and successfully concocted, it could become the dream weapon for beast tamers!

"This thing is practically a divine artifact..." Louis muttered, as the issues of taming magical beasts flashed rapidly in his mind.

Magical beasts are not merely brute creatures relying on muscles; they are supernatural beings sustaining their physique, perception, and various abilities with trace amounts of magic power within them.

That's why they are so difficult to tame.

The magic running within magical beasts is extremely unstable, often disturbing their mental centers, causing agitation, anxiety, or even something akin to "collective insanity," severely reducing taming efficiency.

If a magical beast encounters imprisonment, starvation, or drastic changes, it may undergo "magic stress explosion," blowing itself up on the spot.

If one among them loses control, it can trigger a group rampage due to magic resonance, known as the "Rage Tide Effect."

"So high magic means low controllability..."

This has almost become a deadlock in the field of magical beast taming, which is why Louis didn't plan to breed some creatures but rather killed them for meat.

And plants like Frost Leaf Vine are a glimmer of hope breaking this deadlock.

As for the Turtle Charm Fragrance concocted by Hillco, at most, it just makes the Fire-backed Turtle 'not want to move,' it can't be considered taming, can it?

It merely took advantage of the Fire-backed Turtle's mating season to hit a home run.

And as for the Ice Wolf subdued earlier, although strong, its magic content isn't high, relying instead on its formidable physique as an excellent mount.

But in the future, if high-magic creatures could be stabilized and tamed into controllable breeds.

Whether for use as food, alchemical items, or direct combat power, that would truly be a breakthrough.

"If I have the Frost Leaf Vine... those magical beasts we only dare kill for meat and never dare to breed could potentially be purified and stabilized... perhaps even becoming exclusive war beasts of our Red Tide Territory."

Thinking of this, he couldn't suppress a smile from forming on his lips.

But rare things like Frost Leaf Vine...

tend to attract a horde of magical beasts growing nearby, making harvesting somewhat troublesome.

Although the intelligence doesn't mention such dangers, Louis never takes these matters lightly.

Memorizing this piece of intelligence, Louis moved on to the second one:

Emperor Ernst August of the Ironblood Empire has officially issued a new Northern Territory Pioneer Order.

"Oh, this matter has finally been set out?" he murmured under his breath.

Louis wasn't too surprised by this information.

Before winter, Yorn had hinted at it a bit.

Since Yorn's father is the Emperor's favored one, it's not surprising for him to hear some inside information early.

"However, even if it's truly implemented, I doubt many young Southern nobility would withstand this challenge."

Louis leaned on his chin, pondering that the Northern Territory isn't a place where the sheltered Southern nobles could easily enter.

Here, there's winter, barrenness, chaos, and entrenched local powers.

No matter how harsh the selection criteria of the Pioneer Order, those who come are mostly pampered and fragile, unable to send their true elites here.

They might be slightly better than the nobility of his batch, but they most likely won't adapt well.

"Not many Pioneer Lords as outstanding as myself," Louis bragged a little.

He smiled, feeling it might actually be an opportunity.

If this batch of pioneers has a few who manage to scrape by, Louis wouldn't mind seeing if cooperation is possible.

If not, well...

Having them spend some gold coins in Snow Peak County and "contribute" some of the leftover resources or land from failures isn't a bad gain.

He set his eyes on the third piece of intelligence:

The malevolent spirits raised by the Snow Swearer are restlessly stirring, threatening to sweep across the entire Northern Territory this winter, no less than the great rebellion two years ago.

Luis's pupils slightly contracted, his heart tightening slightly.

"The great rebellion two years ago"—to anyone who knows that part of history, it's not merely a light phrase.

That year, the Snow Swearer suddenly united with the Northern Barbarian Race, along with traitors hidden within the Northern Territory, stirring unrest that shocked the entire Empire.

Several cities fell in one night, the defense lines collapsed, and the Imperial Army was forced to retreat progressively.

The entire Northern Territory lost nearly one-third of its land, and counties that were relatively rich became scorched earth, with refugees flooding and corpses scattered everywhere.

Until the Duke fought fiercely for three months, holding on until the imperial forces arrived, forcibly cutting off the Barbarian Race supply line, barely halting the disaster.

But from then on, the Northern Territory has remained weakened, plagued by frequent wars.

If this crisis is "no less than that"?

"...This isn't a small ordeal."

Louis narrowed his eyes, the light smile on his lips quietly retracting, his gaze gradually becoming heavy.

He leaned against the headboard, gazing at the translucent intelligence interface, his thoughts churning.

"The malevolent spirits raised by the Snow Swearer"...

What kind of disaster could it be? What exactly are they sacrificing?

He often saw intelligence about knights and nobility being captured and sacrificed by the Snow Swearer.

Yet he's never figured out what exactly is being sacrificed, and even when capturing a lone member of the Snow Swearer, they refuse to answer.

The Intelligence System writes such a grave report, yet it is so vague—and it's their first distant prophetic intelligence—that's what unsettles him the most.

"This winter... which means there's about a year left."

He murmured softly, sighed lightly, then stretched his body, leaning against the headboard with the blanket draped over him.

There's still some time, at least enough to make some preparations.

In the worst scenario... I'll just gather my people, bring the grains, seal up the earth tower, and run.

He's not one to die guarding a city. In a place like the Northern Territory, a noble unafraid of the war flames reaching their doorstep only becomes a joke on scorched earth.

"Ah, what a bother."

Thinking these things, Louis casually waved away the daily intelligence system, the interface dispersing like mist.

He turned his head to glance at Sif, still sleeping soundly beside him, reached out and patted her buttocks with a tone laced with amusement, "Lazybones, time to get up."

Chapter 133: Snow River Mad Bull

"That's the place."

Louis crouched half-hidden behind the high cliff, his gaze piercing through the thin mist, firmly locking onto the distant cliff plateau.

Behind him were dozens of knights, all official knights and elite knights, looking in the same direction.

Vines clung like spider webs between the icy rocks, with blue-green leaves glinting faintly in the morning light, clusters of buds quietly blooming, exuding a somewhat alluring beauty.

This was the Frost Leaf Vine, and it was thriving to an unusually rare extent.

"It's really... overgrown," Louis murmured softly, although there was an irrepressible excitement in his eyes.

But before he could say more, a low and eerie snoring suddenly came from within that patch of vines.

"Hoo... hoo—thud."

"What the hell is that..." Weir exclaimed in surprise.

"Look carefully," Lambert's voice was calm. "Eight whole Snow River Mad Bulls, all nestled under those vines sleeping."

Everyone instantly held their breath.

The Snow River Mad Bull, known as the "moving giant rock" among Cold Land Magical Beasts.

So massive it makes one wonder if it's a monster that crawled out from the depths of the icefield, with skin as thick as icy rocks, and extremely violent temper.

Especially in the spring, these behemoths, due to the buildup of magical energy within them and flare-ups of old ailments, enter the so-called "berserk phase."

Even five elite knights can't withstand the frontal impact of just one.

"It's normal, completely normal," Louis's eyes never left that treasured land. "It's stranger if a place like this isn't dominated by magical beasts."

Yet, strangely, even though this time was precisely when the Snow River Mad Bulls should be most aggressive, those bulls were instead completely still, resting as if under a curse, barely making a peep even when they occasionally stirred.

Vines coiled around the icy rocks under their hooves, flowers and leaves trembling softly with their breath, and a strange coolness permeated the air.

"That's the calming scent of the Frost Leaf Vine," Louis said in a low voice.

Frost Leaf Vine can slowly release a natural magical power stabilizer, specifically soothing magical beasts that have chaotic magic energy within them.

That's why, even though the bulls are in their most dangerous berserk phase, they are gathered here.

The cluster of Frost Leaf Vines here has become their natural "sanctuary."

"Attack! All at once, take them down..." a knight suggested quietly, a fighting spirit igniting in his eyes.

But before the words were fully out, Louis gave him a fleeting sideways glance, instantly suppressing all the knights' agitation.

"Do you really think they're asleep?" Louis's gaze was fixed on the plateau where the Snow River Mad Bulls lay. "Wrong! The instincts of the mad bulls are actually still operating, they're just numbed by the scent secreted by the vines, temporarily entering a light sleep.

As soon as we get one step closer, our body heat, our blood, will disrupt the magical energy fluctuations in the air. Once they dare to know, they'll go mad, and then it will cost us dearly to defeat them."

The air seemed to freeze.

Weir swallowed, instinctively glancing at the group of monsters.

The Snow River Mad Bulls were covered entirely with rock-hard hide, each one weighing fifteen tons, with just the rise and fall of their chests causing the ground beneath one's feet to tremble.

Weir gritted his teeth, "Then what should we do? Are we really going to wait for them to leave on their own?"

"No," Louis slowly shook his head, "we must take the initiative. But we must act strategically."

Then he began to unveil the plan he had in mind: "Set up Beast-Attracting Incense at the top of the cliff to force them to flee upwards, set traps with hook ropes to entangle the bulls' legs and slow them down.

Finally, stretch out a cold iron net as a blockade; once they charge down, there's no escaping, and then we can slaughter as we please.

Remember, no one moves until they leave the vines. We're not here to challenge them, but to wait for them to fall into the trap themselves."

"This... you're planning to snag them all at once," Weir exclaimed.

Louis's lips curled into a cold smile, "It's the least risky, most rewarding way. Don't forget, our goal is the Frost Leaf Vine, not to desperately fight the Snow River Mad Bulls."

Having said that, he waved his hand: "Go back and prepare the equipment. In six hours, take your positions and wait for my signal."

"Yes!!"

The knights responded in low voices, immediately dispersing and heading back to the center of the Red Tide Territory to prepare.

Louis took one last look at that plateau.

The vines remained quietly entwined around the rocks, the few behemoths seemingly asleep but could awaken at any moment.

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The snowy wind howled, a streak of deep gray appeared on the horizon.

Louis directed the knights to set the traps.

"Over there, set up the Beast-Attracting Incense," his voice commanded lowly, "we need to lure them to take the bait."

The knights responded quietly, their eyes glistening with excitement.

On the cliff top, a thick wooden stake was firmly driven into the permafrost, and several soldiers quickly tied a pitch-black canister of Beast-Attracting Incense to it.

On the other side, knights quietly buried deer bone hook ropes beneath the snow, like lurking vipers.

It was a natural charging route, steep and broad, the only escape route for the mad bulls, and also their death passage.

And at the base of the cliff, cold steel chain nets lay coiled like a giant serpent, spreading open their deadly mouths silently.

Dozens of knights hidden on either side held their breath, gripping the chains tightly, muscles taut as if ready to pull the chain into a deadly trap at any moment.

After more than half a day, everything was ready.

"Ignite," Louis's cold command shattered the silence.

"Puff!"

The fire leapt up, and the Beast-Attracting Incense blazed vigorously.

Thick smoke instantly rose, turning into a pungent fog, its intense scent exploding in the air.

Chapter 134: Snow River Mad Bull (Part 2)

In the whirling cold wind, like an invisible chain, it yanked straight towards the group of monsters below.

Silence abruptly broke.

The massive shadows within the vine thickets began to stir restlessly.

The Snow River Mad Bulls slowly lifted their heads, their eyes glowing with a blood-red light, and their skin trembling slightly, like moving walls of steel.

"Huff huff—!"

The lead mad bull scraped the ground fiercely, letting out a deep grunt, and then.

"Moo!!!"

The valley echoed with roars that tore through the air, several giant beasts sprang up, their mighty horns rising like war halberds, charging straight for the cliff top!

The thunderous sound of hooves resounded through the forest, as if dozens of tanks were starting up at once, the ground shook violently.

"Step one complete, everyone act as planned." Louis coldly instructed.

The herd of mad bulls roared up the steep slope, snow splashed, stones rolled.

"Crack!!"

The heavy hoof of the first mad bull suddenly stepped down, and the Deer Bone Hook Rope hidden under the snow tightened abruptly, the hook claws fiercely digging into its pillar-thick hind leg!

The giant beast instantly lost its balance, its fifteen-ton body "boomed" as it rolled down the slope, sparking a deafening avalanche!

Following closely, the second and third bulls also fell into the trap, their legs ensnared by the hooks, struggling violently, roaring continuously!

"Do it!!" Louis shouted with fury.

The knights lying in ambush on both sides immediately acted, the "Armor-Piercing Flame Spears" arced through the air, fiercely piercing into the thick hide of the mad bulls!

In an instant, the Demon Marrow within the magic crystals activated!

"Boom!!"

A muffled explosion as blistering flames and high-pressure shock waves erupted, firelight illuminating the entire snowfield!

"Bang!! Bang!!"

Several successive Blast Flame Spears hit their targets, the chest and neck sides of the mad bulls were instantly scorched, forming blackened cracks, the air filled with the scent of burning char.

If these were ordinary magical beasts, they would have long since been reduced to ashes in this hellfire.

However, these were not ordinary magical beasts, they were Snow River Mad Bulls.

Their skin, as thick as rock, only slightly curled into a few charred wisps, the massive bodies almost unmoving.

The only reaction was an even more frenzied roar!

"Moo!!!"

A giant bull shook its head violently, blood gushing from the wounds cut by the hooks, yet it still charged forward like a mad beast.

The other bulls trembled all over, magic energy rolling beneath their skin, their eyes flashing with fierce blood-red light!

Weir gasped, muttering, "What... What are these monsters made of? Even the Blast Flame Spears are useless?"

Standing on high ground, Louis's gaze was cold as a blade, yet a grim curve formed at the corner of his mouth: "Indeed, their defense is nearly impenetrable. But our true goal isn't to kill them like this."

His eyes were locked onto the herd of enraged mad bulls, the light in his eyes was sharp to the extreme.

"It's to force them into the trap."

The knights on either side knew very well that every step of this hunt was a calculated death trap.

"Boom!! Boom!! Boom!!"

The Armor-Piercing Flame Spears were fired continuously, explosions followed one after another, and flames flickered on and off in the snowy night.

With blazing heatwaves and splintered ice shards flying, they struck fiercely on the heads and spines of the mad bulls, blasting out jet black cracks.

Someone else threw short spears and stones, hitting bull eyes and nostrils with precision, completely enraging these giant beasts to the extreme.

Ahead, a few knights suddenly appeared, retreating swiftly while waving a giant red cloth high in the wind and snow.

It was like the banner of death, luring these out-of-control creatures into charging towards the death trap!

"Roar!!"

The Snow River Mad Bulls had utterly lost their senses, their fifteen-ton massive bodies cracked the ground beneath every step!

Rage and intense pain intertwined in their nerves into a terrifying impulse, causing them to burst with suffocating charging power, the entire valley trembled, as if a beastly flood was raging!

In their eyes, there was no longer fear, only that fluttering red cloth in the wind!

It must be torn to shreds!

So they accelerated continuously, faster! Faster!

Louis stood on the high ground, gazing at the battlefield that was about to burst, and smiled:
"Continue!! Let them run to their deaths!!"

Finally, the herd of frenzied giant beasts roared as they charged towards the exit at the cliff's bottom!

"Pull!!!"

Dozens of knights who had been lying in ambush for a long time shouted in unison and suddenly yanked on the chains that had been laid out!

"Rise!!!"

In an instant, red fighting energy exploded from their entire bodies like flames, crazily pouring into the cold iron chains along their arms!

Dozens of powerful knights' eyes turned blood red, their muscles bulging, and the snow under their feet instantly evaporated into a white mist by the scorching fighting energy, accompanied by a low roar that sent chills down the spine.

"Crack, crack!!!"

The cold iron chain net on both sides of the cliff walls suddenly tightened, and the pulleys embedded in the rock walls began to spin rapidly, the sound of metal clashing reverberating!

The chains, thick as giant pythons, burst out with terrifying power under the blessing of fighting energy, spreading out into a large net.

"Bang!!"

The first mad bull slammed into it fiercely, the massive impact causing the entire net array to tremble violently, the cliff walls shattering as a rain of rubble fell like an avalanche!

Yet the chain net forged from cold iron merely quivered slightly and remained unbroken!

The second, the third...

More wild bulls howled as they charged, these massive creatures weighing dozens of tons piling up into the net array, emitting horrifying twisted roars!

They struggled and roared, frantically shaking their bodies, trying to crush the obstacle in front of them.

But the chain net was tightly locked into the clasps on both sides, with ground anchors buried deep into the rock like claws hooked into hell, giving these beasts no chance to escape!

Blood, snowflakes, and roars intertwined, creating a scene as shocking as the gates of hell opening.

The herd of trapped Snow River Mad Bulls fell into complete madness!

Yet that cold iron chain net, like the hand of death, sealed every inch of space tightly.

A wild bull roared, lifting its hoof to kick fiercely, only to heavily kick the side of its companion, the immense force tearing flesh and spraying a mist of blood.

Another struggling bull suddenly swung its horns, piercing through its companion's eye, blood splattering, the roars filled with heart-wrenching pain.

The scene spiraled completely out of control, as these massive beasts of over ten tons slammed into, crushed, and trampled each other, tearing their companions into mangled remains amidst their struggle.

The once terrifying herd of beasts was ironically consumed by their own brutality, falling into a blood-drenched hellish vortex!

Louis stood amidst the wind and snow, his eyes coldly fixed on this slaughtering feast.

"The net's closing is complete." His gaze swept over those creatures now trapped like fish in a barrel, and he said coldly, "Begin the harvest."

Upon hearing Louis's command, the knights tensed their muscles sharply.

"Oh!!"

A deep growl echoed through Snow Valley, and fighting energy ignited instantly, the long spears in their hands shining with a cold light.

They charged in unison, like a pack of death reapers ready to plunge into a group of prey, into that bloody purgatory.

The first row of knights raised their spears high, fiercely stabbing towards the foremost mad bull!

"Puff!!"

The spear tips tore through the thick hide, deeply pierced into the muscle, bringing out a burst of hot blood.

The mad bull howled, its neck arching high, its giant hoofs stomping desperately in the snow, trying to break free, but could only make the chains moan in anguish.

"Continue!!"

The second row, the third row of spears kept thrusting in!

The blades twisted, shredding muscles, blood spraying like a red fountain.

"Moo!!"

The mad bulls struggled frantically within the net, pressing against and trampling one another, their roars overlapping in utter chaos.

But what awaited them was just the next deadly spear's blade, leaving them nowhere to escape, utterly unable to resist.

Fighting energy poured through the cold iron into their bodies, tearing apart their meridians, paralyzing their nerves, each one collapsing heavily.

Half an hour later, the last wail disappeared into the wind.

Only cold corpses remained piled like a mountain inside the net on the snowy ground, alongside the knights' labored breathing.

Chapter 135: Northern Territory Pioneer Order · Second Round

After the hunt concluded, the knights excitedly gathered around the massive corpses of the wild bulls, unable to resist whispering as they looked at the gigantic beasts lying in pools of blood.

"Your Highness, how should we handle these?" A knight finally couldn't help but speak up.

Louis gazed down at the scattered remains of the giant beasts, arms crossed, pondering for a moment.

To be honest, these Snow River Mad Bulls have tough hides and are not rare magical beasts, nor do they have any medicinal or alchemical value...

The only noteworthy aspect is probably that their meat is quite tasty.

His gaze swept over the crowd, and he smiled, saying, "Since we worked so hard to bring them down, let's haul them all back and hold a spring feast to celebrate the harvest."

"Oh—!!" The knights cheered, praising Louis's generosity, and their morale soared to the peak.

But Louis's thoughts had already turned to his true objective.

The bulls were not the key; the Frost Leaf Vine was the reason he went to such great lengths to meticulously plan everything.

Of course, it's impossible to directly uproot and take the vines back; that approach is too short-sighted. The real future lies in reasonably domesticating and cultivating them.

"Go, bring Mike here." He commanded.

It wasn't long before Mike, the Agricultural Official of the Red Tide Territory, hurried over with several seasoned herbal transplant specialists, his face barely concealing his excitement.

"Your Highness, you have orders!"

Louis raised his hand and pointed to the lush Frost Leaf Vine, his tone calm: "Prepare to transplant this plant."

He glanced at them, his voice slow and steady, saying:

"Remember to select seedlings that are 1 to 2 years old, with blue and white roots, and veins that aren't yellowed. Such have the highest survival rate.

Be careful when digging, keep the root system intact, with a soil cluster holding it together, don't let it disperse. Don't break the vine stems, especially the newly sprouted branches, as they are crucial for spring growth.

If you can find root clumps with small side buds, that would be even better, as they are its core for expansion."

"Understood!" Mike grinned, his eyes shining, "Rest assured, Your Highness, we will reproduce this patch of vines exactly for you!"

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Frost Halberd City, deep night.

Thick curtains isolated the whimper of the northern wind outside the windows, the fireplace's light was dim, and a "pop" cracked the charcoal, casting a soft red glow throughout the room.

Duke Edmund sat behind his desk, his fingers slowly brushing over the secret letter sealed with golden wax, the royal dragon emblem on the envelope still familiar.

He already knew the letter was personally penned by the Emperor.

He broke the seal directly, without any unnecessary ceremony.

He read quietly, eyes untroubled: "It has still come."

His tone was neither sad nor happy, only a few traces of weariness between his brows.

In fact, he had long been informed of the letter's contents from several of the Emperor's previous letters.

But this time, it was officially conveyed—the "Northern Territory Pioneer Order · Second Round."

This was not the first time he had received such an order.

The previous batch of so-called "nobility heirs" hadn't even grown a sack of wheat on the permafrost before half of them had died.

The survivors, either mad or deserting, had all become jokes among the Northern Lands populace.

Of course, there was also Louis, who stood out, but there was only that one person.

He knew the true meaning of these orders: not really to value the opening of the northern territories, but for the Emperor to enforce power balance, to weaken the Eight Great Clans, especially those old aristocrats entrenched in the South.

He, or rather his Edmund Family, was long unable to resist the Emperor's mandates.

Two years ago, during the rebellion, the northern territory ran red with blood, and Frost Halberd City was nearly lost.

His family lost two-thirds of its members, with more names crossed off the family records than living members.

Though the Edmund Clan is still listed among the Eight Great Clans, in reality, aside from the command of the Northern Army, other aspects like finances, influence, and trade routes fall far short of their former status.

"So be it..." he murmured.

He wasn't entirely displeased with the weakening of the other Eight Great Clans.

At least it might carve out a breathing space for his family amid the power struggles of the Empire's court.

Of course, the Emperor had also promised that thereafter, Northern local nobles would qualify to participate in the development of new southern territories, as an exchange.

Edmund fully believed this, as he knew what kind of person the Emperor was, who wouldn't lie to him.

They were old acquaintances; when the Emperor was still a prince, he had been stationed in the northern territory for three years, during which the two had drunk and fought side by side.

The camaraderie of those years was genuine, and even though their correspondence has never ceased throughout the years since.

But in recent years, each action taken by this former friend has made him increasingly unable to understand...

"Knock, knock."

Just as Edmund was gazing out the window, deep in thought, there came a few gentle knocks at the door from behind him.

"Father, may I come in?"

It was a sweet voice, like the first ray of sunlight falling on the snow.

He did not need to turn around to know who had arrived.

"Come in, Emily." Edmund's lips curved into a rare gentle smile.

The door was gently pushed open, and a girl carrying a silver tray stepped into the study.

She wore a thick noble blue and white dress, with an apron around her waist, carrying steaming coffee, her steps steady but as light as a cat's movements.

"I see you've stayed up late again," Emily softly complained, placing the coffee steadily on the desk, "I asked them to add extra milk, don't drink it so bitter this time."

"Mm, I know." Edmund reached out to take the cup, the warmth from the cup transmitting to his palm.

He had once remarked to others that if Emily had been born in the Imperial Capital, she might have long become a Princess Consort to someone or other.

Actually, the Emperor had also mentioned assisting with an arranged marriage, but at that time Emily was too young, and he couldn't bear to part with her, so he had tactfully declined.

Chapter 136: Northern Territory Pioneer Order · Second Round

Now he raised his head to look at her standing in the firelight, suddenly feeling a bit blocked in his heart.

She really had reached the age of marriage; it couldn't be delayed any longer.

"What's wrong?" Emily noticed his silence and tilted her head to ask.

"Nothing," he smiled, taking a sip of coffee to cover up, "I just suddenly feel that time is passing too quickly."

Emily couldn't understand what he meant, or perhaps she understood but was unwilling to expose it, merely lowering her head with a gentle smile.

Edmund gazed at her smiling face, a mix of emotions swirling in his heart.

This girl would likely benefit that boy Louis.

He is of the age that matches well with the Calvin Family, has battle accolades, outstanding abilities, and although the Emperor hasn't explicitly stated anything, he hasn't raised objections either, which is an implied approval.

And in the exchange between the two families, details are gradually being confirmed.

If nothing unexpected happens, the wedding would probably be held this year.

Somehow, it feels like...maybe it should be a little later, accompany her for a few more years.

See her a few more times walking in from the doorway, bringing coffee, calling him "Father."

But alas, one cannot keep their daughter by their side forever.

"Emily." Edmund finally spoke, his voice low and slow, "This matter... I had wanted to wait a bit longer."

"Hmm?" Emily, who was fastening the buttons on his shawl, raised her head when she heard this, looking at him with an innocent expression, "What matter?"

He hesitated for a moment, but ultimately said it: "You...might have to get married."

Her hand paused slightly, though she didn't show much surprise.

"Oh." She lowered her eyes, her lashes casting a soft shadow in the firelight.

"Actually, it's about time." Her voice was soft, "I know I'm not young anymore; in other families, they might have already had their second child."

Edmund was a bit taken aback, bitterly shaking his head.

"Then...who has Father chosen for me?" She asked as if casually, yet her tone couldn't hide curiosity.

Edmund paused, as if weighing his words, finally sighed, and said: "Louis Calvin."

"Ah, the one..." Emily narrowed her eyes slightly, searching her memory, "From the Calvin Family? The Pioneer Lord from the South, right."

"Yes." He nodded, "Also one of the Eight Great Clans...but slightly different from our family."

Emily nodded; she certainly knew the name of the "young pioneer," having frequently heard people mention him in Frost Halberd City recently.

Things like the "Qingyu Ridge Raid," "outstanding military accomplishments," "a noble outcast in the wastelands" sounded almost as if he was a Savior from the Northern Territory.

She was also quite curious about the man who could make her father show a solemn expression, even consider marrying her off, what kind of person he really was.

"Everything is up to Father to arrange." She smiled obediently, her hands folded in front of her dress, her posture as proper as a noble lady should be.

But the fleeting sly glint in her eyes didn't escape Edmund's attention.

"Emily..." He glanced at her, speaking meaningfully, "You aren't planning to run away from the marriage, are you?"

"Wha-where would that be." She widened her eyes, with an expression of "I'm so innocent."

"I just feel that you know," she pretended to ponder, pursing her lips playfully, "It's necessary to see him in advance... In case he's too scary, smiles too fakely, has a bad temper, then I have to consider how to escape, right?"

"You little girl." Edmund, unable to suppress a smile, lightly flicked her forehead, "If you run away, I'll have to issue military orders to catch you back as a runaway marriage fugitive."

"Ouch, that hurt." Emily covered her forehead, mumbling, "Then I'll write a letter to him in advance saying 'I'm really ugly,' maybe he'll voluntarily give up."

"He's not that dumb..."

"Then I can only hope he's good-looking, funny, easy to bully." She said while standing up, her skirt swaying lightly, "I can't be forced to marry some fierce, bald old man, can I?"

"He's only nineteen." Edmund cradled his forehead.

"A little brother, then maybe I'll consider it." Saying this, she hummed a tune as she walked out the door, leaving behind a warm coffee aroma.

After leaving her father's sight, Emily's expression slowly turned cold.

Although the words just spoken were joking with father, she indeed had thoughts about meeting her fiancé in advance, to see if he's qualified.

...

The new Northern Territory Pioneer Order wasn't just sent to Duke Edmund; heavy Royal Family envelopes were delivered to every noble study obliged to participate in the dispatch.

Duke Calvin received the visit from a messenger early in the morning.

He sat in his study, fingers tapping the envelope, a somewhat amused smile on his face.

"Here we go again..." he hummed lightly, pulling out the letter, "Nearly identical to last year's, only with a few more requirements, seems to be making it look like a 'serious selection.'

He skipped those pleasantries, focusing on the main point:

Selection criteria: Must be direct family bloodline, Elite Knight status or above, with war experience, and able to lead a Knight Team of at least a hundred people.

"...Oh?" He raised his eyebrows, smiling instead of being angry, "This time they got smarter, afraid we'll send some worthless people to idle away again?"

He recalled last year's ridiculous stunt.

Back then, almost all nobles thought it was just a 'political gesture,' few took it seriously.

So he went along and sent the most mediocre, least impactful son, ridding the family of a pointless leftover.

Who knew that talentless, inconspicuous Louis would soar like a dragon!

He couldn't help but start doubting if his son had been pretending to be an idiot all these years?

So when facing a similar order this time, he didn't take it lightly, spending a whole night deliberating among his ten-plus children.

Finally, he picked two.

Not the best, the best should stay in the Imperial Capital, by his side, as the family's heir seed.

Not the worst, those with no future would just become nameless corpses in the Northern Territory's snow, failing to achieve his goals, he knew Louis was just an exception.

These two, just right.

What he wanted was not to 'send them to die,' but to 'verify.'

To verify whether Louis himself had skills, or if Calvin's blood stood naturally steadier amidst the Northern Territory's chaos than others.

"Butler." He finally spoke.

"Here, master." A butler responded.

"Go, summon Pal and Willis, and say—I have tasks for them."

"Understood."

Soon after, footsteps were heard outside the door.

The door to the study was gently pushed open, and two figures entered consecutively, with upright bearing.

"Father."

"Father, sir."

Duke Calvin nodded, his gaze sweeping between the two.

Pal is twenty-one, consistently outstanding since childhood, especially skilled in tactical studies, though a bit arrogant.

Willis is twenty, steady and reticent, adept in cavalry battles and group leadership.

These two won't stir much storm in Imperial Capital's politics, yet can achieve results in the Northern Territory.

"You know, the Northern Territory Pioneer Order has come again?" His tone was calm.

The two were momentarily stunned, then nodded: "Yes."

"I have submitted your names." He looked at them, his tone devoid of emotion, "Prepare to depart with the troop within three weeks."

They exchanged a glance but didn't question their father's decision.

"Last time it was your brother Louis who went." Duke Calvin said slowly, "He did well, unexpectedly."

The two bowed their heads: "Yes."

"I want to know whether it's his personal ability or Calvin blood naturally suited for ruling the Northern Territory."

Duke Calvin stood up, his tone carrying a hint of heavy authority: "You either establish yourself there, or die in the snow."

"Understood." The two responded in low voices.

Chapter 137: The Calvin Brothers

When leaving Father's study, Willis did not look back.

The heavy wooden door slowly closed behind him, yet he had no intention of walking away.

He just stood quietly under the sunlight at the end of the corridor, his gaze slightly solemn as he looked at the sky, pondering what he should do next.

His brother, Pal, stood a few steps away, and the two exchanged a glance, but neither spoke.

Although they shared the same father, they were unfamiliar with each other.

Especially in this vast Calvin Clan.

Many brothers, and factions everywhere.

Willis, however, had no faction or foundation to speak of.

His mother was a common woman, or rather, a maid who caught Father's fancy on a whim.

Beautiful and gentle, but lowly in status.

She received little privilege within the family and was not involved in any family affairs.

Thus, Willis had no maternal siblings, nor much access to family resources. Even at communal meals, he quietly sat in the most inconspicuous seat in the corner.

Moreover, his mother passed away due to illness when he was twelve.

Since then, he became even more silent, only quietly obeying orders and completing tasks within the family Knight Order.

Willis's goal has always been straightforward.

He didn't want to meddle in the family's convoluted struggles or engage in the intrigues among brothers.

He just wanted to be a dutiful warrior under the Calvin banner, fighting and steadily accumulating merits on the battlefield, perhaps earning a small title in this lifetime, and living his life in peace.

For this, he has given much.

He quietly perused the tactical notes of the Calvin ancestors in the library, delved into battle array changes and terrain combat techniques, even spent his own money consulting retired knights, following them to practice cavalry skills and learn troop leadership...

Gradually, Willis's efforts bore fruit.

He stood out in several of the clan's military exams, finally catching Father's attention, and family resources began to lean towards him.

He thought perhaps in a few more years, he could really make something of himself.

But he didn't expect this chance to "stand out" to come so swiftly.

Father instructed him to go to the Northern Territory, to serve as a Baron of Expansion.

Officially it's a title, but he knows well this is actually exile, a test.

The Northern Territory is icy and barren, surrounded by powerful enemies, resource-scarce, to survive there, even just "survive," is a difficult feat.

But Willis did not shrink back, understanding this as both a crisis and an opportunity.

He recalled Louis, that brother who was also born of a common mother and had always remained silent in the family.

Yet in just a year, he amassed a vast territory in the Northern Territory, ascended to the position of Prefect, becoming the clan's Standard-Bearer in the Northern Territory.

He does not envy him, instead he feels inspired.

Willis Calvin will also carve out a realm truly belonging to himself there.

From that day on, he never again left the library.

He took down the topmost, already faded covered "Imperial North Border Defense Chronicles," meticulously opened it.

Then he took "Northern Grain Management Rules," "Snowfield Military Uniform Record," "Border Battle Strategy Notes"...

He had only one week, this sole opportunity would not be wasted.

...

Meanwhile, another person bound for the Northern Territory—Pal Calvin, was bright-eyed the moment he heard the command.

"Finally it's my turn." He could hardly suppress the smile at the corner of his mouth.

To seal the frontier and be granted a title, the chance to unify the barren borders...

This is the stage of his dreams!

Since childhood, Pal has always been one of those most favored within the clan.

Smart, diligent, especially in terms of tactical warfare, virtually a "genius" level existence.

None of the mentors who taught him failed to exclaim in private: "This kid has boundless prospects."

Not to mention, his mother hails from the renowned Ailanto Clan in the Southeast.

Though not among the Eight Great Clans of the Empire, they control two significant ports, a status not to be underestimated.

His two sisters have long been married into other noble houses.

And his maternal brother, Seldon Calvin, now controls nearly thirty percent of the family's business operations, being an indisputable figure of real power.

Such upbringing, such background, Pal has never bowed his head.

Upon hearing Louis has now become the Prefect of the Northern Territory, he merely scoffed: "Louis? That presence so negligible it makes one forget? Ha, merely lucky he got this far."

He is utterly unyielding.

Clearly, when Louis was dispatched to the Northern Territory, he even mocked that it was a suicidal undertaking.

And what was the outcome?

Now that "invisible man" he always looked down on, has become a new noble in the Northern Territory.

To say he isn't jealous is false, to say he doesn't feel uneasy is even more deceitful.

Pal has always believed, aside from those few truly powerful elder brothers, other siblings in the family are insignificant.

Louis? Even more of a joke.

But despite his arrogance, Pal was no fool.

He knew well what the Northern Territory was, not the comfort zone of the Imperial Capital.

Even he clearly understood that once he went there, without some real skills and preparation, he could be devoured by that icy land in no time.

So Pal secretly sought out his second brother, Seldon, and his mother, planning to secure some "seed funding" for himself.

In the study, the firelight was warm and yellow, the flames in the fireplace licking the logs, casting the family crest on the wall into alternating light and shadow.

Holding the order, Pal reported excitedly to the two, "Father is sending me to the Northern Territory to open up lands!"

His mother's face changed instantly, and she sat up abruptly, "The Northern Territory? You must be joking!"

Pal nodded, eyes sparkling.

His mother frowned deeply, her voice trembling, "That place is hell! It's freezing and full of madmen. You're going there to die! I must see your father and have someone else go."

Pal immediately retorted, "Even that useless wastrel Louis became a prefect there, so I can certainly succeed."

Seldon half-reclined on the chairback, his slender fingers rhythmically tapping the armrest, his gaze settled on his younger brother, with a slight furrow in his brow.

The name Louis, as it emerged from Pal's mouth.

What surfaced in his mind was no longer that silent and almost invisible eighth son of the family.

When Louis first went to the Northern Territory, he had attempted to eliminate that inconspicuous potential rival.

After the attempt failed, he didn't give it much thought; it was just a negligible move.

But who would have thought, the scene he least wanted to see appeared— that rejected family member rose rapidly in a miraculous way.

Seldon slightly squinted his eyes, and the rhythm of his fingers tapping stopped.

He now even suspected that Louis's "inept performance" in the family all these years might have been feigned.

That guy...was he waiting for an opportunity all along?

Waiting to break free from the family's restraints, waiting for a battleground where he could risk everything?

Though with Louis's current ability, he wasn't threatening Seldon's quest for the duke position yet, he could no longer be dismissed as before.

His gaze came back to Pal in front of him, his maternal brother.

Ambitious, with high aspirations, ability...hmm, some, but far from managing the situation.

In simple terms, a typical case of "aiming too high, but lacking in execution."

Seldon knew very well: with Pal's skills, should he recklessly venture into the Northern Territory, he'd likely never return, perishing without a trace.

He took a deep breath and looked at Pal, "Listen, once you reach the Northern Territory, don't act recklessly, stay low-key and practical. If you really run into trouble... don't hesitate to cooperate with Louis.

He has his ways to survive until now. Don't underestimate him, but be cautious."

Pal nodded, "Understood, second brother."

But his expression showed no sign of taking it to heart, with a hint of defiance in his eyes.

Seldon saw through it clearly, let out a cold hum, and tapped the desk again, "I'm not joking, don't gamble with your life. The Northern Territory is not the same as here."

Pal pursed his lips in defiance, a trace of stubbornness on his face, but ultimately said nothing more.

Seldon glanced at him, then turned to his mother, whose eyes were red.

He sighed, "Mother, you know father's decision; no one can change it once he decides.

All we can do is quickly prepare resources for Pal so he can settle down and nothing really happens."

At these words, Pal's eyes immediately brightened.

This was what he was waiting for from them, he didn't care about the rest of the conversation.

His mother wiped away her tears, nodded, her voice trembling, "Yes, yes...prepare quickly, give him whatever we can, more confidence is always good."

With that, she personally went back to her bedroom to have the knights bring two heavy chests and pushed them in front of Pal: "Here are eight thousand gold coins, and also a batch of refined rice and dry provisions from Ailanto Port. I'll have someone escort them to the Northern Territory."

Seldon continued, "I've chosen five veteran stewards to accompany you, all insiders, skilled in logistics and supply management. Just take good care of them, and they can ensure you won't starve.

Plus, I'll assign thirty official knights from my guards to you, together with the support father provides...it should at least let you establish a foothold in the Northern Territory."

He paused here, giving Pal a look, "What a pity..."

The mother took over, sighing, "In the Northern Territory, you have no close allies, no foundation, everything must depend on yourself."

Pal looked down at the chests, his mouth curling into a slightly contemptuous smile, "Relying on myself is enough."

He truly believed that.

In his eyes, this was really nothing.

The Northern Territory? Just a desolate, cold place.

Others feared it, but he did not.

Especially upon seeing this pile of resources before him, his worries completely vanished.

Eight thousand gold coins, a batch of refined rice and dry provisions, dozens of official knights, and five veteran stewards in charge of logistics.

This setup was the best treatment the family could offer.

He couldn't help but let out a cold chuckle: wasn't Louis just lucky?

Back when he ventured north, with less than a thousand gold coins and barely over forty knights, he dared to charge ahead recklessly.

And now, what did he have?

With his father's and brother's support combined, he had at least five or six times Louis's strength, and several times the money.

If Louis could make himself a prefect in the Northern Territory, then for him, a genius with these resources, wasn't it a matter of dominance?

Seldon watched his lighthearted demeanor, inwardly frowning with unease but said nothing more.

Chapter 138: Explosion Is Art

The damp cold wind carried a hint of vine fragrance, sneaking quietly through the valley entrance.

A large shade cloth cast a faint shadow, a touch of frost white, quietly stretching over the gray stone ground.

"These few... have grown a bit taller." Mike crouched by the trellis, lightly touching a newly unfurled leaf with his fingertips.

"Very lively," Louis said indifferently, his gaze landing on the supple yet tense vines.

This place was specifically designed to cultivate Magic Plants in the "Demoness Yin Garden."

The soil here was mixed with "Demon Marrow Soil" refined by Hillco, able to maintain magical activity.

Cold Light Crystal Cloth was hung above the garden to simulate the low temperature and lighting conditions of the Northern Shadow Cliff.

To everyone's surprise, the new seedlings adapted well, not only thriving but even sprouting a few tendrils, gently twining around the railing, as if exploring a new home.

But not all Frost Leaf Vines were so lucky.

The old vines, with yellowed veins and many years behind them, despite careful transplanting, had their roots break and vines shrivel as soon as they were removed from the ground, quickly losing vitality.

"This bunch is beyond saving," Mike shook his head regretfully, "the roots have turned to mush."

"Don't throw them away," Louis said nonchalantly, "send them all to Hillco."

"Understood." Mike nodded, about to turn away, but suddenly turned back.

"By the way, my lord, would you like to take a look at the Frost Blood Redberry? They're doing well."

Louis was pleased to hear the name, nodding slightly: "Lead the way."

They passed through the trellis, heading toward another side of the greenhouse.

The air was noticeably warmer, and a layer of pale purple special soil covered the ground, emitting a faint heat.

A few short, purplish-red plants stood quietly, with their leaf edges faintly tinged with red.

"These are the Frost Blood Redberries." Mike bent down, carefully lifting a corner of the insulating cloth, his voice tinged with excitement.

"Planted seven months ago, and now they've entered the seedling growth stage."

Louis crouched down, lightly touching a leaf with his fingertips, the warm magical fluctuation exuding a hint of wildness and an untamed potential.

"Not bad," he said softly.

"If the conditions remain stable, they could bear fruit in three to five months," Mike said with a smile.

Frost Blood Redberry.

This was the reason they had managed to acquire those mixed seeds cheaply through the "Daily Intelligence System."

Now they were about to bear fruit, and soon they'd be able to produce a batch of fruits that could enhance Knight's Fighting Energy.

"Very good, keep an eye on them."

"Understood!" Mike straightened up, an irrepressible pride on his face.

.....

The potion from the Frost Leaf Vine did not take long for Hillco.

The following afternoon, he arrived with a blue-glowing glass bottle, handing it to Louis with an easy smile: "Sir, the potion is ready."

"So fast?" Louis raised an eyebrow as he took the potion.

The bottle was sealed with alchemy glass, and inside was a thick, light blue liquid.

When gently shaken, a thin mist seeped from the bottle's mouth, carrying a faint mix of grass and mint scents, tinged with a barely perceptible cold magical wave.

Louis gazed at it for a few seconds and spoke softly: "The scent is light, not overpowering. The temperature is lower than the air; it should have a short-term cooling effect... capable of causing Magical Beasts, whose emotions are agitated, to gradually cool down?"

"You've got it roughly right," Hillco spread his hands then suddenly squinted and asked, "So what do you plan to use as the experimental subject? Surely not the Snow River Mad Bull? We don't have enough."

"Of course not." Louis paused before saying, "Furious Rabbit."

"Furious Rabbit?" Hillco raised an eyebrow at the mention, "Hmm... it certainly is a suitable subject. Sufficient stimulation, intense reaction, and clear feedback for observation."

The Furious Rabbit, was the most "illogical" Magical Beast in the Northern Territory.

Small in size, with fluffy ears, when squatting there, it looked like some kind of adorable snow mascot.

But as soon as you got within three meters and made the slightest sudden move...

Like sneezing, picking up a stone, or even just giving a slightly fierce look, it would instantly swell!

The red-platinum-colored spine on its back would spark like a fuse, and the next second...

"Boom!!"

The whole rabbit would explode into a cloud of blood mist, so intense you wouldn't even recognize your own mother.

This is no exaggeration; even an Elite Knight clad in armor, without activating Fighting Energy, could end up in pieces scattered around.

Louis continued, "And once we can control this thing, we can selectively collect the 'Red Platinum Magic Crystal' from them.

This magic crystal, when combined with the explosive effect of Demon Marrow, well, it's unimaginable."

Hillco's eyes lit up: "Red Platinum Magic Crystal... Demon Marrow... and if we add a small amount of Flame-Burning Flower crystals...

No, no, that stability isn't enough, but if we cool the shell first, delay the core's detonation by a second..."

Since the successful trial of the "Ice and Fire Two Realms" explosive bullet, his interests had shifted, seemingly nurtured by Louis into something a bit peculiar.

His biggest pastime was nesting in the workshop, mixing various Magic Crystals and Demon Marrow, trying to concoct different attributes and ranges of Magic Burst Bullets.

Explosion, that's art!

"Red Platinum Magic Crystal..." Hillco murmured, his eyes nearly glowing, "It's a high-purity magic crystal with inherent explosive properties; combined with Demon Marrow and petroleum, it's a match made in heaven..."

Although it might not be as powerful as the magic crystal of an Ice Armor Bear, it's far more versatile, especially considering once we've tamed the Furious Rabbit, we can harvest them indefinitely!"

Chapter 139: Explosion Is Art

He recalled the already used "Ice and Fire Two Realms" Magic Explosion Bullet, a trace of nostalgia flitting through his eyes.

That explosion still replayed in his dreams.

Unfortunately, after those few bombs were used up, there were no more materials, and since then, they couldn't even concoct a decent explosion.

But now... now things were different.

"If we can steadily tame the Furious Rabbit, it'd be like possessing a mine that grows Magic Crystals," Hillco licked his lips.

Then Hillco and Louis exchanged a knowing smile.

That was the tacit understanding between demolition enthusiasts.

If this plan succeeds, Red Tide Territory might become the most dangerous lord's domain in the Northern Territory.

As for "where to catch Furious Rabbits," this question might be troublesome for others, but for Louis... it simply wasn't an issue.

Long before the Daily Intelligence System, the system had pushed it to him.

["Furious Rabbits" are actively gathering in large numbers in the southwest woods outside Red Tide Territory, with numbers exceeding 100."]

At that time, it was the start of winter, chaos was everywhere around him, let alone hunting Magical Beasts, even feeding the residents was a problem, so this intelligence was naturally tagged as "for later" and set aside.

But now, the Frost Leaf Vine reagent had initially taken shape, and the team was ready.

"It's about time to take action." Louis stroked his chin.

...

Deep in the woods, magic mist swirled, and the team held their breath, waiting for the prey to arrive.

Louis gave a big wave of his hand: "Begin action!"

The knights immediately scattered bait grass at the set^阵 eye positions, its sweet scent quickly spreading, as if calling trouble to come.

The Furious Rabbits arrived.

It was small, with ears standing straight up, but no one would be fooled by this appearance.

That deep red ridge on its back was like thunderclouds before a storm, once triggered, it would ignite this powerful natural explosive.

Everyone present involuntarily held their breath.

Lambert carefully adjusted the distillation device to ensure the potion nozzle was aimed in the predetermined direction.

Behind him, three Elite Knights were positioned at preset points, each holding a roughly made net, their expressions focused.

Elite Knights are usually used to decide wins on battlefields.

But Louis always made them do some odd and unusual things, though they were used to it.

"Click."

The moment the device activated, an almost inaudible sound was heard, and a wisp of transparent mist was slowly released by the distillator, quietly spreading in the wind.

It was a soothing potion refined from the Frost Leaf Vine.

Colorless and nontoxic, yet it drifted through the air with a scent reminiscent of early snow.

Faint, cool, like the whispers of forest spirits, gently brushing the skin, as if playing a lullaby for the tense nerves.

The Furious Rabbits' movements, indeed, slowed down.

Their originally tense hind legs relaxed slightly, and their ears no longer leaned forward in alertness but twitched slightly.

The red glow in their eyes seemed to fade a bit, they lay down, scratching their nose with a front paw, looking... sleepy.

"Now." Lambert muttered.

The knights with the net stepped forward, leaping out with a force! The net cut through the air and covered them accurately!

"Snap!"

The rabbit was caught in one net! Success—?

No.

The next second, the red platinum pattern on the rabbit's back suddenly lit up, like a spark thrown into an oil pan.

Its body swelled and writhed as if about to burst into a ball of bloody fire!

The air seemed to solidify at this moment.

"Retreat quickly—!"

Lambert shouted angrily, and everyone rolled aside to evade.

"Boom!!"

With a loud noise, the explosion blasted open in place.

That seemingly harmless little rabbit turned into a swirling mist of blood and bone fragments, blowing cracks in a nearby rock.

Fortunately, everyone evacuated in time, and no one was injured.

However, the air still lingered with a scorched smell, reminding them that this was not a game.

Behind a rock in the distance, Hillco was brushing the dust off himself while jotting down notes:

"Potion effective, delays self-destruction by about 1.02 seconds, meeting preliminary expectations. Vaporization concentration still needs improvement, release speed is slightly slow. Suggest adjusting potion ratios."

The second action was undertaken that afternoon.

This time, after rebalancing the potion, the extracted concentration of Frost Leaf Vine was increased by a full thirty percent.

For this, Hillco almost exhausted the big cauldron at the Alchemy Workshop, even burning out a set of distillers.

"This time, even the rabbits should fall asleep dreaming." He patted Louis on the shoulder, full of confidence.

The sequence of actions was almost a copy of the first, only the spray release device was positioned closer to the center, release speed hastened, and started five seconds earlier.

Ensuring that the potion fully enveloped the surrounding air before the Furious Rabbits entered the capture area.

The Furious Rabbits appeared again, still in that seemingly harmless form, only this time, everyone's eyes on them were like looking at a ticking time bomb.

The mist quietly spread out, the air once again filled with that familiar "early snow fragrance".

The Furious Rabbit sniffed, its forelegs stopped, ears gently twitched.

Then, it... sat down.

Quietly, obediently, like a little pet waiting to be fed, without any of that tense, ready-to-explode aura from the last time.

"Capture!"

The knight with the net leaped forward, capturing the rabbit accurately with the net, this time, no explosion, no red glow appeared.

The air was surprisingly peaceful.

Everyone's gaze turned to the little creature caught, seeing it drowsily blink its eyes and even yawn, as if slightly intoxicated by the mist.

"We did it." Louis said softly, a smile appearing at the corner of his mouth.

Hillco had already pulled out his notebook, writing swiftly: "No self-destruct response, indicates the potion successfully covered. Target's mental state stable, control achieved."

The Furious Rabbit was successfully captured, not exploding into a swirl of blood mist or startling the knights into jumping, it even yawned lazily in the net.

Standing in the wind, Louis watched the rabbit being placed into a special black iron cage, a satisfied smile curling at the corner of his lips.

"The Magic Bomb Factory plan has finally made its first step."

Hillco excitedly spun around twice on the spot: "Next, as long as we can breed them in large numbers, we'll have a continuous supply of bombs!"

Thus, Red Tide Territory's first "Small Rabbit Breeding Ground" officially began operations.

Located in a natural underground cave, the rock walls were meticulously reinforced, the lighting intentionally dimmed, with only a few dim yellow lamps giving off a soft glow.

And most crucially, the small ventilation distillation device in the center of the cave, ticking away, slowly vaporizing and diluting the Frost Leaf Vine, infusing it into the air.

The scent was so faint as to be almost undetectable, yet it subtly seeped into the nerves, gently suppressing the Furious Rabbits' explosive instincts.

Looking around, one could see Furious Rabbits curled up in their respective small enclosures, ears drooped, their fluffy bodies huddled together, quietly unlike the legendary "explosive wild Demon Thunder," more like rows of fluffy buns.

The red platinum pattern on their backs still flickered faintly, yet seemed to have lost the urge to ignite.

"This scent really works." Hillco, wearing a protective mask, walked through the passage, muttering to himself while recording data, "It's like covering a pot of gunpowder with a blanket."

The breeding model had also been established.

One type is the "natural elimination," observing the rabbit's lifespan in a long-term stable environment, waiting for it to naturally die, then completely extracting the Red Platinum Magic Crystal.

The other is the emergency method "active detonation," using specific sound and light stimuli to induce self-destruction, then having the specialized knights collect the unbroken Magic Crystals for making large bombs.

"I'll leave it to you, Hillco." Standing on the platform's edge, Louis gazed at the quietly lying Furious Rabbits below.

"Understood!" Hillco nodded immediately in agreement.

Who could have imagined that in the future, the one to change the battlefield situation in the Northern Territory wouldn't be a Peak Knight.

But rather these "exploding rabbits" lying peacefully in the Frost Leaf mist?

Chapter 140: The Ennoblement Ceremony

Inside the Magic Explosion Bullet testing field.

Hillco raised his hand, carefully presenting the palm-sized Magic Explosion Bullet encased in ceramic to Louis.

"This is the first-generation finished product." His voice trembled yet was filled with pride. "Throw it, and it can blast a three-meter-thick stone into fragments. Do you know? I even used only the content of one Magic Crystal."

As he spoke, he lit it, and with a toss, only a "whoosh" sound was heard.

The Magic Explosion Bullet traced a graceful arc, landing on a large stone in the distance set as a test target.

In the next moment——

"Boom!!"

The blast wind swept up debris, dust surged, and the giant rock shattered instantly, emitting a massive explosion sound.

"Just give me a little more time." Hillco laughed softly, with an unusual spark in his eyes, "I can find the perfect ratio, by then... maybe I can bring down an entire hillside with a single blast."

"No problem." Louis couldn't help but laugh along.

It was the smile of a Lord glimpsing the first gleam of a future war divine artifact.

"Lord!"

A shout with the unique tone of a young man interrupted his excitement.

Weir came running from the end of the passage, his tone unable to conceal his excitement: "The Emperor's envoy is here!"

Louis did not immediately turn around, just gently exhaled a breath, as if this news was already anticipated.

"Hmm, I know." He replied calmly, with no emotional fluctuations.

In fact, he had long known.

Two months ago, he received a tip from the Daily Intelligence System:

[The central document of the Empire has been drafted to promote him from Baron to Viscount and intends to send an envoy to read and bestow it.]

More unexpectedly, this time the Imperial Capital made the decision for an "on-the-spot ennoblement."

Typically, even Northern Territory ennoblements require personal attendance at the Imperial Capital for the ceremony officiated by a Ceremonial Officer.

But now, due to the unrest in the Northern Territory and the perilous journey, the Emperor personally ordered the special envoy to conduct the grand ceremony, recognizing his military merits.

Weir stepped closer and whispered, "Old Bradley is already waiting in the main hall, his face smiling into wrinkles."

"Then let's not keep the esteemed guest waiting." Only then did Louis curl his lips into a slight smile.

.....

When Louis pushed open the door, the envoy from the Imperial Capital was already seated in the center of the hall.

He wore a knight's robe trimmed with purple and gold, with the Imperial Dragon Badge embroidered on the cuffs and collar, exuding a calm and imposing presence, like a longsword standing silently, commanding awe without anger.

Louis immediately recognized his Extraordinary Knight status and his Blood Dragon Legion badge.

And an attendant stood behind him, holding a red lacquered wooden box.

The box lid was open, lined with Imperial black velvet, with two items placed centrally: a scroll with gilt edges appointing him, and a Viscount's Badge gleaming with silver light.

A deep, solemn voice echoed in the hall: "In the name of the Emperor, hereby conferring Louis Calvin the rank of Viscount, for his outstanding merits in defeating the enemy and protecting the territory in the Northern Territory—especially rewarded."

The courtier had yet to say more, and the atmosphere in the hall was already electrified.

Bradley the Old Butler stood by, trying hard to maintain composure, but his quivering lips betrayed his inner excitement.

He had witnessed many storms in his lifetime, yet Louis rising from an obscure Northern Territory Pioneer Lord to this day in just one year still shocked him.

"One year... only one year." He murmured softly.

Weir stood in the line, his fists clenched tightly, as if trying to suppress the boiling blood in his chest.

"Viscount...!" he murmured this new title, his eyes full of respect and longing, "Louis is indeed formidable!"

Sif stood a bit further away.

She didn't quite understand what a Viscount represented, nor did she know if this ennoblement meant new responsibilities or crises.

But she knew, the image of this man standing on the steps, against the backdrop of a golden-patterned flag, was truly so captivating that she couldn't look away.

She was happy for him, truly.

And when all eyes turned to Louis.

He simply stood there, without panic, without excitement, even the smile at the corner of his mouth was faint.

As if all of this... was already under his control.

"Thank you, Your Majesty." He responded softly, his voice not loud, yet loud enough for everyone to hear, "I will continue to guard this land in the name of Viscount."

Surprisingly, the ennoblement ceremony ended simply, and as soon as it was over, the envoy prepared to leave promptly.

There was no extra chitchat, nor any expectation of hospitality.

Just as everyone was still immersed in the lingering joy, Louis had already quietly donned his cloak and personally escorted the envoy out.

The snow was falling, and the Northern Territory wind was as cold as ever.

Outside the castle, the carriage was already prepared, horse hooves leaving deep impressions in the snow.

Louis walked beside the envoy, draped in a wolf fur cloak, his steps steady.

"Stay for dinner tonight?" he asked gently and sincerely, "We don't have any fine wine here, but the smoked fish and demon beast meat still have some flavor. You probably haven't tasted snow wolf ribs before."

Upon hearing this, the envoy brushed off his cloak with a smile, seeming to appreciate Louis' gesture, yet he shook his head.

"I still have to rush to the next ennoblement location," he replied with a relaxed tone, yet with a touch of official propriety, "In the Northern Territory, you're not the only one who has achieved military success."

"Then I won't insist," Louis nodded, not pressing further.

He turned back and gestured, and a knight brought out a heavy chest, placing it on the snow, the lid opening to reveal a faint golden glow.

No elaborate gemstone ornamentation, just bags of thick gold coins neatly stacked, simple and straightforward.

"Just some specialties from the Northern Territory, as a token of respect," Louis said frankly, his tone humble and courteous.

The envoy glanced over, somewhat shocked by the directness of the Northern nobles' bribery.

But he nodded, indicating he was very satisfied.

"Convey my regards to His Majesty," Louis added in a low voice.

"I will," the envoy replied, swiftly mounting his horse as before.

The carriage soon drove into the snow and wind, its tracks leaving marks in the snow, gradually fading away.

Louis stood quietly in place, not in a hurry to return.

The wind swept through his cloak, lifting the edges of his hair as he gazed towards the direction the carriage had gone, his eyes devoid of much longing.

...

The city of Frost Halberd had yet to fully awaken that morning.

The morning mist slid down from the carved railings at the top of the White Tower, drifting gently like feathers into the garden.

In the greenhouse, a cluster of snow jasmines slowly bloomed under the call of a new round of sunlight, pure and fragile.

Emily stood in the center of the greenhouse, dressed in a gray-blue morning robe, her long hair pinned up, with a trace of dew on her sleeve.

She looked down at the stubbornly blooming cluster of snow jasmines, as if lost in thought.

Her fingertips gently brushed over the petals, but her gaze had long drifted far away.

A few days ago, her father Edmond's words still echoed in her ears.

His tone was not commanding, and even carried a hint of jest.

But she knew this was an irrefutable statement, so natural as if her entire life had been meticulously planned, needing only to follow the blueprint.

Emily was well aware of the responsibilities that noblewomen must bear, yet an unquenchable wave stirred within her heart.

She was not a fragile glass vase, easily placed in any corner, not even by her father's hand.

"Louis Calvin," she murmured that name, with a hint of doubt, "What kind of person is he, really?"

Was he the young hero from the rumors, who achieved great military exploits on the battlefield?

Or just some nobleman elevated to high position by a stroke of luck during the Northern war?

She refused to construct a future image based solely on accolades she heard.

She wanted to see, hear, and judge for herself if this man, who might potentially spend a lifetime beside her, was worth her dedication.

"Nora," she called.

There was a prompt response from outside the door, and a maid in a gray dress entered the greenhouse lightly, speaking respectfully, "Miss?"

"I intend to take a trip," Emily said, her eyes steady, but with a hint of stubbornness at the corner of her lips, "This time, for our 'wondrous journey,' we'll take a bit of a detour."

Nora was slightly taken aback, as 'wondrous journey' was their code for sneaking out.

She immediately guessed Emily's thoughts, "Are you going... to Red Tide Territory, Miss?"

"Shh." Emily raised a finger, "Tell no one about this except you. I want to see for myself what kind of person he is, not just hear from others or from father."

Nora hesitated for a moment, but eventually nodded, "I understand. I will arrange the carriage and attire."

"Make sure the clothes are plain. I don't want to be recognized along the way." Emily turned and left the greenhouse, her fingertips still lingering with the fragrance of snow jasmine.

As she walked through the white stone corridor, she looked back once, seeing the morning mist dissipated and sunlight casting on the slanting eaves of the castle, as if lighting a path for her unknown journey.

...

The night fell, and the lights in Frost Halberd City lit up from the high tower.

By the fireplace, Duke Edmund sat quietly at one side of the long table, the light tinkling of silverware against the porcelain plate particularly clear in the silence.

He had little appetite today, only having a bowl of hot soup and a few slices of bread brought to him.

As an old servant with a head full of silver hair approached, he walked very lightly.

"The young lady left the city this morning, taking only her personal maid, Nora, heading southward," the old servant said softly, "Should I send someone to bring her back?"

"So she finally couldn't resist..." Duke Edmund said softly, without a trace of anger, rather as if it was a long-anticipated smile, "Let her go. She won't be satisfied until she sees for herself."

Edmund turned his head, instructing the attendant knight standing beside him, "Send Victor to escort her secretly, without her knowing."

Victor, a trusted guard with the strength of an extraordinary knight, immediately responded, "Yes, my lord."

The firewood in the fireplace cracked with a pop, the flames flickering, reflecting a rare warmth in the Duke's eyes.