

Winter 141

Chapter 141: Duke Calvin's Letter

Nora's preparations began with astonishing speed.

First, a few inconspicuously ordinary carriages were prepared, covered on the outside with gray cloth, simple and unnoticeable, with slightly dusty rooftops that appeared like old items bumped along snowy roads.

The compartments were filled with wooden boxes and cloth bags, presenting a typical wandering merchant's cargo from the outside.

The so-called "wandering merchant" is a type of peddler commonly seen in the Northern Territory, not relying on fixed shops for a living but traveling between territories by carriage, selling silk, spices, medicinal herbs, or other necessities.

They either exchanged for money or bartered, wandering for years and barely noticed.

In the Red Tide Territory, occasionally a few wandering merchants would visit, but since Louis controlled the Calvin Clan's channels.

Most goods were procured directly and delivered within the territory.

Therefore, there was little interest in these small, irregular trading ventures.

Next, Nora personally supervised the arrangements, placing over ten guards at the back of the carriages.

The armor was all replaced with simple iron plate armor, with a crude style that appeared more like temporary guards of mercenary origin, unrelated to noble knights, low-key and practical.

The final preparation was the most crucial step: disguise.

Nora took out a small wooden box, gently opened it, revealing mud glue, lip color, and dark red powder, along with dye mixed from trace amounts of herbs.

She pinched some pigment and turned to Emily; "Miss, for the disguise, draw a large scar across your cheek, this way you'll look less like nobility."

Emily nodded without hesitation, sat before the vanity mirror, and closed her eyes, allowing herself to be manipulated.

Nora's fingers, agile, began to draw the fake scar bit by bit on her fair cheek.

The old wound, slicing diagonally across from the brow bone, carried faint hints of red and gray.

She then added dust and grime to her nose bridge and jawline, making Emily's entire face less delicate and more weathered.

The person in the mirror was no longer the dazzling duke's daughter of Frost Halberd City but looked like a tired yet resilient woman merchant.

Emily glanced at her reflection, and with a slight smile, expressed satisfaction: "Certainly convincing."

Of course, how could all this "secret journey" arrangement be hidden from her father?

Emily knew all along, this was merely a "performance."

She played her part for her father, showing her stance, knowing her father would likely agree.

Indeed, the evening before her departure, the old butler quietly reported the matter to Duke Edmund.

Beside the dining table, the duke merely stared silently at the snowy scene outside the window, after a moment of contemplation, and then revealed a knowing smile.

"Let her go..." he instructed his personal guard beside him, "have Victor escort her secretly, without her noticing."

So, on the following morning, before the mist had cleared, several carriages discreetly departed from the West Gate of Frost Halberd City, quietly heading toward the Red Tide Territory.

Emily did not know whether this young viscount was someone she could entrust her life to.

But she was willing to go see the answer herself.

...

On an early spring morning, Louis had already settled into his office, ready to begin the day's work.

He held a cup of hot red tea, with hints of lemongrass and mint, sipping it slowly.

Beside him, the ever stern old butler Bradley placed a stack of substantial documents on Louis's left hand side.

In fact, this pile wasn't much; it's the norm of winter governance.

The Red Tide Territory, although slightly more populous, is still in the Northern Territory, where everything's rhythm is pressed down by snow after winter sets in.

Compared to the hectic distribution of food and post-war reconstruction in autumn, these daily trivialities now seemed as relaxing as a holiday.

At this point, Bradley reminded, "The one on top is a letter from the master."

"Duke Calvin?" Louis raised an eyebrow.

Louis casually tore open the wax seal and unfolded the letter.

Elegant and tidy handwriting came into view, so familiar that he immediately knew it was written by his father.

As he read, he gently rocked his chair, the more he read, the more a playful smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

First came the customary greetings and congratulations.

"Congratulations on finally becoming a viscount, proof of my years of deliberate nurturing."

"Deliberate nurturing, my foot," Louis rudely retorted in his mind, "From the time I could walk until arriving in the Northern Territory, I've seen you less than twenty times, mostly at family dinner banquets."

The second part was the highlight, where the duke expressed great pleasure in having arranged for him a "most suitable marriage."

The match was with Duke Edmund's beloved daughter, Miss Emily Edmund.

"Ha..."

Upon seeing this bombshell news, Louis remained indifferent and was not overly astonished.

After all, the Daily Intelligence System had reported this matter a few times already.

Additionally, he had received a piece of intelligence regarding Miss Emily this morning.

[1: Miss Emily left Frost Halberd City before dawn, disguised as a wandering merchant convoy, suspected destination being Red Tide Territory]

This piece of intelligence was quite intriguing and piqued Louis's interest.

Of course, he wasn't particularly nervous or eager to react.

After all, she hadn't arrived yet, and she wasn't planning to openly court either. She was just "disguised as a wandering merchant" to see what he was truly like and how he looked.

He himself couldn't make too many arrangements.

Next was the third matter, something that Louis was not yet aware of.

"To fully support the cause, His Majesty the Emperor has issued a new Northern Territory Expansion Order.

It's been decided to send your two brothers, Willis and Pal, to open up the territory. If they encounter difficulties, please support each other.

Of course, you remain the Calvin Clan's representative in the Northern Territory, with family affairs in the region centered around you."

Upon reading this, Louis raised an eyebrow: "Do they want me, a Prefect, to be a babysitter for them?"

His fingers unconsciously tapped twice on the edge of the letter, quickly weighing things over in his mind.

Willis and Pal, these two brothers' names were somewhat unfamiliar, and Louis barely had any impression of them.

"Hmm... if the two brothers come asking for help, I'll assist them if I can, but I won't go out of my way.

However, if they're indeed disrespectful and clueless, they can't blame me for being indifferent."

He harbored no ill will toward these brothers, but neither did he feel any affection.

Blood ties don't mean everything, especially with such "blood ties" devoid of affection.

In this Northern Territory, where cold winds and war entwine, only reliable partners and demonstrable strength are worthy of discussing the future, forming alliances, and earning his support.

He shook his head, folded the letter, and placed it in the letter case, then pulled out a sheet of paper and quickly penned a response.

The content was brief and roughly read: "Regarding the Northern Territory Expansion Order, I've been informed. Thank you, Father, for your concern. Everything in Red Tide Territory is stable, and may the glory of the Calvin Clan never fade."

He didn't add more; it was concise and polite, with words that were orderly yet distant.

After finishing, he sealed the letter with wax and handed it to Bradley beside him: "Send it back."

"Yes." The butler carefully stowed away that reply and then said, "My Lord, there are still some local matters. Although trivial, they need to be handled swiftly."

"Hmm." Louis nodded, turning to the first page.

The first was a report from the River Management Team:

"The snowmelt upstream of the Red Rock River is increasing, and the water level is rising, posing a possible flood risk."

Louis glanced at the map and quickly circled a river section: "Have the River Construction Team set out tomorrow, retrieve timber from the lumber warehouse, and bring heavy-duty hammers as well."

He spoke decisively, "Also, call upon two militia teams to assist; don't let houses be flooded."

"Yes." Bradley noted it down.

The next was a request from the Road Maintenance Team: "The accelerated snowmelt has made the roads muddy and difficult to traverse."

"Allocate ten carts of wheat straw to pave the roads. Don't layer too thick; too much would sink the feet."

"Understood."

Next was a report from the workshop: "The stockpile of winter clothing is excessive; production should be reduced."

"Suspend the production of leather gloves and fur boots, shift to repairs and stock management. Reallocate manpower for bridge repairs and snow barrier construction."

...

Louis put down his pen, systematically organizing each matter like securely laid bricks.

Bradley stood beside him, astonished by how casually the Lord made various decisions from his chair.

Even though he'd seen it countless times, that effortless poise still made him inwardly admire: "Though young, he's already more of a true governor than many older Lords."

Louis closed the final report and rested against the back of his chair, gazing out at the gradually thawing street scene beyond the window.

The corners of the rooftops had long shed their icicles; the snow at pedestrians' feet turned into slush pools of black-brown muddy water. The wheel ruts deepening, dogs barking frequently, sparrows returned to the eaves, chirping incessantly.

He exhaled lightly and, almost to himself, said, "Spring is coming; it's that season again..."

It wasn't a simple change in temperature but a sign that the entire territory was about to awaken.

What followed would be the thawing of the ice, the livestock being released, the workshops resuming, the seeds planted...

Louis considered the idea of planning a festival to celebrate.

So he pulled out a clean sheet, dipped his pen in ink, and began to write.

It wasn't long before a clear plan for a festival was drafted.

He laid the paper out on the table, scrutinized it for a moment, and, seeing nothing amiss, called Bradley over.

"I want to organize a Celebration Day," Louis said calmly, "for three reasons: to celebrate the arrival of spring, to celebrate the first anniversary of Red Tide Territory's founding, and to celebrate my Viscount ennoblement."

He pushed the written plan in front of Bradley.

Bradley looked it over, eyes slightly widening.

He had seen nobles hold celebrations before, but most were about wining and dining guests, irrelevant to ordinary people.

But in this plan, every aspect of Louis's design clearly pointed to one goal.

To involve the entire territory, from the elderly to the young, from slaves to farmers, so everyone could find a sense of "belonging" in the celebration.

"This... is indeed quite innovative." Bradley was momentarily speechless and took a while to respond, "I've never seen such a comprehensive and heartfelt festival plan. I shall arrange for the execution in various areas immediately."

Chapter 142: Emily's Adventure

When Emily first stepped into the Red Tide Territory, she didn't hold much expectation in her heart.

After all, she had read the previous reports about the Red Tide Territory before coming here, and it was nothing more than one of the Northern Territory's remote corners.

She had been accustomed to the harsh and desolate North since her childhood while following her father.

Even with a Lord, what could be different?

In fact, when she first reached the border, all she saw were vast tracts of barren land, bleached pale and lifeless by wind and snow, with almost no signs of habitation.

She was almost certain this place wouldn't be much different from other territories, desolate and lifeless, perhaps with a few broken wooden houses stuck in the snow at most.

But as the carriage went deeper, her thoughts began to waver.

The scene before her eyes started to change; Emily looked out through the carriage window into the distance, expecting only bleak Northern vistas, yet unexpectedly catching a glimpse of an unusual sight.

The residential area of Red Tide Territory faintly appeared in her vision.

From afar, it was no longer the makeshift and shabby camp she had imagined, but carried a sense of unexpected order.

The entire district's outline was clear, with grid-like streets paved in an orderly fashion.

Those semi-subterranean houses were arrayed in undulating patterns upon the dim gray Northern land.

Although it was hard to see the details, there was an unmistakable sense of precision.

More surprisingly, the market's outline was vaguely visible at the town's center.

The market's awnings and densely packed stalls connected like adornments.

Above the sprawling workshop district, wisps of white smoke occasionally rose.

Even from a distance, she could almost feel that faint but continuous bustle and vitality.

Emily held her breath slightly.

She had seen too many Northern settlements, accustomed to chaos, decay, and a dreary atmosphere.

But from a distant perspective, this place seemed like...

A flower quietly blooming in the wild land.

As the carriage approached, the outline of Red Tide Territory became even clearer.

Streets were no longer distant lines but tangible scenes presented before her eyes.

Emily found that the shock she had felt while observing from afar was only the beginning.

As those blurry outlines became incredibly clear, it was almost unbelievable to her eyes.

The cobblestone street was wide and smooth, wheels rolling over them made a solid sound, with not a hint of mud or looseness.

Simple wooden post markers stood along the roadsides, the edges clean and crisp, with no sense of disorder.

Further in, row after row of semi-subterranean houses clung to low hillsides, stone walls thick, and roofs covered with insulating thick grass.

Though they weren't pretty, they gave an astonishing sense of solidity and durability.

Even the houses at the very edge were orderly and intact, without a trace of dilapidation.

"Oh my..." Nora pressed against the window, almost whispering in surprise, "Is this really a Northern village?!"

Emily didn't respond, simply staring out the window.

Those houses and streets were not façades for inspection, nor a temporary tidying up, but exuded stability from the root.

Her gaze fell on the people on the streets, and a peculiar feeling surged inside her.

A few rosy-cheeked children chased a clucking fowl at the street corner, their laughter so clear it seemed almost unreal.

At the roadside, an elderly woman with white hair carried a heavy basket, exchanging goods with neighbors in good spirits.

Men and women passing by in the streets all bore sincere ease on their faces.

It was not the apathetic numbness seen elsewhere in the Northern Territory, nor the forced smiles borne out of survival.

But genuine, peaceful expressions.

"They don't look like they just scraped through winter," Nora murmured, a hint of incredulity in her voice.

Emily nodded slightly.

Indeed, she was all too familiar with scenes from other Northern Territories.

Winter just ended, and logically, at this time, residents should be gaunt, listless, many struggling even to stand.

But the people here...

Both in complexion and spirit, exuded an unbelievable abundance.

Her gaze swept over the not-so-distant market, where several vendors were loudly hawking goods.

There were even cured meats, some scattered cloth, goods far more plentiful than she imagined.

Further in was the workshop district, the blacksmith's forge crackled, the sound of iron striking rhythmically and clearly, the sawing of wood trickling in, the air filled with the scent of sawdust and iron.

All of this... felt too unreal.

The thought Emily had suppressed for so long finally surfaced.

If this wasn't a miracle, then it was a near-crazy level of governance.

Not any kind, mortal can't accomplish.

"Is this really the Northern Territory?" Nora asked again, her eyes full of complexity.

Emily took a deep breath, withdrew her gaze, and spoke softly, "Yes, here is the Northern Territory, it's Red Tide Territory."

She could feel that her little bit of precaution and vigilance towards Louis.

At this moment, a tear was forcibly made, and another deeper emotion of curiosity and shiver was rapidly spreading.

She really wanted to know, on what basis this man could perform such a miracle in this dead land.

The caravan stopped slowly, several guards standing at the street corner had already noticed them and vigilantly stepped forward to block the way.

"Who is it?" the leading guard asked in a deep voice, his gaze sweeping between the caravan and a few companions.

Nora quickly leaned out from the car, with a perfectly measured smile on her face.

Raised her hands to signal harmless: "Don't misunderstand. We are merchants from elsewhere, wanting to find some business here. Specially came to visit... wonder if there is an opportunity to meet your lord?"

The guard squinted slightly, stared at Nora for a moment as if judging the truth, then nodded without asking anything more.

"Wait." He said, turned, and walked swiftly towards the town, apparently went to report.

Emily slightly straightened herself in the carriage, looked through the curtain at the back of that guard: "The discipline is quite good."

Nora withdrew her gaze, laughed softly, "Surprisingly no difficulty, seems quite orderly."

During the waiting interval, Emily didn't remain idle, continued to carefully observe the surrounding scene through the window.

Busy figures were all over the street

Someone wielded a broom, slowly swept clean the residual snow from the street corners.

Someone was arranging chairs and tables, wiped each wooden table to a bright shine, neatly arranged in the empty space.

There was also a group of young adults working together to build a simple wooden stage, discussing while building it, with uncontrollable excited smiles on their faces.

At the streets and alleys, red and gold ribbons danced in the wind, a vivid flag was hung high.

The flag of Red Tide Territory with the red background and golden sun shimmered in the sunlight, while the black-red crescent flag of the Calvin Family was also present, adding a bit of solemnity.

The whole town seemed to be immersed in a warm and festive atmosphere, as if even the air was filled with a faint joy.

Nora widened her eyes, became enchanted by the sight, couldn't help but quietly admire: "It's really interesting... Are they holding some celebration? Seems even livelier than our festival at Frost Halberd City."

Emily nodded, with a bit of confusion in her mind, finally couldn't resist asking: "Could you please tell, what are you preparing for?"

A middle-aged villager, who was carrying decorations, heard Emily's question, set down the item with a cheery smile.

He wiped his sweat and answered with unconcealed pride: "Ah, we are preparing for the New Year's Eve tomorrow!

Celebrate the first anniversary of Red Tide Territory's establishment, hah, and with Lord Louis becoming a Viscount, we must celebrate well!"

"Viscount?" Emily was stunned for a moment, with a flash of disbelief in her eyes, "He... is already a Viscount?"

The villager nodded with a smile: "Indeed, this time last year we had nothing here, just a barren land.

It was Lord Louis, he saved us! At that time, survival was difficult, it was he who pulled us out of the mire, that's why we have the good days now."

A young woman beside him joined, smiling: "Yes, Lord Louis is very good to us.

Not only did he give us houses to live in, food to eat, but also taught us how to sustain ourselves. Over the year, we've nearly forgotten those anxious days!"

"Look at that flag." The middle-aged villager pointed to the waving red-gold sun flag, his eyes filled with genuine admiration.

"To us, Lord Louis is like that sun, lighting the way for us unfortunate souls.

The lord's grace is immeasurable!"

As they said these words, their faces bore genuine smiles, with light shimmering at the bottom of their eyes.

It was an appreciation and respect stemming from the heart.

Emily watched quietly, her heart unable to find calm.

Last year he was just the Baron of Expansion... less than a year to become a Viscount?

This speed is simply incredible.

Moreover, she used to think that this Northern Territory wasteland would not be much different from other places, merely a renamed barren land.

But now, the street, this vitality, the smiles in the eyes of the residents, completely overturned her cognition.

What surprised her most was Louis's prestige here.

That affection almost carried a sense of worship.

She had only seen this kind from those who revered her father, Duke Edmund, in his lands.

But now, this group of ordinary civilians displayed an expression about Louis that was even more sincere and enthusiastic than those subjects who worshipped the Duke.

"Lord Louis is like the sun..."

That sentence still echoed in her ears, making her heart ripple with an indescribable complex feeling.

It's no longer a simple issue of governance or whether people can be adequately fed... it's a complete win of hearts.

Emily slightly inhaled, her eyes full of curiosity: "Louis Calvin, what kind of person are you..."

Coming to the Northern Territory for just a year, and to achieve this level."

Chapter 143: Two Women Meet

Inside the castle of Red Tide Territory, Louis was crouched among a group of children, with a smile in his eyes, patiently giving guidance.

The rehearsal for the Spring Festival was entering the final stages.

And this play was one he personally wrote: "Great Lord Louis's Strategy to Crush the Evil Snow Vow".

"Come on! Carl, the next move needs to be more impressive, you are the protagonist of this play, the guardian of Red Tide Territory!"

"Yes!" The little boy puffed out his chest and tried his best to look imposing.

His cheeks were rosy from the cold, but his seriousness was utterly adorable.

A few children assigned to play the "Evil Snow Vowers" hung their heads, quietly complaining: "Ugh... I'm not really bad."

Louis chuckled and patted their heads, "Being the villain is very important, without you, how could the hero be so amazing?"

The other ordinary-looking children nearby were rehearsing as "flowers and trees".

Playing the swaying background around the granary, they were enthusiastically shaking their handmade paper leaves.

"Remember, when the explosion scene comes, you all need to fall back together, pretending to be blasted away, got it?" Louis gestured.

A child raised his hand excitedly, "Master Louis, can we shout 'Ah—'?"

"Of course, the louder the better!"

Sif, watching from the side, couldn't help but laugh: "You're really dedicated."

The script was simple and straightforward: Snow Vowers sneak into the granary at night, only for Louis to wisely and bravely use a fake granary to trigger a Fire Demon Explosion Bullet, destroying the enemy in one swoop, as the people cheered 'Long live Louis'...

A version clearly simplified from the "Qingyu Ridge Ambush", specifically modified for the less educated residents.

But one had to admit, the children were passionately engaged in their roles.

Especially the handsome boy playing Louis, donned in a "Lord's Cloak", standing hands on hips on the platform, loudly proclaiming: "I, Louis, will not allow anyone to disrupt the peace of Red Tide Territory!"

He was full of vigor, and looked the part.

As the children rehearsed enthusiastically on stage, laughter and shouts arose continuously.

A guard came hurriedly, bowing to report: "My Lord, a wandering merchant has arrived outside, claiming to be from another place, wishing to see you to discuss business."

Louis raised an eyebrow, immediately understanding.

Wandering merchant?

Who else could it be? It's probably the "fiancée" Miss Emily, sneaking a look at him.

At that thought, he slightly curled his lips, with a hint of teasing.

Of course, though he was a bit curious, after all, he hadn't seen what this fiancée looked like yet.

But as a dignified lord, he couldn't just go meet a wandering merchant on a whim, it wouldn't be appropriate.

Moreover, the grand play was just reaching its most exciting part, how could he leave midway?

Louis straightened his cloak, stood up and looked at Sif, who was distributing red cloth strips to the young actors.

"Sif, could you go?" he said with deep meaning.

"This wandering merchant... might not be simple. Whether to do business is up to you, but feel free to invite them to join tomorrow's Spring Festival."

Sif looked up at him, although she didn't quite understand Louis's words, she nodded: "Alright."

She put away the red cloth embroidered with a sun pattern, gently flicked her cloak, and turned to follow the guard.

Louis, standing in place, watched her back, sighed lightly, but still had a slight smile on his lips.

Fiancée meeting a lover in advance?

It's really not that I have a bad taste.

He lowered his head to pat the children's heads: "Come on, continue rehearsing, we're about to blow the place away!"

...

Sif, following the guard, arrived in front of the group of "wandering merchants", her gaze stopping on the leader.

The other wore a gray-blue cloak, the hood half-covering their face, revealing only half a profile, cold white skin, cheeks with subtle scars, and limpid eyes.

A woman? Sif raised an eyebrow, a bit surprised.

But that was all; in these times, wandering businesses had all sorts of people, so she wasn't too surprised.

Just faintly feeling, this woman's presence was too clean and swift, not like a typical merchant leader.

On the other side, Emily was also covertly sizing up this silver-haired woman before her.

That lovely short hair, deep blue eyes, and the kind of vibe that just screamed Northern Tribe...

Made Emily catch a subtle feeling quickly, too natural.

Emily had a hunch: this woman and Louis's relationship... not simple.

However, she didn't show any emotion.

This world was polygamous by nature, a nineteen-year-old young noble, it's actually unusual if he doesn't have a few close females.

Just a tinge of curiosity: turns out to be from the Northern Territory?

And... she had to admit, that face was pretty good-looking.

Then Emily smiled slightly: "Are you an official here?"

"I am Sif, Secretary to Lord Louis." Sif nodded.

"Secretary?" Emily raised an eyebrow, giving a seemingly smiling glance, "I'm Amy."

"Hello, Lady Amy." Sif nodded politely, "Our lord is currently busy with affairs and unable to meet guests. However, I can make the arrangements."

"I understand that your lord is very busy, naturally understandable." Emily said calmly, but couldn't hide a little disappointment at the corners of her mouth.

She originally wanted to at least sneak a look at Louis's appearance; after all, he is her fiancé, but still couldn't fulfill her wish.

Chapter 144: Two Women Meet (Part 2)

But as expected, with Louis's current status, it is impossible for him to casually meet a stranger like a wandering merchant.

After some brief pleasantries, the conversation quickly returned to the main topic.

Sif walked to the side of the wagon, her gaze lightly scanning over the displayed goods.

Several pieces of silk with decent colors, fragrant spice packages, some dried medicinal herbs, and a few bags of dried fruits and oils from the South, all common merchandise.

Her fingers casually brushed the edge of a silk piece, and she said lightly, "These... look like good things, but they are not urgently needed by us in Red Tide Territory at the moment."

Emily smiled slightly, not seeming surprised, "Indeed, this trip is merely passing through the Northern Territory, and the goods brought are just routine supplies, nothing rare."

Sif looked up at her with a polite smile at the corner of her lips, "We won't be making any purchases for the time being."

The conversation reached this point, yet the atmosphere did not become awkward, as everyone knew in their hearts that this "business" wasn't the main focus this time.

Sif suddenly remembered Louis's instructions earlier and added, "But tomorrow is the Spring Festival of our Red Tide Territory. If you and your caravan are interested, you can stay and have a look."

Emily, who was still secretly pondering how to boldly ask to stay, didn't expect the invitation to come so readily.

Her eyes lit up, and she quickly replied, "Really? Thank you so much for your kind invitation. We will definitely stay."

She replied with politeness, but let out a silent sigh of relief in her heart.

Great, not only can they stay, but also have a chance to witness the festival of Red Tide Territory...

Perhaps there might be a chance to catch a glimpse of that fiancé in person.

Seeing everything settled, Sif made a gesture: "Please follow me, and I'll take you to your resting place."

Walking through several alleys along the street, soon, semi-subterranean small houses came into view.

The houses were half-buried in the ground, with just the low door frames and thick earth walls exposed.

Sif pushed open the door of one of them, "You will stay here for now, let me know if you need anything."

Several people went inside, and Emily looked around.

Though the room was simple and didn't have much furniture, the corners were tidy, the wooden beds were covered with thick animal skins, and it was much warmer inside than outside, giving a sense of comfort upon entering.

A thick pottery water jug and several cups were placed in the corner, simple but considerate.

Emily scanned the room with a touch of novelty in her gaze, "This kind of house... I've never seen before, it seems very suitable for the Northern Territory's environment, probably especially warm in winter."

Her hand lightly touched the wall, feeling the faint warmth through the thick earth layer, nodding to herself.

"Thank you for the hospitality." Emily politely nodded towards Sif.

"You're welcome." Sif smiled slightly and then turned to leave.

When the door closed, it became quiet inside the room.

Emily sat down by the bed, fingers absentmindedly toying with the cups on the table, reflecting on this eventful day.

Although she hadn't met her fiancé today, the surprises from Red Tide Territory were already overwhelming.

But thinking about tomorrow's celebration, her heart filled with more anticipation.

"I hope this 'Red Tide Lord' won't let me down..." she murmured to herself, filled with an irresistible curiosity and anticipation in her tone.

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The first ray of morning sunlight had yet to pierce through the thick clouds when Emily opened her eyes.

Vague voices could be heard from outside, carrying a warm fragrance.

It was the scent of bread and porridge, spreading in the slightly chilly air like a foretaste of the Spring Festival, making one involuntarily look forward to it.

She donned her cloak, and as she opened the door, sunlight happened to fall onto the freshly swept street.

People were gradually coming out of their homes from every corner of the street.

Everyone was wearing their cleanest and best outfits.

Although most were still in coarse cloth and cotton clothes, they were cleanly washed and neatly ironed, and that seriousness made Emily unconsciously slow her steps.

"Is it because there is a festival today?" she muttered to herself, looking at the bustling crowd in the square, and couldn't help but follow their steps.

She then arrived at the square with a few guards and Nora and found that people were already queuing here.

There were several lines, and although there were many people, the order was unexpectedly well-maintained, completely unlike the chaotic scenes she imagined of Northern Territory refugees.

Emily initially thought it would take a long time to get her turn, but to her surprise, it only took less than ten minutes.

When she accepted the wooden bowl and bread handed over by a soldier, she was stunned.

The bread was baked golden, crispy on the outside and soft inside, clearly made from high-quality rye flour.

And the porridge in the bowl made her almost doubt if she was dreaming.

Not only were the grains distinct, but there were also bits of vegetables, minced meat, and even a little sprinkling of spring onions.

The porridge was richly colored and glossy with a faint sheen of oil.

With one sniff, her stomach started to growl.

"Isn't this food too luxurious for commoners?" she mumbled, staring blankly at the food in her hand, her mind instinctively questioning.

Winter had just passed, and supposedly, the territory's granaries should have been depleted by now. How could they make such quality porridge?

She turned her head slightly and softly asked the middle-aged woman beside her, "Excuse me... do you eat this well every day?"

The woman glanced at her, seeing her neat attire and probably recognizing her as a visiting merchant, then explained with a smile,

"No, today is the festival, so we have such hot porridge and big bread. Lord Louis said everyone should eat a little better and have fun."

Emily exhaled slightly in relief, so it was indeed just a special day.

As she thought, in this season, many places are still gritting their teeth through the days; having such porridge daily would be too extravagant.

"However," the woman continued slowly while drinking her porridge, "we get to collect rations from the grain station once a week, and there's quite a lot. We have enough to fill our bellies for three meals."

Emily paused in her movements.

She looked up, staring blankly at the woman, almost thinking she heard it wrong.

Seeing the woman's unabashedly satisfied expression, she was at a loss for words momentarily.

This... really isn't a lie?

In Frost Halberd City, residents being able to eat two meals, even if only partially filled, in late winter and early spring would already be considered affluent.

Yet these people before her... had rosy faces, relaxed expressions, and even had the energy to banter and laugh.

This place... is rich like a dream.

"T-three meals a day?" she repeated softly, even with a hint of hesitation in her voice.

"Yes, that's right." The woman chuckled, "Eat well, stay warm, and the kids no longer cry from hunger."

The woman slowly sent the last spoonful of porridge in her bowl to her mouth, her voice full of genuine gratitude, "Thanks to Lord Louis... if not for him, how could we have today's life..."

As the woman spoke, she smiled, a smile interwoven with past hardships and new hopes, leaving Emily somewhat stunned.

Emily originally intended to discreetly, with some curiosity and skepticism, see what kind of person her yet-to-meet fiancé truly was.

After all, as she heard, he was just a young noble, illustrious in battle, and exceedingly prominent...

She wasn't sure if that was mere pretense or if he genuinely had some skill.

But she never expected to be greeted with not a cold military record, not hollow praise, but rather such a town.

She looked down at the hot porridge, and the warmth through her hands birthed a peculiar sense of reassurance in her heart.

"Make sure to eat your fill," the woman reminded with a smile, "There's a competition later."

"What kind of competition?" Emily looked up, curious to ask further.

"Hmm." The other person scratched the back of their head, seemingly unsure how to describe it, "Just... a rope, and people pulling each other... well, just... seeing who can pull whom."

Emily listened, puzzled, trying to piece together a mental picture but couldn't quite envision what kind of "competition" it was.

Chapter 145: Red Tide Sports Festival

Emily was utterly confused, trying to piece together an image in her mind, but she couldn't figure out what the woman meant by "tug-of-war".

"You'll see when the time comes," the woman smiled as she waved her hand, carrying an empty bowl back to the recycling point.

Soon it was morning.

The training ground of the knights and soldiers in the Red Tide Territory became lively.

It had now been transformed into a temporary sports field, with a wooden high platform already set up, and atop it flew the flag of Red Tide Territory.

A hand-drawn schedule of events was nailed at the front, with drawings and crooked lettering reading: "Tug-of-war", "Relay Race", "Stone Throwing Contest", "Wood Relay"...

Though not glamorous, it exuded a simple vibe of everyday life.

Emily originally planned to "take a look and leave," given her identity was not suitable for staying in the crowd for long.

But as she walked to the edge of the sports field, her pace slowed.

Laughter and shouts filled the air.

Children ran joyfully, waving homemade little flags in their hands, weaving in and out among the adults.

These warm and lively scenes captivated her.

After thinking it over, she decided not to leave but instead found a wooden step on the edge of the square to sit down.

At first, Emily was somewhat reserved, worried about being recognized, but she realized quickly that no one noticed her.

People's eyes were all on the competition at the center of the field, emotions rising and falling with the wins and losses, like a pot of boiling water bubbling over.

Next to her crouched a little boy, holding half a piece of sugar cake, muttering, "In our residents' area, we have Long-Legged Cole, we can definitely win!"

When he realized Emily was a guest from outside, he animatedly explained the rules to her.

The tug-of-war was with a hemp rope, ten people on each side mix-matched, regardless of gender.

Running with rice sacks required circling the square entirely, the fastest team could earn silver coins.

There was also the "Wood Relay," where teams passed bundles of wood back and forth to see which team was the steadiest.

These competitions weren't complicated, even somewhat clumsy, but precisely because of this, everyone could join in.

Whether farmers or slaves, men, women, young or old, they all gritted their teeth and gave their all to run, pull the rope, and throw stones.

No one cared about status, no one cared about origin.

All just to let family, neighbors, and friends see their efforts, to cheer them on.

The winners would be surrounded and cheered, medals were iron-engraved round badges, prizes included silver coins and bags of food laid out on tables.

And those who lost would collapse on the ground, faces full of frustration, but they would be given a small loaf of bread or a candy, along with a pat on the shoulder with a smile.

Initially, Emily just sat quietly, with a hint of doubt in her eyes.

She watched those farmers, blacksmiths, and fishermen run in the dust, fall, and get up, smiling and helping each other.

Their actions were clumsy, and the scene was far from elegant, even carrying a touch of comical clumsiness.

"What's the point of this?" Emily couldn't help but ask herself silently.

But gradually, she noticed some details.

The moment these people shouted loudly and their faces lit up, the light in their eyes was genuine.

It was never the fake smiles worn at a noble banquet, not the pretentious acts at a noble ball.

This was the sincere joy belonging to ordinary people.

Children ran on the dusty sidelines, clutching candies and medals, laughing gleefully.

Adults were sweating profusely, giving each other high fives, and those who failed still walked off the field with smiles.

Even when the outcome was decided, no one complained or argued, only laughter and endless applause could be heard.

This simple atmosphere almost made Emily forget where she was or why she was there.

It was rare entertainment for the people of this land.

Finally, it was time for the last event—the Tug-of-War Grand Final.

The square suddenly boiled, the uproar sending tingles down one's spine.

People crowded to the field's edge, children climbed onto adults' shoulders to get a better view, and even the candy vendors could not bother with their business, squeezing in with their baskets.

The two teams crouched down, their hands gripping a thick hemp rope firmly.

The participants were faces of honest simplicity, including tanned blacksmiths, burly woodcutters, and skinny youths.

But not one of them was nobility, not one had knight blood.

Yet their eyes were all equally determined.

The referee raised an arm, and the air seemed to freeze.

"Begin!"

With the command, the whole square exploded.

"Pull! Pull!!"

"Don't let go! Hold it!"

"Almost there, just a little more!"

Cheering, applause, and encouragement echoed as one.

People on both sides roared low, their feet firmly planted on the ground, hands pulling hard with veins popping, faces red as if pouring everything into that rope.

Emily held her breath, watching as they desperately tugged in the dirt.

Someone fell and was yanked back up, someone barely holding on still gritted their teeth to persist.

Sweat, dust, shouts, all mixed together, heated like it would catch fire.

Even the guards beside her forgot their duties, waving their fists and shouting to cheer on strangers:
"Come on! Pull!"

The hemp rope moved bit by bit, and the tension was so thick it was difficult to breathe.

"One last push! All together! Aaaah!!"

Finally, with a loud shout, the rope was pulled over the marker line.

"They won!!"

Applause thundered like an explosion, and the crowd cheered wildly.

The group fell to the ground, laughing and panting heavily, their faces filthy but with eyes shining.

Nora clapped excitedly, "That was so much fun, I've never seen a competition like this before!"

Chapter 146: Red Tide Sports Festival (Part 2)

Emily didn't respond to her words. As a child brought up among the nobility, she could see beyond mere fun.

The people in the field were laughing, shouting, singing.

It wasn't just the smiles from victory, but... an indescribable sense of honor.

Or a feeling of belonging, of unity.

A true love for this land from its people.

If it were just for some prizes, just to fill their bellies, they wouldn't be singing ballads around the team after the match, hoarse from shouting but refusing to stop.

They were giving their all for "our Red Tide Territory."

This was not an achievement that mere policies could bring about; it was an emotion planted deeply within their hearts.

Louis taught the people here to be proud for themselves and for him.

Emily felt a chill in her heart, yet there was a subtle stir inside her.

And this fiancé of hers, whom she originally thought only rose to fame through a few brilliant battles, was quietly sowing seeds across this barren yet fresh land that had never been seen before.

"Louis...how exactly did you do it?"

Emily's thoughts involuntarily drifted back to Frost Halberd City, a place she knew so well that she could walk every street with her eyes closed.

The richest territory in the Northern Territory, without a doubt.

But what about the people there?

They always walked with their heads down, lived their lives cautiously.

They were well-fed and warmly clothed, yet they never smiled.

Even on festive days, they were merely ordered to line up and watch, observing the nobles' celebrations as if they were just ornaments.

She suddenly realized—the city had never truly allowed people to live.

It had only permitted "survival."

"Why is it like this?" Emily asked herself quietly.

Suddenly, she began to imagine, if she could bring this atmosphere, these competitions, this genuine connection between people back...

Might there come a day when the children of Frost Halberd City would also run through the snow, laughing and pulling their parents' hands, giving their all for a small medal?

But she quickly understood, it wasn't a matter of system, not something a decree or event could replicate.

The reason Louis could achieve this was not due to how much grain he distributed or how many houses he built.

It was because he personally set foot on this land. Because he gave these people trust, patience, hope.

In her father's territory, the connection between the people and the land had long been severed by the burdens of life, leaving only cold silence and numb existence.

A thought occurred to her, perhaps...her fiancé could change the entire Northern Territory.

Indeed, Emily wasn't wrong.

This lively and bustling "Red Tide Sports Festival," where even children could run onto the stage to receive awards, wasn't a whimsy, nor an idle distraction thought up on a whim by a resident.

This was an event personally approved and even partly designed by Lord Louis.

The intention was certainly not just to "make everyone happy." *freewebnovel.com*

In this early spring season, with the chill of the Northern Territory still hanging in the air, resources were becoming scarce, and the shadow of war had not completely dissipated.

Precisely because of this, such a competition involving all the people became especially important.

Through contests of physical strength, speed, and teamwork, they could win prizes and applause, and even gain a sense of "collective glory."

It wasn't an individual's victory, but a victory for "us, the Red Tide People."

For Louis, this was a meticulous strategy.

He wanted to use the competition to cultivate an atmosphere of friendly competition, bringing people closer together in their pursuit of challenges.

In the laughter and cheers, they would find a sense of belonging, an acknowledgment that they were part of this place.

More importantly, those moments of practicing, teaming up, and cheering together would slowly nurture something inside them:

"Territorial pride."

As long as there's someone cheering for the same team in the square.

As long as there's regret over a lost match, tears for a win, a transformation takes place quietly.

They wouldn't know what to call it, for it's something that develops imperceptibly.

It allows the residents to be more than just managed; it gives them the consciousness of being owners of the Red Tide Territory.

But Louis knew, with this in place.

When Red Tide Territory faced a great crisis, they would unite and overcome it together.

Only when the commoners' contest finished and the cheers died down did the blare of trumpets once again reverberate through the entire square.

"Next, is the Knight Order's exhibition match!"

The scene quieted for a few moments, then was again filled with the eager shouts of children and youths.

A row of armored knights appeared under the sunlight, Red Tide Territory's unique black and red cloaks billowing like flames, solemn yet fierce.

They wore heavy armor, swords at their waists, their steps uniform and in sync.

As they passed in front of the audience, each movement was like a well-practiced ritual, with no superfluous actions or slack.

The sunlight reflected off their silver-gray breastplates, shining with a dazzling radiance, the rhythmic hoofbeats drumming like a war crescendo in the open square, beating into one's heart.

Making everyone unconsciously hold their breath, straighten their backs, as if they too were an insignificant member of this iron flow.

Emily was transfixed.

As a noble child, she was constantly dealing with her father's elite guard knights.

Those men prided themselves on being elite, well-trained, and rigorously formal...

But she had to admit that the group before her now, in terms of discipline and demeanor, wasn't much different from them.

Even without comparing their levels and strengths, they were even better.

Their synchronized steps, their silent cooperation during coordination, the intense dedication even during a performance...

Chapter 147: Red Tide Sports Festival (Part 3)

She had never seen anything like it in her father's knight order.

She even felt that if this troop were placed on the battlefield, they might not lose to those seasoned knight orders of the same rank from the Northern Territory.

What followed was the official exhibition match.

First up was the mounted joust.

Two knights halted their steeds at the starting line on opposite ends, holding their lances, their visors down, as the signal was given.

"Hah!!"

The sound of hooves thundered! The lances like dragons!

The two knights charged past each other, colliding with a dull thud in the center as the lance tips struck each other's chest targets with sparks flying.

The audience erupted in waves of cheering!

"Amazing! So cool!"

"Is he, is he okay?! That strike seemed like it really hit!"

"I want to become a knight when I grow up!"

It was as if a flame ignited in the eyes of the children, becoming their lifelong dream.

Following was the hand-to-hand combat exercise.

Two fully armored knights brandished blunt swords, facing off, probing, blocking, and sweeping with each move heavy and powerful.

Even though they used practice weapons, each clash was so real it made hearts race.

The spectators watched with bated breath, some unconsciously mimicking the moves.

The knights' performance concluded with the highlight of the show.

"The live combat with a magical beast."

As the host loudly announced it, the stands erupted in excited commotion; countless people even stood up directly, craning their necks taller than giraffes, afraid to miss a single second.

Several elite knights appeared, red fighting energy swirling around their longswords like fiery streams, dazzling to behold.

Their opponent was a glacier boar.

It was as big as an elephant, with thick hide, coarse flesh, long tusks, and swift feet, a commonly seen low-tier magical beast in the Northern Lands.

Though it was not worth mentioning on the battlefield, on this plaza, it remained an excellent performance prop.

And these knights clearly understood "performance" as well.

They didn't swarm to finish off the boar immediately, instead, they went back and forth, their fighting energy flashing as if adding special effects to the beast contest for the audience.

They occasionally lunged forward, sometimes deliberately sidestepping to dodge, controlling the situation, driving the boar in circles, yet always sparing it at the last moment.

The cheers surged like waves.

Some excited audience members jumped up shouting: "Chase it down! Kill it with one sword!"

Others clasped their friends' arms, exclaiming: "Oh my God, did you see that charge just now?!"

Emily stood amidst the crowd, and couldn't help but smile gently.

She had never seen such a scene, not because hunting magical beasts was rare.

But this kind of "deliberately slowing down to let everyone see" style of battle was almost like... staging a musical with the beasts.

"So battle can be seen as performance... It's quite brilliant, actually."

The beast show concluded, leading to the most thrilling segment.

As the trumpeter played the melody of victory, the Red Tide knights, assembled neatly in formation, raised their lances in unison, breastplates clashing, hooves stamping the ground.

They shouted loudly: "For the Red Tide! For Lord Louis! Long live!!!"

Their voice was thunderous.

At that moment, the whole plaza seemed to resonate in the air.

Children jumped up excitedly, imitating the motions, while adults cheered with fervor, some with tears in their eyes, others clenching their fists.

Cascading cheers swept across like a tidal wave.

"Long live the Red Tide!!"

"Long live Lord Louis!!!"

In that instant, it was as if everyone joined into a boiling torrent.

Emily stood among the crowd, feeling as if she were engulfed by this heated wave, moments of breathlessness ensuing.

She looked at the people, the warriors, the commoners, the children...

The pride and reverence on their faces, unmasked and blazing, seared her heart like fire.

Not due to bloodline, not because of birth, nor family honor.

They truly and genuinely revered one person — Louis.

Not because he's nobility, not because he's the young lord who defeated the Snow Swearer.

But because he gave them hope.

He made them feel like they belonged to this land, belonging to the name "Red Tide."

He wasn't just their lord, but also their guardian, their sun.

Emily felt a suffocating sensation; such a scene... she never witnessed in her father's domain.

Her father was the ruler of the entire Northern Territory, embodying the highest power, yet people feared him, obeyed him, but never adored him.

Emily clenched her fists; at that moment, her curiosity about Louis reached new heights.

Yet what she didn't know was that, on a pavilion not far away, Louis was quietly overlooking the revelry of the plaza.

He stood behind the sunlight, arms crossed, and his expression was calm.

"Hmm... it seems effective," Louis murmured softly, a subtle smile playing at the corners of his mouth, "At the very least, it lets them know that even if war arises again in the future, they have a knight order ready to fight at their backs."

The people's ardor and reverence at that moment were neither unfamiliar nor worthy of indulgence to him.

For he knew all too well that the land of the Northern Territory continued to linger in peril.

The current peace was but a temporary reprieve, and he knew distinctly that a greater disaster would befall the Northern Territory this winter.

Clear and firm order was needed to maintain the present serenity.

The knights' tournament from the outset wasn't meant to please anyone.

It wasn't for show, nor romance.

The reason was to demonstrate the territory's military strength, to offer them a sense of security.

Louis then turned, asking: "How are the preparations for the banquet?"

Bradley nodded: "Almost done, the ingredients have been delivered to the plaza, and the performance troupe is in their final rehearsal. We can start in an hour."

"Hmm." Louis nodded, raising his gaze to the sky.

Chapter 148: Louis Makes a Dazzling Entrance

The half-day sports event concluded perfectly amidst cheers and laughter.

Then, the final segment of the spring opening day—the Spring Feast began.

Nowadays, the Red Tide Territory is no longer the desolate outpost it once was.

With the return of displaced people and stabilization at the border, the population has surpassed three thousand.

Trying to gather around in a small clearing for a communal meal, as originally imagined, is no longer realistic.

Thus, the territory-wide banquet was divided into two parts.

In the town square, the majority of residents gathered closely, with fires rising and wooden tables in rows.

Abundant food was served: stews, hot porridge, roasted meat, and bread, along with a few rare pastries.

Some began to sing, others danced a simple group dance, and children chased and played around the bonfire, joy filling the air.

Amidst this jubilant crowd, a young figure walked in slowly.

It was Louis, the Red Tide Lord.

"Hey, it's Lord Louis!"

"Look, the Lord is here!"

People stood up in surprise, their expressions excited as if they had seen a god.

No, as if they had seen the sun.

They looked towards him, like those who had waited long for dawn in the cold night, now finally witnessing the light of dawn.

That brightness and warmth were enough to ignite the long-extinguished flames in their chests.

Louis walked past each table, bowing to greet everyone.

He was not aloof, just smiling softly, "Do you like today's dishes? Are the children full? Did the rain in recent days affect the construction sites?"

Even if it's just a few words, even if it's just a nod, it's like the rising sun in winter, permeating hearts and dispelling years of coldness.

An elderly person stood up with the aid of a cane, holding Louis's hand tightly, choking with emotion: "Lord... if it weren't for you, we wouldn't be able to eat together... Thank you, truly, thank you..."

And this voice brought in more people agreeing.

Those gazes, those tears, those smiles, all directed towards one person—Louis.

He didn't speak much, just listened and responded seriously, as usual, but the crowd seemed to have finally grasped hope.

Because they knew, with him, Red Tide would never be cold.

.....

Meanwhile, in the main hall of the high tower at Red Tide Castle, another more solemn banquet was quietly unfolding.

It had no exaggerated gold and silver decorations, nor the superficial niceties of nobility, just polished oak tables neatly arranged in the firelight against the stone walls.

Those who could enter this hall were the true pillars of the Red Tide Territory.

Those who could sit in this high tower were either official knights or elite knights of Red Tide.

Or various managers responsible for daily operations: Agricultural Director Mike, Luke of Fishery, Technology Workshop Chief, Well Foreman, Grain Warehouse Manageress...

Even a few labor representatives still wearing coarse work clothes, faces marked with tension.

They were farmers, craftsmen, even a couple of slaves.

They too earned recognition through their diligent work, attending this banquet as slave representatives.

But they would soon shed their slave status and become free people.

In this banquet hall, no one was superior, no one had to bow their heads.

Because at Red Tide, as long as you're willing to work hard and can offer help to others, you're worthy of sitting in this hall, drinking alongside the Lord.

These were the rights Louis granted them.

As for Emily, as a "Friend from Allied Countries" from Frost Halberd City, she was surprisingly arranged to be part of this official banquet.

She felt somewhat surprised as a "wandering merchant".

But what surprised her more was that the people around her were not traditional "nobility" at all.

They dressed neatly but clearly not in formal attire, but in regular work clothes. Beneath coarse linen garments, was skin darkened by sunlight and calluses formed from hammer handles.

Their conversations lacked the reserved pretenses of noble ladies, instead, they were fervent and sincere.

"Mike, how's the spring planting preparations going on your side?"

"Not bad, Mike made me a heavy plough, it's very useful."

...

These "honored guests" laughed aloud by the main table, toasting each other, exchanging experiences in farming, fishing conditions, well and canal repairs, and difficulties in recent work.

Yet their faces were full of pride and authenticity.

Neither humble nor reserved.

Emily gazed at them in a daze, not understanding why Louis was doing this.

Her gaze inadvertently swept to the high position.

She expected to see the young Lord, but he wasn't there, Louis was absent.

She finally couldn't resist asking softly to a female worker beside her, "When will Lord Louis arrive?"

The female worker was focused on the roasted meat, smiled upon hearing, and said, "The Lord? He's still greeting the residents on the square, guess he'll be back in a while."

When she said this, her tone was relaxed, yet carried a hint of pride.

As if saying: he is our lord, we all know what he will do.

And at that moment, Emily suddenly understood something.

She understood why this land was exuding such a distinctly different aura.

She understood why these people, originally from humble beginnings, had a glow of dignity on their faces that didn't belong to those at the bottom.

Louis, at first, relied on family background or power to sit in this position.

Yet, he did not leverage those powers against these residents while governing the territory.

Louis did not stay high up on the throne; instead, he walked among the people.

With the order he personally established, he earned their loyalty.

At that moment, Emily gently lowered her head, with no confusion in her eyes, only genuine respect remained.

While she was lost in thought with her head lowered, the entrance to the hall suddenly quieted down.

It was a naturally occurring silence, where everyone spontaneously put down their cups and turned their heads.

The first to stand up was an old craftsman, followed by more people, the sound of chairs sliding was ceaseless, and applause and cheers erupted like a wave:

"Lord Louis!"

"Our Lord has arrived!"

Everyone's eyes were filled with respect and gratitude, as if they were welcoming a true guardian.

Emily also immediately looked up.

He came.

The legendary Lord of Red Tide, the young Viscount, her fiancé.

Louis made a dazzling entrance.

He wore a sharply cut black and gold uniform, its tone restrained yet not lacking in authority.

Emily gazed at the young lord entering the main hall, momentarily mesmerized.

Louis was completely different from the "battlefield hero" she had imagined.

She had once perused reports of the Battle of Qingyu Ridge in Frost Halberd City, seeing descriptions like "defeating a thousand with a hundred" and "crushing the elite Snow Swearers."

In her mind, she envisioned a robust, sharp-featured young general.

Perhaps like her father, with a face covered in scars, exuding authority and a terrifying presence.

After all, how could someone who stood out in such chaotic times not be a roaring beast?

But the Louis standing before her now completely overturned her understanding.

He was not burly, his figure was tall and powerful, lines were distinct but not exaggerated, like a sword with its edge sheathed.

His skin emitted a subtle glow under the candlelight, his face handsome and clear.

Emily couldn't help but add in her mind, perhaps a bit too handsome.

What she couldn't ignore the most was his gaze, like the night over the deep sea, calm, steady, yet hiding a storm.

This was not a fierce general roaring and slashing on the battlefield; this was a king who could sit atop the mountain and overlook the entire scene.

Emily withdrew her gaze, lowering her head to hide a hint of subtle shyness.

"So... my fiancé is this type of person."

A hint of an unreadable smile appeared at the corners of her mouth, her heartbeat somewhat uncontrollably quickening by half a beat.

It wasn't entirely because he was good-looking. What truly moved her were the scenes she had witnessed in the past two days—

The cheers from the sports event, the shouts in the square.

The inescapable pride in the eyes of the residents, the posture of those who once were silent now holding their heads high.

That was the appearance of a lord who had truly won the trust and support of the people.

This was what fascinated Emily the most, although all of this naturally began with being handsome.

Louis finally stepped into the main hall of the Red Tide Castle.

Applause, respectful words, the sound of people standing up all surged like a tide, yet he merely nodded slightly in indication, his gaze quietly sweeping through a corner of the guest seats before sitting down.

His gaze paused there for half a second.

A woman was lowering her head, her stance so cautious it approached... slyness.

On her face was a slanted old scar, stretching from the brow bone to the jaw, like a mark left by a sharp blade.

The scar was faint yet clear, so striking it almost instantly placed her in the category of "a surviving woman from the chaos."

But Louis' eyes only rested on her face for a moment before withdrawing, as if he did not care.

The makeup technique wasn't bad, color adjusted very well, even the light and shadow were handled finely, but it's a pity it can't deceive me.

Since she doesn't want to meet with her true appearance, then let her reveal herself.

There's no rush anyway.

Louis withdrew his gaze, without lingering further, continued walking towards the main seat, the silhouette in his black and gold uniform casting a sharp shadow under the candlelight.

He leapt upward, seated himself at a high position, raised his glass to signal the crowd.

The hall fell silent, everyone was awaiting his voice.

"Dear companions, this year we have endured through the harshest winter together." He slowly scanned the entire place, "It was your perseverance, your hard work, that kept the warmth burning in this territory.

I especially want to thank the female workers of the Smoked Fish Workshop, the porters of the grain station, the craftsmen of the carpenter group, it was your dedication that supported the granary and roofs this winter."

He paused, smiling as he raised his glass to the crowd: "Now, spring has arrived. In the coming year, we will continue to build roads, construct houses, farm fields, fish, and make our home better.

Today, regardless of status, regardless of position, whether it's the Knight standing on the city wall or the farmer working the land, this is a festival belonging to every Red Tide person.

Eat well! Drink well! Laugh heartily! At this moment, Red Tide belongs to you!"

Chapter 149: Emily Makes Up Her Mind

The brief silence in the hall was as if pierced by a spark igniting.

The first to react was an old craftsman sitting in the corner. He raised his clay cup high and shouted the inaugural cheer: "Long live the Red Tide! Long live Lord Louis!"

Immediately, that voice erupted like a torrent from all directions.

"Long live!"

"Long live the Red Tide!!"

"Cheers to Lord Louis!!"

The applause, cheers, and clinking of cups formed a burgeoning wave, as if shaking the entire hall.

Some were moved to tears, others clenched their fists in ceaseless waves, and still others took hearty gulps of spirits while shouting, their faces wearing smiles of long-lost joy.

The gratitude on their faces wasn't blind adoration, but a heartfelt recognition.

Emily sat at the table, her heartbeat rising and falling with every cheer of "Long live the Red Tide."

This was not just the climax of a banquet, but the awakening of a territory's soul.

During the following banquet, laughter and the clinking of glasses rose again and again as a group of children, led by attendants, excitedly ran up to a small stage.

An older child straightened his back, cleared his throat in imitation of the adults, and declared:

"We are the Red Tide Children's Theater! Bringing the story of 'Great Lord Louis's Strategy to Crush the Evil Snow Vow' to everyone!"

The audience burst into laughter and applause.

The young actors divided the roles: the tallest, Carl, draped in a makeshift "Lord's Cloak" that was obviously a repurposed tablecloth, wore an immensely solemn expression as he portrayed Louis, continually emphasizing "protecting the peace of Red Tide Territory" in his lines.

Several children donned homemade "Snow Swearer" masks and brandished wooden swords to play the antagonists.

A group of the youngest kids simply played "flora," shaking paper leaves in their hands to clumsily create a "granary" scene.

The climax came with Louis ingeniously outwitting the enemy's strategy.

Carl shouted loudly: "Light the Fire Demon Explosion Bullet!"

Immediately, all the "granary" cast members fell to the ground with a "boom," creating a dramatic "explosion" effect.

More laughter and cheers erupted from the audience.

Several rounds of song and dance performances followed: some were ballads lauding Lord Louis's quelling of the chaos and rebuilding of homes, others were choruses praising the hardworking and industrious people.

The entire hall was filled with a simple yet enthusiastic atmosphere of joy.

But Emily's thoughts were scarcely on these performances.

Her gaze would, almost involuntarily, drift to the young lord seated in the high seat.

Watching him raise his glass amid the laughter, calm and composed; watching him occasionally lower his head to converse quietly with the steward beside him, with a slight frown of thoughtfulness.

The performances were amusing enough; some scenes even made her unable to suppress a smile.

But in Emily's mind, the same questions echoed over and over:

This person... how exactly did he come this far?

What is he truly thinking?

If they were to become husband and wife, could she really step into this person's world?

...

Emily stared blankly, slightly dazed, forgetting even to put down the cup in her hand.

"Louis..." she silently repeated the name in her heart with irrepressible curiosity and a quietly budding yearning, secretly imagining their future.

And so, the boisterous and passionate banquet finally came to an end, with guests bidding farewell with smiles three by three, leaving the hall one after another with lingering satisfaction.

But Emily barely registered the final farewells.

She sat there in a daze, her heartbeat lightly stirred by something, unable to calm down for a long time.

The laughter, the children's performances, and the toasts that filled the hall all seemed like a blurred dream.

Only the man upon the high seat, Louis.

Vivid and firmly occupying her mind.

"What's happening to me..." she murmured softly, feigning composure, yet internally, she felt like she was being licked by flames, unbearably hot.

All the way back to her residence, she still couldn't escape that muddle of thoughts.

Standing before the mirror, her eyes flickered uncertainly in the candlelight.

Finally, as if having made a decision, Emily took a deep breath and turned to Nora standing beside her.

"Nora," she said softly but firmly, "Help me remove my makeup."

Nora hesitated for a moment, "But miss..."

She had barely finished speaking when Emily's extraordinarily bright eyes interrupted her.

It was a determined light, carrying anticipation, nervousness, and courage.

Nora opened her mouth, ultimately asking nothing, merely nodding silently as she proficiently removed the makeup from Emily's face.

The shaded delineations were wiped away, the concealed colors faded, and the reflection in the mirror seemed to be reborn.

The deliberately drawn scar vanished with the watermarks.

In its place was a face of undeniable beauty.

A high nose bridge, deep blue eyes, imbued with the unique chill and sharpness of the Northern Territory.

Like a poppy blooming atop the snowfield, cold and deadly.

In that moment, the somewhat world-weary merchant woman enshrouded within the crowd disappeared completely.

In her place stood the real Emily Edmund.

Once hailed as the "Flower of the North" noble lady, she now stood up with renewed determination, graceful and slightly heroic.

"The cloak, change it." she said in a low voice.

With a casual tug, she removed the drab hooded cloak, replacing it with the deep blue gown long prepared.

The brocade shimmered in the light, outlining her tall figure, both dignified and imposing.

She lightly adjusted the hem of her dress, lifting her gaze to the reflection, faint light flashing in her eyes.

"Nora," she said slowly, her voice carrying an undeniably commanding tone, "Call for a Red Tide guard."

Not long after, the steady footsteps of the guard resounded outside the door.

Upon opening the door, the guard was momentarily taken aback. Who was this?

Wasn't there always just a low-key merchant woman living here?

How did such an exquisitely poised woman suddenly appear?

But he still spoke politely, "Miss, how may I be of service?"

Emily slowly turned, raising her chin, speaking with a proud tone, "Please inform Viscount Calvin that his fiancée, Emily Edmund, requests an audience."

Upon hearing this surname his heart jolted, instinctively straightening his back, daring not to question a single bit.

"As you command! I will inform him immediately!" the guard responded hurriedly, turning and leaving with swift movements.

The door closed once more, and the room returned to silence.

Emily slowly exhaled, gazing towards the door, her hands unconsciously tightening on the hem of her skirt.

"Louis..." she quietly repeated his name in her heart, her eyes shimmering with anticipation and unease.

Chapter 150: Meeting

On the night after the Spring Festival, the office of the Red Tide Lord's Castle was serene and warm.

The clamor of the banquet had long dispersed. The fireplace burned with a warm fire, casting light on the stone walls and bookshelves. The air was tinged with the scent of mead and stewed meat.

Louis took off his cloak, just sitting down at the desk, preparing to handle some post-festival official documents.

At this moment, a guard knocked and entered, speaking in a low, cautious tone: "Milord, a lady requests to see you, claiming to be... 'Emily Edmund.'"

Louis's quill paused slightly in hand. He looked up, a trace of surprise flashing in his eyes: "Emily Edmund?"

He had thought this noble fiancée would quietly leave after observing all there was to see about Red Tide.

Unexpectedly, she chose to show herself after the festivities, which somewhat surprised him.

"Please bring her here," Louis said deeply.

The guard nodded in response and quickly left.

The wooden door of the Red Tide Lord's Castle opened gently, letting in a light breeze, followed by the sound of the girl's footsteps, light and steady.

Emily stepped into the study, dressed in a deep blue gown, her cloak fluttering slightly behind her, and wearing the silver eagle emblem symbolizing the Edmund Family on her chest.

Her blue hair fell over her shoulders, complementing her cool and dignified demeanor. Her features were exquisite and defined, her figure delicate yet upright,

each step embodying the particular poise and elegance of the nobility.

She came, stripping away the mask, presenting her true self before the young lord.

Emily's gaze settled on Louis.

At that moment, he looked up from his documents, the golden-red firelight casting a gentle glow on his face.

His eyes were clear, his demeanor calm, dressed in his black and gold uniform, appearing more solemn and steady than at the banquet.

Emily felt her heartbeat pause for a moment.

Meanwhile, as Louis looked at her, his eyes also brightened imperceptibly.

She was undeniably a noble lady, dignified, calm, and composed.

Yet the faint trace of nervousness in her eyes did not escape Louis's notice.

"Emily Edmund." Emily stood still and curtsied, her voice clear and composed, "Or, your future betrothed."

Louis rose, returning the gesture with proper etiquette: "Indeed, my father mentioned this in his letter."

"I am here to observe what kind of person you are." Emily looked straight into his eyes, her tone frank, "This union is very important to me... so I must personally judge if it's worthwhile."

She slightly lowered her lashes, her voice softening yet exceptionally sincere: "I hope to make the decision myself."

A moment of silence passed, the firelight flickering over Louis's handsome face, his expression indifferent, showing no hint of surprise.

Emily asked softly, "Aren't you upset?"

"I'm not." Louis smiled gently, his tone warm, "I understand your approach. If it were me, I would do the same."

He did not disclose her disguise at the banquet, using a kind of silent acceptance that comfortingly enveloped her probe and doubt.

At this moment, Emily's eyelashes trembled slightly, as if she breathed a sigh of relief and smiled, her lips curving gently, almost blindingly beautiful.

Louis invited her to sit, and they sat across the desk, the gentle glow of the fireplace illuminating their faces.

"Red Tide is much better than I imagined." Emily spoke first, discussing her most interested topic, "The streets are clean, the houses orderly, the people smile. I never thought I would see such a decent territory in the Northern Territory."

Louis replied calmly, "It's an honor to receive the Edmund lady's evaluation. Red Tide was originally barren. It took everyone's concerted efforts to achieve today's appearance. I just happened to stand in front of them."

"But not every lord is willing to do so." She added softly, her blue eyes looking at him, "When I passed through the market, an old man took me by the hand and said, 'Our lord is the sun, the only fire in the snowy day.'

Louis chuckled, "It seems I must send someone to thank that old man for helping me gain some impression points."

Emily laughed, her blue eyes curving as she looked at him, unwilling to look away.

"What you are doing may not only change Red Tide... it could change the entire Northern Territory," she said softly.

Louis shrugged, "That's a heavy burden. I only plan to manage my small piece of land well."

They talked like this for a long time, the atmosphere gradually shifting from initial probing to a warm ease, as if both silently laid down their armor.

As the conversation deepened, the atmosphere between the two subtly changed.

Emily's hands holding the teacup were no longer stiff. She exhaled softly, her gaze gentle, finally shedding the rational facade she wore when they first met.

"Actually, I... am not so opposed to the marriage. It's just, I don't want to hand my future away carelessly," Emily paused, her expression somewhat hesitant, "Meeting you today, I think perhaps my father's choice wasn't wrong."

"Thank you for your trust." Louis smiled slightly.

Emily's eyelashes fluttered gently, saying nothing more, just nodding lightly.

After a moment, she stood up, tidily adjusting her cloak with impeccable etiquette: "I will depart for Frost Halberd City tomorrow. My father is waiting for my report."

"You're welcome to visit again." Louis also stood, reaching out to open the door for her.

The night breeze outside brushed in, lifting her blue hair.

Emily walked to the door, suddenly stopped, turned around, and looked up into his eyes.

"You truly surprise me," she said softly.

Her eyes glimmered with complex emotions, bearing the nobility's expected reserve while concealing a girl's undisguised excitement.

The next moment, she stood on her tiptoes and lightly kissed his cheek.

A fleeting touch.

"Looking forward to our next meeting, Lord of Red Tide."

Louis stood at the door, watching Emily's figure gradually fade into the night, the fragrance of her presence lingering in the wind.

He tentatively touched the spot where he had been kissed, the corner of his mouth lifting softly, as if a sudden spring breeze had stirred his heartstrings.

He gently closed the door, turned around, and immediately met Sif's gaze.

Sif stood quietly in a corner of the study, silently watching, the light casting fine waves reflected in her eyes.

She said nothing, showing no intense emotion, her expression remaining its usual calm.

But the suppressed emotion was like embers in the fireplace, silently burning in her heart.

Louis paused slightly, awkwardly scratching his head, "I was going to tell you... I didn't expect it to turn out like this."

Sif looked down, her fingers lightly twisting the hem of her clothes.

"I know," she said softly, "I've known for a long time. My status shouldn't have any delusions... you are the lord, she is the duke's daughter."

Her tone tried to remain steady.

But in that moment, Louis saw a hint of grievance flash in her eyes.

He walked over, speaking as gently as possible, "I didn't mean for you to feel this way. I just..."

"I trust you," Sif suddenly interrupted, her voice light yet exceptionally firm.

She raised her head, her eyes brimming with a layer of moisture, yet she forcefully suppressed it from falling.

In the next second, she stood on her tiptoes, suddenly embracing him, softly pressing against him, and kissed him lightly on the lips.

This kiss lacked Emily's reserve but carried a more direct, almost heart-wrenching trust.

"I trust you, no matter what the future holds... I'll be by your side." Her voice was soft, yet it melted his heart.

Louis was startled for a moment, then gently wrapped his arms around her.