

Winter 151

Chapter 151: Supreme Mage

The night descended, dark clouds pressing on the territory, as if even the air carried a hint of an oppressive weight.

In the depths of the Mage Forest, the ancient tower stood silently at the edge of the woods.

Pale moonlight barely broke through the thick clouds, casting a cold silver sheen over the tower.

At the circular balcony atop the tower, Supreme Mage Oriolan stood with his hands behind his back.

In front of him, a bronze messenger crow lay quietly on the carved stone platform, its eyes dull and lifeless, long since devoid of a twinkle.

It was the messaging tool of his senior brother, Grand Mage Jurgen Locke, which used to regularly deliver his news a few months ago.

Even a few words would suffice to confirm that old friend's safety.

But now, months had passed without a word.

"It's been too long, surely nothing's happened," Oriolan muttered under his breath, his voice tinged with an undeniable heaviness.

He raised his right hand, and with his fingertips, slowly drew a simple circular magic array in the air, a faint blue-white light emerging.

"Come," he called softly.

A moment later, twelve figures in gray robes arrived, kneeling on one knee before him, their silver masks glinting coldly in the magic light.

"Supreme."

Their voices were low and solemn, melding with the night's darkness.

Oriolan raised his hand, and a rough parchment map appeared in the air, marking the contours of the Northern Empire.

"Grand Mage Jurgen Locke has gone silent for months. You twelve will immediately head to the Northern Territory to find where he was last seen."

His voice was calm but carried an almost sacred pressure.

"Yes!"

"Bring back everything... regardless of life or death, you must bring back the truth."

In a flash of light, the twelve silver-faced mages disappeared soundlessly, leaving behind an eerie silence.

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The morning light filtered through the window, casting fragmented and hazy shadows indoors.

The revelry of yesterday faded away, with the air still retaining the warmth of last night, so quiet you could almost hear each other's breathing.

Louis slowly opened his eyes, instinctively glancing to his side.

Sif was curled up in his arms, her silver-white hair scattered messily on the pillow, her pale cheeks showing a hint of fatigue, her breathing steady and soft.

His gaze paused slightly, noticing on that sleeping face, a tear still present at the corner of her eye.

Louis gently lifted his fingertips and softly wiped away that tear.

"You've had it hard," he whispered, turning to sit up, skillfully lifting his hand.

A semi-transparent light curtain emerged with a buzz in front of him, emitting an ice-blue glow.

[Daily Intelligence Update Completed]

[1: Supreme Mage Oriolan Sol has dispatched 12 silver-faced mages to investigate the Northern Territory of the Ironblood Empire due to concerns over the disappearance of his friend, Grand Mage Jurgen Locke.]

[2: A large migration of two-headed bears is expected in seven days.]

[3: Mountain snow is melting faster, glacial streams surging, flooding Canglu Territory's settlement areas.]

"Oriolan Sol?" Louis raised an eyebrow at the first item.

He hadn't heard of this name, but the title "Supreme Mage" was not something to be taken lightly.

Someone with such a title should not be an ordinary person.

However, Grand Mage Locke... he was all too familiar with.

That old man who collapsed before him, forcing out an energy wave before dying, embedding fragmented memories and that Primordial Meditation Technique into his mind...

Louis had no acquaintance with any mages, no guidance, unaware of his progress whether fast or slow.

The entire practice felt like groping in the dark, with only the fragmented memories left by the deceased old mage as his crutch.

"Perhaps these twelve silver-faced mages could give me a chance to truly touch the world of magic."

Yet Louis had no intention of casually mentioning the matter of Loken's death.

It wasn't that he distrusted others, but instinctively felt that knowing too much, saying too early, might spoil things.

He decided to hold off for now and wait until he could meet real mages to assess the situation.

He turned his eyes to the second item, a slight smile on his lips: "Two-headed bear migration... intelligence on resources, huh."

These two-headed bears, frankly speaking, were the "strategic-grade livestock" of a low magic world.

Low in magic content, but relatively docile in temperament, likely trainable with the Frost Leaf Vine he cultivated.

The meat of the two-headed bear contained a bit of magic power, not only delicious but also slightly beneficial for strengthening, making it an excellent dietary supplement for knights.

There might even be a chance to turn it into a product chain, selling it to other territories for resources.

Setting up a "Red Tide Brand Magical Beast Jerky" doesn't sound too bad either.

He had already begun planning in his mind: setting up an enclosure, training, cutting, curing, smoking.

But that was still seven days away, so he silently noted this intelligence and moved on to the other updates.

As for the third item, it was a typical warning-type intelligence.

Glacial streams surging, flooding imminent.

"This small matter won't require my personal attention."

He donned an outer robe, wrote a brief and clear letter instructing the local officials of Canglu Territory:

Strengthen the dikes, urgently evacuate the population;

If lacking in timber and craftsmen, support can be provided locally;

Divert waters if necessary, to protect farmlands and cottages.

After sealing the letter, he went to the window, summoned a Gale Bird, attached the envelope, and let it fly away.

The feathered figure soared into the sky.

"Done." He stretched, setting aside all miscellaneous thoughts for now.

With seven days until the two-headed bears' appearance, the priority now was the spring planting.

Chapter 152: Supreme Mage

Yesterday he had arranged with Mike to inspect the fields and agricultural affairs today.

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The early spring sun still carried a chill, with remnants of snow lingering between the fields.

The moist soil mixed with the rising white vapor, as if the earth was slowly awakening from hibernation.

The sound of plowing was incessant, with sturdy oxen pulling improved heavy plows, slowly advancing on the slippery soil.

The metallic blades of the heavy plow cut deep into the permafrost, turning over the black earth.

A few shirtless farmers stood barefoot in the muddy water, their cheeks reddened alternately by steam and cold wind, and their shouts rose with the white mist.

Walking along the field ridges, Mike whispered to Louis beside him, "This field was plowed last year, this year it only needs light hoeing and channel repairing."

His boots were covered in thick mud, yet he firmly held a lump of wet soil in his hands.

Louis watched as he gently rubbed the mud open, pressing it against his palm, as if caressing something extraordinarily precious.

"It can stay warm for another day," Mike said, his voice seemingly directed at the soil rather than a person. "The day after tomorrow, this area can be hoed."

Louis looked down at the field ridge, where a fine stream flowed between the field ridges, winding along with the heat mist spreading, as if spring was quietly emerging from underground.

That was the hot spring water.

He vividly remembered early last spring, to seize the moment before the snow melted to plow and sow, it was he who proposed the idea of "diverting hot spring water to melt the permafrost."

Back then, everyone still wore a look of skepticism.

But now, merely a year later, the craftsmen were already able to lay channels and set troughs on their own, even controlling the temperature differences with precision.

"You've done well." He nodded approvingly with a smile.

Mike stood beside him, looking very pleased, clearly understanding the weight of this compliment.

"We diverted a branch of the southern hot spring," he briefly explained, "The head craftsman modified the waterway structure, using pebbles for the bottom trough to stabilize the flow speed and temperature, allowing the hot water to permeate evenly into the frozen layer... we've started this spring a full half month earlier than last year."

"But look," Mike then guided the Lord to another side, pointing to a patch of soil with grayish-white crystalline deposits, "It's salt, the geothermal thawing quickly, but it also brought up some salinity from below.

Next year we can try covering with boards to make greenhouse insulated planting. The heat won't hit the ground directly, which can ease it a bit."

He didn't say much, but his words were clear, as if he had thought it over repeatedly in his mind.

"Make a note of it." Louis nodded, gesturing to Sif beside him.

At this moment, a pungent smell wafted from ahead.

Mike paused his steps, turned around, and laughed: "Just in time, the fertilizer is ready."

Several workers were dumping a cart of dark brown fertilizer at the head of the field.

As the lid was lifted, the odor resembled gas from a decaying animal's intestines, straight to the nostrils.

"The base fertilizer is a new mix. Magical Beast dung, plant ash, fish entrails, with added clod powder, insects won't approach, and it's quite potent," Mike proudly introduced.

"Is there enough clod powder?" Louis asked.

"This is Hillco's new formula, the Alchemy Room is now fully producing it, enough to support the main fields for spring sowing," Mike paused briefly, "Additionally, last year's giant bones weren't wasted either."

Mike led everyone to a field marked with a "small wooden sign". On the sign, the words [High-Efficiency Fertilizer Experimental Field] were written in charcoal.

He walked to a small fenced piece of field nearby: "This is the experimental field using Cold Crystal Ash, extracted from the Frost Giant's body. We're trying to see the effect."

Louis said, "Keep pushing forward. In agriculture... you've done very well."

Mike scratched his head, smiling somewhat sheepishly.

Then Mike took Louis to the nursery greenhouse.

The greenhouse was located in a low area on the northern foot of the mountain, surrounded by sturdy wooden posts and animal skins to block the wind, with a semi-transparent grease membrane on top, allowing sunlight and retaining warmth.

The air inside was moist and warm, each breath carrying the scent of soil and decaying leaves.

Mixed with a hint of sulfur, a warm current enveloped them.

Louis walked into the nursery greenhouse, and the warm, humid air immediately enveloped him.

At the center of the open space, a giant Fire-backed Turtle lay quietly asleep.

It was curled up, its shell covered with red turtle-patterned cracks, appearing as hot as a volcanic rock.

The turtle's breathing was slow and heavy, occasionally letting out a deep snore.

Faint heat seeped from the crevices in the turtle shell, dispelling the cold in the greenhouse.

Mike whispered, "This Fire-backed Turtle was relocated from a warm zone and kept here in dormancy. Its body temperature continuously releases heat, just enough to maintain the seedbeds' temperature... it's our big fortune this year."

Louis looked at the turtle lying still, secretly nodding inwardly, using Frost Leaf Vine to stabilize the Fire-backed Turtle resolved much of the temperature control issue in the nursery greenhouse.

Along the central path, seedbeds were neatly arranged on both sides.

Rye sprouts had just emerged green tips, turnips and potatoes were still quietly buried in the moist soil.

Mike explained from the side, "Your initial idea was indeed effective. The benefits of nursery growing allow us to seize time early.

Especially before field thawing, we can already start planting, avoiding high periods of pest infestations, and significantly increasing seed germination rates."

Louis nodded, his eyes fixed on the patches of green sprouts that had already broken through the soil: "More importantly, it ensures the management during the seedling stage.

Concentrated nursery growing allows better pest control, watering, and fertilizing, and it also helps select weak seedlings, ensuring only the strongest are transplanted."

He approached a particularly vigorous turnip seedling, lightly touching its tender leaves, feeling the vitality and readiness to sprout in the seedlings: "This is indeed a time-saving and labor-efficient method."

But Louis also noticed something different, amid the rows of lush green seedbeds, there was a spot that seemed dim.

The edges of a few seedling leaves were blackened, the stems faintly whitish, clearly showing signs of mold infestation.

Mike quickly stepped forward, his tone carrying a hint of regret: "This row had some issues, mainly due to serious humidity at night for the past few days, and poor ventilation. I've asked someone to do isolation treatment, it won't spread."

Louis squatted down for a closer look, the moldy spots were indeed confined to a small area, processed in time.

He did not rebuke, instead, he said softly: "It's okay, just handle it."

These few words made Mike's heart tremble.

He lowered his head, nodding in response: "...Yes!"

At that moment, Mike's eyes rimmed red.

He remembered when he first came to the Red Tide Territory, still wearing the collar of a slave, his hands full of frostbite and scars, shrinking away in the mud and snow to avoid gazes.

And now he could stand in the nursery greenhouse, leading the team to farm and cultivate, his words listened to, his suggestions adopted.

All of this was given by the young Lord in front of him, he would always remember the Lord's kindness.

Louis did not notice the redness in Mike's eyes, nor did he perceive the weight and gratitude behind that sentence "I will always remember."

He just looked at the rows of tender green sprouts, silently nodding in his heart: doing well.

This was what he wanted: not just a warm, humid nursery greenhouse, not just those seed leaves surrounded by mist.

It was a territory that was becoming orderly, self-sufficient, and even sustainable.

His thoughts had already surpassed this piece of greenhouse land, extending to the farther borders.

Besides the Red Tide Territory, the other five fiefdoms were also starting spring reclamation successively now.

Though they didn't have geothermal resources, Fire-backed Turtles, or hot spring water channels like Red Tide Territory.

But they had distributed reclamation tools, basic food storage, and a set of "Red Tide mode" that had been verified through practice.

If carried through to the end, without any unforeseen events...

This winter, there is a possibility to achieve self-sufficiency for the first time, without the need to purchase grain from outside.

The warm current from the depths of the nursery greenhouse gently blew, carrying the scent of soil and vitality.

He withdrew his gaze, nodded to Mike behind him: "Keep it up, document all your experiences this year."

Mike straightened his waist abruptly, a hint of brightness in his eyes: "Yes, Lord."

Chapter 153: Double-Headed Bear

The mist spread, wrapping the entire valley entrance in a grayish-white dream.

Louis, standing on the hill, pulled his cloak tightly, watching the cold mist rise slowly ahead: "The mist is thick enough, start releasing the aroma."

"Yes!" A knight quickly uncovered the stew pot.

A wave of fragrant steam drifted out, carrying the scent of animal fat and meat bones, dispersing in the cold mist.

This wasn't an ordinary aroma; it was a specially concocted stew designed to entice beasts through their sense of smell.

According to Hillco and the others' previous experiments, as long as they smelled the aroma, the bears couldn't help but approach.

Sure enough, it wasn't long before heavy footsteps sounded from the distant forest.

"Here they come." Lambert gripped his weapon tightly, eyes wary.

Amidst the swirling mist, the first to poke their heads out were a few round little creatures, the cubs of the double-headed bears.

They were like fluffy snowballs, short-limbed, wobbling out, each with two miniature bear faces atop their heads, sniffing the air curiously.

The tips of their damp noses twitched, clearly drawn by the aroma, yet warily glancing around.

Soon after, heavy footsteps echoed from the forest as the mother bears made their entrance.

They were much larger than the cubs, with broad backs and well-developed muscles, both heads growling on one side while coldly surveying the surroundings, exuding an imposing presence.

Their thick fur was a mix of gray and light brown, resembling giant beasts born amidst ice and snow.

Their tusks gleamed coldly, and the misty breath emanating from their mouths appeared like wisps of smoke.

Soon, the entire beast group appeared, various sizes of double-headed bears huddling together, dozens standing as one, resembling a chaotic yet powerful beast army.

Some were still playfully shoving each other, emitting low "whirring" sounds, occasionally slapping their paws on the muddy ground, causing wet soil to splatter.

"...So many." Even Lambert couldn't help but take a deep breath.

Once these colossal creatures set foot in the mist zone, their originally steady and powerful strides suddenly became hesitant.

Their growls grew lighter, carrying a strange hoarseness, as if even their breath became somewhat confused.

"Awooooo..." An adult double-headed bear shook its head, both heads violently swinging, as if trying to dispel the sudden daze in its mind.

But it was futile; its steps began to stagger, heavy paws leaving a crooked trail in the snow.

Even its eyes, which had been tensely scanning the surroundings, became unfocused.

"Plop!"

Another bear even suddenly stopped, the two heads exchanging a glance, as if in mutual disdain.

It then staggered, nearly falling onto the ground, letting out a muddled low growl, like it had drunk too much.

The mist effect had taken hold.

Louis squinted, watching the white mist swirl slowly, knowing full well that amidst it was the carefully crafted Frost Leaf Vine.

This substance didn't affect humans much but had a strong disruptive effect on the magical beasts' nervous system.

The lower the magical power concentration of the beasts, the easier they were affected.

Just as everything seemed to be progressing smoothly, a sudden change occurred.

"Roar—!!"

Two deafening roars erupted almost simultaneously.

From within the thick mist, two adult male bears, taller than the other double-headed bears, suddenly charged forward.

Their fur stood on end, massive claws aggressively scraping the ground, eyes glowing fiercely, blood-red, radiating a terrifying lust for killing.

"Oh no!" an apprentice knight exclaimed.

These two were clearly the leaders of the pack, with robust physiques and muscles bulging like iron and stone, faintly exuding a layer of dark blue sheen.

Their nostrils puffed white steam, and their growls carried an unusual restlessness and ferocity.

The Frost Leaf Vine had indeed affected them, but rather than making them docile like the other bears, it heightened their awareness of their companions' odd behavior, making them more vigilant and aggressive!

"Roar!!"

One male bear suddenly crashed into the wooden wall, shattering it with immense force, causing a deafening noise.

The other one crushed a thick wood post and fixed its gaze on the nearest knight, lunging forward!

"Quick, dodge!!"

But the squad was not unprepared rookies.

Lambert's voice quickly quelled the chaos: "Ropes! Frost Vine Bombs ready—block them!"

The five knights moved almost simultaneously, their actions swift and clean.

Two specially reinforced hemp nets flew toward the charging giant beasts with a sharp whistle.

With a snap, the first bear was expertly ensnared, its enormous body wildly struggling on the ground, its massive claws tearing at the ropes, unable to break free momentarily.

The other was precisely entangled by the ropes around its front paws, crashing down onto the ground, emitting an angry howl.

It rolled furiously on the ground, trying to break free from the restraints.

"Throw!" Lambert ordered.

Two small bottles, glimmering ice blue, flew swiftly, slicing through the air with a chill, accurately smashing onto the heads of the two giant bears.

"Bang!"

Silvery mist exploded instantly, flooding out like tides, enveloping the giant beasts' heads, the dense Frost Leaf smoke like a damp cold net tightly binding them.

The bears struggled violently, their growls turning hoarse and urgent, their eyes still fixed on the surroundings.

The ferocity lingered, but their movements grew slower and more sluggish.

A few seconds later, they finally collapsed weakly to the snowy ground, panting heavily.

Confusion filled their eyes, with the previous fierce aggression thoroughly suppressed, leaving only powerless struggle.

Chapter 154: Double-Headed Bear

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White Rock Valley remained shrouded in thick fog, the quietly renovated training grounds at the valley floor stood silently.

Nebulizers were embedded in the crevices of the cliffs, releasing a layer of cold white mist every three days, making the entire valley seem like a tamed snow cage.

The animal pens were neatly completed, wooden structures entwined with water moss and lined with bark fragments, coarse and simple, but sufficient to simulate the atmosphere of the forest.

However, this wasn't for comfort, but to ensure these double-headed bears could eat well and grow quickly.

Each bear had its own independent pen, with feeding cycles precise to the minute, twice a day, morning and evening.

Mash mixed with stewed beast bone soup was poured into feeding troughs, and that rich aroma had become their primary signal for swallowing and reacting.

The training results proved very effective, especially with the cubs, who were almost natural-born food hunters.

"The success rate of the whistle test is over seventy percent," Beast Tamer Egger said, flipping through a stained ledger, his tone barely concealing his excitement,

"Seventeen rushed to the trough upon hearing the whistle, with three arriving within three breaths, a very prompt response."

"How about scent guidance?" Louis asked slowly.

"The effects are also good, particularly with that thickly boiled bone soup," Egger nodded, "We've started increasing the conditioning training, ensuring that once they smell it, they approach automatically, without needing extra guidance."

He raised his hand to point at the scene in the valley. Over there, several beast tamers were managing pen allocations.

Young bears were gathered in small pens for training, while adult bears were placed in the outer circle.

They were made to move along designated paths to adapt to fixed walking patterns.

A row of rough recording boards hung in front of the pens—feeding amounts, reaction times, mood markers...

There were even brief personality notes for a few.

"Number fourteen, cub, eats actively but is thin, increase feeding."

"Number thirty-seven, adult male bear, overeats, needs restriction to prevent excessive weight gain."

The mist once again spread through the valley like a slowly drifting curtain.

Suddenly, a low growl was heard.

It wasn't from alarm, but a lazy, inertia-laden voice mixed with a pure hunger instinct.

Louis stopped in his tracks, his gaze fixed on a nearby bear cub.

The cub was lying on a frozen stone block, lazily licking a frozen beast bone, its two heads swapping angles occasionally, crunching audibly.

Upon hearing footsteps, it raised its head and slowly approached the side of the pen.

Two pairs of eyes looked at Louis, their depths holding an instinctive sense of smell and a hint of numb longing.

Louis remained silent, taking a small piece of cold meat from the beast tamer's hand, weighing it in his fingers, and casually tossing it into the pen.

The cub instinctively lowered its head to catch it, turned around and retreated to the stone block beside it, focused on gnawing.

The two heads seemed used to competition, occasionally twisting, but quickly quieting down.

Louis watched the cub, slowly speaking, "No need to tame them too well... as long as they eat fast, grow fat, and breed prolifically, that's enough."

Having inspected the overall situation of the training grounds, Louis's mood was unexpectedly good.

As he walked, he saw the cubs in the pens responding swiftly and having a strong appetite.

The training results exceeded expectations, especially the way a few of them competed for food, making it seem like they were indeed well-raised.

His eyes turned to the other side, falling on an adult double-headed bear.

The creature was robust, with thick, glossy fur, its two heads swaying back and forth, eyes sharp, nostrils slightly flared, seemingly always scenting the air, exuding an untamed fierceness.

Louis glanced a couple of times, the corner of his mouth suddenly curling into a slight smile, casually saying, "Egger, slaughter one and see how it tastes?"

Egger was taken aback but was also very excited; after all, he hadn't tasted demon beast meat yet: "As you command. But... which one?"

"This one," he pointed lightly, his voice calm but indisputable, "this one is too restless, doesn't cooperate with taming, not very useful."

The chef team arrived quickly, led personally by the territory's head chef "Helder", wrapped in a thick cloak, eyebrows brimming with excitement.

A few large pots, portable charcoal stoves, a whole set of chopping boards and knives, set up a field kitchen as efficiently as waging a battle.

The process of skinning and cutting was assisted by several seasoned knights, and the giant bear was swiftly processed neatly.

Some meat chunks were directly put into the pot to make soup, the marrow and thick bones thrown together, the soup bubbling with fine foam.

Another portion was cut into chunks, sprinkled with frost salt and dried grass seeds, and grilled directly over the charcoal fire.

The cooking smoke intertwined with the mist, the aroma so thick it was sticky, permeating the valley with an original wild allure.

Several bears in the pen smelled the scent, their two heads poking out simultaneously, peeking at the commotion outside, almost as if they thought it was their meal being cooked.

In the valley center, a makeshift long table was quickly set up, formed by using stout logs, with thick beast skins as seats.

The cold ground contrasted sharply with the steaming cooking smoke.

Louis sat at the head, draped in a thick cloak, holding a cup of hot soup.

Next to him were knights Lambert, Weir, and also the head chef Helder, Egger, and a few key breeders.

The grilled bear ribs were quickly brought to the table, sizzling with grease, crispy on the outside, retaining a hint of pinkness within the meat.

Meanwhile, the soup pot had snow root buds, frost salt, and marrow boiled to thickness added, the fragrance alluring, making even the air carry a touch of sticky freshness.

Weir widened his eyes, thinking of the double-headed bears' appearance: "Is this... really delicious?"

Louis unhurriedly picked up a rib, examining it closely, then decisively took a bite.

Chewing a few times, his brow furrowed slightly, seemingly savoring carefully.

"...Hmm," he nodded slowly, "The meat is firm with a hint of wild gamey taste, but definitely more delicate than ordinary livestock. The fat isn't greasy, with a strong muscle fiber texture..."

Meanwhile, the previously skeptical Weir had already started devouring it quickly.

But it didn't take long before he collapsed on the seat, rubbing his belly, and sighed contently: "Delicious..."

Lambert picked up a bowl of soup, drinking it in one go, closing his eyes for a moment, and muttered in a low voice: "You can feel a trace of Fighting Energy flowing, albeit faint, it does provide a bit of enhancement."

"Indeed," Louis nodded, "If this subtle effect can be mass-produced, it's sufficient to support a low-tier knight's supply. It's very valuable."

Without knight lineage, Egger and Helder exchanged glances, each trying a bite.

Egger smacked his lips, "The taste is indeed good... but I don't feel anything special."

After eating for over an hour, there really wasn't much more to discuss.

Egger, while gnawing on a roasted rib, opened his portable notebook and said indistinctly, "Lord, it's a good time to report on the livestock situation."

Wiping his mouth, he cleared his throat: "Currently, the main livestock types in Red Tide Territory are cattle, sheep, and reindeer brought in from the far north, and these hardy animals have adapted faster than expected.

Still, the numbers aren't ideal; although the scale has expanded significantly, it's far from enough to fully support the entire territory's consumption."

Changing his tone, a hint of pride emerged: "But given the current stock, sustaining a supply for around a thousand people poses no issue. The latest batch of calves and lambs has just been born, doubling the number in half a year."

Louis nodded while sipping hot soup, his expression quite approving.

Finishing the last sip, he looked at Egger: "You're doing great, progress is ahead of expectations."

But this isn't enough. Livestock is the foundation of the territory; we must establish a stable supply chain. I'll purchase another batch of livestock, focusing on adult females, aiming to scale up within two years."

Egger's eyes lit up, nodding continuously, "Brilliant, my Lord! With another batch of breeding stock, the livestock scale will soon take shape, greatly improving Red Tide Territory's grain and meat supply."

The livestock industry of Red Tide Territory, like new green budding quietly on this icy land, was steadily growing strong.

Chapter 155: Choosing a Fief

The howling northern wind carried the still unmelted ice and snow across the open plains, whipping against the marching party, cutting their faces like knives.

Pal tugged at his cloak and clicked his tongue, "Can this really be called 'spring'? I haven't seen a single blade of grass."

Riding a tall steed, his red and black cloak embroidered with gold thread, he stood out remarkably.

Even in the northern wilderness, he maintained the air of a "young nobleman out on a jaunt."

Not far behind him, Willis kept his head down and wrapped himself tightly in a black cloak, riding silently.

His eyes were constantly patrolling the front and sides, noting the terrain, landscape, climate, and the changes in marching speed, even occasionally noting the collapsed outposts and signs left by beasts along the way.

Pal had never proactively spoken to him, as he actually looked down on this "bastard."

And Willis had no desire to speak to him either; although brothers, they were not very familiar with each other, traveling together only to look out for each other along the way.

Frost Halberd City finally appeared at the end of the snowfield.

The city walls were tall and imposing, the stonework rough yet solid, with battle scars on the mottled surface, as if ready to raise flags and repel enemies at any moment.

Two banners hung high on either side of the city gate, flapping loudly in the wind and snow, though slightly faded, still recognizable as the silver eagle emblem of Frost Halberd City.

Atop the gate tower, guards stood with halberds, their armor shining with an iron-gray sheen under the cold light, their gazes alert.

As they approached, a guard shouted, "Halt! Who goes there?"

Pal nonchalantly brushed the snow off his cloak and replied loudly, "People of the Calvin Clan. Pal Calvin, and beside me is Willis Calvin, both are Pioneer Lords enfeoffed by the Empire."

The guard scanned the two of them, his demeanor not daring to relax, and upon hearing the name "Calvin," his eyes turned solemn, promptly turning inside to report.

Soon, a response came from the gate tower: "Passage granted, guests of the Calvin Family, please enter."

The heavy iron gate slowly opened, emitting a deep metallic grinding sound.

The guard nodded to the two, indicating they could enter the city.

Pal urged his horse forward while muttering softly, "At least the gate looks decent; who knows what the inside will look like?"

As they stepped inside, a middle-aged official in a heavy cloak approached quickly.

He bowed slightly before them, speaking concisely, "I am an aide dispatched by Duke Edmund. Please follow me to the Governor's Mansion; Duke Edmund has been informed of your arrival."

The two nodded and walked with him, occasionally glancing at their surroundings.

The streets of Frost Halberd City were muddy, snow mixed with sewage, making a squelching sound as the horses stepped on it, as if stepping into a mix of unmelted ice and bloodstains.

Unlike the chaotic and filthy mess of the slums, the streets showed almost no sign of idle civilians.

Instead, soldiers and knights could be seen everywhere,

donned in armor and helmets, their expressions grim, marching in step, occasionally brushing shoulders, their hands moving discreetly to their sword hilts.

The city's architecture was mostly stone-built, with a rough and simple style, stone walls mottled and marked with frost scars, like the scars of old soldiers.

Many wooden parts had weathered, door and window frames nailed with iron sheets or large iron nails, many roofs having collapsed before.

Sustained with makeshift planks and leather, with undried frost still hanging in the cold wind.

These houses were clearly not built for "living" but for "holding."

Watchtowers along the street stood tall and silent, slightly tilted in some places, yet still stood like mountains amidst the wind and snow.

No hawking calls, no cooking smoke, no children playing and laughing.

Frost Halberd City lacks any trace of "urban" vitality. It's more like a slumbering suit of battle armor, unremarkable in appearance but capable of withstanding enemy assaults.

"Tsk, this is no city, it's clearly a frontline fortress."

Pal muttered softly, his tone unable to hide the characteristic disdain of a noble son.

He glanced at Willis beside him, seemingly waiting for a confirming response.

But Willis did not respond.

He simply gazed silently at the city before him, the street, and the silently marching soldiers.

A fleeting solemnity crossed his eyes, as if he finally understood something.

This was not desolation, but the remnants of war.

Here there was no chaos, only a near-cold order, a peace sustained by sacrifice and repression.

Willis lowered his head, tightened his cloak, his eyes drooping slightly.

The journey should never have been underestimated, but now it seemed he had still underestimated the weight of this land.

Of course, he did not respond to Pal's complaint, nor did he express his own concerns.

Pal saw his silence, merely pursed his lips and rolled his eyes.

His arrogance prevented him from lowering himself to inquire what the silent man was thinking.

Thus, the two walked side by side down this heavy street, silent, each preoccupied with their own thoughts.

The accompanying scribe walked ahead, speaking steadily, "Just two more streets to the Governor's Mansion; please bear with us a little longer."

Soon they arrived at a rugged castle, the Governor's Mansion.

The gates of the Governor's Mansion slowly opened with a heavy creak, and as they stepped inside, it was solemn at first glance.

There was no opulent ceiling, no velvet carpet or crystal lamps, only a heavy long table, a few old bookshelves leaning against the wall, and the sole decoration, a deep blue military flag.

Chapter 156: Choosing a Fief (Part 2)

And below the military banner sat a towering, imposing man.

Duke Edmund, Lord of the North, the true master of the entire Northern Territory.

His face seemed carved from stone, and the scar that meandered from his left eye to his jaw added a chilling aura of menace.

Even sitting still, he exuded an inescapable sense of pressure.

Pal's gaze intensified, immediately discarding his earlier flippancy. He replaced it with a well-drilled smile, bowed slightly, and respectfully handed over the pioneering credentials sealed with the Royal Family's crest.

"The Calvin Clan, Pal Calvin, reporting in."

Willis followed suit, his movements swift but his expression unchanged, silently presenting his document.

"Willis Calvin." He spoke simply, without any unnecessary words.

Edmond took the documents, glanced at the seals, and his eyebrows twitched slightly, his tone noticeably softened: "Oh—he's from the Calvin Family... Louis's older brother, I see."

In that instant, even his scarred face drew a slight smile.

That momentarily, the ferocious scar on his face seemed to soften as well, even showing a rare smile.

Pal was stunned, his eye twitching involuntarily.

Did he just... address Louis by his first name? And he even remembers their younger brother?

He couldn't help but click his tongue in thought, since when did Louis have such a deep connection with the Governor?

After a few exchanges of pleasantries, Duke Edmund waved to have a detailed map of the Northern Territory brought over, which covered almost the entire tabletop when spread out.

"Apart from the areas marked in red, you can choose anywhere else," he said, his tone indifferent.

Pal's eyes lit up immediately: "This... so many places are still available? I thought last year's batch had already taken them all."

Duke Edmund chuckled lightly, his tone tinged with coldness: "Indeed, quite a few 'Pioneer Nobles' came last year... but alas, winter and war show no mercy. Most of them perished."

Pal's expression faltered, wanting to say something, but in the end, he awkwardly scratched the tip of his nose.

Willis, however, remained calm, carefully scrutinizing the markings on the map.

He knew deep down that Edmond was right.

These "available areas" seemed enticing but were mostly empty lands cleansed by blood and fire.

"These positions," Edmond pointed thick fingers at several spots in Snow Peak County, "are close to your brother Louis's area, relatively rich in resources, and considerable for a good start."

Though he spoke nonchalantly, there was a clear hint of "you might consider these first."

Because of Louis, he had a favorable impression of the Calvin Clan's youths, hence his few extra words.

Before stepping into the Governor's Mansion, Pal had already turned that map of the Northern Territory over in his mind hundreds of times.

He didn't genuinely care about which land was more fertile or which area was richer in resources.

For him, the most crucial thing was who controlled the territory.

"Snow Peak County? Ha." He sneered internally, not even glancing at that region.

As if I could possibly run to Louis's territory?

Pal considered himself far superior to his brother. In background, in appearance, in experience, even in his relationship with their father...

He always felt that Louis was nothing more than an unimportant wastrel.

Just his luck to happen upon the pioneering policy, clinching a Commandery Princess title in this freezing, godforsaken place.

If it came to strength, how could he possibly rank beneath him?

"I came to the North to make my mark, not to be someone's sidekick."

So he set his sights beyond Snow Peak County, on the Eastern Frozen Rock Valley, the Northwestern Wolf Plain Slope, and even further at Foggy Hill.

These places were desolate and scarcely populated, but they also meant freedom and opportunities.

Pal had even thought it through: if maneuvered correctly, his territory could become a new trading hub in the North in the future.

Once the routes were opened, coupled with his family's background, in a few years, he could have his fief, with a Count's title.

By then, their father should view him in a different light.

As for that so-called "Commandery Princess brother"?

He'd probably end up as some noble's vassal, spending his life with a few fishing villages and valley shacks. Just staying out of bankruptcy would be fortunate.

With such thoughts, Pal's lips curled slightly, displaying an expression of "aiming high".

He pulled the map closer, fixing his finger decisively on a spot: "Here, looks quite good."

Edmond followed his direction; it was a region south of the Cold Mist River, near the Wolf Plain Slope.

The terrain had some variations, but the south had a river, and the west a mountain, rumored to have rich iron deposits, while the river could lead to the faraway Frost Forest Plain, making it a region with both resource and transport potential.

"Oh, here..." The Duke nodded, his tone neutral, "The Cold Mist River is a good river, with plenty of forests nearby, making hunting and wood gathering convenient."

The mineral veins at the mountain's base... haven't been fully explored yet; there might be a bit of luck."

He didn't explicitly state his opinion but revealed a faint hint of observer's intent, like watching a young man eager to spread his wings, though he didn't voice the underlying risks.

He narrowed his eyes slightly, repeating slowly: "Are you sure you want it here?"

Pal displayed a confident smile, arms crossed, nodding firmly: "Of course."

Chapter 157: Choosing a Fief (Part 3)

"Alright." Duke Edmund's lips curled slightly, a hint of meaningfulness hidden in his smile.

He did not further comment on the merits of the choice, only lightly marked the area with a circle.

Then, he turned to the silent Willis, "And you, have you chosen?"

Willis did not answer immediately but stood quietly in front of the map, his brows furrowed.

Initially, like Pal, he thought of avoiding Snow Peak County and selecting an unnoticed corner to establish himself independently.

He was not willing to submit under his younger brother.

But during this northern journey, he saw too much; desolate villages, shattered forts, refugees frozen by the roadside, and skeletons gnawed by wild beasts.

The Northern Territory is not land for expansion but a battlefield that devours the weak.

Yet Louis managed to stand firm on this land.

Willis did not want to admit it, but he understood one thing: to survive in the Northern Territory, one relies not on lineage nor background, but on strength.

And his brother Louis clearly possesses such strength.

Rather than clinging to empty pride and fighting alone in the wind and snow, it's better to act according to circumstances, at least to survive before planning further.

He gently raised his hand, pointing to a territory near the edge of Snow Peak County, close to Ice Ridge Territory.

It's an area with slightly elevated terrain, near the Cyan Rock Rift, rich in timber resources nearby, and a tributary winding through.

The geographic conditions are already considered decent in the Northern Territory.

Duke Edmund looked at him, a flicker of admiration in his eyes.

He nodded, marking that area too, "It's a wise choice."

Pal pursed his lips at this but did not comment further.

Willis didn't look at him, nor did he explain why he chose this piece of land.

The Northern Territory is not a place for dignity; it's a place for survival.

Only with one's resources and backing does one have the possibility to survive.

Duke Edmund reached out, taking a heavy steel seal from the side of the table. It was the frontier seal of the Northern Province, representing the initial sovereignty over this barren land.

He spread out two documents on the table, each stamped with the royal seal, pausing slightly.

"Since you have both chosen your territories, from this moment, you become Barons of the Northern Territory."

Before his words fell, he stamped heavily, the metal colliding with the paper with a dull "click" sound.

Willis and Pal's hearts both jolted.

At that moment, they officially owned their own land, becoming true Barons of Expansion.

Even though the title brings no immediate wealth, even though the future is fraught with danger, this written acknowledgment means they qualify to stand at the gambling table of the Northern Territory, to fight for their own future.

Excitement, apprehension, ambition, and unease surged in both men's hearts.

Duke Edmund returned the documents to them with some formal words, "The Northern Territory is harsh and treacherous; I wish you quickly build your fortress and survive until next spring."

He added with a semi-serious smile, "Simply surviving here is worthy of respect."

He shifted his tone, casual yet concerned, "The Governor's Mansion's frontier supplies are limited. You might want to check out the black market; some early survival essentials and slaves might be useful. Remember to haggle, don't be a fat sheep."

Pal's eyes flashed with slight disdain, as he had the vast Calvin Commerce Association behind him, but he still nodded in acknowledgment.

Willis quietly folded the documents, nodding solemnly.

The two men left the Governor's Mansion office, the sun shining on the stone-paved street, yet the air still carried a trace of the characteristic chill of the Northern Territory.

Just as Pal adjusted his collar, preparing to stride proudly onto the road of a Baron, a figure brushed past them.

It was a lady in a dark blue gown, graceful in demeanor, naturally exuding radiance.

Her blue hair gleamed softly in the sunlight, her features were exquisite and stern, bearing an undeniable noble air.

Pal instinctively turned to gaze, his eyes lingering on that silhouette, staring for a moment before coming back to his senses.

He licked his lips, lowered his voice, and asked the accompanying officer beside him, "Who is this lady?"

The officer glanced at him, showing a faint trace of reverence, "Duke Edmund's daughter, Lady Emily."

Pal's heartbeat inexplicably quickened upon hearing this, his mind suddenly whirring.

Edmund's daughter?

Could it be... just perfect!

A suitable age, noble background, matching family status.

All considered, she's a perfect marriage prospect for himself.

He even began fantasizing about their future wedding and the name of their first child, maybe "Arthur" would be better?

However, the blue-haired lady didn't glance at him, just walked past with icy composure.

Her gaze remained aimed straight ahead, as if they were mere unnoticed stones on the street.

Meanwhile, Willis stayed silent. His attention did not linger on the lady but remained in thought.

He knew his focus should be on Louis.

That brother he once looked down upon, today stands firm in this wilderness, even earning the Duke's recognition.

How should he approach him? Seek honest assistance or cautiously draw near?

He lifted his head, looking toward Snow Peak County, silently making a decision:

If he could grasp the thread leading to the future, even bowing a little would be worthwhile.

Emily, with elegant steps, walked past the stairs in front of the Governor's Mansion, her boots creating a series of clean echoes on the stone ground.

Chapter 158: Choosing a Fief

She didn't look at anyone around her.

Including those two young men who had just gained the rights to expand their territories and were in the most exciting moments of their lives.

To her, during this time, too many young nobles had come under her father's command to register their fiefs and flatter him.

Those two just now, in Emily's eyes, were merely two random names that popped up from the long list of "reporting for fief" under her father's command.

Especially since she had just returned from the Red Tide Territory.

After seeing a stunning man like Louis, all other men seemed dim and dull.

"Father," she said softly, bowing slightly.

Duke Edmund smiled as soon as he saw her come in, "How did you feel about your trip to the Red Tide Territory?"

"I just went around the surroundings of Frost Halberd City," Emily replied somewhat reluctantly.

"Don't pretend," Edmund picked up his wine glass, shook it slightly, and tapped the table edge lightly, "I even know how many sets of casual clothes you brought. Do you really think I check nothing?"

Emily coughed lightly, unable to conceal her smile, and sat opposite her father, "Okay, I just wanted to see him for myself."

"Tsk, a grown-up daughter can't be kept at home," the Duke shook his head, his smile ambiguous, "Is my daughter about to be taken away?"

"Father!" she glared at him somewhat annoyedly, her cheeks flushed.

"Alright, alright," Edmund spread his hands, the smile deepening, "Then tell me, what did you actually see on this trip?"

"The Red Tide Territory is much better than I thought," Emily's tone became serious, "The streets are tidy, the public order is good, and the residents feel at ease. I saw many people living with smiles... that wasn't a performance, they are genuinely striving to live."

"Sounds like a fictional place."

"No," she shook her head and continued, her voice soft but glowing with fervor,

"They call Louis 'the Sun', saying he's the one who brings hope. At first, I thought it was a publicity stunt, but their eyes can't deceive. It's trust, and also respect."

Edmund stared at her for a few seconds, smiling faintly, "Quite a detailed observation. Looks like my prospective son-in-law has left a good impression on you?"

"I..." Emily bowed her head, saying somewhat shyly, "He is indeed more reliable than I anticipated. He has courage and patience, knows how to govern."

The land ravaged by war is slowly recovering. He's... a person seriously doing things."

"That's good," the Duke put down his wine glass, "This way, I can be at ease marrying you off."

"Who said anything about marriage?" Emily snorted lightly, turning her head to avoid looking at him.

"If you don't want to, can I force you?" Edmund shook his head with a smile, "But you're saying this too late, your little feelings are already written all over your face."

Emily bit her lip, not arguing back.

The room went quiet for a moment.

"Father," she suddenly said softly, "do you think... he's worth entrusting my life to?"

Edmund paused, looking at his normally calm and rational daughter, for once somewhat wavering.

He sighed, "I don't know what the future holds, but there's no one truly 'worthy' in this world, only whether you want to believe. At least from your reaction this time, he's doing well now."

Emily nodded, feeling somewhat complex.

Edmund leaned back in his chair, his gaze resting on her, and sighed softly.

He knew, of course, that his daughter spoke with a few subjective emotions, perhaps even exaggeration.

But precisely because of this, it showed she truly valued that young man.

And if Louis weren't genuinely capable, she wouldn't have evaluated him this way.

"It seems, this young man... should not disadvantage my daughter," he thought silently, and his expression relaxed a bit.

Chapter 159: Humble Willis

Louis had dealt with the spring food issue and was thinking about handling other problems.

Meanwhile, the prophecy from the Daily Intelligence System about the "Winter Disaster" loomed over his heart like a sword yet to fall.

Although the intelligence never explicitly stated what would happen, it only mentioned that "the evil forces nurtured by the Snow Swearers are stirring."

Furthermore, it mentioned that this crisis would sweep the entire Northern Territory this winter, not unlike the great rebellion two years ago.

"If it is indeed something summoned by the Snow Swearers... be it a beast or monster, I must be fully prepared," he thought.

"Of course, if it's really an Evil God..." He looked up at the sky outside the window, "then I'll flee immediately."

Despite having a nine-year compulsory education, even in this fantasy world, he didn't hold much faith in deities.

He would worship only what was useful, and if something was useless, it was fake.

If it endangered him, then it was an evil monster that needed to be eliminated.

He wasn't arrogant and had already prepared himself to face the worst-case scenario.

For this moment, he needed to establish a defense line before the disaster struck, a line that could both hide people and hold off monsters.

To confront this potential cataclysm, he summoned Mike, the most seasoned master craftsman in the Red Tide Territory and the chief engineer of the Red Tide Castle.

"We already have experience with Earth Tower structures, I want to build two more in the Red Tide Territory," Louis said while unfolding a map and pointing to five territories, "and at least one simple Earth Tower should be built in the other five camps."

"Like the Red Tide Castle?" Mike raised an eyebrow.

"A bit rougher," Louis said lightly, "they'll serve as granaries, resource warehouses, training grounds, stables during peacetime..."

But once calamity strikes, they can close their gates and the populace can hide inside for a month if necessary."

Mike scratched his beard, his eyes glinting with excitement: "You should have mentioned this earlier! Do you know how high the efficiency of the Red Tide construction team is? To roughly build one, without decorations, takes only half a month per structure!"

"That's your efficiency, what about the other territories?"

"That depends on how skilled their craftsmen are, but if you're willing to send a team from our side to supervise, it might be faster."

"Mike, I always have a feeling... that we might be facing a great enemy this winter." Louis gazed northward, where clouds churned over the depths of the Snow Ridge, as if something unseen was awakening.

He turned to look at the old craftsman beside him, "Do you have any other defensive measures suitable for here?"

"You've come to the right person." Mike's eyes lit up as he fished out a dusty, rough blueprint from his belt, his face alight with the enthusiasm of a child.

As he spread out the blueprint, his fingers moved nimbly, pointing out the details.

"Firstly, reverse slope paths with rolling log traps!"

Grabbing some parchment, he stacked them together, "We'll reshape the nearby mountain paths into zigzag gentle slopes. When enemies arrive, will they charge forward? Let them slowly circle around. We'll set ambushes at the corners."

He pulled out a small wooden stick from his pocket, placing it at the top of the 'slope.'

"At that moment, logs with spikes, rolled from the slope," he gestured a strong push, "boom, whoever dares to go up, won't come back alive!"

"A whole gang of barbarians comes, and they'll roll down in droves." He described with great animation, even adding sound effects for the falling logs.

Louis nodded approvingly, tapping his chin lightly: "Good, these should be built on the ramps leading to the Earth Towers... the harder the climb, the worse their fate."

"And there's something even more ingenious," Mike said, patting his knees as he stood up with a grin, "Have you ever heard of vibration columns?"

"Vibration columns?" Louis raised an eyebrow.

"Our Northern Territory permafrost is indeed hard, but it vibrates faster than anywhere else. I plan to bury several large hollow columns under the snow outside, with copper bells inside. When a large number of enemies move or beasts attack, the ground vibrates, ringing the bells."

Mike tapped his boot, "We can hear the 'jingle' from inside the city, and then no one sleeps, we go straight to battle readiness."

Louis's eyes also brightened: "No need for patrols, listening to the earth for movement... this is true Northern Territory wisdom."

Mike proudly said: "That's right, I'm not boasting, our Northern Territory craftsmen may not say it outright, but our minds have long been filled with emergency contraptions like these."

Louis nodded slowly, a cold gleam in his eyes: "Good, implement these measures promptly as you said."

Mike chuckled: "At that time, our enemies won't even see us, but they'll first encounter rolling logs, fall into pits, and be scared half to death by the ringing..."

Just as Mike finished speaking, the heavy wooden door creaked open, and a guard entered.

"Lord, there's a party outside seeking an audience," the guard bowed slightly, "The leader claims to be Willis Calvin. Your brother."

"Willis?" Louis raised an eyebrow, his tone carrying a hint of unexpected surprise.

He had known through the Intelligence System that his two elder brothers had arrived in the Northern Territory.

But he didn't expect Willis to come see him first.

"Let him in," he said calmly, though his tone did not conceal his cautiousness.

The guard bowed and withdrew.

.....

At the Red Tide Territory's city gate, the cold wind lightly blew against a cloak as Willis Calvin sat firmly on his warhorse.

His deep gaze rested on the round, enormous, earth-tower-like castle in the distance.

This was not the "Northern Territory" he recalled.

He had passed through too much desolation in the Northern Territory.

Starving people, collapsing houses, muddy roads...

But what lay before him now at Red Tide Territory seemed like a heterogeneous existence intentionally sculpted by some other force.

Chapter 160: The Humble Willis (Part 2)

The semi-underground homes on both sides may not be luxurious, but they are orderly and unified, with dried herbs hanging on the window sills to repel insects and keep the cold at bay.

A group of simply dressed yet spirited children were playing around the well, while an elder sat chatting in a high-backed wooden chair by the door, his gaze gentle and fearless.

In the distance, a few patrolling knights with red and black capes were slowly making their rounds, their warhorses steady and their armor neat.

"Louis' territory is incredible..." Willis muttered to himself.

He had come all the way from Snow Wind Ridge.

Along the way, he had seen too many lords cloaked in nobility whose lands were like cesspools.

Forcibly recruiting labor, slaughtering common folk, with golden goblets and fine wine inside the castles while littered with corpses outside the city walls.

But now he witnessed with his own eyes a territory where people lived peacefully in the snow.

"This guy... actually managed to transform this barren wilderness into this state within a year?"

He tightened his grip on the reins, his brows furrowed, not in anger, but in deep admiration.

"I really underestimated him before."

He gazed at the castle, looking like it was clad in armor and entrenched in the snow, and exhaled a soft breath of white air.

"If I hadn't seen it myself, I could hardly imagine this was done by someone who a year ago was considered 'family dregs'."

As he marveled, a young guard in a red and black uniform approached.

He spoke with respectful and unassuming tone: "Lord Calvin, the Lord invites you to enter."

Willis nodded, said nothing more, just retied his cloak and rode forward.

As he ventured deeper into the core of the Red Tide Territory, the scenes within the city continued to astonish him.

Along the streets, neat wooden railings guided pedestrians, and the snow was cleared regularly.

Residents walked the streets without panic but with a peace in their expressions that seemed incongruous with the snow and wind of the Northern Territory, as if accustomed to the order and warmth of this place.

The castle of the Red Tide Territory loomed in front of him.

It was not as opulent as the family's southern mansion, nor did it have high towers or flying eaves, but its robust and solid construction was nonetheless impressive.

The castle gates slowly opened, and a faint warmth poured over him.

His heart trembled.

A fortress in the Northern Territory being able to achieve such room temperature?

Walking into the main hall, he felt his clothes stir; he sensed no cold, only a startling warmth.

The floor was covered with clean planks, the walls had warm tunnels, and a gentle fragrance wafted from a brazier not far away.

A few maids in Red Tide uniforms were bustling about in an orderly manner, not panicking, and even had the energy to nod and smile at him.

"No wonder even the Governor remembers him."

He finally realized that what he was facing was no longer a piece of family dregs, but a ruler who could truly create order and bring hope to the Northern Territory.

As he was examining the details of the hall, he heard gentle footsteps ahead.

Willis raised his head.

The person wore a simple dark suit and walked steadily, neither fast nor slow.

He saw the familiar yet unfamiliar face, eyes clear, expression calm, but accompanied by an undeniable solemnity and steadiness.

A stark contrast to the silent, always downcast little brother he remembered.

"Willis." Louis spoke, his voice calm and deep, "Welcome to Red Tide Territory."

Willis paused for a moment, then straightened his back and nodded slightly.

Louis was also watching him.

His gaze calm, but in his mind rapidly flipping through the fragmented information he had.

Willis Calvin, son of a household maid, from the periphery, always outside the core of power.

Steady and pragmatic, he made a mark in the military exams through self-study and hard work, one of the few in the family who built a foundation on his own merit.

This little information, but the Willis standing before him now had undergone a change hard to ignore from the details in his memory.

That face still held familiar contours, but there was a weariness in his brows, clearly having arrived after a long journey.

Louis squinted slightly.

It seemed he came prepared this time.

As for his intentions... that would depend on the conversation to follow.

Willis bowed his head in salute, with a courteous yet slightly reserved smile: "Long time no see, Louis... or rather, I should call you 'Lord Governor' now."

Then, almost inadvertently, his tone carried a tinge of emotion: "Red Tide Territory is truly an admirable place. Along my journey, among all the Northern Territories I've seen, none, big or small, compare to here. You've achieved more than anyone else."

As the conversation shifted, his voice lowered, carrying a bit of tentativeness: "The truth is, I came this time to seek a favor from you.

I am now considered a Pioneer Lord in the Northern Territory. My land is on the fringe of Snow Peak County, which, in the end, is still under your jurisdiction."

Willis raised his eyes slightly, his expression complex, pausing as though choosing his words carefully.

Then his tone softened: "I won't hide it from you, Louis, my territory... is terribly barren, the surrounding environment harsh, and both materials and manpower are scarce. It's the beginning phase now, with many difficulties...

Can you lend a hand at this critical moment, to help stabilize the initial situation? Be it resource allocation or any other support, I would be immensely grateful."

His words sounded humble, showing the helplessness and restraint of a Northern Lord forced to bow before reality.

Louis raised an eyebrow slightly, a little surprised.

Willis' attitude was much more low-key than he had expected, without a hint of provocation or pretended strength.

This made him quietly breathe a sigh of relief.

At least today wasn't for trouble.

He chuckled, his tone also easing: "Willis, no need to be so formal, what 'seeking a favor'—we're family, of course, I'll help with such matters."

He paused, his eyes becoming serious: "Your territory is just starting, it's understandably tough.

I'll arrange for craftsmen and teams to come over these days to help you set up the basics; let me know anything specific you need."

"Really... thank you, Louis." Willis visibly relaxed, the defenses on his face melting away, and a long-lost sense of relaxation and gratitude appeared in his eyes, "I owe you one."

"No need for so many formalities," Louis waved his hand, a smile at the corner of his mouth, "It's tough for everyone, and you building up a land is also helping me."

He stood up, patting Willis on the shoulder: "Do well, once you're stable over there, I'll come visit personally."

Willis nodded vigorously, his voice deep: "Alright, for sure!"

In the time that followed, the two chatted about some childhood family stories.

Though few, those shared memories eased the tense atmosphere somewhat.

"Do you remember when we sneaked to ride horses in the backyard and got caught by the old groom?" Willis shook his head with a smile, with a hint of self-mockery, "We were so naive, thinking hiding behind the firewood pile would keep us from being found."

Louis also chuckled: "I remember, you fell hard that day, but I was the one who got scolded in the end."

The two shared a glance, their laughter carrying a hint of complexity, not quite intimate, but at least there was a sense of long-missed familiarity.

As dusk fell, Willis originally intended to return the same night.

Louis said it naturally: "No need to rush, stay over tonight for a hot meal and leave tomorrow."

Willis hesitated for a moment, then nodded: "I'll take you up on that."

The atmosphere at the dinner table was much more relaxed than before, though not entirely heartfelt, at least without the previous barriers.

Looking at this brother he hadn't interacted much with in a long time, Louis surprisingly felt a touch of warmth in his heart.

After dinner, he leaned back against his chair, squinting slightly, and a thought suddenly crossed his mind.

With new lords like Willis arriving one after another, perhaps... it's a good time to hold a meeting.

Gather all these pioneers in Snow Peak County to formally establish his authority as Prefect?

His eyes lit up slightly, his fingers gently tapping on the table, and he began to calculate in his mind.