

Winter 161

Chapter 161: New Knight Reserves

The warm spring sun scattered like shards of gold over the Knight Training Square at the center of Red Tide Territory.

In the middle of the square stood a temporary platform, reinforced with oak and black iron nails, in still silence.

On the platform, Louis wore a cloak of red and black, standing as straight as a lance.

Behind him stood eight young boys and girls, clad in full armor, with solemn expressions.

Their backs were straight, and a longsword hung at their waists.

These were the eight who passed last year's Blood Stone trial.

A year has passed, and now they are all Apprentice Knights.

The most outstanding naturally was Weir, who had broken through to become a Mid-tier Official Knight.

He stood at the forefront, the sunlight illuminating his stern side profile, while the Red Tide Emblem on his armored chest glowed brilliantly.

Below the platform in the square, over seventy young boys and girls stood densely packed.

Their faces, marked by the shadows of malnutrition, were immature and thin, yet filled with excitement, agitation, and indescribable longing.

They all came from six subsidiary territories under Red Tide Territory, holders of knight blood certified by the Blood Stone, who fate occasionally favored.

But they knew better than anyone, if not for the presence of the Lord on the platform, they would not stand here today.

They were but children of slaves, craftsmen, and refugees, one of the "dead fish" that were to die in hunger and war.

Before the last winter of plunder arrived, their homes were long ruined by war, parents bent over picking firewood in the cold wind, arguing and pleading for food in the snowy night.

Many brothers and sisters disappeared into winter without leaving a name.

But Lord Louis appeared.

He sent relief food, brought soup pots and tents, letting them survive in the ruins, sent people to supervise, settling them one by one.

He pulled them and their parents out of the mud, placed the seed of hope in their hands, and said, "Take this and live."

He also used the Blood Testing Stone to draw their blood, finding possibilities beyond fate for them.

Among these children was a small, thin girl standing at the front of the line.

Her name was Mia, from White Stone Village, once destroyed by war, the daughter of the carpenter Ian.

She was not supposed to live.

Last year, she was near death due to a high fever, shivering in the night wind.

It was a Red Tide Knight sent by Louis who carried her into the camp, a physician staying up all night by the fire to reduce her fever and cold.

Then an epidemic broke out and her father fell ill too.

If not for Lord Louis risking his life to hunt a Fire-backed Turtle and personally directing the development of steam therapy, her father Ian would have turned to ashes long ago.

Louis not only saved them but also prevented her from becoming an orphan.

Now Mia can eat three meals a day and play with other children in the sunlight.

All of this was granted by the youth standing on the platform.

When she stood here and looked up at the platform, it was not just ordinary respect.

It was a reverence bordering on faith.

"I want to become strong," she once secretly told her father, "I want to protect you, just like Lord Louis."

Her father Ian was reluctant to let her participate in the knight trials, fearing the hardship, the distance from home, and her falling sick again.

But when he saw the determination in his daughter's eyes, he simply said softly, "Go."

Now these children stand on the legendary land of Red Tide.

Their eyes, like being pulled by a magnet, clung tightly to Louis's handsome face.

He was as solemn as a Divine Being's sculpture, yet more real than any hero in legendary stories.

In their eyes, at this moment, Louis was the Sun.

And they were like subterraneans seeing the Sun for the first time.

The light was too dazzling, but they couldn't look away.

They were restless, whispering softly to each other.

Some secretly wiped away tears from the corners of their eyes, a mix of the relief of survival and gratitude towards their benefactor.

Others bit their lips tightly, as if fearing that if they relaxed, they would be driven from this land of dreams.

No one wanted to return to the past nor lose this opportunity.

Louis's gaze slowly scanned the square, passing over those pale yet fervent faces, worn by wind and snow.

The next moment, he raised his right hand and waved it lightly.

The entire square fell silent in an instant.

Louis spoke, "Each of you is chosen by heaven. In your blood is the mark of those qualified to step onto the knight's battlefield."

No complex words were used, but each word struck like a hammer on their hearts.

The youths below the platform were stunned.

They opened their eyes wide in disbelief, as if confirming whether the words were meant for them.

Ignoring their expressions, Louis continued, "Many among you will fall, give up, or get lost. But some will truly become Red Tide Knights."

He said, raising his right hand, "A year ago, eight people passed the trial."

With a wave of his hand, eight youths walked out from behind the platform.

They marched forward in unison, armor clanging melodiously.

This made the children below the platform instinctively straighten their spines.

They were the same age as the children below, not tall in stature, yet a sense of pressure slowly approached.

The most prominent was Weir at the front, already a Mid-tier Official Knight.

His stance was as straight as a spear ready to thrust, and though he said nothing, many youngsters in the audience instinctively swallowed their saliva.

His face was stern, with both hands behind his back, and his gaze was fixed, like an ice sculpture.

But if you got close, you'd see his ears a little red, and his eyes barely able to hide his excitement.

That's right, he was thrilled, thrilled beyond measure.

After all, it was the first time in his life that "Lord Louis personally called his name," and he stood at the very front.

He was enduring it with great difficulty.

But outsiders couldn't tell; he was still the genius knight he always was.

Louis's voice rang out once more, louder and more powerful than before: "They were once like you. Youthful, bewildered, even fearful. But now they are the sharp sword that guards this land!"

His voice broke through the silent snow like a trumpet: "And you can as well!"

As soon as he finished speaking, the square exploded.

The children were instantly ignited.

Applause, cheers, and excited shouts rose one after another.

"Ahhh! I also want to become a knight!"

"If it's me, I can do it! I can stand there too!"

"Lord Louis, I won't let you down!"

Many youngsters blushed on the spot, clenching their fists tightly, their faces flushed red, almost jumping with excitement.

At that moment, they believed: Their destiny could truly change.

And on the high platform, the wind lifted Louis's cloak.

He just looked at them calmly, as if to say: "Then prove it to me."

Then a man clad in gray iron heavy armor, draped in the Red Tide Knight's cloak, stepped onto the platform.

His footsteps struck the hearts of the youngsters, each step heavy and firm.

His face was stern, muscles tight like rock, and the gray iron shoulder guard engraved with weathered battle scars silently told the story of the blood and fire he had gone through.

He was none other than Barnes, head instructor of the Red Tide Reserves.

He was originally the apprentice knight instructor of the Calvin Clan, but had to follow Louis to the Northern Territory because he offended someone.

Having him as the head instructor of the Red Tide Reserves was more than fitting.

Barnes stood firm, scanning the crowd in the square, his gaze as cold and piercing as an icicle.

He said in a deep voice: "I won't be gentle with you; this place is a prelude to the battlefield. Crybabies should go back, those who can't take it can leave now."

His words carried an intangible pressure.

A few young children turned pale, their necks instinctively shrinking, and some even trembled slightly.

But not one person stepped back.

They stood there, pale-faced yet stubborn like grass bent but unbroken by the wind and snow.

Some had lips bitten white, some lowered their heads, clenching their fists tightly.

They thought of their parents, their ruined village, and the time they lay on a sickbed, burning with fever, barely clinging to life...

They thought of who had dragged them out of hell to stand here today.

It was the lord standing on the high platform, radiant like the sun—Louis.

This grace could not be squandered, and this opportunity must not be missed.

Louis, seeing this, smiled contentedly.

He looked at those youthful faces and silently thought: "Now, I lack neither money nor resources... so long as I can cultivate even ten Official Knights, it's all worth it."

He knew well that what truly determined the outcome of future battlefields was never the cold weapons or the thickness of the walls, but the number of knights.

It was those capable of wielding Fighting Energy, facing enemies with extraordinary power.

To cope with future unrest, hidden crises, and even larger scale wars that might ignite, he needed more knights of his own.

At times, he thought of directly recruiting Official Knights.

But reality was harsh.

Those born into orthodoxy, already at the official level, were almost all life-long loyalists cultivated from childhood by the nobility.

No matter what the price, they wouldn't easily "change their allegiance."

"That's not a loyalty that money can buy," Louis knew all too well.

Yet he hadn't given up; as long as there were masterless, war-torn vagrant knights, he was still willing to offer a high price to recruit the best fighters among them.

Anyway, now he lacked no money, since the Demon Marrow Ore was like a money-printing machine when opened.

He could barely consider himself a "mine boss" now.

Of course, the ones he could truly trust were always the knights he personally cultivated.

So he had already devised his next plan in his mind:

Each time a new batch of refugees and slaves were incorporated into Red Tide Territory, organize a Blood Stone testing to detect children with knight potential.

Set up temporary knight academies to provide food, lodging, and cultivation for children from afar;

Leverage the Daily Intelligence System to secretly target and excavate those "hidden seeds."

In fact, among these children, three or four had already shown qualities of Extraordinary Knights, and Louis had quietly noted their names, preparing for special training.

Although no talent for Peak Knights had been discovered yet, except for Weir...

But he believed that day wouldn't be far away.

These young ones who never backed down would be the cornerstone of future "Red Tide Knights."

Chapter 162: Two Different Territories

The north wind blew from the direction of the Cold Mist River, sweeping past the temporary line of wooden stakes outside the camp, sending a chill down one's spine.

Pal Calvin stood on a snow-covered rocky hill, clad in a silver-trimmed cloak, his expression stern.

He gazed into the distance, at the iron mine still buried under snow, where a prosperous mining town should have risen.

But reality was far from his original blueprint.

The permafrost underfoot remained as hard as iron, the tents had been torn by the gale three times, the firewood piles long since burned out, and at night even charcoal had to be burned sparingly.

Two days ago, a craftsman froze to death at night due to lack of fuel, a smile still on his face as if he'd seen his grandmother.

Of course, the worst was the hunt a month ago.

That night, the silence of the snow forest south of the camp was torn by a low growl.

Several warhorses neighed and bolted, and the sentry on duty could only shout "Something's coming!" before being ripped into a mist of blood.

Pal donned his armor and personally led a team to pursue it. He didn't give it much thought at the time, assuming it was simply a common Snow Wolf King from the Northern Territory, until a shadow wrapped in cold breath swiftly swept over the Snow Ridge as he entered the forest.

"Quick, form up!" he shouted, but that thing was faster than the wind.

The snow under the forest was torn into ravines by its movements, some soldiers were directly swept aside by its tail, crashing into dead trees, their bodies shattered.

Torchlight flickered in the gale, illuminating half of the magical beast's face, revealing it to be an adult "Split-tooth Snow Lizard."

It shouldn't have appeared in spring, nor in such a densely populated area.

But it did appear, and it was exceptionally cunning.

Pal ordered an encirclement, personally charging forward to slash with a sword, swinging red Fighting Energy, but only managed to cut off a side scale, the beast roared in anger and leapt.

Its tail whipped away two warriors, diving into an icy ravine and disappearing in an instant.

Though his knights were numerous and powerful, the magical beast was simply too fast.

The entire chase lasted less than a quarter of an hour, by the time they relit the torches, bodies lay scattered in the bloodied snow, the air filled with the metallic scent of blood like charred coal.

Twenty-seven dead, three severely injured, and five horses broke their necks crashing into rock walls in their flight.

Pal was silent for a long time.

He stood by that icy ravine, staring in the direction the lizard beast had fled, his eyes bloodshot.

"Just a lizard... and it could tear my knights to such a state?"

That night, after returning to the camp, he didn't return to his tent but sat alone by the fire pit until dawn, repeatedly rubbing the split-tooth scale in his hand all night.

Until dawn, he hadn't closed his eyes.

Returning to reality, Pal tightened his grip on the parchment manuscript in his hand, the wind causing it to rustle, pulling him out of his memories.

He furrowed his brow and carefully tucked the manuscript back inside his cloak.

That was a letter he wrote to Duke Calvin.

Certainly not a report on their predicament, but a victory dispatch of "Cold Mist Territory is already taking shape, only a little more supply is needed to further the agenda."

"A mere bit of cold wind can't block my, Pal Calvin's, ambitions?" he scoffed, "It's just the Northern Territory after all."

A steward rushed up the hill, panting, a look of panic on his face: "Your Highness! The south side of the camp has been attacked by magical beasts again... we lost three horses and a sack of flour."

Pal's eye twitched slightly, then he nodded slowly: "Is that so? That's because they were negligent in their guard duty. It's not a problem."

"But the beast came up from beneath the ice gorge, the camp walls didn't hold at all."

"It's not a problem." He interrupted, his voice colder than the wind, "It shows the terrain is complex, I chose this place because it has enough 'variation.' Variation means potential."

The steward lowered his head with a strange expression and left silently, leaving Pal alone atop the rocky hill.

He looked at the rows of slanted tents in the camp, some not yet erected before being lifted by the wind, like corpses sprawled on the ground.

The Cold Mist River, which was supposed to thaw, remained frozen.

Along with it, his dream of a "trade hub" was frozen outside of spring.

"When my second brother sends the supplies... it'll be different." He murmured to himself as if to confirm it, or perhaps to console himself.

But deep inside, a shadow of that man inevitably emerged—Louis Calvin.

"Hmph, he just had good luck," Pal swung his arm, shaking off the snow, "but I am the one truly pioneering the Northern Territory."

He kept telling himself this, over and over.

Yet, each time the wind and snow attacked at night, the beasts roared, and the tents shook.

He wrapped himself in his cloak, shrinking by the fire pit, and the chill called "reality" quietly crawled into his heart.

Perhaps the Northern Territory is a bit more challenging than I imagined.

"No, it's not my problem." He repeated softly.

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The early spring melt, with the lingering snow still crusted with frost in the depths of the pine forest, but sunlight already reached the central square of Willis's fief.

Unlike Pal's "ambitious yet barren" permafrost, Willis's territory was entirely different.

It was a piece of neatly compacted land, surrounded by newly erected fences and semi-earth-sheltered houses, roofs covered with gray wooden tiles, smoke gently rising.

"Morning, Lord!" A burly craftsman carrying firewood wiped his forehead and grinned at Willis.

"Mm, keep up the good work, don't forget to check the water barrels at the border post again by evening," Willis nodded, his tone gentle.

Who would have thought, just half a month ago, he was standing in the snow, bewildered, not knowing which layer of "permafrost" to dig from.

He had brought family officials and craftsmen, and some supplies.

But if we rely solely on those...

Now, we probably don't know where to start. Still arguing about the thickness of the wooden beams, or quarrelling over which piece of land the tent should be pitched on.

But now not only is the foundation of the main house established.

It adopts the Red Tide Territory's common semi-underground collective structure, with the foundation sunk, walls covered in mud, and the top covered with soil, making it warm in winter and cool in summer, and extremely energy efficient.

The collective dining hall and sentry posts have also been erected, and even a few short pines brought from Red Tide Territory have been planted on the edge of the small "square."

The children will chase around beneath, their laughter especially clear in the crisp mornings when the ice and snow have not yet fully melted.

He knows better than anyone that these changes were brought about by the aid sent by his younger brother Louis.

Twenty craftsmen, nearly every one of them able to shoulder their own responsibilities; three medical personnel stationed regularly, solving the troubles of the accompanying elderly and weak;

Ten logistics officers managing all affairs more orderly than the family estate;

The young clerk dispatched from Red Tide Territory, acting like half a teacher, explaining the Red Tide Organization Manual page by page, teaching him every item hand by hand from the civil regulations, ration allocation to patrol schedule until he understood.

He keeps all this assistance in his heart.

As night deepens, the camp returns to tranquility.

Inside the main house, the brazier is slightly warm, illuminating a letter on the desk that is yet to be sealed with a warm glow.

Willis sits at the wooden desk personally built by Red Tide craftsmen, the tip of his pen pausing on the paper, before finally dipping down once more after a while.

He originally thought this letter was to be sent to his father.

In the draft, he carefully considered many flattering words: how the terrain is exceptionally advantageous, how the planning is orderly, how the people are initially safe and without worries.

But when he actually got to writing, he found that what he most wanted to write was another letter.

To his brother, that familiar stranger.

"What is this aid for?" Willis repeatedly asked himself.

But now, sitting in the warm house, listening to the laughter of children outside the camp, he suddenly understood that this question was not important at all.

No matter the motive, Louis truly gave him the strength to continue living.

It was not charity.

But skill, judgment, coordination, the vision and courage a true noble should possess.

"A noble truly worthy of respect."

This is how he described Louis in the letter to his father.

But the letter to his brother was more personal. It did not contain many flowery phrases, only a sincere line at the end:

"I cannot repay your kindness for now. But please believe, one day I will repay it, whether in my name or in the name of the territory."

Willis gently blew the ink dry, sealed the envelope, and placed it in the supply cart heading for Red Tide Territory the following day.

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In the main castle of Red Tide Territory at night, Louis sat at his desk, flipping through a heavy preparedness map, with a stack of newly delivered documents piled beside him.

The charcoal in the fireplace crackled, illuminating his profile with an even colder sharpness.

"This letter is from Lord Willis." Sif handed over a letter.

Louis nodded slightly, his expression unchanged as he received the letter, but only his fingertips paused for a moment.

He picked up a small knife from the side and slit open the seal.

It was a very short letter, not about family, not about achievements, only about one thing:

Gratitude.

He read very slowly, carefully weighing each word, as if searching for the emotions Willis felt when writing this passage between the lines.

The writing wasn't gorgeous, even somewhat clumsy as a young noble might be, but the subtle sincerity within was not lost on him.

"Indeed..." he murmured softly, "I was not wrong."

Louis's gaze fell on the final sentence, "One day I will repay."

A trace of a smile gently spread across his brows and eyes.

It was not relief, nor joy, but the tranquil satisfaction of a chess player seeing a key piece fall into place.

Willis Calvin should be a good lord, and also someone who knows gratitude.

That was enough.

To him, this letter was not merely emotional affirmation, but a validation of the achievements of his threefold strategy:

First, politically, Willis's rapid stabilization marked the first successful export of the "Pro-Red Tide Faction".

In the future, should there be a prefectural meeting, there will be an additional ally with actual "governance results" in Snow Peak County, not just his solitary advocacy.

Second, militarily, Willis's territory is located at the outer rim of the north side of Snow Peak, by the river valley passage, a natural defense node.

With the formation of the camp now, it is equivalent to quietly planting a "wedge" in the buffer zone between the north and the Snow Swearers.

Should conflict arise again in the Northern Territory in the future, it can serve as a supply relay, alert post, or even the first node of a retreat corridor.

Third, institutionally, through the means of support, he subtly exported Red Tide Territory's construction template: from semi-underground collective housing to Simplified Civil Regulations, from resource coordination to account book registration.

All the aid was actually a complete exercise and trial replication of the Red Tide governance system.

Should it be necessary to promote the governance model elsewhere in the future, it would be the best reputation.

Chapter 163: The Power Structure of Snow Peak County

Bradley the steward gently pushed open the door, holding a stack of documents and a map in his hand, with a hint of caution on his face.

He walked to Louis's desk, bowed his head respectfully and said: "Sir, these are the current materials of all nobles in Snow Peak County."

He carefully spread out the documents, placing them in front of Louis.

Louis reached out to pick up the documents, glanced at them, and then looked at the map, his fingertips sliding lightly over it.

On the map, the territories of Snow Peak County were marked with precision, different colors and symbols representing the divisions of each noble's land.

Louis's gaze was calm, he glanced over it and nodded: "It seems the nobles have mostly gathered here."

Steward Bradley softly echoed: "Yes, sir. Now the noble collective in Snow Peak County.

Includes the newly inherited original Northern Territory nobles and Pioneer Nobles from the South. Most of the nobles have already arrived in Snow Peak County."

Louis slightly furrowed his brow, his eyes scanning the names of nobles listed in the materials, pondering the political dynamics among them.

To convene the Prefect's meeting, he needed to fully understand these nobles' materials.

While flipping through the documents, Louis asked: "Then tell me, which ones are worth paying attention to?"

Bradley paused, then began speaking: "Well, first is Baron Yorn Harvey.

Baron Yorn comes from the Southern Harvey Family, although the family's foundation isn't very deep, his father is an important new noble in the Emperor's presence, possessing considerable power and wealth.

With his father's support, Baron Yorn managed to smoothly become a Pioneer Noble in the Northern Territory and survive here.

Yorn's territory is located in the southwest of Snow Peak County, near the Glacial Canyon.

Although the land is barren and the climate extreme, Yorn gradually stabilized the local economy by relying on advanced water management technology and small-scale sheep raising brought from his family.

Although initially not showing strong governance ability, within a year he gradually found his footing by relying on his family's resources and connections.

Among the nobles in the Northern Territory, he has already started to show prominence."

"Although his territory develops relatively slowly, his cooperative relationship with you remains solid." Bradley succinctly summed up.

Louis listened to Bradley's words and silently nodded.

Although Yorn is somewhat lacking in ability, often appearing clumsy and eager for success, he has never doubted this person's loyalty.

Whether during training in the Imperial Capital, or now in the Northern Territory, Yorn has always been the one who stands by me during a crisis.

"He is a trustworthy friend." Louis murmured gently.

Bradley nodded slightly, and then went on to introduce another noble familiar to Louis.

His tone revealed a hint of admiration, "Next is your brother, Baron Willis.

Although he is not very prominent within the Calvin Clan, he managed to find his footing in the Northern Territory with his own efforts and your support.

His territory is near the edge of Snow Peak County, near the Cyan Rock Rift, a region with rugged terrain, serving as a natural defense line.

Although resources are relatively barren, there are water sources near the glacier and abundant forest resources surrounding it.

It can be said that his entire camp construction is almost entirely based on experiences from Red Tide Territory. And he learned quickly, knowing well how to maximize these valuable resources and stabilize public sentiment.

Moreover, Lord Willis is more forward-looking than we imagined, he has already started to enhance the defense fortifications in the territory to ensure it can become an important part of your strategic layout in the future.

And it can be said he is completely aligned with your camp.

No matter what happens in the future, Master Willis will be a competent ally of yours in Snow Peak County and even the Northern Territory."

Louis nodded, evidently quite agreeable with Bradley's assessment.

If Willis can take root and continue to grow in the Northern Territory, he will undoubtedly become an important force within my camp, possibly even having the potential to become the foremost general.

Besides the above two who are entirely in Louis's camp, for the others this point is uncertain.

"The Southern Nobles remaining include two relatively significant ones."

Bradley continued: "The first is Joseph Kadari, the sixth son of the Kadari Family.

He has always been on the fringes of the family, although he is quite ambitious, he feels pressure due to the lack of real power."

He paused briefly, seemingly pondering his words.

"Therefore Joseph, unlike his father or brothers, cannot comfortably enjoy the family's wealth and power, and he's been eagerly seeking breakthroughs to gain more rights.

In recent years he has tried to gain a firm footing in the family through marriage and political alliances, but has not been successful.

This time he volunteered to come to the Northern Territory, probably seeing more potential here, especially the strategic position of his territory near Qingyu Ridge.

If he can control that area, in the future, it will be crucial for the Empire's pathway to eliminate the Snow Swearer."

Louis slightly furrowed his brow, Bradley continued to supplement: "He is a typical ambitionist, eloquent, and skilled at diplomacy.

But it cannot be ignored that his motivation isn't simply for his own power, but because he sees this barren land as a strategic stepping stone for acquiring longer-term benefits."

Bradley added: "Joseph's territory is close to Qingyu Ridge, a geographical position of great strategic significance.

We need to pay attention to his underlying motives, as he may want to gain further resources and military support through cooperation with us. This is a double-edged sword, and we must handle it cautiously."

Chapter 164: The Power Structure of Snow Peak County (Part 2)

Louis nodded, and after a moment of contemplation, said, "His ambition is quite evident, but if it can be used effectively, it might become an important part of our Northern Territory defenses.

We just need to ensure that we maintain dominance at the intersection of interests, preventing him from becoming excessively inflated."

Bradley nodded and continued with the next introduction: "The second is Edward Noether, the second son of the Nott Clan, closely affiliated with the Royal Knight Order.

Though young, his strength has already reached the level of an Extraordinary Knight, albeit without much military merit."

Bradley paused slightly, his tone becoming more cautious: "It's rumored that Edward is inherently quite timid; although he appears brave, he often lacks decisiveness and judgment when facing real challenges.

To temper his will, the Patriarch Nott sent him to the Northern Territory, hoping to force his growth through the fires of war. When the 20-year pioneering period ends, he is likely to return and inherit the family."

After hearing Bradley's introduction, Louis remained silent for a moment, contemplating how to exploit Edward's weak nature to his advantage.

Moreover, his background and his father's intentions could offer substantial potential value.

Bradley continued, "There are also some minor nobles from the South, whose backgrounds are not illustrious and whose strength is relatively weak."

He concisely summarized, "Firstly, there is Thomas Calwen..."

Bradley then briefly recited a string of names, all from minor southern nobility.

In the end, he concluded, "The inclusion of these minor nobles poses no threat to us and their resources are limited, making them not much help at present.

Perhaps they can play a small role on certain occasions, but we should not hold great expectations."

Louis nodded, pondering for a moment, "Although these minor nobles have little influence, they can serve as feudatory supporters.

If used wisely, they could also act as supplementary players in some situations."

Bradley went on, "Next are the heirs of some of the original Northern Territory old nobility.

Due to the Snow Peak County battle and political purges, these families' statuses have significantly declined.

Many of the mainline members of these families were either killed in battle or purged, so they mostly pose little threat.

He collected his thoughts briefly, then continued, "For instance, the Villa Baron Clan, whose former patriarch and his first, second, and third sons all died in battle, with even their bodies not recovered.

This large-scale disruption forced the inheritance to be transferred to collateral lines, and originally lower-status collateral members have been pushed into positions of inheritance.

Take the Grant Clan, whose new heir is a daughter who married outside the family; she has inherited the title but completely lacks rulership abilities.

She relies on the support of other families, even appearing somewhat feeble..."

Bradley's voice was steady: "These heirs, though nominally holding noble titles, actually possess no substantial power.

Their rule is more dependent on family lineage than personal ability.

Lord Louis, you must be wary of their potential threat, as they may become obstacles to Northern Territory stability or pose a challenge to you with external support."

Louis remained silent for a moment, gazing toward the distance as if pondering the situation of these new and old nobles Bradley had mentioned.

"Though these old nobility have decayed to such an extent," he murmured, a hint of calm thought in his eyes, "we cannot ignore their existence entirely.

After all, excluding Snow Peak County, most of the Northern Territory still belongs to these families.

They continue to control traditional territories and resources, with even intricate familial relationships intertwining among some families.

Even if they seem to hold no real power now, the influence of their bloodlines and the resources of their families are still cards in their hand.

If we underestimate these families too much, we might pay the price in future conflicts."

He pondered for a while, finally smiling faintly, "In this complex situation, we must not only consider their current strength but also the potential latent power behind them.

To maintain stability in Snow Peak County, we must first ensure the loyalty of these families or at least convert them into our allies."

After Bradley's concise introduction of the various aspects of Snow Peak County, Louis quietly sat down, picked up a pen from the table, and began sketching on paper.

He had initially thought the situation in Snow Peak County was straightforward enough that, as Prefect, he should be able to control everything with ease.

After all, only he currently holds dominance in Snow Peak County, with a considerable backing of power.

However, as Bradley's detailed introduction unfolded, Louis couldn't help but furrow his brow.

The originally simple situation had suddenly become complicated.

The arrival of two Pioneer Nobles from the South, Joseph Kadari and Edward Noether, brought significant pressure.

Although their current strength does not yet match his, the families behind them are formidable, not part of the Eight Great Clans, but newly prominent under the Emperor in recent years.

"The situation seems more troublesome than I anticipated; I must employ some tactics," he muttered to himself, continuing to draft his plans on paper.

Their arrival would bring great volatility to the dynamics in the Northern Territory.

Louis turned to Bradley, "I want to host a banquet, centered on my Prefect position and the future planning of Snow Peak County."

Upon hearing this, Bradley did not frown but instead showed a slight sense of agreement.

Louis's decisions are usually not simple, and holding a banquet at this time is evidently to establish his rule as Prefect, ensuring everyone's place is clear and power is effectively distributed.

"I understand, Lord Governor," Bradley responded, "I will immediately begin preparations for the banquet and the invitations. I'll send out invitations to the nobles one by one, ensuring every one receives it."

After Bradley left, Louis leaned back in his chair, his gaze deeply set on the map before him.

In his mind, the situation in the Northern Territory resembled a complex chessboard, with his plans gradually taking shape.

The situation in Snow Peak County was more complex than he had imagined.

Those former old noble families, though mostly decimated after the war, still held significant influence.

Especially those heirs on the fringe, who, while superficially compliant, were hiding underlying currents, with certain families even stockpiling strength, waiting to rebel.

Meanwhile, the Pioneer Nobles from the South, such as Joseph Kadari and Edward Noether, have ambitions and strength that cannot be underestimated.

Louis pondered for a moment, his gaze scanning the map on the table, revealing calm determination, "If the entire Snow Peak County can align on the same side, only then does this winter hold a glimmer of hope."

He knew the Northern Territory's defenses needed restructuring from within outwards, as relying solely on one person's power was not enough to tackle the imminent threats.

And this banquet was not merely to assert his position as Prefect to the nobles.

More so, it was to unify everyone's strength to face the impending crisis.

He had already decided that the primary aim of the banquet was to establish his authority.

From those minor nobles, Louis didn't expect much contribution.

If they could perceive the power and future hope he represented during the banquet, that would be sufficient.

For those with strong backgrounds, such as the Kadari Family and the Nott Clan, he needed more intricate strategies.

The upcoming banquet would be a stage to test his wisdom and strategy.

"No matter what, my capabilities must be felt by everyone," he murmured, with a hint of a cold smile.

He picked up the pen from the table and began marking the map.

The situation in the Northern Territory was severe, but he was prepared.

Following the banquet, a new beginning was bound to come.

Chapter 165: Vital Intelligence Before the Prefect Conference

It's another ordinary morning.

The cold wind outside the window carries a mist, but inside the room, it's warm and cozy, like some sort of relaxing sleeping pill.

Louis woke up early, not because the chill disturbed him, but out of habit.

Ever since he traveled to this world, each day felt like a climber stepping on a rope, unable to relax or stop.

He turned over and glanced at the sleeping girl beside him.

Silver hair cascading down, gentle eyebrows and eyes, the once cold Sif slept like a little defenseless fox, slightly frowning as though caught in a nightmare.

He quietly pulled over the blanket beside him, carefully covering her, and tucked the corner into her shoulder.

"Mm..." Sif murmured lightly at the corner of her lips, her body curling slightly, but she did not wake up.

Louis chuckled softly, sitting up quietly.

Only seven days left until the prefect meeting he personally set up.

A collective meeting to determine power, also a feast of inevitable power struggles.

In recent days, the system seems to have sensed the approach of this game, sending daily intelligence related to the "Snow Peak Nobles."

But most are household trivialities and insignificant secrets.

Whose steward eloped with the cook, whose wine was stolen, who drank a few more glasses at the banquet...

Although they can be considered "insider information," for Louis, they are far from reaching the threshold of "strategic value."

Can we have something substantial today, useless system.

So he sat on the bed, lightly waved his hand: "Come on!"

As always, the semi-transparent light screen silently unfolded in front of him, the fonts glowing with icy blue light, scrolling from top to bottom:

[Daily Intelligence Update Completed]

[1: Joseph has a secret agreement with the Silver Plate Guild, one of the Jade Federation's seven major guilds, selling Kadri family information in exchange for long-term material support.]

[2: The first batch of materials from the Silver Plate Guild will pass through the northern canyon of the Red Tide Territory half a night later.]

[3: Baron Grant is currently facing a bankruptcy crisis, seeking favors from new forces.]

[4: Edward was once provoked by Joseph, being told he "lacks courage to vie for power," hence falling into inner turmoil and anxiety.]

"Holy crap, system daddy!" Louis almost jumped up in excitement upon seeing the intelligence.

Even Sif beside him slightly turned over, her eyelashes fluttering.

"... What happened?" Her voice was hoarse and groggy, her eyes not even open.

"Nothing, continue sleeping." Louis lowered his voice.

Sif turned over, sinking back into deep sleep.

Meanwhile, Louis's eyes had already regained their composure as he slowly raised his head, looking at the still flickering light screen.

Joseph has a secret agreement with the Silver Plate Guild, one of the Jade Federation's seven major guilds, selling Kadri family information in exchange for long-term material support.

His breath slightly halted, staring at that line of text twice, then a third time.

"Is he crazy..." he murmured, his tone filled with uncontrollable shock.

Louis had thought Joseph was just an ambitious young noble.

Good at forming alliances, testing and inciting, with ambitions for power, but not daring enough to be reckless.

But now it seems, he might have underestimated his boldness and overestimated his rationality.

To actually dare collude with the Jade Federation?!

And the Silver Plate Guild!

This isn't ordinary border smuggling, nor gray trades, but signing a secret agreement with one of the federation's seven major guilds!

The Silver Plate Guild is one of the true power cores of the Jade Federation, a giant force capable of influencing wars and controlling politics!

And the Kadri family...

Their territory is in the southwest, closest to the federation, serving as a barrier and strategic buffer between the Empire and the Federation.

Selling their information to the Silver Plate Guild is akin to opening the gate of the Empire!

"This is not just collusion, it's treason..." he whispered, though his eyes shone brighter and brighter.

Even in the corrupt circle of great nobles, such an act could instantly make someone the target of everyone.

Is this his method?

Selling border noble information in exchange for the federation's long-term material support?

Indeed brilliant, if discreet enough, it could truly yield massive resources without a hitch.

Fortune favors the bold, what audacity.

But the more exciting thing is the next piece of intelligence.

The first batch of materials from the Silver Plate Guild will pass through the northern canyon of the Red Tide Territory half a night later.

"Hahaha." The laughter was suppressed, yet couldn't conceal the joy, "Thanks, this time you sent me a godsend lightning strike!"

He was initially worried Joseph was as sly as a snake, that he'd need to treat each step like defusing a bomb carefully.

But this combination of intelligence is like the enemy himself tying his own rope, saying: "Come on."

The key is not suspicion, but solid evidence, with both the transport route and timing provided!

"Caught red-handed, a godsend opportunity!"

"I don't even need to act!" Louis's eyes shone brightly with excitement, "As long as I have someone watch the northern canyon tonight, wait for the convoy to arrive, directly check the goods, arrest people, file a case... Joseph's political life and life itself will be directly announced as terminated."

"As for how big a disturbance this case can stir... that's not my concern anymore."

He's responsible only for igniting the blast.

The remaining fire, leave it to those governors, judicial court, and the Emperor to worry about.

Louis restrained his exhilaration and continued scanning the third piece of intelligence.

[3: Baron Grant is currently facing a bankruptcy crisis, seeking favors from new forces. His daughter, who married outside, inherits the title, lacking governance ability, weak and helpless, could become an unstable factor.]

Chapter 166: Vital Intelligence Before the Prefect Conference_2

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow.

As expected, the Baroness finally couldn't hold on any longer.

A daughter returning from afar to inherit the territory, with no governing experience?

This is akin to building a paper bridge in the snowstorm of the Northern Territory.

"Weak, helpless, and in need of assistance..." Louis gently stroked his chin, a slight smile forming on his lips.

This type of nobility is most suited for a "gentle takeover."

No need for troops, no need for threats, just a bit of grain support, a batch of Red Tide civil servants, and a paper of "cooperative governance" commission...

And she would willingly relinquish control, perhaps even grateful.

He murmured to himself, a flash of calm calculation in his eyes: "It seems this remnant territory of the old nobility will soon become an extension of the Red Tide."

The last piece of intelligence appeared much "lighter" compared to the previous three.

[4: Edward was taunted by Joseph as "lacking guts to vie for power," thus, he fell into inner turmoil and anxiety.]

Louis finished reading this line with a faint smile.

"Tsk, still the same as always." He leaned back against his chair, his gaze deepening.

This piece of news, though lacking clear direction, was enough to confirm two judgments.

Firstly, Joseph is indeed plotting, unabashedly trying to turn and win over others.

Secondly, Edward... rather than an enemy, he seems more like a pawn being used.

"Weak, conceited, indecisive, and easily provoked... Bradley wasn't wrong at all." Louis muttered softly, "He even needs a push from others to decide whether to make a move."

Someone like this, if successfully won over, might be useful.

But if left unchecked, waiting to be controlled by others, that would certainly be troublesome.

"It seems it's also time for Edward to make a choice." He closed the intelligence panel, a gleam in his eyes, "Whether to become an ally or a discard, it's up to him."

Waving the intelligence panel aside, Louis exhaled deeply, swiftly drafting several sets of response strategies in his mind.

But first, cultivate; dual cultivation of Fighting Energy and Magic Power is progressing quite swiftly now.

About four hours later, the daily routine of cultivation was finished, but it was only nine o'clock.

Changing his clothes, Louis first detoured into the spacious office on the east side of the outer courtyard.

Bradley was at the table, cross-referencing several lists, the old butler as impeccably dressed and focused as ever.

Seeing Louis enter, he reported to him: "The Gale Birds have sent out twenty-one messages. Only three confirmations from the nobility are yet to return, but there should be no surprises according to the schedule."

"And the banquet venue arrangements?" Louis walked over to him, glancing at the blueprints and lists on the table.

"I've seen to your requirements; everything's set." Bradley paused, pushing a sheet over, "This is the seating draft, you can check it."

Louis cast a glance, an eyebrow slightly raising: "Joseph's seat is too close to mine, move it a bit farther."

"Understood." Although Bradley didn't understand why, he still agreed to it.

"Not bad. Keep advancing at this pace." Louis nodded slightly and turned to leave, "I'll head to the Knight Camp now, and we'll confirm the details of the ingredients and ceremonies in the afternoon."

Then Louis went straight to the Knight Camp, finding Lambert in training.

"I need you to gather thirty Red Tide Iron Cavalry, set off immediately."

"The target?" Lambert paused, stopping his actions.

"The northern canyon." Louis's tone was light, "A guild caravan will pass through there, we want to give them a warm welcome."

Listening to the implications in Louis's words, Lambert felt a bit shocked, tentatively asking, "Do we... wear masks?"

Louis cast him a sidelong glance: "What are you talking about? This is a righteous charge!"

.....

The Northern Territory's cold winds were fierce, the Silver Plate Guild's convoy moved slowly along the canyon path at dusk.

The iron wheels crunched over the snow-covered rocky roads, making a low creaking sound.

The convoy seemed ordinary, yet it was by no means a normal merchant group.

Behind more than ten heavy carriages, under the drapery marked with the insignia of the Northern Border Commerce Association, were hidden many crates of goods.

The heavy crates contained refined gold coins, high-grade flour, cured meat blocks, and large amounts of medicinal herbs banned from smuggling by the Empire.

At the forefront of the convoy, a middle-aged man in a silver-gray robe, his hair immaculately bound, was in command of this operation.

He was none other than Kalan, a senior operative of the Silver Plate Guild.

Kalan, aged thirty-seven this year, was one of the senior operatives under the Silver Plate Guild, long active in the gray areas between the Jade Federation and the Empire's borders.

He was tasked with overseeing this critical mission.

And in the enclosed carriages at the rear, the beings curled within the cages were not slaves in the usual sense.

Though dressed in uniform coarse clothing, they were neat and clean, sitting straight, almost without any noise or commotion, creating a strangely quiet atmosphere.

These people were trained.

The Silver Plate Guild, known for its "efficiency above all," had long developed a set of cruel yet effective practices in slave cultivation.

From language commands to reflex actions, from task adaptation to psychological obedience, these slaves had been "trained" into highly utilizable tools even before departure.

Craftsmen understood how to complete customized tasks within a limited time, doctors knew how to cooperate with medications without asking an extra question, and slave managers could efficiently handle territory affairs without having any desire to show off.

Their eyes were calm and hollow, devoid of struggle, supplication, or even resentment towards enslavement.

They had been "molded" to near perfection.

Obedient, capable, skilled, and trouble-free.

These individuals were Kalan's "knocking stones" for this journey.

"All are useful and smart goods." Kalan lifted the curtain of one of the cages, looking at those numb craftsmen, doctors, and others.

"Once this batch reaches Joseph's hands, within a year they can prop up his crumbling mess, demonstrating our sincerity."

Kalan, unlike the majority who indulge in internal strife among guild members, disdained manipulating words like business brokers.

He was about action, belonging to the "even if it dirties the hands, as long as the result is achieved" type of executor.

As a core strength of the Federation, he hailed from humble beginnings, yet climbed to his current position through flawless task after flawless task.

Every mission, he personally set the lines and reeled them in, never leaving it to others.

"The first-hand information obtained from Joseph is indeed valuable." Kalan murmured, flipping through a cloth-bound notebook in his hands.

Inside, it detailed the nobility in the Southwest of the Empire, their goods demands, garrison sizes, and vulnerable points along their defenses.

These data were merely "exploratory gifts before the deal."

"The guild headquarters is very satisfied; as long as we stabilize this channel, the Silver Plate Guild has a chance to become the first Federation guild to successfully infiltrate the Southwest of the Empire." Kalan closed the notebook, his expression growing solemn.

Moreover, if Joseph could be made into a "model," future efforts to control this point could influence surrounding families, destabilizing the internal power structure of the Empire.

"This carriage of people, these goods... they aren't merchandise; they're a knocking stone, a pledge of fidelity, the first nail driven deep into the Empire's heart from the Federation.

Once the nail is in, the hammer and splitting axe can follow."

Thus, this wasn't a simple smuggling task; it was a strategic penetration potentially worthy of being etched into the Federation's history.

To avoid complications, he even abandoned major highways, choosing an extremely covert path.

The convoy only moved at dusk each day, avoiding the patrols of knights.

"Just endure a few more days." He whispered.

"Once the material handoff is complete, trust established, and connections made, the next step is the onset of devouring the entirety of the Empire's Southwest."

Yet, little did he know, his "dusk operation" was about to meet with a nighttime predator.

Chapter 167: Silver Plate Guild

Before dusk, the wind rose in the northern canyon.

Louis stood on a high ground, gazing at the narrow roadway below.

"They are indeed taking this route," he murmured.

The scouts had already tracked the daily route of the Silver Plate caravan.

Departing in the evening, avoiding the official road, taking the small paths, making their way through the canyon.

This caravan was well-hidden, but he had uncovered it in advance.

On both sides of the canyon, traps like horse pits and rock slides had long been set up, marked with extreme subtlety.

Several igniting torches were concealed at strategic heights, ready to be used as a signal for gathering anytime.

The pathways on both ends were equipped with movable blocking obstacles. Once activated, it would trap the prey like a turtle in a jar.

Under the instructions, Lambert assembled thirty Red Tide Elite Iron Cavalry and fifty Official Knights, all battle-hardened.

"Try to keep them alive," was Louis's request.

To lure the enemy into the ambush, he specially arranged for two knights to patrol incidentally along the caravan's route.

Forcing the opponent to enter the canyon early and speed up, stepping into the trap.

The trap was set.

Just waiting for the prey to walk into it themselves, fortunately, he didn't have to wait long.

As the last carriage slowly entered the heart of the canyon, the signal knights who had been lying in ambush on both sides simultaneously raised their torches.

"Ignite—!"

The flame burst forth in the wind, and the ambushed knights immediately activated the trap upon receiving the signal.

In an instant, the canyon's openings on both ends closed like a giant beast's jaws.

Boom!

Falling boulders mingled with dust-raising wooden barriers crashed down, locking the entire caravan within the valley!

The horse trap at the front suddenly collapsed, with the leading horses whinnying in surprise, leaping into the air.

Hooves stumbled, carriage shafts tilted, several carriages overturned on the ground, rolling logs shattered the carriage canopies, wailing and curses rose in unison!

"Charge!" Lambert led the charge, the vanguard of the Red Tide Iron Cavalry surging in like a raging tide!

Fighting energy focused at the tip of his sword, scorching red like a fiery long serpent, trailing a beam of light several feet long, illuminating the entire canyon!

Even before the blade reached, the cold was already biting.

A few sharp cries tore through the silence, the caravan guard captain had just raised the command flag, yet before issuing the command.

He was slashed off his horse by a sweeping fighting energy strike, smashing into the adjacent carriage board, blood splattering three feet!

The escorts near the prisoner cart hurriedly turned back, unable to draw their blades before being tackled and subdued by knights descending from above, quickly collapsing.

"Successful segmentation!" Lambert's eyes, sharp as blades, scanned the battlefield, then lifted his sword, pointing to the high slope, "Elite forces, advance!"

However, in the center of the caravan, ten sharp fighting energies suddenly rose up like cold, stinging needles from the ground.

It was a silver light, solid as cold iron, sharp as a spear that pierces the sky!

"They're here..." his gaze darkened.

Ten gray-armored Silver Plate guards flashed out like phantoms, silently stepping into the battle.

Silver fighting energy wrapped around them, like snowflakes in the wind, akin to blades cutting through the air.

They were few in number, but each held formidable combat strength, surpassing even the Elite Knights.

These were powerhouses meticulously trained by the guild, born to escort under the radar.

Though the Red Tide Knights held a numerical advantage, their formation was instantly torn apart.

Amidst the swirling fighting energy storm, red and silver intersected, like two angry tides clashing, intensifying the battle!

"Don't let them break through!" Lambert roared, red fighting energy surged from his feet, leaping up the rock wall, and his sword barred the path like a meteor in an instant!

A direct confrontation!

His sword aimed straight at a leading Silver Plate guard, their fighting energies clashed in the air, creating distorted halos and thunderous booms!

Despite having numerical superiority, the Red Tide Iron Cavalry were momentarily thwarted by these ten gray-armored powerhouses.

Some took on three opponents, yet remained steadfast, their movements swift as shadows.

Suddenly, "clicks" sounded from the slopes on both sides—rock slides were activated!

Rocks and rolling logs poured down like rain, disrupting the rhythm of the Silver Plate powerhouses.

In a brief moment of vulnerability, Lambert delivered a piercing strike, fast as lightning!

Boom!

He descended like a meteor, forcibly knocking a Silver Plate guard dozens of yards away, shattering a carriage!

Another powerhouse attempted to leverage himself towards the rear of the convoy, intending to rush out of the chaos, but was intercepted mid-air by Lambert, cutting him off.

"Go back."

With that, his red sword entwined like a serpent, fighting energy infused, delivering a throat-locking strike, knocking the opponent unconscious to the ground.

And at the very end, Kalan was digging through an oilcloth bundle, his face frantic.

He pulled out several tightly folded intelligence documents, lit a torch, and raised it high, intending to burn them.

"Too late."

With a hoarse whisper, Lambert suddenly appeared, delivering an elbow strike to his back, sending Kalan flying several meters with the torch, rolling into the mud!

The torch fell, sparks scattered, but failed to ignite the documents.

Kalan attempted to struggle and turn over, but a longsword was already at his throat.

Lambert's expression was stern, the firelight dancing in his eyes.

"It's over."

The ambush concluded there.

The dust hadn't settled, and the canyon was a scene of devastation.

Yet Kalan, pinned firmly to the ground, maintained a smile at the corner of his mouth.

Draped in a half-open gray robe, his face smeared with dirt and sparks, he still assessed the situation with seasoned eyes.

"Hmm... I think you may have misunderstood something." He coughed once, trying to make his voice sound more like that of an innocent merchant, "I'm just a junior steward from the Ice Flame Commerce Association, here to transport some herbs..." he trailed off as a young but undeniable voice came from the edge of the canyon: "You're from the Silver Plate Guild, aren't you."

Kalan's expression froze, and he suddenly looked up.

The sound of footsteps came from afar, as a young man draped in a dark red cloak slowly walked down the slope, the sound of his boots on the gravel seeming to pound into one's heart.

He did not draw his sword, nor did he release any fighting energy, and he even looked somewhat too young.

Yet the air in the entire canyon seemed to drop by several degrees instantly.

Kalan's eyelids twitched violently, and his heart was filled with warning signs.

How could it be? How does he know we are...

This team's departure had not the slightest hint of a leak!

The route was randomly decided, and even the cargo was disguised!

Unless... it was Joseph who did something?

"Who are you?" Kalan gritted his teeth, still trying to buy time, "Do you know the responsibility that comes with the word 'Silver Plate'? You're just a... bandit; let me go and my commerce association can give you a generous ransom."

"The ledger," Louis spoke, unmoved.

Lambert immediately took out the thick book wrapped in oilcloth from his pouch and handed it over.

Louis flipped through a few pages, his fingers paused, his eyes slightly tightened.

"Southwest border garrison daily grain conversion table," "Southeast line knight deployment progress: third batch expected arrival mid-June"...

Every line of handwriting was meticulous and neat, obviously written personally by a noble.

The most critical page, the endorsement was clearly visible.

"Joseph Kadari."

This was the leverage he had left for the Silver Plate Guild to show his sincerity.

Yet he didn't expect it to fall into Louis's hands now.

Louis also didn't expect Joseph to be so bold.

He closed the ledger, his fingers lightly tapping on the cover, as if weighing something.

"You said you were an ordinary merchant."

Kalan forced a smile: "Perhaps... it is Mr. Kadari who is truly the problem.

You see, I'm just a middleman, responsible for transportation, without even having seen the cargo. If you really want to catch someone, you should go after him."

Louis' footsteps slowly approached, stopping in front of Kalan, looking down at him.

He didn't speak.

Just a slight curve of the mouth, revealing a teasing smile.

It was an expression of a superior, disdaining to argue, with no intention to debate, just quietly waiting for you to finish, and then decide your fate.

Kalan's smile immediately froze, cold sweat sliding down his neck.

He finally realized that the young man in front of him was not the kind of ordinary officer he could get by with words.

He didn't even know the other's background, but instinct told him that this was not someone easy to mess with.

Kalan's expression darkened, changing his tone, deep yet solemn: "Who exactly are you?"

Louis did not answer.

Just lowered his eyes to look at him, like a hunter watching the prey's final struggle.

Kalan's eyes flickered, weighing for a moment, suddenly revealing a trace of confident smile: "I understand. You're not a soldier here to die; you're a smart person."

He spat out a mouthful of bloody froth, whispering: "If you let me go now, I can offer terms. Real terms."

"The Silver Plate Guild never treats those who know the times harshly. As long as you're willing..." he raised his head, his voice slow and enticing:

"You can become a partner of Silver Plate. We have resources, channels, and backing from Federation members.

Even some vacant seats in the Noble Council or a strip of land, you will have everything you want.

Gold coins, slaves, land, monopoly rights, we can arrange it all.

You want women? A whole group is not a problem. You want territory? I can speak for you regarding control over Federation lands.

As long as you nod, no one will pursue this ambush."

Kalan looked at Louis, trying to find a trace of wavering in those eyes.

And Louis laughed out loud.

Not in sarcasm, not in anger, but genuinely amused, as if he had heard some absurd joke.

The dignified son of Duke Calvin, the future son-in-law of the Lord of the North, the full authority of the Calvin Family in the Northern Territory, the prefect of Snow Peak County, the sun of Red Tide Territory...

Would be swayed by these things?

Louis looked at those eyes desperately trying to manipulate the situation, his tone gentle yet contemptuous: "You think... I'm after these things?"

He turned to Lambert: "Personally escort him, along with all prisoners and evidence, to Frost Halberd City to be adjudicated by the Duke; I'm sure they have professionals there who can pry open his mouth."

Lambert knelt on one knee, replying solemnly: "As you command."

Kalan's face turned ashen in an instant, as if his throat was being choked. He struggled to shout loudly: "Wait! You don't understand! You have no idea what you're getting into! The Silver Plate Guild isn't something you can..."

Slap!

Lambert gave a swift backhand, rendering him unable to speak, with blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

He struggled to keep his eyes open, but his spirit had already collapsed.

As he was being carried away, he still twisted futilely, yet got no response in return.

The slaves in the iron cages were also being escorted away, including some underaged girls not yet "complete."

Their eyes were hollow, having lost their sense of self, but now, those cold numbers and transaction vouchers would become solid evidence.

Tens of thousands of gold coins, sealed wooden boxes bearing the Silver Plate insignia, and Joseph Kadari's handwritten letter.

They really put in a considerable effort.

Louis stood in the center of the canyon, watching the escort team gradually fade into the distance.

He did not pocket those fortunes, although they were extremely tempting.

Such a thing, if he took it, would instead leave leverage against him.

It would be better to hand it all over to Duke Edmund, who would naturally know how to leverage it for an aggressive move.

This case, at the level of the Empire, was already an earth-shattering affair.

A noble colluding with the enemy and betraying the country, an entire smuggling penetration chain exposed, even involving the core business associations of the Federation.

And he was the one who broke this entire case open.

Chapter 168: Immense Ambition

The underground stone chamber of Frost Spear Castle, damp, cold, mingled with the smell of scorching iron and blood, like some twisted purgatory.

Kalan was hung upside down on a torture pillar, his entire body stained with blood and filth, the once sturdy and upright figure now reduced to a spasming, twitching skeleton tormented by torture.

The torturer pressed a glowing red iron needle into the nerve junctions of his calf, instantly eliciting a tooth-grinding wail.

He screamed in collapse, his voice like the whimper of a trapped beast, repeating what he had already said: "It's Joseph! It's Joseph Kadari! He was the one who approached us first... he willingly offered the maps!

He provided the defense maps of the Southwest of the Empire! Even the changing of the guard times at the Empire's southwestern watchtowers, it was all written by him..."

Duke Edmund stood silently before the torture rack, flipping through a ledger and notebook from the Silver Plate Guild.

The pages were slightly curled due to blood stains, but the handwriting was clear, even Joseph's signature was scrawled yet genuine.

He stared fixedly at those words, lost in thought.

Kalan gasped heavily: "I...I was just a middleman...transport, allocation, sending people and materials as needed... Joseph was the one... he wanted to become the 'bridgehead' of the Federation...

He said he was marginalized by the family, wanted to use the Empire's turmoil to make a name for himself... I beg you, I beg you to let me die... give me a swift end..."

The eyes that were once piercingly cold had now become dull and yellow, bloodshot, with sobs and whimpers tangled in his throat, indistinguishable between pleading or cursing.

"Why don't you just kill me..." he trembled in a low voice, "you Imperials are more poisonous than the Federation..."

Edmund said nothing, only slowly turned to the next page of the notebook.

There, a list of noble demands was outlined in strange abbreviations:

"Giant Sun Potion×12, suitable aged female slaves (13-17)×18, West Ridge Private Salt, Demon Marrow, Soft Gold..."

He slowly closed the notebook, taking a deep breath, fury roiling in his chest, yet his face was surprisingly calm.

"It seems to be true, Joseph Kadari... you are truly audacious."

He turned towards the Silver-faced Torturer: "Seal the throat, stop the bleeding, keep him alive. I want him to live, to spill every word Joseph spoke, every map he drew."

"Yes."

Kalan collapsed in a whimper, like a hunting dog whose bones were broken beyond repair, still forced to bite out a comrade's name in despair.

And Edmund's silhouette had already stepped into the long corridor at the end of the stone chamber, his voice low, as if it were both a command and a verdict:

"Prepare the Emperor's secret letter! If this is true, it is not just treason! It's a grave sin that shakes the foundations of the Empire's Southwest!"

Duke Edmund returned to his office, silently picked up a wine glass, the liquid gently swirled inside, reflecting a dim light.

He took a sip, the aroma of the wine slightly easing the anger in his heart.

Those sharp grey eyes pondered for a moment, slowly exhaling, his gaze filled with indescribable fury.

"This madman..." he murmured, his voice low, tinged with disbelief and indignation.

This young man not only engaged in colluding with the Federation, infiltrating military transactions, but even dared to blatantly document these crimes in black and white records?

He understood why it was done, merely to show loyalty, but the audacity was simply shocking.

Duke Edmund lightly stroked the ledger's cover, his fingertips cool, yet a blazing fire ignited in his heart.

And when thinking of the other young man who brought back these pieces of evidence...

Duke Edmund's lips curled slightly, eyes sparkling with deep light, his gaze fixed on the desktop, his tone carrying a hint of pride:

"Louis... truly worthy of my selection, to uncover such a major case, with no piece of evidence missing, no prisoners overlooked, even those piles of gold not a single coin embezzled, all secured and sent over."

He picked up the wine glass, took a gentle sip, the liquid leaving a faint sweet aroma in his mouth, his gaze crossing past the candle flame, as if penetrating the vast Northern Territory, setting on the distant Red Tide Territory.

"Steady, decisive, neat... and knowing what can and cannot be moved." he muttered to himself, the smile on his face rich, even with a sense of having made a fortunate catch, "Once this one grows its wings, the future is unimaginable, lucky I acted first."

And after finishing the wine, his gaze became sharp once again, as if breaking through all gentle façades, his presence suddenly heavy.

"As for Joseph..." he snapped the ledger shut with a fierce look in his eyes, "Come."

The attendant immediately pushed open the door and entered, bowing head low, face respectful, seeming to sense the Duke's anger.

"Head to Red Tide Territory immediately and capture Joseph Kadari, allow no accidents." the Duke commanded coldly.

"This case is too significant for us to trial directly, send it straight to the Imperial Capital, let His Majesty make the decision."

He paused, his tone carrying a cold sneer and deep contempt: "Let His Majesty also see whose mess this Southwest filth swept from the Northern Territory truly belongs to."

.....

A man stood at the peak of the Northern Territory mountains, gazing out at the sky.

His name was Joseph Kadari, the sixth son of the Kaladi Clan, a distinguished Imperial family.

Not a waste, nor was he ever the unnoticed fringe character.

From a young age, he displayed extraordinary intelligence and courage, at nineteen, he was assigned to assist in managing the Southern Territory's finances and taxes, even temporarily holding the trade agency rights for the family in five provinces.

In the many tiered, strictly hierarchical system of the Kaladi Clan, he was someone truly trusted and empowered.

Yet he knew that all of this ultimately did not belong to him.

In this iron-clad family tradition, titles, noble ranks, the position of patriarch, from the moment of his birth were never his to claim.

"I am the sixth son, born only to be used, not to inherit.

All glory eventually falls to that eldest brother who sits in the high seat, empty in appearance.

And even if I conquer the entire Empire for him, I would only be a useful steward."

So he took the Northern Territory Expansion Order, a hefty sum of support funds, and just two hundred knights, and voluntarily set out for the Northern Territory.

In the land near Qingyu Ridge, desolate, distant, and with a biting cold wind.

But a strategic location, a place where one can achieve great deeds.

He chose this place like a gambler wagering his last chip.

As long as he won, he could leap up and force the entire Kadari family to look at him squarely again.

However, the wind and snow in the Northern Territory were harsher than he imagined.

Before winter set in, the ground was frozen as hard as iron, making ox carts unable to move, the night wind outside the tents was like a knife, even breathing carried the taste of blood.

Those "skilled artisans" he brought from the South, half fell ill within three days, the rest were either running away or crying while warming by the fire.

Joseph stood in the wind and snow, cloaked in a gray cape, yet there wasn't a trace of retreat in his eyes.

He had anticipated the difficulties long ago.

The Northern Territory isn't a greenhouse, with its many factions, harsh conditions, and wildness, it's not a chess game that can be easily controlled.

But he wasn't a reckless person; he never intended to bet it all on one throw and had made multiple preparations.

A week before departure, he had a secret meeting with a representative of the Silver Plate Guild.

That was in the backyard of a family spice shop, quite concealed.

A lightly drawn map was slowly unfolded, but what was circled were the positions of the Empire's southwestern defensive fortresses, the frequency of troop movements, and detailed routes of supply lines.

These intel naturally brought substantial rewards in return.

And he had long prepared for the worst-case scenario.

If the situation spiraled out of control, he could directly cross the border into the Federation, where someone would assist him.

Over in the Federation, he already had a new territory, a new identity, and two Jade high-ranking officials willing to shelter him.

They promised that once he successfully stirred up turmoil in the Southwest, they would recommend him to enter the Federation's Noble Council, gaining permanent protection as a "foreign elite."

Of course, he had no intention of succumbing to the rival country just like that.

With his intelligence and the strong support of the Silver Plate Guild, he believed he could make a name for himself in the Northern Territory of the Ironblood Empire.

Going to the Federation was his last resort, a fallback when all else was beyond redemption.

He still hoped to rely on his ability and opportunities to establish a foothold in the Northern Territory, becoming a person of power and influence, rather than willingly being a puppet of a rival country.

All of this he had planned for a long time, with such meticulous layout that it would astonish any old fox.

Of course, this isn't betrayal; it's foresight, he always told himself:

"If the Empire doesn't see my value, then I'll let others recognize it."

He even felt... those nobles who laughed at him for being "out of favor" would one day regret it.

When he stood above the Imperial Council, overlooking them.

It was at this moment, a snow-white invitation was handed to him. The wax seal was still wet, the paper smooth and new.

His personal guard carefully held the letter and said, "Louis, the Prefect of Snow Peak County, invites you to attend a banquet in the Red Tide Territory."

Joseph raised an eyebrow, the corners of his eyes slowly lifting.

"So it's come, the new official must always set a few fires."

He opened the letter, his gaze sweeping over the flowing, elegant script, yet his mouth curled into a disdainful smile.

"Does he think this banquet is a stage under his control? What a pity, I've been waiting for this moment for a long time."

He had already drawn in the pioneer nobles from the South's new nobility and some Northern border nobles eager for advancement.

These people, like him, were full of contempt for the so-called "young prefect with wartime merits."

In their eyes, Louis was merely a noble who rose to power by luck, skilled in warfare but ignorant of state affairs.

They believed Louis couldn't possibly control people's hearts. As long as they could quietly erode his base, hollow out his power...

Soon he could become the true master of this territory.

Of course, all this relied on the strong support of the Silver Plate Guild.

By their timeline, their resources should be arriving soon.

An eagle without claws and fangs is just a pretty bird.

Joseph fastened his cloak, his cape billowing in the wind, a cold glint flickering in his eyes.

"Louis, I will let you see with your own eyes! Even your position is nothing more than a stepping stone for me."

Chapter 169: Joseph's Scheme

The inauguration banquet for Louis Calvin as prefect and the first council of Snow Peak County will be held in Red Tide Territory.

As soon as the news spread, nobles from all directions began their journeys early, heading to this newly established noble's fief.

They each had their own calculations, aiming to gain more benefits for themselves.

Last year, this region of Snow Peak County had just finished a war, followed by the long winter of the Northern Territory...

Logically, everything should have been a mess.

But as soon as they set foot in Red Tide Territory, everyone fell into collective silence.

This was way beyond expectations, right?

They initially imagined a scene of ruined houses and smoke, but what lay before them were neat stone roads, streets so clean they reflected people's images, even the trees planted by the roadside were neatly aligned.

"Did we... take the wrong road?" a southern baron mumbled while holding onto his saddle.

"Are you kidding me? If this is post-war wasteland, then wouldn't our own fief be a primeval forest?"

Another Northern lord spoke with gritted teeth, though his eyes couldn't help but wander to the orderly villages.

Farmers were plowing fields, children with books ran into simple schools, and a notice board in the residential area stated "This month's grain distribution standard."

The nobles were completely silent; their fiefs were still worried about the lack of grain in spring, yet this place had already started distributing food?

Occasionally, patrolling cavalry passed by, with bright armor and tidy steps, clearly knights with fighting energy, not a hastily assembled army. The sound of their capes fluttering gave off a sense of oppression just by standing there.

It didn't feel like they were welcoming the nobles but rather showcasing their strength.

Some clicked their tongues, some frowned, and more secretly gritted their teeth.

Red Tide Territory, not like a newly risen war zone fief, but more like... a well-functioning, strictly disciplined "new lord regime."

Especially the heirs of a few long-established Northern lords, who barely spoke a word along the way.

It wasn't that they didn't want to speak, but they couldn't find the words.

A year or two ago, some of them had been here and saw what this place looked like with their own eyes.

This was once land scorched by war, villages destroyed, even tree bark peeled off by natives to eat—a wasteland.

There was simply no nobility willing to put in the effort to develop it.

But now?

Walking on smooth, clean roads, they could even see newly repaired irrigation canals, with guards standing watch by the granaries.

Even the expressions on the commoners' faces were not that kind of "just grateful to be alive" numbness, but rather... an indescribable calm.

"This doesn't make sense..." a baron murmured softly, "Even if there was money, it's impossible to turn the Northern Territory into this within such a short time."

But regardless of belief, the facts were before their eyes.

Originally, they thought as local Northern lords, it was only natural they understood this land better than that youth who rose through battle achievements.

Yet at this moment, that sense of superiority began to crumble.

It truly felt like cavemen witnessing high-rise buildings, electric lights, and running water for the first time.

"This is... a complete transformation." A baron looked on with a complex expression.

And what shamed them the most was that this was all done by Louis, an "outsider."

.....

Joseph Kadari sat in a carriage, watching the scenery of Red Tide Territory flash by outside the window, his eyes deepened.

No matter where he looked, this place did not resemble a land that had endured war; instead, it resembled a core fief that had been stable for years.

He slowly furrowed his brows, "This Louis seems stronger than I imagined."

He didn't want to admit it, but it was the truth.

The order and prosperity of this land had been his own goal for a "Three-Year Plan."

A nineteen-year-old youth achieved it in one year?

He was silent for a moment, then lightly smiled, though his tone carried a self-consoling confidence:

"Managing a fief well is just the entry point. To be a noble, one needs influence, connections, a strategic perspective... to understand how to play politics."

No matter how well he does, a 'boy of battle achievements' who doesn't understand interacting with the nobility will eventually be isolated and hollowed out."

Raised between the great lords of the Southwest, he was well-aware of the warm water boiling frog approach in political maneuvering.

Power is never seized outright but gradually stripped away.

Joseph soon put on a gentle and sincere smile, beginning the phase of quietly persuading the nobles, formally entering the "under-the-table operation" phase.

He proposed multiple "Commandery Princess suggestions," each sounding righteous and dignified.

He even made others feel as though he was lightening Louis's burden.

"The governance of the province should embody the spirit of co-rule by the nobility. I suggest establishing the 'Noble Council of Snow Peak County,' where we jointly discuss major issues for more stability."

"Military and political nominations should also be cautious; important positions should be nominated by the council and approved by the prefect, for double checks to prevent excessive concentration of power."

"With Snow Peak County bordering the Snow Swearers' territory, the risk of war is ever-present. It would be better to set up an 'emergency grain storage center' managed by us nobles to share the prefect's pressure."

On the surface, he was sharing responsibilities, collectively seeking stability.

In reality, every step was intended to undermine Louis's power.

Entrusting personnel, food, and administration to the council, eventually turning the young prefect into a powerless 'mascot.'

As for the resource bait?

Joseph was well-prepared.

The Silver Plate Guild had already agreed to several batches of support with grain and gold coins...

He had plenty to 'make a cake.'

Joseph's lips curled slightly, his eyes full of calculation: "Once this group takes the first bite, they won't be willing to let go."

Chapter 170: Joseph's Scheme (Part 2)

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Before the ball officially began, Joseph took the initiative to approach Miss Grant.

She stood in a corner of the garden, like a forgotten ornament.

Her dress was somewhat outdated, cinched at the waist but unable to conceal her corpulent figure. Her plump fingers nervously twirled a handkerchief, and her eyes avoided the scrutinizing gaze of Joseph.

She hated such occasions.

She knew she was too fat, too timid, too lacking in the "noble demeanor."

She understood that the only reason she was invited was because the "name of the Grant Family" still held weight, not because of her personally.

"Miss Grant, it's a pleasure to meet you." Joseph approached with a smile.

His tone was as gentle and polite as ever, as if she were the protagonist of the ball.

She was briefly stunned, responding in a low voice, somewhat flattered: "...Hello."

No one had ever spoken to her so proactively, at least not with respect.

"You are the rightful heir of the Grant Clan, an indispensable bloodline among the old nobility of the Northern Territory." Joseph spoke without a hint of emotion.

His tone carried a touch of pity, "But do these people really respect you?"

Her chubby cheeks quivered slightly, wanting to retort, but unable to find the words.

His few light words pierced like needles into the softest, most fragile part of her heart.

"They don't invite you, don't drink with you, don't mention your title... Even though you sit here, it's as if you don't exist."

Grant lowered her head, her lips pressed into a thin line, her eyes somewhat moist.

She had endured many years.

Her father's death, the family's decline, her marriage off, and the rejection by her husband's family.

Even after returning to the Northern Territory this time, she was never truly "accepted."

She wanted to revive her family, but she knew nothing, and no one taught her.

"But I'm not like them." Joseph's voice caressed her ear like the gentle night breeze, "I know the glory of the Grant Clan, and I understand the status you deserve."

Her heart beat violently.

The long-lost feeling of being taken seriously crashed against her defenses like a tide.

Joseph leaned in slightly, whispering like sharing a secret, "Join us, and the Noble Council will offer you a seat. Not as a decoration, but as a real voter with a voice."

Grant was somewhat stunned, looking up at him with a trace of anticipation for the first time.

Yet she hesitated, unsure if she truly belonged at that council table.

"Moreover," Joseph smiled faintly, "we are about to receive a batch of medicinal herbs, grain, spices, and rare fabrics from the family."

"When the time comes, I will prioritize letting you manage a share. It's not just wealth, but an opportunity to prove 'I am not useless.'"

"Of course, I'm not being charitable." He paused, his tone softening, "It's just... respect."

Grant tightly clutched the handkerchief, her heart turmoil-ridden.

She wasn't a fool; she knew he had motives.

But could she refuse?

All these years, she had been waiting for an opportunity.

An opportunity to stand up again, to no longer be seen as the "pitiful married-off woman."

She bit her lip, her eyes glistening with moisture, and finally nodded, shyly whispering, "Then I will... trust you this once."

Joseph displayed no triumphant emotion, merely nodding politely in thanks before turning to leave.

But inwardly, he nearly laughed out loud.

"The old nobility of the Northern Territory are nothing much," he sneered to himself. "Even if they pride themselves on their noble bloodline, as long as they're ignored for a while, a little kindness and resources can make them eternally grateful."

Grant is just the first brick. Once this corner is pried open, the defensive line of the old nobility's unity will begin to crumble, one by one."

It's with these three ploys

A promise of "you deserve respect," a seat saying "you can have status too," and a bit of tangible benefit.

Joseph almost, like an invasive siege, swayed several hesitant nobles within just two days.

Every conversation was like a strategically placed chess move advancing.

Some nobles, uneasy about their family's declining power, dared not oppose the new order, so Joseph gave them the illusion of "having influence."

Some, financially strained and unable to exploit their own territories, were promised generous quotas through "family support."

Even a few seemingly rebellious old nobles were nodding frequently at his assertion that "you are the true foundation of the Northern Territory and should not be marginalized."

But the most crucial premise for these tactics to work was the silence of Louis Calvin.

In the days leading up to the ball, Louis had scarcely shown up, nor had he proactively hosted any nobles; it was all handled by the butler, Bradley.

Joseph thought that at least he would engage in private conversations, arrange for people to build connections, even set a posture.

Yet, not even pleasantries were exchanged.

It was as if the arrival of these nobles was merely a routine "procedural meeting" he had arranged.

This made Joseph feel both annoyed and amused.

He thought his opponent was simply too weak.

"Such a person becoming a Prefect?" he sneered internally, almost rolling his eyes in disdain.

"What good is governance ability? If you don't understand how to manage hearts and minds, won't maneuver through power struggles... you are unfit to stand as Prefect."

He gazed at the peculiar castle, a thin smile on his lips.

"Do you think letting them see clean streets and orderly military bearing is enough? Naïve!"

"Nobility is not the common people; if you don't give them real power, don't afford them dignity, they will take it themselves."