

Winter 171

Chapter 171: Joseph's Scheme (3)

He felt he had already seen through this young new noble.

He was not versed in schemes, not skilled in making connections, and though he held a good position, he was destined to lose it.

Even though the banquet hadn't started, he was already certain: the outcome was decided.

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Of course, Joseph's tactics didn't work on all nobles.

Especially when he tried to persuade Yorn Harvey, it was like hitting a brick wall with his head.

He already knew that Yorn and Louis were quite close in private, but he always believed one thing: "No noble can refuse temptation."

As long as Yorn was willing to relent and help persuade Louis to "open up power," to give part of the authority to the so-called "Noble Council."

"By then, you'll be the third in command, right after me and the Lord Governor." He promised this with a tone as confident as if he could already see Yorn nodding and surrendering.

Not to mention he brought out a whole set of resources and bargaining chips: food quotas, military collaboration, and even priority access to the Southern Commerce Association's channels.

Finally, he added a meaningful remark: "With Louis holding all the power, in the end, you and I are just pawns... If he fails, we both become sacrifices."

Having said that, he poured himself a glass of wine, waiting for Yorn to hesitate, weigh his options, and be tempted.

Yorn accepted the glass, with a faintly amused expression on his face, yet his tone was relaxed and cooperative: "You make a good point, indeed, it's time to think about the future direction."

He nodded, even adding: "Louis should also relinquish some of his power and let us all share the burden, after all, we're all concerned about Snow Peak County."

Joseph smiled, his gaze becoming more assured, feeling that he had succeeded.

Of course, he didn't know that the smile on Yorn's lips was not agreement.

It was merely finding it amusing.

What Joseph just listed as resources was probably not even worth as much as a hair sent by his family steward each month.

Third in command? You're dreaming too highly of yourself.

And besides, my ability to sit here today is all thanks to my big brother, the one you call 'holding all the power.'

Six or seven years ago in the Imperial Capital, he was already covering me. I'm so used to clinging to this thigh that it's become an art form; who would give that up for a little shin that came out of nowhere and sell out their own brother?

But your manner of speaking is quite like that of the Southern Nobles.

Even though he felt extreme disdain inwardly, and was almost tempted to laugh out loud, Yorn maintained his usual composure and grace on the surface, even deliberately showing a bit of "half a beat slow" dullness.

He pretended to listen intently, occasionally showing an "Ah... so that's how it is" look.

As if genuinely intrigued by the "reforms" and "Council" system Joseph spoke of.

Then their conversation quietly shifted to another dimension.

Alcohol, women, festival balls, which noble family's daughter was having an affair with the groom, which Countess made a fool of herself after getting drunk at a banquet.

The more Joseph talked, the more relaxed he became, even patting Yorn on the shoulder, with an air of "We share a common language."

"Baron Harvey sure isn't a bookworm! I knew someone like you knows how to enjoy life." He laughed proudly, as if he had already recruited the other person under his banner.

Yorn laughed along, a bit foolishly: "Ha... I actually don't get it much, just heard a lot about it."

"No worries, I'll treat you to some Plum Wine sent by my family one day, it's said to be something even the Emperor loves."

"That would be such an honor."

When the conversation completely dwindled, Joseph checked the time, stood up, and said: "We've chatted quite a while today; I won't disturb your rest. Let's talk in detail another day."

"Hmm... I'm indeed a bit tired today." Yorn nodded in agreement.

He also showed a somewhat dazed expression, as if his mind was still on the "Plum Wine" and the "noble daughter and groom affair" incident.

Joseph left contentedly, his steps light, as if he had just won a gamble.

"It's so easy it's almost questionable; I thought Harvey would be hard to handle, but it turns out he's just average. After all, what young noble can resist the lure of power and profit?" he thought in the corridor.

Because everything had been going too smoothly for him recently, he had no doubts at all.

Yet when he walked out the door, those eyes that were just a bit puzzled now were as clear as a blade.

Yorn smiled lightly, with a hint of sarcasm in his smile, but mostly — the anticipation was dull.

"Humph, 'third in command,' really thinks he's someone of importance."

He casually adjusted his clothes, walked out of the study with light yet unshowy steps, and went to Louis' office.

"Boss, that Joseph came with ill intentions, offering me a bunch of terms... You should prepare; he might be planning quite a bit."

Louis sat by the fireplace drinking tea and only gave a faint smile after hearing the news: "Let him do as he pleases."

"Aren't you worried?"

"Worried about what? I have my preparations, don't worry." Louis' tone was as casual as talking about the weather.

Yorn blinked, seeing that Louis knew well, he said no more and fully trusted his boss's methods.

Meanwhile, Willis, being Louis' real brother, also detected something amiss without waiting for someone to rope him in.

"That Joseph... whispering to people all over the place, acting way too much."

He came to Louis with a rare tone of unease: "I suggest you keep steady; meet the necessary nobles so you won't be seen as too aloof and end up too passive."

Louis just lightly nodded: "Understood, rest assured, I have my arrangements."

Willis saw his calm demeanor and said no more, but he couldn't shake off the intuition of an approaching storm.

And Joseph, satisfied with his chessboard, was unaware that he had long been pinched by an invisible hand on the edge of the board.

Chapter 172: Clash at the Banquet

Louis's inauguration feast finally commenced amidst a cold wind.

From all over the Northern Territory, the nobility arrived one after another, examining the unusual castle while whispering to each other.

This "castle," built only in a few months, wasn't particularly attractive looking, even... somewhat ugly.

It was simply a cylindrical shape, with only some small engravings as decoration, resembling more of a makeshift military fortress built out of the snow.

But once they stepped into the banquet hall, all impressions dramatically shifted.

It was a spacious domed hall, with polished red gold stone slabs covering the floor, and flames dancing warmly in the fireplaces all around, keeping the winter night's chill at bay.

Over a dozen handmade iron chandeliers hung from the ceiling, with magic powder mixed in the lamp oil, so the light burned softly and non-intrusively, like sunlight on snow.

A thick red gold carpet stretched along the main aisle, with Red Tide Territory's red flag and the Calvin Clan's family crest banner hanging on the walls, colors stable yet noble.

Most astonishing was the warmth within the hall; outside the cold wind cut like a knife, yet inside the castle it was gentle as spring.

As the nobility removed their cloaks, they secretly marveled: "How did they achieve this here?"

Joseph stood among the crowd, slightly looking up at the ceiling, secretly observing the design of a few air vents, and glancing at the edge of the carpet, trying to figure out the layout of the heat sources. But no matter how he looked, it didn't seem like something achievable with ordinary fireplaces.

"Interesting, it seems this young Lord is really willing to spend effort." His mind spun, a hint of an unreadable smile crept up at the corner of his mouth: "When I build a castle, I'll do the same."

In the banquet hall, dishes were being brought out one after another by servants.

Golden plates and silver bowls gleamed, and the food within was dazzling with variety, featuring fine wines and meats, some even of Demon Beast Meat.

Though not any rare Demon Beast Meat, it still showed a lot of sincerity.

"Demon Beast Meat... how did they get it?" a noble murmured in surprise.

"...How much would that cost?" They ate with praise on their lips, yet internally they grew more unsettled.

For this entire feast was clearly a high-profile show of spending money, resources, and means to impress.

Yet the host, Louis, was long absent.

"This kid... so unrefined." The few elderly nobility's expressions subtly changed.

"Are we just left hanging here?"

"Ha, maybe he really thinks winning a few battles makes him a true Northern leader?"

This was precisely Joseph Kadari's opportunity.

He moved through the crowd with ease, exchanging greetings and glances, and those nobility who were originally hesitant gradually leaned towards him.

"At least he knows courtesy."

"Indeed, compared to that Prefect... Joseph here is more like nobility."

Just as the atmosphere tilted, people's thoughts began to drift.

Joseph rejoiced in his heart: "This young man is, after all, too young."

He raised his glass, ready to celebrate the first round victory in this political maneuvering.

As conversations in the room fell quiet, and eyes frequently glanced towards the host's seat.

The double doors at the end of the banquet hall silently began to open.

A gust of cold wind was blocked outside, while a figure slowly entered under the glow of warm lights.

It was a youth, standing tall, striding confidently.

His black hair hung gently, eyes calm as the night, wearing a dark formal suit, well-tailored yet unobtrusive, with metallic shoulder pieces and straps glinting subtly in the light.

He bore no superfluous expressions, his face calm and indifferent, as if the banquet was not set for him.

In this banquet hall, warm as early summer, he carried with him a trace of night wind's chill, impossible to ignore.

This was the new Prefect of Snow Peak County, Louis Calvin.

Behind him followed two armored knights, flanking him left and right.

As silent and solemn as gargoyles guarding a throne, strong-bodied and sharp-eyed, evidently no mere showpieces.

This scene quieted the entire banquet hall for a few seconds.

"So young?"

"Is that... Louis?"

"He truly has an... intimidating presence."

"Just like the officers seen on the battlefield... not the typical young lord."

Some nobility murmured, their words tinged with surprise and a hint of reluctance.

Some had assumed he was a rookie rising through military achievements but didn't expect this composed, commanding presence that involuntarily made them straighten their spines, refraining from casual chatter.

Joseph also looked at him.

His wine glass paused mid-air, eyes slightly intensified, while the smile on his lips remained, though a sense of alert sounded within him.

"Not good."

A sudden sense of crisis washed over him, an indescribable unease.

This young man, too composed, took his rightful position without much prelude.

"This kid... is not simple."

Yet Joseph forcefully suppressed his unease, secretly tightening his grip on the wine glass.

"Young is ultimately young, however poised, it's just a facade," he assured himself.

But a drop of cold sweat quietly slipped down his temples, feeling especially chilling in the warm banquet hall.

Louis slowly ascended the central platform of the banquet hall, with the two knights halting at the foot of the stairs, silently guarding, standing erect as spears.

He hadn't brought a script, nor had he prepared any elaborate speech, merely stood still, nodded subtly, and surveyed the entire hall.

His gaze fell upon each noble's face, with no provocation or appeasement, only a composed and steady eye contact, as if confirming with each of them one by one.

Chapter 173: Clash at the Banquet_2

It was as if he was saying that he had memorized their faces and knew what they were thinking at that moment.

The hall fell silent for a moment.

He spoke, his voice not loud, but clearly reaching everyone's ears:

"Thank you all for coming here despite your busy schedules. I apologize for keeping you waiting.

I just had to handle some last-minute affairs, which took up some time."

His tone was calm, without much self-explanation, yet it appeared all the more measured and tasteful, even causing several nobles who were slightly dissatisfied to nod in approval.

He cracked a joke: "I know, the castle in Red Tide Territory is not quite refined, some places even can be said to be... crude."

Some nobles below responded with dry laughter, glancing at each other awkwardly.

"But I hope tonight's banquet will allow you all to eat well and drink well."

He spread his hands, his demeanor relaxed and generous: "Demon Beast Meat, Spice Soup, Snow Eagle Wine... These are things I ordered to be prepared three months in advance. For today, for you all, should there be any neglect, please bear with us."

After Louis sat down, the banquet resumed, with music flowing softly and candlelight shining brightly. The nobles raised their glasses, and the atmosphere seemed to ease considerably for a moment.

Most people accepted his explanation for being late.

Affairs of state are indeed understandable in the Northern Territory right now.

Moreover, the grandeur of the banquet was indeed impeccable: the aroma of spices wafting through the air, the demon beast meat roasted to crisp perfection, even the wine was specially brought from the distant South.

Many nobles gradually relaxed amidst the fine wine and food, and even grew to appreciate this young Prefect.

Young in age, yet poised and gracious, not sparing any expense in hosting.

This somewhat swayed their hearts.

But there were always some who didn't come just for food and drink.

Joseph held his wine glass, a smile on his face, but his eyes grew cold as he cast a subtle glance, not needing words.

Several nobles who had been quietly eating and drinking suddenly became lively.

"Oh dear, delayed by affairs... how arduous. We have become like servants waiting for food?"

"Can't blame the Prefect, young people, being busy is good... just wonder which lady's affairs he's busy with?"

A few sarcastic remarks immediately broke the superficial harmony of the banquet.

An elderly noble near the high platform slowly put down his wine glass, his tone amused, but deliberately raised his voice: "The Prefect is so diligent, perhaps we could share some of his duties?"

"Quite right." Another middle-aged noble in a gray-blue suit agreed, "Red Tide Territory is becoming more complex, should we consider... forming a Noble Council? Taking turns to host, aiding the Prefect in relieving his burdens, wouldn't that be better?"

These words were spoken with great precision, seemingly for Louis's benefit, but in truth, every word was intended to undermine.

The scene was silent, many instinctively looked towards the high platform.

Joseph lowered his eyes, a faint and almost imperceptible smirk gracing his lips.

This was the "finishing blow" he had prepared for days.

Even before the banquet, he had arranged for these people to propose this seemingly fair "Noble Council" proposal at this moment.

He even had the details planned out, just waiting to present them publicly.

Entirely aimed at this young newly appointed Prefect; if he remained silent and yielded, it would imply weakness, and if he fought back and refused, it would imply arrogance.

No matter what, after tonight the state of "Louis holding sole power" would no longer exist.

And he, Joseph, would become the actual leader of the "Council."

He held up his wine glass, smiling lightly, waiting to see the young man caught in a dilemma, embarrassed and humiliated.

Louis, however, did not pay attention to the aggressive questioning.

Smiling, he raised his glass and said to the crowd: "Everyone, let's discuss the affairs tomorrow. Today I just want to share a drink with all of you, celebrating my official appointment as Prefect of New Snow Peak County. Eat well and drink well, no talk of business."

His attitude seemed relaxed but was interpreted by many as weak and evasive.

Several nobles exchanged glances, their faces carrying undisguised cold smiles: "Buying time? Is he just stalling for time?"

The words, though not explicit, grew sharper, even tinged with mockery.

The atmosphere in the room became increasingly tense, and Joseph couldn't hold back any longer, he spoke up, his voice not loud, yet cut like a blade: "It seems our new Prefect's understanding of governance is as shallow as his enthusiasm for banquets."

As his words fell, the table went silent.

This was not only a challenge to Louis's authority, but also a public questioning of his competence.

Joseph's lips curled slightly, a hint of unabashed satisfaction flashed in his eyes.

This move had long been arranged by him.

From the beginning of the banquet, he deliberately showed weakness, allowing others the opportunity to question.

He let those impatient nobles probe first, pressure first, heat up the situation first.

Meanwhile, he stood by, like an experienced Hunter, waiting for the prey to show weakness.

Now the prey had shown weakness.

Louis chose to evade, chose to smile and raise his glass, unwilling to confront, which amounted to an admission of weakness and incompetence.

This statement wasn't heavy-handed, but very precise.

He intentionally lowered his voice, putting on a rational but disappointed appearance, which, in turn, could resonate more with those around.

Indeed, it was clear for anyone to see, he "could have remained silent," but "for the greater good couldn't help but speak out."

Tonight he wanted everyone to understand: the new Prefect is not trustworthy, not even deserving of this power.

And the real person who should be in charge, was present at this table, someone who understands governance, dares to speak out and doesn't fear offending others.

Like him, Baron Joseph Kaladi.

Chapter 174: Clash at the Banquet (Part 3)

Louis heard this and slowly sighed, finally putting down his wine glass, and said with a helpless tone: "I originally didn't want to do this. I wanted to handle it tomorrow, let everyone have a good drink first."

Then he inexplicably laughed and looked at Joseph: "But since you're so anxious... let's do it now."

Joseph was secretly delighted, hardly able to hide the mockery on his face.

As expected, he was a young man who couldn't keep his composure and was easily provoked.

Just as he was about to respond, he saw Louis suddenly raise his hand and gently clap twice.

"Clap! Clap!"

Crisp applause echoed in the hall, and everyone was stunned, then the side doors of the banquet hall slowly opened.

Teams of knights, armored and sword-bearing, marched in in an orderly manner, with an imposing aura.

And more than twenty knights stood silently in the hall, sealing off all exits.

The hall was in an uproar, everyone looked at each other, not knowing what Louis intended.

For a moment, no one dared speak.

Joseph was taken aback.

He wanted to stand up and reprimand, but found his chair seemed sunk into the ground, with all eyes falling squarely on him.

He instinctively glanced around, suddenly alarmed.

Unnoticed, he was already surrounded by layers of cold armored knights.

"Louis... what do you want to do?" his voice began to falter.

Attempting to squeeze out a shred of authority to reproach, but the tough tone contained traces of shaky emptiness.

Louis slowly looked at him, his expression not angry, but rather so calm it was almost indifferent.

But his gaze was no longer the gentleness of before, the serene smile vanished without a trace.

"You can take him away now." Louis said indifferently.

Before Joseph could react, two knights swiftly stepped forward from left and right, cleanly and succinctly pressing his shoulders, one hand twisting his arm, the other restraining his back.

"How dare you touch me?! I'm nobility! I'm..."

His voice suddenly rose, struggling desperately to break free from the restraint, he was genuinely an Elite Knight.

Yet he was firmly restrained by an Extraordinary Knight, like a trapped beast jumping frantically, powerless.

His face started to flush, veins bulging on his forehead, eyes wild with panic mixed with screams: "You have no right to do this! You're abusing power! This is trampling on the Empire's noble code... this is...!"

He roared furiously, saliva flying, cheeks distorted, somewhat resembling a terrified fat pig squealing.

The dignified demeanor, attire, and noble etiquette he deliberately maintained, all collapsed at this moment, leaving only stark panic and annoyance.

"I'm... I'm the pioneer noble appointed by the Emperor! Daring to touch me is..."

"Shut up." The Knight Commander coldly interrupted.

He raised a hand, precisely hitting Joseph's neck artery with steady and measured force.

"Ugh ah!"

Joseph let out a strange low growl, like a whimper mixed with a wail, eyes rolling back, tongue slightly out, throat choking, instantly going limp.

Like a deflated empty flour sack, with an embarrassing sound of flesh, he collapsed onto the ground.

"Take him away."

The leading knight expressionlessly waved a hand, and two knights silently dragged Joseph out of the banquet hall.

His clothing dragged on the ground, boots overturned a wine glass, spilling the wine all over, leaving a disgraceful trace.

The previously aggressive and smug appearance was now just a mess of disheveled hair, spit-stained clothes, and limp limbs, a ridiculous sight.

The entire hall fell into dead silence.

Even the crackling of burning torches seemed starkly loud in this stillness.

No one in the banquet hall raised a glass, no one spoke, even the sound of swallowing was startlingly abrupt.

Then shock quickly spread, the nobility finally realized: this was not coincidental, nor a sudden decision.

This was clearly a scheme Louis had planned all along.

He wasn't acting impulsively, but had caught the fish, and was now elegantly closing the net.

"Did he... know all along?"

"Then all those things we said earlier..."

"It's over..."

Fear and regret surged like a tide, especially for those nobles who had just sided with Joseph, speaking harshly, their faces turned pale instantly, even their breathing became hasty.

They didn't even remember what they had just said.

Someone sweated on the forehead, quietly hiding within the crowd.

Others subtly shrank back from the edge of their chairs, like guilty schoolchildren, fearing they might be next to be called out.

The worst off was a young Baron, who intended to take the opportunity to express loyalty to Joseph, uttering some mean words to gain presence, now with legs weak, unable to control the urge to urinate, sneaking a glance downward, his face flushing red, breathing chaotic.

"Did we... choose the wrong side?"

That sentence, murmured by someone in a low voice, was like a knife silently cutting through everyone's facade.

No one dared move, no one dared meet Louis's eyes.

The seemingly gentle young man, sitting at the head with a detached demeanor, as if this "purge" was merely a post-meal stroll, casual weeding.

They finally realized that this young Prefect in a black robe, with a smiling face, wasn't a "young, easily bullied shell."

He knew better than anyone what he was doing.

Yet Louis seemed entirely unconcerned by the pallid, shattered nobles.

He didn't even spare them an extra glance, merely picked up his wine glass gently, his expression serenely nearly indifferent.

His tone unhurried, as if the previous scene was just a minor interlude during the meal: "Continue the music, continue the dance."

Thus a peculiar sense of discord pervaded the air.

On one side, music and dance, glasses clinking and crossing;

On the other, the awkward atmosphere of the just-taken noble's cries still lingering.

The absurd, oppressive atmosphere almost suffocated.

But Louis seemed oblivious, simply smiling as he lightly drank the wine in his cup, elegantly putting down the glass, as if nothing had happened.

Chapter 175: Underlying Currents Surging

"Keep the music playing, keep dancing."

As Louis spoke, the music began to play again.

The whole banquet hall turned into a bizarre theater, with everyone forcing a smile, and each sip of wine felt like swallowing seven parts poison.

No one mentioned Joseph again.

It was as if he had never appeared at this banquet, as if his shrill shout of "How dare you!" was just an illusion.

Edward was also pretending to laugh, but his eyes were unfocused, and a thin layer of cold sweat formed on his forehead.

He mechanically echoed the pleasantries around him, secretly feeling fortunate: "Thank goodness... thank goodness I didn't agree to Joseph that day."

He remembered that meeting clearly, Joseph had dragged him to discuss land rights and fiefs, confidently asserting that they should "cooperate to control the parliament's main power and sideline that idiot Louis".

He was tempted for a moment, but due to his cautious nature, he ultimately didn't nod in agreement.

At this moment, he suddenly felt as if he had dodged a guillotine hanging over his head.

But just as that sense of relief arose, it was immediately swallowed by another tumultuous emotion.

"What if Louis thought I was involved too? If I had said a few more words earlier, would it be me being taken away?"

Relief and fear entwined and tugged at his heart.

Even he couldn't tell if he wanted more to escape the eerie banquet, or the young prefect sitting at the host's seat, always with a gentle expression.

Yorn, sitting not far from him, was a completely different story.

He had long been annoyed by that pretentious, profit-driven Joseph.

Watching the man being forcibly dragged away by knights now made him gleeful, with a grin almost reaching his ears.

He laughed like a hooligan enjoying the spectacle, gulping down his drink and muttering under his breath, "Tsk tsk, he really took a solid fall this time."

While saying this, he deliberately nudged Willis lightly with his elbow, eyebrows flying: "See that? Told you he's too pretentious, too much of a poser... did he really think the boss was easy to fool? Now look, he posed his way into prison."

Willis, on the other hand, was far less relaxed.

He made no retort, his gaze crossing over the glasses, landing on the brother sitting at the head of the banquet, always smiling gently as if nothing had happened.

"Did he plan this long ago, waiting for Joseph to walk into the trap? Or was it a last-minute decision, attacking suddenly?"

Willis considered himself to have met quite a few "ruthless people".

But someone like Louis, who fused calmness, authority, and performance together seamlessly, he had never seen before.

He even wondered: just how many more hidden cards does this strange little brother have up his sleeve?

In that barely maintained melody, amidst the awkward atmosphere of forced smiles from everyone, the banquet, originally meant for celebration, finally came to an end.

As the last tune concluded, the musicians placed down their instruments almost relieved, each with sweat beading on their foreheads.

Yet none dared to leave first.

They only looked towards Louis at the head of the table, waiting for his lead.

Only when he slowly stood, waved his hand gently, and said mildly, "Alright, thank you everyone, let's call it a day,"

This "dismissal" was like releasing a tethered warhorse.

The crowd could finally move, but they dared not do so too quickly, fearing to show even a hint of fear or disrespect.

They left the banquet hall in orderly waves, their steps cautious, expressions complex, as if a single wrong step would have Louis take them away.

It was only upon returning to their temporary accommodations that they finally shed the facade of "harmony".

Small groups quietly formed in the night, gathering in twos and threes, each discussing.

Some frowned while whispering, some mumbled softly, some were simply bewildered.

"What do you think... what on earth happened?"

"What right does he have... to just take Joseph away? On what charge?"

"Is he mad?"

"But if he's mad, why does everything seem so meticulous?"

They searched like ants for an exit in the night, yet could never unravel the answer to this question:
"Why did Louis do this?"

But no one knew the truth, and no one dared to publicly ask.

They only realized a terrifying reality:

The young prefect who appeared gentle and seldom smiled, whether or not he was going mad, was far more terrifying than any of them could have imagined.

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Louis, at the center of the vortex, remained as calm as an ancient well.

Not long after the banquet ended, he summoned Willis and Yorn.

One after another, they pushed the door open, Yorn spoke excitedly the moment he entered:

"Louis, your move earlier was brilliant! I nearly burst out laughing, that self-important guy got taken away just like that!"

Willis was not so light-hearted.

He glanced complexly toward the closed door and asked softly, "Louis... aren't you afraid something might go wrong? After all, directly taking Joseph away, could there be any repercussions?"

Hearing this, Louis merely chuckled lightly: "His arrest has nothing to do with me."

"What?" The two were taken aback.

Louis lightly tapped the table, his tone unruffled: "It was an order from Duke Edmund. He's likely on the way to the Governor's Mansion now; I merely took the opportunity to establish my authority."

Yorn and Willis's eyes revealed shock.

"I didn't tell you beforehand," Louis continued, "because the intelligence was initially uncertain. But now the evidence is clear, he committed treason."

Just this afternoon, knights from the Governor's Mansion arrived in Red Tide Territory, explaining the matter to me.

I thought on a whim about using this incident to establish authority, and thanks to the cooperation of the knights, I was able to complete the act."

In the shock and doubt reflected in the two's eyes, Louis succinctly narrated the entire sequence of events:

Joseph Kadari had secretly established communication with the "Silver Plate Guild" of the Jade Federation more than half a year ago.

He provided them with confidential information from the Kaladi Clan in the Imperial Southwest Defense Zone, including guard shift times at watchtowers, consumption calculations for military provisions, and even deployment schedules for the Southeast Line Knight Team.

In exchange, he received a large amount of gold coins, medicinal materials, grain, and "technical slaves" from the Federation.

And it just so happened that I intercepted the informant heading to his territory for the Silver Plate Guild, then sent them to the Governor's Mansion, from which the full story was uncovered.

"Worse yet, the evidence includes not only detailed records of his dealings with the Silver Plate Guild but also his own signed documents."

Willis widened his eyes, while Yorn kept his mouth agape for quite some time.

A silence filled the air.

Yorn clicked his tongue softly, "No wonder he dared to act so boldly; he was aiming for something big..."

"But now," Louis gave a carefree smile, "everything he had is over, and it might even implicate his family."

Willis turned pale, muttering, "He's lost his mind..."

After discussing Joseph's situation, an awkward silence hung in the air.

Louis did not waste any more words, moved directly to the point: "Alright, for tomorrow's meeting, I plan to do something and need the cooperation of you two."

Yorn straightened up: "Of course, just tell us what you need."

Willis nodded: "No problem, we'll follow your instructions."

Louis briefly outlined each person's tasks.

Yorn was responsible for maintaining stability on the floor, appropriately expressing positions to suppress any possible unrest;

Willis would provide rationalization from perspectives of policy, efficiency, and safety, helping lay a "for the people, for the public" foundation in public opinion.

Both agreed without issue, quickly reaching a consensus with a snap.

The three then discussed handling a few key nodes in a more focused manner, soon reaching agreement.

Chapter 176: Meeting

After the nerve-wracking scene last night, the nobility almost had a sleepless night.

The next morning, they all rushed to the banquet hall of the previous day.

However, the banquet hall was completely transformed by now. The opulent draperies were long gone.

Instead, there were orderly tables and chairs, a simple setup, and the Empire's emblem hanging high, as if the air itself was imbued with solemnity and oppression.

The banquet hall had become a true "place of deliberation."

The nobles sat down according to their seats, many still anxious, recalling the scene of Joseph being taken away last night, their cold sweat not yet dry.

And this time, Louis was not late.

He arrived before everyone else, standing in the center of the venue early on with a calm and gentle expression.

He wore a well-tailored black uniform with gold trimmings, and even had the "Shield of the North" pinned on his chest.

As he surveyed the simply decorated venue devoid of excessive ornaments, he greeted each arriving noble cordially.

"Lady Grant, the violet brooch suits you well today."

Facing this slightly round-faced, always cautious middle-aged noblewoman, Louis spoke warmly, bowing slightly.

Lady Grant was startled, seemingly flattered, quickly lowering her head to hide her flustered expression, stammering in response, "Ah... thank you, Lord Governor... I... I just..."

She had initially been anxious about Louis, the scene at yesterday's banquet almost terrifying her into a sleepless night.

Today she had planned to minimize her presence, but did not expect to be addressed first.

Yet Louis merely exchanged polite greetings before moving on to the next noble.

This allowed her to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Baron Berna, the journey must have been arduous. The snow has yet to melt, and your timely arrival is commendable."

"Viscount Welun, I heard you have already begun the spring planting? The Northern Territory needs more diligent people like you."

Every word was neither servile nor overbearing, just right.

Polite, fitting, even kind.

But the more he behaved this way, the tighter it made every noble's heart.

Because they all remembered Joseph being taken from the crowd yesterday, his fate still unknown.

Therefore, many would rather Louis maintain a lofty, cold demeanor, more like a "predictable Governor."

The warmer he was now, the more terrifying it felt.

When the last noble took their seat, the clock struck precisely on cue.

Louis turned and walked leisurely to stand at the main position.

He looked down, surveying the entire assembly.

There were no extra greetings, no preludes, only a concise and powerful opening statement:

"Ladies and gentlemen, the winter snow has just receded, the spring chill unresolved. The Northern Territory is in turmoil, and the intelligence brought by the Gale Bird warns us increasingly of a confrontation with the Snow Swearer this year.

This is not only a battlefield confrontation but also a trial for the entire Snow Peak County. If we remain disunited, bickering amongst ourselves, in the end, only the enemy will benefit.

Unity is the only premise for survival."

As his words fell, the audience was taken aback before bursting into applause.

Within the applause, no one dared to openly challenge this man, nor did anyone dare to mention the name of the one taken away.

Yet seated, each noble harbored doubts about what Louis intended to do.

Some guessed he sought to take the opportunity to weaken their power;

Others suspected he wanted to further consolidate military power, unify control over knights and armaments;

Some even speculated in whispers whether new policies, never before attempted by the Empire, might be enacted, potentially altering the traditional status of the nobility...

The more cautious ones began quietly contemplating their escape routes.

As the applause subsided, Louis got straight to the point.

"Regarding Joseph, I know many of you have been speculating." His tone was steady, his gaze sweeping across the assembly.

"This matter is indeed significant. While details cannot be made public at the moment, I can tell you that he was escorted to the Northern Governor's Mansion last night under the guard of the Duke's trusted cohort."

The hall erupted into an uproar.

Many had assumed Joseph was merely detained by Louis, perhaps there might still be room for negotiation, some even feared becoming the "next one."

But hearing the words "already sent to the Governor's Mansion" stirred a deeper shock throughout the banquet hall.

"Even the Governor's Mansion is involved?"

"What crime could have invoked such measures?"

"It's not a personal vendetta? Then it must really be...?"

Voices of discussion rose and fell, many wore complex expressions, clearly realizing this was far more serious than they had imagined.

It was now that most nobles truly understood that Louis wasn't arbitrarily arresting people but dealing with an issue so grave it couldn't be concealed.

Those who had once been close to Joseph, still writing letters for aid the night before, now felt a chill down their spine.

Silently, they could only pray not to be implicated.

Louis paid no heed to the whispered speculations and exchanged glances below.

His gaze remained calm, his voice not loud but clearly reaching every ear: "I know lately, Joseph has contacted some of you."

This statement was like a dousing of cold water over the venue.

The guilty nobles immediately straightened their backs, their expressions wary, some even instinctively gripping the armrests.

Some lowered their heads, some held their breath, while others cautiously glanced at the main position.

And yet, Louis remained composed, seemingly uninterested in a thorough investigation.

He only paused slightly, then continued, "I am not a despotic ruler."

He surveyed the assembly, steadily and assuredly stating, "On the contrary, I am willing to share some of the authority."

Chapter 177: Meeting_2

He raised a piece of paper in his hand with the names of several nobles written on it, gently shaking it.

"I have decided to establish a new system—'Snow Peak Council'."

Everyone listened, holding their breath involuntarily.

"This council will consist of those among you who are prestigious, capable, and genuinely concerned about the future of Snow Peak County.

You can participate in governing by proposing policy suggestions, reporting on the actual situation of various territories, and assisting in supervising the use of resources."

This surprised many; Louis's authority had reached its peak, yet he was willing to share power.

Louis's tone shifted, his expression softened somewhat, and his tone slowed:

"I will gradually confirm the specific list of council members. But today, I can first introduce some candidates worthy of your recognition and trust."

He turned and looked at the tall young baron on one side, displaying a smile that carried encouragement:

"For example, Edward Noether."

The hall murmured with discussions, and many nobles glanced at the young man.

"Born into the battlefield family of the Nott Clan, even pioneers from the South are no less brave than the Northern Lords."

Louis's tone was firm: "And at a young age, already an Extraordinary Knight, he is a rare pillar of the nation."

Edward felt somewhat embarrassed by Louis's compliments, his face slightly flushed, standing up under the gaze of the crowd, he waved lightly to the hall, "Th-thank you, Prefect, thank you everyone."

And Louis was already prepared for the next candidate: "And Roland Sirius."

He looked at the energetic white-haired elder sitting on the other side, "Mr. Roland comes from an old Northern family, known for being courteous, knowledgeable, and familiar with local affairs. He is one of the elders I most respect.

With such a venerable noble presiding, I believe the Snow Peak Council won't go astray."

Mr. Roland softly coughed, pretending not to care as he waved dismissively, but the smile on his lips was impossible to hide.

He nodded slightly, responding calmly: "If the Prefect truly wishes so, this old man will naturally do his best."

After speaking, he even shyly stroked his beard, secretly observing the reactions around him.

"The third one..." As Louis's voice fell, many already knew whom he would mention.

"Yorn Harvey."

"Territory governance is orderly, wealth is abundant, and most importantly, he consistently abides by the county's laws without overstepping, making him a trustworthy partner."

Before Louis had finished speaking, Yorn stood up abruptly, his smile almost as wide as his face: "I am willing to contribute to Snow Peak County! Working alongside the Prefect is my honor!"

A few individuals led the charge, and the atmosphere had already been thoroughly ignited.

Seizing the moment, Louis steadied his hand gesture, quieting everyone down as he continued: "Of course, this is just the beginning. Everyone present has the potential and qualification to enter the Snow Peak Council."

"This is not a reward, nor an act of charity." His gaze was captivating, every word enunciated, "This is our opportunity to govern Snow Peak County collectively and endure the winter."

A brief silence followed his words, which was then followed by a surge of applause.

Initially, the applause came from the few prominent nobles in the front row—Yorn, Edward, and the elder Roland Sirius—who began clapping first, their expressions displaying a mix of excitement and pride, seemingly proving they were chosen.

Soon, more people stood up, and the applause echoed throughout the banquet hall like a rare warm stream in the winter snow, rapidly spreading.

Louis's words were pleasant to hear, making them happy.

But, in fact, the so-called "council" was ultimately just an empty shell.

Its establishment was merely smoke on the chessboard in Louis's hands.

On the surface, this was a breakthrough in power-sharing, showing respect and trust from the Prefect towards the nobility.

But, in reality, all ultimate decision-making power, command authority, personnel appointment authority, and financial allocation power remained firmly in his sole hands.

The meetings merely allowed them to feel they had the opportunity to "participate."

A sense of participation, a touch of glory as a sugar coating, was enough to soothe uneasy hearts and satiate vain desires.

Compared to blatant suppression, it was safer and more effective.

And Louis needed only to stand steadily on top, occasionally nodding, smiling, and listening, which was enough.

Louis never promised to truly delegate power.

He simply elevated each noble to seemingly dignified high positions, then let them willingly bow down.

But some minor nobles began to show a sense of loss and disappointment, their applause not as enthusiastic.

After all, they knew they'd never rotate into the council membership.

At this moment, Louis spoke again: "I know, not every territory has powerful armies, abundant mineral resources, or enough to be called 'representative' prestige."

His tone was unhurried, his gaze sweeping over those in the margins, the middle and lower-level nobles who had been silent for a long time: "But I do not intend to disappoint others."

The hall quieted down again.

"Starting this quarter, I will establish a special plan called the 'Revitalization Fund.'

He paused, his eyes determined, "All nobles with resource-poor, difficult territories, as long as they submit detailed development plans, whether it's mining salt, developing fields, or expanding fur and hunting industries...

As long as it's reasonable, my Government Hall will provide initial materials, technology, seeds, and labor support, and appropriate tax reductions."

Many were already discussing in whispers, surprised that this policy directly targeted lower-level nobles.

"The plan will be personally coordinated by me, ensuring fairness, transparency, and lack of interference."

Chapter 178: Meeting (Part 3)

Louis spoke concisely, yet it was enough to gradually brighten the eyes of those marginalized nobility.

In the past, the great nobles would never give them such opportunities.

To vie for some resources, they could only rely on attachment, on showing devotion, on barely surviving.

But now, this Prefect personally opened a window for them.

Applause rang out again, and this time, it was not just perfunctory politeness, but genuine anticipation.

Louis was not trying to be a philanthropist.

On the surface, it seemed like an act of benefiting the weak and supporting the marginalized lesser nobility, benevolent and lofty.

But this was not charity; it was the art of distributing power.

The funds for the "Revitalization Fund" came from Red Tide Territory, but were not unconditional gifts.

As long as resources were devolved and support implemented, those lesser nobles originally under the wings of other great nobles of the Northern Territory would naturally gravitate towards a more reliable protector.

And Louis, this young Prefect holding resources, funds, and policies in his hands, was their only direction.

More crucially, each support plan required submitting detailed data on the current state of the territory, asset valuation, and personnel structure.

In what seemed to be an open, transparent, and professional execution,

Louis quietly accomplished an in-depth understanding of the geography and resource structure of the lesser nobility.

And based on this, gradually established a "Directly Affiliated Vassal Network" centered around the Red Tide Territory, bypassing the control of the great nobles.

He didn't need soldiers, nor the blade, just a few documents and a few carloads of seeds.

He could break the monopoly of the great nobles over resources like fur, salt mines, forests, and reindeer belts.

And once those lesser nobility relied on him, willingly handing over finance, military, or even territorial administration to the Governor's Mansion for assistance,

Louis would indirectly gain their "land control rights."

This was truly the consolidation of power in the real sense.

No need for war, nor stripping of titles—just let them surrender power in their "gratitude."

Of course, not everyone was genuinely convinced.

Among the nobles present, there were indeed some smart people.

They might not yet see through Louis's entire plan, but that faint sense of control, that gradually enclosing arrangement, was enough to make them wary.

This was not a simple parliamentary establishment, but more like a well-laid scheme, where they were elegantly ushered into position.

Yet no one dared to question him.

After all, Joseph's scream from yesterday in this banquet hall seemed still to echo in their ears, as the cold sweat hadn't yet dried and their courage had already waned.

So, they just sat quietly, their gazes shifting, falling into silence amidst the applause and responses.

Following the crowd, they submitted to the surface-level "consensus."

The doubts and unease in their hearts were quietly hidden away.

Hidden behind wine glasses, beneath lowered eyelids, and within each loyal applause.

Then Louis raised his hand, as if introducing a routine matter: "The last agenda item, while the parliamentary mechanism is being established, I plan to set up a new auxiliary agency."

The crowd was momentarily stunned.

He paused, his tone light as if discussing tomorrow's weather: "It will be named the 'Inspectorate.'"

At these three words, the air slightly tensed.

Louis's tone remained calm, as if soothing unnecessary panic: "Its duties are not complicated and are unrelated to you, should you abide by the rules."

He displayed a slight smile: "The Inspectorate will be responsible for four things: first, ensuring taxes are paid on time; second, verifying whether the war readiness of each territory meets standards;

third, keeping an eye on those attempting to collude with foreign enemies and endanger the frontier; fourth, monitoring whether the conduct of our parliament members aligns with their oaths."

The nobles below did not respond immediately. Their smiles froze on their faces like masks caught in the wind.

Someone instinctively tightened their grip on their wine glass, someone's eyes flashed, then quickly lowered without speaking.

"You need not fear," Louis said lightly, "the Inspectorate is not meant to spy on you, but to protect our shared future from being corroded by scoundrels."

He surveyed the surroundings, each word distinct: "So do not follow in Joseph's footsteps."

Upon hearing this, the hall was so silent that it was as if the air had frozen.

Even the crackling of logs burning in the fireplace became particularly sharp and clear at that moment.

The nobles, who were previously whispering, all fell silent at this point.

No one spoke.

No one was willing at this moment to be the first to stand out.

The nobles exchanged glances, complex emotions hidden in their eyes: suspicion, unease, struggle.

But ultimately, all were swallowed by silence.

Louis's sharp gaze swept across the room, his tone suddenly becoming straightforward: "If any of you still have questions about the establishment of the Inspectorate, I'm willing to hear different opinions, and we can have an open discussion."

His tone carried not a hint of provocation, almost with a lingering sense of sincerity.

But it was precisely this sincerity that made it all the more terrifying.

Who dared to speak?

Joseph's screams still echoed from last night, and those images remained fresh in everyone's mind.

Furthermore, Louis had indeed just mentioned two "righteous acts": the establishment of the parliament and the Revitalization Fund, both genuinely good deeds.

Anyone standing out to oppose the Inspectorate at this time would essentially label themselves as the villain?

Opposing new policies on "protecting the frontier and clarifying tax obligations," wouldn't that imply...a guilty conscience?

The scene was silent for several seconds.

No one responded to him.

Louis nodded, seemingly unsurprised, his tone as steady as it was gentle: "In that case, the establishment of the Inspectorate is settled."

With a gentle phrase, the decision was made.

Chapter 179: Meeting (Part 4)

Sitting slightly behind him to the right, Yorn moved his fingers slightly, just about to stand up and say something.

Seeing no one move, he merely nodded slightly, making a gesture of "agreeing and supporting."

Willis had also prepared a piece of wording to rationalize the duties of the Inspectorate from the perspective of institutional design, supplemented by considerations of efficiency and public order...

But at this moment, he only needed to display an expression of slight relief.

Louis had originally intended for Yorn to stabilize the situation and Willis to promote the argument of "for the public and the people," so that the Inspectorate could surface as the "will of the people."

But who would have thought it would go so smoothly.

There wasn't even time to perform, and Louis had already seized control of the pace.

The establishment of the Inspectorate was not a spur-of-the-moment idea, nor was it something Louis just casually mentioned.

This agency, while bearing the name "Inspectorate," had duties far beyond just overseeing the parliament.

He could access and verify all tax reports from other territories, checking transactional accounts against actual granaries.

He had the right to inspect war preparedness warehouses, training grounds, recruitment conditions, and even personally inspect the border defenses and armaments.

Record every statement, action, and private interaction of the parliament members... monitoring all obscure contacts, suspicious communications, and secret collusions.

It even had the privilege of presenting secret reports directly to the Prefect, bypassing the checks and balances of the parliament itself.

This was power originally only belonging to the Intelligence System, now granted the guise of legality and public authority.

No longer known as "secret agent," but acting as a "hawk dog."

Neither accountable to parliament, but only looking up to the Prefect alone.

It could be said to be the Eastern Depot of Snow Peak County.

Just after Louis's voice fell, applause sounded.

Initially, it was scattered, like testing the waters with a stone.

A Viscount sitting in the middle hesitated to clap twice, seeing no one opposed, then quickened his pace.

Next, more people followed.

"Clap, clap."

The applause became more and more, increasingly uniform, like footprints in the snow that cannot be stopped, one string after another.

But behind the applause, the smart ones felt their hearts already half-cold.

Sitting in the far corner, Baron Eugene, who originally had a good personal relationship with Joseph, felt his palms cold and sweat oozing from his forehead.

He clapped, maintaining a decent smile on his face, even deliberately nodding to meet Louis's gaze.

But in his heart, it felt like someone was pricking it with fine needles.

"The Inspectorate... this is not at all to oversee the parliament, but to tie us up one by one, tightening with leather ropes."

The applause, like a tide, reverberated continuously in the high-ceilinged banquet hall, as if for the crowning of a new king.

But as this momentum began to rise, Louis raised his hand, with just a simple gesture, quickly cut off the applause like a knife.

The hall fell silent instantly.

He did not rush to speak, merely standing there, his gaze slowly sweeping over every face as if making a final roll call.

Confirming who had submitted, and who still had lingering thoughts.

Then he spoke, his tone no longer sharp, but with a kind of inclusive and steady warmth.

"After today," he said, "Snow Peak County is no longer a loose aggregation."

"We are no longer just families and nobility barely gathered together, no longer individual chess pieces looking out for our own interests."

His tone slow yet firm, like hammering stakes, fixing people's hearts in a common direction.

"We are a community. Because from today, we finally have a direction, a path, a sword."

His voice softened somewhat, but with an undeniable solidity: "From now on, we are all one family."

These words sent a shock through many hearts.

Louis smiled slightly, a smile not with sharpness but with a few touches of approachable gentleness.

"I trust you, and you can trust me too.

In every step ahead, I will not disappoint you."

As his words concluded, the long-suppressed atmosphere finally seemed to find its release, and applause sounded again in the hall.

Some clapped louder, as if eager to show loyalty;

Others clapped slowly, as if weighing Louis's true intentions.

Chapter 180: Lady Grant

The council at the Governor's Mansion had just dispersed, and the cold wind had not yet dispelled the lingering warmth inside the room.

A timid figure quietly appeared at the door of the study.

It was Lady Grant.

She lowered her head, like a withered leaf that might be blown away at any moment, hesitating for a moment in front of the hefty oak door before lightly knocking twice.

"Lord... Louis, may I... speak with you?" Her voice was as soft as a feather landing, with a slight quiver.

The door opened, and Louis was sitting behind the desk, flipping through documents.

Louis looked up at the doorway, unperturbed, as the attendant had already announced her. He showed a gentle smile.

"Of course, please come in."

The gown Lady Grant wore was clearly not from the current season, the tight waistband leaving some reddened marks, and the sheer skirt was somewhat worn.

As she walked in, she clutched a crumpled handkerchief like it was her only source of calm.

She hesitated for a moment by the chair before gently sitting down, legs together, looking as nervous as a young maid just entering court.

Grant spoke in a low voice, as if afraid to disturb something: "I really... don't know what to do."

Then she talked about her family's plight, about that barren land incapable of growing wheat, and how she tried to manage according to the ledger left by her father but couldn't even sort out the basic finances.

Her voice was intermittent, her gaze unfocused, never once looking up at Louis.

"I tried seeking advice from the former lord and my husband's family, but no one was willing to pay me any mind.

Those men... they think I'm just a... temporary placeholder, and that the territory holds no value."

In the end, Grant's voice was almost tearful, biting her lip to keep the tears from falling.

Louis listened quietly, his fingers lightly tapping on the table, like a conductor holding the rhythm of an entire performance.

When Grant finished speaking, he finally replied, his voice steady: "I can see, madam, that you have been working hard for your territory, but you lack direction and resources."

This sentence fell like a drop of water on early spring's permafrost, gently seeping in, yet making her eyes immediately red.

"Would you be willing to help me?" Grant's voice was as faint as a mosquito's hum, as if asking this question exhausted all her courage.

Louis smiled, like responding to a long-awaited call for help: "Of course, I am willing."

Louis leaned slightly forward from behind the desk, looking at her intently, his voice carrying an undeniable strength, though lacking any pressure.

"Do you think there's any resource or industry on your land worth developing?"

Grant froze for a moment, as if something had awakened within her. She opened her mouth, initially intending to deny it, before suddenly seeming to come to a decision, slowly nodding.

"Actually... I've done some research." Her voice was no longer trembling, with a hint of uneasy brightness in her eyes.

"I had people try out several crops... we have a piece of land near the old riverbed. Although it's always been deemed wasteland, a few crops managed to survive test growing."

As she spoke, she tightly grasped the handkerchief but continued: "There's also the foxes and ermine in the mountains."

No one managed them before, nor was there systematic hunting... hunters would only occasionally catch a few. The pelts weren't worth much."

She paused, as if recalling something, "Over by the creek, it freezes over later in the winter, the village elders say there used to be fish in the water. Not many... but I believe, perhaps we could..."

As she spoke, she lowered her head, as if afraid she had said too much or sounded foolish.

"Good."

The word came lightly from Louis, as if sparking a flame in a serene night.

He pulled out notes from a pile of documents, quickly jotting down the three directions she mentioned, then looked up with a newfound resolve in his eyes.

"Specialty crop cultivation, winter creek cold-water fish farming, coupled with small-scale fur trapping..."

These three, though none are sizable on their own, if combined and coordinated, could form a stable, small-scale integrated economic system suitable for your territory."

He paused, letting out a light chuckle, "And most importantly, it doesn't depend on any external networks of the nobility."

Seeing Louis seriously plan for her, Grant was taken aback.

Over the years, she had become accustomed to being overlooked, excluded, and met with cold stares. Yet this man in front of her not only listened but genuinely analyzed and planned for her future.

"Do you mean I can really succeed?"

"It's not about 'can or cannot', but 'how to succeed'." Louis deftly shifted his pen, drawing a few sketches, "The foundation will allocate suitable seeds for you, with Red Tide Territory's agricultural officials stationed there initially to assist."

"I'll send over experienced old farmers. For the furs, we will provide primary processing tools and salting facilities, with Red Tide Territory handling unified acquisition, preventing you from being undercut by trade caravans."

Pointing at the three spots on the diagram, he gently summarized: "Land cultivation as the foundation, fish farming as the supplement, fur as the liquidity. A steady and sure-footed approach should be enough to support your territory."

Initially, Grant could only stare blankly at the sketch, as if unable to believe what she had heard.

"I... really can?" Her voice trembled, as if even she couldn't believe it.

Louis just nodded, his tone gentle, "You can, but I will also send people to do an on-site assessment."

He paused, his voice calm and clear: "Don't worry, once it's confirmed that the conditions are in place, the foundation will arrange everything."

From seeds, techniques, channels, to exchange points, all those things you can't handle alone, we will take care of them."

Grant's eyes widened, swiftly bowing repeatedly, her voice choked up, "...Thank you... truly... thank you... I don't know how to..."

Her eyes were already red, tears glistening on her lashes.

At that moment, she was no longer the marginalized figure in the nobility circle, without a voice, or the helpless lady troubled by debts and unable to sleep at night.

For the first time, she felt regarded as a true noble.

Possessing land, shouldering responsibility, and having the right to be trusted.

He calmly watched Grant, whose face was intertwined with gratitude and shame, yet he remained composed inside.

True, she wasn't strong enough, her character soft, with nearly zero governance experience.

But precisely because of these reasons, she was the ideal model.

A lower-standing noblewoman, scorned, marginalized, and stripped of power, yet rejuvenated under the support of Red Tide Territory.

As long as she could stand up, even just barely, it would be enough to move those still observing from the sidelines, those weakened in family foundations but unwilling to yield.

They would start to ponder:

"Perhaps... I can be like her too."

"Perhaps... I can also hand over part of my power for a way to survive."

This was the first nail of exchanging resources for control.

Grant was also the first "willing to be changed person" Louis intended to establish on this land.