

Winter 181

Chapter 181: Aftermath of the Meeting

The large window in the study was open, and the wind blew in from the snow-melted mountains, carrying the scent of earth and lingering snow.

Louis, draped in a deep blue cloak, sat on the wooden chair in the middle of the meeting room.

Before him was no high-backed throne, only a round table covered with a linen tablecloth, the fire casting a soft glow on the side of his face.

This was the seventh visitor seeking funding in these two days.

An elderly Lord with graying hair and a stooped posture.

He had originally served as a steward in Frost Halberd City, but because his distant relative had frozen to death in winter, he was pulled in to be a so-called Baron.

But he was completely clueless, and seeing the remaining populace in a pitiable state, had no choice but to seek Louis' assistance.

With trembling hands, he took the territory map, damp with sweat, from his attendant and offered it with both hands, saying in a low voice:

"Our land... as long as you... can send someone to take a look, I am willing... willing to give up management rights if necessary..."

As he spoke, his speech became faster and softer, as if afraid of being refused.

Louis took the territory map, his thumb lightly brushing over the damp corners, as if he could feel the weight and helplessness held in those trembling hands.

He did not speak immediately, instead carefully examining the rivers and lakes marked on the map.

"Does the tributary in your territory freeze late in winter?"

The old Lord was momentarily stunned, then quickly nodded: "Ye... yes, previously hunters fished there, but later, with insufficient manpower, no one went anymore..."

Louis nodded slightly, speaking in a low voice: "Although the farming conditions are poor, this water system is still intact, and the cold-water fish in the winter stream can live long and are rich in fat.

You don't have many people, so it's not suitable for large-scale farming, but you can organize a few people to try fishing first."

He looked up, his tone gentle: "I will have the materials team allocate some basic fishing gear for you—ice picks, net cages, salt barrels, and insulated tarpaulins.

Fish can't be used as staple food for the year, but it can help you through the toughest months, and perhaps trade for some grain. Once the territory is fully surveyed, you can then decide on what industry to pursue."

The old Lord listened, his eyes turning red.

He had already prepared himself to be refused, or even driven away, yet unexpectedly, Louis did not scold him. Instead, he offered a practical and narrow but viable path forward.

He opened his mouth, as if wanting to express his gratitude, but was choked up.

Louis stood up, gently returning the map. "Hold onto this piece of land for now. Prepare for fishing, and we'll see the results in three months."

The old noble took the map, bowing repeatedly, his shoulders shaking as if struggling to contain his emotions.

Before leaving, he hesitated for a moment, then suddenly knelt down with a choked voice:

"Thank you for your mercy... In this winter, that someone is still... willing to help us... these almost rotten nobles..."

Louis did not assist him up, nor did he avoid the kneeling, simply observing him quietly.

The news of the Red Tide Aid Fund stirred a silent wave of frenzy in the snow-laden Northern Territory.

After Lady Grant received assistance, seven or eight small nobles hurried to Louis' office within two or three days.

They came with haggard faces, wearing shabby robes, presenting family crests and maps, quietly pleading for support.

In the warm and brightly lit conference hall of the Governor's Mansion, Louis sat in the chief seat, surrounded by his team of secretaries and advisory officials.

Every petitioner's speech was carefully recorded, archived, and analyzed by designated personnel.

He himself quietly listened, occasionally twirling a feather pen without expression, softly offering suggestions now and then.

He resembled a godfather.

Of course, this wasn't charity; it was thorough resource selection and strategic infiltration.

"Submit a detailed development plan," he said calmly. "Land utilization maps, current resources, manpower lists, none of which can be omitted."

Once preliminary approval was granted, Red Tide would dispatch its technicians and financial observers into the territory to assist in constructing so-called "infrastructure."

In reality, it aimed to fully control every aspect of the industry.

More crucially, all products must be collected and resold by Red Tide.

Channels were determined by Louis, and prices were set by Louis.

The true purpose of this aid fund was to integrate these dying small territories into Red Tide's economic network.

Using three chains of material, technology, and market to create a "semi-colonial body" that was both dependent and controllable.

Saving people? That was just a fortunate side effect.

The goal for Louis was mastering territories, consuming land, expanding logistics nodes, processing points, and external sales markets.

For those lands with no development potential or of no geographical value, he had no hesitation in offering a casual suggestion.

Then, smiling, he declined, "I suggest you first attempt self-rescue. If there are tangible results, we will reassess."

And among these lords, there were certainly those with their heads held high.

That afternoon, a noble draped in a white fox fur cloak strode into the Governor's Mansion.

He did not remove his hat in greeting but merely tossed an application letter: "I've come as a favor to you."

The secretaries' expressions changed.

Louis glanced at him, his tone icy: "A favor? You don't even address me as 'Prefect.'"

The man seemed to want to say more, but was quietly "escorted" out by two Knights, the application letter left intact at the door.

Silence returned to the hall.

Louis opened the next document, coolly saying, "Next."

He was in no rush. Once the first batch of successful cases showed results, others would eventually line up to offer their land and resources, eager to join Red Tide's system.

Chapter 182: Aftermath of the Meeting (Part 2)

Just as the Red Tide Assistance Fund was advancing with full force, the Snow Peak Council had also quietly settled.

"Elected by representatives from all sides within the county, to ensure the interests of the people and the aristocracy's autonomy."

The official announcement sounded grandiose, as if it was a great leap forward in the political civilization of the Northern Territory.

Yet the long table inside the council hall had long been laid out as a chessboard by Louis.

As for the so-called representatives, of course, not just anyone could come.

The majority of the seats were filled by individuals nominated as "prestigious and capable."

Translated, it roughly meant: Louis's confidants could join, the obedient could stay, and those who disobeyed? Sorry, the door is over there.

Yorn and Willis sat near the head of the table, smiling with ease.

Though Edward, Roland, and others were not close to Louis, they were considered "reliable and controllable," thus included.

As for those old-fashioned nobles who still adhered to "noble dignity"?

After several private banquets and deals, one or two were reluctantly placed in for "decoration."

The council supposedly had "advisory power," but in reality, was a voting mechanism with a hidden veto power.

True control was not about rejecting a proposal, but about deciding which proposals could survive and leave the room.

On the first day of the council, the atmosphere was gentle yet enthusiastic.

A grassroots representative proposed reallocating part of the road repair budget to epidemic prevention in the border villages.

Louis listened and nodded with a smile: "A good idea, we can try adjusting a small portion."

Yorn led the applause, with others following suit.

The council's inaugural session needed an atmosphere, a little sweetener.

The next proposal was put forth by a certain decorative noble, suggesting the council have advisory power over troop movements in each domain.

The scene suddenly fell silent for a moment.

Louis, without changing his expression, subtly raised his hand to take the glass, while the secretary team had already quietly passed notes behind him.

Yorn yawned: "The timing isn't quite right."

Willis bluntly added: "Matters of the army shouldn't be meddled with."

Edward's mouth twitched slightly as he nonchalantly shook his head.

Seconds later, the proposal was declared suspended due to "majority opposition."

Louis placed down the glass, revealing a polite smile: "Since there are differing opinions, let's respect the majority and move on to the next topic."

His words were unhurried, and his tone was gentle.

But the noble who had proposed the motion had already bowed his head, beads of sweat forming at his temple, seemingly understanding how much of a "taboo" his words had been.

And beside him, the "non-confidant clique" fell silent, like a forest frozen on a snowy night.

The Snow Peak Council continued running, like a clock with perfectly meshed gears, a flawless white dial, and precise, clear hands.

Only Louis could freely adjust its time.

This week-long governor's meeting finally concluded on the night of the seventh day.

Nobles from various regions left Snow Peak City with different feelings, returning to their own fiefs.

Some left silently, some with furrowed brows, while others with smiles, as if they had left a casino with a substantial haul.

Upon departure, no one dared to call him "boy," "lucky one," or "that young man legitimized after the war" behind his back anymore.

They knew the one sitting in the governor's mansion's main seat was now a true "Lord of Snow Peak."

Controlling Snow Peak, consolidating resources, issuing commands precisely.

And as they were thinking the meetings were over and everything would return to calm.

What they didn't expect was that the true "follow-up of the meeting" had just begun.

Just as these nobles set foot back into their domains.

Ready for a long-awaited glass of red wine, to hum a little tune in front of a warm fireplace, they saw those figures.

Draped in black cloaks, with the Snow Peak Governor's badge on their chests, the inspectors with steady, shadow-like strides, seemingly emerging from the snowy night, silently dismounted from their carriages and passed through the castle gates.

They had no prior notification, holding warrants sealed with the "Snow Peak Governor's" wax emblem.

With a standard professional fake smile: "Don't be nervous, we're just conducting a routine inspection. It won't delay your dinner."

The faces of the nobles turned pale, then black.

"Inspectorate? He actually made it happen?"

"Wasn't it just talk?"

"And directly sending people to the fief... how is this different from a raid?"

Unable to contain their fury, they slammed tables and stamped their feet, but ultimately could only grit their teeth and huff: "It's just a formality."

Despite their words, the nobles still obediently handed over their fief records.

Of course, concealing some fake reports in the accounts or stashing goods in warehouses, that was "traditional skill."

The inspectorate knew, but they remained unemotional, merely recording, summarizing, and sending back to the governor's office.

And Louis did not act immediately, no summoning to account, no table-flipping settlement.

He merely offered a faint smile, kept each record, tagged it with a date, and placed it into a box labeled "Observation Period."

As long as these blemishes weren't fundamental issues, he'd wait until the time was right to use them.

The Snow Peak County nobles thought they were still on the game board, until the meeting ended, did they realize they were merely pieces on the board.

Using three tactics, Louis laid down his trump card to control Snow Peak.

The first tactic, the revitalization fund.

It's a gilded carrot, those who toe the line and cooperate would receive priority in food, medicine, ironware, and craftsman aid.

Otherwise, forget about support; you won't even touch the granary door.

The second tactic, the Snow Peak Council.

On the surface, it's for gathering wisdom, but in reality, it's a lawful stage for setting rules and regulations.

The council seats, ostensibly recommended by local lords, had been sifted by Louis's "loyalty sieve."

Most proposals passed as soon as they're presented; for those not passed... after a few routine inspectorate checks, they'd become "clear-eyed."

The third tactic, the Inspectorate.

Cold and ruthless, independent of the nobility system, wielding the "Governor's special directive."

On the surface, it's routine inspection; in reality, it's the second nervous system of Snow Peak County.

At the slightest sign of trouble, it sends signals like a neural reflex to the nerve center—Red Tide Territory.

Thus, the Snow Peak Council and the Inspectorate became Louis's "right and left hands."

The council managed direction, policies, and institutional design, serving as the rational brain.

The Inspectorate managed order, execution, and deterrence, serving as the cold blade.

Underneath spawned an entire system of resource allocation and public opinion guidance.

Whoever shouted slogans louder or cooperated better in governance would receive priority access to food, tools, firewood, and technical support.

By now, Louis was no longer the "post-war parachuted young man with family background" in others' mouths.

He was the true governor.

Military and political power, finance, media, and oversight all centralized in him, unifying title and authority as governor.

He wasn't just "a person" sitting on the governor's throne but the hub of an entirely new regime's power system.

A young, decisive, calm, and ambitious ruler of Snow Peak County had been born.

Of course, not all nobles were willing to bow their heads.

Some disgruntled old folks secretly detoured, quietly writing letters, sending gifts, and even proposing marriage alliances to the age-old nobility of the Northern Territory outside the county border.

They did not believe a young man could truly hold Snow Peak alone.

"As long as external aid intervenes, wouldn't Louis's 'new order' crumble?"

For a time, several old Northern Territory nobles outside the county grew restless, preparing to chide this unruly young governor under the guise of "peace and stability."

Until two pieces of news were released, instantly calming everyone.

The first was the downfall of Joseph Kadari and the Kadari Clan.

The second piece of news left everyone speechless:

Duke Edmund's daughter, one of the most important noblewomen in the Northern Territory, was formally engaged to Louis of the Calvin Family.

At that moment, many old nobles who had been eager to move placed their wine glasses down steadily.

Chapter 183: Joseph's Fate

The ninth underground level of the Imperial Capital Dungeon, a deep prison where light never reaches.

The air here carries no scent of dust, only the pungent mixture of dampness, rust, and decay.

The walls are covered with mottled moss, blood long since seeping into the crevices, forming dark strands like some eerie heraldry.

Joseph Kadari, once a spirited Pioneer Noble of the Northern Territory.

Now reduced to a heap stripped of dignity, skin, and human form.

He curls up in the iron interrogation chair, hands hanging, ankles tightly bound by rusted chains, wounds festering, in a state even crows would disdain to look at.

He lowers his head, strands of hair cling together like dark ropes, indistinguishable from mud, blood, or tears.

"Speak, Lord Joseph,"

The interrogator on the right approaches with a smile, his mouth twitching, revealing misaligned teeth from burns, "This is your fourteenth confession. We want to hear the fifteenth."

Joseph does not answer.

He merely lifts his swollen eyelids, staring at the scarred face.

The other interrogator lazily steps forward, extends his prosthetic limb, and with a snap tears off a small patch of Joseph's unscabbed flesh.

"Ah... Ah—"

His scream seems unable to echo completely even in the dungeon, because the sound is too familiar, even the stone walls have grown numb.

Pain only compels him to repeat words he has spoken countless times.

Initially, amidst the cries he still pondered:

Who betrayed me?

What role did Louis play?

But now, Joseph no longer thinks, he only desires one thing: "Kill me... let me die... I beg you..."

He no longer remembers when he began to pray for death.

"Do you want to die?" the burnt-faced interrogator whispers, his tone almost flirtatious, "I'm sorry, the Emperor hasn't approved your death yet."

"Besides, we want to see how many times a proud dog can bark."

They laughed, as if sharing an incredibly amusing joke.

One dragged out his voice, the other sneered audibly.

Joseph listened to the laughter and began vomiting, yet he could not expel anything.

He was once the invincible strategist of the Northern Territory, spirited and commanding, yet now he cannot even articulate a sentence.

He began to envy those cellmates who died swiftly under the blade.

"It's just about done."

The interrogator with the metal prosthetic recorded Joseph's words once more, then flexed his wrist.

He seemed tired too, leaning against the damp stone wall and stretching: "He's said all he could, repeated it many times."

The one-eyed interrogator murmured lowly while rolling up the blood-stained parchment: "Information consistency is over ninety percent; discrepancies are less than two sentences."

"Hmm, probably can't extract anything new." The metal prosthetic nodded, "Send his confession, letter copies, accounts, and that correspondence letter up... directly to the Emperor."

"The Emperor should smile upon seeing these, right?"

"At least his lips would move."

They no longer bothered with Joseph trembling on the ground, leisurely packing up their tools, as casually as butchers cleaning their cutting boards.

Before leaving, they exchanged whispers about terms like "should be beheaded publicly."

Finally, the iron door closed with a click, the torch was extinguished, and the dungeon returned to stillness.

In the darkness, only one person remained whispering intermittently, mixed with blood froth: "I beg you... let me... die..."

Joseph's wish ultimately came true.

Three days later, Imperial Capital — Longyang Square.

This was the crossroads of the Empire's oldest and busiest main paths, half-sealed streets, patrolling troops sword in hand on guard, their positions like a forest.

A three-layer iron chain fence circled the plaza, nominally "prohibiting miscellaneous persons from approaching," but beyond the fence, crowds packed with onlookers.

This was the usual scene at Longyang Square.

Since the current Emperor's ascension, this place had become one of the Imperial Capital's most infamous "political purge execution grounds."

Every two or three days, a head would roll, the charges varied bizarrely, yet the most beheaded weren't ordinary folk, but former elites.

Disgraced nobility, merchants, officers, scholars, anyone who angered "the one above," couldn't meet a good end.

In recent years, this kind of "cleansing" had become even more frequent.

An old joke among the people goes: "If summoned to the Internal Affairs Hall for tea, family should order a coffin from the blacksmith."

Yet ironically, despite the bloodshed, the populace didn't feel fear.

"Here it comes again."

"Who is it? Do you know them?"

"Don't know, probably another noble who committed a crime."

"Heard it's the family selling arms? Anyway, with so many executions these years, I can't recall who's who."

Among the crowd, there are vendors selling seeds and roasted chestnuts, children riding on fathers' shoulders watching the spectacle, and old men squatting at the front holding their spots.

It all resembled a fair rather than a place of execution.

They could not see the charges posted on the platform, nor did they care who was on it.

They only knew that today another "powerful and influential person" was going to die.

In the plaza's center stood a solemn platform forged of cold iron, draped with black cloth.

Bulletins hung on all sides, inscribed with: [Treason, aiding the enemy, conspiring in Northern Territory unrest, deceiving the court]

Gold edges, silver pins, chillingly gleaming.

But in the eyes of the gathered crowd, it was merely "routine" decoration.

"Do you think he'll beg for mercy?"

"Nobility often act tough... but they sure scream when their heads roll."

Chapter 184: Joseph's Fate (Part 2)

"I bet he faints."

Amidst whispers, the bell tolled.

The iron cage cart transporting the prisoner slowly made its entrance.

The cage carrying the prisoner creaked to a stop, its iron door opened, and several fully armed guards stepped forward, dragging out the "man" inside.

It was a blood-stained, bone-twisted human wreckage.

Joseph Kadari, once a noble seated high at banquets, speaking eloquently, now almost couldn't remember who he was in this shadow.

He was dragged by two soldiers, like a bag of broken straw.

Just last night, the interrogator unusually summoned a military medic.

"Make him at least look like a 'man'."

"A beheading needs to look decent, or it might scare the children."

Thus, his face was washed, his broken nose brutally set, the scabs on his face scraped away, and the fractures bandaged to appear, outwardly, "whole."

They even dressed him in his formerly custom-made noble black robe, though stained with blood, washed to a sullen gray, with two rips at the cuffs, resembling old clothes dug out from a coffin.

Joseph didn't know how he got up there, perhaps he was pushed, perhaps he was held.

The executioner opened the list and read aloud:

"Joseph Kadari, guilty of violating the Empire's laws: colluding with enemy nations, selling secrets, conspiring with merchants, and inciting separatism. The evidence is irrefutable. Three charges determine the verdict, and the punishment is death — beheading, to be displayed."

He was pressed onto the Cold Iron Platform, his neck locked into the icy execution stand.

The cold wind of Longyang Square seeped into his coat, chilling him to the bone.

Suddenly, he heard laughter and cheers.

He opened his swollen eyelids and saw the sea of people, eagerly watching, commenting, and betting.

They didn't know who he was, nor did they want to. He was just the "show" of the day.

"Where did I go wrong?" Joseph asked himself in his mind, but there was no answer.

On the front row of the platform, a few newly risen nobles were kneeling behind the curtain, silent with their heads lowered.

Some old aristocrats also appeared, their expressions indifferent, and their attire neat, as if this was some sort of social morning ritual to check off.

"Is it really the son of the Kadri Family... The Kadri Family is really in trouble now."

"Tsk, three charges judged together, they don't even have the noble execution privilege anymore."

"His Majesty the Emperor has never shown mercy these past few years."

These whispers did not reach a foot away.

Everyone knew that red-robed inspectors were hidden around the square, recording every word.

The executioner looked back at the clock tower, the time was just right.

The raised decapitation blade shimmered silver in the sunlight, as if even the air trembled.

"Execute."

The blade fell, the head rolled several feet, blood gushed like a spring, dyeing the steps.

At the moment the head fell, the entire square seemed frozen for several seconds.

Then, someone first shouted: "Well done!"

Then the second voice, the third voice, each louder than the last, started to ring out.

"He deserved it!"

"Do another one!"

"What a clean cut!"

Laughing, cheering, mixed with children's screams and the hawkers' shouts.

Some waved handkerchiefs, some threw copper coins, and a few young people leaned on the railings, excited as if they'd just watched an exciting gladiatorial match.

They didn't know who the fallen was, nor did they care.

To them, it was just the "morning show" in the Imperial Capital.

There was blood, there were crimes, there was a verdict, there was a beheading, everything was complete.

As for the "Kadri Family", or "military secrets"...

They didn't understand, nor did they care.

These days, as long as it wasn't their own head falling off, it was a good day.

At the edge of the square, the blood on the execution platform hadn't dried yet, and the crows had already descended, pecking at broken remains.

And not far away, the clock tower began to sound the Empire's standard time-keeping melody again.

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Because of this matter, Joseph wasn't the only one unfortunate.

Elman Kadari, patriarch of the Kadri Family, sat before his desk, his eyes bloodshot, devoid of the usual steel and authority, now showing only an unspeakable weariness and dread.

His right hand trembled constantly, the ink dragging out a blurred tail across the memorial.

"In the name of Kadri, sever all ties with the traitor... with three border fortresses and thirty percent military power, plead for a holy judgment..."

He gritted his teeth, signing his name on the last line, stamping down hard with his ring, as if trying to crush the paper's sin.

It was the only thing he could do now.

As a father, sever ties with his child, as a patriarch, give up an arm to survive.

Then, he finally slumped back against the chair, as if all bones and strength had been sucked away, aging ten years in an instant.

"Worthless scum... damnable waste..." he cursed under his breath, his throat rough and tasting of blood.

"Colluding with foreign merchants, selling military intelligence, playing petty deceptive games... did he think he was starring in some political intrigue drama?!"

He struck the table hard, the force making the wine cup jump.

"He ruined himself, dragging with it the foundation I built over decades, the sweat and blood of countless generations of Kadari, into the mire!"

His anger burned to its peak before it dwindled to a light, almost inaudible sigh.

Though he didn't want to cry, his eyes flushed red.

Elman Kadari had fought countless battles, avoided three political traps, and pulled the Kadari Family from the swamps to the center.

But he never thought that the fatal strike would come not from his enemies, but from his own family.

From the child he once held in his arms, now using the entire family to pay for an extreme punishment.

"Worthless scum..." he repeated, this time muttering, as if wanting to completely erase the name from memory.

What he hoped now was for the Emperor to show leniency this once.

Thinking he would receive a response, even a mere "not to the extent of death", would have given him some room to breathe.

But nothing came.

Three days passed, five days passed, not a breeze came by.

Until the seventh morning, a knight from the Constitutional Department arrived at the Kadri residence, bearing an imperial decree.

The heavy letter was brought to him while he continued reviewing military reports in his study.

The seal's wax was still soft, marked with the Empire's golden emblem, indicating it was from the highest authority — the Imperial Secretariat.

His hands shook as he opened it, one page, two pages, three pages...

The first decree, revoke the military contract rights of the Southwest Defense Zone.

The three veteran corps stationed at the border would be taken over by the Royal Dragon Flame Knight Order within ten days.

The Kadari family's banner would be lowered from the forts, replaced by the Golden Dragon Banner.

The second decree, strip away the three noble rights: permanent seat on the Noble Council, military academy recommendation privileges, Royal Hunting Ground license.

This was a blatant act of deprivation, almost akin to casting the entire family out of the Imperial Capital's nobility circle.

The third decree, review of the Imperial Capital's assets, freeze of noble bank accounts, and the sealing and investigation of two family residences.

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Word by word, there was no room for negotiation.

Elman stood in the middle of the hall, holding the three sealed orders just delivered by the royal messenger.

The edges of the letter still held warmth, the golden lacquer of the Empire's emblem sharp and mocking him.

He read it word by word, expressionless, yet it felt like each word drove a nail into his heart.

"From this day forth, a special commissioner shall be stationed to audit and freeze the noble's bank accounts and to oversee the sealing and investigation of two family estates."

Word by word, with no room for negotiation.

When the last word fell—"effective immediately, a special officer shall be stationed"—he sank into the central hall's chair with a hollow thud, like the sound made before an old house caves in.

His aides, stewards, and several sons stood by, frozen in fear, not daring to utter a word.

Elman Kadari, who had fought countless battles in his lifetime, sidestepped three political traps and raised the Kadari family from the mud to the center.

But he had never foreseen that the fatal blow would be dealt not by an enemy, but by family.

By the very child he once held in his arms, now trading the entire family for a severe punishment.

"Damn scoundrel..." he murmured again, with a hoarse and bloody voice.

"Colluding with foreign merchants, selling military information, engaging in trifling deceptions... did he think he was starring in some kind of power drama?!"

He slammed his fist against the table, the force so great it caused the wine cup to jump.

"He ruined himself and dragged the foundation I built over decades, the blood and sweat of generations of the Kadri's, into the mire!"

The fury burned to its peak, but eventually, it faded into a faint, almost inaudible sigh.

He didn't want to cry, but his eyes turned red.

Elman Kadari had fought countless battles in his life, dodged three political traps, and pulled the Kadri family from the mud to the center.

But he never thought that the one who would deliver the fatal blow wasn't an enemy, but family.

It was that baby he once held in his arms, now swapping the entire clan for an ultimate punishment.

Chapter 185: Engagement Confirmed

The winds of the Imperial Capital always carried a certain unspeakable chill, especially recently.

The news of Madam Joseph being beheaded and the Kaladi Clan facing reckoning spread throughout the entire circle of the Imperial Nobility in just half a day.

The rumors ran rampant, and the banquets and salon gatherings in the mansions turned exceptionally quiet.

Everyone was whispering about one thing: this time, the Emperor had acted too harshly.

"No matter the case, they were nobles for five generations... removed without a word, roots and all?"

"Sigh, Kaladi... after all, wasn't someone the Emperor personally elevated."

"Don't forget, this is the third prominent noble purged this year."

"It's still the same... 'balance of power.' In the end, nobody but the Emperor can stand firm."

No one dared openly criticize the Emperor, but beneath the thin veneer of respectful words lay undeniable fear and vigilance.

The veteran nobles understood this reckoning was a borrowed knife to kill, a purge under the guise of rectification, to uproot old forces not birthed from their own origins.

And this wasn't the first time such a pattern appeared.

In recent years, almost every scandal, coup, rebellion, or corruption incident,

a veteran noble's shadow would be found implicated, entangled, and finally swept quietly off the power chessboard.

At the same time, one after another, the "trusted nobles" of knights and frontier military commanders were promoted, ennobled, and granted lands.

The grandiose statement was: "Reconstructing balanced power to prevent local secession."

But in reality, the gears of centralization were grinding down those ancient names rooted for centuries.

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The study was filled with the scent of sandalwood, the fireplace flickered gently, casting a golden glow on the family crest hanging on the wall.

Duke Calvin closed the intelligence letter in his hand, squinted slightly, and leaned back into the chair.

For a moment, he said nothing.

The news of Joseph's execution and the complete purge of the Kaladi Clan did not shock him much.

The head of the Kaladi Clan...

A typical old-school noble, arrogant, sluggish, relying on old power as a talisman yet failing to see the times had long shifted.

Their defeat was not undeserved.

Calvin took a cup of warm wine, sipped it gently, feeling the warm, subtly herbal taste.

His gaze fell into the fire of the hearth, with a casual poke, a spark cracked from the wood.

"Another mountain has crumbled," he thought silently.

It wasn't fear, just reflection.

Someone like him has seen too many rises and falls.

The circle of nobility has never been a stable fortress but a battleground that constantly collapses and rebuilds.

The fall of the Kaladi Clan was merely another collapse of an antiquated beam.

"The Empire... no longer needs old nobility," he understood in his heart.

Names with whom he once drank shoulder to shoulder, sparred in the Noble Council for years, had now become cold criminals, stripped, shattered, reckoned.

The noble class of the Empire is being reset by an iron-blooded Emperor.

"In another ten years, maybe half the surnames of these great nobles will change," he pondered thoughtfully.

Heavy thoughts swirled in his mind like thick fog.

Calvin watched the leaping flames in the fireplace and suddenly sighed lightly.

"Thinking about these things is truly burdensome." His gaze gradually softened, as another matter surfaced in his mind.

Compared to power struggles, noble infighting, and the Emperor's iron fist, this matter seemed much more gentle.

But its significance for the future was no less than any political duel.

The marriage contract between Louis and Emily Edmund was finally settled.

The marriage between Louis and the daughter of the Edmund Family, after rounds of probing, formal diplomatic maneuvering, private exchanges, and secret letters, finally laid its foundation.

Saying he felt relieved would be an understatement.

On the day the letter arrived, Duke Calvin stood before it, silently for a long time.

He was content with the alliance this marriage represented.

One might even say it was one of the rare successful arrangements he had orchestrated in recent years.

Emily Edmund, he didn't know her at all, just heard that she was decent-looking.

As for his own son... he couldn't say he truly understood him.

Especially Louis in the past few months.

The development of Red Tide Territory, the Battle of Qingyu Ridge, gaining a foothold in the Northern Territory...

One by one, it was as if suddenly, this quiet, almost transparent young man was utterly transformed.

Even though the marriage contract was settled, matters of affection were irrelevant.

This union, from the start, was never about romance but an instinctive self-rescue for both families under pressure.

A meticulously crafted and cold exchange of resources.

The Edmund Family, holding the strongest heavy army in the Northern Territory, known as the "Lord of the North," is practically the local sovereign, although weakened by war in recent years, they remain formidable.

The Calvin Family has dominated the Southeast for a century, controlling eight main ports, and countless trade groups and connections, holding sway in the nobility circle of the Southeast Province.

Both families are part of the Empire's "Eight Pillar Nobles," their bloodline pedigree, military power, and status are top-tier.

But in the end, they share a common weakness: they are both founding old nobility.

In this era of iron-blooded new governance, old nobility is no longer needed; they are nails to be eventually pulled.

And so they shook hands.

Establishing the marriage contract was just the beginning.

What followed was the truly troublesome part.

The wedding process must be splendid, at least on the surface, leaving no room for error.

Both families being old nobility, any mistake would become fodder for gossip.

And at this critical juncture, neither side could afford to lose.

Ceremonies, letters, etiquette, envoys, banquets, not a single one could be omitted.

The official marriage certificate needed to be prepared in triplicate, to be archived by the Imperial Nobility Club, Royal Archives, and each family.

The gift list from the Edmund Family also needed pre-approval to prevent any misunderstandings of "too little" or "too much."

Calvin gently rubbed his brow, murmuring, "Not suitable for me to make an appearance."

He wasn't shirking; he simply couldn't appear.

If he personally stepped into the Northern Territory, even if only to attend a wedding, in the Emperor's eyes, it equated to openly declaring:

"We have allied, Emperor, it's beyond your control."

Too blatant, too risky.

He knew that the Emperor disliked being provoked, disliked being tested, and particularly disliked "camaraderie" among old nobility.

Especially from the likes of them, old nobility who lived too long, rooted too deeply, consumed too much.

Besides avoiding suspicion, there were more pragmatic reasons.

The situation in the Southeast was no longer a fief entirely under the Calvin Clan's control.

In recent years, His Majesty seemed to be playing chess in his leisure, quietly placing one piece after another into the Southeast.

Now, the Southeast Province ostensibly remains under his control, but in reality, it is full of constraints, confined at every step.

If he left for too long, even to attend a wedding, who knows how much of his territory would still belong to him upon return.

Therefore, he couldn't leave.

Not only could he not leave, but he also had to be more compliant and "loyal" than anyone else.

So he needed to choose someone who was not too conspicuous, yet stable enough.

In his mind, Duke Calvin scanned several names, finally settling on a certain figure.

It would be him.

Calvin's lips then curled into a faint, almost imperceptible smile.

Chapter 186: Another Mage Down?

Joseph Kadari was publicly executed for treason, aiding the enemy, and other serious crimes, and his family was thoroughly purged by order of the Emperor.

The downfall of this once illustrious family caused a tremor among the nobility within the Empire.

However, the mastermind behind this entire storm was at this moment cuddled up in his thick quilt, sleeping like there was no tomorrow.

It's no wonder; the intense work of recent times, coupled with the establishment of the council, the founding of the Inspectorate, the probing and networking among the noble forces...

It had all exhausted him.

Thus, Louis Calvin, the youngest Prefect of the Northern Territory, creator of the council, mastermind behind the Inspectorate System, designer of the Revival Fund...

Was snoring soundly in bed.

"Master Louis, it's time to wake up." Sif's voice sounded in his ear.

The heavy curtains were drawn open, and a ray of sunlight suddenly slanted in, passing through the indoor light gauze and falling on the figure bundled up in the bed.

It was his own instructions, no matter how tired, he must be woken up by nine every morning to prevent himself from completely degenerating one day.

Louis felt the sun, mumbled something with a frown, and finally opened his eyes with difficulty.

He sat up, resembling an ordinary person who has to get up in the morning, with disheveled hair and a vacant look.

"It's been over a year now." He mumbled while watching the light of dawn outside the window, "Since I've transmigrated, I've really degenerated into a noble..."

But no matter how tired his body was, or how unclear his consciousness, his habits were deeply rooted.

The first thing after getting up, he instinctively raised his hand and made a light stroke in the air.

Activating the Daily Intelligence System.

Just as Sif came in with a towel, handing him water while glancing at him, she couldn't help but chuckle seeing him staring into space again.

"Daydreaming again." She approached, casually rubbing his face like petting a sleepy kitten.

He didn't mind at all, still focusing intently ahead.

He never worried that Sif or anyone else would see anything strange.

In fact, he had long confirmed that this "Daily Intelligence System" could only be seen by himself.

No matter if it was Sif, or anyone else, even standing right in front of him, they would only see him dazing off, unaware of the faint light screen and text slowly emerging in the air.

The system's presence seemed embedded in the deepest part of his consciousness.

The slightly translucent light screen spread out quietly before Louis' eyes, the font glowing with an icy blue hue rolling slowly from top to bottom.

[Daily intelligence update complete]

[1: The arranged marriage date between Louis and Emily has been officially set by both families for July 12th.]

[2: Baron Courtney, dissatisfied with the control of the Inspectorate, has sent gifts to seek help from his cousin, Viscount Hamilton, intending to accuse Louis of being "arbitrary and domineering" before Governor Duke Edmund.]

[3: Three days later, a team of three Silver-faced Mages was attacked by an unknown creature near the Cold Fir Territory, resulting in two deaths and one injury, with the survivor Lei Xi'er hiding in a cave outside the Cold Fir Territory.]

After reading the first piece of intelligence, he blinked with a calm expression.

To him, it wasn't surprising.

An arranged marriage was just a matter of time, and now that it's set for July 12th, right before the Northern Territory truly enters summer, everything was within his expectations.

"In a little over a month, huh..." he murmured softly.

He was actually quite satisfied with this arrangement.

After all, he had already met Emily, the lady with indisputable beauty.

Unlike Sif, her style was more elegant and dignified, as if she was born to wear a wedding dress and walk down the aisle.

"It is something to look forward to."

Unconsciously, he began to imagine the scene on the wedding day, a slight curve appearing at the corners of his mouth.

Of course, as a marriage between prominent families, he didn't need to personally arrange much.

The procedure, ceremony, dowry, guest list... would all be taken care of by others.

"Hm... Just going directly at that time would be fine." He calculated silently in his mind.

With a casual wave, the pale blue light screen flickered as he switched to the second piece of intelligence.

Seeing the words "Baron Courtney," his eyes twitched slightly.

"Him again."

This Baron had long been dissatisfied with his Inspectorate and had appeared in the system's intelligence more than once.

But this time it was more amusing that he actually wanted his future father-in-law to deal with him?

"Complaining about me to my father-in-law?" Louis chuckled, a trace of sarcasm in his tone, "This Mr. Courtney truly has an imaginative brain."

Of course, he didn't intend to pursue it immediately.

Courtney was just a desperate struggle, not worth his action right now.

But he had silently noted this down in his mental notebook.

"When needed... it won't be too late to bring it up."

The first two pieces were almost trivial, practically worthless reports.

It seemed today was another day of a useless system.

Louis curled his lips and switched to the third piece with a casual move.

Then his whole body froze.

Silver-faced Mage team, two dead, one injured? The injured one was hiding in a cave outside the Cold Fir Territory?

He suddenly sat up straight, eyes fixed on the line of icy blue text, confirming he hadn't read it wrong.

"...What?"

His mind felt like it buzzed, instantly dispelling all sleepiness.

This wasn't just any ordinary team, they were—Silver-faced Mages!

He remembered clearly, the last piece of intelligence mentioned they were ordered by the Supreme Mage to investigate the death of the Grand Mage in Red Tide Territory.

At that time, he was thinking of finding a chance to contact them, possibly opening the door to the Magic World.

But now, without even managing to contact them, two were dead, and the remaining one was severely injured and hiding in a cave at the edge of his territory?!

"What a joke... Why do these Mages love dying near my territory..." Louis murmured, his expression unusually serious.

This could no longer be explained by "coincidence."

This indicated there might be some unknown, terrifying threat lurking around his territory.

This made his heart sink, a serious look appearing on his brow.

But he quickly made a decision; the survivor must be rescued.

Not only because the other party might be a breakthrough for him into magic, but also because he must find out what attacked them.

If this wasn't investigated clearly, what if one day the target of the attack became his territory?

Furthermore, there were a few resource clues around the Cold Fir Territory, which could be conveniently retrieved.

"Tsk, what a troublesome autumn."

He got up to wash, his expression calm, though his mind had already made comprehensive plans.

After washing, he called Lambert and quietly instructed: "Bring the Elite Knight Order and Official Knights, prepare to set off, we are going to 'inspect' Cold Fir Territory."

Lambert didn't ask further, nodded briskly and went to make preparations.

Chapter 187: Brutal Mage Battle

Months ago, Grand Mage Jurgen Locke suddenly lost contact.

Thus, the Supreme Mage issued an order.

Send twelve direct Silver-faced Mages to the Northern Territory to find out the truth.

Target: the Northern Territory border and the ruins of the northern tribes.

Due to the vast location, the twelve of them were divided into four teams, searching separately.

This was initially seen as an easy mission, just finding a person...

At least, everyone thought so at the beginning.

But reality quickly taught these determined Silver-faced Mages what "clueless" really meant.

The wind in the icy land was cold, and the clues even colder.

Weeks passed by in the blink of an eye, no ruins, no bodies, not even a trace of lingering magic power was found.

"This place is increasingly like a dead end." Lei Xi'er frowned at the map, casually igniting a ball of magic flame at his feet.

The three of them sat by the campfire near the creek, munching on dried food with expressionless faces.

"I said it a long time ago, getting into management is the true way of life." Modi bit into the rock-hard bread with a crunch,

"Silver-faced Mage sounds glorious, but in reality, what's the difference between us and cattle; at a Mage's word, we have to run into the Northern Territory forest to find a person we can't find for a month."

"If you want to become a Golden-faced Mage, you first need to learn to kiss ass." Lei Xi'er glanced at him, his tone flat.

"Then forget it." Modi shot him a sideways glance.

Flavia said nothing, tearing at her dry food, seemingly deep in thought.

Her gaze occasionally drifted to the shadows of the forest, where the wind seemed a little off.

The firelight flickered, and the intertwining snow and forest shadows created an indescribable sense of oppression.

"By the way, do we really have to keep going? Not a trace of magic residue." Modi asked in a low voice.

Lei Xi'er didn't answer, just stared into the depths of the forest.

"We've come this far, can't really say we turn back now." He said softly, "Let's go ask the residents nearby later."

Just as they were chatting idly, the forest breeze changed subtly.

The sound that should have been the gentle rustling of branches in the forest suddenly mixed with a bizarre noise.

A creaking, as if bones were grinding against each other, or rusted metal dragging on ice, dull and distorted.

"Wait." Flavia halted her words, frowning, her gaze sweeping sharply behind them.

"Something's coming."

In the next second, shadows of trees cracked open, and five or six figures burst from the dark forest.

Wearing tattered leather armor, their cloaks in shreds, their strides strangely uniform, shockingly fast.

Their faces expressionless, eyes unfocused, as if filled with death intent.

The black-purple totems on their chests appeared like birthmarks, pulsating as if alive, like hearts beating outside skin, emitting a "thump, thump" rhythm.

The most terrifying part was their muscles weren't contracting but writhing, like leeches squirming under skin.

From their eyes and mouths continually crawled translucent threads, some even showed wriggling forms under the skin, like nightmares burrowing into bone.

"These are not human." Flavia's voice was barely audible, "No heartbeat... like husks, controlled by insects."

Lei Xi'er kept his brow furrowed, silently donning his silver mask, a heated demon pattern appearing on his palm.

And Modi was already up, battle-ready: "Forget what they are, just stop them first."

"Armor Technique-Rock Shell!"

A low roar, gray patterns rapidly climbed his body, he rose like a stone statue soldier, the ground exploding underfoot, his whole body like an arrow shot from a string!

"Hah—!!"

A fierce punch sent an Insect Warrior flying, crashing through two trees before slamming into the ground.

But—

"Creak, creak."

The Insect Warrior made a sound like misaligned teeth, rising from the pit, its neck twisted a hundred and eighty degrees with a snap, eyes meeting Modi's, actually swinging a sword in a horizontal cut!

"Damn!"

Modi raised an arm to block, the blade sparking against his rock-hardened arm, a counterforce pushing him back half a step.

This wasn't the strength of a puppet, this was combat strength capable of killing.

"Prepare to control the field!" Lei Xi'er said in a low shout, flicking his right hand.

"Fireball Technique·Chain!"

Three fireballs shot out, hitting three Insect Warriors, erupting into a towering blaze!

As the fire storm raged, those Insect Warriors rolled to the ground like charred corpses.

But the next second, several of them stood up amidst the flames, holding their axes tightly, their charred bodies rushing forward as if impervious to pain.

"Even crawling can attack!?" Lei Xi'er grit his teeth quietly.

One Insect Warrior had already lost its lower body but crawled with its arms like a centipede, not much slower than a normal person.

Insects danced at the corners of its mouth, displaying a nauseatingly eerie grin, pouncing at Flavia.

"Disgusting." Flavia dodged while chanting.

"Swift Blessing·Heavy Protection, Modi!"

Magical light whirled, Modi accelerated again, instantly lunging to the side of the Insect Warrior, a downward punch slammed its entire body into the ground, bone cracks mixed with the burst of insect nests echoed.

A sour, rancid smell of insect pulp wafted through the air.

"Lei Xi'er, two more from behind!" Flavia shouted a reminder.

"Got it," he replied in a deep voice, firing with his left hand.

"Fireball Technique!"

Another wave of fire roared, illuminating the shadows among the trees.

But the Insect Warriors had no instinct to dodge at all, they weren't "fighting"—they were "executing orders."

Even with severed limbs, melted eyes, or half their body gone, they still instinctively pounced, slashed, approached.

Chapter 188: Brutal Mage Battle (Part 2)

They feel no pain, no fear of death, they don't even operate within the concept of "death".

Like the walking dead, yet more ruthless, faster, stronger than corpses.

The real horror isn't that they've lost consciousness.

It's that they retain the combat instincts of warriors, completely unfettered by "death".

Though the Insect Warriors are unnaturally powerful, the three Mages are no novices, having earned the title of Silver-faced Mage, they are the elite among mages.

Numerous missions of life and death have engraved experience, skill, and reflexes into their flesh and blood.

Even facing this horde of monsters, they remain steady, advancing cautiously.

Modi charges in recklessly, drawing the frontal attack, his heavy blade fists continually smashing the enemy's bodies;

Lei Xi'er controls fire with precision, exploding every three seconds, never wasting a trace of Magic Power;

Flavia calmly chants, continuously adding shields and speed boosts for the other two.

Their coordination nearly perfect, they fight as they retreat towards the small southern valley, hoping to use the terrain to break free from entanglement.

But surprises often arrive stealthily in the most familiar rhythm.

"Swift Curse—Tier Three Activating!" Flavia chants softly.

Right then, an Insect Warrior suddenly pounces, pressing closely without any warning!

"Flavia!" Lei Xi'er exclaims.

In the next second, the chest cavity of the Insect Warrior suddenly explodes.

"Pop!!"

In the midst of a slimy and terrifying rupture sound, an entire insect pod bursts into pulp, releasing green-black corrosive liquid, accompanied by countless semi-transparent small insect swarms, scattering out like raindrops!

"Aaaaah!!"

Flavia had no time to evade, covered head-on, screaming as she falls to the ground!

Her clothes instantly manifest countless holes from the corrosive liquid, the sizzling sound piercing the air, and large red blisters emerge upon her shoulders and arms, her skin burned into a patchwork of pale white and red!

The greater horror is yet to come!

Those scattered insects "drill" inside!

Several semi-transparent, worm-like creatures slither, slipping inside through her ears, nostrils, even throat!

"Cough, cough cough cough...!!"

She coughs violently, her body convulsing, her consciousness seemingly scrambled instantaneously.

Flavia suddenly flips over, clutching the ground with her nails, spewing out a few drops of blood-mixed mucus from her mouth, her gaze already starting to unfocus.

She can feel something "gnawing" inside her brain, marrow, even soul.

Modi roars, swinging his sword to cut down the pouncing shadows of insects, almost sprinting back to the cover of broken remnants.

"Flavia?!"

The girl's body curls up on the ground, convulsing endlessly as if burned by fierce flames, her skin turning red like boiling water.

"Damn... What did they do to you?"

He rushes forward, grabbing her, but suddenly freezes.

The trembling stops.

She seems emptied of her soul, terrifyingly silent.

"Flavia... Hang in there—!"

He almost instinctively wants to retreat, but hasn't found his footing yet, when the girl in his embrace suddenly moved.

No, she stands up.

She slowly rises, movements as mechanical as a puppet manipulated by strings.

On that once familiar face, all warmth and life have vanished, leaving only a void of dead silence.

"Flavia...?"

Modi looks at her in stunned disbelief.

Those eyes now glow with a bizarre purple light, like spectral figures emerging from the Abyss.

And the magic emanating from her fingertips is undeniably Flavia's Magic.

Yet it's severely chaotic, grotesquely twisted.

"You're still here, Flavia! If you can hear me, then..."

His words are incomplete, as Flavia suddenly raises her hand.

Without a hint of hesitation, a purple beam instantly slices through the air.

Modi's pupils contract sharply.

The Magic pierces through his chest.

His body shudders, blood surging from his mouth, his gaze lingering on her face with that empty expression.

"So... you've already..."

He can no longer hold on, collapsing heavily, life ebbing away.

As Flavia remains standing upright, like a moving corpse puppet, purple light drifts from her palm like a malicious flower silently blooming in the icy night.

Lei Xi'er stood frozen in place, watching Modi fall, the figure that once fought alongside him now twisted into some grotesque vessel.

"No, it can't be..."

His heart felt as if gripped by a blade, causing him to momentarily forget to breathe.

Flavia walked towards him with slow, heavy steps, yet unnervingly steady.

Her eyes still glowed with that eerie purple light.

Devoid of emotion, only carrying a command.

Behind her, five or six Insect Warriors closed in silently, bodies distorted, faces blank, as if extensions of a singular will.

"Hive Mind!"

A terrifying term Lei Xi'er had read about in ancient texts.

They were forming some kind of resonance, a mental fusion.

He clenched his teeth, took a deep breath, and forcibly suppressed the rage and fear in his heart, swinging his Magic Staff fiercely.

"...Wind-Dispelling—Blast Flame!"

The tempest and flames intertwined, surging forward, raising a scorching Fire Wall to momentarily repel the advancing Insect Warriors, granting him a brief respite.

Yet, his actions were ultimately a step too slow.

"Swoosh—!"

A strand of mucus, accompanied by a foul hiss, struck fiercely at his left shoulder.

His Armor corroded and collapsed instantly, the acidic fluid burning its way through the gaps into flesh, and in the next moment, a few finger-sized insects wriggled their way into his wound!

"Ughhhh!!"

The searing pain exploded like thunderbolts in his mind; Lei Xi'er staggered back, his face turning instantly pale.

He could feel the insects rampaging inside him, as if searching for gaps between nerves and pathways... seeking to control him! To erode him!

"I cannot fall!!"

He roared, biting through his tongue, using the very last sliver of clarity to forcibly gather Magic Power and establish a temporary barrier against his meridians.

Even if it backfires, even if the pain drives him mad... he must not become another puppet!

"Displacement Technique!"

Blinding light engulfed his figure, and in the next second, Lei Xi'er appeared dozens of meters away, stumbling and crashing heavily to the ground, his shoulder wound tearing open and splattering a deep red.

He struggled to his feet, crawling a few steps, finally tumbling into a crevice in a mountain wall, rolling clumsily into a cave hidden behind the vines.

Deep within the cave, it was dark and damp, the stone walls covered in moss and streaks, the air thick with a putrid, musty odor, as if untouched for years.

The sound of the wind was sealed outside, leaving only his heavy breathing echoing in the silent space.

Lei Xi'er leaned against the rough rock wall, covered in blood, unable to even tremble fully.

His body temperature fluctuated erratically, his skin a peculiar pallor, yet his eyes still held a flicker of unwilling light.

Clenching his teeth, he maintained the barrier, using feeble Magic Power to temporarily drive back the insects invading his body.

But it was merely a poisoned chalice, the longer he dragged it out, the greater the cost.

"Ha... ha..."

Lei Xi'er's breath was mixed with bloody froth, the crimson oozing from the corner of his mouth like withered petals scattered among the rubble.

The veins on his forehead bulged like snakes, the Magic Power inside him surged like a tide, more than seventy percent already used to seal the meridians, suppressing the corrosion.

He only had the last thirty percent of Magic Power left, barely keeping his mind clear.

Yet the Beacon Technique collapsed into a formless glow as soon as it was attempted.

"Still... not enough..."

Lei Xi'er's hand fell, as if drained of all strength, sliding helplessly onto the stone ground beside him.

Time seemed frozen. Every minute, every second dragged him closer to the brink of death.

One day and night.

No water, no food, no light.

Only the relentless "insects" within him, and a will nearly shattered by agony.

Lei Xi'er once thought he would die on the battlefield, at the glorious end of some campaign.

But never imagined it would be in this dark cavern, like a discarded puppet, quietly decaying.

The dawn of the second day hadn't arrived yet.

The insects finally fell silent.

Perhaps suppressed to the limit, perhaps retreating instinctively, or maybe just asleep.

He finally managed to catch a breath, his taut nerves snapping like broken strings.

His whole being seemed hollowed out of all blood and strength, slowly collapsing onto the ground, darkness engulfing his vision.

"Is this the end...?"

A bitter smile tugged at his lips, as if in self-mockery, or perhaps relief.

Just before his consciousness completely plunged into darkness.

He heard a voice: "Are you okay?"

Chapter 188: Brutal Mage Battle (Part 2)

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Lei Xi'er's breath was mixed with bloody froth, the crimson oozing from the corner of his mouth like withered petals scattered among the rubble.

The veins on his forehead bulged like snakes, the Magic Power inside him surged like a tide, more than seventy percent already used to seal the meridians, suppressing the corrosion.

He only had the last thirty percent of Magic Power left, barely keeping his mind clear.

Yet the Beacon Technique collapsed into a formless glow as soon as it was attempted.

"Still... not enough..."

Lei Xi'er's hand fell, as if drained of all strength, sliding helplessly onto the stone ground beside him.

Time seemed frozen. Every minute, every second dragged him closer to the brink of death.

One day and night.

No water, no food, no light.

Only the relentless "insects" within him, and a will nearly shattered by agony.

Lei Xi'er once thought he would die on the battlefield, at the glorious end of some campaign.

But never imagined it would be in this dark cavern, like a discarded puppet, quietly decaying.

The dawn of the second day hadn't arrived yet.

The insects finally fell silent.

Perhaps suppressed to the limit, perhaps retreating instinctively, or maybe just asleep.

He finally managed to catch a breath, his taut nerves snapping like broken strings.

His whole being seemed hollowed out of all blood and strength, slowly collapsing onto the ground, darkness engulfing his vision.

"Is this the end...?"

A bitter smile tugged at his lips, as if in self-mockery, or perhaps relief.

Just before his consciousness completely plunged into darkness.

He heard a voice: "Are you okay?"

Chapter 190: Cold Fir Territory (Part 2)

This was the first time he set foot outside the Red Tide Territory, onto other lands within his rule.

The reason, well, could be summed up in two words: too busy.

War, reconstruction, food, refugees, winter preparations, administrative systems, the Northern Territory affairs of the Calvin Clan...

Each one was enough to exhaust an ordinary person.

"But despite the busyness, I am still the Lord." He leaned against the carriage window, a rare hint of anticipation in his eyes. "I really want to see what the Cold Fir Territory has become under my policies."

If the situation was ideal, the people lived and worked happily, tax revenues were stable, and the grassroots officials were efficient.

Then he could confidently pat someone's shoulder and say, "Well done."

But if that wasn't the case?

"Hmph..." A smile played on his lips, "Then... everyone's getting removed and re-evaluated."

After all, the policies had already been implemented and resources distributed, so if Cold Fir Territory truly messed things up, those responsible would not escape accountability.

"Don't blame me for being ruthless," he whispered to himself.

.....

On the other side, in Cold Fir Territory.

The moment the news of Lord Louis's impending visit spread throughout the town, the whole Cold Fir Territory seemed ignited.

The roads were swept spotlessly clean, adorned with colorful cloths and flags of the Red Tide Territory waving in the wind.

A festive atmosphere spread, and officials ordered the entire city to have a day off.

"No one is allowed to stay at home today, everyone will welcome the Lord!"

Of course, even without this order, they would still gather to welcome the Lord.

The square was crowded, with residents gathering on the main street from dawn, wrapped in thick clothing, their eyes fervently fixed on the end of the road.

"Will he really come?" a young boy asked his father, his voice tinged with uncertainty.

"He will," the father assuredly patted his head.

The sunlight was dazzling, yet the crowd kept growing.

But by noon, there was still no sign of the cavalry.

A knight couldn't help but complain in a low voice to the civil servant beside him, "Are you sure the Lord is coming today? Better not have mixed up the days."

The civil servant shook his head with a wry smile, "Probably... something got delayed."

As they spoke, suddenly a rumbling sound echoed from afar.

"He's coming! Lord Louis is coming!!!"

The crowd erupted like ignited gunpowder.

Thunderous cheers pierced the sky, mingled with cries, kneeling, and cries of fervor.

Some lifted their children high, some tossed their homegrown flowers into the air, like offerings, also like celebrations;

Even elderly people knelt down with a thud, mumbling tearfully, "The sun... the sun is here..."

And in the midst of the crowd, a middle-aged carpenter listened to the cheers, tears streaming down his face.

Months ago, his daughter Mia had been on the brink of death from a high fever.

It was the patrol of the Red Tide Knights who rescued her and took her to Lord Louis's camp, and healed her with precious potions.

When the plague broke out, he himself fell under the Snow Spirit Curse, close to dying.

Louis himself ventured into the hot zones to capture the Fire-backed Turtle, establishing the first steam treatment shed in Cold Fir Territory, pulling him back from the brink of death.

Now, Mia had been selected into the Knight Reserves.

Every week, she sends letters from the Red Tide, describing her training progress, spear practice, and night patrols, word by word...

It made him proud, yet also pained him.

To him, Louis was not just a lord, but the person who "brought a second life to their family."

But this feeling wasn't just limited to his family.

In Cold Fir Territory, on this land that had risen from the snow disaster and war, nearly everyone had been saved by that man in times of despair.

Refugees ate their first bowl of hot porridge by the fire;

Women gave birth in snowy nights with medical aid and charcoal;

Children learned to read, study, and train under his protection, no longer fearing the future.

"If it weren't for him, we would have died in that winter," an elderly woman trembled as she spoke, her eyes still fixed on the end of the road. "He is our only hope."

Louis rode a tall snow-maned warhorse, his deep red cloak audibly flapping in the wind.

He didn't wear dazzling armor, nor did he carry an extravagant entourage, just a simple battle robe, the cold wind carrying a slight chill, yet enhancing him like light breaking at dawn.

His features were gentle, his appearance youthful, but not frivolous.

It bore a kind of warm grace, like the first rays of sunlight in the morning sky.

In the refugee group, someone burst into tears, not from sadness, but from the emotional breakdown akin to encountering rain after a long drought.

"Is he our Lord?"

"So young..."

"But... it seems like it's not the first time seeing him..."

"Hmm... in dreams... there was a figure just like him."

Soft whispers arose among the crowd.

He was the one who set up camps during chaos, distributed bread and potions during blizzards, buried corpses after battles, providing shelter to refugees.

He was the one who brought hope.

Not a legend, nor a divine being.

But alive, walking right before their eyes, the true sun.

Some stared blankly, forgetting to wave, others wept and collapsed to the ground.

Their kneeling wasn't out of fear, but gratitude, flag-waving wasn't by command, but out of love.

Raising the Red Tide flag high wasn't just symbolic.

Because on it, there truly was light.

Seeing the crowd's emotions nearly ignite the air, Louis was slightly taken aback.

He wasn't without experience in situations like this.

The celebrations in Red Tide Territory, the welcome ceremonies upon returning from battles, the gratitude and tears of the people were something he had already witnessed.

Yet the scene before him... was even more passionate, more genuine.

Crying, kneeling, mixed with shouts of gratitude, each unfamiliar yet sincere face bore a gaze almost of devotion.

"Perhaps it's because it's my first time in Cold Fir Territory," he gently sighed to himself.

These people, most likely had been waiting for him in their hearts for a long time.

He pulled the reins, stopped at the town's entrance, and dismounted.

He looked ahead, his voice not loud, yet it carried through the crowd like the melting of spring snow: "I didn't expect so many people to come to welcome me... nor that I'd be welcomed in such a way."

He smiled, his gaze slowly sweeping over each citizen, with no trace of arrogance, only warmth and sincerity in his eyes.

"Perhaps many of you... received food from us during your hardest times; perhaps someone got a quilt, a potion, or a temporary camp during the snowy winds;

But the reason you are alive today is because you were strong enough, brave enough.

And I came today to visit you, to see this land that has stood up from hardship."

He continued with a touch of sunny warmth in his voice: "And now, spring has arrived.

The ice and snow are melting, the land is awakening. This is the season of sowing, and also the season of hope.

I don't need you to do anything for me, nor do I want you to verbalize your gratitude.

As long as you can, in this spring, work hard, diligently guard your families, contribute to the territory, that will be the best return to me."

A silence followed.

The wind blew over the square, rustling the hair and garments of the people.

Soon after, someone choked up, the emotions suppressed over an entire winter finally finding an outlet.

Someone quietly sobbed, "We will try our best, Lord..."

Quickly, like an avalanche, the emotions spread.

"I'll definitely plant two more ridges this year!"

"We're not fleeing anymore, this land is our home!"

Passionate shouts and applause erupted from the crowd, some waved flags, some burst into tears,

and children knelt, shouting, "Long live the Red Tide! Long live the Lord!"

It wasn't a slogan, but the real testament to their survival.

They had seen this light in the darkness.

Now they're willing to strive for this brightness.

The Red Tide flag waved high in the wind.

Its blood-red background glowed warm gold under the sunlight.

The golden sun at the center of the flag seemed to truly shine.