

Winter 211

Chapter 211: Knight Growth Potion

"No, it's just... my whole body feels lighter, my Fighting Energy seems to be alive again, and my mind is clearer, but I can't quite explain it..." Weir scratched his head, showing a somewhat embarrassed smile, "I'm not very good with words..."

"You don't need to be good with words," Louis sighed softly, patting his shoulder, "you just need to keep getting stronger."

Then he suppressed his amazement and turned to Hillco: "How many of these potions do you have left?"

"Seven portions, mainly due to material issues." Hillco spread his hands, his tone somewhat regretful, "The Azure Patterned Honey is easy to cultivate, but the Frost Blood Redberry is the biggest problem. This batch was the first to bear fruit in the experimental field, and the quantity is indeed small."

"It was the first time planting, after all." Louis nodded, indicating his understanding, "Small quantity as it is, it's still a result. The next batch doubling the yield will make things much easier."

He shifted his focus and looked at Lambert standing to the side.

"Arrange to find the five knights who have performed the best recently, from different ages and cultivation stages. I want to see the effects of the potion on different people."

"Yes, my Lord!" Lambert immediately took the order and left.

In less than half an hour, he returned to the lab with five knights.

Among them were battle-hardened old knights, newcomers in their early twenties, and even a young apprentice knight—all with expectant expressions and bright eyes.

"I've noted your recent achievements." Louis stated directly, "As a reward, each of you will receive a special Combat Qi Potion. It's crafted in our territory, intended to accelerate your cultivation."

The five heard they would receive a "cultivation-enhancing" mysterious potion, and their eyes almost simultaneously lit up with surprise and excitement.

"This... is specifically for us?" The older knight, with weathered eyes, murmured as if afraid he had misheard.

"Can we really use such a precious potion?" The young knight blinked, his voice slightly trembling.

"I've never drunk anything of this level in my life!" Another thin middle-aged knight could hardly contain his joy, his fingers trembling as if holding a sacred artifact.

"Can I, as an apprentice knight, drink this too?" The youngest apprentice knight stared in disbelief at the faint purple glow in the bottle.

"Drink it." Louis's tone was indifferent, yet it contained encouragement.

With these words, the five seemed ignited like fuses, exchanged an excited look, and almost spoke in unison:

"Thank you for your great kindness, my Lord!"

"Long live Lord Louis!"

"Bottoms up!"

"I can't wait to break through!"

"With this power, I vow to repay Red Tide!"

They received the potions as if they were treasures, gently uncorked them, and smelled the sweet aroma mixed with a hint of coldness, their eyes once again showing awe.

The purplish-red liquid flowed slowly in the bottles, its dim light jumping like a soul, every drop seemingly condensed with their longing for power.

"To our destiny." The older knight murmured, raising his head and drinking it all.

"Drinking it, I must become stronger!" The young man grinned and gulped it down.

Thus, the five drank the potions one after another, their bodies tensed almost simultaneously, some frowning, some gritting their teeth, their expressions becoming solemn and focused.

They immediately sat cross-legged, using their familiar breathing techniques to guide the potion's power into a cultivation state.

A moment later, a faint warm current surged in the air, as if a mysterious pulse resonated within the room.

The floor trembled slightly, invisible waves of Fighting Energy silently spreading from the five, like ripples on water.

Hillco and Jenny had already taken out pen and paper, quickly recording their changes for future improvement reference.

Louis stood by with crossed arms, calmly scanning those five figures, a faint smile appearing on his lips.

About a quarter of an hour later, the first to break through was the middle-aged knight who had been stuck at the peak of the initial stage.

He suddenly opened his eyes, a sharp light shooting from them, sweat pouring down like rain, exhaling a long breath of foul air.

"I... broke through?" He looked at his hands incredulously, gently clenching his fists, feeling the smooth, surging movement of Fighting Energy within, almost moved to tears,

"I've been stuck at the Junior Elite Knight level for four whole years... this potion... it actually helped me cross the bottleneck!"

Another followed, his face slightly flushed, clearly not yet breaking through due to the potion, but still full of joy: "Although I didn't break through, I feel my Fighting Energy is about twenty percent more than before.

It flows more steadily too. It's like... I've cultivated for an extra two months!"

"Me too!" The youngest apprentice knight looked up excitedly, his voice betraying uncontrollable excitement, "My Fighting Energy seemed to be lifted, naturally spreading throughout my body... I never thought it would feel like this!"

The rest gained varying degrees of benefit.

While not everyone broke through at once, the sense of "training efficiency being doubled" filled them with hope for the future.

They rose, once again facing Louis, cupping their fists in gratitude:

"Thank you, my Lord, for the granting of the potion!"

"I swear with my life to serve Red Tide!"

"Such kindness is engraved in my heart and never forgotten!"

They hadn't expected their lord to be so generous as to grant them such a precious drug.

Seeing their excited, flushed faces, a hint of satisfaction crossed Louis's eyes.

"The effect is better than expected." He assessed internally: "Though it's not the 'instant transformation with one sip' kind of mythical potion from games, it already has strategic value in promoting qualitative change, and the key is that it can be mass-produced."

"This batch of potions is just the first edition." He turned to look at Hillco and Jenny, smiling: "Once the Frost Blood Redberry is widely ripe, we can produce them in bulk to cultivate knights truly belonging to Red Tide Territory."

"We'll optimize the management of the main materials." Hillco immediately supplemented, his expression serious, "At the current efficiency, we can produce twenty to thirty potions next round."

As the five knights left in high spirits, Louis slowly withdrew his gaze, swiftly reflecting on the entire process just now.

Those who broke through were concentrated at bottlenecks, especially those stuck at thresholds.

This indicates that the best use of these potions is 'assisting breakthroughs' rather than 'forcing growth.'

This potion isn't one of those legendary elixirs that could transform someone with just one drink.

It's more like a springboard that provides precise thrust at the right moment.

Especially for those knights stuck at bottlenecks, it can save months, even years, of hard cultivation time.

This improvement in efficiency is the crucial factor in altering the structure of combat strength.

In the future, as long as raw material supply is stable, the potion can be mass-produced, becoming a strategic resource for Red Tide Territory.

Even more importantly, this experiment's success not only confirmed the potion's efficacy but also strengthened the knights' sense of belonging to him.

They would firmly remember who made them stronger, who could make them stronger.

Then Louis looked at the last two remaining potions, pondered for a moment, and casually handed one to Lambert beside him.

"You should drink one too." He spoke offhandedly, as if merely offering a cup of tea.

Lambert took the potion, bowing his head slightly: "Thank you, my Lord."

He wasn't too excited, as with his relationship with Louis, he figured he would receive one, yet still felt grateful.

"As for this last bottle..." Louis glanced at the remaining potion in his palm, its purple-red glow, thoughtful, "I'll keep it for myself, and drink it whenever I hit a bottleneck."

Chapter 212: Dance Beneath the Fireworks

Louis had just stepped out of the lab when he suddenly halted.

His eyebrows perked up, as if he suddenly remembered something important.

"Wait a minute..." he muttered to himself, turning back to look at Hillco, who was still tidying up potion bottles, "I almost forgot the main thing."

He returned, walked over to the potion racks, and shouted to the alchemy genius who was busily organizing, "Hillco, I'm actually here today not just for the matter of the Knight Potion."

Hillco looked up at this, blinking in confusion: "Not for that? Your timing is perfect, I thought your nose was even more sensitive than the lab cat's."

Clearing his throat, Louis said somewhat embarrassedly, "I want you to help me make something... um, special."

"Oh?" Hillco grew interested, tilting his head and crossing his arms, "What kind? A weapon? A potion? Or a magic device? Or a magic explosion bullet!"

"None of those." Louis paused, as if choosing his words carefully, and then slowly said, "I want to make something that can light up the night sky.

Preferably colorful, shaped like... a flower, exploding in the sky, and then slowly falling apart.

But not a real explosion. Just something... for celebration."

The expression on Hillco's face gradually became oddly nuanced, his brows knitting into a question mark: "You're saying... exploding, glowing, making noise, but not harming anyone?

Doesn't that sound like... a toned-down version of a magic explosion bullet? Are you planning to celebrate by blowing up a few birds during a siege?"

"It's not an explosive!" Louis waved his hands frantically, "It won't kill anyone, or set houses on fire. It's... beautiful, romantic, set in the night sky, like a giant flower blooming up there.

And it will fall like starlike sparks, twinkling. Sometimes it's red, sometimes it's blue, there's also gold and purple... best if it can come in sequences, like dancing in the sky."

Hillco's face was plastered with "What kind of nonsense are you talking about?".

He blinked in confusion: "Are you describing some kind of magic? Why come to me, I'm an alchemist, not a mage?"

"Not magic, nor illusion, it's something tangible." Louis sighed, finally realizing he was describing something that didn't exist in this world.

"You want to make a... 'rhythmic, non-dangerous explosion device', specifically for... looking good? What's the point?" Hillco's tone was already tinged with subtle doubt.

"It can be used in celebrations, ceremonies, like during weddings, everyone looks up at the night sky, with a 'bang', a golden flower bursts open, and people below clap and cheer, that feeling must be fantastic."

"You want to set off a magic explosion bullet at your wedding?"

"It's not a magic explosion bullet!" Louis stressed, exasperated.

Hillco had a look on his face like "it's all about the same", silently uncapping a potion bottle he just closed, possibly to check if he hadn't mistaken the scent of some hallucinogenic ingredient.

"Got it, sort of." He scratched his head, "You want something like launching magic explosion bullets into the sky with an alchemy device, non-lethal, varying effects, as beautiful as possible. Simply put... a 'non-killing magic explosion bullet'?"

"Yes! That's about it." Louis breathed a sigh of relief, finally getting somewhat close.

"Alright, I'll give it a try." Hillco shook his head in resignation.

...

The sun set in the west, its golden-red afterglow sprinkled on the northern field of Red Tide Territory, coating the boundless wilderness with a layer of serene, gentle warmth.

The wind blew through the gaps in the wild grass, kicking up some dust, and also brought with it the impending essence of night.

Louis led his horse and stepped into this somewhat desolate testing ground.

Hillco's figure was clearly visible in the distance.

He stood beside an alchemy launcher, focused, directing a few apprentices as they installed oddly shaped alchemy devices onto the launcher.

On the ground lay several large metal tubes, arranged neatly, though somewhat crude due to hurried manufacture, looking like a bunch of giant carrots ready to ascend.

"Wow..." Louis blinked, "This thing is even more... peculiar than I imagined."

And Hillco, the inventor himself, draped in his smoke-blackened refined white robe, stood excitedly in front of the launcher, instructing the apprentices to pour some powder into the metal tubes.

Sif murmured under his breath, "Why do I feel it's more like Red Tide Castle?"

Louis's mouth twitched, how is it similar, Red Tide Castle is so cool.

Then his gaze swept over the ground, and his eyebrows twitched slightly, "And what's written on these cylinders?"

[Prototype • Ornamental Magic Explosion Bullet]

[Do Not Lick!!!]

[Side Effects: Ringing Ears/Light Dizziness/Possible Romantic Sensations]

"Where do I even start to complain?" Louis held his head, feeling a headache.

It was then that Hillco finally noticed their arrival, waving his hand abruptly: "My Lord! You're just in time! Almost ready!"

In the center of the field, the last set of devices was installed.

"The main ingredient is newly blended magic marrow powder, one of the core energy sources," Hillco explained while checking, "It mixes in a trace of red platinum magic crystal..."

"Is it really safe?" Louis repeated softly, his tone peculiar.

"Safe under normal circumstances." Hillco replied without hesitation.

Louis's eyelid twitched slightly, what about under abnormal circumstances?

"For colors, it's using fire moss ash and gold and silver dust." He continued, his tone calm as water, "Fire moss ash presents bright red under high temperature, and gold and silver dust reflects blue and gold light under different lighting conditions. If the proportions are adjusted well, it can simultaneously explode in red, blue, and gold hues."

Chapter 213: Dance Beneath the Fireworks

He spoke very seriously, as if he were discussing a high-precision explosive project.

"It's just that the noise might be a bit loud." Hillco paused and turned to look at Louis, "Probably as loud as... a large magic explosion bullet."

Louis shrugged, he didn't really mind, after all, the place where the fireworks were to be set off was far from the wedding venue.

In the distance, a few alchemy apprentices had already completed the final preparations. One person quickly ran over to report: "All devices are ready, the Demon Marrow is fully loaded, the procedure is clear and definite."

Upon hearing this, Hillco's spirits lifted, revealing an uncharacteristic look of anticipation.

He waved to everyone, his voice clear: "Everyone, step back thirty paces! Begin the launch!"

The alchemy apprentices quickly scattered, and Hillco pressed a hand against the activation device in front of him.

The next moment, several cylinder-shaped devices emitted a low hum, then with a "bang," they tore through the night sky, whistling upwards with metal tails ripping through the air.

Soon after

"Boom!"

In the sky above, the first firework suddenly exploded like a blazing lotus in full bloom. Crimson flames poured down like a waterfall, dragging trails of burning patterns across the night sky.

"Pop!"

The second burst into a blue light, cool and deep, like ice crystals shattering among the red flames, illuminating the night in an instant.

"Boom—Bang—Pop!"

The successive explosions resonated in the air like drumbeats, with three colors intertwined, and golden starry fragments streaked across the sky like meteors.

The trailing flames intertwined and whirled in the air, like a divine being wielding a paintbrush, dyeing the pitch-black sky into a massive, burning canvas.

It wasn't a piercing roar, but a heavy and deep explosion, like war drums, or like a heartbeat, pounding heavily in everyone's chest.

Louis raised his head, watching the gradually dissipating remnants of the flames, his eyes slightly moving, a faint smile appearing on his lips.

He whispered to himself, "Better than I expected."

Though it couldn't replicate the multi-layered bursts and star-like brilliance of the fireworks from New Year's Eve in his previous life, the complex patterns and long rhythm were missing, and overall it was rougher.

But in this world where the concept of "fireworks" had never existed, this scene was enough to move hearts.

Crude, yet striking, simple yet genuine.

He slowly turned his head to look at Hillco standing nearby by the launch platform.

He was standing there with his arms crossed, looking rather peculiar, as if saying, "What kind of explosion is this?"

"Not bad..." Louis said earnestly, "This is what I wanted. It's just that it could be improved a bit, to make it... more beautiful. For example, less violent, softer colors, shapes more... like flowers, not explosions."

"Flowers?" Hillco furrowed his brows, as if he had heard some heretic nonsense.

He gestured with a somewhat unorthodox hand sign learned who-knows-where: "If you really want me to make those soft, non-explosive fireballs that neither hurt nor explode, I might need to reassess the definition of 'explosion.'"

Louis shrugged helplessly: "I want to release them at the wedding, not on the battlefield!"

"However, it's not difficult to change." Hillco, after grumbling, reverted to the alchemist's calm of converting any emotional request into a formula, "You need to first tell me which part of 'beauty' you're referring to?"

Is it the lack of elegance in the flower shape? The colors not pure enough? Or perhaps the firing frequency lacking rhythm? Of course, I can try them all."

He grinned, "That's pretty simple, I can make it happen."

Sif stood beside Louis, gazing at the night sky.

The fireworks slowly bloomed overhead, like a meteor waterfall hanging upside-down in the night sky, with red, blue, and gold alternating and curling, like a divine being's hand painting an incredible dream.

In her eyes flashed shock and joy, like a child seeing the world's wonders for the first time.

It was a romantic scene she had never imagined, like a fairy tale, like a dream, like a miracle that would only happen in distant lands.

But that joy didn't linger for long.

Because suddenly, she remembered something.

These fireworks weren't meant for her.

Though she had long told herself not to expect anything, though she had long understood that there could be nothing bold and open between them.

Yet even so, witnessing such a miracle, it was hard not to feel... a bit sad.

The smile on her face gradually faded, her gaze dropped a little, and her long lashes lowered slightly.

The wind blew across her hair, and she gently bit her lower lip, as if trying to suppress an emotion that shouldn't surface, then turned quietly, intending to leave the afterglow of that light.

"It's your first time seeing this too, right?" Louis's voice suddenly sounded from behind.

Sif paused, her foot that had just stepped halted.

When she turned back, he was already standing in front of her with a smile, a subtle mischievousness on his face, coupled with a bit of clumsy tenderness.

"Well, how did it look?" he asked, his tone relaxed as if discussing a rainbow after the rain.

She didn't immediately respond.

Because it really was beautiful.

But... that beauty didn't belong to her.

She dropped her gaze, didn't speak the "but" she intended to say, but that calm demeanor betrayed her feelings clearly.

Louis looked at her, didn't continue to ask, just fell silent for a moment.

Then he suddenly stepped back half a pace, bowed slightly, and extended a hand, making an exaggerated yet very gentlemanly gesture of invitation.

"So... would you like to dance with me?"

He said with a smile, his voice low and gentle, as if afraid of disturbing something.

Sif was stunned for a moment.

She hadn't expected to hear such an invitation at this moment, in this place.

Nor did she expect that, at a moment when the fireworks hadn't fully dissipated, Louis would, in this way, seemingly deliberately, leave her a personal memory.

"Can you dance?" she asked softly, with a hint of doubt and challenge in her tone.

"No." Louis answered frankly, "But I'll try not to step on your feet."

In that instant, Sif couldn't help but smile, the little bit of sadness in her eyes illuminated again by the lingering glow of the fireworks.

So she extended her hand, lightly placing it in his palm.

The two stood in the middle of the open ground, with no music, no dance floor, only the lingering flames in the sky and the gently flickering firelight in the wind.

Their steps were not graceful, and their movements were slightly awkward, but neither of them cared.

Sif leaned gently against Louis, palm touching his, feeling the slight coolness of his body temperature, like the night wind, and also like... a long-lost comfort.

The longer she stood beside him, the more Sif could feel the depth beyond his years in those eyes.

Behind that gentle demeanor, there was an extremely determined will and a frighteningly calm judgment.

He was someone truly capable of changing the tides of a battle, reshaping order.

And also... one of the few willing to leave a flame, to light a lamp for others on this harsh wasteland.

She watched his imperfect dancing yet his effort to maintain a gentleman's posture, and suddenly a feeling of indescribable tenderness welled up in her heart.

Perhaps in his heart, she wasn't special.

In the future, he was destined to marry other women, perhaps more than one or two.

This world is terrifyingly lenient to the powerful, especially for Noble Lords like him, it was nothing unusual to have many wives and concubines.

She knew.

She had always known.

Just like she knew this dance wasn't prepared for her, the fireworks didn't bloom for her, and the future wasn't meant to be left for her.

But she still reached out her hand.

As long as this moment, he was dancing with her.

As long as in this fleeting moment of lingering light, she could stand by his side, even if only once, only for a moment.

She was willing to hide this memory in the softest part of her heart, not demanding, not asking for more.

"Louis..." she whispered, voice almost inaudible, as if afraid to disrupt this quietly arrived dream.

She didn't know what expectations she should have for him.

Maybe none.

But she was willing to be with him, at least for now.

Not for power, not for responsibility, just for... this moment, he was looking at her, holding her hand.

Chapter 214: Investigation

The gray clouds hung low, as if the entire sky held its breath due to some ominous omen.

The smell of scorched earth mixed with a stench akin to corpses rotting for days, cutting through the senses like a knife in the wind.

Occasionally, a gust of wind brought a scent reminiscent of corroded metal mingled with rotten eggs, sticky like tar, nauseating.

The vegetation was entirely withered, even the usual bird calls in the forest were absent, a deathly silence shrouded the dense woods ahead.

Vic stood in front of the blockade line, backed by twenty Elite Knights clad in deep silver armor, assembled silently.

A stationed knight quickly approached, blocking the path, spoke with a serious tone: "Ahead is a restricted area, unauthorized entry is prohibited."

Vic was not annoyed, simply retrieved an iron token from within his cloak, engraved with the Sun Mark of the Red Tide Lord.

"The Lord sent me." His tone was calm.

The stationed knight's expression changed, instantly restrained his previous vigilance, and lowered his head with an apologetic gesture: "My apologies, please forgive my rudeness. Please proceed inside."

"Hmm, it's alright." Vic replied mildly, stepping forward.

Passing through several layers of isolation lines, he glanced around, the desolate, charred soil, and that strangely "too clean" scene...

No decaying bodies, no signs of tearing, as if everything had been "erased."

A knight stationed by Louis came to report: "From the beginning until now, we've not found any creatures approaching this area, the combat traces stop here."

"No other discoveries?" Vic glanced at him, his tone calm yet unnerving.

The knight lowered his head: "...Yes."

Vic said nothing, only lowering his gaze to the ground beneath him.

He noticed the surface of the land had cracks indicative of high-temperature scorching, the surrounding grass yellowed but not burnt, clearly the accuracy of the blockade line was precise.

"The isolation line is drawn very well," he said, his tone affirming.

He then took out a bound notebook from his waist, quickly jotting down some comments.

This would be included in the formal intelligence report he submitted to Duke Edmund.

Finished with the notes, he slightly raised his head, looking towards the depth of the blackened earth.

"Alright." His voice was steady as iron, "Next, we'll take over the investigation."

Traversing layers of scorched earth and rotting odors, Vic stepped slowly into the center of the forest clearing.

This used to be a dense forest, but now the branches withered, the soil charred.

It was as if some soul-devouring calamity had lingered here for a moment and then vanished without a trace.

He exhaled a murky breath, touched the ground with his sword, whispering: "Activate."

In an instant, Fighting Energy circulated within, flowing through his blood to his eyes, skin, and every pore.

Fiery red patterns emerged from below his neck onto his skin, as if living creatures were wandering.

His world transformed accordingly.

The colors faded, leaving only a ripple world of cold and warm differences.

The dense forest before him seemed to become a gray silhouette, and countless subtle remnants of heat traces, residual magic power fluctuations, paths of air movement all appeared before his eyes.

He "saw."

Three figures, swift and urgent, shuttled through the woods, cloaks fluttering, magic staffs casting intertwining glows of heat and coldness.

Their positions spread out, coordination orderly, one main attacker, one controller, one suppressor.

Magic explosions left rings of pale blue residual marks in the air, diffusing like ripples.

And right in front of them, several massive and aberrant heat sources crawled forth, neither metallic nor flesh, their writhing posture revolting.

It left corrosion marks on the ground, the temperature oddly high, its trail spreading into a web-like crack, dissolving upon contact.

Those were the individuals of the insect swarm, moving swiftly, breath erratic yet bearing some form of precise coordination.

"Indeed, it is them."

Vic's eyes flickered slightly, pupils reflecting the gray-white writhing traces.

He spoke in a tremendously low voice, almost as if self-talk: "And... they've evolved."

He walked slowly to the edge of the battlefield, crouched down, his palm touching the ground, a strand of cold Fighting Energy seeped through his fingertips into the soil.

Not searching for temperature, but reading the "path."

"These insects... didn't charge in at random."

Along the barely discernible corrosion trails and heat marks, in a world "beyond sight," he saw a terrifying fact.

The advancement trajectory of the insect swarm formed a fan shape, evidently under "control" or "guidance."

They avoided certain obstacles, attacked in batches, most importantly.

Even after death, they took the initiative to recover remains, clean the battlefield, leaving almost no evidence for someone to trace.

"Not beasts... but," Vic stood up, his gaze stern.

He remembered that nightmare three years ago, thousands of corpses like a deluge, crushed the elite of the Northern Army into blood mud with sheer numbers and parasitic traits.

The insect swarm of the past was terrifying, yet like beasts, uncontrollable, chaotic, without order.

But this time, it seemed like an "army."

"More covert... more efficient." He muttered softly.

An ominous thought flashed across his mind.

He pulled out a pocket notebook from his waist, scribbled a few words on the remnants:

"Insect swarm behavior trends towards organization, suspected test-type organisms."

He did not speak out this deduction.

After all, if anyone truly commanded the insect swarm, it would not be merely a defense, but a precursor to a battle of annihilation.

At this moment, his thoughts yet to settle, his brow slightly moved.

"...?"

In the air, there was a faint, almost dissipated remnant wave, extending to the southwest, not yet completely cooled.

Those were the traces left by the fleeing insect swarm, which the average person wouldn't notice, but his magical eyes could easily perceive.

"They haven't completely escaped." Vic's gaze turned cold, instantly resuming its sternness. "Everyone, prepare for battle. Head northwest, pursue."

The adjutant was taken aback, "Your Excellency, we have not yet..."

"The investigation here is complete," Vic interrupted, his voice calm yet chilling. "Let's go."

Vic took the lead, venturing into the depths of the dense forest.

Twenty elite knights followed without hesitation, swiftly forming ranks, resembling a cold, sharp spear thrust into the silent forest.

A silent hunt commenced.

...

Magical flames burned quietly.

The gray-blue flames reflected against the obsidian walls, several cold gazes cast upon Lei Xi'er.

He stood at the center of the "Secret Council Hall," clad in the Flowing Light Robe symbolizing a Silver-faced Mage, his face pale.

His left hand unconsciously pressed against his chest, where a searing sensation from crawling insects seemed to still churn beneath the skin.

Above, amidst shadowed layers of steps, was the Mage Elder Council.

Seventeen ancient mages, aging but still potent in magic power, silently watched this young man who brought news of disaster.

In the topmost platinum seat sat a silent figure, draped in a pale silver robe, their visage hidden beneath the brim.

This was the Supreme Mage—the highest authority in the Mage Forest.

Lei Xi'er knelt on one knee, his voice hoarse but each word distinct.

"Report begins. Flavia, Modi, and I arrived in the Northern Territory of the Ironblood Empire, following the trail to investigate the disappearance of Grand Mage Jorgen...

Subsequently, we were attacked. Six Insect Warriors, cooperating with precision, unafraid of magic, unafraid of death, their combat instincts unlost...

Flavia was parasitized. She retains memories of magic and combat, but doesn't recognize the two of us..."

Lei Xi'er recounted everything in detail.

There was no embellishment, no omissions, as if laying himself bare before the elders.

Except for the matter of teaching Louis magic.

If he confessed to "teaching magic to a lord without permission," even in the name of "repayment," it would inevitably invite disturbance and reproach, something to be approached cautiously.

The elders' seats fell silent momentarily.

The gazes of the seven gray-robed figures shifted over Lei Xi'er, like invisible spiritual barriers, dissecting and analyzing him.

"The 'insect corpses' you mentioned... We have no records of such." An older female mage finally broke the silence, her tone cautious, "Are you certain what you saw wasn't an illusion? Or perhaps, some kind of psychic parasitism-induced delusion?"

"I am not mad." Lei Xi'er stared straight at her, his calm like iron.

"Councilor," he called softly.

In the next instant, a Blue Silver Demon Pattern Box, with sealed magic inside, floated from his sleeve and settled in the hall's center.

"This was... extracted from my body."

Click.

The sealing runes shattered like chains, and a faint green light spread through the air.

It was a dead insect.

Only palm-sized, twisted yet intricate, with its joints as orderly as a metallic structure, and its thread-like limbs coated in some corrosive mucus. Most terrifyingly, the eye of the insect hadn't completely dried up, appearing to be slightly moving.

"This is... from your body?"

"Before I fainted, it was alive. A doctor in Red Tide Territory surgically removed it, and with my last bit of magic, I sealed it. It tried to bore into my spine." Lei Xi'er stared down at the insect, his voice like a blade sliding over ice.

The Magic Court fell into chaos for the first time.

Whispers and psychic waves crisscrossed the air, the elders uncharacteristically engaging in heated discussion.

Some advocated for keeping this matter under wraps to prevent panic, while others suggested forming a dedicated research group...

Beneath the purple-silver mask, the Supreme Mage never spoke.

He simply sat silently, as if merging with the Secret Council Hall, his silence seeming to carry more weight than any words spoken.

Until the Councilor's gaze fell on him for the third time, the elders' voices gradually lowered.

The Supreme Mage slowly raised his hand.

Five fingers tapped lightly, a deep sound resonating.

It was not a spell or a curse, but a simple strike, yet it felt like a heavy hammer upon the heart of the entire Secret Council Hall.

"This insect swarm event is not incidental."

He finally spoke, his voice deep and hoarse, yet with an undeniable authority.

"The Mage Forest will officially dispatch personnel of Grand Mage caliber, leading an elite team, to the Northern Territory to uncover the truth."

The entire chamber was shaken.

The elders fell silent, nodding slightly in agreement.

Lei Xi'er stood in the hall, finally exhaling imperceptibly after a long stretch of tension.

He did not show any obvious expression, but the string in his heart finally loosened in that moment.

Not because he was praised, nor because he was saved, but:

The danger he worked so hard to convey had finally been truly heard.

Chapter 215: Wedding Preparations

The faint light of dawn silently spilled into the room through the lattice window.

A layer of fog-like morning light cast soft and hazy shadows on the floor and the edge of the bed, reflecting a scene inside the room so tranquil it was as if time had stopped.

The warmth of last night's fireworks had not completely dissipated, like the trailing notes left by a dream.

Louis slowly opened his eyes.

He didn't get up immediately but instinctively glanced to the side.

Sif was quietly curled up in his arms, her posture a little cautious, yet carrying an unintentional dependency.

Her silver-white short hair was scattered on the pillow, like a layer of frost silently covering a snowy night.

Her eyebrows were peaceful, her pale cheeks were tinged with a hint of red from sleep, breathing steadily and warmly.

Last night, she didn't say anything, just stayed silently by his side after the dance ended, not uttering a word.

Louis knew she had sensed his hesitation, ambiguity, even avoidance.

She was too smart not to know that the fireworks were not prepared for her, nor would she misunderstand his casual mention of a "dance partner invitation."

Yet she still smiled and extended her hand.

"Thank you for your hard work," he murmured softly, as if speaking to her, or perhaps to himself.

He slowly sat up, his movements gentle as if not wanting to disturb the girl sleeping in his arms.

Raising his right hand lightly, he waved his palm.

Accompanied by a soft "hum," a translucent light curtain slowly unfolded before him, revealing familiar ice-blue interfaces.

[Daily intelligence update complete]

[1: The Supreme Mage decided to dispatch three Grand Mages and an elite Silver-faced Squad to the Northern Territory of the Ironblood Empire to investigate the insect corpse attack case.]

[2: Vic's investigation discovered that the insect swarm has shown organized tactical behavior, suspected of intelligent evolution, and has sent a team for in-depth investigation.]

[3: Eduardo Calvin, under the orders of a Bishop from the Golden Feather Flower Church Court, heads to the Northern Territory to investigate the disappearance of Grand Mage Jurgen Locke.]

The floating blue light curtain in the air gently trembled, lines of intelligence automatically scrolling and updating.

Louis quietly watched, his right-hand fingers tapping lightly on his knee, his emotions ebbing and flowing with the three pieces of intelligence.

The first was that the Grand Mages and Silver-faced Squad would be visiting the Northern Territory to investigate the insect corpses.

His lips unconsciously curved up slightly; it was good news.

The deployment of Grand Mages by the Mage Forest indicated that they had finally realized the seriousness of the situation.

This not only alleviated his pressure but also meant that higher-level forces were involved, shielding him from much trouble and suspicion in the short term.

Besides, if the presence of the insect corpses could be eliminated by them, he wouldn't have to worry about it either.

The second piece was that Vic had identified the insect swarm exhibiting organized behavior and tracked the whereabouts of the insect corpses.

Louis nodded; another piece of good news, though nothing much to say, he hoped Vic could uncover more truths.

But just then, his eyes fell on the third piece of intelligence.

That moment, his brow gently furrowed.

Eduardo Calvin.

The name of his older brother appearing in the intelligence list wasn't surprising, but the problem lay in his credentials.

"Under the orders of the Bishop from the Golden Feather Flower Church Court."

Louis's gaze fixed.

The Golden Feather Flower Church Court? ... That's the authoritative body of the Golden Feather Flower Religious Authority Country.

Everyone in the Empire knew that this religious country was at odds with the Ironblood Empire and could even be considered its most significant enemy faction.

And now his brother was appearing in the Northern Territory as a "Bishop's Envoy," coincidentally investigating the disappearance of Grand Mage Jurgen Locke, which was closely tied to him...

His fingertips twitched slightly, the characters on the intelligence light curtain reflecting in his eyes but unable to conceal the turmoil in his thoughts.

"When did he establish connections with the Golden Feather Flower Church Court? Does father... know about this?"

This was the first thought that flashed in his mind. If father didn't know, then it was too dangerous.

If father knew, then this was probably his contingency plan.

After all... the Emperor's actions had become increasingly overbearing in recent years, forcing various powerful nobility to prepare alternative routes in secret or openly.

The Calvin Clan should be no exception.

He wasn't sure if his brother was attending his wedding, investigating the Grand Mage, or using the church's name to strategize in the Northern Territory.

Perhaps all three.

But in any case, such a figure appearing at this time must not be left unattended.

Not to mention that the subject of his investigation was Jurgen Locke.

The missing Grand Mage had died right before him and was closely connected to the Primordial Meditation Technique in his mind.

"All right then..." He extended his hand, closing the light curtain with a finger, as the blue light slowly dissipated.

Louis planned to guide him to focus on the insect corpses.

The more people entangled in this mess of insect corpses, the safer he would be.

With more people involved, he would have more shields to protect him.

Then he still disappointedly glanced at where the light curtain had last disappeared.

"Still no... direct core intelligence on the insect corpses."

.....

Outside, the sky was flushed, like a red satin gently crumpled and slowly spread along the silhouette of distant mountains, shimmering in the clean evening breeze unique to the Northern Territory in July.

In the Governor's Mansion's dressing room, a silver mirror hung high, white gauze half-draped, like a stage curtain.

Emily was standing in front of the mirror, her skirt slightly lifted, her fingertips gently brushing the collar of her wedding dress.

This was her third time trying on this dress, and it would be the last.

The wedding dress was dark red, with a fine pattern woven into it, and gold thread meandered down from the shoulders, embroidered with the symbols of the Northern Territory: a flying eagle and a cedar tree.

At her waist was a pale gold belt that perfectly outlined her straight posture.

She stood there like a crimson rose on the snowfield, upright, elegant, yet exuding an unapproachable chill.

Emily had a typical face of the Edmund Family, with distinct features, brows sharp as blades, and dark eyes that were calm and cold.

She inherited her mother's soft hair color, a head of long blue hair, now styled into a "vow-style" bun of the Northern Lords, with a few strands of loose hair at her neck, tinged with a golden hue in the candlelight.

She stared at herself in the mirror, her gaze focused yet complex.

Her mouth slightly upturned, but not smiling, as if trying to adapt to a new identity.

"So, it's really... time to set out now." she said softly, her voice like a feather brushing across a clean tabletop.

Emily took a gentle breath, turned around, and said to the maid beside her, "Pack this wedding dress well, I'll wear it on the road tomorrow."

"Yes, miss."

It had only been three months since Emily decided to accept this marriage proposal.

"How sly, even though he only said, 'Welcome to the Red Tide,' I started expecting him to hold my hand, worrying about whether the headdress at the wedding would be too tacky."

She sat on the chair, hugged her knees, gently rested her head on them, and murmured softly.

"What color suit will he wear? Will he think my wedding dress is too formal? Or will he wait for me seriously, and then smile and take me over..."

As she thought, she looked at the distant flower vine wooden chair, where several half-written sheets of paper lay scattered.

She had originally wanted to write something, maybe a family letter or a farewell speech before the wedding.

But when holding the pen, she felt that the blankness was heavier than words.

The closer to the wedding, the more at a loss she felt, even though she wasn't that kind of person.

A gentle knocking sound came from outside the door.

"Come in."

The door creaked open, and it was her mother—no, her stepmother, but Emily never called her that.

To her, this was the woman who gently took her hand when she was six and stayed by her side ever since, her true mother.

"Are you all ready?"

Her mother was dressed in a simple dark blue gown, her hair coiled into a traditional Northern bun, looking gentler than usual.

"Hmm, pretty much..." Emily nodded.

She stood up, obediently walked over, and sat beside her mother.

Her mother gently tidied up a few strands of hair ruffled by the wind, then handed her a cup of hot tea.

"I remember the first time you attended a court ball when you were young, you wouldn't let me touch your hair and insisted on braiding a messy pigtail yourself."

"That's because I was afraid you'd make my hair too 'obedient'!" Emily protested softly.

Her mother smiled and gently tapped her forehead with her fingertip.

"From that time, I knew you were an eagle meant to fly away. One day you would fly out of this castle and walk your own path."

"But this time, you're flying a bit far." Emily said softly, without any hesitation in her voice.

"I... even though I've only met him once, I know he's not someone who lives off his family..."

"I trust he won't let me fall. Even if I fly far, I'm not afraid."

Her mother looked at her, momentarily absent-minded.

"You've grown into a woman, Emily. Faster than I imagined."

She gently embraced Emily, letting her lean on her shoulder.

"If one day you feel wronged, no matter how far, just write home. Even if I can't help you, you'll know you're not alone."

Emily hugged her mother tightly and nodded, "I won't feel wronged. I won't let you see such a thing."

.....

On the early dawn of the next day, before the sky was fully bright, the sound of wheels rolling and horses' hooves hitting the stone path in front of Edmund's Mansion could be heard.

A grand dowry caravan lined up in the morning mist, the red and gold patterned curtain of the carriages fluttering in the wind, dozens of exquisite carriages lined up in a row.

Chests piled high as small hills, gold and silver wares, ceremonial utensils, wedding dresses and combs, and even Emily's sword for practicing swordsmanship were placed inside.

Guards and servants each played their roles, impressive yet not ostentatious.

Emily, dressed in a dark blue traveling cloak and wearing a cape, slowly descended from the stone steps.

Her stepmother held her hand, and they walked side by side towards the caravan, their buns damp from the morning dew, their expressions gentle.

"Father said he'd leave a bit later," Emily said softly.

"He'll make it to the wedding." Her mother tightened her grip.

The bells tolled, and the caravan slowly set off, heading in the direction of the Red Tide Territory.

Chapter 216: Arrival

July is the shortest and gentlest season of the year in the Northern Territory.

The sunlight, though faint, lightly sprinkles over the wilderness, brushing past the treetops and wheat fields, as if the cold wind has taken a rest, leaving only a slight coolness gently twirling between the hair strands.

On such a quiet afternoon, a caravan slowly approaches on the main road outside Red Tide City.

Leading the way is an honor guard dispatched by Duke Edmund's Mansion, followed by more than a dozen carriages.

"Is this the Red Tide Territory?"

The Duchess Alina sits in the second carriage, lifting a corner of the curtain, gazing at the changing scenery outside the window.

Born from the old nobility of the Northern Territory, she has been well-traveled since childhood, following her husband on provincial tours for many years, having visited many famous places in both the north and south.

Yet the scene before her still causes her to pause slightly.

The streets are clean, with not a scrap of paper at the edges, and the cobbled path appears as if newly laid—immaculate and neat.

On either side of the road, workers are efficiently transporting sacks of wheat; their movements are skillful and orderly, with not a trace of fatigue on their faces.

Further away, several children are running and playing by the low fences, their laughter mingling with the summer breeze.

Outside the carriage, a gray-haired middle-aged attendant approaches Alina's carriage window, quietly sighing, "Madam... In all my life traveling through the provinces, I have never seen such a stable border territory."

"Is this truly... the main territory being developed for just over a year?" Alina murmurs to herself.

Opposite her, the maid Olivia adjusts her glasses, a slight appreciative smile on her lips, "The farmland is well-kept, and the roads are smoothly maintained."

She pauses, speaking earnestly, "The most important thing is that the villagers' complexions are rosy; such a place, even if not wealthy, can never be poor."

On the other side, Emily listens to these praises of the Red Tide, a slight smile rising on her lips, a faint but unnoticeable pride emerging from the depths of her heart.

As the caravan moves forward, the city gates gradually become clear in the distance.

A row of Red Tide Knights is lined up on both sides of the main road, donned in cloaks with black backgrounds and red patterns, each standing solemnly with swords in hand.

The leading knight kneels on one knee, loudly announcing, "Red Tide Lord Louis Calvin commands us to welcome Duke Edmund's daughter, the future mistress, Her Highness Emily!"

Welcoming them is an elder but very dignified butler, dressed impeccably with steady steps.

"Welcome, Your Highness, welcome, Madam, the Lord is busy with the final preparations for the wedding, and I have been instructed to arrange rest for you both."

Louis did not come personally because, according to the Empire's wedding customs, especially among the nobility, the bride and groom should not meet before the wedding.

Thus, the carriages slowly enter the main street of Red Tide City.

Inside the city is busier than expected.

However, it is not a chaotic kind of busy, but one that is almost rhythmic and orderly.

Red and blue intertwined ribbons hang on either side of the road, symbolizing union and celebration.

The wind makes the ribbons wave gently like waves, adding a tender rhythm to the upcoming wedding.

The marketplace is at its afternoon peak, with stalls lined up neatly one after another, goods classified clearly.

The candy vendor, wearing a clean linen apron, is putting honey-drizzled dried fruit into jars.

Beside him, a traveling bard plucks the strings, singing a new tune of wedding hymns, surprisingly rhythmic.

Children hum the tune as they run by, pulling a ribbon to wrap around their head as a scarf, laughter bursting crisply among the crowd.

Just as the carriage is about to turn the corner, Alina softly lifts the curtain to look at the scenery.

Not far ahead, a long line has formed in front of a grain shop.

Strangely, those in line don't appear anxious; instead, they are chatting and laughing, with a few roughly-dressed men spontaneously maintaining order.

This made her very curious, so she sent a few people to investigate.

Soon, a maid approached the carriage window, whispering, "Madam, that grain shop is a relief point set up by the Red Tide.

As long as they are willing to work, they can exchange labor for food, even for the refugees... everyone here is well-fed."

"Well-fed..." Alina murmurs, as if confirming.

An elderly knight accompanying the party added in a deep voice, "In Frost Halberd City, refugees outside the regular army troop are either stealing or causing trouble...

Yet, Red Tide can use full bellies to pacify them, without chaos. This is... truly incredible."

Hearing this, Emily's lips couldn't help but curl upward, feeling honored.

She stealthily glanced at her mother, only to find that Alina's gaze had softened, even showing some thoughtful agreement.

Emily's cheeks immediately flushed, and she lowered her head to lightly bite her lip, a sense of sweetness welling up inside her.

He didn't do anything earth-shattering, nor did he make people bow in servitude...

Yet the people here genuinely revere him like the sun, simply because he can feed them.

Soon they arrived at a three-story mansion.

In the flower beds at the entrance, the early summer roses were in full bloom, the air filled with the rich scent of flowers, even the sunlight seemed tinged with sweetness.

With the continued expansion of the Red Tide Territory and Louis's growing influence in the Northern Territory, the collective cave-style dwelling is no longer all there is.

Today's Red Tide not only has a strictly ordered urban plan but also has gradually built a number of residences and reception areas for foreign guests, this mansion being one of them.

On the second-floor balcony of the mansion, the wind stirs the window voile, carrying a hint of rose scent mixed with the distant song from the market.

Governor's wife Alina sits quietly, her gaze falling on the neatly arranged streets and rooftops in the distance, her expression dazed.

Chapter 217: Arrival (Part 2)

The sunlight slanted across a few strands of silver at her temples, softening the always dignified profile.

She recalled how much she had once resisted this marriage.

The Northern Territory was barren, and the Red Tide Territory was merely a frontier establishment for just over a year.

The young man named Louis, though he came from the Calvin Clan, one of the "Eight Great Clans" like the Edmund Family, he was ultimately just a rootless Pioneer Noble. What could he truly offer Emily?

Though not Emily's biological mother, she had personally raised her since she was six.

She couldn't bear to see this intelligent and gentle girl marry off to such a desolate place.

She had hoped Emily could stay in the Imperial Capital, or marry into the warm, prosperous South to enjoy a truly comfortable and luxurious noble life, not endure hardships in the North, accompanying a young man to "build an empire."

But now it seemed she might have been too pessimistic initially.

She saw clean villages, bountiful fields, and bustling markets without chaos, a well-prepared wedding, and respect in every staff member's eyes.

Footsteps lightly resonated.

Emily approached, wearing a pale blue gown adorned with their family crest.

She didn't disturb her mother's contemplation, instead quietly walking to her side, lightly wrapping her arm around hers.

"Mother," she softly called.

Alina turned her head, looking at the girl she had raised, myriad complex emotions flickering in her eyes.

She slowly lifted her hand, gently resting it on the back of Emily's hand.

"I really used to worry you'd suffer," she said softly, her tone light, "I tried persuading your father to marry you to the South, so you wouldn't endure hardship later."

She paused, looking toward the distant children dancing by the street, then glancing once more at the distant city walls and guard towers where soldiers stood straight.

"But look," she said softly, "this city is built more orderly than your father's domain; and people smile... as if without fear. I find myself feeling at ease."

Emily remained silent, only tightening her grip on her mother's hand, tears silently welling in her eyes.

The Governor's Wife sighed gently, but smiled: "Maybe marrying here isn't really wronging you."

"Mm..." Emily softly responded, her cheeks slightly flushed, resting gently on her mother's shoulder.

In her mother's eyes, she had entrusted her fate.

And this trust, her mother could finally willingly let go.

...

The sunlight in Red Tide City was slightly blinding.

Pal Calvin rode on horseback, his cape billowing in the wind, yet his gaze remained as cold as ever.

Pal disliked noise and disliked weddings even more, and he had initially wanted to refuse.

But his father coldly commanded in a letter, "Support your brother's wedding."

The family had too few people in the Northern Territory, so his father sent him to offer some support.

He was highly dissatisfied with this marriage.

He had seen Emily once from afar at Frost Halberd.

At that time, Emily was like a red plum in the snow, passing by him with the grace of an alpine flower.

Pal thought she would fall for a noble type like himself, silent, resilient, and self-reliant.

Not someone like the Baron of Expansion, who relied on good fortune and effortlessly won favor.

Yet she chose Louis.

It was as if a flower was stuck in cow dung!

"That guy just happened to stumble upon fertile land and conveniently cling to Miss Frost Spear," Pal gritted his teeth.

He was dissatisfied, of course, dissatisfied.

In the beginning, to exhibit his spirit of "I can conquer the world on my own," he refused the Governor's offer of land near Red Tide.

He personally selected Wolf Plain Slope south of the Cold Mist River, choosing it based on intelligence about its rich mineral resources and potential for trade.

But reality proved harsher than he imagined.

Unyielding Permafrost was as hard to cultivate as ascending the heavens, thriving only with recent support from his second brother, managing barely to survive on the limited accumulated food and morale.

Yet he refused to acknowledge failure.

"Others would have collapsed long ago, but I stayed strong, which is proof in itself."

He always believed that with complete resources and sufficient support, he would absolutely exceed that "fate-blessed guy!"

Even if his clothes were muddied now, and the carriage that brought him to Red Tide was rickety and trembling.

Standing beyond the city gates, seeing the rows of red and white ribbons and knights in formation, he still snorted inwardly.

"Is this all their pomp? Hmph, when my Wolf Plain rises, one day I'll have them all see."

But before that... he still had to hold up this "family support" task.

Perhaps he could seize the opportunity to see Emily once more.

Just to prove to himself: "She chose wrong."

Pal trotted through the streets of Red Tide City, his eyes involuntarily wandering.

His gaze initially held contempt, even almost hoping to witness a spectacle. However, as he traveled, his expression gradually hardened.

The city gates were heavily guarded, soldiers standing with arms, armor gleaming and expressions solemn.

Unlike some noble displays, these men truly experienced combat.

"Tsk, but that's all it is," he smirked, mouth hardening in arrogance.

But before he could finish his sneering, his words were cut short by the scenes within the city.

The streets were surprisingly clean for the Northern Territory.

Shops hung banners in red and blue, children ran through alleys, and someone shouted, "Hurry! The Lord's wedding is about to start!"

Further away, a few older children surrounded the younger ones telling stories.

Stories of the "Red Tide Sun," who defeated the Snow Swearer at the Battle of Qingyu Ridge, saving three villages.

Chapter 218: Arrival (Part 3)

Pal led the horse forward at a slow pace, his brow slightly furrowed.

He saw refugees in coarse cloth assisting with road repairs at a street corner, while officials indicated the route beside them, but there was hardly any scolding or coercion.

The attendant next to him was equally perplexed, unable to hold back: "This order... it's rare."

"Hmph." Pal snorted coldly, as if to mask something: "They're quite good actors."

Yet he himself noticed that his words were somewhat lacking in confidence.

The Red Tide Knights arrayed on the city walls made him even more uneasy. They were nothing like the typical, slack private soldiers of the nobility.

Pal recognized that most of these knights came from the Calvin Clan, then glanced at his own knights. Born of the same Calvin Clan, why was there such a discrepancy in their morale?

He wanted to find fault but realized there was nothing to pick at.

"How is it possible... in just over a year?" He felt a chill in his heart, asking himself if he could have done the same.

For the first time, he realized that the "Louis Calvin," not yet twenty, might not be the lucky lad he had imagined.

Passing the main street, Pal encountered a familiar face in a square adorned with a red carpet.

Willis Calvin, just finished greeting the reception officer of Red Tide City, slowly turned around, meeting Pal's gaze.

The two paused, after all, they were half-brothers. Though not close, they hadn't reached the point of turning against each other.

"Long time no see." Pal smiled a bit, his tone neither warm nor cold.

"Indeed." Willis nodded, responding gently.

They walked towards the banquet hall, one behind the other, their steps half a foot apart, the conversation barely natural.

"I heard that spring plowing started quite early on your side?" Pal probed.

"Yes, Louis helped me a lot." Willis's tone was calm, "We've set aside three hundred acres as a pilot area, planting cold-resistant rye. This year... we should be able to harvest some food."

His tone was steady, neither boasting nor concealing.

"Oh?" Pal raised an eyebrow.

"The waterwheel and the sowing team were also sent from here." Willis continued, "Initially the villagers were unfamiliar, but Louis's agricultural official taught meticulously, and the progress is still relatively smooth."

He mentioned "Louis's help," with gratitude in his words.

Pal listened, but felt uncomfortable inside.

He had certainly heard rumors that after Willis stationed himself in Snow Peak County, he took the initiative to align with Louis, even planning the fiefdom according to the Red Tide model.

He had thought it was a last resort of "exchanging allegiance for sustenance," not expecting that the other would speak so steadily at this moment.

It didn't seem like he was showing off, yet it was more piercing than showing off.

"Our side is about the same." Pal feigned nonchalance, "The water system on Wolf Plain Slope is quite open, I had people clear the land first. Although the magical beasts are somewhat bothersome... they've mostly been dealt with, and spring plowing has commenced."

While saying this, Pal used vague words like "also," "fine," "about the same" to obscure the situation.

He was unwilling to say that the frost layer was deep, the land unturnable, the people scattered quickly, and they had to rely on knights at night to prevent camp theft.

Even more unwilling to say, the seeds he could barely plant this time were transported by the second brother from the South.

After speaking, he glanced at Willis.

The other merely nodded quietly as usual, without probing or sneering, instead appearing overly composed.

In this instant, Pal suddenly felt an inexplicable sense of defeat.

The more low-key and earnest Willis was, the more it highlighted that he was merely putting on airs without substance...

He pulled at the corners of his mouth: "We're doing quite well too, let's grow and strengthen together."

But what he thought internally was: "Living off his younger brother's charity... isn't it truly shameful?"

Pal perfunctorily made a few more remarks, then the two exchanged pleasantries on inconsequential topics, maintaining appearances. But even until they parted, an indescribable bitterness lingered in his heart.

He was the eldest among the three brothers and had the best birth. Logically, by now, he should be the most stable one.

But in comparison now...

Louis emerged out of nowhere, with numerous military achievements, and today's Red Tide City had nearly become the new star territory of the Northern Territory.

Although Willis started late, he just caught Louis's strong support, and he was thriving, at least with no worries about food and clothing, and the governance had taken shape.

And as for Pal?

The fief was overrun with magical beasts, the people's morale scattered, relying on financial help from the second brother, barely standing, and still couldn't make sense of the land.

If what Willis said was true, then the one doing the worst was him.

The more he thought, the more annoyed he became, and he followed the Red Tide Guard back to the guest house.

The streets were clean, the soldiers orderly, even the young servants were courteous, as if this place was not a newly-prominent noble territory, but an old nobility that had ruled the Northern Territory for years.

This deepened his gloom a few degrees.

Back in the guest house, he flung his cloak aside and sat down heavily. His eyes were dark as he picked up a silver cup, as if to drain it in one gulp, but ended up taking just a sip, forcing out a sentence:

"Hmph... he's merely lucky."

The butler respectfully poured more wine beside him, softly reminding: "Sir, this visit was expressly directed by the Duke as a goodwill gesture... not a contest to determine victory."

Pal didn't respond immediately.

He certainly knew that this trip to the Red Tide was to represent the family's stance.

To admit that Louis was no longer a marginal figure, but the new core of the Northern Territory.

He just hadn't expected reality to be more glaring than he imagined.

He had thought, even if Louis had some military success, it was mere dumb luck.

That Willis was simply clinging to Louis's coattails, wasn't a skill.

But what he saw and heard today...

Scenes of orderly military formations, calm markets, those townsfolk's respectful homage to their "Lord," Willis's calm yet firm tone flashed through Pal's mind...

He gritted his teeth and drained the red wine from the cup.

"Let him relish the moment." Pal said quietly, "To think a few victories can secure the Northern Territory... is way too naive."

But even he could hear the lack of conviction in his own words.

Chapter 219: Louis's Third Brother

It's the peak of wedding preparations, and the entire Red Tide City has become busy.

The main street is already adorned with red and white ribbons and feather lamps, children running around, peddlers' cries and blessings echoing, even the cold wind carries a touch of joy.

But as the central figure of this wedding, the Red Tide Lord, Louis Calvin, was not immersed in it.

He was flipping through a thick stack of gift lists in his hand, not a trace of the relaxation a groom should have on his brow, but only the habitual suppression of fatigue and alertness.

To avoid attracting attention from the Imperial Capital, Louis deliberately tightened the guest list at the start of the wedding announcement.

He limited participation to "direct family and the Duke's circle," even refusing visits from other Northern lords.

But the Northern Lords have always valued "ceremonial appearance," even if they do not come in person, they will send gifts to save face for the Calvin and Edmund Families.

"Sir." Bradley hurriedly pushed the door open, holding an invitation and bowing respectfully, "Count Grant's envoy has arrived."

Louis sighed, slowly putting on a half-cloak with black and gold patterns, his long boots echoing crisply on the mahogany floor.

As he walked out of the side hall, the attendants almost forgot that he was a young man in his twenties; his gestures already had the calm demeanor of an old noble.

In the reception room, Albert, the Deputy Deacon of the Grant Family, had been waiting for a long time.

He was a middle-aged man approaching forty, with graying temples, dressed in a meticulously tailored black and gold robe, with a composed demeanor and serious expression, exuding the steady manner of an old noble's butler.

He had not brought any attendants, only a young servant behind him holding a brocade box.

All was kept simple, yet appropriately showcased the "Grant Family's" dignity and propriety.

Albert stepped forward, slightly bowed, and spoke respectfully: "Count Grant was unable to come personally due to matters, and specially sent me to deliver a wedding gift."

"Welcome to deliver this on behalf of Count Grant." Louis's tone was cordial yet measured.

Then Albert opened the brocade box, revealing the deep blue Magic Crystal Stone inside.

The crystal looked like a frozen night sky, deep and silent, with delicate light veins flowing on its surface, like gentle waves, containing pure and stable Fighting Energy fluctuations inside.

"This Magic Crystal Stone, from the far north deep rock mines, can store energy and recover Fighting Energy, specially prepared by Count Grant for your wedding." Albert spoke softly, respectfully, but his eyes quietly observed.

Louis gently pressed the lid of the box, not examining the Magic Crystal Stone closely, merely lifting his eyes with a faint smile.

"Please convey my gratitude to the Count." He said warmly, with sincerity in his eyes, "This gift is truly too precious, I will remember it fondly."

Albert bowed his head again upon hearing this.

Then the two sat down and chatted for a while, their words impeccable.

When parting, Louis personally escorted Albert to the front hall, observing all the formalities.

"He truly seems like an old lord who has been ruling for twenty years." Albert couldn't help but reflect as he left the Red Tide City castle.

After sending off Albert, the Deputy Deacon of the Grant Family, Louis had just sat down when Bradley quietly entered the room, whispering in his ear:

"Sir, the representative of the Calvin Family has arrived. It is the third prince, Eduardo."

"Is that so?" Louis's tone was steady, without evident fluctuations in his expression.

The teacup paused slightly at his fingertips, causing fine ripples in the tea.

The third son of Duke Calvin, Eduardo Calvin, Louis had almost no memory of this "brother."

Even his appearance was merely a vague glimpse from childhood.

In the Calvin Family, filled with noble offspring, a "brother" missing for over ten years was hardly different from being deceased.

However, Louis had long learned from daily intelligence that this "long-lost third brother" was coming to Red Tide not merely to attend the wedding on behalf of their father.

Officially a family envoy, secretly he was tasked by the bishop of the Golden Feather Flower Church Court to investigate the disappearance of "Grand Mage Jurgen Locke" in the Northern Territory.

Louis set down the teacup, speaking warmly, "Let him in."

Steady footsteps soon echoed from outside.

No exaggerated entourage, no deliberate ostentation, only a middle-aged man wearing a deep gold patterned robe entered the reception hall.

The robe was well-tailored, with a silky gloss subtly revealing totem-like geometric patterns, clearly from the hand of a Southern noble.

He walked steadily, with poise, his face showing the perfect hint of a smile, appearing warm and kind, with a bit of the unique leisureliness of the Southern nobility.

Louis had already stepped forward, a proper smile on his face, standing like a spring breeze: "Third brother, long time no see."

"Oh, indeed, it's been so long, over a decade, the last time I saw you, you couldn't even walk." Eduardo laughed, extending his hand to pat Louis's shoulder lightly, joking.

His smile was as warm as an old friend meeting, his tone almost teasingly relaxed: "You've really risen to prominence in recent years, the Star of the Northern Territory. Father said... you've brought the Calvin bloodline to shine again on the battlefield."

As he spoke, he took a gold-edged letter and an exquisite silver badge from his bosom, bearing the Calvin Family's red moon crest.

"Father's handwritten letter, and this 'Family Core' badge." Louis took them without his smile changing: "Father has always been mindful, I understand. Thank you, third brother, for personally bringing them."

Chapter 220: Louis's Third Brother 2

After speaking, the two sat down, and the topic naturally shifted to daily matters.

"Actually," Eduardo picked up the teacup and smiled lightly, "the family sent much more than just these two things."

The carts outside are almost full, and according to the people traveling with them, a pile of boxes is stacked on the small square; they can't even be moved inside."

"Is that so?" Louis chuckled softly, with a hint of helplessness, "Please ask them to wait a moment. The warehouse in Red Tide City is almost out of space these days."

"Yes, I noticed."

In the ensuing conversation, both of them maintained their composure, lacking pretense and probing questions; everything felt natural, like thin clouds in spring.

But Louis had long known that Eduardo's true mission was not just to deliver gifts.

He was here for "investigation."

And the "investigation target" he had was just one of the core secrets Louis didn't want anyone to pry into.

According to protocol, they should talk a bit longer, but night was falling now, lights were just being lit in Red Tide City, and the day of hustle and bustle was drawing to a close.

The streets and residences of the city were gradually lighting up, the candlelight casting the entire city in the soft glow of amber.

People came and went in the front hall of the mansion, with the butler and maids of the City Lord's Mansion constantly on the move.

Seeing this, Eduardo was about to go rest, but Louis personally stopped him before he could head back to his room.

"Brother," he began with a sincere smile, "it's been a long time since we last got together, let's have a simple meal together."

Eduardo was slightly taken aback, then smiled and said, "This is your busiest time; I shouldn't add to your troubles."

"It won't be a bother," Louis waved his hand, "I just gave the order, a small hall has been prepared, and only four or five dishes are ready; I also want to take a breather."

He looked at his brother, his tone light yet firm: "You've been back from the Imperial Capital for so long, we haven't met once; if we don't have a proper chat tonight, even I'd feel uncomfortable."

"Since you put it that way," Eduardo finally nodded with a smile, "I graciously won't refuse."

Thus, the two of them walked side by side into a side hall, avoiding the hustle and bustle.

The banquet was set in a warm, tranquil little hall, the wooden floor spotless, and the fire in the corner gently burned, dispelling the early evening chill.

The windows were half-draped, with faint lights from the garden visible outside.

The table was simply set, yet elegant and fitting, with Red Tide City's specialty dishes: clear vegetable soup, honey-roasted fowl, and special smoked fish, all warming without being cloying.

Only Bradley and two trusted attendants served at a distance, so quietly they were nearly invisible.

"How goes the post-war reconstruction in the Northern Territory?" Eduardo raised his glass, seemingly a casual question.

"Quite smoothly, I'd say," Louis replied with a smile, "at least on my end, everything is nearly restored."

"When I just arrived at the castle, the scenery I saw indeed reflected that. You've done exceptionally well."

"Thank you for the compliment, brother." Louis gently shook his head, his tone modest yet dignified, "I've only done a little work."

"Before I came, Father kept praising your effective governance," Eduardo spoke with a hint of amusement, "I was wondering what kind of governance it could be, hearing it a hundred times couldn't compare to seeing it once."

"Well, please thank Father for his concern, but such minor accomplishments aren't worth too much focus from the family."

"You're so modest, it's almost annoying."

Initially, their topics were leisurely, occasionally sharing small jokes, like relatives reuniting after a long separation, or chess players cautiously testing each other's moves.

Then they lightly touched on topics about the Imperial Capital.

About the Emperor's recent "relapse," the unusual moves from a few princes during court meetings, and the gossip circulating in the Imperial Capital...

Eduardo, like a friendly storyteller, stopped at just the right spots, yet always managed to bring up intriguing details, even eliciting a low chuckle from Louis.

After a few rounds of drinks, Louis gradually began to notice some clues.

This "elder brother" probably wasn't as mild as he appeared on the surface.

He spoke with remarkable tact, never leading you to disclose what shouldn't be said.

Yet he could always adeptly guide the atmosphere to a point where he could listen, remember, and judge.

If not for the Daily Intelligence System, and if he wasn't vigilant enough, he might have fallen into a trap.

Louis narrowed his eyes slightly, his smile remained warm, but a sense of caution grew in his heart.

He took a sip of wine, seemingly casually looking out at the night: "Speaking of which, brother, did you know... recently, there's been something strange near my territory."

"Hmm?" Eduardo's eyes had a hint of curiosity, yet still seemed lazy, "Something strange? Don't tell me it's just the pre-wedding groom so stressed he's seeing ghosts."

"Ha, if that were the case, it would be great." Louis laughed, lowering his voice as if talking about something inconveniently publicized, "Recently, a patrol team found an unconscious mage at the edge of the forest, reportedly attacked by bugs in the woods."

"Bugs?" Eduardo raised an eyebrow, "A mage attacked by bugs?"

"This is different." Louis curved his lips, his eyes growing colder, "The man said, it's one thing for the bugs to attack the living, but the strangest part is, they don't even spare corpses."

"Corpses?" Eduardo's brow finally furrowed.

"Yes. They manipulate corpses."

As soon as those words fell, the small hall fell silent.

Eduardo didn't speak, as if waiting for more.

Louis also didn't immediately continue, instead, he took another sip of wine, as if to loosen his lips so that the words 'lightly touched' on the matter.

"The mage said that the bugs' behavior wasn't like that of wild beasts. They were extremely coordinated, almost like... a trained army, and they seemed to maintain the combat skills of the corpses' pre-death."

Eduardo gently exhaled, leaned back in his chair, his eyes turning profound.

"This doesn't sound like an ordinary wilderness attack."

"I found it strange, too," Louis, throughout, as if discussing something interesting, "I sent people to check the scene, guess what?"

He looked up at Eduardo, as if to confirm whether his older brother had understood the weight behind his words.

"They found almost no intact corpses, very little blood. It was as if someone had deliberately cleaned up the scene. All that was left was a stench beyond belief and... some scorch marks on the bark."

At this moment, the smile on Eduardo's face slowly faded, as if he finally detached from the 'drinking and chatting' context, adopting another identity.

He tilted his head for a moment, changed his posture, one hand resting on the chair back: "Those bugs you mentioned... do they have any distinct markings? Such as color, patterns, or any physical traits? What about their numbers, are there many?"

Louis gently swirled the wine in his glass and answered, "Those bugs are very small, so small they could fit on a fingernail, yet they can burrow into a body, manipulate a person's limbs like pulling puppet strings.

Not the kind of mindless walking dead, but with purpose, formation, and order. As for the numbers, I don't know."

Then he added, as if inadvertently, "I didn't want to publicize this matter; the Governor also told me not to speak out. But since you're here, I thought some things should be discussed with family."

Then the topic shifted away from this matter, moving back to some interesting things about the Imperial Capital.

As the gathering ended, servants cleared the silverware, and the fireplace flames continued burning, casting flickering shadows as the two exchanged final pleasantries.

However, when Eduardo returned to his temporary quarters alone, the smile on his face had long faded.

He walked slowly, as if digesting the "intelligence" garnered from that meal.

Louis' words lingered in his ears, each one seemingly still echoing.

He had already made a judgment in his heart, feeling this matter was likely related to what he was investigating.

Yet unbeknownst to him, he had fallen into Louis' trap.