

Winter 221

Chapter 221: Nest

The forest is silent, cold firs like pillars.

Even at noon, sunlight struggles to penetrate the branches and leaves, falling into this lifeless dense forest.

The knights entering this place seem to step into an ancient tomb in slumber.

They have been searching this forest area for nearly half a month.

Yet, nothing has been found.

But no one complained because of this, nor did anyone question the leader, they trusted him completely.

Because walking at their forefront is the "Northern Blade"—Vic Glanser.

His deep silver armor gleams coldly, twenty elite knights of the Northern Territory silently follow behind him, weaving through the deathly silent forest sea.

This squad is personally selected, trained, and led by Vic.

They never rely on their eyes to find enemies; they cross battlefields by relying on Vic's perception ability, and have accomplished great deeds several times.

But only Vic himself knows that the tightly wound string in his heart has quietly trembled.

The clues have been cleaned too thoroughly, unnaturally so.

The forest land feels as if it was "scrubbed"; all perceivable anomalies have been erased, leaving only emptiness.

Even for him, without consuming Fighting Energy, he can only rely on a few traces to follow the faintest scents and marks to find a way forward.

He is not without anxiety.

For the longer the time, the harder it is to find.

Vic understands this point, but can only suppress the unease in his heart, continuing forward, gambling on the correctness of that vague intuition.

But today is finally different.

He found a small piece of dark brown residue in a crack on the tree trunk.

Vic raised his fingertip, gently touched that sticky trace, then smelled it before his nose, and his gaze suddenly changed.

"Stay close to me, don't fall behind."

"Yes, Sir." A young knight responded, his tone calm yet unable to conceal his tension.

Vic lowered his eyelids, his right hand's knuckle gently tapping the armor at his neck.

"Activate."

A faint silver-blue Fighting Energy flowed through his veins, and beneath his skin appeared faint crackling red streaks.

The world in his eyes suddenly changed, colors faded away, with gray and shadows interwoven.

The air's fluctuations, the residual heat traces on the ground, and the signs of magic power recirculation were precisely captured by him.

He scanned the forest land, one step at a time entering the place that common people call "completely traceless" silent land.

"There has been an insect swarm here." His tone was low, without extra embellishment.

The ground seemed intact, but its temperature structure was twisted.

Weak yet orderly corrosion ripples meandered along, as if countless figures had passed through, yet forcefully buried all traces.

"It has been deliberately cleaned." Vic squatted down, placing his palm against the damp soil beneath the dead leaves.

A young knight who had just joined couldn't resist speaking: "But Captain, we... cannot see any traceable clues at all."

"It's normal that you can't see them." Vic slowly stood, gazing straight ahead, "They've already learned to hide, not just corroding, but controlling the diffusion of corrosion marks."

He turned to look northwest.

In the gray world, that faint heat wave source like dead ashes was stirred by the wind, about to disperse yet not.

"Over there." He said and then stepped forward, the silver armored knights behind him followed without hesitation, silently pacing behind.

No one questioned.

They followed Vic, walking into the traceless land, toward the unknown depths of the dense forest.

Night had deepened, the mist in the forest depths seemed stirred by some invisible force, rolling endlessly.

The silver armored knights moved silently, boots stepping between fallen leaves and decayed matter, soundless, like shadows through the forest.

Suddenly Vic stopped, raised his hand for everyone to halt immediately.

The air changed.

A sticky and intense stench of corpses assaulted their noses, unlike regular decay; it was a rotting smell blackened by time.

Mixed with the rust of dried blood, the bitter stench of ruptured viscera, and some cold mucus not belonging to the living.

It was like a cold finger inserted into the nasal cavity, slowly stirring one's nerves, making one involuntarily gag, yet unable to escape.

Not only did Vic feel it, but everyone smelled this stench.

"The scent has grown stronger." A knight said softly, with a hint of tension in his voice.

Soon the team discreetly clustered closer, holding their breath as they advanced, following the increasingly potent corpse stench.

They bypassed a section of overhang rock and a fallen giant tree, arriving at a crevice at the valley bottom.

The scene before them made even a few seasoned veteran knights instinctively grip their weapons tightly.

It was a... nest.

Or more precisely, a shrine from the depths of a nightmare.

This colossal nest was like a living hive, resin structures intertwined and nested to form countless passages and cavities, resembling some indescribable insect king's abode.

It was like an unfinished insect queen egg cocoon, yet possessed the womb features nurturing countless corpse swarms.

It appeared gray-white, the surface moist and soft, like flesh stripped of all blood color, continuously writhing in the cold wind, rhythmically swelling and collapsing.

The surface constantly oozed moist mucus, filling slowly writhing tubular holes, as if more insect corpses were gestating inside.

The entire structure was composed of some unknown resin, semi-transparent and undried, seemingly breathing slowly.

It's the insect corpses.

Those human corpses that should have rested in peace are now forcibly "reset."

Deprived of will, personality erased, leaving only a shell controlled by spiritual energy.

There are hundreds, even thousands, of them, slowly climbing the surface of the nest, moving with an eerily coordinated motion, neither lively nor stiff, more like a troupe of ritual slaves infused with commands, completing some ancient, mysterious sacrificial process.

Bodies, one after another—of humans, magical beasts, even knight remains clad in broken armor.

They were carried here in batches, lined up quietly, and eventually thrown into a "fissure" at the base of resin.

And above this nest, a huge flesh sac hangs high, that is the mother body.

The flesh sac is connected to the nest via multiple writhing flesh "fibers," slowly transmitting the sacrifices thrown into the fissure upwards.

With each undulation, the entire nest emits a low, heartbeat-like sound.

The air seems to tremble with it, like a hell bellows breathing, inhaling and exhaling death and birth.

But most terrifying is the human faces emerging beneath the surface.

It's not an illusion.

Faces, one by one, like soul remnants pressed under translucent resin, slowly emerge, struggle, and slide.

Some are filled with agony, eye sockets exploding; some are expressionless, lips slightly moving, as if whispering;

And one of them reveals a sinister smile.

The corners of the mouth lift, eyes open slowly, facing Vic's direction.

At that moment, Vic's entire body seemed to freeze, throat dry, barely able to make a sound: "That is..."

He recognized that face.

Baron Hald Blo.

A Northern Lord he had met several times at the Frost Halberd City banquet, always speaking with a smile, courteous in manner.

Yet mysteriously disappeared after last year's war, the official report was "killed in action, body unrecovered."

Now that familiar face is embedded on the mother's surface like a relief, with a stiff smile and slightly tearful eyes, as if pleading in a dream... or mocking.

"This thing..." Vic's voice seemed to seep from deep within his throat.

The twenty Elite Knights behind him were also completely silenced at this moment.

They were the strongest warriors of the Northern Territory, each having experienced countless bloody battles, swords and flames carved into their bones.

But at this moment, they remained silent, some taking a half step back, some with pupils tightened, some gripping spears so hard their knuckles turned white.

"Impossible... this..." a young knight muttered to himself, seemingly trying to use reason to block the cracks of fear.

"This is disgusting..." The adjutant also had cold sweat on his forehead, just seeing the mother seemed to pollute the mind.

Vic forcibly suppressed the urge to vomit rising to his throat, shoulders tensed, the skin under his eyes showing traces of red fighting energy lines.

It was a stress reaction after overly suppressing perception.

But Vic remained calm.

He gave a short and low order: "Mark the coordinates, everyone retreat, we can't handle it, must request support."

The adjutant nodded upon hearing Vic's order and began organizing the retreat.

Vic scanned the team, ensuring everyone started executing the retreat, and also prepared to withdraw.

However, the next moment, a sudden mutation occurred.

The insect swarm suddenly paused, as if an invisible thread was pulled tight.

The insect corpses that were originally busy transporting all raised their heads simultaneously.

Their movements were so synchronized it caused the scalp to tingle, without a hint of delay, like a puppet army controlled by a single will.

Then they all twisted their heads, producing a creaking sound of bones rubbing, slowly turning towards Vic's direction!

In an instant, the air seemed to freeze.

It wasn't killing intent.

But a gaze, a gaze beyond life, as if the entire nest "identified" him as the target.

The knights of the elite squad were all battle-hardened Fighting Spirit Knights.

Yet as that mechanical gaze fell upon them, everyone's heart raced with fear, cold sweat poured out.

The next instant.

The insect corpses all emitted an eerie crackling sound, like bones dislocating, or vertebrae disjoining.

Then they lunged forward.

Without warning, without momentum.

The insect corpses crawling on the nest's surface detached like a collapsing wall of corpses, guided by gravity and will, falling en masse!

Then they skillfully flipped and pounced mid-air, moving in ways not befitting corpses, lunging towards the team.

The knights had entered the hunting ground of the insect corpses!!

"Full retreat!! Spread the message!" Vic roared, his voice like thunder, dispersing the deathly atmosphere among the woods.

The next moment, his fighting energy burst explosively!

Silver-gray flames swept around like a storm, the air currents stirred, lifting fallen leaves and forcing the approaching insect corpses to a standstill momentarily.

The adjutant's eye twitched, seemingly realizing something, but ultimately said nothing.

The team members gritted their teeth, turned, and retreated swiftly, none hesitating.

That silver light behind them did not follow, only faintly heard, the sound of wind like tearing.

Chapter 222: The Wedding

The dawn had not yet awakened, and a light mist lightly covered the eaves of Red Tide City; dewdrops hung between the stone slabs and vine leaves as if the world had just opened one eye.

Today was not an ordinary day.

It was the wedding day of the great Lord Louis Calvin.

The sky remained dim, yet the square outside Red Tide City was already filled with shadows of people.

People gathered spontaneously in twos and threes, rarely seeing anyone holding weapons or shouting loudly.

They wore their best clothes, and some even adorned themselves with their own embroidered "Red Sun Shoulder Badge," the color of the Red Tide flag.

No one knew who started it, but families brought out food for the celebration.

Pots of steaming new fish soup were laid out on the prepared cloth, with wild ginger and radish rolling at the bottom, giving off a fresh and fragrant aroma.

Dry loaves of coarse wheat bread were stacked beside them, and nearby, children clutched berry wine jugs tightly in their hands, the rich sweetness tinged with a hint of wild acidity.

The entire square was free from noise and urgency.

The crowd sat quietly, some whispering, others with calm eyes, gazing only at the towering Red Tide Castle.

The castle they once looked up to on the coldest winter nights.

"He fed us through the winter and drove back the Barbarians."

"Today, he is to marry, and we must come to bless him."

The voice was soft, yet it seemed to stir waves, leading everyone to nod silently.

Some even quietly wiped their tears, an old woman with a rough, worn shawl and a face marked by wind and frost.

"My son... if he hadn't been killed by the Snow Swearer last year, perhaps he too could see this day, living warm and full. The great Lord... he saved us people..."

Her words did not alarm many, and those who heard only tugged gently at her shawl, offering hot soup, and helping her sit down.

To not trouble the Lord, no one shouted or sang loudly.

Yet it seemed all emotions were condensed in this strand of summer wind that had not yet awakened.

The sun had not yet risen, but the "sun" of the Red Tide Territory had long stood in people's hearts.

...

The castle's bell, after the seventh chime, fell slowly and steadily.

The double doors of the banquet hall deep within the Red Tide Main Castle closed quietly, leaving the noise outside and the people's prayers behind.

Peering in from the porch, it felt like stepping into another world.

On the high vaulted ceiling, two large emblems swayed in the wind.

The moon-patterned red glow of the Calvin Family burned hot, while the silver eagle of the Edmund Family spread its wings, mutually reflecting, weaving the faith light of noble union across the ceiling.

Candelabras stood densely around, all crafted from traditional Northern high-stem bronze, the firelight gentle yet steady, intersecting with the morning light seeping in through the windows, casting a solemn purity on the walls and banners.

The bluebells, white violets, and ice roses, carefully selected over three rounds by the noble merchants' guild, were skillfully woven into the flower stands and table decorations.

The bluebells quivered like the morning breeze, the white violets stood upright, the ice roses shimmered bright as if the first frost had melted—these were not for brilliance, but for remembrance—loyalty, chastity, honor.

All these, from the emblem drapes falling from high above to every inch of limestone patterns on the red carpet;

from the choice of flowers to the height and placement of the candelabras, even the angle of the light entering the hall.

Each detail at the scene reflected the Calvin Clan's respect for tradition, yet it never appeared extravagant.

This arrangement made guests, once stepping in, unconsciously hold their breath and lighten their footsteps.

It was all thanks to Bradley's personal design and arrangement.

This old butler of the Calvin Family and chief of household affairs at the Red Tide Main Castle had been busy for over a month.

All for the perfect realization of this moment.

He was not seated at the main table, nor in the spotlight among the guests.

Yet every breath and beat of this wedding bore his signature and belief.

The guests were already seated, and the wedding hall was silent.

On the front row of benches sat a man and a woman.

One was the Governor of the North, a heavy minister of the Empire, Duke Edmund.

He wore a ceremonial robe of interwoven black and silver, a silver eagle cloak draped over his shoulders, with eagle eyes gently closed, his face carved like stone—stern and authoritative.

Today, he set aside all official matters to personally come to Red Tide, in the capacity of a father.

Edmund slowly opened his eyes; within those eyes like an eagle's, for a moment, there seemed a barely noticeable trace of gentleness.

That expression seemed to pull time back to more than ten years ago.

Back then, little Emily was cloaked in a little gosling yellow cape, chasing an eagle through the snow, falling and shouting, "Father! Look, I caught it!"

In the blink of an eye, it was time for her to wed, filling him with endless emotions.

Beside him sat a woman, Duchess Irina, Emily's stepmother.

She was always dignified and serene, naturally embodying the demeanor of an imperial noble lady.

Yet at this moment, she clutched a snow-white embroidered handkerchief tightly, her knuckles slightly white.

Irina looked at the girl about to appear at the end of the red carpet, her eyes already tinged with redness, lips trembling as if she was trying to suppress some emotion.

She remembered the first time that child called her "mother."

Remembered her curling up with a fever in the middle of the night, holding her little hand, feeding her medicine spoon by spoon.

Remembered teaching her to wear a formal dress, teaching her her first dance, remembered her smile in the sunlight.

And now, she was to be wed.

Irina took a deep breath, lowering her head to hide her moist eyes.

She did not know that through the window, Emily had already glanced at her discreetly.

In that glance, aside from gratitude, there was also a deep sense of reluctance.

For Emily, this wedding wasn't just about honor and family, it was also one of the most significant farewells of her life.

Chapter 223: The Wedding (Part 2)

The rest of the members of the Edmund Clan, along with the family retainers, sat sternly in the back rows according to bloodline and ceremony.

Count, Baron, Viscount...

They might not be familiar with the Calvin Clan or with Louis.

But today, as members of the Edmund Clan, they too must witness this union personally decreed by the patriarch.

The Calvin Clan did not send a large delegation to the Northern Territory, after all, the Southeast Province and the Red Tide Territory are thousands of miles apart.

In the end, only Pal and Willis, who were originally serving as Pioneer Nobles in the Northern Territory, and their third brother Eduardo, representing their father, attended.

Eduardo's expression was calm, his demeanor composed, as if he was merely a guest here to observe the ceremony.

On the surface, he always wore a smile, but his thoughts were no longer on the wedding itself.

Last night, Louis mentioned the matter of the "worm corpse," which caught his great interest and awakened his vigilance as a church envoy, possibly related to his own mission.

Pal's expression was much more complicated, his eyes always filled with jealousy and resentment.

He envied the glory that Louis now had, yet found it difficult to admit his own defeat and loss of power.

In contrast, Willis seemed much more composed.

He sincerely felt happy for Louis, after all, this brother Louis had provided him with countless tangible help, and also helped his domain establish a firm foothold in the Northern Territory.

In addition, some collateral nobles of the Calvin Clan in the Northern Territory were sent to "support the occasion," though most were insignificant figures.

They appeared respectful, but each harbored their own plans in their hearts.

As Louis was the representative of the Calvin Clan in the Northern Territory, the higher his prestige, the more benefits they could share in the future.

The wedding ceremony was about to begin, and a cleric clad in a gold-threaded magic robe stood quietly at the front of the stage.

He was one of the highest tier priests in the Northern Territory, with a solemn face, his hands folded in front of him, the whole person like some ancient vow sealed within a statue of God.

No one dared to make a sound; even a dropped pin might be distinctly heard in this silence.

Only the music began to quietly flow forth.

From the side hall came the faint and gentle notes, at first just a few low string murmurs, as if the first footprints in the snow.

Then a Cold Moon Three-Stringed Flute quietly joined in, its tone distant like the north wind swirling atop a mountain peak.

It was the joint orchestra of Red Tide City and the Cold Moon Clan, specially prepared for today's celebration program.

It was said that just coordinating this "North and South Ensemble" took two whole months of rehearsals.

The moment it began playing, the entire hall seemed to be split open by a rift in time and space, with the tides of the Southern Territory and the frost of the Northern Territory briefly joined together in the notes.

The cleric opened his eyes and looked toward the direction of the grand doors.

The two protagonists should make their entrance.

The music paused lightly, as if the myriad of sounds were silenced in the wind and snow.

Then the melodious sound of horns rose, like morning bells and evening drums rising from both sides of the hall.

The first to appear was the bride.

Emily walked slowly into the hall, dressed in an ivory wedding gown, the hem sweeping across the ground like snow waves, each step seeming to tread upon the morning light.

The cloak was meticulously embroidered with yarn unique to the Northern Territory, silver threads shimmering like a star river in the night sky drooping over her shoulders, swaying gently with her steps, as if even the wind were holding its breath.

The veil partially covered her face, through the light fabric, her eyes could be seen slightly trembling, like soft ripples on lake water, hiding a trace of nervousness and an unspoken joy.

On her neck hung an old silver pendant, its design ancient, yet polished to shine, the last piece of jewelry left by her mother.

It lay against her skin like a silent guardian.

She instinctively glanced at the audience below the stage.

Duke Edmund sat calmly in his place, his expression steady and unperturbed.

Lady Irina gently wiped her tears, her gaze full of tenderness.

Emily's gaze lingered on them for a moment, tears involuntarily brimmed in her eyes.

She bit her lower lip, trying hard not to let the tears fall.

Today is her wedding day, not a day for nostalgia, not a day for farewells.

Following closely, the grand doors on the other end of the hall slowly opened.

Under the focus of everyone's attention, Louis Calvin stepped into the hall.

He wore a modified Northern ceremonial outfit, the dark black base color deep and restrained, further accentuating his tall figure.

On his chest hung a silver double emblem - on one side the crescent emblem of the Calvin Family, on the other the Sun unique to the Red Tide Territory, symbolizing his current status as the full representative of the Calvin Family in the Empire's Northern Territory.

He draped a red and gold cloak, carried no sword, yet exuded a certain cold and oppressive aura.

There were no ostentatious jewels, no ornate gold ornaments.

But the entirety of him was like a longsword sheathed, standing quietly there, its edge concealed, yet none dared to underestimate it.

Louis's steps were steady and composed, his gaze swept over the guests within the hall, but when he saw the bride on the other side, he paused involuntarily.

That wedding dress seemed as if it was made for her.

And her eyes, her posture, she stood there like a sudden burst of warmth in the snowy night.

The blend of smile and tear beneath the veil left him momentarily stunned.

Truly beautiful, he thought to himself.

On the other side, Emily's gaze also penetrated through the crowd, landing on the man clad in formal attire, stepping forward, her heart suddenly gave a gentle jolt.

In a black cloak, a neat uniform, with eyes so firm they seemed able to pierce through the wind and snow.

The first time she saw Louis, she felt that this man was not only handsome, but also possessed an indescribable aura.

Chapter 224: The Wedding (Part 3)

Like light, yet not dazzling.

Just like the Sun provides a reassuring presence.

"Oh no, much more handsome than I imagined." She softly murmured in her heart, but the corners of her lips couldn't help but rise slowly.

With the cleric's gesture, the two of them stepped towards each other, and finally, met in the center of the hall, standing before one another.

At this moment, all music and blessings seemed to pause between them, as if the entire hall contained only the two of them.

The ceremony, at last, was about to begin.

Upon the cleric's indication, Louis Calvin and Emily Edmund walked side by side to the center of the hall.

Their footsteps mirrored as reflections, each step in perfect rhythm with the music, solemn and serene.

When the two finally met at the center of the hall, standing face to face, it was as if everything around suddenly fell into silence.

Whether it was the music, the incense, the guests, or the circulating colored lights overhead, it all seemed to be paused by some invisible force.

Only the two of them remained.

The cleric raised the Dragon Patterned Staff, an ancient and solemn voice resonated in the high hall:

"Under the witness of the Dragon Ancestor, before everyone present, the couple shall make three vows—"

The first vow, the family vow.

"Do you vow to uphold the honor of the bloodline, support your spouse, and strive for the prosperity of the family?"

Louis extended his right hand, holding Emily's veiled hand. The warmth in his palm was comforting, yet not hesitant.

He looked into her eyes, his voice steady, "I do."

There was no hesitation, no delay, even though his heart did not stir with many emotions.

He did not dislike her, but neither could he claim familiarity.

Emily Edmund, a name of political significance, but merely their second meeting on an emotional level.

A political marriage.

He was already clear about the essence of this marriage.

Yet, he still pronounced the vow with firmness.

Emily looked at him, taking a gentle breath.

"I do."

Her voice trembled slightly, yet was unambiguous. She had prepared for this day for a long time.

From the moment she knew she would marry into Red Tide Territory, she understood she would not be sent there merely as a "daughter" or "noble lady," but as a "wife" and "future lady of the lord."

She could not show weakness.

Yet the pride in her parents' eyes, her godmother's hushed advice, and the etiquette and imaginations of the future that she had pondered day and night,

all seemed to surge from her heart at this moment, almost drowning her.

She lowered her head, hiding the glisten in her eyes.

The second vow, the empire vow.

"Do you vow to be loyal to the Empire, uphold the law, and never betray?"

"I do." Louis replied without hesitation.

"I do." Emily clutched the edge of her ceremonial dress. She knew this vow was the continuing bond with her family and the second threshold into this new world.

The third vow, the faith vow.

"Do you vow to take the Dragon Ancestor as your guide, to walk together in light and in hardship?"

"I do."

"I do."

Tears shimmered in Emily's eyes, glistening faintly beneath the veil, but she did not shy away.

And so, the three vows were made.

The cleric solemnly declared:

"In the name of the Dragon Ancestor, your destinies shall intertwine from this day forth; the chains of bloodline and faith now bind you closely together."

Applause rose, and colorful flowers fluttered down like snow.

The Dragon Patterned Staff gently tapped between the two, and the Holy Emblem's glow of platinum and crimson gold flickered slightly, like a blessing bestowed by an ancient Divine Being.

Emily trembled slightly, feeling that warmth fall between her brows, yet it seemed to imprint deep within her fate.

In the front row, Duchess Irina discreetly wiped away tears, and as her fingertips brushed past the gleam in her eyes, she quickly regained the composure expected of noblewomen.

She looked at her daughter's seemingly grown-up silhouette, yet a strange sense of weightlessness surged in her heart.

It wasn't sadness but the fulfillment of a mother hawk as she pushed her fledgling with newly grown wings toward the sky.

Duke Edmund sat quietly by her side, his expression as calm as ever.

Even in the face of such a situation, he remained the composed and unmoved high-ranking imperial official.

But at the moment when Emily formally took her vows, a fleeting tenderness flickered in his eyes.

On the other side, Pal Calvin leaned against his chair, his expression dark.

Clenching his rear teeth, he struggled to maintain the noble smile, though it seemed more like a sneer.

"Nothing more than a political marriage, she won't truly love him," he sneered softly, half mocking, yet half resentful.

He could not accept that this once overlooked brother had now married the most dazzling woman in the entire Northern Territory.

"Truly a flower planted on cow dung," he consoled himself.

As the marriage vows were concluded, the ceremony moved into the celebration phase.

First was the Holy Emblem coronation.

The cleric placed the double-ring Holy Emblem, symbolizing the union of husband and wife, over the shoulders of the couple, engraved with dragon wings and the Sun, signifying faith and future.

Louis knelt on one knee, received the emblem, then stood to fasten it on Emily personally.

At that moment, Emily's eyes widened. His touch was gentle, fingertips brushing past the strands of hair at her neck. That subtle tenderness made her heartbeat skip.

He... was meticulous in every detail.

Then came the ritual offering of wine, where both held the silver cup, presenting wine brewed from their hometowns to each other.

Louis poured her wine brewed from Red Tide Territory, its color clear, yet tasting as fiery as a cold night's wind.

He watched Emily drink and smiled slightly, "If you're not used to it, you can switch to water."

"I quite like it," Emily said softly, a tightness in her throat.

She was earnest.

Chapter 225: The Wedding (Part 4)

The wine was strong, but it had a unique clarity and straightforwardness that only the Northern Territory possessed. It was just like him: not many words, yet it always left a deep impression.

Next, the court musicians commenced the ceremonial songs.

A bard walked to the center of the hall, singing excerpts from the Empire's chronicles, praising the glory of the Dragon Ancestor and the joy of the couple's union.

The song flowed like water, as if history at this moment overlapped with the new nobility marriage, inscribed in the continuing Chapters of the Empire.

Then came the banquet.

Light changed color, silver plates moved, and fragrant mists rose. The noble guests stood up one after another to toast the newlyweds, the sounds of congratulations and clinking glasses intertwined.

On the long table, red flame lobsters from the Imperial Capital, frozen honey chestnuts from Red Tide Territory, and royal special golden feathered pheasant meat were presented one by one, weaving into a feast for the senses.

Emily sat at the main seat, appearing slightly reserved yet trying to respond to every toast with a smile.

She occasionally turned her head to look at Louis.

He remained calm, dealing with each guest, speaking appropriately and responding with ease.

But she noticed that several times, before she looked over, he had already glanced at her.

Their eyes met, and he nodded lightly, without unnecessary words, yet it seemed they shared a silent understanding.

The ceremony neared its end, the music softened, the scent of wine lingered, and the formalities and pleasantries gradually faded away.

Just as everyone was about to leave, Louis leaned in slightly and whispered in Emily's ear, "Come with me."

Emily was taken aback, not yet reacting before he took her hand.

"L-Louis?" She was being led by him, the hem of her skirt fluttering slightly as she hurried to keep up with his pace.

The two passed through the side door of the banquet hall, walking onto the vast balcony overlooking the stars and the entire hall.

Then, Louis gestured to the attendant behind him, and the accompanying officiant immediately announced loudly:

"Please, distinguished guests, move to the balcony to enjoy the wedding ceremony scene."

The crowd quickly gathered there, and the cold night did not feel biting amidst the fire pits and warm wine, instead adding solemnity and mystery.

The distant night sky was clear as if washed, with sparse starlight, seemingly leaving the stage solely for this moment.

Emily had not yet understood what was happening, but Louis stood in the center of the balcony, nodding slightly to the crowd.

"This marriage belongs not only to the two of us," his tone was steady as he looked at the eyes watching under the stars, "but also to this Northern Territory. I wish for it to be remembered."

He lifted his hand to indicate, and a row of metal devices ignited in the distance.

The next second, the first alchemical firework soared into the sky.

Boom—!

A blazing red sun blossomed in the night sky, its center flame blazing, like the heart of a flame.

The crowd gasped in amazement.

"It's the sun...a symbol of the Red Tide!"

"So beautiful... It's my first time seeing Demon Marrow fireworks..."

Emily was also stunned in place, the firelight reflected in her pupils, she quietly glanced at the man beside her.

He did not speak more, just quietly looked at the red fire lotus blooming in the sky.

Then the second burst sounded: boom!

This time, ice-blue flames cascaded downwards, like a snow waterfall pouring from the sky.

Crystal light like snow, drifting like illusion, enveloping the entire Red Tide Territory as if the whole world was surrounded by gentle snow fog.

Emily held her breath, how beautiful...

The third boom—!

One of gold, one of silver, enormous winged fireworks exploded from the sky, spreading out beneath the dome.

The light and shadow of flying wings left a magnificent arc in the night sky, resembling a silver eagle soaring, faintly forming part of the Edmund Clan's crest, symbolizing order and alliance.

"Wow..." Even the noble children couldn't help clapping, and the elders also stood in reverence.

Louis raised his brow slightly: "Hillco indeed has some skill."

He had originally scorned that guy's so-called "alchemy genius."

After all, that person always spouted strange theories and frequently caused trouble, but now he had to admit.

Whenever this guy got serious, he could indeed create something remarkable.

The balcony of the hall was already a place of murmuring interwoven with shock and awe.

Almost no noble guests seeing such a scene for the first time weren't astonished.

"What's that?... Magic?" A Southern noble squinted in surprise.

After a series of earth-shattering three firework bursts, the night sky did not return to silence, instead becoming more lively.

As the mechanisms triggered one by one, a series of splendid lights and shadows rose into the sky, flowers, streamlines, whirls, star showers, phoenix tails... one after another, almost dyeing the entire night sky into a moving painting.

The nobility could hardly take it all in, almost pinned in place.

"Is that... magic?" someone opened their mouth blankly, with a trace of reverent uncertainty in the tone.

"No... it's an illusion technique? How could there be such orderly changes?!"

"Look at that trajectory...is it a Magic Explosion Bullet! Could a Magic Explosion Bullet create such an effect!"

"This, this is no longer the 'ceremonial cannon' we know..."

People whispered among themselves, yet not one was willing to look away.

They had attended countless weddings, seen countless luxurious spectacles, but never had they witnessed a ceremony that used the "sky" as its canvas.

That wasn't fireworks; it was a declaration that defied all imagination.

Even the usually composed Duke Edmund raised his head slightly to look for a moment.

He had never cared for lively occasions, nor was he impressed by luxury, but at this moment, he rarely stopped his thoughts, silently gazing, a hint of light appearing in his eyes.

"Indeed quite beautiful." He said.

As if even he had been forced to acknowledge the extraordinary nature of this "young people's wedding."

The lady standing beside him, Lady Irina, could not conceal the amazement in her eyes; her eyes were bright as if lit by the fireworks, softly exclaiming:

"It's truly... too beautiful."

It wasn't just about the fireworks; it seemed to express amazement at her daughter's wedding and the night's significance.

"You had planned this all along?" Emily asked softly, her voice so light as if afraid of disturbing the stars ignited.

"Not for everyone." Louis looked at her, his voice still calm but with rare seriousness, "It's prepared for you."

Emily was stunned, the breeze brushed her hair, yet couldn't disperse the tremor in her eyes.

Louis spoke slowly, pondering each word, "I know well how much you've sacrificed for this day. But I don't want you to feel like you're just a family pawn."

He turned his head, looking at the brightly intertwined sky, his voice low yet firm: "After today, you're my wife. I hope when you look back on today's scene, it's the light welcoming you, blooming for you."

Emily stared at him, looking at this destined person.

The fireworks bloomed again, star showers rained on her shoulders, and her heartbeat seemed to skip a beat at this moment.

"Why did you..." She opened her mouth but found her throat tightened, her voice trembling softly.

"I'm not good at saying moving words," Louis chuckled lightly, "but I know you deserve such a night."

At that moment, Emily's tears almost burst forth.

She slowly reached out, grasping his hand.

The sound of the wind moved slightly, as if it had become gentle.

This moment belonged to them, not to any alliance, family, or empire.

It belonged only to her and him.

Chapter 226: Wedding Night

The night was deep, the guests had departed, and most of the lights had already dimmed.

The heavy wooden door gently closed after the attendant withdrew, leaving only a soft "click" to separate the world outside.

The bedroom was spacious and silent, with drapes hanging low, and the air retained a faint sweet scent of roses and incense.

In the room, only the two of them remained.

Emily stood in the center of the room, head bowed, her hands subconsciously clutching the hem of her wedding dress.

It was the wedding dress she proudly wore today, one that had amazed everyone.

Yet at this moment, Emily found herself feeling... a bit at a loss.

Her ears were burning, and her heart pounded as if she had just fought a battle.

She didn't even dare to look at Louis.

"Is this what they call a wedding night?" she silently asked herself.

Just then, she heard the soft rustle of fabric behind her.

Louis had taken off his outer robe and carefully draped it over the back of a nearby chair.

He then approached her, his footsteps so light they were almost inaudible.

Emily felt him standing in front of her.

Then her hand was taken.

His hand was warm, his palm dry and strong, enveloping her cold fingers.

"Are you still nervous?" Louis asked, humor tinging his low voice.

Before she could answer, he suddenly put on a serious expression and said earnestly, "Should I... go and fetch the priest back? We can hold the ceremony formally once more."

"Pfft." Emily couldn't help but laugh, raising her eyes to glare at him, yet a smile had already found its way to her lips.

"What nonsense are you saying?"

"You smiled." Louis also smiled, lowering his head to plant a gentle kiss on the back of her hand, "That puts me at ease."

Louis didn't rush into anything, merely looking at her quietly.

"Emily," he said softly, "I won't rush, nor will I let you be afraid."

He raised a hand to gently brush aside a lock of her drooping blue hair, then began to unfasten the intricate buttons on her wedding dress.

His movements were extremely gentle, whispering in her ear with each button he unfastened.

Sometimes it was a playful joke: "These buttons are so hard to undo..."

Sometimes it was tender sentiments: "You looked truly beautiful today, I've never seen a more radiant bride than you."

Emily blushed so deeply that her neck and shoulders seemed to be on fire from his words.

"You... stop talking." She mumbled, turning her face aside, yet couldn't help but chuckle softly.

Though her heart raced as if it wanted to burst from her chest, within those gentle moments, she slowly calmed down.

That uncertainty, that self-reminder of "this is a political marriage", seemed to quietly dissolve into an invisible emotion on this night.

Emily gently closed her eyes.

He gently led her to the bed, with no hasty movements, no restless emotions.

Step by step, they closed the distance, not like a conquest, but more like a guiding path.

"You don't have to be nervous, I'm here." he said softly, like a reassurance, also like a promise.

Emily bit her lip, her face buried deep in the pillow.

Every inch of contact felt like breaking that barrier of seeming closeness yet distance.

He occasionally whispered something in her ear, like a joke, or a teasing: "Do you regret it yet? Marrying a 'political tool' like me."

"Shut up..." she lightly punched him, not daring to look at him, only burying her face deeper.

Then their silhouettes slowly entwined, the candlelight flickered gently, within the canopy, time seemed to stand still.

Until the night was deep as ink, the wind stopped, everything outside had nothing to do with them anymore.

In this gentle glow, they finally truly became husband and wife.

.....

The morning light shone softly through the thin curtains into the room, spreading over the carved wooden bed and the pale golden carpet.

Warm, yet not glaring.

Louis woke very early.

He always did, even if last night... after an extraordinary night, his body felt slightly tired, yet his mind was remarkably clear.

Last night's memories returned to him like a tide.

He instinctively reached out beside him, touching a soft and warm form.

Emily lay curled in his arms, breathing steadily, her eyelashes quietly lowered, like a small beast sleeping in the snow.

Perhaps she was too tired, not even disturbed by the slightest dreams.

Some blush lingered on her face, a trace of the emotions and warmth from last night.

Louis gazed dazedly at her, not moving for a long time.

Her long blue hair spread out like flowing water in the morning light, enhancing the snow-white of her skin.

Her features were still exquisitely beautiful, with that high and straight nose, the light-colored lips, and those closed ice-blue eyes, even now, not open, bearing a natural cool elegance.

No wonder she's called the "Flower of the North".

He had heard that said many times before but never really paid attention.

But now, he suddenly felt those words were too shallow.

She was not just beautiful, but stunningly compelling.

Not only her appearance, but a presence that commanded respect and a desire to protect.

Louis gently raised his hand, his fingertips pausing through her hair, caution evident in his movements, as if worried about waking her.

Recalling last night, when she lay in his arms, the tears in her eyes and her efforts to restrain her voice.

He bowed his head and left a kiss on her forehead.

Although last night was indeed wonderful, enough to be a treasured page in life.

But come morning, there was still work to be done; after all, the Northern Province of the Ironblood Empire, Snow Peak County, still rested upon his shoulders.

He raised his hand slightly and opened the Daily Intelligence System.

"Swish—"

A translucent light screen quietly appeared before Louis, and familiar fonts slowly rolled.

When Louis's gaze fell on the Daily Intelligence light screen that emerged in front of him, he was slightly taken aback.

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

[1: Vic led the Northern Elite Knights deep into the Dark Snow Forest to track the Insect Swarm and discovered a giant Nest in the depths of the forest. After the troops were exposed, they engaged in combat. Vic volunteered to cover the retreat and confirmed a heroic sacrifice.]

[2: The surviving knight Carl escaped alone and arrived at Red Tide Territory this morning. He will personally report the details of the incident to Louis and Duke Edmund.]

[3: The Nest is the second experimental product of the Desperate Witch, characterized by high fear of extreme high temperature explosion; once the central sac core is destroyed, a structural collapse will occur, paralyzing all insect bodies and causing mass death.]

Louis squinted his eyes and silently watched the intelligence roll by.

Three pieces of intelligence, all about the Insect Swarm, all... extremely shocking.

Discovering the Nest was undoubtedly a huge breakthrough.

He had long suspected the existence of a master brain in the swarm, but this was the first time it turned from a "guess" into a clearly marked "target."

But the next line tightened his eyebrows.

Vic, dead.

The Northern Extraordinary Knight whom he had only met once, with a straightforward disposition and not many words, yet with eyes extremely steady, now became the "sacrifice" in the intelligence.

Louis didn't feel deeply moved, but a faint regret indeed arose in the depths of his heart.

"Quite a pity," he sighed. "He was a good person."

Someone he had only met once made him somewhat regretful, probably because such proactive High-tier Knight should have lived.

Moreover, losing an extraordinary level warrior like this also indirectly indicated how dangerous that place was.

This wasn't the lair of a small group of insect corpses but likely the uncontrollable source of pollution threatening Snow Peak County and even the Northern Territory.

And being so close to his territory made him somewhat alarmed.

The second piece of intelligence, however, let him slightly breathe a sigh of relief.

"At least someone survived to return. The Duke... he'll handle the explanation."

Someone coming to report saved Louis a lot of trouble in figuring out how to "reasonably conceal the source of intelligence."

But what truly made him sit up straight and sharpen his gaze was the third piece of intelligence.

"...Desperate Witch?"

Louis murmured the unfamiliar name under his breath, and his voice carried an undeniable severity.

He had never heard of this name before. No records, no rumors, not even in the secret reports of the Empire.

The name itself sent a chill into one's heart.

"The Nest... is her experimental product?"

This wasn't ordinary demon breeding, nor an unconscious mutation.

Behind it lay an intention, a design, control.

The swarm was no longer beasts but more like some manipulated weapon.

Purposeful expansion, logical nest construction, experiments, iterations, evolution.

"If that's just 'Second Number'..."

Then where are the First, Third, Fourth... hidden? What intentions do they hold?

He couldn't help but clench his fist at this thought, his palm slightly sweating.

Louis wasn't afraid of battles or enemies.

He feared unseen enemies, the sinister hand quietly arranging fate in the dark.

"The swarm is just the surface. The real threat is the one who created them."

Yet the intelligence below struck his mind like a bolt of thunder.

"Extremely high temperature explosion fear. Once the central sac core is destroyed, the entire Nest collapses."

Louis froze suddenly, then slowly curved his lips into a smile.

"That does help me a lot." He sat upright, his gaze steadily growing sharp, like a wolf in the snow catching the scent of prey.

Something in his warehouse instantly came to mind.

Red Platinum Magic Explosion Bullet, Hillco's proud work, capable of destroying walls several meters thick.

Originally just reserve emergency stock, but now seems crafted for this moment.

"The Nest fears this? Then it seems I've made the right bet in advance."

He couldn't help but chuckle lightly, feeling a kind of rejoicing as if "good fortune had finally come to me."

This means they now have the possibility to actively strike and resolve the Nest rather than passively wait for the Insect Tide to consume them.

"As long as we can get close... as long as we can blast that core."

His mind had already begun simulating the raid routes, force configurations, detonation conditions...

"Good news." He whispered, his eyes already reflecting the icy contours of the battlefield.

"Next, it's just about how to take it down." He slowly closed the light screen, his expression restrained, taking a deep breath.

Although the emergence of the Nest brought unprecedented darkness.

But at least now they finally hold the key to counterattack.

"As long as there's intelligence... I can win," he said softly.

Louis lifted the covers quietly, afraid to disturb Emily.

He reached out and rubbed his brow, looking out the window where dawn had not yet fully broken, just a layer of very faint silver blue.

He should have another four hours for cultivation, but today is different.

The Duke is scheduled to leave for Frost Halberd City this morning.

Last night's banquet, his father-in-law sincerely invited him to join breakfast, saying, "We should have a good chat."

Between them lie family matters as well as the Northern Territory's grand scheme to discuss.

"So cultivation time has to be compressed..."

He sat cross-legged, gaze focused, hesitating between Fighting Energy and Magic, ultimately choosing the latter as the Primordial Meditation Technique's magic benefits were greater for him.

Louis slowly exhaled, letting the magic power inside him flow gently through the circuit, entering a meditative state.

Meanwhile, his mind had already started contemplating tactics: how to approach the core of the Nest? How to deploy the Magic Explosion Bullet? Is there a team capable of undertaking the infiltration mission?

Chapter 227: An Extraordinary Breakfast

The early morning light gently filtered through the high windows of Red Tide City, softly casting on the carved long table and silver-edged plates, as if murmuring softly in this tranquil morning.

This was Louis's first time having breakfast with Duke Edmund's family.

Also his first time, sitting as both "Red Tide Lord" and "son-in-law" at the table of the most powerful duke in the Northern Territory.

He wore a neat black formal suit, with complete etiquette, neither humble nor arrogant.

The Duke sat at the main seat, his expression calm, his gaze as distant as a snowfield.

To his left was Lady Irina, still in a fog blue long dress, gentle and elegant.

And on Louis's right was Emily, sitting cautiously, yet her gaze quietly fixed on his profile for a long time.

The long table was filled with exquisite breakfast: hot wheat cakes and cheese laid on silver plates, warm honey wine in fine porcelain pot, and slices of smoked salmon, golden orange in color and fragrant.

But the most intense in the air was not the aroma of the food, but that subtle, yet-to-be-fully-unfolded family atmosphere.

"This fish is quite good." Edmund spoke first, picking up a slice of smoked salmon, his eyebrows slightly raised.

"A specialty of Red Tide," Louis replied calmly, "specially smoked in the workshop. If you like it, my lord, I can prepare some for you to take back to Frost Halberd City."

"Hmm." The Duke responded plainly, his tone unchanged.

Emily picked up the teacup, took a small sip, her gaze drifting across the table, landing between her father and husband, her expression slightly tense.

She knew this meal was not just breakfast, but also a test.

"How are you two getting along?" The Duke asked.

Emily blushed slightly, not knowing what she thought of.

Louis did not evade, but answered calmly, "Very well, Emily is a perfect wife. I'm lucky to have married her."

"Hmph." Edmund nodded, a certain examining tone hidden in his nasal response.

And Irina beside him laughed softly, saying warmly, "Emily indeed has a bit of a stubborn streak. She never shows her soft side easily since she was young. You'll need to be a little more accommodating."

"Mother." Emily protested in a low voice, her face slightly flushed.

Irina gently patted her hand, a mischievous smile tugging at her lips.

Edmund, however, did not smile. He stared at Louis, his tone lowered a bit.

"This girl... has a hard mouth but a soft heart. Outwardly she seems reserved, but she cares more than anyone. She is my most beloved daughter, the person I most hope finds happiness in this world."

His gaze fixed on Louis, his voice calm, yet heavier than a blade.

"I married her to you not just for an alliance with the Calvin Clan. I want her to live well. So I hope you don't treat this marriage as merely a political exchange."

The air suddenly became silent.

Emily's eyelashes trembled as she looked up at her husband.

Louis was silent for a moment, then put down his knife and fork, turned to look at Duke Edmund, his tone steady, "I won't. No matter the initial reason, now and in the future, I will treat her sincerely and won't let her suffer any grievances."

Emily held her breath for an instant.

What she heard was not sweet words, but a promise made after careful thought.

Just like last night, when he said in front of her, "I will never hurt you."

The Duke looked at Louis, saying nothing for a long time.

Irina slowly smiled first, "That's enough, Edmund. Don't turn breakfast into an inquisition. Emily is about to be unable to sit still."

"Not at all," Emily murmured in rebuttal, but her ears were still red.

Edmund finally nodded, said nothing more, picked up the wine glass, and took a slow sip.

The topic gently shifted in the silence.

"Speaking of which," the Duke put down the cup, his gaze falling on the rising morning mist outside the window, "I originally only heard that your territory was well-built."

His tone was calm, as if casually discussing someone else's situation.

"But after taking a look around yesterday," he paused, his eyes slightly narrowed as if recalling everything he saw, "your territory really did surprise me."

Louis was slightly taken aback, just about to speak, but the Duke had already continued the conversation himself.

"Clean streets, people's faces looking decent, granaries, workshops, markets... I didn't expect you transformed a war-torn border into a prosperous place in just one year."

His tone carried a faint sense of admiration, even a bit of helplessness.

"I did something similar when I was young, but you did it faster and more steady than I did."

As he said this, his gaze unconsciously avoided Louis.

He knew full well that in managing livelihood, he was indeed not as good as this young man before him.

Despite his years in military and politics, the peace, satiety, and hope spoken by the common people were never as tangible as they were in Red Tide Territory.

In less than two years, from a broken battlefield to the current city walls, streets, and order.

If not seen with his own eyes, he wouldn't have believed this was achieved by someone in his early twenties.

Simply a genius, far exceeding what he had done, especially in terms of civilian life.

And only took a year's time.

He was reluctant to admit it, but also couldn't deny it.

Perhaps... this young man really has the potential to bring about an unimaginable transformation for the entire Northern Territory.

Emily sat quietly, her fingers gently brushing the edge of the teacup.

As soon as her father's voice faded, she couldn't help but sit up straight, a faint arc slowly curling her lips.

Chapter 228: An Unusual Breakfast (Part 2)

That was a kind of quiet pride.

She recalled the heartfelt smiles of the people when they spoke of Louis, even referring to him as the Sun of the Northern Territory.

It was something she had witnessed firsthand, just as her father had mentioned, though back then he felt he might have been exaggerating.

And now, her father finally saw it for himself.

Then Duke Demond changed his tone slightly, with a hint of teasing: "Even this castle has made me see it with new eyes."

"The structure is solid, the distribution of the towers is reasonable, the supply routes, watchtowers, and inner halls are well protected, and its appearance is very impressive, quite to my taste..."

Louis widened his eyes slightly.

He was accustomed to others describing the castle as practical and durable, warm as spring inside.

But when evaluating its exterior, it was either called "ugly" or "strange."

This was the first time someone had praised the castle's appearance to his face.

And it was Duke Edmund.

He instinctively glanced at Emily, only to find her nonchalantly looking out the window, her lips slightly curled as if suppressing something.

"I thought you would find it too unlike a noble castle." He whispered.

"But this is the style of the Northern Territory, isn't it?" The Duke looked at him meaningfully, then took up his cup and sipped his wine gently.

"However..." Duke Edmund's gaze returned to the window.

Under the morning mist, the streets of Red Tide City were starting to awaken, with the distant sounds of iron hammering and hoofbeats.

"Although it seems calm here, the situation in the entire Northern Territory... is quite dire." Duke Edmund's tone shifted, discarding his earlier admiration for the heavy concern of a commander.

"This year, many places have suffered disasters, resources are scarce, rebels, marauders, and conflicts over supply routes are frequent, unrest is unsettled, logistics are in crisis.

Although last year's purge severely weakened the Snow Swearers, and we initially planned the final battle for fall... I intend to postpone it to next spring."

He spoke calmly, without probing or negotiation, as if updating an already decided order.

Louis didn't respond immediately, simply lowering his eyes to the pale golden liquid in his cup, his gaze slightly flickering.

To postpone was indeed a reasonable decision for the current Northern Territory.

Stable, cautious, and gradual.

But for him, it was not good news.

What flashed in Louis' mind was that vague and oppressive warning from the daily intelligence system.

That unverifiable message, that warning from the future.

[The evil being nurtured by the Snow Swearers is stirring, and this crisis will sweep the entire Northern Territory this winter, no less than the great rebellion two years ago.]

He tightened his grip on the cup handle but couldn't bring himself to speak.

The Duke was unaware, at least not yet.

After all, Louis still couldn't persuade anyone with "intelligence from a mysterious system."

Moreover, his intelligence was limited, and revealing it might mislead the Duke's judgment.

He could only wait, wait for more clues to surface, wait for the contours of that winter crisis to really become clear...

Louis had a hunch that perhaps... the Nest hidden in the dark valley was the "nurtured evil" mentioned in the warning.

He noted this privately.

But outwardly, he only nodded lightly, his expression as usual, as if merely an obedient subordinate receiving his commander's orders.

At that moment, urgent footsteps came from outside the door.

A soldier quickly stepped in, knelt on one knee, and urgently said, "Your Highness, Knight Carl from Vic's squad... has returned injured and requests an audience."

"Injured?" Louis' face turned grave as he slowly stood up, his gaze fixed in the direction of the archway, as if restraining his emotions.

However, he wasn't surprised by Carl's return or his injuries.

After all, the morning's daily intelligence system had already informed him of Carl's return and the information he brought back.

The Duke frowned, hesitating hardly at all: "Let him in at once."

The sound of iron boots stepping on stone bricks was heavy and viscous, as if each step came from a pool of blood.

Carl was covered in dry and not yet coagulated bloodstains, one hand clutching the wound on his shoulder tightly, the other gripping the arm of a guard as if holding onto the last unsunken piece of driftwood.

He staggered into the hall, his ankles seemingly unable to bear his weight, his knees almost sliding into view.

Louis quickly approached, half kneeling, to support the knight who was in a sorry state.

Duke Edmund didn't move, only lifted his eyes slowly, that gaze shadowed as if it were never shaken.

No need for questions, just by the sight alone, Edmund understood—Vic was in grave danger.

He simply tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair, his rhythm slow to the point of coldness, as if pressing a kind of sorrow into his bones.

Carl looked up to see the familiar figure, a faint smile appearing at the corner of his blood-stained mouth.

"Duke... sire..." His voice was hoarse, like a knife cutting through sand, "you... you are here..."

He broke free from the guard's support, gritting his teeth to half kneel, maintaining the dignity of a knight even if he were to faint in the next moment.

"Report the situation," Edmund's voice was low and steady.

Carl nodded, his chest heaving intensely several times, finally squeezing out what was on his mind in a broken string of words from his throat.

"We... found that place, the Nest of the bugs."

He suddenly coughed up a mouthful of blood and foam, yet seemed not to notice, only raising a trembling hand to point to a distant direction outside the window.

"Within 20 kilometers southwest of the entrance to the Shadow Mountain Forest, where they are... no, it's a nest made of some... living thing."

Chapter 229: An Extraordinary Breakfast_3

He closed his eyes, as if the horrific scene was still firmly nailed to his retina.

"It's... it's breathing." His voice was as light as the wind, "That's not stone, it's flesh. Gray-white, covered in mucus... with holes that constantly open and close, just like... like it's gasping."

Louis said nothing, only holding his shoulder, feeling the body still trembling slightly.

Carl's expression froze in the shadows, as he slowly raised another hand, gesturing some shape.

"Above the nest, something hung... like a human, also like some kind of fetus... a mass of flesh and blood, with countless tentacles. We saw it—using those tentacles to slowly pull corpses into its body... and then..."

He paused, his Adam's apple sliding.

"A dozen seconds later... a new insect corpse slid out from the nest wall... like a peeled fruit."

The chamber fell into dead silence, only the weak fire in the fireplace crackling softly.

"They still wore armor... still used weapons... I saw an insect corpse with a blue-gold armband, that was... one of our legion." Carl's voice lowered, carrying a barely audible tremor, "They still fight, just like when they were alive."

Edmond slowly sat back in the chair, hands intertwined on his lap, his gaze serene and cold.

He said nothing, but the air seemed even colder by a few degrees.

"Then we were... discovered."

Carl continued, as if using all his willpower.

"Vic at that time... told us to retreat." He clenched his fist.

"They soon caught up, hundreds... maybe more."

He struggled to suppress the trembling, but terror seeped inch by inch from his gaze.

"They feel no pain, no fear, make no sound. We sever their legs, they crawl with their hands... break their hands, they bite with their jaws. Their movements... like beasts, but with human combat skills."

Carl gasped, as if it took all his strength to squeeze out the next words:

"And they can infect, I saw with my own eyes Benito hit by an insect sac... a few seconds later, his eyes changed, like they were hollowed out. He drew his sword, without any warning, stabbed through Seville's chest."

At this point, Carl paused for a moment: "They died one by one. I'm sorry, I... the only thing I could do was bring this information back."

He lowered his head, as if apologizing to all his fallen companions, his nails digging deep into his palm, blood seeping once again from the wound.

Throughout the explanation, Carl's lips trembled, and he looked like he was fished out of ice water, even breathing seemed broken.

His eyes scattered, speech becoming incoherent, sentences breaking now and then, without much logic, but he still managed to say everything that needed to be said.

The location of the nest...

Its grotesque, twisted form...

The number and types of the insect corpses, and... their combat methods.

Every word was like the last drop of blood squeezed from his spirit.

The Duke stood in front of him, face heavy, a noticeable shock in his eyes upon hearing "insect corpses transmit rapidly".

When Carl finished the last detail, he seemed drained, staggering a half step forward, fortunately caught by Louis.

The Duke was silent for several seconds, as if shadows were slowly spreading across his heart, but he stepped forward, gently pressing Carl's shoulder.

"You did well, Carl." His voice was gentle, yet full of suppressed grief, "Go rest, leave the rest to us."

After Carl withdrew, the hall fell into a long silence.

The air seemed frozen, even the falling dust's trajectory became clearly visible.

In that suffocating silence, sitting nearby, Emily clasped her hands tightly.

Maintaining a poised upright posture, yet her slightly trembling eyelashes betrayed her inner turmoil.

Emily was not a weak girl.

She had witnessed heaps of corpses in war, and once rode with a sword as an elite knight.

But Carl's description was too gruesome, plus the fact that so many elite knights and an extraordinary knight managed to escape alone, further illustrated the horror of the nest.

And that thing was hidden near the Red Tide Territory, and Louis would face this horror directly.

Duchess Irina simply sat quietly, her expression as dignified as ever.

She had seen too many of such things, and believed that her man could handle it.

And Duke Edmund slowly leaned back into the high-backed chair, saying nothing, looking as though he had sunk beneath a cold abyss.

He was not a cowardly man.

On the contrary, he was a peak knight who had fought bloody battles in the Northern Snowfield for ten days and nights and had clawed his way out of a pile of corpses during an avalanche to counterattack.

Precisely because of this, he understood that in the face of truly unpredictable enemies, caution is far more important than hot-bloodedness.

After a few breaths, he finally spoke, voice deep and low, like a snowstorm upon the borders.

"The Frost Halberd... is too far from there. Even if I order the assembly and departure at the fastest speed, reinforcements to that valley would take at least ten days.

That thing... can it afford to wait?"

No one answered.

Not out of fear, but helplessness.

Snow Peak County has not yet recovered its primordial energy, the Red Tide Territory's strength remains, but other territories were severely wounded last year in the repeated struggles with the Snow Swearers.

To temporarily gather a force capable of countering the nest is nearly a fool's dream.

But in the silence, Louis's voice suddenly sounded, unusually firm: "Cannot wait."

In an instant, all eyes focused on the young Viscount.

"Carl made it very clear. They have tactics, divisions of labor, even understand encirclements and anti-ambushes. That's not an ordinary demon's nest, it's a... an evolving intelligence. Now it has been alerted, if we don't act now, they might act first."

Chapter 230: An Extraordinary Breakfast_4

Louis's speech was exceedingly steady, but every sentence was like a nail, "By then, it won't be us going to subdue it, instead it will proactively cross the dense forest to devour us."

"We must destroy it before it fully expands and takes the initiative to attack."

Duke Edmund knitted his brows deeply, "You want to lead a raid on the nest?"

"Yes." Louis did not hesitate, "We have the elite, understand coordination, and I will oversee it personally. We are not going to die, but to intercept and kill. Once it spreads out the insect swarm, that's when the real corpse tide will get out of control."

Listening to these words, Emily couldn't help but feel her heartbeat quicken.

She was proud of him, admiring his calm, stable, clear, and decisive judgment.

Yet, she was equally worried about his resolve to risk himself personally.

"You are too impatient, Louis." Edmond spoke slowly, without a hint of anger in his tone, "It's not that I underestimate you, but you've also heard... twenty elite knights were completely wiped out, do you have enough troops to gamble with?"

"I am not going to gamble." Louis's voice remained firm, "I will lead a lightly armed unit to first observe the periphery and confirm whether there is a possibility of annihilation.

If possible, we will kill it in one strike. If not, we will come back alive and bring back more specific intelligence."

He paused briefly, his gaze steady, "And you can start mobilizing troops, we are conducting dual operations, not putting all eggs in one basket."

The council hall fell silent once again.

A few moments later, Edmond finally nodded slowly, his voice deep, "Alright. You may go, but only take those you trust."

He stood up, his cloak slightly moved, and his eyes darkened.

"I will also go with you."

The hall subtly trembled.

Louis was taken aback, frowning slightly, "Sir, you..."

"I am not mad." Edmond said faintly, "I don't believe anyone would willingly let their daughter become a widow just after getting married."

Emily blushed upon hearing this.

"With me there, in the worst situation... at least one life can be saved."

Edmond's tone was still cold, yet carried a touch of appreciation.

His gaze lingered on Louis for a half second, as if assessing, or perhaps as a kind of warning, before slowly moving away.

"Besides, I also want to see how much capability you truly have."

Upon finishing, he slightly tilted his head, instructing the adjutant guard behind him, "The thirty elite knights I brought will also be at his full disposal."

Louis showed a delighted expression and said, "Thank you, Sir."

The Duke did not acknowledge him but continued speaking to the guard, "Immediately ride swiftly to inform Gibson to gather a contingent on site. Reinforce at any sign of change."

The adjutant responded and left, while Edmond did not look at Louis again, merely reclining slightly in the chair, the rhythm of his fingers tapping on the armrest never ceasing.

He did not truly believe Louis could resolve this matter.

No matter how sharp a small lord is, it's impossible to easily clear that bizarre nest.

But he acknowledged that the analysis was indeed irrefutable.

Yet sending someone to probe and scout was a strategic move.

It could clarify the situation and suppress it in time.

At this moment, Louis stood silently, a string of judgments flashed rapidly in his mind:

Thirty elite knights under the Duke, plus the thirty I can mobilize from my own troops... a total of sixty elite knights in my hand.

Add in eighty official knights who can also operate on the periphery.

Not to mention the Duke, a peak knight, overseeing everything.

There's also the Red Soul Demon Explosion Bullet, a means specifically aimed at large creatures like the nest...

Even the nest has a ninety percent chance of being eliminated.