

Winter 231

Chapter 231: Preparations Before the Expedition

As soon as Louis stepped out of the reception room and had taken only a few steps, he heard hurried footsteps coming from behind.

He didn't turn back but stopped at the corner of the corridor.

The wind blew in from the high windows, the curtains trembled lightly, and the sunlight cast familiar boot shadows on the stone floor.

"Are you... really going in person?" Emily's tone was filled with a barely contained anxiety.

She stood by his side, her lips tightly pressed yet trying to maintain her calm.

Louis didn't answer immediately, he simply said softly, "I should do this."

Emily bit her lip, her eyes fixated on him as if trying to discern even a hint of hesitation from his face.

"You heard it too... what Carl said, it's not an ordinary demon." Her voice quivered slightly, "We could just send others to investigate, why does it have to be you?"

In her eyes, there was no teasing, no tantrum, only genuine fear.

A fear that he might never return, and she might have to watch him throw himself into a perilous one-way journey.

"We just got married..." she said softly, eyes reddening, "I haven't even had the chance... to talk to you more."

The wind gently stirred her hair, a few strands lay against her cheek, fragile and stubborn.

Without extra words, Louis merely reached out and gently held her cold fingers.

At that moment, silence filled the corridor, save for the sound of the wind.

Emily was momentarily taken aback, then gently leaned her head against his shoulder.

With eyes closed, it seemed like she was secretly hiding the moisture at the corners of her eyes.

"Then at least... you must promise me," she murmured softly, "If you notice anything wrong, return immediately..."

"Mm." Louis' grip on her fingers tightened slightly.

A moment later, Emily released her grip, took a deep breath, and regained her usual composure: "Go, my hero, gather your knights. Don't let them wait too long."

She turned away, never looking back again.

After bidding Emily farewell, Louis did not linger at all, striding decisively toward the castle's training ground.

Lambert was overseeing several adjutants patrolling the edge of the field, and upon seeing Louis stride purposefully toward them, he immediately stopped and saluted.

"Lord?"

"Lambert," Louis said with a deep voice, "immediately gather all the elite knights and official knights currently stationed within the Red Tide Territory, have them assemble fully armed and ready to march out."

Lambert's expression changed, his gaze instantly became solemn.

"...All of them?" he instinctively confirmed.

"All of them." Louis nodded, his tone allowing no room for negotiation, "I want to see them fully armed at the training ground in half an hour."

"Understood." Lambert did not ask any more questions, swiftly turning away to deliver the order.

Louis then immediately mounted his horse and galloped straight to the alchemy workshop on the south street of Red Tide City.

In front of the door, two apprentices wearing thick apron were transporting equipment out, and upon seeing the Lord himself arrive, they hurriedly bowed.

"Is Hillco here?"

"Yes, yes, he's inside handling the explosive bullet reagents!"

Louis pushed open the door, the familiar pungent smell hit him, the alchemy furnace fizzing, with various test tubes and metal containers laid out on three long tables.

Hillco, wearing goggles, was in the midst of mixing something, and upon raising his head, saw Louis and hurriedly removed his gloves: "You're here just in time! I've just experimented with a new batch of magic explosion potion base, just need to..."

Louis interrupted him, speaking rapidly, "I'm asking you, how many finished Red Platinum Magic Explosion Bullets do we have now."

Hillco paused for a moment, reflexively replying, "Ready-made? About over sixty, haven't had the time to fully categorize and number them yet..."

"Bring out thirty of them and send them to the training ground." Louis ordered directly.

"Are you crazy?!" Hillco almost jumped up, eyes wide, "Thirty! Are you planning to blow up Frost Halberd City?! Are you trying to turn against the Northern Territory?!"

"I don't have time to joke with you." Louis' voice was cold.

The air suddenly froze, Hillco looked at his calm and steady, yet sharp eyes.

Realizing he genuinely intended to use these explosive bullets, and the target was probably even more formidable than he had imagined.

"I understand." Hillco licked his lips, "I'll personally pack them and have them at the training ground within half an hour."

"The faster the better." Louis nodded, then pushed the door open, mounted his horse again, and sped off.

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The rare summer sunlight of the Northern Territory fell upon the shoulder of the armored knights, yet no one was distracted by it.

One hundred and forty knights stood solemnly within the training ground.

Each with determined faces looking toward the high platform ahead.

Louis stood atop it, clad in a red lord's battle robe, holding several sheets of hand-drawn diagrams.

"Ladies and gentlemen." he began, his voice not loud, yet it instantly subdued all unrest in the field.

"I know this assembly was abrupt. But before you march out, you must know the enemy we are about to face is no ordinary foe."

He unfolded the drawings, revealing an alarming depiction of a structure resembling a hive interwoven with blood and flesh, its core illustrated a large, suspended "flesh sac," with countless "bodies" being thrown into it.

This was the artwork he had people produce in advance.

"This is our enemy's nest."

He paused for a second, allowing everyone to see the image clearly before continuing:

"It is not a simple demon lair, but a living, continuously evolving intelligent structure. The hive presents a honeycomb-like shape, protected by a layer of bone and flesh on the exterior, and at its core is this suspended 'transformation core'."

He then turned to the next piece of paper, depicting a more impactful monster:

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The fused bodies of humans and insects twisted grotesquely, with bones exposed and empty eyes, yet their hands still gripped shattered Knight's Swords and Shields.

"These are called corpse worms," he said calmly, "They are formed from infected human cadavers, retaining the combat instincts they had in life and can even use weapons and defensive postures.

The parasite corpse worms inside them make them nearly impossible to kill completely. Even if cut in half, they will try to crawl towards you.

More importantly, they are contagious. If you are accidentally parasitized by these worms, you too will become a mindless walking dead. That's why you must be fully armored."

Whispers filled the room, even the battle-hardened knights couldn't help but frown.

"I suspect that the unified command of the corpse worms comes from the mental link of the Nest, just like a queen bee controls the swarm. It is not a scattered enemy, but an entire army with tactics and coordination."

"So, we only have one goal, and that is to destroy the heart of the Nest, which is the central system of everything."

He scanned the room, his eyes sharp, his tone suddenly changing, "I won't deceive you about how dangerous it is."

An entire squad, led by an Extraordinary Knight and twenty Elite Knights, was wiped out, only one returned."

This statement poured like a cold wave into everyone's hearts.

After a moment of silence, some young knights gulped and tightened their grip on their Longswords.

But more people straightened their spines in silence.

This was not their first time facing a terrifying enemy; they were no longer the abandoned knights of the fledgling Red Tide Territory.

They were the Red Tide Knights, following Louis through blood and corpses to victory at Qingyu Ridge.

Duke Edmund, standing not far away, watched quietly with a hint of surprise and admiration in his eyes.

He initially thought this young man was just bold and occasionally strategic, yet he had not expected him to piece together such a complete and reasonable enemy profile from mere fragments of information.

The Duke's lips curled almost imperceptibly, "Truly, a commander-in-chief's talent."

Near him, Eduardo, who had come to watch the commotion, listened to his brother vividly describing the structure of the 'Nest' and the 'Core'. He frowned slightly.

"Like a beehive, with collective thinking, creating soldiers by converting bodies..." It seemed to trigger a familiar memory, "I think I've seen this design somewhere."

Eduardo lowered his eyelids, took a gentle breath, and murmured softly, "That missing Grand Mage... could he also be involved?"

He suddenly looked up and approached the high platform, "When do you plan to set out?"

"At noon," replied Louis.

Eduardo nodded slightly, a faint smile curling his lips, "Then I'll join too, since I have nothing better to do recently."

"You?" Louis hesitated slightly.

"Don't forget, I'm also an Extraordinary Knight," Eduardo shrugged.

"Alright," Louis thought for half a second, nodding, "Then you stay, and we will set out together."

Louis then unfurled the map again on the high platform, beginning to lay out the tactical plans.

"Concerning the weaknesses of the Nest, here are my speculations." His gaze swept the crowd below, but his tone was unwavering:

"First, the Nest has no long-range attack capability. It is too large, too slow, and structured not to support remote strikes outside the corpse worms.

As long as we maintain mobility, it can only stare helplessly.

Second, the central Core of the Nest is exceptionally fragile. It is encased in the deepest flesh sac, the core of the entire insect swarm's mental link.

Once destroyed, it might cause the entire corpse worm system to collapse, become chaotic, or even bite each other.

Third, it cannot move. The Nest is a sedentary parasite, deeply relying on the current terrain to maintain its structure.

Once we confirm the coordinates, we can surround and advance, gradually compressing its combat radius."

He paused here, fingers tapping the central area of the map outlined with ink lines.

"Thus, our action plan is 'lure, divide, penetrate, and destroy'." He flipped the map to reveal a detailed tactical diagram.

"Official Knights, in groups of five. Your mission is not a decisive battle but to create chaos.

Continuously draw the attention of corpse worms on the periphery, lead them to diverge, avoid hard combat; no matter how fast the corpse worms, they cannot catch up to your warhorses. Do not get embroiled in battles; preserving yourselves is the priority."

The knights nodded below the stage; this was the tactic they regularly trained in, more than familiar.

"Next, Elite Knights will be divided into two groups."

Louis turned to point at the arrows surrounded by two red lines: "The first group, the squad from Frost Halberd City, is responsible for the flame blockade.

Each of you is equipped with three jars of flame petroleum, a new high-temperature distilled oil, which, once ignited, can burn through corpse worms.

Your goal is to lay a line of fire around the Nest to block the large-scale return of the corpse worms, creating the 'illusion of encirclement,' forcing them to move their elite to the outskirts, thus opening the central gap."

"The second group, the squad from Red Tide Territory, will raid the core." His finger heavily pointed to the deepest part of the map.

Louis retrieved a wooden box wrapped in black cloth from under the table and popped it open.

The bright red explosive stirred a cold light under the sun, like a heart full of deadly energy.

"This is a Red Platinum Magic Explosion Bullet, an alchemical achievement of Red Tide Territory.

Containing compressed high-temperature Magic Essence, once exploded, it creates a superheated blast and shockwave within a three-meter radius. Even steel would melt, let alone the flesh-construction of core sacs.

Each assault knight will carry two and be equipped with short-barrel Power Cannon Tubes for launching.

You will infiltrate through the gaps in the corpse worms, striking the core as quickly as possible, then immediately retreat upon completing the task."

He closed up the map, his gaze swept across the room, his voice firm:

"This isn't a reckless gamble but a paced, coordinated, and hopeful hunting operation; of course, the most important thing is to complete the task while securing yourselves."

Concluding the last tactical map, Louis put down his pen, his gaze sweeping over each knight present.

They said nothing, yet all looked up at him, their expressions solemn and focused.

The air was filled with solemnity.

Duke Edmund, seated nearby, had been quietly observing.

However, now his fingers couldn't help but tap the armrest of his chair.

The emotions in his heart were hard to calm.

"Such a complete tactical system, from battlefield structure, enemy analysis to division and cooperation... even I couldn't think of a better response plan.

Originally thought he was still a young newcomer, if just rashly charging, I would wrest back military power when necessary... but now it seems..."

He smiled slightly, his eyes filled with appreciation and relief.

This son-in-law could already stand on his own.

Thus, the Duke clapped first without hesitation.

The applause wasn't loud, yet it sounded like a trumpet being blown.

The knights were stunned for a moment, then joined in clapping.

The applause, initially sporadic, turned into a uniform sound; the clang of armor echoed like mountain winds sweeping snow through the training ground.

Some knights already had a light in their eyes, that long-lost willingness to die for a worthy lord.

Louis did not move, only raised a hand, palm down, slowly pressing downwards.

The applause stopped, as if the entire air had also gathered its edge, forming a force about to Burst.

He gazed at the audience, his voice not loud, yet carrying steady sharpness:

"I know, you all are battle-hardened knights, have killed real enemies, and have seen comrades bleed dry.

But this enemy is different. They feel no fear, no anger, no pain, and will not surrender.

Whereas we have will, honor, a need to protect companions."

He paused, eyes piercing: "So we are not going to our deaths; we are hunting a monster, severing its lifeline, protecting all lives in the Northern Territory.

But do not underestimate them, nor retreat. Among us, some may be injured, some... may fall in darkness.

But remember, we are the Northern Knights, the Shield standing between this land and the Abyss.

We do not fight for death; we fight for the living."

Louis paused slightly, his gaze sweeping across the ranks, "Now return to camp and prepare."

Then, in unison, they nodded and clapped, their applause growing from scattered to synchronized.

Within the applause, some knights had an expression filled with the light of willingness, the willingness to die with honor for a cause they believed in.

Louis paused once more, his eyes scanning the entire unit: "Now return to camp and make preparations." As agreement erupted from his knights, Duke Edmund, standing not far off, watched quietly, a hint of surprise yet also a measure of admiration in his eyes.

Chapter 233: The Frenzied Nest

The mountain wind shuttled between the dense forests, carrying a suffocating stench of corpses.

Weir held his breath for a while, but ultimately lowered his voice and said, "God, is that the Nest... It's so, so disgusting."

He spoke softly, yet his voice trembled uncontrollably, as if afraid of disturbing the world of silence and writhing below the valley:

Below the slope was a gorge that seemed to be torn open by the earth.

Sunlight could not penetrate the treetops, leaving only dim shadows and darkness, outlining a huge shadow that seemed to wriggle like a living creature.

The Nest was nestled in the deepest part of that shadow.

It looked like some enormous beehive or a festering organ, situated on the mud, its surface covered in a resin-like shell of a pale color, each subtle movement producing a sticky wet sound.

On that shell were embedded blurred faces of humans, mostly adult men, with distorted, struggling expressions, as if frozen eternally in pain, sealed within a nightmare-like amber.

Nearby the Nest, rows of insect corpses moved slowly.

Some of these insect corpses had once been human, some were formerly magical beasts, and some vaguely resembled knights.

Their eyes were hollow, their steps uniform as if guided by invisible threads, lifting and casting bodies into the opened fissure of the Nest.

It resembled a ritual of the dead.

Silent, repetitive, endless.

This was not a battlefield but a theater of sacrifice.

No one could utter a word.

Even Duke Edmund, seasoned in battle and accustomed to gore, frowned slightly, standing beside Louis, gazing at the scene defying common sense, a rare heavy expression in his eyes.

He patted Louis's shoulder, as if comforting him: "I don't think this is something you should handle."

The Duke's tone was not reprimanding but advising, having recognized the young man in front of him, often regarding him as a future cornerstone.

Yet, having never encountered it, he did not know if his own strength as a Peak Knight could withstand it, let alone Louis's knights.

He wished to persuade further, even considered issuing a strong order to retreat.

But turning his head, he saw in Louis's eyes no hesitation as he looked at the Nest, but a gaze as if surveying a castle awaiting assault.

The young man's expression was focused, his eyes fervent, a glow only those confident in victory would possess.

Edmund wanted to say more, advising him to abandon this dangerous gamble, but ultimately he held his tongue.

Letting this spirited young man suffer a setback also wasn't entirely bad.

Who in their youth hasn't been slapped by reality a few times, learning genuine caution and skill?

Besides... he was already absurdly stronger than most.

Their location was a concealed slope about two miles away from the Nest, surrounded by woods on three sides.

To ascertain the Nest's scale before it spread, Louis had led the raid team at noon, traveling non-stop until this evening.

Finally reaching the "heart" built of rot and fear.

"Prepare."

The wind continued to howl on the slope, stirring fallen leaves and dust.

Yet Louis's voice was as steady as a rock, unwavering as he squinted at the enormous Nest encircled by insect corpses, raising his right hand slightly, fingertip trembling.

The knights hiding under the trees held their breath, gripping specially made spears bound with Magic Burst Crystal Cores, weapons capable of tearing rocks and burning through Iron Armor.

Louis gestured.

"Release!"

In the next instant, several streaks of cold light whizzed from the shadows, tearing through the sky, heading directly for the Nest!

Air seemed shredded, the screech piercing through eardrums.

The spears dragged brilliant red trails, like meteors descending from the heavens, shooting fiercely towards the enormous black-red Nest.

However.

"Bam!"

A thick tentacle, as dark as ink, suddenly sprung from the Nest's surface, striking the flying spears, knocking them along with the bursting light to the ground.

Boom! Fire erupted but only burned a shallow pit at the gorge's edge.

Then, a second, a third... countless tentacles oozing stench and slime exploded from the Nest's surface.

Like a disturbed deep-sea monster, they flailed wildly, forming a suffocating defense, intercepting all incoming spears.

"Tsk." Louis squinted his eyes, whispered softly.

And as the echoes of the explosion hadn't faded, nauseating sounds emerged from the valley.

"Cluck... cluck cluck cluck... gaaah—"

One of the insect corpses, having lay orderly to cast bodies, suddenly halted.

Its head twisted abruptly, the unnatural seam of bones in its neck emitting creaking sounds.

Then, like an out-of-control puppet, it began convulsing, issuing low murmurs mimicking human speech but entirely incoherent.

"Murmur... return... murmur... mother..."

Its fingers twisted, trembling, footsteps retreating and rotating, as if struggling or obeying an irresistible call.

The next moment, as if a chain reaction was triggered, hundreds, thousands of insect corpses convulsed violently.

Humanoid insect corpses began to howl upwards, voices like screams or cheers.

Magical beast insect corpses started to kneel, tongues writhing on the ground.

Some half-decayed knight remnants even raised their Broken Swords high, turned towards the slope.

A pair of murky white-filmed eyes suddenly focused on the distant observers.

It wasn't a roar, nor a call, but a kind of echo of an assembly order.

They began to stir violently, shoving and biting each other, rushing up the slope from the valley floor with reckless abandon.

The formation was chaotic, the movements twisted, yet carried a fervent fanatical frenzy.

A pure, frenzied impulse for group slaughter!

"Disturbance group knights, advance the entire army."

Louis's command was calm and firm, like a stone of ice thrown into the Abyss.

As the command flag waved, several knight teams filed out from both sides of the forest, five knights in a team.

Burning with red fighting energy, they rode warhorses like scarlet meteors along the valley sides, instantly disturbing the swarming black fog of the insect corpses.

"Focus on disrupting, no hard fights!" The frontline captain roared the order.

Hooves flew, dirt scattered.

The Red Tide Knights skillfully galloped around the outer circle of the insect corpses, each approach accompanied by sweeping spears, thrown petroleum bottles, and piercing lances.

Each strike tore open a chaos of corpses and pus, yet they never lingered for glory, retreating swiftly, though accidents always happened.

"Ugh!"

A low growl suddenly erupted, a young knight in the front team was a beat too slow, his shoulder struck by a heavy sword swung by an insect corpse, sending both horse and rider tumbling to the ground, rolling into the dirt.

That was no ordinary corpse.

In life, it had been a knight of the elite Northern Territory legion, devoured by the Nest after death, yet still retained its military muscle memory.

Its body was as stiff as iron, yet it could wield a sword to kill with precision, pouncing and biting like a beast, with immense strength.

"Sven!" A teammate shouted, but the response was no more.

Just as he fell, the insect corpses swarmed, engulfing him, armor bitten through, flesh peeled away.

Yet astonishingly, the broken insect corpse, after having its legs chopped off, crawled with two mangled forearms.

Its teeth biting the ground, it shot forward like a snake, lunging again at the hind leg of another knight's warhorse.

"Damn!" Another knight quickly flipped backwards, throwing a short spear to pin it to the ground, barely avoiding the lethal strike.

But the more horrifying was yet to come.

From within the slain insect corpse, a bubbling explosive sound suddenly emerged, swelling sac-like tissues burst out from its abdomen.

Green-black corrosive liquid sprayed out, scattering on the ground, even causing the rocks to sizzle.

At the same time, hundreds of semi-transparent parasites gushed from its burst torso, rising like smoke, frantically wriggling towards all directions.

"Face shields! Fully sealed!"

"Hold your breath! Don't expose breathing holes!"

The well-prepared commander roared orders, as all knights pulled down their sealed helmets and continued brandishing their lances.

Their armor corroded by the insects, low growls emerged from their mouths, but their eyes remained resolutely clear, not a single one fell under the infestation of the insect swarm.

No one fled.

In shouts of rage, all charged again and again, circling, retreating, then charging again!

Fighting energy burned fiercely, turning into blazing red flames on each Red Tide Knight!

Fear was suppressed with each spear thrown.

Anger burned fiercer with each fallen comrade.

The insect corpses surged like tides, Red Tide Knights burned like flames.

Continuously disrupting, luring, harassing, forcing the insect corpses around the Nest to gather toward the perimeter.

It was a "lure-the-enemy" operation close to death.

But they succeeded.

When the first rays of sunset shone through the forest into the valley, the shadows in front of the distant Nest had thinned.

A large number of insect corpses were lured to the outer circle by the Red Tide Knights, mindlessly chasing, roaring but never able to extinguish this elite fire.

Duke Edmund stood at the edge of the rock, his eyes locked tightly on the red-clad knight formation threading through the black tide in the valley.

He did not speak, but the tremor between his brows was almost hard to hide.

This was not a training exercise, nor an exhibition.

It was a lure-the-enemy battle on the brink of Hell.

And they executed it so cleanly and neatly.

Precise coordination, firm formation, calm execution through life and death...

Even though they were only "Official Knights," not one fled, not one was consumed by fear!

Even when comrades fell, even while insect corpses bit relentlessly, those knights only roared, gritted their teeth, and charged again!

Edmond was astounded by the discipline of the knights under Louis.

Even with a territory not established for two years, with scant resources... still, he had forged such a team?

He glanced at the silent Louis beside him, the young man dressed in a deep red cloak, standing straight, his face unperturbed.

As if those charging were not soldiers, but pieces on his chessboard, steadily advancing the game he had laid out.

And Louis remained in the wind, gazing forward, eyes as calm as a mirror.

"Very well," he said in a low voice, "continue, prepare for the second phase."

Chapter 234: The Nest's Finale

Louis raised his right hand, the gesture simple and decisive: "Continue, prepare for the second phase."

"Yes, sir!" The banner soldier immediately raised the signal flag and waved it several times with swift, clean actions.

The battle flag signaled the attack.

Below the high ground, the fireline group, which had been ambushing for a long time, moved in an instant.

"Receive the order! Fireline, advance!"

The Knight Captain roared in a low voice, the battle armor clashing heavily in the night. He shook the battle blade in his hand, and the warhorse under him leapt out, leading the elite knights behind him into a sudden charge.

Heavy torches were raised high, and what spilled out was petroleum mixed to near boiling point.

Bang—!

Flames engulfed the frontline in an instant, the fire wall roaring and surging as if alive, slicing the entire position into sections.

The undead creatures shrieked with beastly twisted hoarseness as the flames licked their limbs.

Yet in the next moment, even with half their bodies charred, they kept crawling and biting, as if burning was just another force propelling them forward.

The elite Knight Captain rode forward, his blue cape speckled with gray-black sparks, and said coldly:
"Briel, you take the left wing, the rest follow me to the right, don't let them crawl out from the fireline!"

"Understood!"

The elite knights of the Northern Territory were mobilized.

They were veterans who had walked through mountains of corpses and seas of blood, piercing the throats of magical beasts in the snow, each capable of taking on three enemies at once.

But this time, the enemy wasn't human.

"Ahhh! Get off!"

A knight swung his sword, slicing off an undead creature's head, yet even in its last attack, there was madness.

Its severed arm crawled up his leg armor, biting and not letting go.

"Sean! Sean, you!"

Another knight came over to knock the arm away, but that knight had already fallen, blood gushing from his neck guard, staining the gray-white armor red in an instant.

The fireline continued to advance, the fire wall twisting like a giant snake, locking the undead creatures in sections.

But even elite knights were dragged into the fire during the melee, burning with the enemy.

"Wait... is that—Benito?!"

A cry of shock caused several knights to lose focus momentarily. That figure...

Once their comrade, who laughed and drank with them, slept in the same tent, swore to watch each other's back on the battlefield.

Now, his body was rotting, pupils glowing green, sharp screams spewing from his mouth, trailing parasitic nerves like tendrils behind him.

"He's no longer human."

"Cut him down!"

Benito lunged forward, roaring, his eyes void of human emotions.

Comrades, united by flames and tears, surrounded and finally slew this former friend amid the firelight.

At the moment his head fell, vague syllables seemed to spill from his mouth.

Flames roared, smoke obscured the sky, the fire wall like a cage locking in the undead creatures, also severing their pathways.

High-tier undead creatures attempted to reinforce from the other side, but were forced back repeatedly by the intense heat, writhing and struggling in the searing air, turning into charred bones.

At the forefront of the fireline, the blockade team knights resolutely blocked the escaping remnants.

The longsword was like a wall, flesh and blood like a barrier, even if one fell, another would fill the gap.

"As long as the fire wall stands, we can suppress them!"

A knight, covered in blood, gritted his teeth and shouted.

Duke Edmund stood on high, staring at the battle that surged like tides.

His hand tightly gripped the sword hilt, his eyes rarely showing a solemn glint.

"...I see." He murmured, "This isn't a melee, it's... a game of chess."

Louis... this is nothing but step by step, forcing the enemy onto a path of death."

The fire continued to spread, the undead creatures tried to break through, but were sealed by the fire wall.

High-tier undead creatures wanted to turn back to reinforce, but were repelled by the burning heat waves.

The entire battlefield seemed to be thoroughly locked by a massive net of fire.

"It's done." The Knight Captain stood amidst the smoke and flame, looking at the disrupted insect tide ahead, "We've severed their roots, they can no longer move in unison, nor return to the nest."

"But this is not the end." He looked up towards the quieter region at the far end of the fire wall.

That was the target of the assault team.

"Now, it's time for the young lord... to deliver his true killer move."

Thick smoke blocked the sun, the battlefield surged with burning waves.

The elite knights tore an irreparable rift in the enemy's ranks with blood and fire, winning the only and crucial window for the most lethal strike—the assault team's raid.

Amidst the rolling smoke, Louis stood on the hillside, his cloak billowing, fire reflecting in his eyes.

He saw the rift on the battlefield finally take shape.

The undead creatures were torn apart by the fireline, command completely severed, the enemy formation howling like beasts, plunged into leaderless chaos.

"Now is the time." He whispered, a cold edge forming at the corner of his lips.

"Wave the flag—begin the assault."

The banner soldier raised the battle flag high, waving it fiercely, the flag tracing an arc amidst the thick smoke!

The signal for assault was sent.

From the fireline afar, Lambert turned sharply, seeing that familiar banner rise amidst the sea of fire.

His lips twisted beneath the visor, his voice like metal tearing through the air: "Now."

The assault team was deployed!

Heavy armor clanged, footsteps like thunder.

Everyone knew they were treading a blood-soaked path where hesitation was not an option.

They charged into the purgatory woven of firelight and corpses, like a blade forged by battle intent, unerringly aimed at the core of the insect nest.

The flames behind roared like wild beasts, fire waves howling, scorching wind sweeping in, the scent of charred flesh almost suffocating.

Charred undead creatures piled haphazardly, some still twitching, others with mouths agape as if chewing on death.

Chapter 235: The Nest's Finale (Part 2)

"Clear the way!" Lambert commanded.

A shadow flashed by, and as a surviving insect corpse half-leaped into the air, it was pinned through the eye socket by a slender sword and crushed underfoot by a Heavy Armor Soldier.

"Three o'clock on the left, approaching fast!"

Another Knight reacted instantly, drawing his sword in a reverse grip. In a flash of cold light, an insect shadow was cut apart, its severed limbs falling into the flames, turning to charcoal in an instant.

Advance!

The remaining insect corpses lunged from the shadows like sharks drawn by blood, but were all crushed in the symphony of iron and fire.

A Fiery Bottle traced an arc, landing amid a group of writhing insect corpses.

"Ignite."

Bang—!

The flames exploded, and the insect corpses shrieked and rolled in the fire, their writhing limbs beating the ground as if playing music for Hell.

Their skin ruptured, bodily fluids spurted out, and the air was thick with an acrid stench.

Yet the assault team ignored this, pushing ever forward.

It was not because they were fearless, but because they knew they were the sharpest blade, meant to stab straight into the enemy's heart.

Eventually, they stepped into the depths of the Insect Nest.

The air was like coagulated mucus, weighing down their breaths.

Flames couldn't fully illuminate the path ahead, their light seeming swallowed by some invisible substance in this area, barely showing a few steps ahead.

The walls were neither stone nor earth, but some kind of dark red, moist, warm material.

Like the innards of a giant beast, they pulsed gently, as if slowly breathing.

Irregular folds squirmed around them, hinting at flowing shadows and... faces.

It wasn't an illusion but appeared clearly on the surface of the "meat wall," blurred, distorted, and even familiar.

Their eyes were closed, lips moving as if whispering softly.

In the next moment, they opened their eyes, looking at the Knights.

"Did you see that?" a Knight suddenly whispered, his voice trembling, "That's... my brother's face..."

"Shut up!" Lambert roared, cutting him off, "Everyone stay alert, the Insect Nest manipulates your perception! Don't look! Don't listen!"

But how could humans completely shut off their senses?

Some heard their mothers calling them home, others heard their comrades' dying murmurs.

Even more heard their own deceased voices, low and hoarse, calling their names.

"Charge forward, don't look back." Lambert repeated, his tone icy.

Ahead was the heart of the Insect Nest.

A vast hollow cavity opened up, like a temple that should not exist in the world.

The cavity's walls were filled with soft tendrils and spiral "incubation layers," with thousands of insect eggs floating inside like bubbles in putrid slurry.

In the center of the cavity hung the "sac nucleus."

It did not belong to this world.

The semi-transparent organic structure pulsed gently, like a heart, or some ancient god's unopened eye.

With each pulse, the surrounding walls gently throbbed, breathing, pulsating, resonating...

The entire Insect Nest seemed an extension of this sac nucleus.

"There it is." The Archer whispered.

His voice felt trapped at the back of his throat, an instinctive resistance and fear kept him from speaking louder.

Then "it" opened.

A hole slowly split open at the center of the sac nucleus, revealing a rolling eerie red glow inside.

This wasn't light, but some pure mental contamination, like a pupil staring, like Hell opening its bloody maw.

The Knights held their breath for a moment.

Someone's knees trembled, another stiffened, sweat soaking through their undergarments.

But none retreated.

Their armor scorched, hearts pounding violently, breaths heavy as hammers, yet they still raised their weapons, lowered their bodies, and charged forward.

They were the protectors of the Red Tide Territory, the only blade capable of cutting through chaos amid the fire.

"Red Platinum Bullet—fire!!" Lambert's order boomed like thunder.

The assault team hesitated not a second.

Boom!!

Dozens of Red Platinum Magic Explosion Bullets sliced through the air almost simultaneously, trailing long, blinding trails of fire, precisely aimed at the sac nucleus.

"Retreat!" Lambert shouted.

Nobody waited for the result; the next second, they had already turned, retreating at full speed!

They didn't need to confirm a hit, just getting close was enough.

A series of explosions erupted behind them!

The heat was like a scorching sun falling, the Magic Burst like an invisible hammer shattering the entire cavity's structure from its foundation.

Seething flames roared through the incubation layers, igniting, carbonizing, and consuming all those writhing egg sacs and tender parasite lines into fire clouds!

Within the explosive blaze, the sac nucleus twisted and struggled, dozens of black tendrils hanging from the top of the cavity, frantically trying to intercept the Red Platinum Bullets.

But they lasted not even a second under the intense heat, like straw meeting the Purgatory flame, igniting in a touch, charring within an instant.

The gigantic "heart"-like structure seemed to sense its doom.

It shivered, convulsed, its wide-open "eye" filled with terror and hatred, and then collapsed entirely within flames and shockwaves.

Like a beast at its last moment, the Nest plunged into madness just before death.

The remaining insect corpses, driven by some unknown will, howled like mad dogs, self-destructing, biting, burning, turning themselves into the final sacrifice!

They were no longer an army but a horde of uncontrollable curses.

Each decaying body groaned and exploded, merely to drag the retreating assault team into that shared dark extinction.

"Hold it off!"

Lambert roared angrily, slicing an attacking insect corpse in two, black blood splattering.

The vice-captain followed closely, a spinning slash repelling another explosive insect corpse.

In the next moment, with a boom, acid sprayed out like molten iron!

Chapter 236: The Nest's Finale

"Ahhhh!"

A Knight was caught off guard, his entire faceplate corroded and collapsed by acid, metal and flesh smoking, charred, and collapsing together.

Yet he did not take a step back. Instead, he gritted his teeth and roared with a twisted voice:

"I'll block the way! You all go!"

He raised his shield high, like a burning iron wall, standing at the only exit, using his scorched arm to firmly press the fire shield against the collapsing edge, blocking the rushing tide of Insect Corpses!

His whole body was smoking, his figure swaying in the firelight, yet remained unmoving, like a gatekeeper unmoved even by death.

The last few Knights dragged his body out of the tunnel, a thunderous explosion shaking the ground behind, the entire Insect Nest tunnel collapsing like a volcanic eruption, engulfing everything!

Scorching airwaves swept out, throwing them high into the air, landing heavily.

Behind them, a fiery underground collapse soared into the sky, like a monster's heart being uprooted from its roots.

They did it.

And outside, the battlefield abruptly transformed.

The Insect Corpse Legion, which had advanced like a terrifying tide, completely collapsed in the instant of the explosion.

It was as if they were pierced through the central nervous system by a spiritual blade.

One by one, the monsters suddenly paused, convulsed, whimpered, their eyes lost their glimmer, but were filled with a frenzied murkiness.

The once stern military formation instantly disintegrated, those Insect Corpses that had once terrified the Knights, now crazily crashed, staggered, and rolled over, crushing themselves and their kindred into the mud.

Severed limbs, broken bodies, blood, and organs mixed together, forming a disgusting swamp of blood.

Amid the Insect Tide, screams, shrieks, chewing noises, and the sound of bone shattering merged into a symphony of Hell.

And at this moment, no one on the battlefield gave the order to attack.

Because everyone was witnessing this in shock.

Even the battle-hardened Frost Halberd Knights had never seen such madness, such horror.

Louis stood quietly on the platform, his gaze fixed on the battlefield.

But there was not a hint of wavering in his eyes, instead... a deeply hidden brightness emerged.

"It's done."

His tone was calm, as if confirming a long-expected result.

"Everyone, retreat along the planned route."

He ordered the Banner Soldier beside him, "Pull back the encirclement, build the defensive line, no need for further attacks."

The flags waved, the orders followed like shadows. The Knight Orders on the front line swiftly and orderly withdrew from the battlefield, like a receding tide, without the slightest panic.

Yet, standing beside him, Duke Edmund was initially still not fully responsive.

He watched the Insect Tide slaughtering each other, frowning: "What's happening? Why are they suddenly killing each other?"

Then his gaze flickered, recalling the deafening explosion just now.

The pieces of the puzzle instantly fit together, everything became clear.

Could it be... the Nest, was blown up?

And with the Nest blown up, the Insect Corpses lost control and went completely mad.

He turned his head to look at Louis, the young man's appearance still unchanged by the dust of battle, his black hair turned gray by the fire, his expression steady, no joy, no pride, as if everything was as expected.

He did it? Really did it?!

"All with that 'Flame Cutting'? With just one strike? A small team of Archers and Knights?"

Edmund did not show the storm surging in his heart but his gaze lingered for a long time on the young man's back.

He never underestimated Louis.

From the campaign at Qingfeng Ridge, he had felt this young man was extraordinary.

With courage and decisiveness, although there was luck, there was also situational wit and battlefield perception.

At that time, he already had the assessment in his heart: This is a good seed that can be nurtured, and may become a pillar of the Northern Territory in the future, which is why he married his daughter to him.

But the Duke did not expect, Louis's brilliance is not in the future but in the present.

Louis's calm and composure is not a facade.

His strategic calculation is not by chance.

The means to grasp the battle situation, the calm decision to sever the enemy's command, far exceeded the potential category, rather—truly someone who can command.

"I see." He sighed softly, his expression complex.

For the first time in his heart, Duke Edmund truly let go of the condescension of the nobility elder.

Replacing it was a complex, serene respect.

The chaos after the Insect Tide lost control did not last long.

The Insect Corpses, losing the Nest's command, like empty shells drained of souls, after a burst of frantic struggle, began to rapidly "self-digest."

Hundreds of thousands of Insect Corpses, in a very short time, were reduced to just a ground of bloody mud and broken armor.

When silence returned to the world, Louis finally gave a low order: "Clean up the battlefield, assess the casualties."

But when the assessment results were reported, Louis fell silent.

The Red Tide Knight Order, three Elite Knights perished, twelve Official Knights died in battle.

Although it was a very good loss ratio, he still felt somewhat sorrowful.

Among them, some were those who initially trekked across the Snowfield, crossing the Northern Territory with him, and some... were joking and laughing with him just last night.

The blood mist on the battlefield had not yet dissipated, and the flames still danced in the embers.

The Knights returned to the array with wounded bodies, their fire shields burnt through, their armor charred black, yet they stood straight as ever, the sorrow and pride visible on their faces.

They knew they had won, and also knew the cost of this victory.

And at this time, Edmund noticed one thing:

Louis did not show any joy.

He just stood there, slightly frowning, looking at the ruins of the Insect Nest for a long time without speaking.

As if to him, this victory was not perfect, and even... regrettable.

"Not satisfied with this?!" Edmund's heart trembled slightly.

If it were someone else, after destroying the Nest and annihilating the Insect Tide, even the most composed would have breathed a sigh of relief and rejoiced, yet he did not.

Not feigned calmness, but genuinely felt: there could be a better solution, there could be warriors saved.

This strictness makes him feel the younger generation is truly formidable.

Chapter 237: Origin of the Nest

The smoke had yet to dissipate, and the scent of acid from shattered insect bodies lingered in the burnt soil.

The Red Tide Knights were cleaning the battlefield, recovering magic burst remnants, and burying the bones of their fallen comrades with meticulous precision.

A figure in a silver-white cloak quietly bypassed the crowd, walking alone towards the collapsed remains of the Nest.

Eduardo Calvin, the third son of Duke Calvin, a Church Investigator of the Golden Feather Flower, had remained silent since the start of the battle.

Even at the moment the Nest was destroyed, he merely frowned and gazed intently, as if witnessing a familiar sensation that couldn't be expressed.

Why do I feel like... I've seen it before?

The broken shell of the Nest before him resembled a blackened stone fetus, with semi-dried slime visible in the cracks.

And biological tissues that shouldn't exist in the world.

They still twitched, as if refusing to give up a certain "birth" mission even after death.

"...It looks too similar." He murmured softly, finally stepping forward.

Eduardo removed his gloves, revealing a slightly glowing right palm, where a gold pattern, not quite a feather, appeared.

That was the Divine Grace bestowed upon him by the Pope himself, granting him the ability to read the residual memories of the dead.

This was also why the Church had sent him to investigate the Grand Mage's whereabouts.

"If you ever had consciousness... then tell me."

His palm lightly touched the fleshy walls that were once the oviposition chamber, and in an instant, the ground seemed to quake.

Boom!

His mind felt ignited by flames, as a wave of information surged through.

Crying, laughter, wailing, curses, blood, fire, flesh, nurturing, devouring.

Thousands of memories poured into his consciousness like a flood, the pain causing an instant loss of self.

"Ugh—!!"

Eduardo abruptly fell to his knees, blood trickling from his nose, his vision blurred.

He nearly severed the connection immediately, gasping for air, his heart pounding like a drum.

These memories were not for human touch.

Yet in that terrifying abyss, he managed to capture a vague yet clear piece of information.

Not naturally generated.

This Nest was not naturally birthed, but "sown".

A woman in a white robe stood within a snowstorm-laden valley.

She retrieved Nest eggs from a tattered leather bag, pressing them into the permafrost, burying, sealing, chanting spells, performing blood sacrifices...

"A bag full..." Eduardo murmured, the remnant image echoed in his mind, that bag of weighty eggs, that woman's gentle yet insane smile...

She wasn't creating weapons; she was planting war.

"This isn't the only one..." Eduardo's Adam's apple moved, sweat trickling down his temple. He knew what this meant.

Eduardo stood among the wreckage, his fingers trembling slightly.

The "divine revelation" of that moment brought not only pain and fear but also a suffocatingly heavy revelation.

If there are others... if that bag of eggs remains in existence...

He could imagine how many villages would be wiped out in an instant, how many civilians would become fields of flesh for the Insect Swarm to incubate, once these Nests awakened in other corners.

And they knew nothing, not even that "disaster is imminent".

"It must... be reported to the Church."

The thought arose almost instinctively.

His duty, his identity, his faith had always orbited around that towering Golden Feather Sacred Hall.

If there were signs of evil, they should be handed to the Church for judgment.

But the next second, he paused.

In his mind emerged the indifferent eyes of those high in the Church Court.

Not anger, not concern, but calculation and weighing.

"How deeply is it linked to the Empire?"

"If spread, would it benefit the Church's position?"

"Could it be used as leverage against the Empire?"

He knew clearly what the bishops of today's Church were like, those dressed in holy attire.

Especially after the Pope fell into slumber, they were even more unchecked.

"They won't aid the Empire." He muttered bitterly, almost through clenched teeth.

A gust of wind blew, mixing the scent of blood and burnt odor.

Eduardo looked at the backs of the knights not far away, feeling conflicted inside.

If he didn't speak, perhaps he could preserve himself, continuing to navigate the world with this facade of composure.

If he did speak, he would have to give up part of the secret, even risking unnecessary attention and suspicion.

"But can I sleep peacefully? What will the Lord think?"

His fingertips clenched the cloak, and he gazed down at his palm, where the golden feather pattern quietly faded away, leaving only a cool touch.

The inner struggle felt like iron chains coiling within his chest cavity.

Responsibility, conscience, identity, faith clashed violently deep in his soul.

In the end, he lifted his head.

Eduardo took a deep breath, his expression returning to calm, that gentle and elegant composure once again present on his face.

"I should indeed speak." He spoke softly, "But not everything."

The source of the ability? No need to mention Divine Grace.

Just say it's a rare empathic superpower within the knight's bloodline, capable of perceiving fragmentary memories upon contact with the living residues.

Bloodline talents vary immensely in the world; even a noblewoman waking up with a new tail can claim it as a bloodline talent.

What harm is there in him having an "empathic memory"?

As long as it alerts them to be vigilant in advance, that's enough.

With this thought, he finally stepped forward, approaching Louis.

Louis had already noticed his every move, just puzzled by what he was contemplating.

Eduardo walked up, stopped before him, hesitantly choosing his words, and softly spoke:

"My bloodline ability—it's capable of reading fragmentary memories left by the dead.

And on the rotting corpse of the Nest, I saw the image of a female mage."

He paused, his eyes grave, "She... is the originator and controller of the entire Insect Swarm, at least of this Nest."

Duke Edmund stood nearby, frowning, a glint of vigilance in his eyes: "Are you saying there is more than one Nest?"

Eduardo nodded, his tone heavy: "At least a dozen seeds."

Edmund didn't immediately question; a horrifying scene quickly formed in his mind:

If a dozen Nests were scattered across the Northern Territory, even surrounding Snow Eagle City, what kind of disaster would that be?

Swarms of insect corpses pouring in from all directions, devouring all life, an unimaginable terror even Snow Swearers couldn't withstand instantly furrowed his brows.

"This... is far more dreadful than Snow Swearers." He spoke softly, his demeanor grim.

Louis took in their conversation, feeling a slight relief, just moments ago contemplating how to convey the matter of "test subjects" in the intelligence system to the Duke.

Unexpectedly, Eduardo spoke up first.

Louis felt a mixture of surprise and admiration in his heart.

He didn't expect his brother, whose identity was that of an enemy country spy, to candidly reveal this matter at such a critical moment, risking exposing his own identity.

At that moment, he saw the sincerity and responsibility hidden beneath Eduardo's exterior.

Chapter 238: Postwar Plans

Of course, Duke Edmund didn't completely believe it at first.

He narrowed his eyes, slightly turned his head, and scrutinized Eduardo with a sharp gaze like a blade.

His voice was calm and low: "You say there are a dozen seeds. This means... this isn't the only nest."

In that moment, the air seemed to freeze.

"Yes." Eduardo did not flinch, his response was crisp and decisive, but a trace of exhaustion from the backlash of divine grace flashed in his eyes, "Those eggs didn't appear by chance; they were deliberately planted..."

A flash of doubt passed quickly through Edmund's eyes.

Are you lying?

He was one of the most powerful people in the Empire, the Lord of the Northern Territory, accustomed to lies and betrayal on the battlefield and in politics.

The more tense the moment, the less he could easily believe a suddenly emerging "truth."

But he immediately realized something: this kid had no reason to lie.

Eduardo was a descendant of the Calvin family, Louis's half-brother, and the Calvin family had just married into his.

Saying such things now wouldn't bring any benefit to himself and might even make him suspicious of their marriage alliance.

If this were a framing attempt, what could he gain from setting himself up?

"My lord Duke." Louis saw his hesitant expression and added fuel to the fire, "I remembered something. You once said that the insect disaster three years ago was equally insane, but the insect carcasses back then weren't as organized and disciplined as they are now."

He paused for a moment, "And now, these insect bodies not only are vast in number, but have a clear 'nest,' signs of sacrifice, organization, and unified action. My lord Duke, do you think it's possible that... the same nest has been growing for three years? Or is it..."

"A completely different 'nest'." Edmund continued, his voice deep, "Otherwise, there's no way to explain the change in behavior."

He closed his eyes, thoughts surging. He began to ponder: if this were true, it meant that at least two or more undiscovered nests existed in the Northern Territory.

If these nests burst simultaneously, what disaster would ensue?

The rebellion of the Snow Swearers was merely swordplay, but this was rot and despair.

"If there are really a dozen..." He opened his eyes, with a hint of repressed fear hidden in his gaze at that moment, "The Northern Territory will cease to exist."

The wind grew colder, ashes and the stench of rot lingered in the air.

Duke Edmund stood in the wind, the breeze carrying remnants of the decaying nests across his shoulders, like some unseen omen.

His eyes deepened, thoughts racing, like a cold machine forged for war, starting to weigh, plan, and respond.

"A special task force must be formed." This idea took shape in his mind first.

It must be an absolutely mobile, absolutely loyal squad with the mission to eradicate anomalies.

The kind that could traverse the dark forests and swamps of the Northern Territory, advancing into perilous areas, executing the most secretive and dangerous tasks.

Vic Glanser, the Northern Blade.

This time, it was he who led a team of thirty elite knights into the dense fog of the Corrupted Forest and found traces of the nest.

If Vic were still here, he'd undoubtedly be the most suited to deal with what was to come.

It's just a pity.

And now, he didn't have much talent in this area, so he had to seek help from the Imperial Divine Blood Pool.

And he must report upwards, he looked toward the distant, dim horizon, as if the cloud-swathed throne of the Imperial Capital was vaguely in sight.

Both the Emperor himself and the Imperial Council must be informed of this matter.

Even if it would draw too much attention, it would be a real disaster compared to delayed information and hidden truths.

Then, the local nobility of the Northern Territory...

Each one controls critical forces and resources, if not pre-informed.

If multiple nests were to burst simultaneously, they might not even have time to react.

He originally wanted to recuperate this year, but the current situation necessitates getting them moving and entering a wartime state.

While Duke Edmund outlined a strategic imperial-level response with a heavy expression, Louis stood quietly by, thinking about the next steps.

Not grand, nor ostentatious.

His thoughts weren't as grand as the Duke's, merely concerning the Red Tide Territory and the six territories under his command.

Or extending to the entire Snow Peak County, anything more was beyond his capability.

Moreover, he wouldn't hope for others to save his land, nor entrust the Red Tide Territory and those six sub-territories he built brick by brick to others' promises.

The battlefield's scorched ground hadn't cooled, yet the memories of the nest's focal point had already been coldly and clearly etched in his mind:

Burning, bursting, insect tide paralysis...

The prophecy mentioned: "The evil nurtured by the Snow Swearer stirs restlessly."

Now, it seemed more than likely referring to these undead insects and nests hatched from the abyss.

What does this mean?

Simply put, all preparations from now on must revolve around the nests.

He quickly listed several key pieces of information in his mind:

The nests fear warmth and flames.

Once breached, all insect bodies would go into paralysis.

Capable of releasing mental disturbances, possessing a defensive mechanism that advances tentacles.

The only effective weapon in the Red Tide Territory currently is the Red Amber Magic Explosion Bullet, with limited stock.

This is far from enough.

"We need to accelerate the research on new weapons," Louis muttered to himself, his voice sharp as cold iron, "Not just the Red Amber Bullet; we also need flame projection devices that can penetrate the nest's structure, distributed explosive guidance... even considering an overhaul of knight tactics."

Moreover, this nest is not complete; it's an experimental version.

So, the real nest might be several, ten times, even a hundred times stronger than this one.

As for intelligence on the Nest, he was utterly clueless, for the entity known as the "Despair Witch" was far too mysterious.

He could only hope that the Daily Intelligence System would push more relevant information, or that the Duke's side would soon uncover something.

These were matters for the future.

Strategies, weapons, enemies, Insect Nest—all of these could be put aside for now.

For the moment, there was something more important: returning home.

He needed to go back and reassure those who were worried about him.

Louis stood at the edge of the battlefield, looking in the direction where the ashes had scattered, instructing a few reliable attendants to stay behind and handle the subsequent tasks.

"Remember to seal off that area, don't tamper with the remnants of the Nest."

"Burn all the insect corpses to prevent any hidden dangers."

...

He didn't speak much, but each word pointed to the key issues.

And so, the group set on their journey home, with a grand procession like an iron serpent slowly returning to Red Tide City.

By the time he reached the city gates, the sky had darkened somewhat.

And indeed, she was already waiting there.

Emily, light in attire, stood under the porch, her hands twisted together, her eyes filled with anxiety, caution, and an emotion she could barely contain.

The moment she saw that familiar black cloak emerge from the crowd, she dashed forward like an arrow released from a bow, throwing herself into his arms without regard for the setting.

"You—you've finally returned... I..."

Her voice carried a hint of a sob, her nose rubbing against the shoulder armor on his chest, as if confirming that he was alive, that he stood before her whole and unscathed.

Louis hadn't expected such a strong reaction from her, and for a half-second he froze before lifting his hand to gently pat her head, "I've returned."

Lady Irina was standing nearby under the porch, covering her mouth and laughing discreetly.

"Oh my, this is not like our Emily at all, isn't she the most graceful usually?"

"Mother!" Emily's head shot up, her face suddenly flushed deep red.

Seeing her flustered look, Louis had to stifle a smile, but still softly said, "I'm tired, I'll go to my room to rest first."

It was meant as a simple truth, but for some reason, the air suddenly felt nuanced the moment he spoke.

Emily's face turned even brighter red, almost flushed from neck to ear, and she mumbled quietly, "Then—then I... I'll accompany you..."

She hadn't even finished her sentence when she realized how strange it sounded, quickly lowering her head, not daring to look at anyone.

Louis, however, showed no reaction, maintaining his composed demeanor, walking indoors as if nothing had happened.

As he passed by Alina, she blinked and whispered into Emily's ear, "Hmm... does this mean I'll soon have a little grandchild?"

Emily: "Mother!!!"

Louis: "?"

...

Blood and flesh were dripping.

No, it was the walls breathing.

This was not a stone-built prison, but a space seemingly inside some immense biological creature.

The walls writhed, moist, and sticky, like countless severed limbs and viscera woven into the vault above, while the ground was covered with folds like rotting lingual tissue, responding with a "gurgling" pulse at every step.

In the center of this living hall, he sat upon a throne constructed from vertebrae and nerves.

The Despair Witch.

Astonishingly long legs crossed, skin pale as bone china, draped in a tattered, web-like blood-red gown.

Features seemingly sculpted by gods, so exquisite they were difficult to look at directly.

Yet those eyes were lifeless, like glass balls bobbing in a pond of rot, stripped of all human warmth.

When he opened his mouth, the voice that emerged was not a woman's but a deep, soft, almost gentle male voice.

Like a lover's whisper, yet laced with a nauseatingly twisted tone.

"...Ah, bad news."

He had already sensed that the Insect Nest had been destroyed.

"It's been discovered after all... tch tch tch."

His brow furrowed briefly, as if slightly annoyed, but it only lasted for a moment.

The next instant, she laughed softly, the curve of her lips so beautiful it was nearly harmless: "Well, it doesn't matter."

The walls of flesh quivered at her laughter, as if in resonance.

"It was merely an experiment destined to fail... A half-finished product blown to bits; tsk, such a brutish way to handle it."

He lowered his head, fondling a twitching segment of an insect limb in his hand, tenderly as if caressing a lover: "However, the 'finished product' is taking shape quickly."

His tone lighthearted, as though a child eagerly anticipating a gift, his fingers suddenly pinched, and the insect limb burst into a bloody mist, splattering across her face, yet she inhaled deeply as if wearing perfume, revealing an intoxicated expression.

"By that time... every inch of soil in the Northern Territory will become my 'stage'."

He slowly rose, his long gown trailing, steps light, like a noble maiden about to attend a banquet.

The camera gradually pulled away.

In his "audience," a row of figures sat, human and not, long deceased, their bodies reshaped into a bizarre, liminal living-dead state.

Some faces were contorted, others had split skulls, and some even had their faces replaced by grafted insect shells.

One of the figures kneeled partially, motionless, with a huge hollow in its chest, but the silver-black armor and those ashen gray eyes...

It was still recognizable—indeed the fallen Northern Blade—Vic Glanser.

Chapter 239: New Intelligence

The sky was not yet light, and the outside of Red Tide City was still shrouded in a thin mist.

When Louis opened his eyes, the ceiling reflected a faint morning light.

He hadn't slept well, with the eerie sounds before the Brood Nest was burned down echoing in his mind.

He closed his eyes but couldn't dispel the unease and agitation.

The Red Tide Territory is safe now, but "now" never means "future."

He slightly turned his head, his gaze falling on the girl beside him.

Emily was quietly asleep, her long azure hair spread like water over the white pillowcase, her eyelashes slightly trembling, her cheeks tinged with a faint blush.

As if she was still immersed in the afterglow of last night.

Her hand tightly grasped the corner of his pajamas, like she was relying on him in her dreams, unwilling to let go.

"Last night, perhaps we were a bit too determined." Louis smiled wryly.

After all, whether for emotional reasons, responsibility, or political significance, the Red Tide Territory urgently needed a "symbol."

An heir to put those nobles, soldiers, and citizens at ease...

But as the lord, he couldn't truly get a peaceful sleep.

He gently reached out, carefully prying Emily's fingers from the fabric, trying not to disturb her dreams, then quietly sat up and donned his clothes.

At that moment, he moved his right hand slightly, his fingertips traced through the air.

Accompanied by a slight "buzzing" resonance, a translucent light screen slowly unfolded before him, the blue and white interface hanging like an icy surface in the air.

He took a deep breath, and his eyes instantly became clear and calm.

It was as if, in an instant, he transformed from a husband and lover back into the young lord maneuvering between the battlefield and crisis.

"Come on... what news will today bring?"

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

[1: The mage sent by the Mage Forest to investigate the insect corpse attack case will arrive in the Red Tide Territory this evening.]

[2: Vic Glanser was turned into a special insect corpse by the 'Desperate Witch.']

[3: A group of 'Fire-Scaled Vipers' discovered in the deep geothermal area of the Red Tide Territory.]

A slight dripping sound fell, and the icy blue interface appeared exceptionally stern in the morning light.

Louis glanced at the first piece of intelligence, a cold light flashing in his eyes.

"That's good news."

The Mage Forest would certainly not send ordinary mages, they could definitely provide some assistance.

"At least it's better than sending some armor-piercing knights to search the mountains for corpses." He muttered, a hint of sarcasm in his smile.

Knights may be brave, but when it comes to finding the Brood Nest, mages are far more professional.

Since his Brood Nest had already been destroyed, he might as well guide this batch of mages to investigate other nests...

If he really wanted to lead this group off track, it wouldn't be a difficult task.

Hopefully, they'll uncover something.

Even if it's just a clue.

But when his gaze slid down to the second piece of information, the smile instantly faded.

[Vic Glanser was turned into a special insect corpse by the 'Desperate Witch.']

In an instant, the air seemed to freeze. Louis stared at the line, silent for a long time.

Vic, the high-tier knight who unhesitatingly gave the order to "retreat fully" while holding the line alone against the Brood Nest...

He had only spoken with him once, but that composed presence and sense of responsibility still left a deep impression.

"Even he couldn't find peace."

But what sent a chill down Louis's spine wasn't just Vic's death, but another fact.

The Desperate Witch was still in the Northern Territory.

Not only that, perhaps... he was near the Red Tide Territory.

"A creature capable of creating a Brood Nest... what exactly is this thing?" He gazed at that line, exhaling only after a long pause.

The intelligence only used the title "Desperate Witch" without more details, but it was precisely because of this that it was more unsettling.

Capable of silently creating such monsters as a Brood Nest...

Just that fact alone was enough to send chills down the spine of every lord.

"I don't think my men are capable of defeating her." Louis smiled wryly, his tone carrying a touch of self-mockery, but it was also the truth.

If they really encountered her, it was better to arrange patrol lines and leave multiple escape routes early.

If it doesn't work, just run.

Surviving was more important than dying a brave death.

Before his thoughts could settle, the third piece of information appeared on the screen.

[A group of 'Fire-Scaled Vipers' discovered in the geothermal area of the Red Tide Territory.]

This actually made Louis's eyes brighten.

"...This is good news."

The Fire-Scaled Vipers were coppery red all over, their bodies covered with a silicon-based oil film that could withstand temperatures of up to 800 degrees Celsius.

Once refined, it could even burn for more than six hours at high temperatures.

Intelligence had previously mentioned the possibility of them being in the geothermal area, but by the time Louis had the chance to search for them, they were nowhere to be found.

However, with this intelligence coming out again, he naturally wouldn't miss this opportunity; after all, such important resources needed to be secured, especially with the threat of the Brood Nest looming.

For dealing with the Brood Nest, which feared fire, it was simply heaven-sent.

"If I can systematically collect and refine them, perhaps I could develop a continuously burning type of field weapon." He mumbled, already beginning to design blueprints and associated strategies in his mind.

But the joy lasted only for a few moments before being overshadowed by the previous piece of intelligence.

Even with a new weapon direction, the presence of that "Desperate Witch" was like a sword hanging over his head, ready to drop at any moment.

No matter how useful the Fire-Scaled Vipers were... they were just for dealing with the 'Insect Swarm.'

"Sigh..." Louis sighed lowly.

The gloom of the intelligence still hung heavily in his heart, but he also knew: anxiety wouldn't bring any change.

To control the situation, there was always only one crucial thing—become stronger.

So he stood up, walked towards the corner of the room where a meditation mat was laid out with animal skin, and sat down with a calm cross-legged posture.

The air seemed to quiet down at that moment, leaving only the echo of heartbeats, breaths, and the flow of inner strength.

The fighting energy within him flowed like a gentle stream through his bones and muscles, hot yet steady, with occasional minor obstructions which he swiftly smoothed out with his skilled techniques.

His cultivation was now close to the threshold of a Low-tier Elite Knight.

Yet, he was still one step away from it.

Whether it was the quantity of fighting energy, muscle fiber density, or internal circulation speed, all were close to the breakthrough standards required.

But... it was just a little short.

"Relying solely on accumulation, it might take another month." Louis opened his eyes, his gaze falling on a small bottle with a wax seal on the desk.

It was a Knight Growth Potion concocted by Hillco, which he had saved for this bottleneck period.

Made with the rare Frost Blood Redberry and Azure Patterned Honey, it emitted a viscous purplish-red glow, pulsating slowly like a heartbeat, as if some kind of intense vitality was sealed within the bottle.

"Why not just now." He murmured, picking up the potion.

There was no unnecessary ceremony, nor any hesitation.

"Pop." The cork was pulled off, a strong sweet-and-sour smell mixed with a medicinal fragrance assailed his nose.

It was quite unpalatable.

Louis forced down the swirling sensation in his throat and gulped it down in one go.

At that moment, it felt as if a fiery line ignited from his throat, instantly rushing into his entire body!

Like pouring water on hot iron, his blood and energy inside boiled instantly, and the previously stable flowing fighting energy suddenly became agitated.

"Hiss..."

The next second, the energy of the Frost Blood Redberry erupted like a volcanic explosion at the center of his abdomen.

A scorching torrent exploded fiercely, seemingly wanting to char his internal organs, surging through his blood vessels to his entire body!

His muscles twitched violently, his bones quaked like war drums, his breathing was momentarily disrupted, like someone suddenly threw him into a burning furnace!

But he wasn't torn apart; it was the Azure Patterned Honey at work.

That naturally sweet essence, thread by thread, flowed into the wild waves like a clear spring, slowing, diluting, and softening the fierce flames, eventually converting it into a purifiable pure energy.

He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth to stabilize his breath, quickly entered a cultivation state, and the internal operating methods within him were swiftly activated, his breathing syncing with the pulse, resonating with the heaven and earth.

The violent forces, under the suppression of his will, gradually turned gentle, ultimately settling within his meridians!

At that moment!

The core of his fighting energy shook violently, and the bottleneck that had been suppressed for a long time suddenly loosened!

Within him, it seemed like war drums were pounding, waves of fighting energy stormed like torrential waves, constantly washing over that critical barrier!

Thud—! Thud—! Thud—!

It was as if the drums of heaven were echoing, fighting energy erupted and coursed throughout his body!

His skin emitted an abnormal red glow, as if illuminated by firelight, or as if a blazing radiance was emanating from within.

The air gently trembled, like barely perceptible ripples breaking across a water surface.

His eyelashes quivered lightly, his eyelids slightly lifted.

When he opened his eyes again, that sharpness lurking deep in his pupils was no longer concealed.

Mid-tier Elite Knight, breakthrough!

He slowly exhaled a breath of white mist, the fighting energy within him surging like the sea, his entire being felt like it had been tempered in a furnace and then immersed into the cold water of the Snowfield.

"Indeed, it's a stage that can't be crossed by effort alone." He chuckled softly.

Just as Louis managed to stabilize his breathing, the searing energy within him still hadn't completely settled.

At this moment, there was a soft sound from the bed: "Hmm..."

He turned his head.

Emily sat up, rubbing her eyes, her slender shoulders half-covered by her nightgown, with a sleepy yet alluring dishevelment to her blue hair.

"Did you just... have a breakthrough?" Her voice carried the remnants of sleep, yet couldn't hide her delight.

Louis turned towards her, a suppressed smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth, "Yes. Just now."

"That's great!" She jumped off the bed and leaped into his arms, wrapping him tight, her face full of pride and happiness.

He paused momentarily, then leaned closer to her ear to tease softly, "It's thanks to your nourishing last night that I could break through."

"You, you, you...stop talking nonsense!" Emily's face instantly turned as red as a boiling kettle, her voice climbing half an octave as she let go to hit him.

He dodged with a laugh, "I meant the dinner you made was nourishing. What were you thinking?"

"...!"

She shot him a fierce glare, pouting angrily, her face flushed to her ears.

The two bantered back and forth, creating a warm and slightly irreverent atmosphere.

But Louis quickly put away his smile, glanced at the sky, and said softly, "There's still time, how about... we continue cultivating?"

Emily was slightly surprised, and before she could respond, Louis was already sitting cross-legged, meditating with his hands forming seals.

She knew this wasn't simply resting meditation.

On their wedding night, Louis secretly told her—he was cultivating magic.

"You... can use magic?" She was indeed surprised that night, but she didn't doubt him.

She just wondered why this man always kept so many secrets, and yet always used these secrets to quietly protect everything around him.

She walked over, sitting quietly beside him.

To outsiders, the Meditation Technique appeared very similar to a knight's Breathing Technique.

However, each inhalation and exhalation seemed more serene; that deep mental stability felt like a lake under the moonlit night, bottomless yet calm and still.

"It's not that magical, really."

Emily murmured, hugging her knees, pondering for a moment, before she simply sat cross-legged like him, starting to cultivate the Blue Radiance Breathing Technique belonging to the Edmund Clan.

She also had fighting energy flowing within her, blue glimmers appearing on the surface of her skin, as if the moonlight was gently brushing against her, calm and clear.

It intertwined with the faint white magic flow within Louis, like two parallel galaxies running alongside each other.

In the quiet room, one breath was strong and the other gentle, one blue and one white, resonating silently.

The wind was gentle outside, the sun not yet breaking through the clouds.

Yet the light from their cultivation in the room had already illuminated the journey they were about to embark on together.

Chapter 240: The Benefits of Marriage

After their cultivation was finished, the two of them washed up simply, threw on some outer garments, and headed to the dining room.

The morning sunlight finally broke through the thin clouds, casting into the room and illuminating the warm wooden dining table, as well as the simple yet meticulously prepared breakfast upon it.

Emily had personally instructed the kitchen yesterday, saying she didn't want greasy food, so today it was fish soup and bread, with a bit of salted butter and lightly fried mushrooms.

"Not luxurious," Louis tore off a piece of bread, dipping it into the soup and chewing slowly.

"But still quite good," Emily replied with a smile, taking a spoonful of the fish soup into her mouth and squinting her eyes slightly.

The soup was made with the signature white-finned eel from the Red Tide area, with tender and delicate meat, the fish bones removed, leaving only a warm and fresh taste.

"This fish soup, really isn't bad."

The two quietly ate their breakfast, occasionally exchanging a few softly spoken words, as a sense of long-lost stability filled the whole room.

After all, the noisy wedding had already passed several days ago.

Those lively noble guests and the clamorous banquet scenes seemed like a corner of a dream, all now scattered, leaving only this newlywed couple to return to their routine.

Even Duke Edmund and his wife had set off for Frost Halberd City yesterday.

But compared to their farewell, another departing figure left a more lasting impression on Louis.

Eduardo Calvin, his third brother.

As he was leaving, he patted Louis's shoulder with a smile and said, "I just thought I'd take a look around, maybe I can help you find some clues about the Nest."

Louis didn't reveal Eduardo's identity, after all, the more forces involved, the more it would benefit him.

Halfway through breakfast, Emily suddenly seemed to recall something, looked up and asked, "By the way, how many gifts did we finally receive for our wedding?"

Louis paused his chewing, then smiled slightly, "Hm...not many, given the sensitive situation, it was deliberately kept low-key, and not many were invited."

But he knew the so-called "low-key" just meant not extravagantly inviting guests to the feast.

The nobles of the Northern Territory, which one of them isn't keenly observant?

Which one didn't immediately send gifts to Red Tide upon hearing the news?

The gifts were varied but could be roughly categorized into three types:

The first type was the most common "expression of sincerity" — Gold Coins and Magic Crystals, which are never considered too much.

The second type was the rare treasures with some thought from a few truly considerate nobles, like the one from Count Grant, who personally sent a "Fighting Spirit Magic Stone" that contained rich fighting energy, said to allow knights to quickly recover their fighting energy.

The heaviest ones, of course, came from the two family clans:

The Calvin Clan, being Louis's own kin, sent almost entirely resources for living and construction.

There were plenty of luxury items: top-grade grains, spices, high-quality wine, and silk from the Southern Territory.

A large batch of skilled personnel: experienced furriers, tanners, artifact makers, experienced pharmacists and veterinarians, and even fishermen skilled in fishing in cold regions.

More importantly, these people were not "exiled peoples", but elite selected by the family, willing to serve the new domain.

This was the first time the Calvin Clan used a "wedding" as an excuse to lean such a scale of resources towards him.

This was not merely a simple dowry, but a change of attitude, a hint: "You are no longer an outlying branch, but a core worth supporting."

On the other hand, the Edmund Clan continued their "robust military spirit":

Hundreds of pieces of weaponry and equipment: spears, swords, axes, warhammers made of Cold Iron, matching chainmail and studded leather armor;

A batch of rigorously trained warhorses, and even exclusive armor and training knights for the warhorses;

The key gift, knights:

Aside from the two Extraordinary Knights who came with Emily,

There were thirty Elite Knights left stationed directly at Red Tide.

Despite losing three in the recent battle against the Nest, there were still twenty-seven ready to serve.

Before departing, the Duke personally promised to dispatch an additional fifty Elite Knights, two Extraordinary Knights, and seventy Official Knights for support.

This...was quite extravagant.

Louis recalled blurting out, "No wonder you're the Lord of the North, just handing out knights like they cost nothing."

Of course, that was just a joke, not "randomly dispensing resources."

The real reason was probably his performance in that battle against the Nest.

Leading a team of merely dozens, they uprooted the Nest, an achievement even Duke Edmund couldn't ignore.

Besides, he married Emily, Duke Edmund's most beloved daughter.

Louis knew that this time he had received Duke Edmund's true "acknowledgment".

Though it was indeed a bit excessive, directly boosting his knight forces by more than two or three times.

Louis thought, if he married Emily a few more times, he might dominate the Northern Territory!

"This time...we've gained quite a lot," Louis put down his spoon, looking at Emily, with a somewhat cheerful tone.

Emily was slicing a piece of bread; she smiled at his words, "Sounds like a merchant who just won a big victory."

"Pretty much," he shrugged lightly, but his eyes grew a bit serious, "But no matter how much stuff there is, if it doesn't transform into real 'strength', it's just sitting in the warehouse waiting to be taken."

Emily paused, looking at him, "You think someone will come to take it?"

Louis didn't answer immediately, but finished the last bit of fish soup in his bowl, as if pondering, and then said, "It's not that someone's coming to take it, but I have a bad feeling..."

Emily looked at him seriously, but didn't question further, just watched him.

"You were born and raised in the Northern Territory," Louis spoke with a calm tone but carried a hint of probing, "Has this place ever been calm?"

Emily was silent for a moment, and nodded.

"Yes. The Northern Territory has never been 'stable'. Just in the past ten years, I've experienced three large-scale turmoils and countless minor conflicts."

She paused, with an indescribable emotion in her eyes, "You're right, we should implement these resources now. Otherwise, when the real blizzard hits, it will be too late to build anything or raise anything."

Louis looked at her, joking, "So you support me in squandering?"

"I support your foresight," Emily's face showed a faint smile, "To be honest, you have more foresight than most Lords I've seen. I only knew you were smart before; now I know you... actually have a lot of patience too."

"Hm?"

"...and pretty good-looking," she finished her words, took a sip of water, avoiding his gaze intentionally.

Louis coughed lightly, though a smile appeared in his eyes.

The breakfast ended amidst such casual and not-so-casual conversations.

Even though the topic wasn't light, the atmosphere wasn't oppressive.

The two seemed to be gradually adapting to each other's pace.

After a little rest following the meal, Louis got up and moved his body.

"What's your work later?" Emily casually asked.

"Catching snakes."

"...Catching snakes?"