

Winter 331

Chapter 331: Postwar Conference (Part 1)

Just as the sky began to brighten, Viscount Brooke opened his eyes.

He sat up, donned a long robe with a black background and silver patterns, impeccably tailored, the leather wolf-tooth epaulets retained the Northern tradition, steady yet dignified.

He smoothed the cuffs gently before the bronze mirror, adjusted his bow tie, and casually draped a cloak bearing his family crest over his shoulder.

"Hmm, indeed a Northern noble." He murmured to himself, a satisfied smile flickering in his eyes.

Once fully dressed, he stepped onto the carriage with composed steps.

Inside, the carriage was lined with furs, and outside stood his remaining three personal guards, though slightly lower ranked, still spirited.

He lifted the curtain, gazing outside, where the streets of Red Tide Territory were already waking under the morning light.

The streets of Red Tide remained bustling.

Under the dawn's illumination, rows of neatly lined new-style wooden houses and semi-subterranean dwellings stretched along the street, geothermal chimneys emitted steam intermittently.

The roads were all paved, many refugees stood in orderly queues receiving hot porridge and clear water.

Children chased and played by the clay roadsides, while peacekeeping knights adorned with Red Tide emblems patrolled.

Further away, several craftsmen hoisted some boiler apparatus, and a Fire-backed Turtle dozed by the warming relay point.

"Indeed well done." Viscount Brooke observed it all, a hint of admiration in his gaze, "Better than many seasoned old nobles."

He stroked the wooden frame beside the carriage window, squinting, "Able to fight, yet understands livelihood... If only my son had a tenth of his ability."

But then, Brooke's smile faded: "It's a pity he doesn't understand the rules between the nobility. We are not commoners, not these poor souls living off porridge."

He gripped the window frame tightly, his gaze intensified.

Holding military power, storing supplies in the warehouse, pushing influence into a few confidential orders and the Inspectorate's ears.

Even if he comes from one of the Eight Great Clans of the Empire, even if he accomplished great feats, even if the Governor claims he saved the Northern Territory... what of it?

"I am not seeking anything... just some say, a few hundred troops, that's all." Brooke whispered, as if convincing himself, "I am willing to submit to him, truly. But one must have breathing room."

The carriage turned several familiar stone road corners, halting outside the inner castle district of Red Tide Territory.

The black stone gate of Earth Tower Castle remained heavy, knights on duty had changed, each with clean armor and crisp stature.

Brooke recalled his last visit here, during the beginning of the insect corpse crisis.

At that time, he humbly pledged loyalty, handing over all his knights just to preserve his family's lineage.

But this time, he donned noble dignity, brought a joint proposal, also garnered support from many Snow Peak Nobles.

"This time, I will not bow in submission."

He straightened his chest, walked into the meeting hall, steps steady as if entering the stage of a strategic play.

Inside the Red Tide Lord's meeting hall.

Dawn light poured through high windows, casting slanted rays on neatly arranged long tables, iron lamp racks embedded in stone walls dispelled the cold but not the heavy oppressive air.

Red Tide's flag hung high at the forefront of the hall, its sun-designed crest illuminated by the sunlight, resembling burning eyes that surveyed the crowd.

Tables and chairs were impeccably arranged, noble representatives seated according to family status and post-war registration order, name cards written with red ink.

Viscount Brooke sat near the center, his left hand idly playing with a silver ring,.

He appeared indifferent, yet his gaze swept past the guests in the hall, landing on the still vacant main seat above.

That was his true focus today.

Among those upper seats, already positioned were several core figures from Louis's Snow Peak conference.

First spotted was Baron Willis, Louis's brother, also Duke Calvin's son, who entered the Northern Territory a year after Louis, rising swiftly along with Louis.

Next was Baron Jorn, from the wealthy nouveau riche Harvey Clan, whose father was the recently ascendant Count Harvey.

Yet, this young baron followed Louis wholeheartedly, rumor had it they were close friends before arriving in the Northern Territory.

Below were several emerging nobles personally elevated and supported by Louis, despite humble origins, they wielded significant power, all loyal and steadfast.

Of course, there were a few dissenters in the hall as well.

Though they sat quietly, their expressions calm, they exchanged cryptic signals with Brooke occasionally.

These were precisely the "pieces" he had secretly associated beforehand.

And among the two highest seats, sat two young women.

Emily, with elegant blue hair, her demeanor composed, was the Governor of the Northern Empire and daughter of Duke Edmund, also Louis's legitimate wife.

Sif, with cold silver hair, an imposing aura, without speaking her presence commanded respect, though her background was unknown, she was not to be underestimated.

The main seat between them remained empty, the true protagonist of today had yet to appear—Louis Calvin Viscount.

Brooke slightly raised his head, looking at the unoccupied high-backed chair, a touch of mocking in his eyes.

"Louis..." he whispered internally, "I am ready, let's see how you respond today."

Thus scheming in silence, Brooke watched as the hall's clock pendulum ticked closer to the planned hour.

As the meeting clock struck, the doors finally opened slowly.

A gust of cold wind crossed the heavy threshold, ushering in the awaited young man.

Louis's steps were unhurried, draped in a crimson robe, his sword by his waist undrawn, bearing the Shield of the North emblem on his chest.

Chapter 332: Postwar Council (Part 1)

A gentle smile, slightly tinged with fatigue, hung on his face, akin to winter sunlight, exuding great warmth.

As soon as he entered, everyone instinctively stood and greeted him.

"Master Louis."

"Congratulations on your triumphant return, Master Louis!"

"Snow Peak is fortunate to have you, truly our blessing."

"The Light of the Northern Territory, truly deserving!"

The compliments poured in like a tide, faces of the nobility filled with smiles. Among their words were sincerity and pretense, yet externally, all were uniformly respectful.

Brooke also stood, clapping lightly while keeping his gaze fixed on Louis's eyes.

This young man, without much change on his face, as if these praises were merely wind rustling through leaves, didn't even bother to respond with a "thank you."

"Still looks like a true young hero," he murmured to himself, a tone full of envy.

"Gentlemen." Louis sat at the head seat, his gaze sweeping across the hall.

"The war is over, and we have entered the recovery phase. I know each family has suffered significant losses and has ideas, so in today's meeting, let's skip the pleasantries and talk business. If you have any issues or suggestions, feel free to speak."

He tapped the table lightly, getting straight to the point, even skipping the formalities.

It was unexpected for the crowd; the entire hall instantly fell silent.

An awkward silence.

Many exchanged glances, clearly having prepared in advance, even thought about what to argue or propose.

But at this moment, no one wanted to be the first to speak.

The atmosphere was like solidified honey, dense and sluggish, as if afraid of breaking an invisible line with the slightest carelessness.

Brooke slightly frowned, he had hoped Roland would speak first, but the old fellow shirked like a field mouse.

Just as the air seemed about to freeze, Baron Jorn chuckled softly and raised his hand to speak:

"Boss, now that you're back, we have food, lodging, and even hot springs, so this is home after the war. Honestly, I have no objections."

Louis turned his head, glanced at him, and smiled.

Then he continued calmly, "If there are no suggestions, let's move on to the next topic."

Seeing Louis intending to skip the proposal section, Brooke felt a restless anxiety stirring within him.

Something's wrong.

This is not what he anticipated.

The few leaders he had arranged were all shrinking back, not even daring to meet Louis's gaze, even though they had been the loudest in private, now they were like wooden sculptures frozen in their seats.

Did you not say that once Louis returned, he must be taught a "lesson" about the rules?

He glanced at a few allies who had previously "collaborated."

Baron Harris was looking down at his shoes, even young Sirius was uncharacteristically silent, his eyes darting around.

And Viscount Roland indeed looked like he was trembling, staring at the corner of the table as if he himself were just a chair.

All useless...

Clearly, they had pounded their chests last night proclaiming they would speak openly at the meeting, but now they wouldn't even raise their heads.

Brooke just felt the opportunity slipping through his fingers, heart clenched in determination.

He couldn't wait anymore.

He slowly stood up, a gentle and humble smile on his face, his voice steady yet courteous: "Master Louis."

First, an opening filled with respect: "First of all, allow me, on behalf of all the nobility present, to extend our sincerest respect and thanks for your meritorious deeds in the Battle of the Frost Halberd.

Were it not for your bravery, the Northern Territory might have fallen to the Insect Nest. You brought back hope and safeguarded the last light of Snow Peak."

There were faint voices of agreement in the venue.

Not many, but enough for Brooke to continue.

He shifted the tone, slowing his pace, like an elderly family leader kindly "reminding" a younger member:

"However, as you mentioned, post-war reconstruction is indeed a daunting task, and because of that, we wish to pool our ideas and solve problems together."

As he spoke, he gently raised a hand.

Sitting beside him, Viscount Roland, like being pricked by a needle, trembled and, with trembling hands, slowly pulled a parchment document from his sleeve.

"This is a 'Snow Peak Joint Proposal' formulated by several nobles present, mainly proposing two points..." Brooke smiled, as if announcing a humble request, not a demand.

"First, to request the appropriate return of some military authority to the traditional units of each family to stabilize the borders and alleviate the refugee pressure.

Second, in terms of resource distribution and territory restoration, could a special committee be established by the 'Snow Peak Council' to jointly review with the Red Tide Territory?

We do not distrust the Red Tide Territory but wish to enhance the confidence of the people through 'joint governance.'"

With this, he raised his eyes to the young lord at the main seat: "What do you think— is it feasible?"

And beside him, Viscount Roland already looked pale, holding that letter like a hot potato, his gaze completely averted from Louis, lowly mumbling: "I...am merely delivering it..."

All eyes fell upon him, like countless invisible hands lifting him from his chair, delivering him to the altar.

Brooke watched as that document finally reached the desk, quietly exhaling a breath of relief in his heart.

He stood there, smiling, every word perfect, feeling even a bit smug inside.

Everything is going according to plan.

None of the nobles opposed, even Viscount Roland obediently handed over the letter.

Adding to his skillful use of language, first flattering, then advising, he balanced advancement and retreat with precision.

This is Viscount Brooke's forte in social tactics.

"Well done."

He was about to reveal a perfectly poised and confident smile...

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But suddenly realized that the young man in the main seat had not said a word from beginning to end.

Louis just sat there, his fingertips tapping on the solid wood table intermittently, producing a rhythmic yet deep sound, like the faint beating of war drums.

No response, no retort, not even an expression.

Just his gaze, like a blade in a cold night, sweeping from one side of the assembly to the other.

Those who had just echoed Brooke's words lowered their heads, as if a sword was pressed against their necks, not daring to glance again.

Brooke's smile slowly froze.

He suddenly felt a bit cold, with sweat gradually forming at the back of his neck.

Why doesn't he speak? Why doesn't he counter?

Not taking the bait is the fiercest counterattack.

He doesn't care about the so-called "Snow Peak Nobles' joint proposal," nor does he bother to challenge its legitimacy.

Is he waiting for me to finish speaking, to make a decision in one stroke?

At that moment, a ridiculous yet terrifying thought flashed through Brooke's mind: he knew all along.

"Viscount Brooke," Louis spoke, his voice as chilly as snow.

"Were you the main author of this proposal?"

Brooke straightened his back, trying to maintain his composure: "Yes, but it is a consensus among many..."

"Understood." Louis nodded, his tone light but like the fall of a gavel in judgment.

He raised his right hand, giving a gentle wave.

"Take him away."

The main door burst open with a loud bang, and several Inspectorate Knights, along with Bradley, stepped steadily into the hall, their armor causing a low rumbling sound.

They held a document high, Bradley standing to one side, cleared his throat, and read in his usual official tone: "Red Tide Inspectorate intelligence..."

Viscount Brooke, privately colluding with vagrant bandits, allowing them to harass grain depots and military stations, instigating multiple uprisings among vagrants, scheming for military power.

During wartime, he conspired with noble groups, attempted to disrupt the internal order of the Red Tide, sought to manipulate the Snow Peak conference's restructuring, scheming against the law."

The entire conference hall seemed to freeze instantly.

No one dared to move.

Brooke was paralyzed, his lips moved but no sound emerged. He instinctively wanted to deny, to proclaim his innocence, even to rush over and tear the document to pieces.

But he couldn't move...

Because at that moment he realized: Louis's gaze was not one of anger, but of indifference.

A detachment of the superior towards a worthless plaything.

As Brooke was dragged to the door, his body struggled, his voice hoarse and exhausted.

Yet those heavy knightly arms clamped him as tightly as iron shackles.

Unable to comprehend how everything he had meticulously planned, passing along the line, avoiding all scrutiny, even his contacts were absolutely trustworthy.

"How could he possibly know..."

This thought swirled endlessly in his mind, like a whirlpool in stagnant water, drowning him between absurdity and fear.

He couldn't imagine it was Louis who had a Daily Intelligence System like a cheat code.

In fact, even without the Daily Intelligence System, even if Louis knew nothing of Viscount Brooke's deeds,

he could still easily assign a heavy enough crime to knock him off his high horse, drag him out of the assembly hall, and cast him into the mire for execution.

Because it's quite simple, the majority of the "nobles" present were no longer nobles.

They had lost their Knight Orders, their manors burned to ashes, their fiefdoms buried under snow, their kin either dead or fled.

They also had no backing, the grand houses of the Northern Territory's great nobles had long collapsed in the disaster of the "Doomsday Nest."

And they were merely vagrants escaping from the ruins, just vagrants dressed in noble attire.

Louis granted them dignity only as a courtesy to the Empire's "noble law."

What qualifications did they have to bargain with Louis?

Bouncing before him only made him feel annoyed.

And what's more absurd: they themselves knew it.

Thus, when Brooke was dragged out and his bloody head fell, no one was truly surprised, let alone dared to shout for justice.

Their eyes carried fear, not righteous indignation.

What raced through their minds was:

"Thank goodness I didn't say much."

"Did he find out about me too?"

"From now on... better keep a low profile."

The conference hall was deathly silent, leaving only the crackling of the fireplace.

Louis did not rise.

He simply leaned back in the high-backed chair, his gaze coolly surveying the crowd.

"Bradley," he said calmly, "continue."

The old steward stood up, unfurling the document in his hands, his voice clear and merciless.

"Baron Harris, three attempts to bribe transport officials, with the intention to allocate materials not belonging to his quota."

"Sirius Kalan, seven days ago, attempted secret contact with former family retainers and tried to privately reorganize the remaining knights, in violation of the military unification order..."

As each name and crime was pronounced, the air in the hall seemed to grow colder.

Some lowered their heads, some turned pale, and others quietly pushed their chairs back, as if to avoid the gaze sweeping over them.

Sirius Kalan abruptly stood up, his youthful blood undiminished, his face flushed with red, nearly hysterical as he shouted, "What gives you the right?! I am a Count, a legitimate noble of the Northern Territory, you are but a Viscount! Who gave you the courage to judge me!"

Before he could finish, Louis finally moved.

He merely tilted his head slightly, giving Sirius a dismissive glance, then turned to the Red Tide Knight Commander, his tone as cold as if discussing the weather: "Silence him, drag him out."

With the issuance of the command, the actions were as swift as lightning.

Two fully armed Red Tide Knights stepped forward almost simultaneously. One unsheathed a piece of cloth, rudely stuffing it into Sirius's wide-open mouth, while the other grabbed him by the collar, toppling both him and the chair, dragging them out of the hall.

"Um! Um—!!"

The screams turned into muffled sobs, the boots scraping against the stone floor with a piercing sound.

No one stopped them, nor did anyone speak.

Even those nobles who had been conspiring with him at the same table just bow their heads, as if they didn't know him at all.

Louis lowered his lashes, lifting the teacup for a sip, as if the commotion wasn't significant enough to pause his action.

Chapter 334: Postwar Council (Part 2)

The conference hall was deathly silent.

The heavy double doors slowly closed, shutting out the screams and dragging sounds.

The nobles whose names had been called and whose guilt was certain had already been escorted away one by one.

The remaining two-thirds seemed to have an invisible hand clutching their throats, even breathing was done with caution.

They sat stiffly, even changing posture seemed abrupt.

No one whispered, and no one dared to look directly at the young, cold figure above them.

Yorn and Willis appeared as usual, the only two who remained composed.

Yet even so, not once had they smiled.

What Louis had demonstrated was not just power, but an indisputable authority.

Time seemed to have vanished from the venue.

A slight sound of chair legs scraping suddenly pierced the silence.

Almost simultaneously, everyone looked up, feeling a tightening in their hearts.

He stood up.

The youth's figure wasn't tall, yet the aura of pressure he exuded in his calmness seemed to thin the air just a little.

He walked around the conference table, his pace unhurried, each step seemingly treading on the hearts of everyone present.

His gaze swept over everyone, from the aged Viscount to the young, ambitious Baron of Expansion, no one could meet his eyes.

Finally, he stopped behind Viscount Roland.

The old man had already stiffened, even his neck seemed rigid, cold sweat drenched his collar.

"Don't be afraid." Louis's tone was gentle, like a kind young relative comforting a shocked elder, "They were taken away because they did something wrong."

He paused, leaning in closer: "Did you do anything wrong?"

Roland jolted intensely, nearly leaping from his chair, and hurriedly shook his head like a rattle-drum: "No, no! I—I was just taken to listen... I did nothing at all..."

"Good." Louis gently patted his shoulder as if comforting a child, "That's good."

Roland appeared almost pardoned, nearly collapsing on the spot.

Louis straightened himself and continued forward.

In the silence, the young lord's figure was like a longsword pressing horizontally atop the heads of all the old nobility.

No one dared to recklessly move.

Louis slowly returned to the main seat.

He did not hurry to sit down, instead standing behind the long table, overlooking the entire room.

The nobles who just moments ago had been restless were now all bowing their heads and holding their breath, as if returning to their school days, like students awaiting reprimand.

The air remained oppressive, the flames in the fireplace murmured lowly, as if aware to dampen their own sound.

"Are you sure you can return to your own lands now?"

Louis spoke, his tone not high yet clearly reaching everyone's ears.

He displayed no anger, nor aggressiveness, rather like a guiding mentor, his tone almost tender.

But precisely because of that, it was even more terrifying.

"Your lands are still yours." He continued, "But if you wish to survive the Red Tide, you must—respect the rules of the Red Tide."

No one spoke.

He slowly surveyed them, his gaze sweeping over the face of every noble, none dared to meet it.

Viscount Roland kept his head low, his hands gripping the chair tightly, Harris's seat already vacant, the cushion still seemingly retaining its chill, while Sirius's overturned chair lay like a tombstone.

"Although the disaster is over," Louis paused, his eyes growing somber, "the Northern Territory remains a wasteland. The Insect Swarm has receded, but winter is coming."

He extended his fingers, itemizing point by point: "A large number of refugees are stranded, the people have no houses and still sleep in geothermal shelters.

Food is scarce, the warehouse calculates the last of its reserves daily. Medical resources are lacking, an epidemic could break out in the refuge areas at any moment.

The mountain roads are snowbound, roads cut off, can you return? Who will build bridges for you? Who will clear the snow? The villages and towns everywhere are destroyed, magical beasts roam free, do you have knights?"

No one answered.

The nobles seated at the lower end of the long table, each with an ashy face, only dared to murmur softly in agreement, none dared propose leaving.

Even if moments ago someone was considering whether they should "proactively exit the Red Tide and rebuild their estates," now they lacked even the courage to think a single word further.

Because they understood very well, that path simply did not exist.

The old mansions behind them had long fallen into the sea of insects, the boundary markers of their fiefs had transformed into piles of white bones.

Their knights had dwindled in the blood battle of the Nest, leaving only dust-covered family crests with no place to hang.

And the young lord, merely twenty years old at present, was their sole reliance.

Silence spread in the hall like a dense fog, pressing down like a weight on everyone's breath.

Louis did not continue speaking, seeming to wait for them to speak themselves, waiting for them to offer words of gratitude, words of regret, a statement of understanding.

But there were none.

He finally smiled, the corners of his mouth lifted yet devoid of warmth.

"You all..." his voice was low, sounding like self-talk but also like a judgement, "I dragged you out from the fog of insects, out of the sea of fire, I gave you food, medicine, beds. I built shelters for you, sent patrols for safety, repaired roads and bridges, distributed charcoal for warmth."

"I worked tirelessly, dared not sleep fully, handling documents, dispatching people, allocating food daily... yet what were you doing?"

He lifted a hand, giving a light wave, as if to sweep away all those past events, "Gathering in secret plots, connecting with old forces, even inciting refugee riots, trying to stab me in the back."

He paused at this point, his gaze coldly sweeping over those nobles sitting below, their faces pale: "Is this your 'gratitude'?"

The air became still once again.

Yorn stopped his casual banter, while Willis bowed his head slowly, with a hint of coldness in his eyes; they knew Louis was genuinely angry.

"Lord Louis, it's a misunderstanding... a misunderstanding!" a minor noble began to speak in a trembling voice, his hands tightly gripping the edge of his chair, "I never... never dared to have any disrespectful thoughts!"

"Indeed, how dare we!" Another person echoed, "We... we were just deceived, blinded by lies..."

"Thankfully, the Lord was wise enough to see through the treachery early!"

"If not for the protection of the Red Tide, we would have... would have died in the Insect Tide..."

"My entire family, we owe our lives to the Lord's saving grace..."

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Suddenly, the atmosphere in the meeting hall seemed to shift; the nobility who had just looked as if they were mourning now...

All stood up, bowed, and lowered their heads, voices rising and falling.

All were words of "gratitude," "loyalty," "repentance," "allegiance."

Even an older noble suddenly burst into tears, choking out: "My... my two grandsons, it was you who saved them, it was you who saved them, lord! How could we possibly forget your kindness?"

Viscount Roland finally caught his breath and stood up, bowing respectfully, his voice trembling: "Lord, this old man was confused... it's all a misunderstanding, a misunderstanding... your wisdom and courage are the hope reborn in the Northern Territory, who would dare defy you..."

Louis watched them quietly, saying nothing.

He neither stopped nor nodded approvingly, allowing them to continue their "pledges of loyalty," continue their "expressions of regret."

Only after more than half of the audience had bent over in bowing did he slowly return to the main seat.

Then Louis's tone shifted, finally adding a touch of "forgiveness."

"But those who perform exceptionally will not go unrewarded."

"The land of Snow Peak is vast. If you help me stabilize the people's hearts and maintain order, I will naturally let go. Red Tide will establish a rebuilding system.

Based on contribution, order, public opinion, and level of cooperation, we will determine the order of post-war reconstruction and the aid investment. Those who do more, receive more, and those who mess around... don't blame me for settling accounts."

"Those who perform well will be given priority after winter to redistribute lands, return to their family's old territories, and restore their military formations."

As soon as his words fell, the atmosphere in the hall relaxed instantly.

The nobles, like prisoners suddenly pardoned, each showed a relieved expression.

"We will certainly obey the Lord's command!" "We will surely serve loyally!"

They all stood up, bowed, and affirmed, their tone eager, their posture respectful.

With some trembling emotions, they claimed willingness to fight for the Red Tide, as if they had never been part of any previous conspiracies.

Even Viscount Roland hurriedly bowed, his voice shivering as he added, "It's all a misunderstanding... Lord, you are wise!"

Louis ignored him, smiling lightly as if only hearing the wind.

"Alright." He propped his hands on the edge of the conference table, speaking blandly, "Since the words have been said, let's discuss the issues of winter survival."

The nobles all sat upright, listening intently to the arrangements.

"Although the Red Tide's food supplies are tight, I have already sent people to the southern counties to buy dry food and charcoal.

Each place needs to retake count of the refugee population, settle them at designated points; there shall be no private withholding, selling, or false reporting.

Three more medical offices will be established, focusing on controlling respiratory infectious diseases in winter.

Temporary repair of transport paths, distribution of charcoal, clearing obstacles after snowfall... these tasks require laborers from your territories."

He spoke concisely and powerfully, waste-free, listing item by item on each noble's shoulders.

"Of course." He reached this point, his tone slightly softened, "I won't exploit you for free."

"Those who provide personnel, those who exert effort, next year's budget funds will be prioritized favorably, coal, food, and rebuilding funds will be inclined accordingly."

A noble quietly replied, "We are willing to contribute financially, willing to offer some modest assistance."

Others echoed, "Red Tide faces difficulties, we should bear them together."

"We will definitely contribute both financially and physically, not dragging behind."

One even straightforwardly raised a hand to offer, "If the Lord trusts me, I can organize laborers to assist with transportation!"

Louis listened to these, showing no expression, merely nodding slightly.

At this moment, Bradley leaned closer to whisper a few words in his ear.

Louis inclined his head slightly to listen, nodding imperceptibly, then stood up.

"I have some matters to attend to; I'll leave first." He said, patting the desk, "After discussing, you can submit the team division lists to Bradley."

But remember, to survive, cooperate with me. To live well, speak with achievements."

After finishing, he said no more, turning to leave with his followers.

The nobles immediately scrambled to their feet, bowing deeply, "Farewell, Lord!"

"Lord, you work tirelessly!"

"May the Red Tide prosper forever, and Snow Peak's reconstruction hopeful!"

Louis did not look back, only waved his hand, stepping away slowly under everyone's watchful gaze from the assembly hall.

Finally, as his silhouette disappeared behind the door, the nobles inside collectively heaved a sigh of relief.

Some wiped sweat from their foreheads, some sat back in their seats saying nothing, while others instantly turned to Bradley to start discussing "how to arrange the squads," "I'm willing to repair the west road," "our family still has dozens of people to spare."

This meeting, which went from purging, warning, intimidating, to distinct rewards and punishments, promises of incentives—Louis left not a speck of chance.

And these former nobles, today's refugees, finally understood one thing:

To survive in this Northern Territory, they must obey Louis.

Chapter 335: Execution

After Louis left the chamber, the hall remained oppressive.

Bradley slowly stepped forward, standing beneath the main seat, taking a stack of documents bearing the Red Tide seal from the adjutant's hand. He announced without expression: "This is the draft of the 'Snow Peak Rebuilding Treaty'. Please sign in order."

The document was brief, yet its wording was as cold and hard as iron:

Within the Red Tide Territory, all nobility must comply with the Red Tide laws; no private armies shall be established, nor shall there be interference in military or governmental affairs.

All matters of the nobility must be coordinated with the Red Tide, in unified cooperation with the winter transition and rebuilding deployment.

Those who disobey will be considered as committing rebellion.

"This treaty is regarded as the nobility's formal commitment to voluntarily participate in the Red Tide rebuilding. If there are no objections, sign immediately." Bradley's voice was not loud, yet it carried an undeniable oppression.

Yorn was the first to step forward and sign, followed by Willis, their expressions calm, even proactively pressing their signet rings.

Afterwards, the hall was silent for a few breaths.

The other nobles began to sign one after another.

Each name written on the paper felt like a debt contract, a vow, an invisible noose.

No one protested; it wasn't that they didn't want to, but they didn't dare.

Those who finished signing bowed their heads and left in single file, without uttering a word.

The only sound left in the stone pillar colonnade was the echo of boots, eerily silent.

The nobles who once laughed and chatted dared not meet each other's eyes now, nor did anyone mention the fate of Brooke, Harris, and Sirius.

Outside, the cold wind cut like a blade, and the falling snow was silent.

They walked step by step out of the Earth Tower, their hearts heavier than the stone bricks beneath their feet.

The wind fluttered their cloaks, but no one dared turn back to glance at the Red Tide banner atop that tall building.

The noble representatives walked out of the Red Tide hall in a file, originally expected to return home, but their steps involuntarily slowed as they descended the castle stone stairs.

At the end of the street came a noisy crowd. It wasn't the bustle of a market but a wave-like surge.

"What's happening?" someone asked in a low voice.

Toward the square, it was a sea of people.

The throngs of people coming from all sides blocked the main street and side alleys entirely, shaking the stone pavements faintly.

The nobles stood on the steps, momentarily motionless.

"Do you... see that?" a Viscount frowned, "Over there, is that an execution platform?"

"It seems so." Another person strained to tiptoe but could only see a shadow of the high platform's corner and the Red Tide Iron Cavalry arrayed like a forest.

Viscount Roland leaned against a stone pillar, catching his breath, finally unable to resist calling over a Red Tide Knight maintaining order nearby: "Hey, what's happening up ahead?"

The young knight looked serious, seeing them in noble attire, he replied: "Reporting to you, sir, the Inspectorate is conducting a public trial of the rebellion's main perpetrators by order."

"Rebellion?" Roland's expression changed slightly, "Who has rebelled?!"

"It is... the vagrant bandits." The knight also didn't know how to explain, so he took out a neatly folded rough leaflet from his pocket and respectfully handed it over.

The leaflet contained few words, but its illustrations were powerful and evocative.

A rough woodcut depicted the bustling crowd and Armored Knights surrounding the judgment platform, where several ragged prisoners stood facing the execution pillars, with four large characters "Red Tide Law" hanging behind them.

"On the fifteenth of this month, the Inspectorate, upon investigation, discovered that some vagrant leaders took advantage of the Red Tide's main force being on expedition to gather a disturbance, loot military provisions, and assault the garrison, leading to serious public order incidents and material losses. This morning, they are being tried and processed according to law at Red Tide Square."

The nobles exchanged glances.

"So it's... those vagrants again."

"These people are never satisfied."

"The main force has just returned, yet the rabble causes trouble. If the Red Tide doesn't suppress this chaos, it will be unstoppable."

Despite their calm words, unease grew in their hearts.

The knight, seeing their hesitation, spoke proactively: "If the lords wish to observe the trial, there is a prepared area up front, I can lead you there."

The nobles glanced at each other, not knowing who nodded first, but finally followed along.

They did not have to wait long; the morning bell rang thrice, echoing heavily across the sky of Red Tide City.

The dense fog hadn't lifted, the wind swept snowflakes, the Red Tide Square saw its flag fluttering high, blood-red like fire, flapping loudly.

More than a thousand Red Tide Territory citizens had long gathered here, from East Street to South Alley, from within the city to the newly expanded vagrant area; the dense crowd encircled the square, with even rooftops occupied.

The city defense troops and Inspectorate Knights arranged in three layers of Iron Cavalry blockade, their armor clanking, swords and knives drawn, reflecting a cold, chilling gleam.

The atmosphere was tense to the point of solidification.

With the last bell chime fading, an Inspectorate official, cloaked in black, slowly ascended the judgment platform.

Quinn, Chief of the Red Tide Inspectorate.

His tone was steady: "The public trial begins. By Red Tide law, the origin of chaos is judged."

As his voice fell, several prisoners were dragged onto the high platform.

They were clothed in prison garb, covered in dust and blood, bound by iron chains, prostrated in the snowy mud. Some were already unconscious, others glared in anger, and some cried and begged for mercy.

But it was only one person who stirred whispers among the nobles in the VIP seats.

It was Viscount Brooke.

Just a moment ago, he was still dressed elegantly, eloquently speaking in the lord's council, pointing out the realm's affairs.

Yet now he stood stripped of his finery, clad in prison garb, hands tightly bound, face ashen, gaze lifeless as death.

A Viscount once priding himself on being an old Northern nobility, now kneeling before the crowd like a dried-up old cur.

Quinn loudly read each charge, his voice like a great bell penetrating the crowd:

"Firstly, assembly and incitement. Viscount Brooke secretly colluded with the vagrant leaders 'Lean Horse' and 'Herder', ordering them to incite public sentiment at various distribution points, spreading false rumors of 'Red Tide hoarding provisions', attempting to provoke looting."

Chapter 336: Execution (Part 2)

"Secondly, his followers ambushed the Red Tide Knight Team at night, leaving an Apprentice Knight severely injured on the ground. The injured's name is Aaron Tyne, who is still unconscious."

"Thirdly, taking advantage of the chaos in the city, Brooke instructed his subordinates to forcefully open the west granary and steal three boxes of war materials and over thirty winter stoves, causing a shortage of supplies along several lines of defense."

"Fourthly, inciting a riot at the grain distribution site, resulting in a four-year-old child being trampled to death; additionally, three post-operative wounded soldiers saw their wounds worsen due to a lack of medicine, of which one succumbed to the wounds."

"Fifthly, disrupting order by setting fire on West Street, creating panic. The fire spread, causing a nighttime escape and stampede, injuring thirteen people, including two with serious fractures."

With each point read, the scene erupted into a bout of commotion.

Each statement was accompanied by the testimony of eyewitnesses, records signed by Red Tide soldiers, and physical evidence, painting a picture of blatant wrongdoing, proof beyond doubt.

Quinn spoke with a voice like forged iron, calm yet heavy, with each word seemingly nailing Brooke's head to the judgment stand.

The murmurs among the crowd began to surge.

Upon hearing "a four-year-old child trampled to death," an old woman began to sob quietly, while someone cursed angrily: "That was my neighbor's granddaughter!", "Only a beast would do such a thing!"

On the high platform, Brooke hung his head low, his lips trembling, his entire being collapsing as if his backbone had been removed, his face ashen.

He wanted to defend himself, but no sound could escape his throat.

Beside him, Quinn thundered with a voice like thunder, "Such treasonous rogues, their crimes are unforgivable, and today they shall be made a bloody offering to the law, and through execution, establish authority!"

With these words, the Red Tide Iron Guard below responded in unison, and the executioners on both sides were already in position.

On the execution platform, several principal offenders were heavily pressed down to kneel, their throats clamped, struggling futilely.

A flash of cold light, the knife rose.

Blood sprayed three feet.

Corpses tumbled down the wooden steps, rolling into the snow, tracing winding scarlet lines across the icy ground.

Brooke, in his last struggle, twisted his head, his lips trembling, as if trying to shout something, but only spit out thick blood, the sound dying in his throat.

Once a nobleman, a councilman, now he could not even take a single defense with him, his eyes filled with unyielding shock, ultimately swallowed by snow and blood.

The crowd below fell silent for a moment, then erupted:

"Well killed!"

"These scoundrels should have been dealt with long ago!"

Meanwhile, a white-haired old woman in the back row covered her face crying, muttering, "My son's death was unjust... but today, at least there's an end to it..."

Emotions scattered, there were roars, cries, and even near-frenzied cheers, as it was a release of emotions long suppressed after the war.

In the nobles' seats, a group of "survivors" already looked ashen.

They watched helplessly as Brooke, who had conspired with them just last night, was beheaded in broad daylight, with not a soul daring to plead for him.

"He... he actually directly beheaded Brooke..."

"Mad... he's mad..."

Whispers rose, but no one dared to speak aloud.

Some were soaked with cold sweat down their backs, others' fingers were stiff as wood, almost unable to grip their canes.

Though not named, it felt as if the execution blade was already at their necks.

Immediately after the execution of the principal offenders, the square had not yet dispersed.

On the platform, the Iron Guards swiftly cleared the bloodstains, the red liquid from the execution knife not yet congealed, yet Quinn continued unabated, unfolding the scroll in his hand, his voice resounding once more: "Secondary participants, twenty-three, bring them up one by one."

As the order was given, another squad of Red Tide Guards escorted the accused onto the platform.

These people had ragged clothes and unsteady steps, varying in age and gender, their expressions either dull, terrified, or fiercely defiant—but none dared to shout.

"These twenty-three people, though not the masterminds, aided the rebellion in this instance.

First, refugee Joseph, spread rumors claiming 'the Red Tide hoards grain without distribution,' inciting over a hundred people to gather at the South Street tavern.

Second, refugee woman Melinda, provided information and multiple times covered the main offender's escape.

Third, member of an outsider caravan 'Marcel,' secretly probed Red Tide's mobilization and garrison deployments."

As each count of crime was read, soldiers would drag the involved parties to the execution post, either to be tied or to kneel.

The whipping immediately commenced.

The sound of whips slicing through the air resembled wind arrows, brutally landing on flesh.

"Aaaah—!"

The first prisoner screamed as the second whip landed before the cry could fade.

Blood splattered, dust swirled, and the audience was in an uproar.

"Good beating!" someone shouted, raising a fist, "My spouse was tricked out by these people! Barely came back!"

"These henchmen of the rebels, if not killed, should at least be whipped to a pulp!" another woman cried out forcefully, her eyes red.

A child beside her shrank into his mother's arms, yet watched the execution stage with wide eyes, not daring to blink.

On stage, Quinn announced calmly, "For those with lighter offenses, they are to be whipped between ten to fifty times, and sentenced to labor for the Red Tide work crew, to dig canals and build walls, not to be discharged before winter."

On the execution platform, the sounds of whipping continued.

It was the sound of iron law driven into flesh, the clearest and coldest declaration of justice in the Red Tide Territory during the harsh winter.

Outside the execution stage, in the small alleys closest to the square's edge, some roamers who refused to "line up properly" had originally hid.

These were the traffickers of black market grain tickets, the midnight rumor spreaders, the "spectators" who injured Red Tide soldiers the day before.

At the moment when heads rolled, someone almost fell to the ground, some turned to flee, while others bit a rag hard and covered their mouths, terrified that even a single breath would bring calamity.

After witnessing the entire public trial and execution, these roamers, who had intended to stir trouble, no longer dared to act rashly.

Chapter 337: Execution (Part 3)

They quietly disbanded like the wind scattering sand, dispersing into the alleys, ruins, and crowds, as if they never existed.

In just one day, the undercurrent of the entire Red Tide City seemed to have been severed by a heavy blow.

No one mentioned "Red Tide's hidden grains" anymore, and no one dared to gather for discussions.

They suddenly realized:

This land was not the Northern Wasteland that could be plundered and burned at will.

It belonged to the man who dared to kill nobility, execute the unruly, and showed no mercy.

This is Red Tide.

In Red Tide, those who disobey, disregard the law, or are unafraid of death, will die quickly.

The sound of the whip finally ceased, the blood on the execution platform not yet dry, but the crowd in the square surged like a tide.

Some knelt on the ground with tears streaming, repeatedly kowtowing and murmuring, "Thank you, my lord... Thank you, Red Tide... Thank you for saving us..."

Others shouted emotionally, "It is Red Tide that gave us a place to stay!"

"We were hiding in a cave, almost freezing to death, and they brought us out!"

"We can drink porridge because Lord Louis sent people to cook it!"

"My spouse is in the medicine camp; Red Tide dressed his wounds three times, and they're almost healed!"

The shouts rose and fell, the originally oppressive square welcoming a glimmer of sunlight after the thaw of spring snow.

It was the joy of surviving calamity, the fervor of grasping a lifeline in desperation.

A middle-aged man raised a half-tattered flag high—one he had picked up from the ruins during the Insect Tide, now painted with Red Tide's moon emblem using dye.

"Long live Lord Louis!"

He was the first to shout this slogan, his voice hoarse but deafening.

The next moment, as if engulfed by flames, the entire square erupted:

"Long live Red Tide!"

"Long live Lord Louis!!"

"We swear to protect Red Tide to death!!"

The civilians waved their torn hats, split hands, and not yet scabbed palms high, their voices hoarse but still shouting.

Children joined in, even if they did not understand the meaning, knowing it was "that lord who protects them."

Amidst the thousands of cheers, a deep yet authoritative voice came from the south end of the square.

"Silence."

The voice was not loud, yet it felt like a heavy hammer from within, quieting the boiling crowd.

Following their gaze, it was a typical red and black cloak of the Red Tide Knight Order, with fire-lacquered edges shining in the morning sun.

Louis slowly ascended the high platform.

His cloak undisturbed, his expression stern, each step as steady as a hammer.

But when he stood still, scanning the people below, he did not rebuke them; instead, he calmly spoke:

"You stand here because you held your ground.

Red Tide Territory is your shelter.

But remember—this land is safe not because someone favors it but because of the iron laws here."

The wind howled as Louis raised his hand, pointing below the platform:

"As long as you're willing to follow Red Tide's rules, as long as you're willing to unite, obey orders, cause no chaos, harm no one, this iron law will protect you!"

The instant his words fell, the square was silent, then erupted into thunderous applause and cheers.

"We vow to uphold Red Tide's law!"

"We vow to serve my lord with all our might!"

"As long as we can survive, we are willing to do anything!"

Some even knelt down, shouting, "This is not a land of exile; it's our home! Red Tide allows us to have a home to return to!"

And Louis stood on the execution platform, the red cloak billowing in the wind, amidst the blood-stained snow and mountains of cheers, like a true king ascending the throne.

Refugees in millions, food routes paralyzed, the old system collapsed, the new system not established...

The entire Northern Territory was like a severely wounded beast, skin torn, and blood streaming, only a strong medicine could stop the life from flowing away.

And before Red Tide's true laws, food routes, and allocation systems were established, Louis knew that human nature was unreliable.

So he picked the worst chaos and laid down the harshest blade.

The survival instinct would drive refugees to raid granaries, hunger and hatred would ignite armed fights, and the struggle for territory and interests would replay the madness before the collapse of the Northern Territory.

He couldn't wait.

Couldn't wait for the laws to be perfected, , couldn't wait for the city defenses to be built, couldn't wait for negotiations with the old nobility to conclude.

He needed to kill a batch of people first.

Kill with enough ruthlessness, enough volume.

Killing so that the people on this land would hear the sound of iron touching bone, there would be the first hint of "rules."

This public trial was the horn of iron and blood, the vanguard of rebuilding, Louis carving out a "boundary" amidst the chaos.

And since that day, no one dared to engage in private armed fights or raiding in Red Tide Territory.

No refugee dared to break into the granary without permission.

And no one dared to disrespect the name Louis Calvin.

Because everyone knew that it was not just a lord's name, but a new code written in fresh blood, above the old nobility.

In the center of the square, that familiar flag slowly rose.

The Red Tide flag, like a blazing sun, flapping in the Northern wind, like an undying flame, lighting up the ice and snow, reflecting the bloodstains beneath the execution platform yet to solidify.

The two red colors resonated with each other, and it was this hue that spoke more than a thousand words.

It symbolized order, protection, and that name which had pulled everyone back from the brink of death on the darkest night.

"Long live Red Tide!"

"Long live Lord Louis!!"

The shouts like tides spread from the heart of the square to the city walls, streets, and even to those huddled on rooftops.

It was not commanded by anyone, not led by anyone, but the most primitive, most instinctive outburst of emotion.

The representatives of the nobility stood aside, their expressions complex. They intended to leave amid the commotion but were briefly struck by the sudden wave of sound.

Many felt a chill in their hearts, stepping back half a step involuntarily.

Someone whispered, "Are these still refugees? They're... believers."

Ultimately, they dared not linger, bowing their heads and leaving quickly without a word.

They dared not look back at the high platform, only feeling that the Red Tide flag watched them silently.

But the indigenous people and new settlers in the square still stood in the cold wind, looking at the figure once standing amidst the flames and Insect Tide, tears of intense emotion in their eyes.

One shout followed by ten, a hundred, a thousand—

"Long live Red Tide!"

"Long live Lord Louis!!"

It was an oath beneath the snow; it was loyalty in the ruins, the people's most fervent gratitude and submission to their protector.

After this turmoil, on this blood-stained square, the order belonging to Red Tide finally took firm root.

Chapter 338: Duke Calvin's Scheme

The night was deep and dark, a gentle breeze tapping against the window, yet inside the study, only the candlelight glimmered faintly.

Duke Calvin sat alone in a high-backed chair, his fingertips flipping through a thick stack of urgent battle reports from the Imperial Secretariat.

The edges of the parchment still bore the scorch marks peculiar to rapid delivery, indicative of their urgent transmission.

His gaze swept calmly over the post-battle summaries, but his fingers paused slightly upon seeing a particular piece of information.

"Gaius Calvin, severely injured in the Battle of Doomsday Nest, Fighting Energy depleted, nervous system disintegrated, now in a long-term coma... currently in a vegetative state, unable to awaken."

For a long time, only the ticking of the wall clock could be heard.

Duke Calvin lowered his head, his long fingers gently rubbing over the words "deep coma" and "consciousness sealed"...

His brows twitched slightly, yet he showed no sign of losing composure.

He was not a man who would cry his heart out in the study; he was one of the Empire's eight pillars and the patriarch of the Calvin Clan.

But his fingertips unconsciously tightened, folding a distinct crease into the edge of the letter.

He closed his eyes, murmuring softly, "...Gaius."

His eldest son—Gaius, the family's stalwart sent to the Imperial Capital as a youth, who made steady progress on the battlefield.

Gentle, steady, neither arrogant nor impatient.

And also a Peak Knight, the Deputy Corps Commander of the Imperial Dragon Blood Legion.

He had thought this person would be the most reliable successor for the Calvin Clan.

Yet now he had fallen in the Northern Territory.

The lamplight flickered gently, as if stirred by the wind.

He remained silent for a long while, then suddenly spoke in a low voice as if to himself, "Still alive... might yet awaken... perhaps it's only temporary..."

His voice was soft, carrying a kind of barely maintained calmness.

Of course, he knew such words were merely excuses for himself.

Duke Calvin sighed, slowly leaning back into the high-backed chair, his thumb stroking the edge of the letter's wax seal, his thoughts like a tide.

"A family's top combat strength, gone just like that."

A momentary shadow crossed his eyes, but it quickly returned to a stern demeanor, not devoid of emotion, but never allowing emotions to dictate judgment.

Gaius was too straightforward...

Lacking any sense of self-preservation, perhaps he was never suited to be the leader of the Calvin Clan.

This was related to his early departure for the Imperial Capital as a hostage. If he had known he would become a Peak Knight, he would have kept him by his side to raise personally.

But now, thinking about such matters was pointless.

The Duke let out a slow breath, suppressing the turmoil in his heart, and continued to unfold the next page of the secret letter.

"Viscount Louis Calvin of the Red Tide Territory organized local military and civilians to hold Snow Peak Line; led a breakthrough of the Insect Swarm blockade to aid Frost Halberd City;

Near the end of the battle, detonated the outer defenses of the Doomsday Nest, assisting in destroying the Nest core, with remarkable battle achievements, reported to the Imperial Capital by Duke Edmund."

He was stunned.

At first, he even thought some clerk had mistaken the name.

"Louis?"

That... eighth son?

Until last year, he didn't even remember the child's name, nor had he ever intended to.

It wasn't until last year that the child began to accomplish things step by step.

He established a foothold in the Northern Territory, sheltered refugees, built bases, and even won the trust of the Governor.

To what extent?—Edmond even married his daughter to him.

That was the first time he truly regarded that "overlooked eighth son."

But even then, he had never pinned high hopes on him.

Just gradually expanding the family's influence in the Northern Territory was considered a significant achievement.

As for turning the tide in large-scale campaigns like the "Doomsday Nest"? He hadn't even considered it, but—

"Near the end of the battle, detonated the outer defenses of the Doomsday Nest, assisting in destroying the Nest core... one of the key contributors to this battle's success."

Duke Calvin slowly furrowed his brow, "How did he do it? The Knights he commands shouldn't have been enough to participate in a battle of such a scale."

Louis unknowingly was no longer that child to be ignored, or casually sent to the Northern Territory to die.

He was now one of the largest Lords in the Northern Territory, a pillar of the Northern defensive line, recognized as a "meritorious figure" in the Empire's battle reports.

Duke Calvin slowly leaned back into the high-backed chair, remaining silent for a long time.

The candlelight flickered gently in his eyes, revealing no emotion.

But his mind was already racing.

He must secure the best rewards for Louis.

This is the iron law of an ancient noble family—if you are a waste, they can discard you anytime.

But if you demonstrate value, capable of winning glory and profit for the family, they will spare no effort to support you, paving your path with strategies, and offering all resources.

That is how cruel it is, and that is how realistic it is.

And this opportunity is also a gamble.

The Imperial Northern Territory is at the beginning of reconstruction, with every major Northern family full of scars, dozens of noble lineages extinct, the old powers collapsed, and the new order yet to be established.

And he, Duke Calvin, happens to have a son there, one recognized as a crucial contributor in the most critical battle.

Only this contributor is exactly the type the Emperor dislikes:

Hailing from one of the Eight Great Clans, with battle accomplishments, popular appeal, territory, and married to Duke Edmund's daughter.

It can be said, Louis gathers every label the Emperor disapproves of.

Emperor Ernst August, that man as cold as Cold Iron, never trusts nobles, nor birthrights.

He personally stripped dozens of hereditary vassals of their titles, just to break the noble hereditary system.

He can reward a mere foot soldier with honor, yet he is extremely wary of aristocratic offspring with battle achievements.

He detests any descendant of deep-rooted families standing outside the realm of imperial power, forming their own climate.

Chapter 339: Duke Calvin's Scheme (2)

Duke Calvin slowly tapped the armrest of his chair, his expression grim.

If I directly petition for Louis to be rewarded, that will only raise suspicion.

Not only will we not gain any advantage, but that child will also be under watch.

He must change the approach to make the entire Empire believe: it's not the Calvin Family supporting Louis, but that the Northern Territory has produced a Louis.

Make everyone, including the Emperor, see a local hero who climbed out on his own and fought bravely to carve out a space for himself.

A meritorious figure who won't shake the Empire's foundation, and a survivor who can stabilize the post-war frontier.

A sudden thought flashed through his mind, and the Duke's eyes gradually lit up.

He slowly sat up straight, tapping his fingers lightly on the table as if striking the rhythm of an impending political maneuver.

If he can organize a complete set of political rhetoric on "speaking for the Northern Territory" and "speaking for the survivors."

Even if it's just a carefully designed facade, it will be enough to push the internal aid process for the Northern Territory within the Empire.

As long as the direction is right, public opinion and court councils will naturally assist him.

And instead of himself going to "request" the Emperor, which would only make the Emperor guard against the influence of great clans on military exploits;

The ideal scenario is for Governor of the North, Duke Edmund, to take the lead and other families to petition, which aligns with the Empire's legal principles and avoids suspicion on himself.

His eyes flashed, and he already had an idea in mind; it would be best if the Governor himself managed the awards and allocations.

Despite His Majesty the Emperor's iron-fisted governance over the years, cutting the power of the Eight Great Clans and being wary of all old nobility.

There is only one exception—Duke Edmund of the Northern Territory.

He is one of the Eight Great Clans, but his position is rock solid.

He has guarded the Northern Territory for over forty years, and his family has declined because of it, his only son even died in battle for the Empire.

Military power, reputation, imperial favor, he possesses all three.

He's arguably the most "trusted" veteran in the current Empire.

And if Duke Edmund led the proposal for post-disaster reconstruction, fighting for resources and political exemptions for survivors across the Northern Territory.

The Emperor would not only not veto it, he perhaps would "graciously agree."

That would mean laying the whole benefit squarely onto Duke Edmund's table.

And in this large plate of post-disaster handling, Louis could at least get a big chunk of the most delicious, central spoils.

Because he is both Duke Edmund's son-in-law and one of the few who actually gained merits in the war and maintained territorial operations post-war as a local lord.

His Red Tide Territory is currently the most intact, well-organized army, unlost granary, and stable public sentiment core of governance in the Northern Territory.

Far stronger than other half-ruined territories and broken walls with scattered troops.

All this means, no matter how the Empire decides to handle the Northern Territory next, Louis must be considered one of the candidates.

Duke Calvin's gaze remained calm, but his mind was already swiftly planning the details of the entire scheme.

First, the Calvin Family must not make an appearance.

If he rashly stepped forward to fight for Louis' honor and territory, it would only alert the Emperor and the Inspectorate.

That emperor, as cold as cold iron, fears most the noble heirs rising again through family influence.

He cannot act, but Edmund can move.

If Duke Edmund steps forward to request the establishment of post-disaster agencies, for rewarding meritorious individuals, it's not only reasonable, but the Emperor would be glad to "go with the flow."

"The ones standing opposite His Majesty seeking aid are most likely to be drawn swords upon; those at His Majesty's feet crying are most likely to be rewarded."

Duke Calvin sneered inwardly, resolving to push the Edmund Family to the forefront.

The second step is to unite the nobility and weave a web of petitions.

Secretly selecting several stable relations, old families capable of speaking in the Imperial Council, preparing to pay some territorial mining rights, procurement rights, resources, gold coins, and other interests in exchange for their support.

Having them support the establishment of the Empire's 'Northern Territory Post-Disaster Reward Bill.'

Not for one person, but for all survivors and all meritorious individuals.

The main aim of this bill will be:

To request the Emperor and the Imperial Council to grant resources and reward power for post-war aftermath in the Northern Territory and establish temporary autonomous institutions to stabilize politics.

The third step is to push for the establishment of the "Northern Territory Post-Disaster Consultation and Autonomous Group."

This is the most critical step.

Establishing this autonomous group seems to assist the Empire in "handling disaster areas, settling people, reorganizing remnants," but is actually crafting a legitimate ruling platform tailored for Louis.

The group will be led nominally by Duke Edmund, with Louis naturally entering the standing committee as the "Red Tide Territory representative."

Titles are mere vanity; only Red Tide Territory holds troops, food, population, law enforcement, and knight organization, and therefore truly has "governing capability."

The Empire only needs to "grant autonomous ruling rights," without deploying a single soldier, and who would oppose?

And this devolvement implicitly signifies authorized legitimate power and resource distribution.

Throughout this process, Duke Calvin will be fully invisible, not signing, not standing out, nor speaking.

He only needs to contribute some wealth and resources, letting these proposals naturally rise, voiced and driven by others.

His influence in the circle of Imperial Nobility will quietly drive these gears to mesh precisely.

Let the Emperor see a grand post-disaster cooperation movement.

Rather than a new Calvin family power emerging in the Northern Territory.

With thoughts settled, Duke Calvin slowly stood up, walked to his desk, and pulled out several encrypted parchment sheets.

He dipped his pen in ink, writing boldly and fluidly, each stroke imbued with calm calculation of family interests.

The first letter was to his sister, Eleanor Calvin, the family's spokesperson in the Imperial Capital.

He instructed her on how to maneuver in the core council and elaborate on Louis's military achievements while concealing overly conspicuous edges.

The second was to Duke Edmund, his in-law.

In a tone of "overcoming crises together," he sincerely expressed that he would fully support his rebuilding of the Northern Territory and could put forward any requests.

The subsequent few were written to several noble political advisors he was quite familiar with in the Imperial Capital's court.

He didn't directly request support for Louis but rather under the banner of "Northern Territory's shared prosperity," "merits in civilian relief," and "reconstruction of a new imperial order," encouraged them to support Duke Edmund.

He dried the ink, packed each letter into black tube-envelopes with family secret seals, and sealed them with copper seals of different levels.

A moment later, a steward quietly appeared to collect the letters.

Then he casually flipped back to the last page of that bulletin, originally thought to be an unimportant post-war roster, only to find an inconspicuous line at the very bottom:

"...Pal Calvin, lost contact in the Doomsday Nest combat zone, confirmed deceased."

He paused his finger, his gaze slightly focused.

"Pal?" he softly uttered the name, as if retrieving a dust-covered plaque from a distant and blurry corner.

Silence prevailed for a moment; his brow didn't furrow, nor did his gaze show sadness, but quickly sifted through that person's outline in his mind.

"Ah... it's him."

"It's that one I sent in the second batch of pioneers last year, was his mother... Esther? No, or Marine?" he paused, eventually unable to recall.

"So be it, not worth remembering evidently means... it was never important."

He gently set the letter down, his fingertips not exerting force, treating it like a discarded piece of paper.

Pal.

Another who couldn't survive the Northern Territory.

"Dead then dead," he spoke plainly, as if confirming a settled account.

A son, he has plenty.

Those without value are destined to be eliminated in the gears of power, and those able to survive will naturally climb up.

This is the truth of the Calvin Family system.

Not everyone is worthy of the honor of the surname; bearing the name Calvin can also be just a one-time disposable try.

He resumed his posture, picking up new documents.

The ember-stained paper lay at the bottom, no longer retaining any sense of presence.

Chapter 340: Meeting in the Imperial Capital (Part 1)

Imperial Capital, Imperial Hall.

The dome made of boulders towered high in the sky.

At the center of the dome, a gigantic chandelier forged from alchemy and eternal fire demon patterns slowly rotated, with blue flames blazing brightly, yet without any hint of heat.

This everlasting flame, sealed and refined by the Empire's exclusive alchemist using celestial fire, has been burning for three hundred seventy-two years, never extinguishing, symbolizing the unyielding will of the Empire.

The four walls embedded with twelve massive antique emblems, each from the twelve original old cities of the Empire.

From the shattered dragon shield of Dragon Breath City to the crescent spear of Ghost Breeze Ridge, each observed this sanctuary of power solemnly and silently, as if they were the petrified incarnations of millennial imperial authority.

The royal throne stood high above the top steps, as a Divine Being gazes upon the world.

Emperor Ernst August sat on the throne, the black and gold dragon-patterned robe cascading down the steps like a giant dragon curled up.

The eternal fire on the dome failed to illuminate his face, the shadow of the high position enveloping like a curtain, allowing only a glimpse of a cold silhouette, but never his expression.

Beside him stood only one person, Chief Steward Lin Ze, wearing a black silk-patterned magic robe.

A crescent-shaped long table surrounded the imperial steps in a semicircle.

More than twenty dignitaries wearing official robes and family emblems sat in order.

There were grand dukes, princes, privy councilors, legion commanders, finance controllers, representatives of the Eight Great Clans, representatives of new nobility...

The seating was arranged based on titles, military achievements, bloodlines, and actual power.

Every one of them held high positions and authority, but at this moment, they were silent as cicadas in winter.

They spoke in low voices, perusing reports, some coughed, others feigned composure, but every now and then, all eyes subconsciously glanced towards the throne.

As if a sleeping giant dragon sat there, whose opening eyes could determine the fate of each of them.

This was the Empire's highest council, the Dragon Throne Meeting.

And the true heart of this millennia-old Empire, with every beat, it dictated the joys and sorrows of hundreds of thousands of lives.

Eleanor wore a family shawl with red base and moon patterns, expressionless, but her heartbeat was far from calm as it appeared.

Even though she had served as the Calvin Clan's representative in the Imperial Capital for over a decade, well-versed in the open and hidden struggles among the city's families, every time she stepped into this "Imperial Hall," her nerves would quietly tighten.

This was not merely a meeting hall, but a materialization of the Empire's will.

A faint scent lingered in the air, known as the "Dragon Blood Fragrance."

This ceremonial incense, said to mix with the essence blood of true dragon descendants, was used exclusively in imperial settings, extremely subtle, but penetrated the marrow, oppressively making one involuntarily clench their fingers.

Even more unsettling was the "sound."

Within the Imperial Hall, whether footsteps, speech, or the rustling of papers, all were suppressed into a peculiar low frequency by the arranged echo arrays, as if being in a deep well.

Even the tiniest sound became piercingly loud and unavoidable in this well.

And whenever the Emperor moved slightly, the base of the obsidian throne would emit a humming rhythm.

Not vibrating the eardrums, but the soul.

In that instant, Eleanor even felt that her heartbeat skipped half a beat, a slight chill spreading on her back.

She quietly adjusted her breathing, restraining her tension, having already read Duke Calvin's letter.

This time she needed to win for Louis the "Empire-recognized actual power status in the Northern Territory."

But it must be done with utmost caution, not allowing anyone to perceive that it was the Calvin Clan's arrangement.

This was an ultimate test of social skills in the Empire's highest council.

Eleanor had already met with a few old friends in advance, all representatives of families within the Empire that had alliances or debts with the Calvin Clan, briefly exchanging stances and terms before the meeting.

Whether they could indeed voice support for her proposal in the meeting remained uncertain.

Eleanor's fingertips silently tightened, her hands clasped more firmly beneath the shawl.

Pressure surrounded her like seawater.

This concerned not only Louis's future but also the pivotal moment for her family to potentially take root again in the Northern Territory.

She slightly raised her head, gazing at the throne seemingly capable of devouring all sound, swallowing a mouthful of saliva.

The atmosphere in the hall was frost-covered.

Though the Imperial Hall was not short of illustrious dignitaries.

Each person seated at the table was a figure capable of shaking a province or a county, yet no one dared to speak rashly at this moment.

Everyone's breathing was suppressed to the minimum, even coughing was intentionally suppressed, as if fearing to disturb the dead silence in front of the throne.

In fact, even before the meeting was formally convened, a few councilors of noble birth had protested vocally.

Their children, as members of the Imperial Dragon Blood Legion, had fallen in the Northern Territory during the "Doomsday Nest" battle.

Included were individuals talented and of illustrious bloodline.

They were excellent members of their families, some even expected to become the next generation's patriarchs.

Yet they fell on the twilight front of the Insect Tide, their bodies lost.

Some grew angry, others resentful.

They attempted to bring these emotions into the meeting, to issue "gentle inquiries" to the throne.

Why such hasty deployment? Why was the battle line so isolated? Why was the Empire's support so belated?

However, those voices were coldly muted during the preliminary briefing prior to the meeting by Steward Lin Ze's statement "The Empire will provide full compensation," leaving no echo.

No one continued to ask further.

Those seated at the table understood well.

Certain answers the Emperor might already have prepared, merely waiting for someone to speak them aloud.

The time had come.