

Winter 361

Chapter 361: In the Depths of Winter (Part 3)

He didn't know what those stoves were burning, only that they had saved his and his brother's lives.

And that day, a "angel" he would never forget in his life came to the ward, along with a true "sun."

The wind and snow were kept outside, with only the subtle crackle of the stove heard indoors.

The moment the door opened, it was as if light and warmth flooded in simultaneously.

Leading the way was a girl in a white cloak, holding bundles of thick blankets in her arms, her blue hair flowing like a river under night sky.

Her gaze was gentle, yet like the only lit lantern on a snowy night.

She was Miss Emily.

Beside her, a young man in a black cloak stepped into the ward.

He didn't speak, simply nodded slightly to indicate the soldiers behind him to bring in a big box of medicine and new fire-backed stoves.

This was the Red Tide Lord, Louis.

The two nobles, shoulder to shoulder, walked into the mildew and blood-scented ward without any hesitation or disdain.

They appeared not in dreams, nor did they stand atop towers overlooking their fate, but personally walked into their despair.

Emily squatted down, passing by each sickbed, personally covering the children with blankets.

She softly asked, "Are you cold?" "Hold on a little longer, you'll be better soon."

Each word was not loud, yet like a flame that could pierce wind and snow, tender and real.

And Louis stood among the sickbeds, neither looking down with superiority but rolled up his sleeves, personally unscrewed medicine bottles, and checked the stove temperatures, bit by bit confirming each corner's standard.

His expression remained serene, yet not the aloofness and frost of nobility's view.

When he reached a little girl trembling with high fever, seeing the instinctive fear in her eyes, he just slightly bent, softly saying, "Don't be afraid, I'm here."

His tone was gentle, voice not high, yet made the little girl unconsciously extend her small hand, tightly holding his fingertip.

He didn't pull back, just squatted down alongside her, accompanying her for a moment.

When it was Noon's turn, Emily squatted down, covering him with a blanket, which was new, warm with the heat of scalding and the scent of herbs.

Someone whispered near his ear, "She's Miss Emily, the mistress of Red Tide Territory."

In an instant, he remembered his mother's appearance, and his brother's hand clinging to his sleeve during a fever...

But now, someone had taken hold of him.

Not a god, not a legend, but a sister squatting down, personally delivering medicine and blankets with a smile.

She had no wings, yet was more dazzling than any image in the snow night.

Emily patted his hand, smiling, said: "Hold on till spring, and everything will get better."

Noon opened his mouth but couldn't utter a word, only tightly holding on to the blanket's corner, as if it were not a piece of cloth but a light that could lift him from darkness.

Choking, his gaze swept to Emily, then to Louis standing not far beside her.

At this moment, he finally understood: she was the Holy Maiden of a winter night; he was the sun igniting this darkness.

They truly regarded him as human, and valued his weed-like life as one worth saving.

In this moment, he etched these two faces deeply into his heart.

That night, in his dream, Noon saw himself wearing a Red Tide cloak, holding his brother's hand, walking in the snowy night.

In his dream, he said, "We will survive. When I grow up, I want to become a Red Tide knight."

He wasn't nobility, nor did he have lineage or much intelligence.

But on this winter's night, he received dignity and hope truly belonging to a human.

Not just Noon, in this frozen winter, the names of the two rulers of Red Tide Territory had become more than just names, but hope itself.

There were refugees kneeling in the snow praying, softly murmuring, "Sun of the Red Tide, grant us a night's warm wind."

This is how people referred to Louis Calvin—the Sun of the Northern Territory.

Not a king, not a god, but a sun, unextinguished in the dark, one that could burn in the ice and snow.

And for Emily, the most widely spread phrase was: "She is the Holy Maiden who sheds tears on snowy nights, the second mother to the children."

Women secretly wove white cloaks for her, saying they were for the Holy Maiden in the snow.

Children drew her likeness on the shelter walls: a woman tenderly bending, holding blankets, with a halo of light behind her.

Stories were told by the stove to children: "A beautiful Holy Maiden walked in the snow, unafraid of dirt, cold, or disease. She brought medicine and the scent of springtime."

Elders said, "They are the Saviors of the Northern Territory."

Yet not all Northern Territory people were so fortunate.

Not everyone had a lord named Louis Calvin, nor did all towns like Red Tide Territory have warm geothermal, and inexhaustible fire-backed turtles...

Outside Red Tide was true hell.

Food had completely run out. Many minor nobles began slaughtering the sick and prisoners; it's said some dried "human jerky" in basements.

In the streets and alleys, crowds huddling around burning bodies for warmth silently gnawed on bones, afraid of waking the noble guards.

The heating system collapsed, everything was thrown into the fire, even elders self-immolated, just to provide family with a night's light.

Medical care? That was now an unfamiliar term.

Epidemics spiraled out of control, no medicine, no doctors, unburied corpses piled up in alleys, well mouths, in front of churches, stinking to high heaven.

Yet some refugees deliberately approached corpse piles for warmth.

Nobles and armies were no longer protectors, but became food plunderers.

Relief grain from the Governor's Mansion was withheld; inside castle high walls sparkled, but outside was like a ghostly ice domain.

Most terrifying was human nature's collapse.

Many nobles simply sealed gates, abandoning the people, even driving the entire city's residents south, leaving only an empty city and snow behind.

Some took the last batch of grain, deserted in the night, the people woke to see footprints in the snow, not even getting to hear a shout.

Most despairing were the messages from those "extreme regions."

A noble personally led a team to massacre refugees, just to save firewood and medicine.

In one city, people had begun to devour each other; what burned in the firepit wasn't wood, but family banners embossed with gold patterns.

This was the real portrayal for most Northern Territories this winter.

The freezing dead rate reached forty percent, uprisings spread, plagues raged, order collapsed.

In contrast, the Red Tide Territory rose like a lone flame in the snowfields, not very bright yet the only flame unextinguished.

The gates of Red Tide never closed, its dining rooms never stopped burning, and its medical tents never ceased operating.

Even in those coldest, stormiest few days of winter nights, smoke still rose from "Warm Soup Station" in the sky.

Night-patrolling knights wrapped in red cloaks passed by refugee camps, and in the distance atop the tower, the red banner with the golden sun fluttered still.

But no matter what, as time slowly passed, this cold and long winter finally ended.

Snow started to melt, permafrost cracking, and buds stirred on withered branches.

The initial sunlight reached the Northern Territory silently, with no one cheering, only watching quietly, watching for a long, long time.

Someone knelt in the snow, lightly placing their head to the ground, as if bidding farewell to the deceased, or perhaps welcoming some long-lost hope.

In this most desperate year for the Northern Territory, they once believed spring would never return.

But it still came.

Chapter 362: Astha August

Astha August sat alone in the study, tightly gripping the freshly delivered imperial decree.

The candlelight reflected off the parchment, making the Empire's golden crest appear dazzling.

Northern Territory establishment, just a few words.

No instructions, no expectations, just a cold third-person imperative tone.

He stared at the candle flame, yet within his heart surged an indescribable emotion.

Unease.

And... a sense of hidden opportunity.

"Finally remembered me?" he murmured to himself, with a hint of self-deprecating sarcasm.

For years, he had almost convinced himself he would quietly, silently age within these courts.

As a prince without achievements, without real power, without a story.

He had long been locked away in the Empire's blind spot of power, as if his name on the genealogical page was merely to make up the numbers.

It wasn't that no one had warned him.

Many had kindly advised him: "You're not suited for the struggle."

He couldn't argue otherwise, nor could he say he was "willing to settle."

He always felt something weighing down on his heart.

It wasn't ambition; it was a dissatisfaction... a dissatisfaction with being categorized as "useless," a dissatisfaction with being deprived of even one chance to try.

But now, his father suddenly extended a hand, pushing him to this already shattered Northern Territory.

"What is this? A test? An exile? Or... a gamble?" Astha didn't believe it was out of any appreciation or affection.

He understood his father, a man who never spoke much, didn't allow pampering, didn't offer opportunities.

He had never heard his father say, "I have faith in you," nor had he received any attention beyond a written mandate.

The Emperor of this Empire excelled in making people fight tooth and nail on their own, treating not only his subjects this way but his own sons.

"Sending me to the Northern Territory... is it giving me power or just watching how I die?"

He looked at the unfolded map; it was the Northern Territory.

A land scorched by insect plagues, a wasteland interwoven with epidemics and cold disasters, deserted by nobility, overrun by mobs — a "land of death."

"But if... I can truly survive, truly sustain a fiefdom, then maybe, I won't just be a transparent prince anymore."

He spoke softly to himself, his tone unwavering, yet like a sharp sword starting to clash within his chest.

But when he recalled how the imperial command was issued, he couldn't help but feel humiliated.

His father did not meet him, did not summon, did not explain anything.

He just had Lin Ze, the head of internal affairs, calmly and efficiently notify him about the personnel, resources, and departure time involved.

After speaking, he left, as if announcing a routine task.

"He doesn't even want to spare me a glance..."

At this moment, Astha couldn't help feeling disappointed, couldn't help feeling perhaps he was merely a "discarded piece" thrown out to test the waters.

He understood the current situation of the Northern Territory, also knowing why none of his brothers competed for it.

He understood he was chosen because he was too "harmless," too "insignificant."

The Empire map spread out before him, with the corners creased under his grip.

His fingers stopped on the Northern Province on the Empire map, his gaze falling on the imperial decree, short as it was.

"Northern Territory establishment, proceed independently, arrangements made."

Terse, indifferent, as if ordering a piece of furniture to be placed rather than pushing a prince into the eye of the storm.

He stared at the line of words for a long time, ultimately unable to discern even a hint of his father's expectations from them.

He spoke softly to the guard: "Has Sefer not arrived yet?"

Just as the words left his mouth, the door was gently pushed open, and an elderly man with silver hair entered, wrapped in snow and wind.

His figure was upright, his gaze sharp, despite his advancing years, his demeanor remained brisk with the unique severity of a soldier.

Astha rose to greet him: "Teacher."

This old man was Sefer, once the Deputy Corps Commander of the Imperial Sixth Legion.

The only elder who still addressed Astha as "Your Highness" when everyone else had long forgotten the name Astha.

"I've heard," Sefer removed his cloak, hung it by the hearth, glanced at the map and decree on the table, his expression complex, "Finally, what must come has come."

"Does he want me dead?" Astha asked directly, his tone somber.

"Perhaps." Sefer did not shy away, "Maybe he just casually threw you out to test the waters, whether you die or not, he doesn't care."

Astha lowered his gaze, silent for a moment: "What should I do then?"

Sefer did not answer but instead sat down, took out an old, neatly folded map from his bosom, and spread it on the table.

"What do you see the Northern Territory as now?"

"A ruin, chaos after the plague, cold disaster, insect disaster," Astha said blandly, "a place no one wants to go."

"Wrong," Sefer pointed at the map, "it's opportunity."

Astha raised his head.

"The old nobility of the Northern Territory either died in the insect plague or fled; those remaining are either severely damaged or teetering on the edge," Sefer analyzed calmly, "You think the Emperor entrusted the Northern Territory to you out of trust? No, it's because there's no one left there. He doesn't expect you to perform any miracles, it's just a casual move in clearing the chessboard."

Astha remained silent.

His pride wanted to refute these words, but he couldn't, for they might just be true.

"But if you can establish a foothold in the Northern Territory, then it's your land." Sefer's tone shifted to steady.

"In the current Empire situation, whoever can secure a territory has a voice. Even if you've always gone unnoticed, as long as you wield real power, no one can ignore you anymore."

Astha's fingers resting by his knee tightened slightly.

"You are not without ambition," Sefer looked at him, speaking slowly, "You are just too afraid of not being good enough, afraid of making mistakes, afraid of failure."

This struck him deeply.

He suddenly raised his head, a wounded rage appearing on his face: "I just have no one to teach me how to do it!"

"Teaching you now," Sefer did not falter, "The Northern Territory is already in such chaos, it is the perfect time for you to practice soldiers, administration, and courage."

"Will they respect me? A prince with no backing, no military achievements?" Astha sneered.

"They won't look at you, but they will see if you have fire behind you, if you can distribute food," Sefer tapped the table with his cane, "If you can save the populace, soothe the refugees, fend off chaos, when your banner rises, there will be those who rally to you."

"...Banner." Astha softly murmured, suddenly remembering the magnificent emblem banners of his brothers.

He never had his own banner.

"Precisely." Sefer nodded, "You've been out of the spotlight for years; no one in court takes you seriously. At this time, being sent to the Northern Territory seems like being thrown into a mess to survive or perish. But..."

He abruptly changed his tone, his gaze piercing: "The Northern Territory is the most real, most brutal chessboard of the Empire right now, and you are the player with the most opportunities."

Astha frowned slightly.

"Duke Edmund is still alive, but old and injured. The Northern Lords under him are mostly dead, and the rest are either still recovering from grave wounds or with shattered territories. And you, even with just a bit of imperial mandate, a bit of force, might become the key to breaking this impasse."

Sefer paused, casually picking up a charcoal pencil and circling a name on the map.

"However, there is one person... you cannot ignore."

Astha looked down; there were some words: Louis Calvin.

"The eighth son of the Calvin Family, newly appointed noble, yet in a little over a year, has risen to Viscount through battle merits, and is one of the few credited for the recent Northern disaster. If it weren't for his surname Calvin, he'd already be a Count.

Moreover, he's Duke Edmund's son-in-law, supported by Duke Calvin behind him."

"How capable is he?" Astha asked.

"Young, but formidable. You can cooperate with him, learn from him, but never underestimate him." Sefer tossed the charcoal pencil, his tone carrying a complex reminder, "He's the type who can carve a bloody path through wastelands. You need to guide him well, but also be wary of him."

Astha remained silent for a long time, eventually saying softly: "I understand."

Chapter 363: Louis's Schemes

The snow finally stopped.

Louis stood atop Red Tide Castle, gazing far into the snow-clad mountains and ruins.

A sliver of early spring sunlight barely penetrated the clouds, illuminating the rooftops and fields that had not yet fallen during the harsh winter.

The temperature was slowly rising, with tiny cracks appearing on the frozen river, and the steam vents were more vigorous than a few days ago.

But this did not mean that spring had arrived in the Northern Territory.

Although the recent snow was lighter, the number of refugees outside the Red Tide Territory continued to grow.

They appeared in groups, wrapped in tattered blankets, fingers cracked and bound with twine, some carrying the sick, others dragging corpses, and more women clutching babies, kneeling by the main road to Red Tide. Their eyes long devoid of tears, only numbness and the instinct to survive remained.

"Please... we don't ask to live, just let the children in..."

"My husband has already frozen to death... if we don't enter the city soon, not even bones will be found..."

Louis stood on the city wall, watched them silently for a while, and then turned to give orders:

"Open the eastern defense zone and set up temporary refugee shelters. However, all incoming refugees must pass through two stages of disinfection quarantine, and no already-dead bodies can come in.

Anyone whose body is not completely deteriorated and can still stand will be assigned to labor groups, where the disaster recovery team will define temporary tent zones, organized by family.

Severely ill individuals will be transferred to make-shift medical camps, and doctors there will do their best, but nothing is forced.

Whether they survive depends on their own will, but at the very least, they'll have a bowl of hot porridge here."

Thus, rows of tents were erected on the open grounds outside Red Tide City, hastily built from waste wood, animal hides, and fuel cloth to shield the refugees from the night chill.

Every morning, convoys delivered cooked bitter frost potato soup and Snow Bone Wheat dumplings, distributed per head, one portion per person, with precise order.

Not warm enough, nor secure enough.

But this is the Northern Territory.

Elsewhere, they would have died long ago.

In the Red Tide Territory, they at least still have the ability to live.

The scout intel from the north told an even more silent tale, several remote small territories had completely disappeared.

Not swallowed by pestilence, nor consumed by war, but simply lost contact.

He looked down at the latest statistics in his hand, the Red Tide Territory had lost only 3,261 people this winter.

This may seem like a lot of deaths, but it was the best result Louis could achieve, the most outstanding answer in the entire Northern Territory.

And those places that had been in contact with Louis in the fall, now had no response at all.

They had just survived the pest plague, escaping the monsters' blades thanks to mountains or rivers, but couldn't withstand this winter.

Perhaps the nobility had abandoned the people and fled, or maybe they didn't manage to escape in time and had no chance to call for help.

Louis said nothing, he simply picked up a pen quietly and drew a thin line on the map, circling those towns that had gone silent into the shadow of death.

Then he turned and said, "No festivities this year, as supplies are tight and food must be reserved for an emergency quota for another quarter."

Bradley nodded and noted it down.

"However, something has to be done," he paused, his eyes remained clear, "Prepare a distribution ceremony, keep it simple in the square. Distribute an extra portion of 'spring ration' to everyone. New residents and old residents are treated equally."

That morning, the first open smiles of the winter appeared on Red Tide's square.

Carriages rolled into the square, soldiers neatly stacked sacks of food: potatoes, rye, salted meat, smoked fish, and some mixed, dried, and durable stew packs.

This had become the current food limit for the Red Tide Territory.

Standing on the platform, Louis scanned the square.

He wasn't dressed formally, nor did he give a long speech, just a few brief words: "This is your proof of getting through the winter. May we keep on living through every winter to come."

The applause first started sparsely, like tiny flakes falling on stone pavements, but soon grew into a roaring tide, echoing across the square like spring thunder in the valleys.

New residents were deeply touched, bowing their heads in thanks, many with reddened eyes as tears fell when they received their symbolic portion of spring grain.

For those who narrowly escaped death, this one serving of spring grain was not just sustenance, but a belief in survival.

As for the city's native residents who had started with Louis in the ruins two years ago, they voiced no complaints.

"We were just the same before, even a hot soup or a blanket was borne out by Lord Louis."

"You're new, you don't understand. The Lord even buried our dead family and arranged night watch."

"The great Lord always thinks of letting everyone have a bite to eat."

After this ceremony, Red Tide quickly returned to its usual rhythm.

There were no celebratory banquets, no fireworks, no balls.

By the time Louis returned to his study, it was pitch dark outside, and the cold wind had not completely ceased.

He took off his snow-laden cloak, hung it by the stove, yet didn't immediately sit down to rest.

In truth, the pressure was just beginning, not only with the plans for spring.

According to intelligence, the Sixth Prince, Astha August, who had been marginalized by the Empire for a long time, had arrived in the Northern Territory.

And the post-disaster reconstruction Governor's meeting in the Northern Territory would also be held in a month.

Time was simply too short.

He walked to the desk and spread out his intelligence notebook, written in Chinese characters, alongside the map.

These were records of resource distribution and power shifts across various territories over the years, compiled through the Daily Intelligence System.

In the past, his territory was too small to qualify for participation in the struggle for these lands.

But now the situation has changed.

The majority of Northern Territory nobility have been heavily damaged, some lords have been completely destroyed, and large tracts of land have become vacant.

With the dominion and survival miracle he demonstrated during this disaster, Red Tide Territory is bound to be rewarded with more.

More precisely, large amounts of wasted land needing reclamation will be allocated to him.

He sipped the cold tea, his eyebrows and eyes calm, yet within him was a cool delight.

This is an opportunity arising from misfortune.

The map was spread out before him, covered with circles, dots, dense notes overlaying tactical symbols and red-blue markings.

He held a silver pen in hand, gently sketching along the mountain ranges and valleys on the map.

First target: Southeast low-lying valley.

He circled the area with three thick lines.

"There's also some geothermal, suitable for greenhouse expansion, refugee settlement, and food storage as well."

He wrote three words on the side: Red Tide Grain Store.

As long as he controls this valley area, combined with his greenhouse planting method, along with the existing grain fields of Red Tide's domain.

Within the next two years, not only can he achieve food self-sufficiency, but perhaps even export, and by then the entire Northern Territory will depend on our rations to survive the winter.

Second target: Northern abandoned mineral veins.

He marked several deep brown mountain ranges on the Northern Territory map, lines winding like yet-unawakened permafrost veins.

The mineral band is scattered among the northern mountains, with complex terrain and high mining difficulty.

Generations of nobility have attempted to exploit it, but due to unstable rock layers and unknown resources, have abandoned it, leaving behind mountain-full abandoned mining tunnels, now recorded in Empire records as a "mining failure area."

But Louis is different; he has a cheat— the Daily Intelligence System.

The intelligence informs him, the mineral band isn't exhausted in mining but hasn't truly begun.

Flare oil, chi pulse stones, and potentially deep-layer magic marrow veins all lie hidden beneath the ice.

By securing and stabilizing the land, and gradually exploring, it will eventually become the most important resource backing of Red Tide Territory.

The Empire's development of magic energy has always been slow and conservative, truly led by the Jade Federation.

He has always wanted to use memories from his past life to advance magic energy technology, as future military equipment and infrastructure for Red Tide, stepping up technological evolution.

But without the resources before, a clever housewife cannot cook without rice.

And now he has it.

Even if Red Tide cannot fully utilize it in the short term, just serving as an export base for magic energy raw materials could lead to wealth.

Third target: Frost Howl Fjord.

He marked a hypothetical sea route along the ice-bound coastline of white and blue, and marked several pirate activity points around it.

"A port brings trade, trade gathers wealth."

He lightly tapped the harbor with sharp eyes: "Even if operational for only a few months a year, if it yields spices, salt, wine, and intelligence from the South, I can change the strategic rhythm for a whole year."

"As for those pirates..." he smiled faintly, not writing any more but merely tapping the edge of the coast.

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As time passed, the map became increasingly filled with dense annotations, red lines like veins, the silver pen lying quietly against the table edge.

Louis leaned back against the chair, fingers lightly tapping the tabletop, eyes clear and calm.

"The issue isn't whether these lands can be claimed, but how to claim them quickly, steadily, and without detection."

The true hunter never makes a sound before they bite down on their prey.

He thought about how to propose suggestions under the guise of "assisting reconstruction," use the most reasonable excuses to apply for the land, quietly incorporating key places into his domain.

When others notice, he will have already quietly taken root.

He knew he could not be too strong, as it is hard work and high prowess can invoke fear and bind restraint.

Yet he can't be too weak either; too weak means no bargaining chips, inciting other nobles' envy.

So he must be perfectly strong."

In the upcoming Northern Territory meeting, he will disguise this "expansion plan" as selfless contribution to post-disaster recovery.

And tonight, he has already, in his heart, quietly sketched out the development for the next ten years.

The red pens draw out not just border lines, but a hidden line to true strength.

When the snow melts and the seeds are sown, he will have his granary, mines, ports, and sources of troops.

He will make everyone think he is merely "striving to survive."

Until one day, they realize that the once weak Louis has become a sun shining upon the Northern Territory.

Chapter 364: Arrival

A few days before the first meeting of the Northern Reconstruction Directorate began, a group of heavy-hoofed riders arrived in Frost Halberd City.

The banners of the Red Tide Territory fluttered fiercely in the snowy winds.

The hoofbeats of over fifty knights broke the silence, like a torrent forged from fire.

Their leader was the current Viscount Red Tide, Louis Calvin.

At this time, the winter snow had just receded, yet decay was still present.

The fields and defenses outside Frost Halberd City still bore marks of the insect infestation.

The remnants of Nest carcasses, devoured bones, overturned wooden sheds, and charred gullies... all filled the air with a nauseating stench.

"It should have been cleaned once, but still..." A knight traveling with them covered his mouth and nose, his face pale.

"The snow melted, and the smell is coming up." Louis spurred his horse forward, his expression calm.

He had stayed in Frost Halberd City during the insect disaster before winter, so the foul stench, bones, and decay before him did not affect him at all.

But Emily beside him was different, her eyes held undisguised shock and sadness.

This was where she grew up, the home with beautiful scenery in her memory.

And now, those familiar roads were covered with countless insect corpses, and even the city walls still bore frozen bloodstains, all changed beyond recognition in just one year.

"...Why did it become like this?" she murmured softly, her voice trembling.

Louis glanced at her without saying much, simply rode closer and helped pull her cloak tighter.

Emily lowered her head, held back her emotions, nodded lightly, and followed Louis into the city.

The city's residents had been evacuated and resettled, the streets mostly patrolled by soldiers and temporary repair teams.

Though it was desolate, compared to a city that had just experienced war and winter, it was already a miracle.

After settling their group upon entering the city, they directly headed to the Governor's Mansion following the officials.

That grand and solemn building was now covered with dust, the cracks on its outer walls unrepaired, yet it remained the power center of Frost Halberd City and the Northern Territory.

Knowing his daughter and son-in-law were coming, Duke Edmund personally came out to greet them.

The moment he saw his daughter, his originally dignified and steady face softened significantly, even the deep scar no longer seemed so harsh.

"Emily." Edmund's voice was low, but with a restrained tone of reunion after a long time.

"Father." Emily quickly moved forward, throwing herself into his embrace.

Edmund sighed lightly, gently brushing over her hair, a rare hint of tenderness and fatigue in his eyes.

"Go, see your mother and brother. They've been waiting for you."

Emily nodded in agreement, bid farewell to Louis, and quickly walked through the familiar corridors to the side hall's inner room.

As soon as she opened the door, a gentle baby's cry greeted her.

She saw Alina sitting by the fireplace, holding a newborn baby in her arms, a peaceful smile on her face.

"Emily." Alina beckoned with a smile.

"Mother!" Emily rushed over, cautiously sat down, looking at the wrinkled little face, her eyes instantly brightened.

"Is this my brother?"

"Yes, your little brother." Alina gently handed the baby over to her.

Emily took him carefully, her gaze as tender as if it could drip with water.

"Hello, little one, it's our first meeting, I'm your sister." She whispered to the baby, holding her brother's soft little fingers, her smile full of joy.

This scene was as warm as a painting.

Alina watched her, suddenly smiling tenderly, her tone gentle, "From now on, you'll have to take more care of him."

Emily was startled, looked at Alina.

The latter's gaze was gentle, but her words carried significant meaning.

It was a subtle entrustment, and also a mother's hope.

Emily said nothing, only nodded gently, holding her brother a little tighter.

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While Emily was playing with the child, another conversation was taking place.

The fire crackled, casting the shadows of an old and a young man.

Duke Edmund half-leaned in a high-backed chair, his cloak still on, looking slightly weary.

His beard was disheveled, and his eyes carried more heaviness.

The once fearsome scar now lacked its former sharpness, leaving only an old wound.

Louis looked at him, feeling a slight heaviness in his heart, it seemed the Duke's injuries were severe.

This disaster had aged this Northern Guardian by at least ten years.

"...The current situation in the Northern Territory is more vulnerable than ever." Edmund said softly, his gaze falling outside the window, "This winter... I don't dare to send people to investigate the death toll in detail, for fear of scaring myself."

Louis was silent for a moment, then said softly, "You've done very well."

The old Duke shook his head, sighed, "I'm alive just to hold up some semblance of order."

His tone carried a rare fragility and helplessness.

Louis took the opportunity to steer the topic to himself, "I heard... the report on the merits after the disaster has already been submitted to the Imperial Capital?"

Edmund glanced at him, nodded, "I wrote it myself, intending to recommend you for a Count title, the merit certainly suffices."

He paused, sneered, "But unfortunately the Emperor personally denied it. Didn't give much reason."

"Because I'm from the Eight Great Clans." Louis said calmly, as if he had expected it.

"So you understand." Edmund sighed, "You come from the Calvin family, plus you're my son-in-law, your status is too sensitive. Wanting to rise another step is not easy..."

He then shifted the topic, "But rest assured, we won't ignore your merit. Whatever I can give, I will. If the title can't be elevated, I can compensate with territory. This matter, I can make decisions on."

Chapter 365: Arrival_2

Louis' heart stirred.

He had been thinking about how to guide the conversation to "territory rewards," but was relieved when Duke Edmund brought it up himself, saving him the trouble.

He said no more, simply took out a rolled-up map from his bag, and spread it out before Edmund: "Actually, I've already prepared some drafts."

The old Duke raised an eyebrow, then burst into laughter at the sight of the map: "So you had plans all along, young man."

He picked up a pen and marked a few spots on the map: "These places are well-chosen... especially this southeastern valley, the soil is good, suitable for grain farming."

"But this area..." he pointed at the circled mining belt on the map and frowned, "the mining difficulty is too high, and there aren't many minerals. In recent years, even a few families of the nobility have thrown people in there but didn't even retrieve their bones."

Louis silently retorted in his heart: You don't have the Daily Intelligence System, how would you know what treasures lie beneath?

Yet he maintained a faint smile on his face: "I have some of my own ideas, I'll take it slowly."

"I trust your abilities." Edmund nodded, then suddenly smiled, "Consider these pieces of land yours, and in addition... on top of this, I'll grant you three times more."

Louis was taken aback: "Three times?"

Edmund found his reaction amusing: "Do you think the Northern Territory is what it used to be? Those little brats from the South can't accomplish anything. I'd rather give the land to you than to them."

These places are neglected, with too many dead nobles leaving no heirs. Now, what the Northern Territory lacks the least is unclaimed land, just take it."

He paused, his tone becoming solemn as he looked at Louis seriously: "But remember, don't let me down."

I am willing to give you these things not just because you are my son-in-law, but also because I believe you can support the future of this wasteland and find a path for the Northern Territory."

For now, be as low-key as you can. The Emperor is treating the whole Northern Territory as a chessboard, dividing it. For us to survive, it's not about stubborn resistance, but rather securing our position first."

Louis nodded, putting away the map, his eyes calm.

.....

The early spring snow was still astonishingly thick, as if winter were reluctant to depart.

Heavy gray clouds pressed against the sky, blocking the sunlight, and large expanses of ice and snow covered the roadsides, piling into dirty white snow walls.

The hooves clattered dully on the permafrost, as several heavy supply carts got stuck in the snow, only to be pushed out, inch by inch, by the soldiers' shoulders.

In the distance, the royal procession advanced slowly, the banners flapping in the cold wind, the golden royal emblem particularly striking.

Astha August sat in the main carriage, gently lifting the curtain to look at the slowly advancing procession outside.

Even if he was the most overlooked prince, at this moment, he was the face of the Empire.

Six thousand knights marched in unison like an iron stream;

The entourage comprised over twenty thousand people, including engineers, physicians, alchemists, craftsmen, civil servants...

And then there were the supply carts piled so high they almost crushed the carriages, loaded with food, building materials, spare alchemy furnaces, and cold-resistant equipment...

He even saw the Silver Dragon Knight Order, imperial elite troops, and a symbol of the Royal Family, alongside the Dragon Blood Legion.

As well as his personally nurtured Imperial Guard; they were not yet seasoned, but their loyalty made up for it.

He leaned back into the seat, exhaling a long white breath.

"Looks like... Father isn't simply sending me to my death," Astha murmured softly, a hint of relief in his tone.

He had thought this journey to the Northern Territory was a convenient exile.

After all, after decades in the court, he was used to being treated like an invisible person.

He never flaunted, competed for favor, or took sides, nor did he have the capability; he was the type of prince whose full name the Imperial Nobility didn't bother to learn.

But the current grandeur was too solemn.

He knew this wasn't about valuing him, Astha, but rather about valuing the royal face.

Even the most inconspicuous prince was not allowed by His Majesty to set foot in the Northern Territory with an undignified demeanor.

Nonetheless—even if it was just for face, he could accomplish something.

Astha gently pressed his hand on the already unfolded map of the Northern Territory inside the carriage.

"If this is a hopeless game... let's see if I can find a way out with these broken pieces."

A barely perceptible curve lifted the corner of his mouth, his gaze sharp as a fresh blossom in the snow, full of youthful vigor.

However, as the carriage rumbled forward, the sound of iron hooves on snow became heavy and slow.

The snow was no longer pristine white, stained with large patches of desiccated black-brown and decayed gray-purple.

Astha lifted a corner of the curtain, and the cold wind immediately rushed into the carriage, making his eyelashes tremble.

He looked down at the road in the distance... no, it wasn't a "road" at all but a path paved with blood and corpses.

Among the broken ruins, some villages still retained the breath of life.

The elderly curled up inside houses, gazing blankly; children clutched food wrapped in coarse cloth with fingers red from the cold.

Their eyes as they looked at the convoy were neither excited nor joyful, but a blend of instinctive awe and deep-seated numbness.

Further north, the bodies began to appear.

Piles of corpses lay buried under the snow, with limbs or frozen shoes exposed by the winds.

Some had been gnawed by beasts, incomplete, while others maintained combat postures, long frozen into sculptures.

One could even see some strange gray-white spores, growing wildly along the broken battle armor, evidently remnants of Nest contamination.

Chapter 366: Arrival_3

A strange smell wafted inside and outside the carriage, and a civil servant finally couldn't help but retch audibly.

Another carriage even tipped over in panic, spilling loosely sealed potions and fuel from its cargo.

Astha heard the horn of the personal guard ahead ordering the road to be cleared. It seemed today was the fifth stop.

He did not speak. He merely gently lowered the curtain, his eyelids drooped, his fingertips slightly clenched.

The Northern Territory was far more ruined than he imagined. This was not a land needing 'governance,' but a scorched earth left from destruction.

Astha had long known the war at the Nest was brutally fought, yet he had never anticipated it to be this severe.

This territory did not resemble a living domain but rather a desperate land forsaken by God.

The cold wind seeped through cracks into the carriage, he instinctively tugged at his cloak, yet his fingertips remained icy.

He realized his fingers were actually trembling slightly.

It wasn't from the cold, it was... fear.

A slow and sticky dread was spreading within his body.

He considered himself experienced with turbulent times, but the sight before him was far more terrifying than the open and concealed fights in the Imperial Capital...

This was not a chess game with pieces waiting for him, but a battlefield utterly destroyed.

He suddenly felt short of breath, as if a frozen rock was pressing upon his chest.

At this moment, he truly felt a strong urge to turn back.

"Perhaps, find an excuse... request the Emperor to reassess the situation? Or... claim insufficient supplies and return to the Imperial Capital to prepare for a while."

But as soon as this thought arose, Astha immediately bit his teeth hard.

"No." He hoarsely muttered two words to himself, as if suppressing that trace of weakness.

He knew that once he retreated, everything would truly be lost.

Not only the Empire's last shred of patience towards him, but also his inconspicuous fate throughout his life.

"If it were merely for me to hold the fort... a land capable of reconstruction should be given."

His thoughts abruptly stopped, he swallowed hard, forcibly suppressing the turmoil in his chest.

The movement was subtle, but that moment of tightening seemed to drag him back to reality.

Astha didn't lift the curtain again, but he knew that the tide of corpses was piled high.

The air was thick with the scent of blood and the stench of decaying corpses, making it almost impossible to breathe.

A few days later, Frost Halberd City finally appeared in the sight of the convoy.

The once tall and imposing walls now full of cracks, large collapsed sections patched with wood and temporary rocks.

The city gates were wide open, and the pillars still had the black crystal shells left by the Nest's burning, giving off a faint scent of corrosive magic energy upon approach.

Inside the city, intentionally sprayed plant fragrances were occasionally present, but couldn't mask the lingering smell of scorching and the aftermath of insect swarms, instead making the smell more peculiar.

Astha arrived at the appointed station and had yet to remove his coat when he received notice.

"His Excellency the Governor requests the Sixth Prince to immediately meet at the Governor's Mansion."

With the dust and dirt of travel yet untouched, he could only change into the Royal Family's ceremonial cloak, lightly tidy his appearance, and follow the escort to the Governor's Mansion meeting room.

Governor of the North, Duke Edmund, was seated across from the fireplace, his visage aged yet still upright, sharp eyes unchanged.

The scar crossing his left cheek appeared deeper in the firelight than in paintings, yet lacked the harshness of youth, instead bearing a touch of solemnity.

He rose to greet, taking two steps forward willingly, his tone neither fast nor slow, carrying a noble stability: "Sixth Prince, your journey has been arduous."

Astha immediately bowed in salute, his tone respectful: "Father is concerned about the Northern Territory, especially dispatched me to participate in the reconstruction. Astha, lacking in talent, is willing to offer his meager assistance and weather the tough times with everyone."

Edmund nodded slightly, his gaze as calm as a deep well: "His Majesty the Emperor has profound foresight, and the entire Northern Territory is deeply grateful. Your visit here is the hope for the people of the Northern Territory."

The two exchanged brief pleasantries, both words were appropriate, yet neither spoke of sensitive topics like real power, governance, or military authority.

Mentioning, for example, that snow fell early this year, there were too many refugees on the road, and what's been happening recently in the Imperial Capital.

Edmund even casually brought up his war experiences with the Emperor when he was young, and Astha responded with a smile, circling back with news from the Imperial Capital, both sides were courteous, but not a single key issue was spoken.

Edmund seemed quite amicable, his speech neither rushed nor slow, yet impermeable, while Astha outwardly cooperated, inwardly growing more alert.

Shortly, Astha steered the topic to the main issue: "I'm tasked with stationing in the north, if the Royal territory could be established in the southwestern corner of the Northern Territory, near a transportation hub, it would facilitate administrative tasks and expedite rescue organization."

Edmund agreed with hardly any hesitation: "I have considered this matter a long time ago, the southwestern area has relatively stable terrain, accessible transportation, a suitable selection."

He gestured for the attendant to bring the map, directly circling a region on it, "Here, reserved for you."

Astha was slightly taken aback, too quick.

He had expected several rounds of probing, negotiation, and maneuvering, but didn't anticipate the other party directly marking out a piece of land without further inquiry.

"I appreciate the Duke's consideration." He bowed his head, his voice meek, yet stealthily harboring a trace of doubt.

Edmund then casually mentioned: "Coincidentally, tomorrow the Northern Territory Reconstruction Directorate's first plenary meeting will be held in Frost Halberd. At that time, thirteen legislators and the Empire's inspector will attend, also inviting His Highness to join."

Astha was suddenly greatly shaken.

He hadn't received any meeting notification.

Ordinarily, meetings of such status would at least send invitations and agendas a few days in advance, even if only symbolically prepared.

Chapter 367: Arrival_4

But now, just after arriving at Frost Halberd City, he was unexpectedly "invited to take the stage."

"I..." He almost refused outright, but swallowed his words with clenched teeth. "I will comply with the arrangement."

At night, he returned to the carriage, not speaking a word along the way.

Returned to the temporary camp in Frost Halberd City.

Astha paced slowly in the tent, his cloak trailing on the ground.

"They knew I was coming long ago, yet no one informed me of the meeting in advance." He muttered to himself, his tone cold and heavy.

This was not just a sudden arrangement; it seemed deliberately aimed at catching him off guard.

He stood up, pacing slowly in the tent, his cloak trailing on the ground.

Were these local powers scheming against him, making him anxious and uneasy.

At this moment, the curtain was gently lifted, and an elderly man stepped into the tent—it was his mentor, Saif.

Saif got straight to the point: "Your Highness, this is an arrangement, not a mistake."

Astha furrowed his eyebrows slightly: "An arrangement?"

Saif nodded, picking up the brief from the table, flipping through it, then glancing at the map with a faint smile.

"Duke Edmund is not deliberately making things difficult for you. If he really wanted to cause trouble, he could easily delay granting land or let you linger outside the city for a few days, and the Lords would immediately know you have no real power."

"But he didn't. As soon as you arrived in Frost Halberd, he met with you without delay, exchanged pleasantries, granted land, and invited you to attend the meeting, without omitting a single step."

Astha remained silent, his gaze deepening.

Saif gently brushed over the ashes on the table, as if clearing away a layer of fog, and said, "He does not reject cooperation, but he is not a benevolent person. Edmund is an old fox, experienced in the life-and-death power plays between the court, military, and noble factions."

Of course, he wants to present you with a meeting gift. You take the stage unprepared, with no allies, he wants to see if you are a tame prince or a fox with claws."

Astha lowered his eyelashes, listening quietly.

"There's a deeper layer," Saif's tone slowed, "He is currently surrounded by representatives from three departments—finance, inspection, and military—all with their own schemes, none trusting him."

"He needs you, the Prince, this balancing thorn, to use you to keep them in check with each other."

"If you act like a docile mascot, he'll sideline you, but if you respond appropriately, with judgment and foresight, you'll be included in his next phase of the Northern Territory's plans."

Astha looked at the southwestern territory on the map allocated to him, his gaze complex, "So I... must take this stage."

Saif nodded, his tone calm yet firm, "You have no way out, Your Highness. The structure of this meeting is very clear with thirteen seats.

Eight seats belong to the Northern Lords, all nominated by Edmund, the remaining five seats are jointly appointed by the Office of Inspection, the Ministry of Finance, the Military Affairs, and the Imperial Capital's Logistics Bureau... and only the last seat is yours."

He paused, his gaze sweeping over the map spread out in front of Astha, and added softly, "Your identity as the prince does not mean you have their trust. Don't think about using this meeting to vie for power, nor rush to make a stance.

Those who came from the Imperial Capital are not your allies; they only act under royal orders, and also seek their own benefits, anyone might betray you. And the local power, Edmund, he is an old fox, but you cannot bite him yet.

So what you need to do is not to draw the sword, but to observe the game. They are all waiting for you to make a move. But the smartest thing to do is not to make a move, not to take sides, not to act impulsively, or give any handle.

Let them know you are watching, you understand, but you will not enter the game lightly.

Astha furrowed his brows slightly, pondering for a long time, finally responding in a low voice, "... I understand."

Chapter 368: Returning Fully Loaded

In the temporary Council Hall of the Frost Halberd, the fire was burning brightly, casting flickers of light and shadow on the thick stone walls.

The thirteen seats were arranged according to protocol, but the atmosphere was as still as the snowstorm outside, with undercurrents surging beneath the silence.

The Sixth Prince Astha sat placidly on the left side of the main guest seat, his eyes quietly scanning the speakers in the hall.

Placed in the center of the room, he appeared somewhat uneasy. Compared to the seasoned foxes seated there, he was noticeably young, cautiously witnessing this silent blade confrontation.

The first to speak was Heluda, seated prominently on the right row. He represented the Imperial Capital's logistics bureau, exuding the "self-evident" arrogance of the nobility in his manner of speech.

He looked around and spoke in a gentle tone, "Everyone, the current state of the Northern Territory is surely clearer to all present here than to me.

Storage is inadequate, transport strained, and the frozen roads frequently break along the routes. If reconstruction in each area is left to independently manage, resource wastage is inevitable."

Speaking, Heluda inclined slightly toward Duke Edmund, "Our logistics bureau could assist in constructing a unified warehousing and distribution system across regions, but now... Without establishing a coordinating institution, I fear efficiency cannot be guaranteed.

Thus, I suggest establishing the Northern Territory United Logistics Coordination Department, temporarily led by our bureau for the execution of primary tasks. Of course, this is solely for the imperative of overall Empire coordination, without any ulterior motive."

He spoke with great precision, avoiding directly saying "deprive dispatch rights," yet subtly shifting Duke Edmund's power core quietly away.

Edmund did not respond immediately, instead looking at Heluda for a moment, his expression as steady as ever, but a subtle shadow crossed his eyes.

"I understand Heluda's concerns. However, the Northern Territory's situation is complex; storage, transportation, and distribution are closely tied to civil affairs. Establishing such an office could result in overlapping decisions..." The Duke's words were polite yet restrained.

Before he finished speaking, a dry voice interrupted at the end, "The Emperor once said at the imperial conference, 'The Northern Territory must not tread the path of disaster again,' a statement memorable to this day."

Mei Si, the representative of the Inspectorate, calmly supplemented, "Concentrating resources and unifying supervision is the best response to His Majesty's directive. If management is decentralized, any oversight... The Inspectorate could hardly be accountable."

The phrase "hardly be accountable" now subtly transitioned to an indirect warning to Edmund.

Financial Department representative Kant Kafir also smiled lazily, "The Inspectorate is quite right. If local governments act independently, the financial ledger won't look good. To avoid wasting Imperial Gold Coins, Heluda's proposal seems efficient."

All three maintained respect, with hardly a word offensive, yet each sentence sought to strip dispatching rights from Duke Edmund.

Edmund furrowed his brow slightly.

This was not an ordinary meeting but an ambush, a political negotiation cloaked as "imperial mandate."

They seemed to say little, yet nearly communicated the sentence "Even the Emperor wishes you to cede your powers" in an impeccably roundabout manner.

Duke Edmund's brow furrowed, his voice carrying a querying undertone, "Since everyone insists on the approach of resource coordination... could we perhaps invite the Royal Family's observation group, with the Sixth Prince as the core?"

As the words fell, the atmosphere in the hall paused slightly.

Astha, seated beside the main guest seat, remained motionless, his eyes lightly lowered as though choosing his words carefully.

Suddenly, the silver cup beside him was tapped lightly twice by someone's knuckle, the sound exceedingly faint, yet precisely reaching his ear.

Saif behind him withdrew his index finger, his expression still serene but his gaze secretly warning.

This was a reminder—not to respond, not to get trapped.

Astha nodded softly, unchanged in demeanor, more humble in tone, "Father ordered me to swiftly advance exploration tasks. As for the reconstruction details of the Northern Territory... I've just arrived and require counsel from various sources, hence dare not speak presumptively."

He neither supported nor opposed, bypassing the issue with understated subtlety.

Yet this vague response brought a sinking feeling to Edmund's heart.

Was it reluctance to speak or was the Emperor never intending to divulge the truth to him?

Edmund appeared composed on the surface but internally was a storm of emotions.

Though none of the trio mentioned "imperial mandate," every sentence revolved around "Empire's will" and "centralized allocation," their tone ambiguous, yet irrefutable.

In reality, their words had flaws, but he couldn't calmly discern them now.

Over the months, the intelligence reaching him was mostly severe bad news, leaving him mentally drained, unlike his once incisive self.

"...The Emperor surely isn't letting me go." He gazed down at his calloused palm, his heart tightened.

Perhaps since his family's influence was devastatingly struck by the Nest, he was seen by His Majesty as an old relic to be discarded.

Anxiety surged like a tide, making him almost certain they intended to actually strip his authority this time.

The hall's atmosphere grew increasingly oppressive, as if even the fire had dimmed from the chilling words exchanged.

The Northern Lords presented varied expressions, some bowed their heads, some glanced sideways, but none volunteered opinions.

To the four department representatives from the Imperial Capital, they felt both intimidation and suspicion.

Even their leader, Edmund, plunged into silence, leaving them equally tongue-tied.

Astha sat on the side seat, hands folded on his knees, seemingly courteous while silently observing every word.

He didn't speak but was already stirred inside—is this the clash of supreme power?

And as the atmosphere continued to intensify, a young yet steady voice suddenly emerged, breaking the silence.

Chapter 369: A Fruitful Return (Part 2)

"What the lords have mentioned... seems to slightly deviate from His Majesty's prior decree."

The audience was startled and turned towards the voice, which belonged to the youngest real power holder in the Northern Territory—Louis Calvin.

"Since there is a need to amend the Dragon Throne's established resource allocation process, I boldly believe that this matter should first be reported to the Dragon Throne Council or be judged directly by His Majesty the Emperor, otherwise, it may be considered overstepping."

He didn't finish his words, yet it felt like a needle of ice was piercing the still water, causing the representatives of the four departments to noticeably change their expressions.

At that moment, Duke Edmund glanced at the expressions of the officials from the four departments across from him.

The representative from the Logistics Bureau, Heruda, maintained the same facial expression, yet forced a smile at the corner of his mouth.

Kant from the Ministry of Finance raised an eyebrow and said in a low voice, "No need to trouble His Majesty with minor matters..."

Mei Si from the Monitoring Institute slightly narrowed his pupils, then lowered his gaze to conceal it.

Only Gareth, the military affairs representative, revealed a faint trace of annoyance that was hard to detect.

In that brief moment, Edmund finally realized: they were staging a joint performance, and he was almost about to walk right into their trap.

Even if... this really was His Majesty's intention, what harm was there in kicking the ball back to the throne; it would only buy some time.

"Indeed." He spoke slowly, his voice tinged with a trace of sarcasm, "Such matters should ultimately be decided by His Majesty."

These words caused the atmosphere in the meeting hall to turn chilly in an instant.

The representatives from the four departments all calmed down and chose not to say any more.

Only Kant laughed dryly a couple of times, trying to smooth things over: "Since it's just a proposal, it can naturally be deliberated."

On one side of the council chamber, Astha slowly raised his head and looked at Louis's profile.

This was the first time he had truly seen this legendary Viscount of the Red Tide.

He was silent, calm, not eager to speak, yet he immediately severed the situation with a soft reminder, causing his opponents to fall into disarray without resorting to strong arguments.

This person was younger than himself, yet sitting in the meeting hall, he was the most steady.

Thus, the meeting drew to a close, with the Reconstruction Department still chaired by Edmund, while the logistics coordination proposal was shelved.

The military affairs representative took advantage of the situation to suggest strengthening front-line military logistics, expressing willingness to send additional troops to assist in holding the Northern Territory border, trying to find an alternative route to avoid being implicated.

All of this naturally owed to Louis's one sentence that pierced through the false hints from the Imperial Capital's four departments.

In fact, he had already learned a few days ago through the Daily Intelligence System about the secret alliance between several representatives from the Imperial Capital, aiming to profit together and undermine the local nobility.

Therefore, he was prepared in advance to see how they would perform.

As for Edmund, although still somewhat fearful, he also calmed down silently in his heart.

He was not unaware of the loopholes in the words of those three, but... that instant of anxiety and the "lonely minister's peril" almost led him to misjudge all the signals.

If it weren't for Louis's timely revelation, today's meeting might truly have seen him surrendering control.

Once fallen into the other party's control, retrieving it would be as hard as climbing to the sky.

Post meeting, the participants stood and left their seats.

Edmund did not leave immediately, instead waited quietly in place until that familiar young figure walked towards him.

He rarely showed a relaxed smile, patted Louis on the shoulder, and said in a low voice, "...Well done, Louis."

Louis was slightly startled, then humbly smiled, "Actually, it's nothing. If I remained silent, you would have realized sooner or later, I just spoke a bit earlier."

Edmund shook his head, looking at the not yet extinguished fireplace flames: "You think too well. Those few set a deep enough trap, and even before the meeting, they had... At that moment, I did waver somewhat."

He paused, his voice lightened: "Perhaps it's been too long since I've left the power core, and I almost believed that it was indeed the Emperor's intention. Indeed... I was a bit anxious."

After a moment of silence, Edmund seemed to realize something, and his tone returned to the usual rigor: "Today was just the start, tomorrow will be the real tug of war."

You have demonstrated enough today to let them know that the Northern Territory is not clay they can mold. With matters like resources, fiefs, military settlements, grain taxes... each one, they cannot bypass you. But for tonight, go back and rest well first."

His tone carried a rare hint of concern: "Tomorrow, I still need your help."

Louis nodded in acknowledgment and bowed: "I understand, Duke. Then I shall take my leave."

Duke Edmund nodded in agreement, allowing Louis to go back and rest.

As Louis was about to leave, a gentle greeting came from behind: "Viscount Calvin... please wait a moment."

Turning back, he saw the Sixth Prince Astha approaching steadily.

"Your Highness." Louis stopped and saluted, his tone respectful yet not servile.

Astha nodded slightly: "I heard you also graduated from the Imperial Capital's Knight Academy? Although we attended at different times, being from the same school counts for some connection."

Louis displayed a polite smile: "That's true. If I remember correctly, Your Highness enrolled a few classes before me. While I was still in the Southeast Province, I had heard of 'Lord Augustus' tactical examination scoring top marks of the year."

"That was just for the year," Astha laughed lightly, transitioning his tone seamlessly, "Having seen you today, despite your youth, you do make this senior feel somewhat humbled."

"I wouldn't dare claim so. The affairs in the Northern Territory are complex and numerous; if caution is to be commended, Your Highness's conduct today is truly admirable."

The two exchanged smiles, each taking a step back, a respectful exchange without deep words between them.

This was the standard ritual in noble circles for initially closing distance.

Astha calmly said, "If the Viscount is ever free, feel free to come to my place for a visit. Although my residence is still being organized, I can at least offer some warm tea."

Louis bowed again: "If Your Highness doesn't mind the simplicity of it, there are always a few kegs of strong liquor at the Red Tide residence ready to warm and invigorate Your Highness."

Chapter 370: A Fruitful Return (Part 3)

The two exchanged gratitude, and in the conversation, they had already developed an initial acquaintance in the Northern Territory where the frost and snow had just begun to melt, before going their separate ways.

A little further away under the corridor, Safer held a cane and looked at the back of the young viscount who was turning to leave with a gift, he squinted slightly and whispered, "This young man from the Caven Clan is truly remarkable."

.....

The three-day meeting continued; like melting frost and snow, the flow was slow but never stopped.

After the first day's rivalry, the four branches of the Imperial Capital seemed to have had a bucket of cold water poured over them; although they did not admit defeat, they realized that they could not force it.

In the following two days, their tone was noticeably more restrained, proposals became more cautious, frequently concluding with "negotiation" and "discussion".

The framework for the Reconstruction General Authority's power thus solidified, and the Northern Territory's seat of power no longer appeared as weak as it initially had.

Under the coercion and inducement from Duke Edmund, the four branches of the Imperial Capital also began to slowly split apart.

The financial representative Kant and the logistics representative Heruda gradually felt frustrated, and their words turned cautious daily.

Meanwhile, the military representative Gareth, after several discussions with Duke Edmund, began to lean towards practicality, gaining the right to station troops in the Northern Territory.

Mei Si from the Inspectorate continued to watch coldly, seemingly having everything recorded in his little notebook, but no one could discern his true stance.

Thus, the pile of parchment on the table grew taller, each written phrase outlining the fate of the Northern Territory in the coming years:

Who would oversee the reconstruction among the ruins?

Where would the first batch of grain and iron materials be transported to and from?

How would the displaced people be registered, taxed, and settled?

Would soldiers return to their camps, establish military farmlands, or borrow land for farming?

...

In this gradually stabilizing situation, Louis was like a quiet stream seeping into every crack unnoticed.

He almost never actively sought to seize power, yet he could always unfold his network of interests in unnoticeable details.

As if those decisions were always meant to be, not out of contention, but out of "reasonableness," gaining substantial benefits.

Once the three-day meeting concluded, Louis did not linger any longer.

He merely nodded and exchanged polite greetings with Astha and several local nobles before turning and leaving the Frost Halberd Council Hall.

In the howling cold wind, the Red Tide's carriage was already waiting at the street corner.

Louis boarded the carriage, shut the door, closed the curtains, and the sound of wind was instantly blocked outside.

Then he untied his scarf, leaned against the cushions, and exhaled deeply with eyes closed.

Success!

Louis's mind quickly reviewed every topic and every "suggestion" from the three days of meetings; he did not directly propose even one requirement, nor did he directly compete for any area.

Yet what finally landed in his hands exceeded his expectations by a margin.

An area of over 800,000 square kilometers was skillfully carved under the name of Red Tide as a temporary reconstruction zone, becoming his territory.

Concentrated in the North East, and according to the Daily Intelligence System, it contained vast resources.

Of course, he couldn't boast about it.

For a viscount to hold lands of marquis or even ducal scale was to be kept low-key and hidden.

He only needed to ensure genuine settlement of the population, village towns formed, and the granary operational—for it to become a fait accompli.

Additionally, 23,000 refugees were listed as permanent residents and farm workers for Red Tide, forming the lowest tier of labor and future "New Red Tide People."

Also, more than 20,000 other slaves were incorporated into support teams, scheduled to arrive gradually within a month.

They were nameless, without backgrounds, yet were indispensable flesh and blood for farming and construction.

Moreover, in that "Northern Territory Recovery Priority" program, he was in the first tier.

Refugees, craftsmen, merchants, wandering knights—as long as he provided a meal, a piece of land, a protective contract, they would become part of Red Tide.

No aristocracy could "consume" this marginal populace earlier than he could.

As for resources, he didn't return empty-handed either.

This time, what he truly brought back was a whole set of core material systems sufficient for Red Tide Territory to fully recover.

He secured the priority for grain allocation; the first batch of 2,500 tons of emergency relief grain before spring was to be directly allocated by the Imperial Capital Grain Reserves Bureau, first shipped to the Red Tide Territory warehouse.

This meant all refugee resettlement points and farmland areas would complete food coverage before spring, securing a crucial planting window.

Thirty tons of salt and cheese each, forty tons of cured meat, and a batch of herbs and basic medical supplies.

In addition, priority for five hundred sets of agricultural iron tools was granted, including hoes, plows, hammers, spades, etc.

Plus, approval for two initial smithing furnaces, three spare magic energy cores, and one hundred tons of raw ore for smelting—even if the amount wasn't large.

Yet it was enough to ignite the first spark in Red Tide's "self-made" system.

Thus, the resources in Louis's hands were sufficient to emerge from disaster and the cold winter.

Spring plowing would have oxen and iron tools, construction sites could light furnaces and forge iron, refugees no longer survived by gnawing on tree bark through winter, and simple shelters could be built before the snow melted.

Louis leaned against the seat cushions in the carriage, his heart like deep silent water.

He did not fight for a say at the negotiating table, but upon turning around, he had secured the initiative for the entire spring's sowing.

Not returning empty-handed but coming back fully loaded.

At this moment, the Northern Territory was still covered in ice and snow, with the wind singing mournfully through the trees.

But in the Red Tide Territory, those refugees had long started turning the permafrost, craftsmen were building greenhouses by the geothermal wells, furnace fires breathed in the snow, and people's hearts were ignited with hope amidst hunger and cold.

Just one more month...

When spring plowing starts, iron tools hit the ground, and kitchen smoke rises, he will no longer be a young lord, but a true founder of the new Northern Territory.

This was a gamble.

He didn't bet on the Emperor's favor, nor on the Duke's shelter.

But on what every hungry mouth and every hopeful face on this permafrost could bring him.

And now the situation had begun to quietly turn over.