

Winter 401

Chapter 401: Rise of the Star Forging Territory (Part 2)

These devices aren't particularly advanced, but the process flows smoothly, everyone knows what to do, and they also know which part of the work cannot be overlooked.

A daily output of over ten tons is ground out in this way.

Even more valuable is that this setup does not rely on imports or external assistance, as all parts, structures, and processes can be replicated and expanded locally in the Star Forging Territory.

Of course, a factory is not just a place filled with magic energy equipment and iron furnace pipelines.

To Louis, those who operate the hammer furnace, push the mine carts, and adjust the valves are the true "heart" that keeps this energy factory running.

Without people, there is no capacity. Let alone any assembly line.

So Louis immediately ordered that all new workers must undergo basic training, otherwise, they are not even allowed near the mine tunnels.

So, the training camp was set up in an old wooden shed on the north side of the factory.

There was no blackboard and no profound knowledge. What was taught was the most basic content.

How to wear goggles, what is meant by combustible block overheating, how to brake the mine cart, which color of Qi Vein Stone should not be touched.

"Take a look at this," the instructor held up a bluish-glowing stone, "When the Qi Vein Stone is hot, it shines white, not red. Red means it's about to explode! Once placed in the furnace, the whole line stops. Then it's not just you, everyone nearby suffers."

A group of newly arrived slave workers gulped and nodded quickly.

"Don't think it's a small problem, one explosion, and your life is gone," the instructor patted his chest, "This system is personally set by Lord Louis."

During breaks, the workers gathered by the furnace to munch on dry rations, some lit up tobacco sticks, smoking as they whispered, "Isn't it strange, someone actually cares about the lives of us slaves."

"Yeah," the person next to him nodded, "We've been here three days, and we've received equipment, clothes, meals, and yesterday someone even came to look at the burnt injury on the foot."

Not far away, the small house built with thick stone slabs was brightly lit.

That's the infirmary, inside were cooling stones, anti-inflammatory ointment, and several pharmacists took turns sitting on duty.

Usually, there's hot soup, and when a worker gets frostbitten, they can get a bowl.

It's not a matter of great favor, but to them, it's like rain from heaven.

No whips, no curses, no one forcing them to work non-stop.

They ate well, wore warmly, received pay for more work, and their families also lived safely in town.

To those who had drifted through chaotic times for too long, this was already an unimaginable way of life even in dreams.

So they remembered this kindness in their hearts.

Not everyone spoke words of gratitude, but instead expressed it through their actual work.

They got up earlier, moved faster, chose stones more meticulously, and maintained the furnace temperature more carefully.

Some people started to actively maintain equipment, some self-taught how to read the pressure gauge, and others cleaned and neatly put back tools on the shelf after each work break.

In this way, the three-shift rotation kept going, and the factory operated like an old clock, precise to the second.

With their rough hands, they worked with shovels and hammers, cart by cart, pushing the daily ore processing volume to nearly fifty tons, steadily refining over ten tons of standard Qi Vein Stone fuel blocks.

And this reward for their effort happened to become the foundation for the rise of the Star Forging Territory.

Thus, as of now, it is only in a preliminary scale, but Louis has already drawn up sketches for the second and third-phase plant areas.

Moreover, this mining area does not only contain Qi Vein Stones; geological exploration has also found several rare resources such as Marrow Oil, Demon Marrow Ore, and Fuel Ember Sinking Iron.

However, Louis is well aware that in times like this, the most taboo is to bite off more than you can chew.

Each mineral's extraction and processing technology differs, often involving an entire independent industrial chain.

He does not want to throw the resource system of the Star Forging Territory into chaos before it has even got its feet firmly on the ground.

Thus he decisively chose to focus on Qi Vein Stone alone.

Qi Vein Stone is currently the most urgently needed energy mineral, suitable for use as high-heat fuel, and can also provide energy for primary magic energy equipment, making it the most appropriate catalyst for initiating the entire territory's industrial startup

"First, do one thing the best." This is the phrase he has repeated the most recently.

Therefore, in the planning of the first stage, all resources were concentrated and invested in the extraction, transportation, screening, smelting, and compaction of Qi Vein Stone.

No splitting of lines, no trying to do both — even though the value of other mineral veins is tempting, they are all temporarily sealed and unmoved.

Once the miners became familiar with the workflow, furnace temperature control becomes gradually standardized, and the factory production lines stabilize, even starting to have a certain self-maintenance and expansion capability, he plans to gradually introduce more types of workers.

Soon, a batch of slave support dispatched by the Empire will arrive, most of whom are prisoners of war, debtors, or displaced persons.

Although they are nominally slaves, in the Star Forging Territory, they will not be exploited to death like elsewhere, but rather trained as workers to fill the continuously expanding labor gap in the mining area.

By then, he will consider gradually opening the other mineral veins and constructing corresponding refining and transportation lines for different categories of materials, truly entering a stage of industrial expansion with multiple parallel lines.

Of course, Louis does not only focus on mines and factories.

In the overall blueprint he planned personally, mining is just the pillar, while living is the foundation.

Around a radius of a few kilometers from the main mining area, a mining residential area, medical stations, canteens, school houses, and nurseries were sequentially constructed as basic infrastructure.

Not only providing workers with work, but also giving them a place to stay, food to eat, medical care when ill, and raising their children.

Even those entertainment venues often overlooked such as taverns, bathhouses, theaters, and markets were set up one after another.

The miners and workers did laborious work and got paid, but they also needed somewhere to spend and relieve stress, otherwise, problems would inevitably arise.

Thus, he encouraged outsiders with handicraft skills or commercial talents to reside, rent small plots of land or houses, and run their own businesses, also invisibly building a gradually self-circulating small economic system.

With basic faculties being perfected one by one, external population steadily flowing in, and the output of Qi Vein Stones continuously rising, an industrial territory centered around mining is steadily emerging from the Northern Territory's Frozen Tundra.

It's one of the few stable high-energy resource production strongholds in the Northern Empire.

And in Louis' further vision, it will be the first step for the future magic energy technology system, the starting point for his entire strategic industrial layout.

The construction of the Qi Vein Energy Zone has lasted for more than three months so far.

From the initial rocky wasteland to today's forest of smokestacks, tracks in operation, and factory furnaces roaring, the once-forgotten frozen tundra mining land of the Star Forging Territory has finally gotten on track.

Daily it can produce a stable twelve tons of standard fuel blocks!

Such achievements might even surpass those of some old established mining territories, as the Star Forging Territory could be considered the top mining district in the Northern Territory now.

However, not all the daily production of Qi Vein Stone fuel blocks is stockpiled.

A portion is purchased by the Calvin Commerce Association and transported along the southern trade route to territories in the southern Empire that are large consumers of magic energy, used as fuel to exchange for urgently needed materials and population.

Another portion is used as Star Forging Territory's own energy, allocated to the smelting furnace group, winter residential heating rooms, and the upcoming machine processing plant.

In this way, it relieves storage pressure while establishing an initial external trade cycle, providing the necessary funding return and energy support for the steady growth of the Star Forging Territory's industrial ecology.

This signifies that the four foundational systems in the first phase of planning, the residential area, main road traffic, smelting workshop, and basic education institutions have all been deployed and are operational.

The entire mining area has evolved from a temporary station to the embryonic form of a structurally clear and functionally clear energy town.

It is now mid-August, and Louis is finally preparing to leave temporarily.

He will return to the Red Tide Territory to rest and personally oversee the upcoming autumn harvest preparations.

But this mining land will not stop.

The next phase of construction has already commenced.

The Empire's first wave of supporting slave populations will transfer to this territory independently.

Three new factory buildings are scheduled for expansion, more alchemy technicians and grassroots management personnel will be introduced, and a more complete standardized production line gradually established.

The industry of the Star Forging Territory will fully enter the second phase of industrialization.

Chapter 402: Battle of Fury

"Why... how could it be like this..."

Batu sat numbly amidst the ruins, his eyes bloodshot, lips cracked, yet he could not make a sound.

The battle was already over.

The Red Rock Broken Axe Coalition—the force proclaimed as the most elite heavy-armored force of the Northern Barbarian Race, now only had scorched earth and broken bones left.

The blood-soaked mud across the hills had not yet dried, the battle flags were tattered and rolled in the fireworks, armor and severed limbs were buried in the charred black grass slopes.

The air was filled with the stench of burnt fur and flesh, the corpses of wolf riders lay piled chaotically, a war axe stuck in the back of a warrior's head, flies buzzing and circling around the mountain of corpses.

Last night, they still had a force five times larger than the enemy, occupied the advantageous terrain, with high-built camps, well-prepared equipment, and cavalry lined up like a steel torrent in front of the slope.

The Broken Axe Clan even hung their ancestral battle flag in the center of the camp, swearing to "fight to the last drop of blood."

Moreover, for a whole month before that, the Frost Fierce Legion had been beaten into constant retreat.

People of the Broken Axe cheered daily, "the final battle is imminent," even the clan elders prophesied that Frost Fierce would hold out for at most one more day, and then it would be the time for the Northern Clans to divide the spoils of victory.

Everyone thought this was a crushingly victorious battle.

Yet, before dawn, the inner line had collapsed.

Without warning, without the sound of fighting as an alarm, the main central army seemed to be sliced open by an invisible sharp blade, breaking all the way through.

The initial anomaly was just a slight error... first, the communication suddenly cut off, the horn blower's bronze horn issued a sharp residual sound and then abruptly stopped.

Then the outermost guards abandoned their lines, some even turned and rushed towards their own main tents, like wild wolves charging into a sheep pen, their eyes filled with red.

He saw with his own eyes some familiar Fighting Energy warriors suddenly turn their spears, stabbing at their own brothers with ruthless and resolute actions.

That brother beside him had his throat slit, fell to the ground, a thick black blood gushing from his mouth, his eyes full of confusion, incomprehension, and despair.

He even tried to shout with his last breath "Why."

But no one answered him.

More warriors rushed out of the tents, but their eyes were frighteningly empty, as if their consciousness had been stripped away.

They no longer distinguished friend from foe, some even hacked their war axes into the necks of their horses, just to make them scream.

The tents exploded in the flames, burning with the mixed smell of blood and wine, forming a blood-colored burnt aroma, choking people, making it hard to breathe.

Shouts, roars, collisions, the sound of bones breaking, all intertwined into a symphony of hell.

Batu roared orders to assemble, but no one responded.

He crossed three fire walls to barely reach the central army, and all he saw were fragments and people switching sides on the ground...

This was not a defeat, it was a mental collapse.

The entire legion seemed, at the same moment, to have something steal their loyalty and rationality from their souls.

It was not magic. Yet even more terrifying than magic.

Because what they lost was their will as human beings.

Just when the Broken Axe camp was at its most chaotic and vulnerable, in the distant white mist, the warriors of the Frost Fierce tribe finally appeared.

They did not blow horns, did not shout, not even the thunderous sound of cavalry hooves.

They advanced silently from the morning mist like a heavy iron wall. Only those dead silent eyes under their eyebrows induced fear.

And when the first rays of sunlight shone down, it became clear that their battle armor was still stained with undried blood, and their long knives in hand glimmered with a chilling light...

They charged.

No roars, no slogans, yet more unsettling than any shouting.

The rhythm of their steps seemed like a funeral procession, not for themselves, but for those chaotic, lost, and unraveled enemies before them.

The Broken Axe warriors finally came to their senses, wanting to resist, but their formation had already collapsed.

They frantically raised their shields, but could not withstand the avalanche-like dense charge.

Long spears pierced into chests, blunt instruments shattered helmets, row after row of men were knocked down, trampled over.

The camp gate, like tissue paper, was smashed down forcefully.

"Retreat! Retreat!" a deputy commander screamed, but his voice was drowned out by the sounds of weapons slashing through the air and the cracking of flesh and bones.

The Frost Fierce Legion advanced across the battlefield like a cold plague, slowly consuming the entire camp, every step taken on the pool of blood, every strike imbued with undeniable determination.

They were not fighting, they were cleansing.

Like a band of "executioners" with no mercy for their enemies.

"How could... just like this..." Batu knelt among the pile of corpses, the world before him burning and collapsing.

His battle armor was already blackened by fire, his palm full of bloody mud and the hair fragments of his comrades.

His thoughts were still tumbling, chaotic images of the battlefield and the continually collapsing orders intertwined into a mess in his mind.

At this moment, a gust of wind swept over the scorched earth. Among the flying ashes, a figure walked against the wind.

Batu suddenly looked up, Titus Frost Fierce was already standing before him.

At that moment, Batu almost thought he was hallucinating.

No companions, just him alone, yet as if condensed from the anger of the entire battlefield.

The cloak slightly flared, carrying the scent of gunpowder and the stench of charred bone in the wind.

Frost Fierce was clad in heavy armor, devoid of any family crest or color, as if a garb crafted solely for death.

And on his face, aside from those eyes, calm to the point of deathly stillness, were gray-black lines like vines spreading from the corners of his eyes to the sides of his neck, coiling like withered branches etched onto his skin.

But the way he looked at Batu was like a lead weight pressing on his chest, instinctively making him want to avert his gaze, bow his head, and submit.

Batu breathed heavily, his chest heaving violently, his eyes full of bloodshot, the anger on his face gradually being overshadowed by an indescribable fear.

Chapter 403: Battle of Wrath (Part 2)

"What kind of witchcraft did you use!" he roared, his voice hoarse like burnt cloth, "Poison? A curse? Or... what evil spirit got into our heads, tearing us apart one by one?"

He staggered forward a step, as if to pounce, but suddenly halted at the moment of approach, as if hitting some invisible deadly boundary.

"Your men... your handful of men! How could it be?! Five times the troops, triple-layered walls, ancestral banners held high, how could we lose?!"

Your men aren't warriors; they're the scum that betrayed the chieftain! How could they tear us apart?!"

His eyes twitched, and the hand pointing at Titus trembled slightly, like a final struggle before madness.

"You're not human," he murmured, as if cursing or talking to himself, "You're not human... you're some breed of... catastrophe."

Finally, he staggered back a step, almost like a madman: "This shouldn't happen... this can't happen... this isn't a strength this world should have."

The wind blew across the scorched earth, fluttering the tattered edges of the broken axe banner.

Yet Titus only sneered.

The sneer was icy like a spike penetrating from the depths of the ice, neither happy nor angry, just a kind of disdain.

"You still don't understand," his voice was raspy.

Batu wanted to argue, but it was as if something was blocking his throat, his tongue heavy as lead, the words churning at the base of his tongue but unable to come out.

Suddenly, his mind felt as though a long-sealed book had been violently flipped open, filled with memories he was unwilling to recall.

He saw Empire cavalry riding through his childhood village brandishing flaming guns, his mother's blood shed on the snow, his father forced to kneel and swallow orders.

He recalled the first night he gritted his teeth and endured humiliation, hearing the silence, schemes, and compromises disguised as "oaths" within the Red Rock Tribe.

These humiliations and resentments, which should have been deeply buried, now surged back like a tide, flooding his mind frame by frame, as if forcibly unveiled by "some power."

The corners of his eyes twitched violently, his knuckles turned white, yet he couldn't utter a single word.

And Titus just kept watching him, silently.

No raised hand, no magic fluctuations, not the slightest intimidating posture.

But standing there, he seemed to be the axle of the entire world.

Around him, not a single Frost Fierce warrior moved, yet they were as steady as statues, breathing in sync and stable.

At some point, Batu unconsciously started to follow their rhythm of breathing, his body expanding and contracting, as if being pulled by invisible strings.

He saw Titus's figure flicker unsteadily in his pupils, like a ghostly figure engulfed by flames, eventually blurring into an eerie scene.

It was a grey land entwined with vines, cold flames burning on the vines, hills collapsing, streams freezing, and countless black shadows kneeling in the distance, as if silently begging for mercy.

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The grey-blue morning mist had not yet dissipated, but smoke was already rising from the smokestacks above the smelting plant, and the aura of chi stones faintly fluctuated in the air.

Louis stood by the ironwood railing on the high ground, looking distantly at the bustling scene in the pit area.

A stream of workers in gray cloth uniforms entered one after another, with knights patrolling by the pit entrance, ensuring order was not chaotic.

"Have they gone down the shaft yet?" he asked casually.

Kael stepped forward, wearing his usual serious expression, "They just finished this morning, and the branch mines around the main mine have all started operations. According to the staged arrangement, the labor support from the Empire has also been fully integrated into the mineshaft work teams."

Louis nodded: "How many in total?"

"Five thousand seventy-three," Kael replied precisely, "Nearly seventy percent of whom have criminal records, mostly redemption soldiers, families of disgraced officials, or exiled slaves. They've been assigned to the mines in batches as per your instructions. Each group consists of ten people, led by an experienced worker."

"No trouble, I presume?"

Kael shook his head: "Few incidents, any minor conflicts have been suppressed. Surprisingly, they work harder than expected. Some even work overnight, eager to change their status by tomorrow."

Louis smiled: "Seems these criminals still have hope. What about those without records?"

"As you instructed, I've integrated them into the factory line," Kael nodded, "They're responsible for sorting, cleaning, pre-furnace mixing, cooling, and molding..."

Although they're not fast yet, they are seriously learning the rules. Perhaps it's because of your 'excellent performers can gradually leave slavery' policy."

Louis spoke calmly: "As long as they're willing to work, I don't care whether they're slaves or not.

The Red Tide Territory has already proven that as long as the system holds, these people, if willing to endure hardship and work desperately for freedom, are far better than those free people who idle away."

Kael paused, then asked softly: "You... really plan to free them all?"

"Not free, let them earn it themselves," Louis said calmly, "I give them a path, whether they take it is up to them."

With that, he patted Kael's shoulder: "I'll return to the Red Tide Territory first, it's the harvest season over there, and they can't do without me."

Kael immediately raised his head: "Lord Louis... it's just begun here, without you..."

"It's already on track," Louis interrupted him, raising his hand, "Follow my plan. Once the second batch of equipment arrives, expand by two lines and integrate the newcomers as reserve skilled workers.

Remember to report weekly, and use Gale Bird to inform me of any issues, I will surely respond."

Kael was silent for a moment, then bowed solemnly: "I... will not disappoint you."

Louis said nothing more.

He gave one last look in the direction of the mine.

In the distance, the flames at the mine entrance flickered like a heart burning underground, hundreds and thousands of figures moved like ants, yet in orderly steps.

The heavy rails hummed softly, one mining cart after another heading toward the alchemy factory, chi stone fuel piled like small hills.

Sweat, heat, and the sound of gears combined at this moment to form the true pulse of the Star Forging Territory.

Then he turned, his cloak swaying lightly in the wind.

At the end of the slope, Sif waited for him, simply dressed and holding the reins, eyes containing a hint of humor but no words of urging.

The convoy behind her had already formed up.

Several reinforced Black Iron Boxes had been loaded into the middle carriages, sealed personally by Kael.

Inside were assorted graded samples of chi stone, along with recently registered recipes and equipment parameters.

Each item was not merely stone or paper, but the most crucial "achievement list" of the Star Forging Territory over the past two months.

Alongside were nearly fifty knights, each in light armor, ready to depart.

Louis didn't say much, just glanced at the sky, then raised his hand to signal.

With the sound of a horn, the convoy turned onto the mountain path, leaving a trail of dust as the Star Forging Mine's towers and elevated structures were silhouetted in the twilight.

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The carriage gently jostled along the wide, smooth official road.

Soft curtains covered all four windows, shielding the sun, yet the rising sun's presence could still be felt outside.

Louis awoke on the soft cushion inside the carriage, staring at the ceiling adorned with golden vine patterns, the scent of fragrant wood and saffron mingling in the air.

This was no longer the modest carriage of earlier days.

With the rapid development of the Red Tide Territory, Louis no longer confined himself to the early "pretend poverty for popularity" strategy.

Nobility, in this world, is sometimes not a burden but essential armor.

This carriage was built to Empire southern "Count's Chariot" standards, with widened shock-absorbent axles, all-leather silver-covered seats, a small ceiling ventilation array, and an independent cold water cabinet.

Luxurious yet practical, it could travel muddy roads, cross snowfields, or park outside a noble hall without seeming the least bit shabby.

Beside him, Sif was nestled.

She slept soundly, half her face buried under his arm, breathing evenly.

Louis shifted his shoulder gently, not waking her, making a light gesture in the air.

[Daily Intelligence Update Completed]

Chapter 404: Frost Fierce Scouts

[Daily Intelligence Update Completed]

[1: Out of boredom, Astha Augus roams the Northern Territory, with the Red Tide Territory being one of his primary inspection targets.]

[2: Within the Red Tide Territory, a young apprentice craftsman named Hamilton possesses a rare talent for both mechanics and alchemy, and may become a grandmaster in the future.]

[3: Titus of the Frost Fierce tribe led three thousand elite soldiers to launch an offensive against the Smashed Axe and Red Rock tribes with the aid of the Burning Pain Vine Court, achieving a decisive victory despite being outnumbered and forcibly reorganizing the two barbarian armies under his command.]

[4: The vanguard and scouting forces dispatched by the Frost Fierce tribe have quietly crossed the border and are secretly encamped in a canyon area not far from the Red Tide Territory.]

Upon seeing the first entry, he didn't even lift an eyelid, his lips twitched almost imperceptibly.

There was not much surprise, nor tension.

"Let him come if he wants." Louis leaned back against the cushion, looking indifferent, "We'll run into each other sooner or later anyway.

With the current scale of the Red Tide Territory, there's nothing left to hide. Towns, roads, factories, thermal hubs... let him see what's there to see."

He paused, speaking with a tinge of mockery in his calm tone, "Of course, the truly valuable things won't be placed at the front door."

The original formula for Frostleaf Potion, the structure of the Magic Explosion Bullet, the plan for the honey Combat Qi Potion...

These were things he never intended to show anyone, let alone the Sixth Prince of the Ironblood Empire.

His fingers tapped on his knee, "However, letting him see the order and efficiency of the Red Tide isn't a bad thing either."

He then turned his gaze to the second point: a young apprentice craftsman within the Red Tide Territory...

This time, his eyes visibly focused.

"Oh?"

His brow lifted, a trace of genuine interest emerging in his eyes.

He reached into the side pocket of the seat to pull out a thick booklet, his "talent list," kept on hand for capturing such intelligence.

The book recorded names filtered from daily reports, from Agricultural Official Mike, to craftsman Valentine, to administrative knight Green... most have now become indispensable backbones across various lines of the Red Tide Territory.

"To get several industries up and running so quickly... it's all thanks to these intelligence reports." He thought to himself, flipping through a few pages and stopping to write in the most recent section:

[No. 147: Hamilton, Craftsman Apprentice, Mechanics/Alchemy Dual Potential]

He closed the book, gently tapping on the cover, "Another gem found."

Louis lingered particularly long on the third piece of intelligence.

He was originally half-leaning on the carriage seat, holding the booklet, looking relaxed and leisurely.

But upon seeing this news, his gaze immediately sharpened, and he sat up straight.

Just days ago intelligence said Titus suffered defeat after defeat, with the Frost Fierce tribe near collapse.

He thought the Frost Fierce tribe was about to withdraw from the Northern Territory power struggle, but within a night, they reversed their fortunes, swallowing two barbarian armies in the process?

The turnaround was too fierce, too sudden, too peculiar.

His brows furrowed slightly, fingers tapping on the words "Burning Pain Vine Court."

"Burning Pain Vine Court? What is this?"

He had never heard of this term, nor had any record mentioned it.

A completely unfamiliar yet game-changing "trump card" had suddenly emerged.

It reminded him of those nests that burst from underground—an unrepeatable nightmare for him.

"Another kind of ancient magic..."

His eyes turned cold, and his wariness peaked instantly. In any case, it's time to redeploy the Red Tide Territory's military system.

This so-called "Frost Fierce Alliance" probably won't take long to consolidate a new military order in the Northern Territory.

Once they unify, the Red Tide, as the most stable force in the Northern Territory, will undoubtedly become one of the battlefields.

Preparations must be made in advance.

Then he calmly scanned the fourth piece of information.

"Scouts overstepping the boundary, encamped at the edge of my territory..."

Louis squinted, pondering for several moments, then gently tapped on the window frame: "On the return route, detour near that canyon and 'invite' that group over."

He turned his gaze to Sif, who was still asleep beside him.

Her white hair draped messily over the blanket, lashes quivering slightly, her face peaceful.

Wasn't the predecessor of the Frost Fierce tribe the Cold Moon Tribe?

If those vanguards truly are remnants of the Cold Moon... Sif may still recognize them.

When the time comes, perhaps let her speak with them first.

After reading the intelligence, Louis closed the booklet with a crisp and fluid motion.

Even while traveling, he never neglected his daily cultivation.

With eyes slightly closed, he sat cross-legged in the center of the carriage, slowly circulating the fighting energy breathing technique within his body while guiding the flow of magical power through the meditation technique in his mental sphere.

The intertwining of the two, with each breath, resonated his vitality with spiritual energy, submerging him in a meditation as solid as iron.

This kind of cultivation he had persisted in for years, long integrated into his life, as natural as eating and sleeping.

Upon finishing, he opened his eyes, sharper and more restrained.

"Hmm, you've finally finished cultivating?" A familiar girl's voice echoed inside the carriage.

Sif had woken up without him realizing when and had changed her clothes, wearing a clean and light travel dress, her white hair tied into a loose braid, spirited yet lazily putting her at ease.

She approached holding a small silver tray, atop which was a delicate breakfast: crispy bread rolls, hot pies with cheese filling, and Red Tide Territory's signature jam and smoked meat.

"I specifically had them prepare it first. It would all go cold if you didn't wake soon."

Sif glanced aside, her lips curling slightly: "You always start cultivating as soon as you wake up, rare for someone to join me for breakfast."

Chapter 405: Frost Fierce Scouts (2)

Louis reached out to take the tray, smiling at her with his eyes: "Isn't it because someone got up early to prepare this for me?"

"Hmph, sweet-talking." She pouted, sitting next to him, and picked up a piece of jam bread, taking a bite and chewing it seriously.

The two ate silently, the atmosphere warm and leisurely for a moment.

"By the way," Louis suddenly spoke midway through the meal, "the Barbarian Race area has started fighting again."

Sif's hand, holding the fork, paused, her expression slightly somber.

"...Mm." She responded softly, lowering her eyes.

Louis looked at her, his expression unmoving, yet he was carefully observing every nuance of her reaction.

Two years ago, she had already told him about her identity, the last princess of the Cold Moon Tribe.

She still hated those enemies who killed her father and destroyed her clan, but even now she hadn't discovered who had made the move or which blade had taken her father's head.

At that time blood flowed like a river, and the truth had long been buried in the chaos of tribal war.

This hatred had no target, no way to exact revenge, it could only be sealed in her heart, like a blade that never left its sheath, silently cut down every day.

"...I know someone among them harmed my father," she said softly, her eyes gazing out at the misty forest beyond the carriage window, "but specifically who, I still do not know."

She paused, her voice dropping a few tones: "No one remembers the name 'Cold Moon' anymore."

Over the years, she had stepped by step assisted Louis in managing Red Tide, from a mere secretary to a de facto ruler. In state affairs, mining, defensive scheduling, she involved herself personally—those hatreds had been layer over layer buried by these trivial matters.

But it wasn't that she forgot, she just tried hard not to think about it.

"If possible..." she bowed her head, feeling a bit shy, yet still spoke frankly, "I just want to stay with you now, give you a son, and earnestly remain by your side..."

Inside the carriage, silence reigned for a moment.

Louis slightly raised an eyebrow, a trace of a sigh and pity glimmered through his gaze.

"This doesn't seem like the you from two years ago who was always gnashing her teeth."

"Do you want me to be that way? Are you a pervert?" She lightly glared at him, softly retorting.

"No." Louis reached out and stroked her hair, smiling gently, "But since they have surfaced again, sooner or later we will still have to face them."

Sif said nothing, just nodded slightly.

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This scout team numbered no more than a dozen, yet each one was cloaked in heavy fur, their eyes sharp.

Their appearance differed somewhat from typical Barbarians—more silent, more restrained.

Their beast-hide war robes were not adorned with extravagant bone ornaments, rather muted in color, better to blend into the Snow Forest.

At the very front walked a woman.

She was tall, carrying a double-edged spear, a circle of white wolf fur wrapped around her shoulder guard, and a Feather Bone Hairpin tucked by her temple.

It was a traditional ornament from the old Cold Moon Tribe, symbolizing the "undying fire beneath the cold frost."

Her face was sharply defined, her gaze like a blade's edge beneath the ice, though she did not speak, it made the rough men behind her instinctively restrain their flirtation.

Her name was Visa, the temporary leader of this small team.

They were originally from the old Cold Moon Tribe, forced to submit after Frost Fierce's grand conquest of Cold Moon, now reduced to mere remnants within the Frost Fierce Clan, barely able to be listed as official soldiers.

Visa and her team belonged to the loyalist faction of Cold Moon, sent by Titus to scout the Northern Territory, nominally as the vanguard, but in reality, just marginalized pawns.

They knew true trust had been buried with the blood in the snow the day Cold Moon fell.

But if they could establish themselves here with meritorious deeds, perhaps they might regain some initiative.

For themselves, for that shattered old banner long past.

So they journeyed southward.

The first sensation after crossing the border was desolation.

Withered grasslands, dilapidated camps, half-rebuilt villages burned after rebirth, along with the wind-scattered, uncleared white bones along the way.

The Nest catastrophe nearly plunged the entire Northern Empire into Hell.

After all, the Nest had initially established its Desperate Witch plantation base within imperial borders, and the first wave of impact crashed entirely upon Frost Halberd City.

Ironically, the clans outside the Northern Territory were barely rippled due to their distance from the Nest's center.

Thus the current situation became extremely ironic—the wildlands intact, the Northern Empire heavily damaged.

They began murmuring among themselves: if Frost Fierce truly could unify the clans and push southward, the presently broken Northern Territory might indeed be swallowed in one bite.

One scout licked his cracked lips: "When that day comes, we won't have to beg the Empire for winter grain anymore."

Visa stayed silent, but her gaze grew more resolute.

For the clan, this was a turning point, for these marginalized individuals, it might be the only upward path.

They marched on, observing all the way.

The desolate scenery numbed one's senses.

Occasionally they'd see functional nobility territories, but be it personnel or farms, facilities or roads, everything seemed to be struggling on its last breath, gloomy and death-like.

Yet at the end of these wastelands, they finally encountered an unexpected scene.

When the mountain path opened up, a whole cluster of cities appeared before them, even the well-traveled Visa couldn't help but tighten her reins.

Red Tide Territory.

The city walls were well-repaired, towers stood in great numbers, carts and carriages flowed in orderly fashion.

Sunlight reflected faintly off the spires, and orderly plumes of white smoke rose from distant workshops.

Passersby hurried, yet without a trace of panic.

Even the patrolling cavalry wore unified armor, their discipline alarmingly unlike what the Northern Territory should have been.

"How can this be? In the Northern Territory, there's a place like this?" a young scout murmured in disbelief.

"Even Frost Halberd City isn't this good," another quietly added.

Visa said nothing, only stared at the markers outside the city, the sentries, the road layouts, as her expression gradually darkened.

This wasn't an ordinary defense line, it was a meticulously designed, continually expanded, long-maintained war machine.

And evidently, it still operated or even grew stronger.

They exchanged glances. No one spoke.

In the broken Northern Territory, this stable, complete, even bafflingly flourishing domain stood out glaringly.

This wasn't a refuge for survivors, it seemed more like a sign of new order.

"Camp nearby," she eventually spoke, her voice low but unwavering, "let's not alert them for now, we need to take a closer look first."

This was the most prosperous Northern Territory land she'd seen, and also the most dangerous one.

They found a concealed place to camp outside Red Tide Territory amid a canyon.

This was a natural ravine terrain, the canyon long and narrow, surrounded by rugged cliffs, providing windbreaks and cover, as well as ease for night sentry placement.

Visa and her team set up camouflage overnight, reducing smoke, switching sentry duties, doing their utmost not to alert any patrols.

She was meticulously careful, even if an unowned hunting hawk flew over, she would not take her eyes off its path for a moment.

Because she sensed something profoundly wrong here.

In the days following, they deployed in turn, repeatedly infiltrating the outer mountains and approaching the fortification routes, even trying to document the daily changeovers and formations of the guards.

"This couldn't have been built in just a few years," Visa muttered gravely as she gazed at the outlines on the drawing board.

"A few years ago this was wasteland," an old scout beside her whispered, "I remember, that year we sneaked along the southern line and camped overnight here; there was nothing but marsh grass and bones then."

"But now," the young scout lowered his telescope, his voice hoarse, "it's city walls, streets, workshops... it's like this place just dropped from the sky."

The most disturbing wasn't the prosperity, but the discipline.

Red Tide's guards showed no sign of slacking.

Sentries remained post, patrols switched on schedule, each squad cooperated with messenger hawks and light signal flags, everything as precise as if conducted by an imperial central military drill template.

More bizarre, they saw almost no "post-war reconstruction" traces.

No ruins, no fire scarring, no traces of migrating refugees, and hardly any victims of the Nest.

"...Did the Nest not sweep through here?" someone whispered a guess.

Visa said nothing, repeatedly mulling over the questions.

How had they accomplished all this within a few years?

And at dusk on the fifth day, winds and clouds changed dramatically.

Chapter 406: Traitor

On the fifth day at dusk, the snowstorm had not yet arrived, but a chilling anxiety spread throughout the canyon, as if even the air had lowered its voice.

Deep within the camp, a few wisps of cooking smoke had just risen, and the scouts' low-voiced reports echoed between the rocks.

Visa crouched in front of a map behind a rock, frowning at the updated frontier defense map.

"... The scout positions change slightly every day, hard to find a pattern, but there's definitely a planned adjustment." A scout chewed on dried meat, speaking in a low tone.

"It's the best defense scale I've seen in the Northern Territory." Another veteran frowned.

Visa's gaze grew more solemn; she could sense that this border defense was not merely for protection.

The rhythm and layout resembled a wartime scenario, crafted by a highly professional military core, rather than the usual style of an Empire's territorial lord.

This meant that the owner of this territory was not simple.

Just as she was about to speak, a slight sound of something cutting through the air reached her ears.

"Boom!"

A cloud of ice-blue smoke exploded at the mouth of the canyon, the medicated scent quickly spreading.

Visa had no time to react; her body suddenly went limp.

Suddenly, dozens of Red Tide Knights sprang out from both sides of the mountain path.

They launched their assault silently, their coordination so precise it was almost chilling.

Their tactics were clear, coordination precise; one threw explosives, one managed the field, one captured, like a finely tuned machine.

In just a few heartbeats, more than a dozen scouts were hit and fell into the forest, unconscious.

Visa gritted her teeth, wielding her spear in defense, trying to protect the last few comrades, as agile as a snow fox.

But just as she struck, she heard a soft sound behind her, a subtle, cool scent wafting her way as another magic explosion bullet detonated beside her.

She felt her knees buckle, her strength quickly draining away as if drawn out.

"Gulp..."

Before her, the rocks, forest shadows, battle flames, and shouts blurred in violent tremors, as if the entire world were being torn apart.

Her last thought before she fell was: We've been watched for a long time.

The last image before unconsciousness was the knights neatly charging into the camp, moving like mirror reflections, silently and cooperatively subduing and disarming all surviving scouts.

The cold clink of metal clasps, heavy breathing, and practiced footsteps wove together.

Then came the plunge into cold, dark nothingness.

.....

Consciousness returned in a cold, damp air.

Visa opened her eyes to feel not light first, but the chill on her back.

It was the stone wall pressed against her back, rough and hard, with the dampness of underground moisture.

A movement of her wrist immediately led to the sound of chains clinking.

She was bound and fixed to the dungeon wall, her ankles shackled, her movement confined to a few steps.

She struggled to lift her head, realizing she was in an orderly constructed, gray-black stone-walled underground prison cell.

The iron door was heavy, the gap narrow, letting in only a sliver of light.

This was the dungeon of the Red Tide Territory.

Not a crude makeshift cage, but a standardized, long-term detention facility.

She could even smell the lingering stench on the walls, mixed with rust and blood.

Footsteps approached.

Steady, rhythmic, neither fast nor slow, the steps of a long-trained soldier.

The iron door opened.

Four guards in Red Tide Standard armor filed in, followed by a man in a black robe.

The interrogator, expressionless, stood before Visa without wasting words, his tone cold and direct: "Name, clan affiliation, mission objective."

No one answered him, so over the next few hours, the Red Tide Territory began its interrogation in a most imperial manner.

They separated everyone.

Each interrogation room consisted of one chief inquisitor, one recorder, and two guards.

The questions were almost entirely consistent, and any scraps of information revealed were quickly recorded, filed, and cross-referenced.

Even deliberate lies were swiftly uncovered by overlapping information.

Visa was left until the last.

She spent most of the day in the black stone cell before being taken to another relatively bright interrogation room.

She wasn't tortured or humiliated, just escorted into a small black stone interrogation room, sitting on a fixed iron chair, her hands chained to the armrests.

Before her sat a middle-aged man, neatly dressed in black, his face devoid of extra expression.

"Visa," he said without preamble, getting straight to the point, "Your accomplices have admitted their barbarian race bloodline and unauthorized border entry, constituting military espionage suspicion."

Visa's gaze was indifferent, silent.

The man stared at her, continuing: "The feather bone hairpin you wear is only worn by former members of the Cold Moon Clan."

This sentence was like a small knife, slicing open a line in her heart.

Visa remained silent, her jaw clenched tightly.

The interrogator stared at her silently for a long time, expressionlessly closing the record file.

He stood up, walked to the desk: "You won't talk, then listen well."

We will pull out your nails, one by one. We will drill into your leg bones, pour ice water inside, letting you hear the sound of your marrow cracking while conscious.

We will burn your skin, piece by piece. Not to force you to speak, just to see when you'll start to cry.

He leaned closer, his voice extremely light, but each word like an awl: "Then drag you into the snow, strip you naked, throw you into a snow pile not letting you die, freeze for a few hours then bring you back to continue asking."

Then he stared straight into Visa's eyes, but those eyes did not show fear; they met his gaze fiercely.

Chapter 407: Traitor (Part 2)

The inquisitor straightened up, slowly putting his gloves back on: "I assure you, you will talk, only the time hasn't come yet."

The heavy iron door closed, the lock bar clicked together with a heavy thud like that of a tomb.

Visa curled up in the corner of the dungeon, her shackles removed, replaced by something even heavier waiting.

Then, inexplicably, those people never appeared again. There was no torture, not even a question posed to her.

Days passed, silent, without light or warmth. Only the sound of water dripping from high walls and the occasional distant cries, as if the world outside this cell was sealed away as well.

She kept repeating a phrase: "I am the Clan's blade. Blades do not betray."

Yet she also understood that her pride had, in a sense, become a joke.

Someone from her team must have already talked.

They weren't weak, just young; they had no concept of dignity.

And Titus, he would not come to rescue them.

It wasn't that he hadn't come yet, but rather, he simply would not come.

She was not naive; Titus needed tools, not loyalists, and she was now useless.

"Maybe... I was too stubborn."

She thought mockingly to herself as she sat slowly against the cold stone wall.

"The Cold Moon Clan is long gone, for whom am I preserving this innocence?"

Yet a shred of pride still gnawed at her heart, like the last ember not yet buried by ice and snow.

Thus, she preferred to rot below ground than let those haughty Imperial People hear a word about her clan from her.

Even now that she had sworn loyalty to Frost Fierce, even though Titus had abandoned her.

She still clenched tightly the bloodstained, torn Cold Moon insignia hidden in a seam in her clothes.

.....

Sif paused at the end of the stone steps.

The dungeon was cold, damp, the walls covered with black mold, cold creeping inch by inch up through the bluestone floor into her bones.

Her heart raced a bit, but she did not retreat.

Shortly after returning to Red Tide Territory, Louis had told her: "We captured a team of Barbarian Scouts operating around the canyons of Red Tide Territory... They are from the Cold Moon clan."

Sif had remained silent.

Until Louis softly added: "Would you like to see them?"

She hesitated for a moment but nodded.

She wanted to know the truth; to know who had betrayed her father, who had killed her brothers and mother amid the flames.

At the end of the corridor was a heavy iron door, faint breathing sounds emanated from within.

The guard opened the door for her.

Sif was somewhat surprised; she recognized the person, even remembered her name was Visa, the female warrior who had wielded a spear to protect her in her childhood.

Now, she was unkempt, emaciated, curled in the corner, dirt and fatigue all over.

The other slowly raised her head.

Meeting eyes, time seemed to freeze for a moment.

"...It's you." Visa spoke with a hoarse voice, her eyes filled with shock and complexity.

Sif stood at the doorway, unmoving for a long while.

She had imagined countless times the scene of reuniting with the remnants of her old clan: would there be rage? accusations? silence? or complete estrangement?

Yet at this moment, she simply gazed quietly at this warrior who had once shed blood for Cold Moon.

Visa forced herself to stand, still carrying that stubborn habit of a Barbarian soldier.

"Why are you here? Did you betray us?" Visa's voice tightened, hoarse with strain.

The question sparked the long-suppressed emotions in Sif like a firework.

Images flashed through her mind —

Her father's bleeding chest, her mother's cries, brothers falling...

She stood straight, her fists clenched until they almost turned white, her voice filled with anger: "Was it me who betrayed them?"

Was it me who killed my father? My mother? One by one, siblings buried in the snow, was it I who betrayed them?"

The air froze for a moment.

"That's right..." She laughed coldly, her gaze sharp as a blade, "There is no more Cold Moon Tribe. Tell me, what do you now pledge allegiance to? Have you kept true to your vows?"

Words fell, and Visa seemed struck, choking suddenly, opening her mouth yet unable to utter a single word.

Her body tightened, eyes bewildered, her throat caught as if her strings had snapped, ultimately bowing her head like a puppet with its skeleton torn away.

Silence froze in the dungeon's air like frost.

After a long time, Sif quietly asked, "Do you know who poisoned my father at the banquet?"

Visa bit her lip, hesitated for a moment, and then spoke softly: "...Everyone says it was Lord Titus. But... there's no direct evidence. It's just after that, things kept happening... and eventually, Cold Moon became 'Frost Fierce'."

"Titus?" Sif was stunned.

Her mind flashed with the image of his gentle, but always slightly distant face.

Her cousin, who had once held her as a child, riding horses and teaching her archery.

She had suspected him before. But when the truth was laid bare, she was still stunned.

Not from shock, but because it made too much sense.

"Are you certain?"

Visa shook her head: "...No evidence. But he led the purge of the royal tent, and months later, renamed Cold Moon to Frost Fierce."

Sif felt a sharp pain in her heart, but she showed no outward sign.

She simply stood straighter, her voice lowering: "Tell me what you know... all about Frost Fierce."

Visa seemed suddenly disconnected.

She had appeared unyielding in the Red Tide inquisitor's interrogation, but now facing Sif, she seemed entirely like a kite with its strings cut.

Chapter 408: Traitor (Part 3)

She poured out the things she knew, one after another:

From Frost Fierce's supply at the border to the line of sentries Titus set in the north, from the secret conflicts between the tribes to how the war with the Axebreaker tribe was being fought...

She spoke faster and faster, more and more chaotically, as if the long-suppressed emotions had completely collapsed, dumping out everything she knew.

There was no longer any resistance to the interrogator in the dungeon, no longer any of the Barbarian Warrior's pride.

Sif listened till the end, without saying a word beyond what was necessary.

She just whispered, "Close the door."

The iron door slammed shut, the sound of heavy locks echoing down the corridor, lingering.

Visa still sat in the corner.

She tightly hugged her knees, burying her face in the crook of her arm, as if her entire being had collapsed.

Promises, battle flags, glory... all seemed to have turned into a silent joke.

.....

Night fell heavy, the lights in the Red Tide tower dim and faint.

Sif walked up to the assembly hall, the echo of boots on the corridor clear and cold.

She did not knock, but pushed the door open and entered.

Louis was leaning over his desk arranging some drawings, hearing the door, he looked up and raised an eyebrow, as if he already sensed something off about her expression.

"What did they say?" he asked, his tone steady.

Sif did not answer, merely walked forward in silence.

She stood in front of his desk for a few seconds, her expression like stone, hard and cold, yet the next moment, the emotions buried for so long finally collapsed.

She softly began to speak, "It's Titus, it's him... they all say he killed my father."

Her voice was as thin as a needle, yet carried the utmost of suppressed sobs.

"He's my brother... the person I trusted most since childhood. He even taught me archery, he was still by my side when Father died... how could he..."

She suddenly sat down on the chair, burying her face in her palms.

"I stayed here, I stood up again, I even... thought I no longer hated.

But I can't deceive myself, I haven't let go at all.

They said I betrayed Cold Moon, but Cold Moon was gone long ago!"

She was nearly losing control, tears silently sliding down, tears falling onto the intricate metal clasp in front of her, gradually blurring the stubbornness she had suppressed for so long.

Louis did not offer any unnecessary words, gently pulling her onto his lap, letting her lean closer, his palm softly caressing her back.

In that moment, she did not resist.

She leaned into his embrace, as if finally not needing to face everything alone.

Heavy betrayal, the hatred of extermination, the tearing and guilt within blood ties, all like a tidal wave, inch by inch submerging her in this quiet office.

"You've done very well," Louis murmured.

Sif did not respond, just buried her face deeper into his shoulder, like a child finally allowed to be weak.

After a long silence, Louis gently said, "Get some sleep first, the rest... we'll handle it slowly."

Sif nodded slightly, her eyes red as she stood up, gave Louis a glance, and turned to walk out of the office.

The door closed, so quiet it was as if nothing had happened.

Not long after, an official holding a black leather dossier entered, placing a sealed document on the long table in front of Louis.

"The record of Miss Sif's conversation with Scout leader Visa," he bowed slightly.

Louis nodded, and after the person left, he opened the seal and flipped through the thick record book.

The handwriting was neat, the sentences precise, the recorder nearly word-for-word replicating the emotionally suppressed yet information-rich conversation.

His eyes quickly scanned each line, the lines between his brows deepening with a few key phrases.

This conversation between Visa and Sif, was starkly honest, almost piercing, with no concealment, and hardly any misleading.

Combined with the recent strands of evidence pieced together in his Daily Intelligence System about Frost Fierce tribe...

This testimony could almost be deemed highly credible.

"Titus..." he softly read out the name, his fingertip lightly tapping the edge of the page.

Once a member of Cold Moon's bloodline, yet swiftly rising to power after Cold Moon's demise, annexing the old faction, re-establishing the system under the banner of Frost Fierce, acting cleanly and decisively without hesitation.

Not to mention that mysterious Burning Pain Vine Court power, proving extremely troublesome.

Louis slowly closed the intelligence, gently exhaled, got up and walked to the window, gazing far out at the antenna snowfield beyond the city walls in the night.

For some reason, he had a clear premonition: the direct confrontation with Titus was not far off.

And he would, for Sif, and for himself, settle this bloody account, one by one.

Chapter 409: Changes in the Red Tide Territory

Sunshine streamed through the gaps in the clouds, and Red Tide Territory welcomed a rare clear and bright day. There was no snow on the streets, and the air carried a hint of crisp warmth.

Louis Calvin traveled discreetly.

He wore a black cloak, followed by several well-equipped but subtly low-key knights.

The overall atmosphere was not ostentatious, merely aiming to maintain safety without alarming the populace.

After all, in Red Tide Territory, he was like the Sun. If he were too high-profile, it might inadvertently cause a small riot or even a stampede, which would be undesirable.

Today he was heading to the Artisan District to discuss the manufacturing of new weapons with the heads of the craftsmen there.

Stepping out of the main hall of the government building, the stone-paved streets stretched out straight. The cold wind blew, causing the pine trees on both sides to sway gently. The streets were clean and tidy, reflecting the current order and new atmosphere of Red Tide.

Although he was intentionally low-key, some sharp-eyed citizens still recognized him.

After all, the light of the Sun is indeed difficult to conceal.

However, Louis quickly raised his hand and waved slightly to signal everyone to quiet down and not to be ostentatious.

The people quieted immediately, watching excitedly but refrained from shouting, bowing their heads in silent salutation to express their gratitude.

Beside Louis was Bradley, the nearly sixty-year-old elder steward of the Calvin Family, who now supported half of Red Tide's administration. This was no exaggeration.

Today he personally accompanied Louis, reporting on the latest progress of the urbanization plan while they walked.

The two strolled along the street, and with each step they took, the lines that had once only existed on blueprints were now materializing into reality with bricks, cement, and district planning, with clear outlines and significant changes.

Bradley, with a light chuckle and pointing his cane at the street ahead, said, "The urbanization plan of Red Tide Territory is being turned into reality step by step. Just as you originally planned.

Although we cannot fully replicate your envisioned ideal blueprint, we are steadily approaching it."

Louis nodded, his eyes calm yet with a hint of satisfaction.

During the three months he was away, the changes in Red Tide Territory were indeed significant. For instance, his daily administrative duties were no longer in Earth Tower City.

The new administration center was officially in use, with all departments of Red Tide centralized for office work, greatly enhancing the efficiency of administrative dispatch. The entire city-state now operated more smoothly.

"Well done, Bradley. As expected from the Calvin Clan's elder steward, the administrative efficiency has never disappointed me," Louis praised.

Bradley smiled slightly, clearly pleased with the compliment.

And the road they were now treading was already vastly different from before.

Once upon a time, the roads and alleys of Red Tide Territory were mere dirt paths that turned into a muddy mess when it rained and a dreaded nightmare for both humans and horses when snow fell.

Residents, carriages, and transport vehicles mingled, with no one knowing which path was theirs to take.

As for drainage? That was almost a luxury.

In winter, snow piled into mountains and thawed water turned into ice, making the entire city feel as if it were sealed inside a cold prison.

That is no longer the case now.

Under Louis's plan, Red Tide Territory completely replaced its urban framework:

A three-segment main road system was laid out: central avenue, branch streets, and residential alleys, each with clear functions.

The main roads were paved with heavy stone bricks, with some sections having embedded heat ducts that had warm water pumped through in winter to melt snow and prevent slipping.

Snow and drainage ditches were set up along the streets, leading into specially designed snow melting pools to prevent chaotic overflow.

The small alleys were converted to cobblestone paths, complemented by trough-guided structures that are both aesthetic and practical.

The entire city had uniform road widths and distances, flanked by rows of cold-climate pines and cypresses that sheltered from the wind and snow and added significant greenery and a sense of order.

Bradley, reporting in a low voice with a hint of uncontainable pride, said, "A third of the main streets have been completed, and per your blueprints, the heat conduits have already been connected to the government hall and some residences."

He paused, glancing at the road section still under construction ahead, "It's estimated that in two more months, the intersection of the main roads and auxiliary roads will also be complete."

Louis nodded, his gaze sweeping over the neatly paved new bricks and cleared water ditches.

"Next," he said steadily, "priority should be given to expanding to the schools and medical clinics."

Bradley, nodding while taking notes, said, "Understood, my lord. I will have the planning division prepare the budget and manpower in advance."

As they walked along, the mud of the past was no longer present, and the city's framework was becoming increasingly clear.

After a while, Bradley suddenly glanced sideways at a familiar building in the distance, his tone hinted at a suggestion, "Actually, my lord...regarding your Earth Tower Castle, I think—it might be time to consider reconstruction."

Louis paused, turning his head towards him, "Reason?"

Bradley coughed and said very delicately, "It appears somewhat out of place with the overall style of Red Tide Main City as it is now."

"..." Louis was silent for a moment, looking up at that old castle.

It was functional and structurally solid, the first base he had personally planned.

"I think it's actually quite good."

"Of course, its practicality is undeniable," Bradley respectfully added, "but in terms of appearance...it indeed seems somewhat, um, plain. To be honest, some people think it doesn't quite resemble the abode of a lord, but rather looks like a granary tower."

"A granary tower?" Louis twitched slightly at the corner of his mouth.

Bradley bowed very seriously, "Moreover, you're now the most dazzling Sun of the Northern Territory...Your residence should naturally align with that status. Even just standing there, it should inspire awe."

"..." Louis sighed.

Alright, it wasn't just Bradley; even his personal knights and the head chef had mentioned this matter.

Chapter 410: Changes in Red Tide Territory (Part 2)

Since public opinion is all pointing in one direction, as a lord who values his people, he can only...

"Then... when the planning for other areas is done, we'll tear it down and rebuild." Louis finally spoke, his tone carrying a hint of reluctant compromise.

Upon hearing this, Bradley visibly breathed a sigh of relief, as if he had shed a heavy burden.

"Thank you, my lord, for your wisdom." He bowed respectfully, but there was a trace of smugness in his eyes—indeed, he knew how to persuade this rational yet stubborn young lord.

Bradley knew Louis wasn't actually too attached to that Earth Tower.

It was merely a utilitarian fortress planned for efficiency and safety when Red Tide was first built, a tool not a symbol. He always followed the principle of "as long as it works," never wasting resources on vanity.

But times have changed.

Red Tide is no longer a remote outpost in the wilderness but one of the fastest-growing cities in the Northern Territory, with a booming population, stable order, and flourishing economy.

And Louis is no longer the teenager sketching blueprints in a tent on a construction site, but one of the most powerful and revered among the Northern Lords of the Empire.

He must have a castle that befits his status.

Towering and dignified, inspiring awe in visitors and fear in enemies.

"A castle is the face of the lord," Bradley thought to himself, "We cannot let this lord's face be... as plain as a grain storage tower."

Now, Red Tide Territory not only has the capability to build a new castle but is also qualified to establish a symbol of this new era for the new city.

Looking at the ambitious Bradley, Louis internally joked, "Who would have thought this old fellow was a fan of wonders."

Then everyone arrived at the core residential area of Red Tide Territory, the first part of the entire territory to be revitalized.

This is where the initial batch of "people" of Red Tide lived, or more accurately, the group once called slaves, refugees, and natives—the nameless ones.

They once supported the embryonic form of this city with their backs during the most chaotic pioneering period of Red Tide.

Now they are the core citizens of this city, and Louis chose to transform their residential area first—it was their rightful due.

The neighborhood is now renewed, with rows of unified, smoothly lined new buildings replacing the mud-covered small houses buried in the ground.

Louis named it: Red Tide Style Round Dome House.

Bradley stood before a newly completed dome house, slightly lifted his head, and introduced proudly:

"Eighty percent of the reconstruction in this area is complete. Everything uses your envisioned semi-subterranean structure—winter geothermal circulation heating, automatic snow-shedding roof, double-layer insulated walls... it's the ideal residence in cold regions."

Louis nodded, his gaze sweeping across every door and window around him, as the people who once huddled to survive in the wind and snow now breathed warm air as they opened their doors, gently easing a heavy emotion in his heart.

"Residential density has reduced by half, but each household's space has increased nearly threefold," Bradley continued,

"We have achieved indoor climate control, water source purification, and a street numbering system. Hygiene issues have been resolved, and since last winter, not a single case of infectious disease has appeared in this area."

The streets are spacious and straight, the cobblestone paths crisscross into a network, the drainage systems extend seamlessly, pine and cypress cast shadows, warmth pervades.

Every house's exterior walls adopt a unified palette of dark gray, dark red, and muted gold, with a warm dignity.

Bradley chuckled lightly, his tone carrying undisguised pride: "It's been completely transformed."

Louis smiled faintly, his voice carrying a gentle approval: "Well done, Bradley."

This is what sets Louis apart from traditional nobility.

Other lords think about how to exploit, tax, and conscript.

But he thinks about supplying hot water, clearing snow, developing territory...

He took the knowledge from his previous life—city functional zoning, road grading, heating systems, architectural aesthetics—and wrote it all into blueprints, now finally transforming piece by piece into bricks and mortar, integrating into this territory.

And Bradley, always by his side, turned these absurd dreams into tangible walls and streets.

"Next, we'll promote this standard throughout Red Tide City," Bradley said softly, "All new districts will use the round dome houses with unified three-color design, giving the city a consistent appearance."

Along the way, they passed a square construction site still unfinished.

The wind stirred the thin snow, grey-white stone bricks already laid halfway, the foundation in the center being compacted, silhouettes of tall column pedestals starting to take shape.

Though incomplete, one can already imagine the grand scenes of future crowds gathering here.

Bradley paused, raised his hand and pointed ahead: "This is 'Fierce Tide Square', adjacent to the Town Hall, designed according to your blueprints for the future announcement of decrees, public gatherings, and military parades. Floor installation is expected to complete next month, ready for winter opening."

Louis nodded.

"The other two squares," Bradley continued, "one planned in the west of the city near the newly constructed school and theater for an amusement square; the other in the south market connecting to the market, depot, and commercial street to become the market square of Red Tide."

"Amusement, gathering, trade—three squares, three functions," he summarized with a nod.

Throughout the journey, Louis frequently nodded, his gaze occasionally drifting to the new buildings by the street, the road signs at intersections, and the busy craftsmen and surveyors in the squares.

The lines on those sheets of paper were transforming into real scenes, and the blueprint for the future was being realized brick by brick.

Finally, the two of them reached the destination of their trip—the Red Tide Territory Industrial Zone.

This area is located on the south slope plateau with gentle terrain, close to the main river water source of Red Tide, and connected to multiple raw material transport routes—the result of Louis's personal survey and site selection.

"Here, it's protected from the wind in winter and ventilated in summer," Bradley walking at the forefront, smiled and introduced, "near the storage area and material transport passages, raw materials can be immediately processed, and finished products can also be directly transported outside the city."

Looking around, workshops stood in order, chimneys emitting bursts of white smoke, yet not chaotic or noisy.

The buildings of differing heights were precisely divided by craft category: metallurgy area, woodworking area, alchemy and magitech experimentation area, weaving and leather area... neatly distributed, clearly layered.

"This is the final version of the third reconstruction," Bradley said softly, his tone carrying a faint hint of respect.

Yes, this is no longer a temporary production site of some territory but the future "industrial heart."

A multifunctional base integrating production, training, and technology research.

Fire lanes strictly divided, safe distances kept between workshops; main roads wide and straight, facilitating passage of large transport wagons and official inspections.

There is also centralized management of public tool storage and resource allocation stations, with unified efficient distribution preventing waste.

Craftsmen's rest houses, canteens, shift systems... these are "details" that traditional nobility never considered, yet they are the parts Louis values most.

The apprentice training camp in the industrial zone has also started operation, with a new batch of young people being taught by experienced craftsmen. In the future, they will become the first generation of craftsmen souls supporting the backbone of industry on this land.

"In other territories, workshops are the noisiest, most chaotic places; but here, it symbolizes the parallel of discipline, production, and technology." Bradley looked into the distance and sighed.

Louis stood at a vantage point, watching the entire industrial zone operate methodically under the winter sun, revealing a slight smile.

He had no doubt in his heart that this industrial zone might still be seen by some old nobility as merely a "gathering place for crude craftsmen."

But in his eyes, this is the starting point toward the future."

Just as Louis stepped down the stone steps, his stride not entirely steady, a rough, hearty voice rang out from ahead: "Yo! Our lord has arrived!"

The person had a face full of stubble, wore a heavy leather apron, and had an oil cloth not yet fully wiped clean draped over his shoulder.

He was naturally Mike, now the chief craftsman responsible for the entire Red Tide Industrial Zone.

"Mike." Louis looked at him, smiled, and nodded.

Mike strode towards them, moving boldly, yet subconsciously restrained a bit of his roughness when approaching, wiping his burn-marked hands a few times on his clothing before solemnly saluting: "My lord, the craftsmen management team is all here, waiting in the meeting room."

Though his tone was hearty, the seriousness and anticipation in it was evident to anyone.

Today they would discuss the development plan for a new weapon system concerning the entire future of Red Tide.