

## Winter 421

### Chapter 421: The Red Tide's Strategic Forge

Last night, the entire Mai Lang Valley was immersed in a true celebration of the harvesters.

Each village community lit bonfires in their own threshing grounds or village squares, set up long tables, slaughtered chickens and lambs, with hot soup bubbling away. Large chunks of meat and big bowls of wine were exchanged without count.

The liveliest place was the main celebration venue in the center of the valley, where more than a dozen of the most outstanding village communities held a joint feast, with dozens of pots of dishes coming out of the oven, their aroma drifting far away in the night breeze.

Under the night's veil, the firelight illuminated people's smiling faces, as the "Spring Plowing Performance Chart" was read out one by one and the awards were announced one by one.

"This year's 'King of Plowing' is Hall Sawn from the Thirteen Villages!"

Cheers erupted, shaking the sky, and Hall Sawn, with a flushed face, went on stage, trembling hands receiving the land contract stamped with the Red Tide Territory seal.

A piece of permanently high-quality private land, accompanied by the right to use a new iron plow and two oxen.

For this, he got up early and worked late into the night, proving to be the most diligent person in the Mai Lang Territory. Tonight, all his efforts became worthwhile, as his destiny changed because of it.

"The list of the Top Ten Households is as follows—Loy, Kayla, Bessie..."

Behind every name is the year's hard work of a village community.

Villagers excitedly pushed their relatives and friends onto the stage to receive prizes, with children tugging at their parents' clothes, loudly proclaiming, "That's my dad!"

Some elderly folk received certificates with trembling hands, barely returning to their seats before being lifted high by the young.

The prizes included grain, cloth, iron tools, as well as land deeds and livestock.

For these farmers, whose feet tread the soil, this was more than just a reward; it was a form of recognition.

And right after the "Top Ten Households" list was announced, a group of young people were called out by village community representatives.

Most of them were around twenty, their shoulders not fully straightened, yet their eyes were already steadfast.

Green mentioned their names in a particularly solemn tone: "The above fifteen individuals, due to outstanding work performance, have been recommended to attend the primary management team training in the Red Tide Main Territory later this month. Upon completion, they will return to their homes to take priority positions as deputy leaders of community teams, assisting with agricultural coordination, logistics, and disaster preparedness."

The villagers were astir, followed by another round of loud applause.

This was more than just praise; it was a gateway to higher realms.

These young people would no longer just be good laborers but were expected to become the backbone responsible for a village, a community, or even an entire territory.

In this Northern Territory valley, once filled with slaves and vagrants, at this moment, countless eyes looked upon them, with envy and hope.

And in one noisy corner, the main seating area appeared somewhat quieter.

Louis held a wine cup, nestled into his chair, his cloak warmed and reddened by the firelight.

He listened to the villagers' laughter while half-closing his eyes, gazing at the stacks of grain.

The firelight occasionally danced across his face, making him seem less like a lord and more like a veteran soldier who had just won a battle, laying down his arms to catch his breath beside a campfire.

He said nothing, but his gaze spoke volumes.

It was not self-satisfaction, nor was it relaxation; it was a sense of grounding after prolonged travels.

He indeed didn't drink much.

Emily glanced at him, smiled, shook her head, took his cup, poured herself half a glass of warm honey wine, and handed it back.

"You always do this," she said softly, "when you should be enjoying yourself the most, you're always thinking about tomorrow."

"I have no choice; the two counties and thirteen territories of the Northern Territory rest on my shoulders. I dare not slack," Louis replied with a smile.

His eyes held a glint of mischief, with a hint of self-mockery.

Emily said nothing, she simply leaned gently against his shoulder.

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On the second day of the celebration, in the warm afternoon sun, Louis boarded the carriage back to the Red Tide Main Territory.

As he boarded, a command was given, and the entire convoy set off, unlike when they came, this time they departed with dozens of grain wagons.

On both sides of the carriage, fully armed Red Tide Cavalry escorted them in formation.

They were no strangers, as this was the third grain transport convoy.

The success of the previous two had made everyone more steady and skilled, familiar with the routes, defenses, and pace.

Hooves trod upon the ground, wheels pressed against the road, dust rising from the main road, the formation orderly.

This massive transport fleet strictly executed the "mainline transportation plan" previously laid down by Louis:

The main road led directly from the Mai Lang Territory to the warehouse of the Red Tide Main City, a journey of approximately five to seven days, with compressed stone roads laid along the way, suitable for large carts.

Three transfer points and fixed grain protection posts were established along the route, to guard against bandits and sudden magical beast attacks.

The convoy operated in a "ten carts per group, one group equipped with an escort cavalry team" mode.

The transport tools included ox carts, mule carts, and newly crafted precision-cast iron wheeled carts, with loads ranging from five hundred to eight hundred kilograms, advancing continuously day and night.

To prevent loss, each bag of grain was lined with oil paper and labeled for processing status, with red stripes for "dried," blue for "baked," and yellow for "awaiting screening."

Daily inspections were arranged to prevent sprouting, mold, and rat infestations.

A "temporary grain drying stack" was specially set up along the route for transfer during rain.

Originally, Louis had considered using the medium-sized river within Mai Lang for transporting grain via ship to Red Tide, saving manpower and vehicles.

However, the current shipbuilding technology was not yet mature, and with the Northern Territory's early winter and fast-freezing rivers, implementation carried too high a risk.

For this, he personally wrote a letter to Duke Calvin requesting assistance, hoping to dispatch several shipbuilders north for support.

Especially as the Calvin Clan was famous for shipbuilding in the Empire, succeeding in this would not only solve inland transportation issues but would be a crucial step in building his future maritime trade network.

The slanting sun shone, illuminating the winding grain convoy, dust kicked up by hooves, floating like light smoke behind the fleet.

Chapter 422: Red Tide's Strategic Forge\_2

Each wagon was loaded full with heavy grain sacks, tightly sealed at the mouth, and the marked cloth strips fluttered gently in the wind.

The coachman held a long whip, eyes fixed on the road ahead, as the wheels rolled over the stone-paved road, making a dull, rumbling sound.

The knight at the front raised his whip high and shouted: "Keep moving, no delays!"

The voice pierced through the valley, and the coachmen responded in unison, the convoy slightly accelerated, snaking its way to the end of the main road, slowly advancing towards Red Tide Territory.

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The night wind grew stiff, and the chill deepened in the valley.

In the forest by the roadside, a squad of Barbarian scouts crept closer.

They were the vanguard of a certain Barbarian Race from the Northern Territory, about fifty of them, riding short-legged war horses with shaggy fur, faces smeared with black mud, wielding short bows and axes and spears, moving with the stealth of a wolf pack.

Seeing the vast convoy in the valley, they crouched behind rocks, their eyes glinting with greed like hungry wolves staring at a pile of meat.

"What's happening... just the grain wagons alone are nearly a hundred!"

"Tsk, look at those sacks, all dried and processed grains. Snatching one wagon would be a huge haul."

"But there sure are a lot of knights..." The leading Barbarian chief frowned.

He wasn't foolish, he could see at a glance that the escort knights for the grain convoy were very disciplined, though not many in number.

But every ten wagons had a unit of Elite Knights; a direct attack would easily lead to total annihilation.

However, greed had already set their hearts ablaze.

It was a real mountain of gold and grain; one wagon could save a tribe through winter.

"Rushing in directly is unrealistic." He licked his dry lips, eyes turning cold, "But no matter how many they have, there are blind spots at night. We won't hit the whole team, just tear a gap, grab what we can and go."

His gaze swept over a segment of slope below the mountain path, where the terrain was relatively gentle, only two hundred paces from the edge of the convoy, with the sentry spacing somewhat distant.

Beyond that were a few slower-moving rear wagons.

"Go down from there, take advantage of the night, attack when they change posts, quickly and neatly snatch two wagons."

"Raiding complete, scatter, retreat into the forest in three separate routes, don't linger."

He gestured with a few signs, instructing the troops to divide into three: one to assault the convoy, another to distract the outer knights, and the last to ambush in the mountain forest for support.

"Just need one charge, hack open a small gap when they're not paying attention, drag the wagons off immediately. Fight fast—don't dawdle."

His men nodded in agreement, gripping their weapons tightly, eyes eager for action.

Some even quietly tightened the hemp rope on their war axe handles, ready for a reckoning.

As long as the raid succeeded, it would be worth it.

Winter was coming, who wouldn't want to stock up a few sacks of grain, a few barrels of flour? More valuable than anything.

Their shadows, like phantoms, slowly surrounded down the mountain forest from three sides, brewing murderous intent in the night wind, silently approaching the Red Tide grain convoy.

The night was their most familiar ally, with black mud on their faces and animal skins on their bodies, they almost blended into the rock wall, even the wind didn't notice their approach.

But, suddenly—"Boom!!"

A Magic Explosion Bullet suddenly blasted, light as bright as day appeared abruptly, the deafening roar seemed to tear apart the night sky.

The five or six Barbarians at the forefront were instantly blown away by the blast, their bodies rolling in the air, shattered when hitting the rocks, flesh and broken stone mixed into a mass.

The aftershock of the explosion gently shook the entire mountain forest, scattered frightened birds, their cries raining down.

"There's a trap!!"

"Retreat—retreat—!"

Hardly had they turned back when the second wave of fire broke from both sides.

The Red Tide Cavalry had long been lurking within the valley walls, and at this moment, using the firelight to illuminate the enemy's shadow, charged down from above!

They were clad in red and black armor, red Fighting Energy burst along the armor's contours, like war deities descending.

Lances and swords streaked blood in the night, giving the Barbarians no chance to breathe.

"Kill!"

The cavalry surrounded from three sides, iron hooves thundered like lightning, the war horses neighed, piercing through the rear formation of the Barbarian's second scout route.

A Barbarian warrior had just drawn his axe when a lance pierced through his chest, sending him flying backward.

"Don't let a single one live," Lambert shouted, it was Louis's order.

And Louis still sat atop the lead wagon, the vehicle steady as a rock.

He was glancing down at some recent Empire news, as if this battle was just the insects chirping at night, unrelated to him.

In fact, all this was under his control from the start.

Earlier that morning, the Daily Intelligence System had informed Louis of the Barbarian's plan to intercept the grain convoy.

Thus, the Barbarian's fate was sealed even before they encountered the convoy.

The battle lasted less than a quarter-hour, the last Barbarian scout attempting to climb the cliff was sliced in two from behind by a Red Tide Knight.

The bodies were quickly dragged to a mountain hollow for concentrated incineration, doused with pine oil and scrap cloth, ignited into a heap of charcoal ashes.

The Red Tide Cavalry quickly reformed, returning to the escort formation, the convoy as if never separated.

After this small episode, the wagon wheels pressed again onto the valley road, rolling over the scorched ground, where dust and ashes mixed rising up.

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On the return grain route, Louis temporarily changed his itinerary.

Before the convoy reached Red Tide Territory, he personally led a small team, detoured to a rarely mentioned location—the Ancient Tomb of Shadow.

It was a special facility he meticulously planned and secretly remodeled.

Now it had a new name: Shadow Trial Arena, more precisely, it was the core base of Red Tide Territory's internal code "Mental Forge."

"Let's go see the progress over there." He said briefly, without much explanation.

To outsiders, it was no more than an abandoned ancient tomb in the north.

But in Louis's heart, it was the furnace for hundreds of knights to rise, the crucible he would use to forge the true elite of the Red Tide.

Chapter 423: The Strategic Forge of the Red Tide (Part 3)

The surface disguise still maintains the original appearance of the ancient tomb, with jagged rocks, weathered stone monuments, and broken slopes, appearing to be nothing more than an abandoned old tomb.

Only the concealed beacons and the sparsely distributed sentry posts reveal its actual purpose.

As soon as the sound of hooves approached, a middle-aged man clad in grey-patterned training armor quickly stepped forward.

He had a solemn expression and steady steps, precisely the person in charge here, the training commander of the Red Tide Knight Order, Alian.

"Lord Louis, you've arrived." Alian bowed in greeting.

"What's the situation?" Louis dismounted swiftly, responding briefly, his gaze already moving past him, looking towards the fog-concealed entrance to the rock cleft.

"The refurbishment is progressing smoothly, four core areas have taken initial shape. Coincidentally today, the training officers and pharmacists are conducting tests, you are welcome to observe if you don't mind the simplicity."

So they proceeded into the depths of the subterranean space, greeted by record tables, fogging equipment, and stone paths leading to various districts.

Phosphorescent moss hung from the walls, weak purple light resembling fireflies in the eternal night, creating a mysterious and solemn atmosphere.

The first place they arrived at was the Shadow Moss Cultivation Station.

"We can currently stabilize the cultivation of three types of mutated moss." A young technician in a medicinal robe reported, "They respectively enhance concentration, catalyze the fighting energy cycle, and suppress hallucination reactions. We are attempting to synthesize and refine sprays suitable for frontline portable use."

"Very good." Louis's gaze focused, "What stable concentration ranges can be maintained for the catalytic moss?"

"Between about 1.2 and 1.5, any higher tends to induce short-term hallucination backlash."

"Then mass-produce with 1.3 as the baseline." He paused and then instructed his lieutenant, "Record it in the battle readiness plan, prioritize including it in the knight squad training package. Consider phased equipment in the future."

Continuing deeper, they arrived at the Lizard Beast Breeding Room.

The temperature here was noticeably higher, in the closed compartments of the cave, a large Soul-devouring Lizard Beast lay quietly, its scales faintly flowing with a dim purple glow.

A layer of mental barriers isolated the spirit waves it emitted, but the air still felt oppressively tense, making one subconsciously tense up.

"This one is the most stable batch." The chief technician displayed a gray-silver device, "We are testing this 'Spirit Shock Bomb,' with an embedded magic crystal, capable of creating short-term fear illusions upon activation."

"Suitable for breaking formations and disrupting minds." Louis's gaze grew colder, "Record it, plan to equip the Scout Knights with it to break enemy mental defenses."

"Yes." The lieutenant responded.

But what drew his attention the most was the core of the trial ground – the Will Breakthrough Altar.

The central hall was finely tuned for cultivation sequestration, the surrounding stone walls still retained ancient tomb sacrificial patterns, and hazy phosphorescence floated in the air, illuminating the altar with the elite knight sitting cross-legged.

The individual sat cross-legged with closed eyes, surrounded by fighting energy like a fountain, at times condensing into threads, at times dispersing like mist, clearly at a critical breakthrough stage.

"How many... have there been?" Louis asked in a low voice.

Alian nodded, "Since being transferred here three weeks ago, seven have been promoted to elites, three are currently breaking through bottlenecks. The training process is becoming stable, combining fumigation, medicine, and breathing techniques in three stages... The consumption is significant, but the benefits are astounding."

"What's the cycle duration?"

"With normal diet supplementation, recovery takes seven days; with catalytic medicine, it's one cycle every three days."

"How many can simultaneously undergo cultivation?"

"Currently, it can maintain 12 in parallel; as medicine production increases, it can expand to 20."

Louis was silent for a moment, his gaze fixed on the young knight sitting cross-legged before the altar, surrounded by fighting energy, undergoing a breakthrough.

His fingers slightly trembled, and around him, a faint luminescence pulsed, as if some iron was being repeatedly forged, hammered, and shaped.

"If we maintain this efficiency..."

His voice was deep, but he couldn't contain the heat surging within, "In three months, how many newly promoted elites can I expect?"

"Conservatively estimated at thirty to thirty-five."

At this moment, time seemed to stand still.

Louis slowly inhaled, staring intently at the figure before the trial platform, his mind already racing through the entire Northern Territory's military layout.

A special breakthrough method in the Empire, numerous, yet so stable, batchable, and controllable.

In three months, thirty-five elites.

Thirty-five blades with will, discipline, and passion.

And that's just in three months.

Given enough time, he could forge the Red Tide into the sharpest fang of the Northern Territory!

"You're using a factory to forge ordinary knights into elites, batch by batch..." Emily stood beside him, her tone gentle, yet also shaken by the scene before her.

"Precisely, which is why it must be included in the Red Tide Strategic Core." Louis almost blurted out, a hint of excitement seeping into his voice. He suddenly turned his head to look at his lieutenant, speaking more quickly,

"From today, transfer all related medicinal materials here, prioritize supplying the Shadow Moss Catalyst Pool, and transfer two senior pharmacists for equipment optimization, not a day of delay is allowed."

"Yes, my lord."

"Also," Louis lowered his voice, "transfer that batch of Azure Patterned Honey and Frost Blood Redberry, mix with the Shadow Catalyst, and see if it achieves faster breakthrough efficiency."

The lieutenant was momentarily stunned and immediately took his leave to carry out the orders.

The underground was silent, save for the gentle trembling of the Shadow Moss in the distance, like the dark light rising from a furnace.

Louis squinted his eyes, looking at this serene spiritual forge.

At this moment, he was no longer calm, for it was his sharpest and most terrifying strategic weapon.

When disaster strikes, he would no longer be anxious, for as long as he had this "forge," he could continually transform ordinary men into elites, forge elites into blades!

"Excellent..." he softly murmured, finally letting a slight smile play on his lips,

#### Chapter 424: Winter Preparations and War Machines

The third batch of grain convoy led by Louis arrived at the Red Tide Territory in the afternoon.

The people along the streets had long been accustomed to this scene. Dozens of horse-drawn carriages, fully loaded with bags of golden wheat, slowly passed through the main road and went straight to the newly expanded warehouse.

The warehouse doors were open, and the workers seamlessly carried out transportation, registration, and storage.

Sentinels on distant towers patrol quietly, guarding against any possible disturbances.

Bradley stood in front of the warehouse entrance, holding a record board, waiting for a while until he saw that familiar figure dismount from his horse; only then did he slightly nod.

"Third batch already. Thankfully, this warehouse was expanded in advance, otherwise it wouldn't fit." Bradley commented.

"We'll have to wait another half month for the fourth batch." Louis drank some water, speaking casually as if discussing the weather.

Bradley did not respond, just watched as bags of wheat were moved into the dry and clean warehouse.

Sunlight came down, reflecting a faint glow between the grains.

A year ago, when Louis proposed cleaning up Mai Lang Territory to specialize as a grain production site to supply the entire Red Tide domains with food, it wasn't that he disbelieved; he just thought such a thing would be impossible in the post-disaster chaos of the Northern Territory.

After all, a year after the disaster, most territories in the Northern Territory were barely surviving thanks to aid from the Imperial Capital.

Maintaining order in the Red Tide Territory was already quite remarkable.

Yet Louis managed to accomplish this, without relying on others, he created the greatest miracle ever seen in the Northern Territory.

Mai Lang Territory has truly become Red Tide's own granary. And now it has become the fundamental guarantee for the entire domain for the coming year, and even if Louis wished, he could sell a part of this grain, though he wouldn't do it.

"You once said you wanted Red Tide to no longer rely on others to sustain itself." Bradley whispered, "Back then, I thought it was just a young man's bold words. Now it seems...my vision was narrow."

From inside the warehouse sounded the workers' cheers, as bags of grain were moved in endlessly like the tides.

Bradley pulled himself out of his reverie and chuckled, "Before winter this year, this warehouse will have to be squeezed again."

After the grain convoy finished unloading, the warehouse doors slowly closed, and the record book was presented by the soldiers responsible for documentation. Bradley flipped a few pages and glanced at the sky.

"Lord, are you heading back to the castle next?"

"I still need to make a trip to the rear warehouse." Louis turned back, "To see how the winter supplies preparation is coming along over there."

Bradley nodded and followed him.

The rear warehouse area was near the west side of the main warehouse, reinforced in the last half-year.

Along the way, several small trucks were being dispatched, carrying not grain but boxes of firewood, fabric, and dry food packs.

Louis's gaze swept past the barrels filled with pickled radish and smoked fish.

After sealing the barrel lids, the warehouse workers carried them into the cellar, their actions swift.

"How is the stock of dried and pickled foods?" he inquired.

"Salted meat, smoked meat, smoked fish, pickled radish, dried mushrooms, all are being prepared in batches as planned. The pickle factory started work two weeks early, and the progress is currently over seventy percent." Bradley paused, flipping open the second thin book.

"As for fuel, the firewood, coal, and flint marrow oil have been distributed according to population quotas. Before the mountain roads are closed, we can still bring back two more batches."

"What about the Fire-backed Turtle setup?" Louis asked.

"The barracks has completed its setup, while the residences are slowly expanding according to requests." Bradley showed a rare satisfied expression, "It's a good thing."

They stopped in front of a row of fabric racks, where several female workers were fitting soldiers for newly made coats.

"As for warm clothing, civilian segments are eighty percent complete, while the workshop is still rushing to make military boots and animal fur cloaks. As long as there isn't a sudden climate change, no one will be cold this winter."

"And the medicines?" Louis glanced at the neatly stacked medicine boxes in the corner.

"All standard pharmaceuticals, pain-relieving grass powders, antifreeze balm, and fever-reducing water plants have been replenished. We've also re-verified the consumption model submitted by the medical camp, equipping every ten households in the risk zones with a medicine kit, implemented according to the new regulations."

Louis looked around, nodding slightly, as he watched boxes of supplies being labeled and sealed, ready to be distributed to various districts according to quotas in the coming days.

His gaze swept over the warehouse racks, then looked at Bradley beside him:

"Everyone worked hard this year. Also, there were no major disasters, no wars, which makes it a rare good year. Since we have enough grain, clothing, firewood, and dry food, there's no need to be too frugal.

This year, we can distribute more items down, without being stingy."

At his words, Bradley was momentarily stunned, then gently chuckled.

While other lords were figuring out how to save materials and hoard surplus grain as a backup, Louis proactively proposed increasing winter supplies.

This abundance stems not only from his confidence but also from his genuine care for the people.

Bradley whispered, "No wonder...everyone is willing to follow wherever you go."

Louis did not respond, just walked closer to the warehouse rack, touched the stamp on a bag of dried mushrooms to confirm its clarity, then nodded to indicate the adjutant start conveying the new distribution orders.

This year's winter is going to be very good.

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In the late autumn afternoon, the cold wind, tinged with a slight metallic rust scent, hovered over the demonstration field in the Artisan District.

Louis, draped in a half-cloak, steadily walked through the thick stone gate, his black and gold military robe shimmering with a cold light under the sun.

The demonstration field had long been set up: the tools in place, devices secured, test tracks covered with a thin layer of coal dust, the air carrying scents of molten gold and alchemy residue, the heat mingling with an impending burst's subtle pressure.

Mike came up first, his hands stained with metal dust, yet not bothering to wipe them.

Chapter 425: Winter Preparations and War Machine (Part 2)

A thick palm wiped casually on the trouser leg. He straightened his chest and said with barely concealable excitement, "Sir, all the prototypes have been completed according to the blueprints, now awaiting your inspection."

Louis's gaze swept over the distant array of devices ready to go, then glanced over a row of expectant craftsmen and several alchemists in yellow-stained robes, finally nodding lightly.

"Let's begin." With his order, the entire demonstration area roared into operation.

Mike waved his hand, and an assistant craftsman immediately pulled the rope.

"Activate the folding cheval de frise, ready to ignite!"

With a "click-clack—a bang," three segments of cheval de frise suddenly sprang out, the mechanism's slots automatically engaged, resembling a beast's skeleton unfurling, heavily striking the ground.

Each segment was covered with iron spikes and interlocking stakes. Amid a subtle tremor, the ground spikes fit precisely into the stone floor of the testing arena, immovable.

Subsequently, the alchemy team on the other side immediately sprang into action.

A fiery magic core, the size of a knuckle, was pressed into the activation slot, causing the petroleum pipeline to tremble slightly.

"Whoosh—!"

Alongside a string of soft sounds, a row of flames shot up from the spine of the cheval de frise.

Golden-orange flames spread rapidly across the stakes like boiling waves, forming a complete fire wall in just three seconds, sealing off the entire testing passage.

The flames crackled and roared with heat waves billowing.

"Prepare to charge!" Mike shouted.

Two test knights armored heavily urged their horses to charge from the other end, hooves thundering like lightning, but as they approached the fire line, the horses hesitated, eyes showing fear.

They tried to bypass it, only to find all three parts of the cheval de frise interlocked, sealed tight.

"Retreat!" The knight pulled the reins, forcefully halting the charge.

Fifteen seconds later, only the scorched stake surface was left smoking.

For a moment, silence descended.

"Emergency closure formed within ten seconds," Louis stood with his hands behind his back at the edge of the arena, "If used at a canyon mouth... the unprepared vanguard of enemy cavalry would be thrown into chaos."

Mike grinned widely, "Our workshop's creation is far more agile than the old wooden stakes in the Northern Territory's passes."

The craftsmen nodded repeatedly at this.

"Then let's start the next item." Louis said softly, his gaze already moving to the heavy-covered "Steel Giant" further away.

Under the pull of chain strings, the heavy curtain slowly fell away, and in the next instant, an almost breath-stopping sense of oppression swept through the demonstration area.

It was roughly wedge-shaped as a sleeping giant beast crouched on the ground.

The front end projected a distinctively sharp-armored car front, embedded with narrow observation slits and enclosed arrow slots, resembling a cold, menacing beast face.

The sides were fitted with thick side armor, sheets of black steel plates connected by rivets, overlapping like the scales armor of a plated lizard.

And four steel bulls were dragging it slowly out.

They were clad in gleaming battle armor, their horned helmets flashing cold lights, exhaling faint blue vapor.

This is the effect of Frost Leaf Vine potions, used to soothe their fierce nature, enabling calm on the battlefield.

Iron chains and reins connected under the car front, each step they took felt like a heavy hammer striking the chest, making the air subtly tremble.

"...This is the Steel Beast indeed."

Emily stood beside Louis, her gaze inadvertently uplifted towards the gigantic entity, her voice almost inaudible.

Her slender figure appeared as diminutive as dust under the shadow of the giant beast.

"Like a... moving fortress." She murmured, supplementing the sentence with an expression of undisguised awe.

The Steel Beast proceeded slowly, the heavy wheels and gear tracks engaged and rubbed, emitting a deep and continuous rumbling as if some underground creature were turning over in its slumber.

The four steel bulls drawing it forward maintained a steady pace—iron hooves on the ground, armor engaging—with each impact sounding like a hammer falling on the hearts of everyone present.

A cold mist escaped their breaths, bluish-white vapor swirling in the air.

Under the craftsman's control inside the steel, the colossal beast completed the turning test slowly yet accurately.

It maneuvered across the front of the demonstration area unhurriedly, with everyone present holding their breath.

In the silence, a pressing feeling like an unspeakable tide swelled up in their hearts.

This is not a war machine.

This is a moving steel wall.

"More stable than I expected," Louis commented, his tone still revealing a trace of inescapable satisfaction, "If set outside the city... the Barbarian cavalry line would crash into utter wreckage."

The Steel Beast advanced somewhat clumsily, yet the heavy, stable pressure was exactly as he had initially imagined on the blueprint.

He nodded slightly, adding, "With a few more rounds of conditioning, make these bulls more familiar with the commands, it could speed up considerably."

"Your design is superb, sir!" Mike responded standing at attention, his face flushed, unable to suppress his excitement, "We only followed the instructions..."

Louis waved a hand, advising him to ease off the flattery, though Mike was sincerely praising.

The drill wasn't over. With a crisp sound of mechanism activation, the side cabin of the Steel Beast "clicked" open, and a set of tri-claw javelins immediately extended along the sliding arm, the metal friction evoking a sharp echo like a beast grinding its teeth in the night.

"Javelin—ready."

Mike ordered in a low voice, the master craftsman pushed with his right hand, the retractable arm suddenly extending rapidly, a clawed javelin piercing through the air with a sharp angle, fiercely embedding into the wooden shield target on the simulated battlefield.

"Retract!"

The claw grasped the shield edge, pulling with immense force, instantly splintering the wooden shield into pieces. The scene was filled with a sharp crackling sound, wood chips flying; that hefty combat shield was directly torn into two sections.

Immediately, the second arm bounced out, the javelin flexibly adjusted its angle, hooking the rear edge of another side-standing wooden shield, pulling—twisting, dragging, rolling back—the entire action completed seamlessly, like metal predator claws repeatedly testing prey.

Chapter 426: Winter Preparations and the War Machine (Part 3)

On the demonstration field, Louis squinted his eyes, watching intently.

"Begin the field test!" Mike commanded sharply.

Three Knights immediately rushed out from the side door, holding shields and forming an array, initiating a short-distance charge toward the Steel Beast.

"Target locked—"

"Adjusting advancement angle by 2.4—"

"Thrust!"

With these three voice commands echoing almost simultaneously within the Steel Beast, the first hook spear on the left instantly shot out, precisely biting the edge of the shield of the foremost Knight, and the cable tightened immediately.

The Knight staggered, pulled forward, and his shield cracked audibly. The hook claw quickly retracted, carrying shattered wooden pieces into the cabin.

The two Knights behind instinctively halted to adjust, yet the hook spear, like a chain of claws, was already upon them; the second sharp thrust violently skewing the middle shield's edge, disrupting the shield rhythm.

In merely a few breaths, the simulated enemy's charge formation crumbled instantly, the array falling apart.

"The angle for shield ripping is well designed." Louis commented slowly from the high platform, his tone calm with a hint of approval. "Combined with the follow-up of the bull rush... it can disrupt the array, piercing directly through the middle."

Mike's eyes shone brightly hearing this comment. "We've been repeatedly testing the force and angle. Indeed, you noticed it."

He glanced at the hook spear arm in the distance, adding quietly, "This current system can basically launch and retract the hooks stably even while in motion... Just keep improving, and it can be installed in the next batch of production models."

The beast stood silently on the rails, its massive metallic silhouette seemingly awaiting the next command.

Following that was the remote attack test.

"Fire control position ready!" a craftsman reported quietly.

Hillco stood next to Louis, dark circles heavy beneath his eyes as if he hadn't slept all night, his collar askew, sleeves messy, who knows what explosion experiment he had been up to overnight.

But his eyes were exceptionally bright, his entire demeanor seemingly ready to spring forth with excitement.

"Magic Explosion Bullet Arrow, prototype one—fire!"

A crisp "bang" echoed, exploding within the lower cabin, the sliding rail controlling the crossbow jolting, and the arrow burst through the air.

"Target hit!"

At the end of the testing arena, the heavy iron target responded by shattering, a roaring explosion sending sparks flying, the iron surface scorched and curled, a bowl-sized dent seemingly punched through with fury.

Beside it, ordinary arrows barely penetrated the wooden shields, failing to pierce even the second layer, providing a stark contrast.

Even before the blast had dissipated, Hillco was already shaking his sleeve excitedly, like a mad alchemist hawking his own explosive toys, retrieving three differently inscribed arrowheads from his pocket to show Louis.

"Close detonation, timed detonation, delayed detonation, all calibrated! Precision testing all passed!"

He spoke with an unmistakable pride, "We've optimized the detonation patterns through three rounds, improving trigger stability by 40%. Now, whether you want to blast one person or a group, all is achievable."

"Controllability of the explosion radius?"

"Tested from two fingers wide to thirty-six inches!" Hillco grinned, "If you need a five-in-a-row blast, it's no problem; explosion is our alchemy group's specialty, path overlay, progressive ignition, we've nailed it all down."

Louis nodded gently, his gaze falling on the explosion-scarred blackened iron target. "Excellent, true explosions... are for creating tactical space."

Finally came the comprehensive experiment, the test field was reconfigured, one side erecting over a dozen iron men shield arrays, mingled with iron magical beast targets simulating the barbarian formation.

On the other side, the iron wild bull stood ready, the Steel Beast calmly poised, several craftsmen and Knights entered the cabin and control positions in succession.

"Comprehensive test—begin!" Mike ordered.

First came the explosive arrow test shot.

From the distant platform, the magical crossbow bolt precisely struck the enemy array's rear echelon, several iron men shield bearers exploded "boom" into the air, scorched explosion scars pulling an opening in the grass.

Then the wild bull roared, four armored iron wild bulls dragged the Steel Beast into motion, the roller on the tracks murmuring like war drums struck heavily.

They broke open the path, charging into the formation.

Hook spear mechanisms deployed—"click—boom!" accompanied by the sharp metallic tearing, the front iron men shield formation was violently hooked and torn apart, splintered wood and iron shards flying.

The Steel Beast subsequently unfolded its side wing armor, internal slides swirling, heavy armor structure sealing both sides like a shutting gate, successfully entrapping the simulated enemy remnants.

Cold explosive bullets released from the terminal launch chamber, magical beast targets fragmented in the icy blue impact, freezing marks ravaged upon them like a snowfield storm.

In a mere forty seconds, the simulated enemy array was thoroughly crushed.

After a brief silence, thunderous cheers erupted within the test field.

"It succeeded!"

"Full procedure! Complete process coordination success!"

Many craftsmen were so excited they nearly jumped up, some grabbing a companion's collar to roar, "We actually managed to create this war machine! It was us who did it!"

The young alchemy apprentice's eyes reddened, "This level of integrated combat system... something only those alchemy maniacs in the Jade Federation could manage to pull off; we can make it too!"

Louis standing quietly on the high platform, gazing at the drill field, then he turned to look at Bradley: "All direct participants in the manufacture, merit recognition."

With these words, thunderous cheers erupted once more, even Hillco couldn't hide his smile, yawning while chucklingly speaking to the craftsman beside him, "Don't forget me tonight when you're drinking."

In the corner, a figure stood quietly, her gaze dark.

It was Visa, who followed Sif to see the entire process; the scene sent shivers down her spine.

Visa gazed at the distant Steel Beast halting gently like a mountain, something she had never seen on the northern battlefield.

It was unfeeling, steady, advancing with no emotion, like a true embodiment of war.

She once was a barbarian scout familiar with the barbarian army's battle formations and the Knights' charge rhythm, yet such a thing before her...

If such a weapon truly proliferated, she couldn't fathom how the future barbarian race would withstand it?

Chapter 427: A Day in Ian's Life

The sky had not yet dawned, but a faint warmth already permeated the dome-shaped room.

The wooden wall panels had been slightly heated by last night's fire, and a lingering scent of ash and charcoal hung in the air.

Ian slowly opened his eyes under the heavy woolen blanket.

For a moment upon waking, he even forgot where he was. Having moved here for half a year, he was still unaccustomed.

The bed was too soft, the bedding too warm, and the ceiling above too neat and pristine.

He habitually turned his head and saw a small fabric doll placed in the corner by the bedside, with slightly curled ears and a crooked eye—one of Mia’s creations.

Outside, there came the low sound of footsteps, perhaps a patrolling knight walking past the muddy alley entrance, or an early craftsman moving tools.

Ian lay quietly, staring at the little doll for a long time, suddenly feeling unreal.

He had once been a woodworker in White Stone Village. Every day, he worked with wood, drank porridge made by his wife in the morning, and slept at night holding his daughter while listening to the crackling sound of burning firewood.

Though not wealthy, the days were warm and complete.

Until three winters ago, the Snow Swearer cut through his life like a dagger, dissecting him into a blood-and-flesh mess.

That day, he had merely gone to the forest early to cut some decent spruce branches.

Upon returning, all he saw was black smoke, a collapsed roof, and an already shattered well.

He knelt at the doorway where the blood had yet to coagulate and picked up his wife’s apron.

He did not cry; there was no time to cry.

Mia was still alive. He found her behind the barn’s remnants, her eyes, always smiling, now widened with fear, curled up behind a haystack, too afraid to make a sound.

On the fifth night of her fevered coma, they almost died on an icy slab together.

Ian took off his last layer of outerwear, wrapped her in burlap, and sat in the snow, as if waiting for God to offer the last straw.

He didn't wait for God, but a patrol knight squad from the Red Tide Territory found them.

The knight merely glanced at Mia in his arms and, without hesitation, whispered, "There's still time."

Thus, he followed the firelight into a makeshift camp.

A place that rose like a micro-city from the wasteland.

There was order, hot porridge, tents for warmth, and physicians who asked no questions about origins.

He remembered the tired doctor who stayed up all night to bring down Mia's fever, while he sat outside the door all night like a fractured piece of wood, until someone handed him a pair of old boots.

It was then that he first whispered, "Thank you."

Later, he was assigned to the craftsman's team.

Initially, it was nailing fences, sawing stakes, laying floors—work he was familiar with.

His tools had been burned by the fire, but his skills remained.

Later, he had a stable tent, clothes to change into, and nights when he no longer worried about Mia going hungry.

In the earliest winter nights, he had to wake up three times a night to confirm that she was by his side, without a fever.

Then later... she was chosen.

The Blood Stone revealed her knight's lineage. It was a future none of them had ever anticipated.

She entered the training camp, donned training armor, learned riding and how to use Fighting Energy.

Watching her determined eyes, he suddenly felt that this child was no longer a slender girl who had walked out from a pile of firewood; she would become a protector.

Now they were assigned to live in the second residential area of the main city, a genuine "Red Tide-style dome house" that truly belonged to them.

"In the past, we could only winter under a wooden shed wrapped in burlap. Now, sleeping in this big house, who would have thought?"

Ian murmured softly, putting on a thick cotton undershirt and a coarse outer coat with a tightly fastened collar by the stove.

Then he took the half bowl of leftover porridge from last night from the table, gulped it down, exhaled, fastened his scarf, and pushed open the door, stepping into the morning of the Red Tide Territory.

He had grown accustomed to this route.

Starting from the residential area, passing through bustling marketplaces, across the square, and then into the workshop lane by the west city.

The ground was laid with smooth stone bricks, drainage ditches embedded in the corners of both walls, and the thin snow that fell overnight had mostly been swept away.

In the distance, the firelight poles were still lit, their warm yellow glow flickering on the bluestone slabs.

A man in a thick coat walked past the street corner, holding a freshly replaced bucket of hot water.

He nodded a greeting to Ian, who returned a smile in kind.

More and more passersby appeared, mostly craftsmen, logistic soldiers, market administrators, moving orderly through the districts.

Occasionally, some children would run out from the alley, with uniform-issued red scarves around their necks, jumping and hiding in the corners, as their mothers called their names from afar.

He stopped by a wall for a moment.

A notice was posted on the bulletin board: roughly written "Ninth Batch Winter Supplies Distribution," accompanied by illustrations below—small bread, salted meat, and soap, with the smiling face of a child holding a sparkler.

Approaching the trading square, he saw from afar a four-wheeled transport cart parked at the bottom of the slope, with several porters loading bags of burlap onto it—those were provisions, marked with red string for the Northern Army's quota.

Ian squinted to recognize the familiar stamp on the burlap: "Snowfield Winter Camp · Sixth Batch of Stored Grains."

He knew these items would be transported along the main road to the northern Red Tide front-line outpost, Mia's future destination.

He continued forward, his pace neither hurried nor slow, and the voices in the wind and snow grew denser.

The craftsmen's quarter was reached; the entire woodwork camp was already bustling, sawdust, steam mingled with the scent of furnace smoke wafted through the air.

In the distance, dried spruce planks hung from wooden beams, people weaving through carrying tools, lifting a section of an axle, shouting about measurement discrepancies.

#### Chapter 428: Ian's Day (2)

Ian walked into the familiar warmth, and a young carpenter greeted him: "The boss is here!"

"Last day at work, be late and you'll miss the copper lamp." He replied with a smile, taking off his cloak and putting on a leather apron.

The camp grew warmer, with the fire by the west wall burning brightly.

Today is the last workday before winter closure, no need for major construction, everyone only responsible for finishing touches and repairs.

The apprentices under Ian were busy around two unfinished large wooden boxes.

He walked over without saying much, directly taking up the planer, starting to smooth the grooves on the corners.

Sawdust flew, his hands were knobby, with calluses accumulated over the years.

The planer moved steadily, leaving the wooden surface polished as smooth as pebbles.

A young carpenter couldn't help but exclaim: "Master, the edges you carve, not even my dad can reach this level."

Ian chuckled softly without responding, he focused on the work, every joint made meticulously.

This year, he was promoted to be the head carpenter. During the year, he led over thirty people under the city construction division, building twenty-four new houses and three wooden bridges.

People began calling him "Master Ian," which for a refugee who crawled out from a snowy night, was a great honor.

Before noon, today's quota was wholly completed.

The boxes were sealed, the axles polished, records submitted, and Tuba personally came for approval.

The short woodworking supervisor stroked his beard, grinned, and said: "Everyone, great work this year. According to the old tradition, anyone who worked diligently throughout the year gets a lamp."

An assistant brought out a small cloth bundle, distributing copper lamps wrapped in oil paper.

Ian stood in line, his hands couldn't help trembling slightly as he received his lamp.

It was a small, solid lamp, with a smooth fire opening, engraved with the words "Red Tide Workshop Year Three Winter," and a finely carved Red Tide sun emblem, reportedly designed by Lord Louis himself.

Gazing at the little lamp, he seemed to see himself on that snowy night.

Snowflakes filled the sky, holding feverish Mia in his arms, trudging step by step through the frozen wilderness.

"If it weren't for Lord Louis..." he murmured, "I would already be bones under the snow."

His colleagues heard him, unconsciously looked his way.

Someone spoke: "Working for such a lord is our skill."

Another laughed, raising the copper lamp in hand: "This year's winter lamp looks great! I'll fight for another next year!"

Everyone laughed.

A space in the workshop yard was cleared, covered with hay and wood planks, a temporary wooden table set up with dried fruits, smoked meat, strong wheat beer, and steaming carrot beef stew.

Apprentices were already whistling, and a few old artisans gathered around, recounting glorious past stories.

When Ian sat down, someone had already handed over a cup of beer.

He didn't refuse, slowly standing up, raising the cup and looking around.

His throat was a bit choked, yet he spoke calmly: "For us, and for Lord Louis."

"For Lord Louis!" everyone responded.

The clinking of cups created a crisp sound.

They sat in the workshop's backyard for over an hour, chatting, eating meat, drinking.

Copper lamps were arranged in a circle, the light reflecting off the copper walls into blurred spots, like stars falling to earth.

By afternoon, Tuba finally patted his knees and stood up: "Alright, just a little drink is enough. We still have to go collect supplies later."

So everyone gradually got up, some hiccupping while cleaning the table, others carrying tools and heading for their dwellings.

Ian also took his tools and walked toward the allocation point.

That was the Red Tide Territory's supplies distribution center; today's is sequentially distributed by street and workshop number.

The long queue wound around the small cobblestone square, orderly, people wrapped in leather jackets or cloth cloaks, standing in the snow with not a hint of impatience.

He joined a familiar group of queues, next to him were neighbors Hank and the weaver woman Ghia.

"Ian, you came back just in time," Ghia smiled and nodded, "This year is truly good. How many times has this been?"

"Ninth time," Hank chimed in, speaking quietly, but unable to hide his sentiment, "If only every year were like this, it'd be great."

Ghia couldn't help but laugh: "It will be. As long as Lord Louis is here."

Speaking of this, the people in line around them nodded silently.

When it was Ian's turn, he received today's distributed supplies with both hands:

A bag of coarse wheat flour, twenty-five pounds.

Three large pieces of salted meat, with the Red Tide Territory's seal on it.

A clean soft cotton blanket.

Two bars of sheep fat soap, his daughter Mia's favorite scent.

And a small pack of fireworks, for lighting on the winter festival night.

He looked at the things in his hands, very pleased, knowing his daughter would be thrilled to see the soap.

Suddenly things quieted down in front, and a low murmur came: "It's Lord Louis."

Ian followed the voice and saw the man walking slowly from the end of the crowd, donned in a dark red cloak, figure upright, expression calm.

Several aides conversed quietly, seemingly reporting something, but the lord merely nodded, then turned to personally hand a package of salted meat and blanket to an old soldier with a missing arm at the front of the queue.

That veteran's eyes turned red, bowed tremblingly.

Louis patted his shoulder.

This scene was as quiet as firelight ignited amidst the snow.

And as Louis passed by Ian, Ian instinctively stood straight, eyes bright.

He bowed deeply, his voice faint but especially earnest: "Thank you, my lord."

The man merely paused his steps slightly, nodded gently, and continued forward, like a breeze sweeping through the winter night, yet carrying weight.

Ian stood there, his fingers unconsciously clenched around the salted meat and soap, his palm slightly warm.

He said nothing, only silently vowed in his heart: "I must work harder... to be worthy of such a great lord."

Dusk came slowly and profoundly, the distant sky glowing crimson, like clouds tinted by flames.

Ian carrying his items home, opening the door of their domed house, was first greeted by strands of red silk hanging from the door frame.

Simply knotted, but the color vivid enough to almost leap out against the snowy backdrop.

He smiled; that was the signal Mia was home for vacation.

Inside, the hearth fire was ablaze, warmth welcoming.

From the kitchen came the gentle clinking of pots and pans.

Mia was taking off the Red Tide Standard's knight training uniform, changing into the newly issued sweater, its cuffs still rolled up.

Her back was straight and sturdy, shoulder seams taut from the sweater's curvature.

Ian stood by the door, dazed for a moment, heat rising in his chest: "Back then she was as skinny as a twig, now she can chop shields."

Tonight was the pre-festival gathering dinner, thus abundant.

There were roast meat, carrot lamb stew, rye beer, beet root thick soup.

Things unimaginable years ago, yet now could be eaten comfortably yet occasionally.

Father and daughter settled, hands clasped, quietly reciting: "Thanking Lord Louis for everything he has given us."

This phrase, they were long accustomed to, but each time they say it, their hearts were filled with solemn respect.

During dinner, Mia excitedly recounted experiences from the training camp: "Today we practiced offense and defense, and I was able to press a classmate into the snow for the first time!"

She raised her eyebrows, face full of pride: "Luckily it was a drill, or he'd lose a tooth."

Ian laughed as he reminded her: "Don't be too smug, he might have gone easy on you."

Ian then spoke of the workshop's copper lamp distribution, describing the lively celebration with drinking.

They continued like this, back and forth, until late at night.

Outside the window, silver snow covered the tiles, the domed house illuminated by moonlight like a silent little hill.

The whole city of Red Tide was immersed in softness and tranquility at that moment, firelight spilling from windows, each household safely in dreamland.

Mia slept early, only her light breath visible beneath the covers.

Ian sat in the old wooden chair by the fireplace, taking out the awarded lamp, slowly wiping away the snow marks on the copper with a cloth.

He looked at it for a long time, his gaze calm, a faint smile at the corners of his lips gradually fading.

The lamp reflected the fireplace's flames, shadows weaving his wife's silhouette.

He softly said: "If only you were still here..."

Chapter 429: The Plight of Frost Halberd

Winter is about to descend.

The first full year after the Mother Nest War is also coming to an end.

And Duke Edmund still retains his old-era traditions, holding a Northern Territory meeting before the deep autumn ends and the snow season begins.

But this year, the meeting place is no longer that grand and majestic, coldly imposing Frost Halberd City from memory.

That city is dead.

The entire city, repeatedly consumed, gnawed, and penetrated by insect poison, has long become like a recently deceased giant corpse.

Streets collapsed, rooftops caved in, wells dried up, with some even emitting black goo, no one dares approach.

It doesn't look like a city, but a graveyard.

Now the three words "Frost Halberd City" left on the map are just an empty name.

The real new city is established two miles northwest of the old city, depending on mountains and ridges, as a temporary location.

It is called "New Frost Halberd," but it resembles more of a wind-sheltered haven constructed from gray bricks, planks, and recycled remnants, every brick and tile appearing rushed and pitiful.

Even so, the Duke insists on naming it "Frost Halberd City."

Because, in his view, if even the name were lost, then the Northern Territory would truly have no backbone left.

But the reconstruction of New Frost Halberd City is not yet complete, not even "formed," merely surrounded by a rough frame following the mountain's shape.

Only the core Government Hall, Command Tower, and barracks have initially taken shape; the rest of the area is built with many prefabricated wooden houses, temporary panels, and simple roofs.

Walking into the streets, gray bricks yet to be plastered can be seen everywhere, low eaves, temporarily fixed gutters, moisture lingering.

People have moved in, making the houses feel cramped.

During the day, the sound of sawing wood and hammering nails rises and falls; at night, it's the crackling of stove fires spreading from one household to another.

Children run in the muddy ground, women airing damp clothes and blankets, soldiers exchanging a few idle words with street vendors while patrolling.

Soldiers jokingly call this place the "Canvas Fortress," while civilians privately refer to it as the "Winter Camp."

But the Duke always insists on one name: "This is Frost Halberd, we will not give up this name, just as we should not give up this permafrost land."

It's also one of the reasons he insists on holding a "Frost Halberd meeting" before winter.

The meeting venue is in the new Governor's Mansion of Frost Halberd City, actually just the product of hastily repairing a discarded fortress.

But after the fall of old Frost Halberd City, it became the last venue for events in the entire Northern Territory.

The nobles of the Northern Territory never cared about pomp; especially after the Mother Nest War, they were more focused on whether the firewood was enough, and whether the guards were well-fed.

But even so, they made slight efforts to dress up for this meeting.

The hall's dome was painted dark gray, curtains hung, the wooden podium and long table polished and repainted, several oil lamps striving to cast a bit of warm glow.

Not quite solemn, nor comfortable, but compared to discussing matters in tents, it's already "decent."

This was a high-level internal meeting belonging to the Edmund Clan.

Only those truly holding power, bearing the Edmund Clan's blood, or who could still barely maintain order in the aftermath of insect catastrophe, could attend.

Not anyone just wanting to come could join, not even the currently soaring Red Tide Lord Louis was included on the list.

No whispering, no needless chatter, the conference room was momentarily silent and oppressive.

Most of them understood clearly how much power Duke Edmund actually still possessed.

And how difficult this year had been for the entire Northern Territory's old nobility.

The expression of those around the conference table varied, fatigue enveloping them, a year of snow, a year of decaying corpses, a year of insect poison, seeming to have carved into their eyes.

The door at this moment was pushed open from outside.

A burly man wearing a black-red cloak appeared.

His presence seemed to make the air of the hall more heavy.

Beneath the cloak was a simple yet heavy military-style uniform, epaulets adorned with gold dragon emblem, a badge symbolizing the Empire's shield pinned on the chest, exceptionally eye-catching.

He was Duke Edmund, one of the most prestigious warriors in the Northern Empire.

Though age had carved some wrinkles onto his face and dyed his temples gray, his frame remained as sturdy as iron.

He appeared not like an old man, but more like a cast-iron statue emerging from ancient battlefields.

Yet, no matter how steady his expression, it couldn't hide the occasional fatigue flickering in those eyes.

It wasn't the senile ailment, but a deep fatigue from mental exhaustion.

Like a giant who once supported mountains, now still holding on, but with subtle cracks beginning to appear deep within his bones.

Edmund walked to the main seat, paused slightly, and glanced over everyone, carrying an invisible pressure, making one involuntarily straighten their backs.

"Let's not engage in pleasantries," he said, sitting down with one palm resting on the table edge, "Just get to the recent situations."

Kavier the scribe opened the leather ledger, without preamble, stating directly: "As of this winter, the total population of the Northern Territory is less than one-fifth of pre-insect disaster numbers."

No one in the hall felt surprised, yet several vassal representatives lowered their heads in sighs.

"The current population mainly concentrates in several regions 'still able to maintain autonomy and order,' such as New Frost Halberd, Silver Bay Valley, Red Tide Territory, etc.

Additionally, new Pioneer Nobles arriving from the south have brought many refugees and slaves, although helpful, the overall situation... is not as it used to be."

He turned a page, continuing: "Regarding total grain supply: 650 carts of grain from the Imperial Capital, with two-thirds under our control for distribution. The rest is supervised by Imperial appointees and foreign emissaries, allocated to respective regions."

Chapter 430: Frost Halberd's Predicament (Part 2)

"This year's autumn harvest wasn't ideal," he said briefly, but it was clear enough, "Too little land cleared, too severe land wastage. Those who can farm have either died or are recovering from injuries. Farmers who can work can't even gather enough plows."

The chamber fell silent.

"...Additionally, from the Red Tide Territory—Viscount Calvin sent five thousand tons of green wheat. It was moved into storage yesterday via the West Shore Corridor."

The people in the chamber were stunned.

"Five thousand tons?"

"At this time, who else can spare five thousand tons of surplus grain?" Count Haigel frowned, his voice incredulous.

"Is it 'sent'?" someone asked softly, "Not traded, not loaned?"

Kavier nodded, his voice calm, "Indeed, it's a supply. No price is marked. The letter states that Louis 'voluntarily gifted' it."

Everyone simultaneously turned their gaze toward Duke Edmund sitting at the head seat.

The Duke merely nodded silently, his face showing no clear emotion, but his eyes slightly narrowed, as if suppressing some complex feelings.

He certainly knew about this matter, even earlier than everyone present.

The night before the grain carts set off, Louis had personally sent him a letter, saying this year had yielded a bountiful harvest and he was sending some grain.

Less than three days after that letter, his youngest daughter, Emily, also sent a family letter from the Red Tide Territory.

The content was still understated: "Father, this year's yield is much better than expected. I agreed with Louis that we won't take part in the empire's resource allocation this time; we can even send some over."

And the so-called "some" was five thousand tons of green wheat.

Duke Edmund shook his head, a barely perceptible smile touched his lips, like a long-missed consolation amid the endless winter snow.

"...Perhaps the one good news amidst all the bad news recently," he thought.

Seeing him not expressing any stance, the meeting continued.

"What about coal?" a noble vassal in the corner asked softly.

Kavier nodded in acknowledgment, continued to read aloud, "Current coal stock is less than forty percent. Priority distributions will go to the sentinel posts guarding the city, command hall, noble district, and key shelters. Most ordinary residents rely on rotten wood for warmth."

He turned to the next page, his tone deepening further: "Regarding medicine, storage is also critically low, with reports of small-scale epidemics spreading from multiple areas.

Imperial aid medicine is about to run out. Therefore, we must... prepare for the overlapping challenges of severe cold and disease."

No one spoke immediately.

The big figures lowered their heads, faces weary and resigned.

And on the high seat, Duke Edmund merely closed his eyes briefly.

These situations, he had long been aware of.

On his desk was a stack of even more reports, each page with brittle corners from frost and dried cracks from pen marks.

"...Indeed, there's no better method." Xavier finally spoke.

He scanned the room, presenting his proposal: "My suggestion is to formally implement the personnel aggregation plan before the first snowfall this winter."

He opened a new chart, pointing to several marked areas: "Transfer the citizens as much as possible to the 'core shelter areas,' centralize heating, and concentrate coal distribution.

Maintain tier-three food ration standards, prioritizing military and government, limiting civilians to soup; it's all we can do at this stage."

He closed the booklet, looking at the high-seated person, "At least... we can avoid widespread deaths from cold and hunger."

After his statement, the hall remained silent.

Because everyone knew this truly was the most reliable way to survive at present.

Edmund did not respond immediately, he merely exhaled deeply as if releasing the cold accumulated in his chest throughout the winter: "Proceed accordingly."

Once Xavier settled back into his seat, the meeting fell into a momentary quietude.

Then, a gray-haired noble by the north side of the round table spoke somberly, "How many people can we muster now?"

His tone lacked provocation, just dryly voiced out the question on everyone's mind but none wished to utter.

Xavier hesitated briefly, finally flipping to a document:

"...Originally sixty-three Northern Territory vassals," he said softly, "As of this winter, only twenty-three can muster effective military force."

"The others fell victim to the insect plague, lost contact directly... or simply pledged allegiance to other powers."

Various expressions changed among the crowd, many furrowed their brows tightly.

"The Northern Territory's noble system is fragmenting," Kavier added, "We can no longer organize defenses and allocate resources through hierarchical orders as before."

"And this, can still be counted as 'nobility'?" a young general couldn't help but mockingly snort.

Just then, General Barrett spoke up: "Moreover, after the insect plague was quelled, the Empire's Military Affairs Department forcibly stationed three temporary knight orders under the guise of 'security patrol,' taking control of several key points on the old south line."

"They're entrenched in Old Iron Fort, Selan Pass, and Silver Pine Ridge, nominally under command, yet... acting independently," he spoke slowly but each sentence hit like a hammer, "Soldiers have clashed with them at the border."

He concluded coldly: "They're not here to guard the Northern Territory, they're here to seize power and land."

The air in the chamber seemed to freeze.

Then Edmund finally spoke slowly: "These are minor issues, the most crucial is the external barbarian forces, recently, none of the five scout riders returned; I have a very bad feeling."

He turned to Barrett, "From tomorrow, deploy thirty elite knights, in six routes. Directly investigate the Barbarian Territory."

"Tell them," he instructed, "Even if only one remains... bring the news back."

His voice wasn't loud, yet sent shivers through everyone in the hall.

No one spoke again.

Because they all understood, should the barbarians seize the chance to march south, the already fragile Northern Empire would plunge into an unprecedented crisis.

Later in the meeting, several secondary topics were discussed, such as a recent letter from the Ministry of Finance proposing that the Imperial Capital appoint commissioners to oversee the next round of disaster relief grain distribution, causing dissatisfaction among several noble representatives.

Additionally, multiple new noble troops from the south settled in the Northern Territory, frequently clashing with local old nobles over station allocation and resource distribution, with tensions gradually rising.

And other relatively less significant topics.

These topics sparked some disputes, but Duke Edmund continued to stay silent, just listening quietly until the meeting officially concluded.

By the end of the meeting, night had fully fallen.

On the command tower of New Frost Halberd City, one lamp after another was lit, snowstorm blew past the temporary wooden eaves, swirling cold air along the stone-paved streets.

Everyone gradually left their seats, some whispered softly, others had complex expressions.

Yet Duke Edmund just stood up from his high-back chair, nodded in acknowledgment, and left slowly.

The meeting indeed resolved some pressing issues, distribution plans were finalized, patrol plans advanced, even some vassal troop deployments received principled agreement.

But these felt like patching up a leaking ship, and how long it could float no one knew.

And he himself, more than anyone, understood the bottom of that ship was long riddled with cracks.

Duke Edmund returned to the back residence of the Governor's Mansion.

He didn't go to his study first, nor change out of his heavy armor, but directly pushed open the door of the warming room on the west side.

Inside, Duchess Alina was sitting on a low couch, gently soothing the baby she held.

She heard the footsteps and looked up, revealing a faint smile, "Back early."

Edmund didn't reply, went over to sit beside her, reaching an arm to take the swaddled child.

The child slept soundly, there's even some dried milk around his lips, small fists curled in front of his chest, soft like a ball of cotton.

Edmund lowered his head to gaze at him, roughened fingers lightly tapped the child's forehead.

He smiled, a rare gentle expression.

But the smile lasted only a moment, silently fading into the deep gray in his eyes.

Alina leaned against him, sitting down: "You left with your back straight today... and now it's slumped again."

He didn't respond, just exhaled slowly.

The final battle of the Nest War, those creatures almost took his life, combined with his old injuries, he knew his time was limited.

Maybe a few years, maybe less.

But he couldn't bear to fall.

He looked at the child in his arms, that little life oblivious to the world's dangers, his flesh and blood, the next generation of the family.

And saw Alina's weary yet still gentle eyes.

And the unfinished city in the snowstorm, tens of thousands of shattered yet unyielding residents, pervasive cold winds, ruins, and wailing...

He couldn't collapse yet.

Even if by dragging himself forward step by step.

"Let's hold on for a few more years," he spoke softly, as if talking to himself, "If I'm not here, what will become of them."