

Winter 491

Chapter 491: Territory Exchange (2)

Wei Lan cautiously took a sip of the honey wine, feeling a slight stirring of energy within his blood, and remarkably, his fighting energy seemed to have increased somewhat.

"Good wine..." he blurted out.

This gift relaxed the atmosphere at the banquet, and the two ate and drank without discussing serious matters.

But Wei Lan was still uneasy, pondering Horn's intentions.

It wasn't until halfway through the banquet that Horn set down his wine glass and spoke slowly.

His tone was gentle, without any official airs or the least bit of concealment: "Baron Wei Lan, the Red Tide Territory hopes to exchange lands with you."

As soon as these words fell, the smile on Wei Lan's face momentarily froze imperceptibly.

On the surface, he quickly regained his composure and even poured himself a glass of wine, but inside he was already in turmoil.

So, they had their eyes on this barren land beneath his feet.

It seemed shrouded in mist with a mysterious air, but he knew better than anyone the true nature of this place.

It grew almost no crops, the soil was barren, and each year's harvest barely fed the livestock, leaving only fallow ground.

For three whole months, sunlight didn't reach in, and the mist lingered like the sighs of the dead among the treetops, and a knight once even reported seeing mysterious shadows, which caused an uproar in half the territory.

And the most damning fact was that this place was utterly undevelopable, with no resources whatsoever.

He had sent people to try clearing the vegetation, only for it to turn to ash within days. Attempting to build a fort was futile, as the foundations always collapsed.

The only usable resource was a vine that could be used as rope, to trade with the Red Tide Territory for supplies.

Claiming this land rashly back then was his greatest mistake since obtaining the Northern Territory pioneering rights.

So at this moment, when Red Tide's people unexpectedly suggested exchanging that land, his first reaction was not anger, but surprise.

A sense of excitement at hitting the jackpot surged in his heart.

Have these Red Tide folks gone blind? They actually want this land?

But then, the caution hidden beneath his initial joy quickly resurfaced.

Something's wrong... Wait, these people would never make a losing deal.

Horn was a formal special envoy from the Red Tide Territory, and their dealings were as shrewd as foxes.

Wei Lan kept up his stiff smile, inner anxiety rising.

If Red Tide traded him something worse, like the "Blackwater Swamp" or "Icebite Ridge," places so desolate not even birds could survive, he'd be jumping from hardship into hell.

As Wei Lan weighed the pros and cons, trying to steer the conversation away from the main topic, Horn calmly pulled out a scroll.

He unrolled it before everyone, the firelight illuminating a meticulously drawn map, with a red seal from the administration office of the Red Tide prominently stamped on the corners.

"Baron, please take a look," Horn's tone was gentle and composed, as he pointed with his fingertip, "We are willing to trade you this fertile land to the north for your Ghost Vine Slope."

The area he pointed to was situated in the north of the southeast region, adjacent to a river's tributary, with flat terrain and abundant water sources.

The map was finely annotated with numerous labels.

Marshes at the river mouth, three marked usable farmlands, two paths, and a suspected Cold Iron vein.

"The terrain here is stable and does not easily waterlog; the southern slope's soil is gray-brown, found suitable for wheat growth after surveying." Horn added, raising his eyes, "More importantly, a suspected iron mine, an extension of a Cold Iron vein, is likely here."

Wei Lan's heart suddenly wavered, his breath even paused for a moment.

Cold Iron Ore? Such a mature vein could nearly sustain an entire territory!

This could be considered quite a fine land, compared to his Ghost Vine Slope ridden with phantasmal shadows, it was precisely the kind of legitimate fiefdom that the nobility dreamed of.

But wait, something's amiss...

Why? Why would Red Tide exchange a piece of land that could almost serve as a main city's vassal territory for his land?

But either way, he knew for sure he had to ask for more.

So he slowly showed a troubled expression, sighed, lifted his glass to mask his face, and squeezed out a reluctant smile: "Your Excellency's words... came unexpectedly. This is my ancestral..."

Horn didn't wait for him to finish, the tone remaining gentle, but with alarming frankness that brought cold sweat: "Baron, you've been in the Northern Territory for just two years, ancestral is a bit of a stretch..."

The air suddenly stilled.

Though thick-skinned, Wei Lan's heart skipped a beat, almost spilling his wine.

He coughed twice, wearing a sheepish smile: "Ahem... Indeed, I was mistaken."

But Wei Lan's skin was thick enough, his expression switched to a fake look of regret and he mournfully said:

"While not by bloodline, I've grown attached to this land. Patrolling amidst the mountain mists every day, listening to the misty birdsong, I've come to see it as a child."

The attendant beside him almost spat out his wine.

But Horn remained unfazed, only smiling slightly, as if he had anticipated this rhetoric.

"In that case," he said, unhurriedly, "we'll add another one hundred gold coins, and three months' worth of the territory's grain allocation."

He spoke casually, as if discussing a trivial transaction, adding offhandedly:

"Red Tide Territory is interested in this area's convenient terrain for commerce. If the Baron finds it hard to part with, it's fine."

Wei Lan was secretly delighted: This is more like it! It seems my audacious demand was the right move!

But he still wore a stipulated aggrieved look, frowning to the point where he could crush a mosquito:
"This... your Excellency is indeed a reasonable person... but..."

He paused, his eyes showing a glimmer of "add a bit more."

Horn didn't respond, instead sipping his wine, calmly observing him, showing neither impatience nor any willingness to raise the price.

They quietly stared at each other for a few beats.

Realizing his lack of bargaining experience, Wei Lan sensed this might be Red Tide's highest offer, and further demands might cause him to lose the deal.

Reluctantly clenching his teeth, he moderated his thoughts with a feigned expression of weighing greater good, slowly nodding: "Very well, in light of Lord Louis' favor... let's proceed with the exchange."

Having said this, Wei Lan purposely covered his face with his hand, muttering under his breath as if at a great loss, though his mouth had already quietly crooked up.

Trading a foggy slope where even knights refused to patrol, for fertile land, rivers, mineral veins, plus gold coins and food...

"It's like manna from heaven; Red Tide Territory is truly generous..." Wei Lan laughed inwardly.

Horn slightly tilted his head, his gaze sweeping across Wei Lan's barely concealed glee.

This newly minted Pioneer Noble still tried hard to suppress his smile, not very naturally, truly a novice negotiator.

Yet Horn didn't expose him, only offering a faint smile.

He had achieved his objective.

Horn still didn't understand why Lord Louis personally marked this almost non-productive barren slope as a premium exchange.

But he knew that with the current trade terms, the Red Tide Territory could at least make room three to four times over.

In other words, Horn secured an incredibly overpriced target at an extremely small cost.

"Mission accomplished perfectly." Horn smiled slightly, laying out the pre-prepared dossier on the table.

"If there are no objections, please sign and seal, Baron."

Wei Lan was already eager, maintaining modesty before the envoy, yet now saw the other party voluntarily offer pen and paper, smiling so broadly that the corners of his eyes wrinkled like flowers: "Naturally, naturally!"

He pretended to examine the document, muttering "reasonable terms" and "Lord Louis is indeed a righteous person."

Then, without hesitation, he stamped his family crest.

Horn silently took notes from the side, rising to bid farewell courteously whilst retrieving the map and contract back slowly.

Meanwhile, Baron Wei Lan remained submerged in his self-satisfaction of being a negotiation genius, as if he had just outmaneuvered a great threat.

But little did they know, beneath this seemingly insignificant barren slope, lay dormant a priceless treasure.

The sprawling roots of the Abyss Silk Flower, if successfully refined, could become the core nerve fibers of a new generation of Magic Explosion Bullet ignites.

It would be the key weapon to reverse the tide in future warfare.

Chapter 492: The Art of Negotiation

As the special envoys continuously traveled between the various small noble territories, the expansion of Red Tide Territory was advancing at an undeniable pace.

The reason lies in the fact that most Lords of these lands feel little attachment to the soil beneath their feet; given enough temptation, they are ready to let go, for example, in exchange for land more suitable for their own development.

Moreover, these small Nobility understand well that without the support and trade from Red Tide Territory, their territories would have long been devoured by war and famine.

Before the arrival of Red Tide, even without war, they endured the dilemma of food shortages, relying on outside assistance to survive.

And now, Red Tide Territory is like a lighthouse, emitting reassuring light, protecting them from external pressure and harassment.

Especially for those Pioneer Nobles who arrived in the Northern Territory for less than two years, their land feels more like a burden.

If not for the Northern Territory Expansion Order forbidding Pioneer Lords from leaving the Northern Territory arbitrarily.

These people would rather sell their land and return to the South to continue living as their own playboys.

Being a distressed Lord of the North, ah, for us southern young masters, there's nothing but eating and drinking.

And now, Lord Louis of Red Tide Territory has given them a new opportunity.

The supply of food, money, and materials has revived them from their previous poverty.

The commerce of goods has restored their sense of nobility, allowing them to enjoy the luxurious life they once lost.

Every cart of wine sent from Red Tide Territory is a hope for their continued extravagance.

So when Red Tide Territory proposed the land exchange, many small nobles agreed without hesitation.

Looking at the land in their hands, they feel little reluctance.

Who wouldn't want to seize such an opportunity for a more secure future?

However, not everyone can complete the transaction in one go.

There is a small portion of Nobility, possessing inexplicable obsessions.

This land is a symbol of their family's glory and the testament of generations' sweat and struggle.

Whether it's a windswept plain or the busy figures in the fields, these elements are deeply engraved in their lives, nearly becoming a part they cannot separate from.

No matter how tempting the current offer is.

The exchange plan from Red Tide Territory, offering food, money, resources, and future guarantees, still cannot sway their persistence toward this land.

Hence, these Noble Lords, Louis did not force the exchange.

Instead, he proposed a new scheme with a cooperative attitude: jointly developing the land, building a future together.

"We are not merely exchanging this piece of land," the envoy from Red Tide said gently, "We can cooperate, cultivate land, establish workshops, and achieve mutual benefits.

Red Tide Territory is willing to provide materials and technical support while we share all the benefits of this land, just requiring you to cede some power to Red Tide Territory."

This proposal is almost the only way these nobles can accept.

Although they cannot part with this land, faced with the promises from Red Tide Territory and harsh realities, they realize they have no other choice.

If they persist in their own territory, their family influence will gradually weaken, and they might not be able to survive.

After a long period of consideration, these nobles finally agreed to Red Tide Territory's proposal.

"We are willing to cooperate and explore the future together." One Lord nodded, his voice carrying a trace of determination.

Even though their hearts are filled with distress, they are willing to leave past glory behind and embrace new opportunities for the future of their family.

The subsequent cooperative attitude of Red Tide Territory also eased the minds of these Nobles.

They no longer stubbornly cling to the form of this land but work hard for future common prosperity.

Apart from the few Nobility who uphold ancestral glory, most Lords focus solely on immediate benefits.

And although they know the conditions offered by Red Tide Territory are already quite favorable.

Seeing the envoys from Red Tide extend the olive branch, many small Noble Lords begin to become greedy, believing they hold negotiation chips and can demand higher conditions.

Thinking in their hearts: "This is a big piece of juicy meat, how could I let such a rare opportunity slip away?"

These people understand how important Red Tide Territory's protection is to them.

"Add three thousand more gold coins as an extra exchange reward." One Lord raised his eyebrows, proposing proudly.

"Or provide two more years of food quota?" Another Lord greedily added.

Some Lords even proposed more outrageous conditions, asking Red Tide Territory to reduce land taxes or even ask for more land in exchange.

They are confident about these proposals, believing that Red Tide Territory's envoys will surely compromise for a piece of land.

After all, after offering such "generous" land, they shouldn't receive no return.

But it seems Red Tide Territory's envoys predicted such negotiation tactics.

They calmly dealt with each unreasonable request, not making any compromises.

Under the continuous pressure from these greedy Nobility, a Red Tide envoy coldly stated: "If that's the case, let's not waste any more time."

Then he left the banquet room directly, leaving the demanding Lord in bewilderment.

At that time, many Lords thought this was a negotiation tactic from Red Tide Territory.

No matter what, they are confident they will eventually gain more benefits and won't give up the opportunity.

Chapter 493: The Art of Negotiation (2)

However, in the following month, they noticed unusual changes.

The aid goods and supplies that were once delivered on time from the Red Tide Territory were now nowhere to be seen.

Some lords couldn't sit still and immediately sent letters of inquiry to the Red Tide Territory.

Yet, the Red Tide Territory did not provide much explanation, only claiming: "Currently, supplies are scarce, and approvals must follow the regulations in order."

But no specific dates or queue orders were reported.

As days passed by, more and more lords began to realize they might have been intentionally ignored by the Red Tide Territory.

"Is this the way of the Red Tide Territory? Truly barbaric." they murmured, feeling uneasy.

The nobles who once thought they could gain more benefits from the Red Tide Territory gradually understood they had reached a dead end.

The patience of the Red Tide Territory had reached its limit; any attempt to be greedy in trade would ultimately pay the price.

As time went by, many nobles who originally insisted on not giving up their territories gradually became complex.

Some once arrogant lords now began to show helplessness and anger.

Even though they felt dissatisfied, they gradually realized they couldn't refuse the proposal of the Red Tide Territory.

Several months later, almost all the lords proactively requested a land exchange with the Red Tide Territory.

But to their surprise, the terms offered by the Red Tide Territory were much lower than the initial version!

This made them very angry, questioning the envoy why this was the case.

The envoy shrugged indifferently and said, "Next time, it will be even less."

As their territories were already unreachable, some lords could only accept it helplessly.

While others tried to continue negotiating, fantasizing about securing better exchange conditions or the initial terms.

But with each round of negotiations, they eventually discovered that the first offer from the Red Tide Territory was the highest version, and every subsequent version would only be lower.

These greedy nobles were no longer arrogant and even regretted why they didn't agree to the land exchange from the beginning.

The damn market monopoly left them with no chance to resist.

But what could they do?

This world never really cares about fairness and decency; it's a naked contest of the survival of the fittest.

Moreover, today's Northern Territory is far from ordinary times.

After the insect plague and the war with the Barbarian Race, the entire power structure collapsed and reorganized.

Besides Duke Edmund, the only person who could really enable survival was the young lord of the Red Tide Territory.

A complaint? Even the avenue for complaints no longer existed.

At the Northern Empire reconstruction meeting, Louis presided over it, not to mention the inspector who had long fled the Northern Territory and was still missing.

Even the Imperial Capital itself was in chaos, and this little matter in the Northern Territory didn't cause even the slightest ripple.

In this Southeastern snowy land, the place that could keep them fed and alive was the Red Tide Territory.

The power that could control resources, the market, and decide who lived or died was only the Red Tide Territory.

Thus, they bowed their heads.

Even though they knew they suffered losses, they could only grit their teeth and accept the currently reduced exchange terms.

"At least... we can still get something in return, rather than nothing." they consoled themselves.

Just like that, an invisible gigantic hand steadily gathered piece after piece of land from those old nobles and Pioneer Lords.

Absorbed were not just those seemingly "resource-poor" border hills or "seemingly disposable" forested mountain valleys.

The truly important were those territories containing special resources or located at strategic passages and transportation nodes.

The Ghost Vine Slope was just the beginning.

As well as the Fuhe Ferry, Cold Branch Valley, Red Earth Ridge...

Each plot silently circled in red by Louis on the map now officially changed hands.

With one contract after another, eighty percent of the target territories were all gathered in the bag.

But there were always a few places, where neither exchanges nor cooperation happened, no matter how advantageous the proposals, they stubbornly refused to give in.

There must be something fishy!

This wasn't an ordinary lord, so a heavy strike was necessary!

For example, in the constantly advancing expansion plans of the Red Tide Territory, there was a corner that remained excessively quiet.

The land of Viscount Zachariah.

He was the only noble who showed no sign of concession from beginning to end, without submitting exchanges or discussing cooperation.

He even sent away the special envoy from the Red Tide without allowing him to have a sip of hot water.

Why?

It's not that he's stubbornly ignorant of the situation.

In fact, Viscount Zachariah had been living in extreme torment these days.

Every morning when he woke, the first thing he did was stand atop his tower and gaze southward, silently praying: "Please don't let anyone come... please don't."

Because he knew very well that once people from the Red Tide actually set foot on this land, it wouldn't matter whether the land was exchanged or not.

His own body might just end up hanging over the city gates, becoming a wind-dried specimen.

The reason is simple; he was not an ordinary noble.

He was a relic of the "Old Snow Country," once entangled with the now eradicated Snow Swearer.

Even with the status of an Imperial noble, his underground hall still worshipped the remnants of the Ancient God of Cold Abyss.

Every year, live sacrifices were offered in exchange for protection from death in the frigid winds of winter.

Where did the sacrificed people come from?

Just catch a few from within the territory, it's that simple.

So when the Red Tide Territory proposed a "land exchange cooperation" plan and sent a special envoy, Zachariah was almost scared out of his wits.

If the Red Tide Territory were to enter, they could see everything.

"If I'm found out... then it's over, truly over."

So he made a decision that seemed strong but was actually panicked: close the city gates, refuse all people from the Red Tide.

Even at the risk of offending the Lord of the Red Tide, he couldn't let them in!

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The morning sunlight passed through the high window, falling on a huge map of the North East where marks were densely packed.

Most of the land had been colored with a deep red mark, signifying the ever-expanding territory of the Red Tide.

These were pieces of land annexed, integrated, or exchanged, spreading around the main city like a tide.

But there were still a few places that stood out distinctly.

Black stamps, lonely embedded among the red, like rotten tumors.

"As of yesterday, the ninth batch of special envoys has completed their reports." Bradley lowered his head, flipping through the files.

"Eighty percent of the land inclusion agreements are completed, only the last three territories have not been successfully contacted."

He pointed to a particularly conspicuous black mark near the edge on the map in a hilly area.

"For instance, the land of Viscount Zachariah still refuses the Red Tide envoy at the door. I am still unable to determine his intentions."

A moment of brief silence ensued in the meeting hall.

The officials responsible for the negotiations exchanged glances, faintly revealing a hint of unease.

"He has issues." A middle-aged intelligence officer spoke up, "He obviously has unspeakable secrets, special measures must be used."

"Reason for deploying troops?" A young official frowned, "Without evidence, hasty military actions... might provoke criticism."

However, the youth seated at the main position spoke up unhurriedly the next moment.

"No reason?" Louis raised his eyes, his tone ominously calm, "Open their gates first. If there's truly no crime..."

He paused briefly, then smiled and said, "...then find a suitable one to pin on."

With these words, the entire meeting hall felt the chill rise several degrees.

No one spoke again.

For a viscount, finding a "suitable crime" was never a problem.

Of course, they didn't know that Louis had already learned through the Daily Intelligence System about Viscount Zachariah's worship of the Evil God.

"The Broken Blade Knight Order is currently stationed at the Red Rock Pass, a hundred elite knights can be deployed to reach the border of Zachariah within a day." Lambert reminded.

"Let Reggie lead the team." Louis said softly, as if arranging a trivial matter.

Chapter 494: Heavy Strike

Red Rock Pass.

The iron horse neighed softly, like a long-silent blade waiting to be drawn.

Over a hundred knights of the Broken Blade Knight Order stood in neat rows on the platform of the pass.

Their battle robes were no longer the deep blue of Frost Halberd City but had donned the custom-made red and blue cloaks of the Red Tide Territory, signifying they originated from Frost Halberd and were now loyal to Red Tide.

They were supposed to be stationed here as merely a "buffer point" of the Red Tide's northern defense.

But now, at last, they were about to embrace the opportunity to express their loyalty for the first time.

At the front of the formation, a rider stood in the wind.

It was Regi Olson, the deputy head of the Broken Blade Knight Order, formerly the youngest Extraordinary Knight of Frost Halberd City.

His silver hair lifted slightly in the dawn light, an ice-blue longsword resting across the saddle, restrained yet thunderous in aura.

He surveyed the entire army, his gaze like a blade sweeping across the face of each knight, speaking unhurriedly:

"We've just joined Red Tide and haven't yet fought a battle worthy of our vows. You all remember what Lord Louis has done for us.

Provisioning for your families, thrice the salary, healing potions when you're injured, and even arrangements for your children's education... all have been well taken care of.

And now it's time to repay all of this."

With that, he slowly drew his longsword, slanting it across his chest, the sunlight reflecting off the blade in an icy gleam.

"We are the edge of the Northern Territory, the blade of the vow."

Regi's horse hooves moved half a step forward slowly.

Behind him, a hundred knights simultaneously tapped their sword hilts to the ground, the clashing of armor like a hundred iron bells ringing in unison, followed by a collective shout that shook the pass walls:

"Fight for Red Tide, no retreat without victory!!!"

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As the scout rode into the castle, bringing back that chilling message, Viscount Zachariah was arguing with two advisors over the arrangement of the sacrificial ceremony in the hall.

"My lord, it's the Red Tide Knights at Red Rock Pass, coming this way, not a patrol... it's the Knight Order!"

A mere sentence, yet it pierced Viscount Zachariah's heart and lungs like an ice pick.

His expression darkened abruptly, slamming the table as he stood up, shouting angrily, "Louis?! How dare he!"

There was anger in his tone, but the panic was unmistakable in his eyes.

He thought he had weathered this crisis a month after the Red Tide Special Envoy met with failure, since surely they wouldn't resort to forceful coercion.

But who knew, they would directly send knights to seize! Is there truly no law in the Northern Territory anymore?

Yet, upon learning that the opponent was only a hundred knights, a flash of contempt crossed Zachariah's eyes, this young man was truly overconfident, and must be taught a lesson.

"Only a hundred men? Do they think a hundred men can step into my territory?"

He sneered, tossing the military report into the fireplace, the paper quickly turning to ash in the flames, but he felt no warmth at all.

"Assemble the entire army." He ordered coldly, "Call out my 'old friends' I sheltered during the insect disaster, it's time for them to prove their loyalty."

Then he donned his armor, ascending to the high walls of the inner castle, looking down at the warriors in the courtyard.

Under Zachariah's command, three hundred knights lined up ready, all of them hereditary knights of the Zachariah family.

They were trained and raised in the territory from childhood, his most loyal knights, his most trusted strength.

And outside the castle, another four hundred light-armored warriors were quietly gathering.

Unlike the regular knights, their armor was varied, yet their demeanor was fierce and unruly, with an almost beast-like lust for battle in their eyes.

These were the Snow Swearers who had survived the insect disaster by luck.

They were once the Empire's mortal enemies, once igniting war and blood snow in the Northern Territory.

Now they were secretly sheltered and incorporated by Zachariah into his private army, secretly hidden within.

This was something he could never let be revealed.

If it were discovered he secretly harbored and privately maintained remnants of the Old Snow Country, even if the Red Tide Territory remained silent, the other Northern nobles would never let him off.

In such a scenario, he would not only lose his lands but might not even leave a complete corpse.

Eight hundred men gathered, weapons clanging, banners waving.

Zachariah climbed to the top of the castle, raising the scepter in his hand, a voice carried through the entire army: "Let them know, the might of the Red Tide does not apply to our Snow Country bloodline!"

The soldiers responded in unison, their shouts like thunder.

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The morning frost had not yet dissipated, the cold wind stirred the Red Tide battle flag, flapping loudly.

One hundred knights of the Broken Blade Knight Order stood in formation before the city, the Red Tide sun emblem shining brightly in the sunlight.

Regi's gaze swept coldly over the high walls.

Shadows beneath gray-white cloaks silently stood, backlit, outlining faces both unfamiliar and familiar.

Regi's eye twitched slightly, immediately recognizing they were no ordinary garrison.

He had served in Frost Halberd's Broken Blade for over ten years, the scent... he knew it too well.

Snow Swearers.

A name that should have been extinguished in the insect disaster, yet still lurked in shadow like a venomous snake.

He snorted coldly, his gaze growing colder, his voice not loud, yet sharp as a blade scraping armor: "Those rats, still not all dead."

The fire within him slowly kindled.

He had a blood feud with the Snow Swearers.

Had personally dragged the corpses of brothers ambushed and slain by the Snow Swearers from the battlefield.

Had fought tooth and nail to break free from their ambush, just to leave a glimmer of hope for his comrades.

He thought this swarm had long been devoured by the insect tide, yet here they were, crawling out like maggots from meat again.

Regi's hand had already grasped the hilt of his sword: "It seems we are in the right place."

He slowly drew the longsword engraved with the Broken Blade emblem, pointing it at the tightly shut city gates: "Magic Burst team, prepare."

Chapter 495: Heavy Assault (Part 2)

A few heavily armored knights with Red Tide's special fighting energy cloaks rode forward from the rear, shouldering heavy Red Tide-style magic explosion bullet launchers, the barrels trembling with a metallic "click".

Regis stood at the front of the formation, waved his sword, and shouted like thunder: "Pierce through the enemy gate!"

Boom!!

The next second, a magic explosion bullet tore through the air, crashing towards the front gate like meteoric rain!

With a loud bang, the entire wooden and iron double doors shattered explosively, debris scattering dozens of steps away, the knights defending behind were blasted off their mounts.

The explosion's shockwave, wrapped in fiery destruction, instantly engulfed several rows of guards at the entrance.

Regis's lips coldly curled: "Not bad."

Then he slashed his sword forward obliquely, shouting: "Broken Blade, attack!"

The knight order rallied with a roar, like a steel fortress suddenly advancing, silver-patterned longswords raised high in charge.

On the city wall, Viscount Zachariah's face was pale, his figure stumbled as he was knocked to the ground, his cloak torn by the magic explosion's aftermath, looking disheveled and pitiful.

"A frontal assault!? Damn... are they crazy!"

He struggled to stand up, looking down at the hundred Red Tide knights breaking through like lightning, his throat tightening.

The three hundred knights had not yet fully formed their ranks, and the four hundred Snow Swearer's remnants were still redeploying.

He thought there was at least time to build a defense line, but that initial magic explosion bullet shattered the entire battlefield rhythm.

Regis charged at the forefront, like an azure-blue streak of light weaving through the enemy lines, sword light flashing, blood splattering, resembling a flower of the other shore blooming in the snow.

"Watch out!"

The frontline knight commander exclaimed, yet before organizing a counterattack, he saw Regis's longsword sweeping with a cold gleam, and a semicircular fighting energy slash burst into the air.

Boom!

The two leading knights, horse and all, were split in two; blood lines hadn't even settled before the corpses fell lifeless.

"Don't be afraid! They are only a hundred! Surround them!" yelled a deputy, trying to stabilize morale.

But before he finished speaking, the Broken Blade Knight Order spread its wings instantly!

The heavy cavalry pressed forward, like an iron wall crushing the enemy's front line, while the rear light cavalry penetrated the breach Regis made, slashing into the stream of blood and flesh like a giant longsword.

Blades tore through iron armor, fighting energy shattered spears, and every move by the Broken Blade knights was as precise and lethal as from a textbook, conducting an efficient slaughter.

"Retreat quickly! Retreat!!"

The sound of the defeated finally rang, the frontline collapsing like a snow dam breaking.

Suddenly, a shout erupted from the flank: "Kill!!!"

It was a Snow Swearer warrior squad temporarily formed, clad in wolf skins of gray and white, eyes crimson.

They charged with battle axes and spears, roaring fiercely over shattered stones, showing no fear against the knights' fighting energy front line.

The leader bolder still, thrust himself forward, wearing rusty armor, roaring as his fighting energy spread like a storm.

But Regis only glanced back coldly.

He pointed his longsword ahead, spoke softly: "Flank, suppress."

A horn sounded, and the left wing of the Broken Blade Knight Order galloped forth immediately.

Leading them was a female knight, her lance's cold gleam like a snake, blue fighting energy swiftly forming into a blade, carving an arc in mid-air!

A strike piercing the Snow Swearer leading warrior's chest, fighting energy bursting through the body, blood mist exploding in the air!

Then more riders arrive simultaneously, shields advancing like walls, heavy blows severing the Snow Swearer's knees and shoulders, their axes knocked away, crushed into blood and mud before any counterattack could form!

Though the Snow Swearer remnants were valiant, under the Knight's fighting energy suppression, they couldn't form formations, broken individually.

The final wave of Snow Swearers gathered behind a ruinous stone building, attempting a last stand with a makeshift defense line.

Yet, the right flank of the Broken Blade unit launched three consecutive magic explosion bullets, blasts exploding, drowning the wails of the remnants.

In mere moments, resistance was entirely quelled.

The gale scattered the gunpowder smoke, the blend of blood and dust filling the ruins of the castle with a rust-like metallic stench.

Once those knights shouting "Surround them," now lay dead across the street, armor shattered, warhorses silently fallen.

And the Broken Blade Knight Order of one hundred men, stood in neat formation amidst the ruins, with only a dozen or so wounded, yet not a single one had fallen.

This was a complete massacre, not even worthy of being called a war, just a ruthless slaughter by high-tier knights over the disadvantaged.

The enemy had only a lingering wave struggling to hold on.

"Lord Viscount! Hurry, run! Escape!!"

Behind the last stone fortress, Viscount Zachariah's face was pale as paper, splattered with the blood of his subordinates.

He grabbed a nearby wounded Snow Swearer soldier, and growled, "The cellar! To the cellar! Through the secret passage, to the sacrificial hall! There's still hope there."

Thus, under the knights' desperate cover, he led over twenty wounded soldiers, stumbling into the main castle, heading straight for the underground evil god altar that had been sealed for many years.

"As long as... as long as we offer blood to Him... He will respond... He will still be willing to protect us, the descendants of the Old Snow Country..." Zachariah's eyes were wild, muttering spells under his breath.

His shadowy soldiers behind him walked alongside the walls, their steps chaotic, blood flowing in a line, but none stopped.

Once those Red Tide Knights caught up, there would be no way out.

At the end of the cellar under the main castle, a dim blue magic light quietly seeped through the cracks.

It was an ancient sacrificial hall, with a circular dome built of white stone bricks, but the seams were already crawling with twisted black vines like snakes, crammed with dense reliefs.

The upside-down statue of the Ancient God of Cold Abyss, seven eyes and a mouth, like a nightmare opened within the ice abyss.

In the center of the stone altar, Viscount Zachariah, his face twisted, knelt on the ground, holding a still-beating human heart aloft, his incantations rapid, like a cold wind passing through cracks, stirring eerie echoes in the space.

"With blood for eyes, with heart for body, blood debts to be repaid by snow... Master of the Cold Abyss, please will you—"

"Enough." A deep voice coldly interrupted the echo of the spells.

The next moment, Fighting Energy exploded like thunder, as the iron door of the cellar burst apart!

Regis's Fighting Energy swept across the altar like an extremely cold wind, followed by dozens of Broken Blade elite carrying swords as they entered.

"You shouldn't have come, Louis's dog..."

Kneeling in the pool of blood, Viscount Zachariah suddenly lifted his head, deep blue sigils surfacing in his eyes, he bit his tongue, and struck the ground with both palms, as blood spread like a web!

The stone slabs instantly revealed dozens of ancient spell marks, writhing like tentacles among the cold abyss deep sea, while in the tremor of spells, the air seemed to stifle, and malice surged like tide.

"With blood as key, with heart as guide! Abyssal cleave!"

A mass of pitch-black magical intent suddenly burst forth, like a soul-tearing screech diving straight at Regis's forehead!

That was the Ancient God of Cold Abyss's mental corruption spell, capable of tearing apart one's will, leading it into the abyss of madness.

But Regis didn't retreat even a single step.

"Star Abyss Barrier, activate."

He murmured, the starry pattern on his forehead blazing, Fighting Energy rising like a shield from his body.

Instantly forming a transparent azure barrier, forcefully blocking that wave of sorcery outside it.

This was his bloodline talent, the Star Abyss Barrier, able to block attacks of Fighting Energy and Magic, and certainly effective against sorcery too.

The clash of evil power against the barrier's edge raised a crackling sound, yet it couldn't penetrate.

With no ripple in his gaze, Regis unsheathed his sword in the next instant, his figure darting like light!

Cold blue Fighting Energy erupted, the longsword transformed into a stream of breaking light, sweeping across before Zachariah's shocked spell could be completed!

"Slash!"

The sword's light cleaved through array and malice.

"Urgh!!!"

Viscount Zachariah's body flung like a rag doll against the cracked statue, spewing masses of blood, his incantations fragmenting, as he fainted completely.

The relief wall of the Ancient God of Cold Abyss shuddered slightly under the aftershock of Fighting Energy.

The statue cracked with a "crack" into a winding seam, as if it too was moaning softly.

Regis sheathed his sword coldly, his protective Fighting Energy gradually retracting, and with a calm turn, he ordered, "Secure the scene, collect evidence, and take him back to Red Tide City."

"Yes!"

The Broken Blade Knight Order elite began dispersing to clear the field, dismantling the remaining offering platform and array engravings, eradicating the entire heretical base one by one, leaving no trace.

Chapter 496: Unifying the Red Tide

"Have you heard? The Red Tide Territory attacked Viscount Zachariah's land."

"What? Did they resort to violence over territorial exchanges? That's too excessive... Are they rebelling?"

Upon hearing the news, the entire nobility circle in the Southeast of the Northern Territory was shaken.

In council halls and reception rooms, hushed discussions spread like wildfire.

"Even for the Red Tide Territory, such behavior is too reckless."

"Who dares negotiate with them now? Today it's Zachariah; tomorrow will it be me?"

Quite a few people began crafting anonymous letters to the Imperial Capital.

The letters were filled with accusations of "forcible land seizure," "military threats," and "violating imperial agreements."

Doubt, fear, anger... quietly grew between the nobles and traders.

The prestige of the Red Tide Territory seemed to be teetering on the edge of collapse.

Until the Red Tide Territory publicly displayed the remnants left from the war.

Corpses were carried outside the city, the remnants of the Snow Swearer soldiers, their arms faintly showing the Snow Swear mark.

At the same time, there were fragments of a broken statue taken from an altar.

Viscount Zachariah worshipped an Evil God in secret, even using live sacrifices as a summoning medium.

Thus, before the anonymous letters were sent, they were burned to ashes.

"... So that's how it is."

"To collude with the remnants of the Old Snow Country and worship an Evil God..."

"The Red Tide has done an incredible deed."

Public opinion reversed instantly, the direction totally changed.

People no longer discussed the "territorial exchange conflict," only the "Evil God's infiltration," and the "Northern threat."

After all, exterminating the Snow Swearer was absolute political correctness in the North, no one dared to object.

When more intelligence was exposed, the entire Southeast noble circle exploded.

Viscount Zachariah, cloaked in a tattered noble cape, was pressed back to Red Tide City by five Broken Blade Knights, his face devoid of his usual pride, replaced by hollow madness after the frenzy.

He soon "gave up" a list of nobles connected to Evil God rituals.

Mostly those frontier nobles who, after the insect disaster, took advantage of the chaos to gather Snow Swearer remnants.

The interior regions were cleared in batches by the Red Tide Territory's knight order.

For external areas, Louis sent the list to the prefect of the respective county, suggesting cooperative handling.

Then, the Red Tide Court sentenced the Zachariah family to extermination for worshipping the Evil God, concealing Snow Swearer remnants, and conducting live sacrifices.

The judgment was led by the Red Tide Law Office, with no defense, no hearing, and no pardon.

Even his youngest illegitimate offspring did not escape.

Other nobles who worshipped the Evil God and harbored Snow Swearers met similar fates.

Their lands were to be taken over and rebuilt by the Red Tide.

Nobles across the Southeast, whether involved with the Evil God or connected to Snow Swearers, suddenly became anxious when the news spread.

For a while, the Red Tide administrative office received a large number of "voluntary land exchange applications."

Surprisingly, even some innocent nobles unrelated to the incident were among them.

They weren't hiding anything; it was just...

"Who knows? What if that lord thinks I 'might have issues'?"

"Exchange land early, put worries to rest, save the trouble of sleepless nights..."

The nobles were well aware of the Red Tide's speed, the completeness of evidence, the severity of suppression, leaving no room for explanation or negotiation.

Anyone still insisting at this point must be utterly foolish.

As for those land exchange applications?

Louis didn't bother inspecting the underlying motives, leaving it to his subordinates to archive and process.

Regardless of innocence, since they voluntarily approached, he'd accept them all.

Thus, under thunderous tactics and iron-blooded authority, Louis gathered almost all the lands he wanted without obstacle.

On the Southeast Northern Territory map, the once incomplete Red Tide domain, fragmented by black territories, finally united as one, resembling a new era's battle flag.

.....

Red Tide Main City · Council Hall.

The afternoon light poured from the dome, quietly illuminating the newly drawn giant map.

A complete map of the Southeast Northern Territory unfolded on the council hall's main wall, with Red Tide City at its center, crimson borders extending like vines, encircling dozens of territories, forming a solid whole.

Only at the edge were some blue spots embedded like scars in the red sea, representing affiliated noble lands not yet officially annexed but having signed cooperation agreements.

At this point, the Red Tide was no longer a frontier survivor but a giant in the fractured Northern Territory.

Inside the meeting hall, the long table spanned the hall.

In the central seat, Louis sat quietly, all eyes naturally focused on him.

Officials had taken their seats, expressions varied, but none were distracted.

They all were the backbone of the current Red Tide political system.

Bradley, the old steward of the Calvin Clan, now overseeing all of Red Tide's internal affairs, held a rock-solid position.

Lambert, Louis's former Guardian Knight, now a Middle Tier Extraordinary Knight and commander of Red Tide's military affairs, wielding control over thousands of Red Tide troops.

Inspector Erin, the only female knight among those who accompanied Louis north, loyal only to Louis, wielding power to oversee and purge corruption, an official's most feared cold-faced adjudicator.

And Director Mike of the Craftsmanship Bureau, Director Desland of the Trade Bureau, Agricultural Bureau official Helena (Director Mike now stationed in Mai Lang Territory responsible for agricultural expansion)...

These names were all selected as loyal followers who chose to support Louis in the early days.

Most came from ordinary backgrounds but possessed exceptional talents discovered by Louis through the Daily Intelligence System, allowing for extraordinary promotion.

Chapter 497: Red Tide Integration (2)

It is precisely these people who support the pillars of Red Tide's current rule, leading this new territory and hundreds of thousands of citizens.

After everyone was seated, the meeting officially began.

Bradley, who had been standing solemnly to the side, slowly stepped forward, bowed slightly, and stood at the center of the long table.

"The Red Tide Land Integration Plan has entered its third month today," Bradley read slowly and steadily.

"A total of twenty-seven areas have been incorporated into the territory, of which nine are strategic locations, all situated at transport routes, mineral veins, and grain production nodes.

Five Evil God worship sites have been sealed, three heretic strongholds have been eradicated, and twelve instances of illegal nobility autonomy have been dismantled, fully integrated into the Red Tide legal framework.

As of yesterday, the new population is approximately sixty-four thousand, with an additional one thousand two hundred hectares of arable land and four hundred eighty hectares of pasture.

Bradley turned to the primary seat, nodding slightly to Louis: "At the lord's suggestion, the original Red Tide Territory is now officially named 'Red Tide City.'

All exchanged, managed, and cooperatively integrated lands will be incorporated into the Red Tide Territory's jurisdiction.

Each jurisdiction will establish a resident official, managed jointly by civilian and knight oversight, with an inspection unit directly under Inspector Erin's command."

The officials whispered among themselves, having anticipated this but still slightly excited by the preliminary formation of the Red Tide system.

Bradley did not close his booklet but turned to the last page, slightly lowering his voice:

"However, though the integration is complete, subsequent affairs require vigilance.

Nearly a hundred new townships have been added, with clerical staffing still below fifty percent, necessitating the reassignment of Red Tide grassroots officials.

The pressure on civilian supply distribution is high, with some border towns yet to fully establish grain depots and supply stations, requiring early planning for storage construction.

While thirty percent of border outposts have begun construction, additional coordination with the Blacksmith Bureau is needed for ongoing construction.

The Barbarian Race scattered soldiers and remnants of the Snow Vow have not appeared, but there is a possibility they may infiltrate the borders, and the Inspectorate has preliminarily delineated key screening areas."

Bradley spoke with great calmness, without embellishing the sentiment.

"Though the district of Red Tide has been established, the hearts of the new citizens still need to be cultivated, and the sense of belonging and order in the towns remains unequal."

He paused, bowing slightly toward the primary seat: "Overall, it is controllable, but requires a multi-pronged approach to be prepared for contingencies."

The people around the table nodded, and several newly appointed officials quickly made low-recorded notes, exchanging brief opinions.

Bradley took his seat, and on the primary seat, Louis slowly opened his eyes, his voice not loud, yet instantly silenced the room.

"Very well, our Red Tide territory has finally taken shape." He paused, his gaze sweeping over the newly hung Red Tide map on the wall, "Next, it is time to bring it to life."

All the officials simultaneously sat up straight, listening intently.

"The most important thing," Louis said softly, "is roads; to develop, we must first build roads."

He looked at the Blacksmith Director Mike sitting to the right, and said, "The Blacksmith Bureau is to immediately prepare for the Red Tide main roadway construction. With Red Tide City at its heart, it will connect to Mai Lang, then extend to all integrated lands."

He pointed to the red line drawn on the map, tapping it twice: "Along the road, every twenty miles, establish 'Defense Outpost + Relay Station nodes,' for patrol stationed garrisons and merchant travel rest stops, etc."

"Understood." Mike promptly stood up, one hand on his chest, speaking in a rough voice:

"My Blacksmith Bureau has prepared fifteen construction teams, including blacksmiths, stonemasons, carpenters, and more. We are willing to open the main line from Red Tide to Mai Lang before the snow melts."

As for the defensive relay station design... I will coordinate with the Defense Bureau and Trade Bureau to determine the placement."

"Very good." Louis nodded, "Local residents can be used as labor, rewarding them with merit and money."

"Yes." Mike bowed again.

Just as Mike sat down, Lambert, the military commander, stood up: "Regarding border defense, I have drafted a simple and direct plan."

He walked to the map and lightly pointed out three locations with the short command staff in his hand:

"Establish three internal military regions—Mai Lang, Star Forge, and Red Tide City. These are the core areas of Red Tide, with a permanent Knight Order, and small territories organizing knight teams of about fifty members."

He shifted his focus, drawing out two bold lines.

"Next, establish five external patrol knight teams, fifty men each team, equipped for reconnaissance, harassment, messaging, disengagement, etc.

Equip them with light armor and fast horses, alternating day and night, changing every five days, patrolling along the Red Tide territory border.

Though the Northern Territory poses no major threat, remnants of the Barbarian Race haven't been completely wiped out, and the Empire's Northern Army frequently tests the boundaries under the guise of patrol.

We do not seek to repel all enemies, but at the very least, we must be aware of their arrival and be prepared."

"Approved, execute." Louis nodded slightly, "You may immediately allocate a legion to participate in the establishment of outposts and patrol knight team formation.

If still no war after the season, arrange for monthly practical exercises, for defense and training."

Lambert bowed: "As you command."

The military proposal concluded, the meeting continued to advance, with all the gears of the Red Tide governance machine gradually set into motion, aided by Louis' nods and approvals, item after item of practical deployments quickly ratified.

For instance, the arrangements of the Trade Bureau.

Trade Bureau Director Desland, a lean and shrewd middle-aged man, brought concise and effective plans.

Proposes setting up "relay posts and trade stations" at each pass and transport key point, managing passage and operating bases.

Deploy skilled personnel to inspect smugglers and maintain caravan order.

Also establish a bulletin board mechanism to relay local information back to the main city promptly, allowing civilians to access policies and intelligence quickly.

Besides this, the Trade Bureau encourages setting up simple markets around the relay stations.

Markets are free to open but must be registered, both stimulating popularity and facilitating supervision.

Louis nodded in support.

After all, a smooth commercial route is the true precondition for a territory to thrive.

Meanwhile, the Agricultural Bureau's deployment is more practical.

Under the leadership of Director Mike, agricultural officials have begun planning to replicate and promote the "Mai Lang experience" to other new territories.

Such as the rotational farming system, wet and dry alternate planting methods, district management of field canals, and household performance evaluation system...

Previously only present within Mai Lang, these mechanisms now serve as models to be transplanted to newly incorporated lands.

Especially Zachariah's old territory, classified as the primary target for transformation, with plans to trial "greenhouse farming" to address current food issues.

Finally, there is the Inspectorate.

Erin, carrying a stack of documents, sat quietly at the end of the conference table, only standing up to report when Louis called her.

The Inspectorate will formally establish an anti-corruption group.

Personally selected by Erin, composed of honest and capable inspectors, prioritizing patrol among new integrated territories' grain officials, warehouse stewards, and administrative officers.

Holding monthly inspection briefings, reporting typical cases, both punishing violations and establishing norms and prestige.

Additionally, Erin suggested setting up a partial civilian representative system.

Trialing the Red Tide Town Council prototype in select new towns, recruiting civilian representatives to participate in governance, as preparation for future semi-autonomous mechanisms.

This suggestion received Louis' approval, as it can attract talent and pre-screen potential risk individuals, killing two birds with one stone.

And so, the meeting in the Red Tide Council Hall finally began to wind down.

Louis slowly rose, his robe lightly brushing against the map of Red Tide Territory behind him.

"The larger the territory, the harder it is to govern." His voice was light, yet it echoed in the hearts of everyone present.

"In the past, we only needed to guard one city, a few villages, keep an eye on the granaries, and watch over the barracks to maintain order, but now?

Louis raised his hand, pointing to that large map, his fingertip sweeping past the land encircled by a bright red border.

That is their victory's result, and a weighty responsibility.

"Twenty-seven newly acquired lands, sixty thousand additional people, hundreds of small paths, numerous unregistered farmland and remnants of old systems' officials, in which lies the hearts of the people as well as decay, this cannot be overseen by one person.

Therefore, going forward, each of us, whether in military, construction, agriculture, commerce, or inspection, must extend our duties into areas we previously never touched.

Some say Red Tide has won victory."

He paused for a moment, his tone suddenly rising: "No, we've only just taken the first step; the real challenges lie ahead!"

May you not relax, not underestimate, not become complacent. Otherwise, this land we've claimed with sweat and blood may soon be forfeited."

Around the long table, silence prevailed.

Then Bradley was the first to bow: "I will remember."

"I will remember!"

Lambert, Erin, Mike, the Trade Bureau Director, agricultural officials... all stood up, responding in unison.

Chapter 498: Talent Is the Most Important Asset in the Northern Territory

Dim light fell between the thick maps, scrolls, and drafts, carrying a faint scent of ink in the air.

Outside the window was the Red Tide's main road under renovation, while inside were the three individuals about to decide the future of Red Tide.

Bradley stood by the window, silently flipping through page after page of briefs, his expression still familiar with its old-fashioned rigor.

At the end near the bookshelf, Lanna stood silently in a simple dark blue robe, her fingertips unconsciously stroking the parchment book clip in her hand, a barely noticeable hint of nervousness between her brows.

Lanna Verdi, once the famous daughter of the Verdi family in the northwestern frontier of the Empire, known for her literary and historical talent from a young age.

If everything had gone as usual, her life would have been one accompanied by poetry and books, later marrying other nobles and spending her life leisurely.

But the gears of fate suddenly broke when her father openly opposed the Imperial Capital's proposal on land annexation.

The Verdi family instantaneously became abandoned; noble feudal lands were revoked, family private soldiers were purged, her brother disappeared, and her mother passed away.

Wearing civilian clothes, Lanna, escorted by several family knights, eventually arrived at Red Tide along with a group of Northern Territory refugees from the war with Snow Vow.

Because she knew how to read and write, she taught children in school to read and write, thinking this would be her life.

Until Louis approached her, handing her a bill draft: "Write a pilot education program."

From then on, Lanna hid the Verdi name, only referring to herself as "Lanna," gradually taking over the educational affairs across Red Tide.

Two years later, on the day the Department of Education was officially established, she finally became one of the youngest core officials within the Red Tide system under the title of director.

But she always remembered the plain words Louis said when handing over the bill draft: "Do something meaningful."

No pity, no probing, only trust.

At that moment, Lanna suddenly realized she was no longer a fleeing noble orphan, but a useful person.

In this rebuilt land, she found long-lost dignity and purpose, and found a lord worth following.

Of course, Lanna did not disappoint Louis's expectations.

During the rapid development in the Red Tide Territory over these two years, she earned Louis's trust and full support,

leading the creation of a network of primary school points covering the main city, establishing twelve elementary schools in total, and setting up numerous adult literacy classes.

The courses she designed followed the principle of "practical first, order as the framework," systematically teaching the following three basic modules:

Basic literacy connected with the Red Tide's official document system, covering everything from social etiquette to basic contract formats;

Practical arithmetic matched the Red Tide's rationing system and market trading system, ensuring students can independently calculate distribution and conversion;

Code education, selectively teaching straightforward clauses from the "Red Tide Basic Code," supplemented with storytelling, subtly spreading the awareness of rule of law and public order.

As of now, nearly three thousand children aged 7 to 14 among the returning citizens have entered the classroom.

In adult education, young people are continually being selected for the local positions of town clerk, grain allocation assistant, and border post recorder after becoming literate.

More importantly, Lanna assisted in constructing a "teacher assessment and recruitment" system, slowly integrating the teaching workforce into the Red Tide's civil system, elevating the status of the education profession.

All these achievements not only earned her the respectful title of Lady Lanna but laid the first foundation of order inheritance for the Red Tide Territory.

And today, she was here to report the Department of Education's five-year plan to Louis.

"It's the five-year planning document from the Department of Education, please have a look." Lanna whispered.

She had never been more nervous.

Facing other officials, she was always adept, but in front of Louis, she never dared to relax even a bit.

Louis took the manuscript but did not immediately review it.

He merely looked up at her, smiled, and said, "Lanna, there's no need to be nervous. You're not here to be judged; you're here to report something... that we both care deeply about."

For Red Tide Lord Louis, education was never merely about "teaching people to read."

He saw further, farther than anyone else.

To truly lead this land out from under the shadow of war and famine requires more than the knights' swords or the strictness of decrees.

It requires ordinary people who can stand on their own, who can think, who can change their destiny.

The backward Northern Territory was once abandoned land repeatedly contested by the Barbarian Race and the Empire, not because people lacked courage, but because technology was not advanced enough, industry was not solid enough, and systems were not clear enough.

And education is the foundation of the territory, the most critical investment.

For sustainable development, and to make the people prosperous, more alchemists, draftsmen, people who can understand laws, devise tax systems, design canals are required, all of which require education.

Moreover, education is the widest path to upward mobility.

No matter whether a child is an orphan from a fishing village or a discarded child from the Barbarian Race, as long as he is willing to study and strive to build Red Tide, he can become an official managing an area or a senior craftsman mastering a workshop.

He wants to leave a path of upward progress for everyone on this land.

Furthermore, education enables people to discern right from wrong, respect rules, know shame and honor.

When knowledge is planted, when generations of children learn to think independently and obey the law, the real Red Tide era may finally arrive.

Louis leaned back in his chair, flipping through the five-year development blueprint drafted by the Department of Education in his hand.

Lanna, standing beside him, couldn't hide her nervousness, her hands folded in front of her abdomen, standing upright, her voice involuntarily carrying a slight tremor:

Chapter 499: The Most Important Asset in the Northern Territory Is Talent (Part 2)

"The preliminary three-phase plan of the Education Department is currently drafted. Most of the content has been gradually refined by our team after you proposed the core objectives..."

"Hmm." Louis nodded, his tone calm, "Continue."

Lanna continued to explain: "The first plan is basic compulsory education. We intend to establish one hundred town schools outside the Red Tide City within five years, covering the entire jurisdiction, especially in densely populated or concentrated areas.

Each location will be equipped with at least one literacy teacher and several specialized course teachers tailored to local needs, such as teaching agriculture mainly in Mai Lang Territory, and 'Circuit Lecturers' dispatched from headquarters to give a monthly lecture on law and order. Of course, particularly smart children can study in the Red Tide Territory.

Class times will be concentrated to avoid the busy periods of spring planting and autumn harvest, ensuring attendance rates."

Louis nodded slightly: "Is the grain subsidy included as well?"

"Yes." Lanna quickly replied, "Enrolled children can receive an additional ten percent grain quota to ensure families agree."

Additionally, all teachers will be formally integrated into the Red Tide civil system, enjoying the treatment of grassroots officials, which helps attract stable teaching resources."

"Very good." Louis closed the document and looked up to meet her gaze, "Are these independently drafted by you?"

"Lanna slightly lowered her head nervously: "The overall direction comes from your initial arrangement, and the rest were refined by the Education Department."

"Very good." Louis repeated, "Next item."

Lanna turned to the next page, her tone no longer restrained, with a subtle sense of pride: "The second phase is a pilot for higher education, the Red Tide College."

This is a plan you personally proposed. We plan to establish a new campus in the old fort area in the west suburb of Red Tide City, named Red Tide College."

"How many districts?" Bradley interjected.

"Four." Lanna answered succinctly, then added, "The first is the Teachers' College to train key faculty for town schools; the second is the Administrative Clerks Department, preparing for the future civil servant system of Red Tide."

She paused, glanced at Louis's expression, and continued: "The third is the Skills Workshop to train alchemy apprentices, craftsmen, and other technical talents. Lastly, the basic medical department fills the huge post-war gap, which we must address quickly."

"Admission standards?" Louis asked, clearly focused.

"The first cohort plans to enroll two hundred people." Lanna replied, "Recommended and screened jointly by town mayors and the Inspectorate, with public tuition waived and a mandatory service of ten years. Graduates must serve within the Red Tide system for ten years."

Louis nodded upon hearing this: "Very good."

Lanna also smiled a bit, turning to the last page: "Finally, it's publicity and supporting facility construction.

We'll form mobile teams consisting of lecturers and performers, touring all areas to promote educational concepts and benefits, encouraging children of residents to go to school.

Also establishing the 'Red Tide Talents List,' publicly announcing outstanding students each year and prioritizing them for excellent job positions."

Louis closed the plan book, lightly flicking the cover and leaning back in his chair.

He didn't speak immediately but slowly surveyed the entire office before his gaze returned to Lanna.

"Well done." His voice was full of affirmation, "You've truly understood the meaning of education."

Lanna hurriedly stood and saluted, her voice carrying a slight tremble: "Y-Yes! We will obey the Lord's orders!"

In that moment, her eyes felt warm as she struggled to keep her emotions in check.

During these two years in Red Tide, she had learned restraint, calmness, and responsibility.

This sentence suddenly gave weight to all the fatigue from daily preparations and nightly revisions.

"These... are all because of your good guidance." She bowed her head, speaking swiftly and solemnly, "If it weren't for your personal guidance and system establishment, we could never have come this far. It's Red Tide that taught me the mission, it's you... that helped me find the meaning of life."

She wasn't the type of person who was good at expressing herself, but at this moment, all accumulated gratitude turned into sincere words.

Louis didn't respond immediately but smiled lightly instead: "I just did some small things. The main accomplishment is yours, keep working hard."

Lanna nodded vigorously, her eyes bright like stars.

"And here are these newly written children's textbooks for your review."

Lanna respectfully took out three newly bound textbooks from her leather document bag and handed them to Louis.

Her expression carried a tinge of nervousness but mostly undisguised pride and dedication.

Louis took them, lowered his eyes to look at the cover of the first page, and the thick paper was printed with the clear Red Tide Emblem and a bright red title:

"Our Great Lord Louis."

He softly read the book title, his mouth twitching slightly.

"It's a storybook. Make sure the children can understand it." Lanna explained.

She quickly supplemented with: "We selected the Red Tide defensive battle during the insect disaster, Red Tide City restoration project, and the Bone Canyon rescue as the main lines. Core words are courage, protection, dedication, order.

Each lesson ends with a phrase, like this one..."

She flipped to the last page, pointing to the printed small heading and reading aloud:

"When you encounter danger, remember the words of the Lord: protect your loved ones and be someone others can rely on."

Louis looked down at that line of words, silent for a moment, did he ever say that?

If you can't be sure who said a quote, just say it was the great lord?

Louis flipped through the illustration pages again, there was one page with him in a red cape, riding fast in the snow.

Another page was him building walls with the people, and yet another was his silhouette racing towards the battle line in a foggy canyon waving a long spear.

"It's quite exaggerated." He silently mocked in his heart, even suspecting that more illustrations would depict Louis ascending to be a god and slaying the Evil God together.

Louis opened the second book: "Red Tide Knowledge Workbook."

The content was more practical, covering territorial division, geographical understanding, basic agriculture knowledge, and identifying points about cult followers...

Simple legal articles clearly marked, such as "Do not carry blades at night" and "Household registration change must be reported," clear and easy to understand yet still serious.

The third book, "Three Thousand Questions of Red Tide," used a daily question format to repeatedly instill some knowledge:

"Do you know who dug the first well in Mai Lang Territory?"

"Who was the person that led us out of the winter disaster?"

"Why are cultists dangerous?"

Louis closed the last book, pressing his thumb lightly on the cover.

"Not bad." He commented, placing the three textbooks on one side of the table, his tone carrying its usual warmth, "But... isn't the content about me a bit exaggerated?"

"No." Lanna almost immediately replied, her tone unwavering, "This is necessary education."

Her gaze was sincere, unwavering, as if explaining an absolute truth.

Beside him, Bradley also put on his reading glasses, squinted at an illustration, then nodded: "Hmm, indeed, quite impactful... I think it's good."

"You too." Louis looked at him somewhat distressed, "I'm just saying - maybe trim it down a bit, don't let it be all about me charging on horseback, waving to save the day. Include some sections about ordinary citizens, craftsmen, children also making significant contributions."

He paused, added, "Red Tide wasn't built by me alone."

But Lanna's eyes brightened, seemingly ignited with a creative enthusiasm: "Then I know! I'll write another section - telling the touching story of how the Lord led the people through the winter, rebuilt ruins, and ignited the flame of hope!"

"No...that's not what I meant."

Louis opened his mouth but eventually couldn't stop her from quickly jotting down the draft.

She seemed to misunderstand something.

Louis watched Lanna's face, flushed with excitement, writing fervently in her notebook, and sighed,

Forget it, I'll personally revise it when the draft comes out.

"At least, don't draw me holding a long spear and jumping into the fire anymore." he muttered softly.

Chapter 500: Steam Creations

The workshop district on the west side of the Red Tide Main City still lay in fog on this late summer morning.

Morning light slowly streamed into the factory area from the east, illuminating the white steam and furnace smoke billowing in mid-air, rendering the entire forge workshop as a steel beast breathing gently.

The door creaked open as Louis and his entourage stepped into the trial area.

He walked at the front, followed by Mike, Hillco, Bradley, and the young genius with bright eyes and a drawing tube on his back — Hamilton.

As they entered, a scalding wave of heat rushed towards them, mixed with the scents of coal, machine oil, and red-hot iron ingots, making their brows fiery.

"A really warm welcome," Hillco remarked, shielding the steam with his sleeve and grumbled in a low voice.

But no one responded to him, as everyone's attention was captured by the massive, roaring steam forge machine.

"Click-clack, click-clack, click-clack..."

That was the heartbeat of the iron.

The upgraded steam engine was running at an extremely high frequency, with the flywheel spinning rapidly beside, driving the huge connecting rod hammer to smash down.

Amidst the sparks flying, the red gold metal on the anvil was constantly being flattened, rolled, and solidified again.

Pieces of iron were forming at a speed visible to the eye.

The artisan team had long been in place, and seeing Louis arrive, they worked even harder.

A robust worker steadfastly held the wheel lock lever, keeping his sight fixed on the main spindle.

Another tall, thin man knelt halfway on the side, swiftly jotting down pressure and speed records, the paper dampened by the steam.

Two apprentices took turns rushing up to apply alchemical grease on the pistons, their movements swift yet calm, even with a flush of excitement on their faces.

The old artisan standing behind the main valve was sweating profusely, occasionally rotating the valve ring to adjust the steam rhythm.

Amidst the roar of steam, the hammer rumbled like a military drum, the air seemingly heated by this rhythm.

Mike stepped forward half a step, his tone filled with pride, as he introduced to Louis:

"Lord Louis, behold, this is the 'Heavy Hammer One'. The jointed structure, the power comes from the steam piston driving the flywheel shaft, which then transmits to the hammer joint."

He gestured at the connection between the piston and flywheel, speaking louder than the steam sound: "It can strike metals at a stable frequency, with efficiency about three times that of manual labor, and without fatigue or pause."

Louis turned his head to watch the rapidly spinning flywheel and connecting rods.

He didn't immediately speak but quietly observed how the iron beast shaped the glowing metal, hammer by hammer.

Hamilton, standing by, seeing Mike's gesture, instinctively straightened his back, as if gathering some courage.

"I... I redesigned its gear track structure," he said, somewhat nervously, his voice not loud but his eyes gleaming,

"optimized the engagement accuracy between the piston and flywheel. Under the third scale steam pressure, it can... can operate continuously and steadily for over seventy cycles... virtually without losing speed."

After saying this, Hamilton slightly lowered his head, his hand subconsciously clutching the drawing tube behind him, his ears blushing red.

Faced with the legendary Lord who rebuilt the Northern Territory, although he had seen him a few times, he still wasn't accustomed to how to interact.

Louis slightly turned to look at the seemingly immature young man, smiling lightly: "You've done well, Hamilton, better than I imagined."

The boy was momentarily stunned, as if he hadn't realized this praise was directed at him.

"To think of reducing the load on the structure rather than simply increasing pressure shows you truly understand its operating principles." Louis continued, "That's not something sheer rote learning can achieve; it's your own work."

The steam path has just started taking its first step, and the future is long, needing young people like you to continue forging ahead. You did well, Hamilton."

In that moment, the youth's eyes widened, as if sunlight had illuminated the deepest corner of his heart.

"Yes, yes! I'll definitely keep striving!" Hamilton hurriedly bowed, his voice filled with excitement, nearly cracking, as if he were about to ascend instantly.

Meanwhile, Mike nodded at the side, full of pride for his protégé.

Having viewed the Heavy Hammer One, Mike led the group to the adjacent furnace platform.

It was a compression furnace embedded in the foundation with a cast iron shell, pitch black, operating at full speed.

"Whoosh—!"

The blower port roared like a dragon's mouth, hot air currents sweeping ground debris, flames dancing wildly within the furnace as blacksmiths took advantage of the peak temperature to extract iron embryos.

"Steam pressure through this linkage," Mike said while pointing at a set of steam pipes and gears, "drives the bellows to pump air, allowing precise control of temperature fluctuations. Now, it's solely relied upon to maintain the furnace temperature."

He grinned: "No longer need four strong men taking shifts to crank the blower. Manpower saved, temperature stabilized."

Bradley nodded: "If this thing were promoted to every casting furnace, productivity would more than double."

Louis stepped closer, the heat wave surging towards him: "Temperature stabilized, wind force steady, higher efficiency, and safer."

Mike nodded repeatedly: "Exactly so! Previously, relying on manual air pumping often led to uneven wind volumes, either failing to penetrate or blowing apart the iron embryo.

With our current testing, this steam blower can complete a heating curve within ten breaths, nearly every time staying within the optimal temperature range!"

"Which means," Bradley interjected, scanning the artisans pulling the iron embryo, "the same amount of coal is used less; the same manpower can achieve more."

"Indeed." Mike chuckled, "Moreover, it can link multiple blower ports, one furnace for three machines."