

Winter 501

Chapter 501: Steam Constructs (Part 2)

Louis did not express an opinion, he just nodded lightly and slowly turned to look at Hamilton: "Did you also participate in this one?"

"Uh, I only assisted with calibration on this one." The young man answered shyly, his voice not loud, "I adjusted the gear ratio of the blower intake valve to make the wind flow more smooth..."

Mike couldn't help but add from the side: "Don't be fooled by his modesty. He drew the blueprints for several key parameters! I never thought it could be tuned so precisely!"

"Very good." Louis simply commented.

Yet it made Hamilton's shoulder tremble, and his ears turned red again.

Louis seemed not to notice, he just slightly nodded: "Isn't there another machine? Take me to see it."

Then Mike led everyone backwards, it was a well house made of brick and stone, the walls were mottled, and the top was covered with iron sheets.

Upon opening the door, the steam pump was already operating at full speed, the piston rose and fell with a distinct rhythm.

Thick copper pipes spiraled upward along the wall, the sound of water roared, an iron pipe surged from the bottom of the well and connected to an overhead water tank, the clear water flowed like a silver snake, gushing out, shining softly in the morning light.

"This one... I designed the most." Hamilton mustered the courage to speak, slightly shyly.

"I readjusted the flow ratio of the valves and the structure of the check valve... allowing one person to operate it."

"It can draw six zhang deep well water." Mike stood beside him, smiling so broadly that the corners of his eyes were twitching.

"We tried it this morning, it filled all the water tanks in the workshop in one go. Originally it took six water workers a whole morning, now it's done in a few minutes!"

Louis quietly watched this still steam-spewing water pump, gazing at the clear water continuously surging in the overhead tank.

Then he turned back to glance at the boy who stood straight, yet still nervously clutching his coat corner.

He reached out to lightly pat Hamilton's shoulder: "You are the future of this city."

Hamilton appeared as if struck by lightning, his face quickly flushed, hesitating for several seconds before squeezing out a sentence: "I-I-I will continue to work hard! Definitely won't let down, let down...!"

"Alright." Louis interrupted with a smile, turned to Mike and said, "Record a first-class merit for him, award a 'Red Tide Artisan Badge' and five hundred gold coins."

Mike was startled, then nodded in surprise: "Understood!"

"Furthermore," Louis again looked at the boy, "from today onwards, confer you the title of 'Special-level Artisan'."

This statement even made Bradley raise his eyebrows.

What is the status of Red Tide's 'Special-level Artisan'?

Throughout the entire territory, less than five people hold this honor, mostly at Mike's level as veteran artisans.

And now this sixteen-year-old, not yet grown a beard boy.

Stood amid the roar of the steam water pump, receiving the same title.

"I... I will work hard!" Hamilton hesitated for a long time, yet still said this sentence.

Several young artisans had long begun to cheer, surrounding Hamilton in celebration.

And Louis, standing at the edge of the crowd, just smiled lightly, his gaze falling on that still "click-clack" breathing steam pump.

He raised his hand to signal to Bradley, his tone carrying clear decisiveness: "These three devices, hammer, pump, blower, immediately begin drafting a unified workshop specification and operating manual."

"Mass replication." Louis' tone was calm yet powerful, "Prioritize allocation at blacksmith workshops, well areas, and areas dense with foundry furnaces. Start from Red Tide Main City and gradually expand to each major territory."

"Okay." Bradley took out a notebook and recorded it.

Louis then gazed at the water pump's still gushing clear spring, after a moment of contemplation, he finally spoke: "Quiet down, I will say a few simple words."

The voice wasn't loud, yet everyone present quieted down, looking towards Louis, even the roaring pump seemed to lower its voice a bit.

"The potential of this thing," Louis' gaze swept over the flywheel, piston, copper tubes, and blower furnace, "is far beyond these few things at hand."

"What I want is a path. A technological path of our own."

Louis' tone was calm, yet carried a thunderous pressure crossing a mountain.

"You must try, build, and verify what exactly steam can achieve.

You can attempt to transform it into forging power... a workshop not relying on human or animal force.

You can also make devices to irrigate fields, replacing the buckets of a dozen people.

Try making transportation carts, use steam instead of horses, imagine a team able to cross snowy paths without horses.

Even things for the battlefield. Get it moving, turn it into a roaring iron beast."

"If you can accomplish it." He looked around, paused for a moment, "Then in the future, Red Tide will not need to watch anyone's expressions."

Mike had long listened with boiling enthusiasm, Bradley nodded silently, as if he had already written these words into the "Red Tide Future Plan".

And behind them, the young man was utterly stupefied.

Hamilton opened his eyes wide, lips slightly parted, looking at Louis as if hearing a god's revelation for the first time.

At that moment, countless structural drafts, gear interlocks, valve iterations, pipeline guides erupted like a volcano in his mind.

"Not only can it drive an iron hammer... if an additional divergent flywheel were added..."

"If it could turn, respond to commands... wouldn't that be..."

"If an offset guiding valve were added... maybe... maybe it could produce..."

His hands unconsciously gestured in the air, murmuring under his breath, as if dreaming, or creating gods.

"I must try it, I must create something for Lord Louis that has never existed."

Louis quietly watched this young man.

Hamilton stood at the steam water pump, immersed in a world only belonging to him and the machines.

"This is genius," Louis murmured softly, then turned around, his tone steady yet resonant: "Effective immediately, establish a 'Red Tide Mechanical Assembly Group', directly affiliated with the Artisan Bureau, responsible for researching and developing steam mechanisms.

Mike as the team leader, overseeing comprehensively. Hamilton as deputy leader, responsible for design, verification, and model testing.

This is one of the future priorities of Red Tide Territory, resources assured and will fully support."

As soon as the words were spoken, the entire workshop exploded like coals thrown into a furnace.

"We are finally going to do something big!"

"Oh my god, can I design a weaving automaton?"

"I want to make a flying iron bird, one that won't die if it jumps from the city wall!"

"Stop dreaming, how about making a digging iron claw beast that can dig ten wells a day!"

"Get lost, I'd rather create a self-working ox or horse!"

The artisans gathered around, as if released from suppression, freely letting their imaginations run wild, mostly unrealistic.

Mike also grinned broadly, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes smiling open: "Got it! I will personally lead the team, anyone dares to slack off, I'll personally knock their heads!"

Bradley raised his eyebrows, revealing a rare gratified expression: "Red Tide's future... might truly be hidden in this mass of steam."

And pushed to the forefront, Hamilton... still hadn't come back to his senses.

He still stood by the water pump, clutching the blueprint tube tightly with one hand, his gaze far-reaching, as if chasing a yet-to-be-born monstrous steam battle car.

As if all the cheering and announcements hadn't interrupted him, still immersed in that gear-filled world.

Just as the artisans excitedly cheered, clapped, with mouths full of "flame-throwing iron cars" and "flying water birds" ideations, hurried hoofbeats arose from the stone path outside the workshop.

"Thump, thump, thump—!"

Everyone stopped laughing, turning back.

The iron door opened with a "creak", a Red Tide Knight entered dust-covered.

Quickly came before Louis, handed him a parchment letter with still-wet sealing wax: "Lord Louis, urgent dispatch from Frost Halberd City!"

Louis put away his smile, steadily caught the envelope.

The snow-white letter paper had a gray-blue Frost Halberd Badge quietly pressed on it.

He lowered his head, tore open the sealing wax with his thumb, and pulled out the letter.

Sunlight fell on his eyelashes, yet could not conceal the slight constriction of light in his pupils.

That day, inevitably arrived.

Chapter 502: The Death of Duke Edmund

The night in the Northern Territory is bone-chilling, and the high towers of Frost Halberd City are engulfed by wind and snow.

Inside the study, a faint candle flickers, casting mottled shadows on the heavy curtains.

Duke Edmund sits in that familiar high-backed chair, wrapped in a thick blanket, yet unable to stop the slight tremor in his fingers.

His figure is gaunt like dry twigs, no longer the majestic figure akin to a city wall from months ago.

He slowly pours the black potion into the wine cup, its bitterness mixed with intensity, and drinks it in one go, feeling a knife-like burning spiral along his spine.

But Edmond doesn't even frown, he simply gazes silently at the wall opposite.

There is the map of the Northern Territory, the genealogical chart of the family, and three portraits.

His father Bertran, who stayed awake for seven days and nights, fought alongside three snow oath elders until the end, dying with a long spear in hand.

His brother Auden, gentle and reticent, yet during the barbarian southern invasion, he used his last bit of Fighting Energy to explode the enemy leader while covering the main army.

His eldest son Arthur, died in the great rebellion, the traitor detonating a Magic Explosion Bullet, turning the entire battle platform to ashes, not even leaving behind bone ash.

Edmond closed his eyes, scenes of memories long yellowed flashed in his mind.

Back then, he was still young, full of vigor, clad in silver armor standing on the battlements of Frost Halberd City, angrily reprimanding his brother Auden.

"Leave this to me! The honor of the family must not be extinguished by your hand!"

But his brother simply remained silent, ultimately leading the iron cavalry up the rear hill, disappearing into the rolling flames of war.

After that night, he took up the sword of frost iron, and with it, the fate of the entire Northern Territory.

Yet, looking back on thirty years of border guarding, what he sees is:

The broken city walls during the great rebellion, the council hall burned by the Red Oath zealots, those flayed and hanged civil servants of the Northern Territory, and knights who finally froze to death in Snow Valley.

He also sees cities covered in Demonic Energy after the pestilence, and the trembling backs of parents burying their sick children in the snow.

He ordered the burning of seventeen infected towns to prevent further spread of the insect plague and personally signed the "survival rules" rejecting tens of thousands of refugees.

Lastly, after the complete mutation of the barbarian race, enemies flooded in like a tide.

Frost beasts with bones spikes, vine-entwined barbarians aflame with rage, and the roaring Frost Giants under the sky.

The Northern Territory...has become the tomb of countless people.

Edmond slowly opened his eyes, the pain hadn't dissipated, perhaps even intensified.

He looked at the old painting on the wall, depicting a middle-aged man with blond hair and blue eyes, standing back-to-back with him on the battlefield, behind them, the snowfield ablaze.

Ernst August, who hadn't become Emperor yet at the time.

At that age, he was only fourteen, marching alongside August into the barbarian cold plains.

August patted his shoulder, saying, "You are the future Shield of the North."

He remembered this sentence all his life, guarding the Northern Territory for the Empire all his life.

But in the recent decade, he started to question whether he and the Edmund Family were abandoned by the Empire.

When the food aid from the Imperial Capital was late, the military supplies repeatedly reduced, and the numbers of the war dead in the Northern Territory piled into snow mounds, while the Imperial Capital was busy contending for power.

Edmond understood; they never intended to save the Northern Territory, just wanted it...to serve as a shield.

Shield of the North, truly an ironic title.

Yet, he still deeply loves this snowy land.

This land covered in white frost, these people laboring arduously in the cold nights, these craftsmen who built city walls with their hands and feet, knights who defended it with their lives.

But he dislikes this era.

An era where knights turned into Gold Coins, honor became tokens, loyalty became folly, and lives counted for nothing.

He once thought that was what he was to protect, but now realizes it was merely a corpse donned in a new robe.

"After I die...what will the Northern Territory become?"

Edmond pondered this question for a long time.

He knows his time is short, yet he doesn't wish for this land to be buried with him.

And once again, the face of that young man surfaced in his mind—Louis Calvin.

This son-in-law, spoken of by Emily, always carries that...inexpressible respect and adoration, hearing her describe Louis is like hearing about a legendary Saint.

Initially, he just thought it was a girl's filter, not paying much attention.

Then came the information from spies he planted in Red Tide Territory.

All from his most trusted old subordinates, some disguised as vagrants, some became officials of the Red Tide, and some were knights from the Broken Blade Knight Order.

The news they brought back was so consistent it raised suspicion in him.

Too clean, too positive, too perfect.

"A young lord, within three years receiving a hundred thousand returnees, reconstructing farmland, orderly military industry, loyal people...

If it was all an act, it'd be too perfect."

So he had doubts, suspecting it was mere facade concentrated in a few locations.

He even instructed a trusted old knight to personally visit the peripheral territories of Red Tide to check whether it was consistent or only the core territories were like this.

Upon returning, the old knight said just one sentence, "That place is where I'd choose to retire."

This sentence was more convincing than anything.

Acting could last a month, could last a year, but could it last three to four years?

Could it be performed so that even farmers look up in respect? Could it be so convincing that not one refugee would consider fleeing south?

Edmond looked at the map, at the territory of Red Tide, which was already painted from gray to red.

He doesn't want to admit it, yet cannot deny it.

Louis achieved what he desired to do in his youth but couldn't.

Within a few short years, he sheltered the exiles, cultivated the wilderness, and united the knights.

Chapter 503: Death of Duke Edmund (Part 2)

At least under Louis' rule, those people lived a life they could never have before.

Perhaps the Northern Territory in Louis' hands will see a rebirth.

Thinking of this, Duke Edmund couldn't help but sigh softly.

"Emily..." he murmured.

She was his smartest, most stubborn child, and the one most like her mother.

Edmond had originally planned not to disturb her until his death, not to disturb the one nurturing new life.

In this destined-to-end drama, not letting her see his aging, collapsing state.

But now, he suddenly wanted to see her, and this thought had been recurring these past few days.

Between Red Tide and Frost Halberd, there lay the mud and ruins of post-war reconstruction, and more so the relentless cold currents of the Northern Territory day and night.

It was too selfish to let her risk it.

But he still... wanted to see her.

After a long silence, Edmond suddenly laughed.

The laughter was like rusty armor, making a soft, creaking noise in the quiet night.

"Forget it. Let me be selfish one last time."

He reached out, opened the bookshelf by his side, and only after a while did he pull out a hidden compartment.

Inside lay quietly a letter that had been sealed long ago.

The light red sealing wax was imprinted with the Frost Halberd emblem, the edges of the letter paper slightly yellowed.

This letter, he had written more than once, revised more than once.

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Only seven days after the letter was sent, Red Tide's carriage arrived at the gates of the inner residence of Frost Halberd, and the first to jump down from the carriage was that stubborn yet gentle girl from his memory.

"Father." Emily called out with a smile, but her eyes were slightly red, "I'm back."

Edmond squinted at her, said nothing, just nodded slightly, then extended his aged and withered hand.

Emily gently took it, just like when she was a child.

In the following days, the inner residence of Frost Halberd finally had long-lost laughter.

Emily brought specialty pastries from Red Tide, Alina personally brewed tea, and young Isaac ran around chasing the cat.

Edmond sat on a chair by the window, like a quiet observer, watching this scene as if it were a dream.

At night, Emily played chess with him, deliberately losing, but her father saw through it.

"Don't let me win," Edmond coughed twice, but showed a rare smile, "I don't need you to fake it."

She just nodded and smiled but quietly clenched her fist in her sleeve.

Actually, Louis also came.

But this time, he intentionally stayed "invisible," did not disturb, and did not seek presence.

The matters needing discussion had already been settled during the night of the Bone-Burying Canyon months ago and through secret correspondences over the past half year.

Power, promises, future plans have all been arranged.

Therefore, he did not inappropriately insert himself into this warm family atmosphere.

He chose to stand outside the house, quietly guarding, guarding the man who was once the Shield of the North, welcoming the final peaceful moments of his life.

Until the morning of the seventh day, before dawn.

Emily came to her father's room, found the door half-open, the hearth still warm.

Edmond wore a casual robe, sitting on a high-backed chair by the window, gently holding Isaac in his arms.

The child was still small, sleeping peacefully in his embrace.

His withered hand gently supported the child's head, like he was protecting an ember.

Emily quietly approached, finding her father with his eyes closed, a peaceful smile at the corner of his mouth.

He felt no pain, offered no struggle.

Just silently, like an old eagle, he sank into the earth overnight.

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On the morning of the third day after the Duke's passing.

Outside Frost Halberd City, the southwest side of the old district—the "Guardians' Cemetery."

This was a silent white stone slope, surrounded by forests on three sides, facing the snowfield to the north, burying the bloodlines of the Edmund Clan throughout generations.

At this moment, the entire cemetery was shrouded in snow mist, as if heaven and earth had lowered their voices, fearing to disturb the peace of the sleeping one.

No public mourning, no caravan of nobles from afar, no overwhelming obituaries or dirges.

Just as he wished during his life.

Everything was kept simple, arranged only by the inner residence of Frost Halberd. Just family, representatives of the three major knight orders, old subordinates and officials from Frost Halberd, and a few Northern Lords still stationed locally, merely a few dozen people.

Everyone stood silently in front of the tombstone, no one spoke; even coughs seemed to be frozen in their throats.

The coffin was carved from a whole piece of Northern black pine.

Simple, silent, covered with coarse grey cloth, as if it grew naturally from the snowfield and returned to the earth.

Presiding over the funeral before the wooden coffin was the priest lord of Frost Halberd City.

A nonagenarian elder, draped in an ancient ceremonial robe of dusky blue and silver grey, his staff was carved with ancient inscriptions, the tip hung with a pale silver ribbon, lightly dancing in the wind with his trembling gestures.

He did not proclaim loudly, but opened his hoarse voice, softly in the silent snow:

"At the coldest border, he raised his sword above his head; on the quietest battlefield, he held out as the last person. He was not perfect, but he accomplished everything a loyal minister could."

The priest lord paused slightly, the staff pointed, landing in the snow before the coffin: "Today, he shall bear no more burdens."

Coincidentally, at that moment, the wind seemed to suddenly stop.

Emily stood in front of the coffin, standing tall, her belly held firm, as if using all her strength to resist the cold wind and sorrow.

Her face was expressionless, for she was the daughter of a Northern Lord, the daughter of Edmond.

Louis stood by her side, saying nothing, just gently held her hand.

His hand was warm and firm, just like the one who now slumbered, who had countless times been her support.

Lady Alina held little Isaac, standing to one side.

She was cloaked in deep black, her expression vacant, eyes wandering, her mind still lingering on the image of her husband laughing days before, not yet accepting that this man now lay at rest.

And little Isaac looked up at the sky, reaching out his hand trying to catch a falling snowflake, but he missed.

When the priest lord finished the last vow, the commander of the Cold Iron Knight Order, Felan, stepped forward onto the snow, knelt on one knee, and loudly declared the vow:

"Duke Edmund has returned to the silent snow, and we swear not to dishonor his will!"

One after another, knights removed their helmets, knelt on one knee in the snow.

Finally, several personal guards of the Duke slowly lifted the coffin, placing it into the pre-dug stone crypt.

No dirges, no drumming, only the dull sound of the wooden coffin slowly contacting the ice and snow.

The ceremony ended, everyone quietly withdrew, the knights bid farewell one by one, returning to their posts, the old subordinates and officials supporting each other, leaving with grief-laden faces.

Alina, holding Isaac, left, her gaze still vacant, glancing back at the cemetery several times.

But Emily continued to stand there, watching every person leave.

Her expression was calm, able even to exchange words with, comfort her stepmother.

Until she returned to the inner residence, pushed open the familiar study door.

The room still preserved the look from when the Duke was alive.

The old high-backed chair still leaned against the fireplace, a thick blanket draped over its back, on the small table beside the chair lay a half-drunk medicinal wine, and beside it was an unfolded newspaper, its corner slightly curled up.

The hearth had gone out, but everything still carried the lingering presence of her father.

Her shoulder trembled.

Then, as if some invisible string snapped suddenly, Emily flung herself before the chair, burying her face deep into her arms.

It was only then that the long-restrained sobs broke free from her throat, raw and tearing.

She cried almost voicelessly, as if to tear out all the emotions weighed against her chest these past six months.

It was at this moment that a warm hand gently settled on her shoulder.

Louis had appeared at her side sometime.

Without saying a word, he just slowly sat down, opening his arms, gently embracing his wife.

Emily did not struggle, not even lifting her head, allowing the tears to flow.

And that emotion hardened into armor finally, in the familiar presence, quietly dissolved.

The hearth quietly reignited, little by little, lighting up the cold night.

Chapter 504: Aftermath and Schemes

On the first morning after the death of the Duke of Frost Halberd.

Emily solemnly handed a document sealed with red wax, inscribed with "For Louis Calvin" to him.

"This is written by Father himself, to be given to you after his death."

Louis slowly drew out the thick letter paper.

More than ten pages, neatly organized like military documents, yet all handwritten by the Duke:

The opening was about the responses to the disasters of the four seasons in the Northern Territory.

The second page detailed the deployment procedures of the Frost Spear Three Armies and brief evaluations of the leaders' personalities.

The third page was a meticulous strategy on maintaining stability rather than balance among the nobility.

The fourth page directly marked the weaknesses and flaws of several Northern Lords' families.

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Altogether, over a dozen pages contained his experiences in politics and military governance, even including tables for the distribution of military horse feed and drafts of a territorial military food inspection system.

On the last page, there was no longer any formatted language.

Just a few lines of scrawled handwriting, evidently written slowly:

"These are merely my personal experiences, possibly outdated or obsolete, so follow your own ideas... And please take good care of Emily and Isaac for me."

Louis remained silent for a long time, turning the entire letter page by page, and read it over again.

The methods of governance seemed too old, conservative, bloated, with a heavy imprint of the old Empire nobility.

There was even a page discussing "how to distribute stew during festivals to soothe the people's hearts," which made Louis smile wryly.

But in the military matters, he acknowledged that he had never thought so meticulously, and realized this might be the essence of the Duke's entire life.

Battlefield deployment, supply rhythm, layers of command authority, crisis response triggers...

Louis extracted quite a few key insights from it.

He solemnly folded the letter, pressed it flat, and placed it in his personal letterbox.

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The news of Duke Edmund's death spread, not shaking the earth like thunder, but quietly like a silent first snow slipping into every Northern Territory.

The old Duke, who had guarded the border for over thirty years, ultimately couldn't withstand this winter.

The news was first discreetly released by the interior of Frost Halberd City, with no public mourning in the square, no memorial music.

Yet even with such low-key measures, it was like a blunt, old sword piercing into the hearts of every Northern Lord and Knight.

They remained silent, not out of fear, but out of respect.

"He endured for too long."

"No one knows the ice and snow of the North like he does."

"The Wall of Frost Halberd was built by him, block by block."

But in the Northern markets, in the farmhouses, at the entrances to mines, the obituary was nothing more than a piece of waste paper flipping in the wind.

Those commoners in their worn robes mostly glanced at it indifferently before turning back to their shouting, wood chopping, or cart driving.

"The Duke has passed away."

"Really?"

In their eyes, the "Empire's Shield" was too far away, existing only in the words of those high and mighty.

It was merely another Lord who had died, and another name would sit in that chair, continuing to issue tax orders.

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Meanwhile, in the sun-warmed Southern Empire far from the North, several black-sealed letters from the Northern Lands quietly arrived.

The Gale Bird traveled thousands of miles, personally delivering them to a few long-silent "branches of the Edmund Clan."

Count Edmund of Radiant Rock City, Viscount Edmund of the Northwest Wilderness, a distant relative serving as an intelligence associate officer in the Southern Border Legion, along with a few eager young men yet to inherit noble titles.

They opened the letters to find only a few lines of coldly succinct words: "I hereby transfer the title to my youngest son, Isaac.

From this day, the Northern Territory Military and Political Affairs will be managed by the Red Tide Lord, Louis Calvin."

There were no pleasantries, no room for negotiation, and no "what if" scenarios.

In that moment, many restless thoughts felt as if a bucket of cold water had been poured over them.

Of course, they had entertained the idea.

Who wouldn't want to become the "new Duke Edmund"?

Especially now with the Northern Knights still intact, the vast lands unclaimed, and true power in abeyance.

But precisely because they understood, they dared not act rashly.

These branches knew very well: they lacked the forces in the Northern Territory, and there were no granaries or gold coins to maintain Frost Halberd's operations.

If they forcibly took over, they would only sink bit by bit into the deep sea like a stone cast into Ice Lake.

So they held back, watched, waited, but with no lack of cynicism in their hearts:

"A little brat dares to take on the Northern Territory?"

"Does he think just winning a few battles means he can control the Empire's border? Ridiculous."

"Isn't he the husband of Emily, that child? No wonder..."

Outwardly, they respected the Duke's wishes, but inwardly they were like a group of patient vultures.

Waiting for the storm to come, for the avalanche to bury, for Louis to make mistakes, lose control, and collapse.

Waiting for the day Frost Halberd becomes ruins, so they might fly down to tear apart the remnants and snatch a warm bite of the bone and blood.

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Furthermore, during Duke Edmund's dying moments, he wrote an order into his will.

The title was to pass to Isaac, to be taken with his mother Alina to Red Tide to be raised, with Louis acting as guardian, until he returns to Frost Halberd City upon reaching adulthood.

The arrangements on paper seemed unremarkable, with no grandiose ceremony of title conferment, nor any family council election process.

But precisely because of this, the whole arrangement was terrifyingly stable.

Thus, not yet two years old, Isaac bore the title of "Duke of the North" before even learning to ride a horse.

And the name of the proxy fell upon that young Lord of Red Tide.

The agent and guardian is not an inheritance, but all truly wise persons understood, the true power had already fallen into Louis' hands, not the young boy still learning his letters.

Chapter 505: Aftermath and Conspiracy (Part 2)

Of course, Louis was never officially appointed by the Imperial Capital as "Governor of the North," nor did he hold any swearing-in ceremony.

He relied on the actual power documents handed over by the old Duke on his deathbed, fueled by three consecutive months of Red Tide Territory's supply of grain and salt mines, and controlled the leading voice in the Northern Territory's reconstruction meetings.

Without wearing a crown, Louis has already achieved approximately seventy percent political support in the Northern Territory.

And Louis's sharpest tool is naturally the data collected by the Daily Intelligence System, converging into an almost cold political map.

Those who can be wooed are marked "usable," with strategies and needs attached.

Those with weak wills and dirty tails are marked as "to be watched."

As for the observers, the "scheme to be decided after the situation evolves" column is left blank.

Yet Louis was in no hurry to clean up or curry favor.

Because he knows, under the seventy percent support, the remaining thirty percent are left with only the choice of "silence."

Of course, the beginning of all this was not the road paved by Louis himself.

But he never denies that what truly made it possible for him to sit on this chair was the deceased old Duke.

It was he who, before dying, sent letters to intimidate the family branches coveting power.

It was he who handed over real power in advance, allowing the Northern Territory's power vacuum to be silently filled.

It was he who, through his posthumous reputation, shielded Louis from countless questioning glances.

Louis realizes this is not a simple legacy, but a favor heavy enough to break one's spine.

He is grateful.

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On the third day after the Duke's death, the frost in Frost Halberd City remained unfrozen.

Louis convened a very brief closed-door meeting within Frost Halberd's inner city.

No audience, no civil servants were present—only three attendees: the three Knight Order leaders: Blunt Edge, Cold Iron, Silver Fang.

The venue was an old stone hall, with a long table spanning across, the fire pit barely aglow.

Sitting closest to Louis was Captain Blunt Edge, Remor.

He smiled faintly as if having awaited this moment for long, nodding first: "We are at your command. The old Duke said as much during his life, and we are already familiar with your rhythm."

This legion had been personally handed over to Louis by Duke Edmund half a year ago.

After half a year's effort of wooing by Louis, it has now become one of Red Tide's most stable military supports.

Louis did not repeat his gratitude, just nodded slightly, as a form of promise.

Sitting in the middle was Captain Cold Iron, Felan, clad in immaculate iron armor, with a postured like a mountain.

His tone was steady: "The old Duke made us guardians; we'll keep guard till he can stand independently by the saddle."

This is the most "disciplined" legion, executing Edmund's orders with an almost obsessive adherence, and this time is no different.

Louis pointed to the map on the table, his tone calming: "Then I'll have you escort Lady Emily and Young Master Isaac back south to Red Tide."

Felan had no objections, only pounded his chest lightly as a salute: "I faithfully follow the Duke's last orders."

Sitting farthest is Captain Silver Fang, Oser.

He was silent for a long time, eventually speaking slowly: "We wish to obey orders... but, if possible, still hope to remain in Frost Halberd."

He did not lie nor say everything.

Yet Louis, through the Daily Intelligence System, had already grasped everything clearly:

This Knight Order maintains independent will and possesses its own political inclinations, their captain privately harboring much hesitation towards Louis's policies.

Moreover, realistically speaking, they number many, alongside numerous families, and Louis indeed doesn't intend to take the entire legion to Red Tide.

Housing, supply distribution, and morale stability are all issues.

He smiled gently, his tone amicable yet hitting the nail on the head: "Then Silver Fang shall guard Frost Halberd."

Oser subsequently rose and bowed, silently accepting.

He gained face while retaining the independence of his division.

And Louis skillfully left this "potential variable" on the strategic sidelines.

The meeting concluded without discord, without shouting.

Only a gradual restructuring of order and the consolidation of power for a temporary guardian agent.

Thus, the temporary command authority of the three Knight Orders, Blunt Edge, Cold Iron, and Silver Fang, formally returned to Louis.

Until Isaac Edmund comes of age, Louis can accomplish much through these knights, which is probably still a good dozen years away.

.....

Clan leader Duke Simmons of the Eight Great Clans of the Empire has recently been in high spirits, quite unlike an old fox.

Robes of deep purple with golden patterns draped him, holding an ivory scepter, his smile as if honey-coated; even a few white hairs seemed to revert, growing anew.

Half a year has passed.

Emperor Ernst August, his First Legion, Dragon Blood Legion, and Imperial Guard, have all vanished without a trace in this half-year.

During these months, the Imperial Capital has been turbulent, while beneath the surface of the Dragon Throne meetings, power centers have quietly shifted several times.

Originally, he was the one among the Eight Great Clans suffering the most from the Emperor's suppression, now finally able to catch his breath.

"How's the arrangement on the Eighth Prince's side?" he asked casually.

"Already secretly met with three marquises, their attitude is positive," Oder responded with lowered head.

"Very well, continue drawing people in, gradually letting them adapt to the Empire without Ernst."

At that moment, a young attendant knocked on the door, holding a sealed letter: "Your Grace, the latest intelligence from the Northern Territory, Frost Halberd Duke, Edmund, has passed away."

The air seemingly froze for a moment.

Simmons glanced back at the letter, took it over, ripped it open, and quickly scanned through, slightly raising his brows.

"Finally gone, that tough old bone," he said quietly, though he had long known of Edmund's serious illness.

His impressions of Edmund are complex.

For over thirty years, protecting the entire Northern border almost single-handedly, defending against the Barbarian Race, insect disasters, rebel armies, and even palace purges.

He admires his loyalty but also finds him foolish.

"Fought for the Empire all his life, and in the end, Edmund's family is now left with just a few marginal figures," Simmons chuckled and shook his head.

"So, who's the new Duke of the North?" he asked lightly.

"It's Lord Isaac, a one-and-a-half-year-old young child." Oder paused, his voice lowering when delivering the intelligence.

"A baby? Hah." Simmons set down the letter, glanced at it, as if watching a farce, "And who's wielding real power?"

"According to intelligence from the Northern Territory, it is... Louis Calvin, currently substantially in control of military and political power."

"Calvin? Which Calvin family branch?" Simmons furrowed his brow.

"He's Duke Calvin's eighth son, previously dispatched to the Northern Territory for its expansion. Wedded Duke Edmund's daughter," Oder answered cautiously.

Simmons dropped back in his seat, lightly tapping the chairback with his knuckles; "Meaning... the Calvin Clan now simultaneously controls the Southeast and the Northern Territory?"

"In theory, the Northern Territory is still under Edmund's name, but the actual power has fully been entrusted to Viscount Louis."

An unusual silence seemed to seep into the air.

The Calvin Family, one of the Eight Great Clans of the Empire, already paramount in influence, now further grasping the vastness of the Northern Territory through marriage.

If the Emperor were still around, if the Imperial Capital was stable, such a thing would never happen; Duke Calvin indeed has a good method.

He recalled the Northern Territory Expansion Order from a few years prior.

Back then, he too had sent a few family juniors for experiences in the Northern Territory, two nephews, one biological third son.

Regrettably, all perished inexplicably in that "Insect Tide" incident; truly, comparing oneself to others is equally infuriating.

Simmons stood facing the map for a long time, slowly moving his finger from the Southeast to the words Frost Halberd, gently tapping it, as if confirming a certain reality.

"Calvin's eighth son..." he chuckled, partly sarcastically, partly in surprise, "Who'd have thought... that lecher, dedicated to having children, actually produced a talent."

Moments later, the smile slowly faded.

"But... Louis Calvin is not yet Governor of the North, right?"

"Yes." Oder instantly nodded, "Currently, externally referred to only as 'Guardian Agent' to Lord Isaac. While many Northern Lords support him, he hasn't received formal recognition from the Imperial Capital."

Simmons chuckled: "Well, then there's still fun to be had."

No Imperial Capital appointment means everything is temporary, not legitimate, and I remember there's a Prince residing in the Northern Territory too, isn't there?"

Chapter 506: The Dragon Throne Council Without the Emperor

The morning mist had not yet fully dissipated, casting shadowy reflections on the windowsill of the Kite Tower residence.

Eleanor Calvin sat quietly before the mirror, allowing her maid to comb her hair, her ceremonial dress layered and neat, with the gold buttons under the blue satin perfectly aligned.

Her gaze settled on the thin pages of intelligence reports spread open at the corner of the dressing table, and with a light blink, she recited the seventeen secret reports delivered the previous night back to her mind.

"The Ministry of Finance is holding a closed-door meeting this morning, with the agenda unknown."

"The Regent King has established a new reception procedure within the palace, even his personal knights must seek approval at every level to approach him."

"The Inspectorate has suddenly detained a knight from the original Helan family in the ninth hall of the inner city, identity unknown."

...

Eleanor did not frown, maintaining her usual calm composure.

She only sat a bit more upright than usual.

Half a year, not a short period, and the situation began to change.

Some people were getting restless, starting to make small moves.

But these probes were still done in private, subtle, cautious, and not crossing the line, like a tentative first step on an icy river.

It seemed the nobles of the Imperial Capital still retained basic patience.

After dressing, Eleanor headed to the dining room escorted by guards, looking out the window.

A flock of Gale Birds was passing over the Imperial Capital, flying in various directions, a sight that had persisted for half a year.

In the dining room, light green tea was steaming, and the maid gently placed a piece of toast spread with apricot jam in front of her.

Eleanor held the silver spoon, stirred it twice, but did not take a sip.

Her thoughts continued to flow, like a slow yet never-ceasing undercurrent, silently interwoven in her mind.

Today, the Dragon Throne meeting convenes again.

The theme was announced a week ago: the death of the Governor of the North, Duke Edmund.

Eleanor closed her eyes.

Not out of shock, but mourning for an old rival, an old ally.

How many nobles now are still utterly loyal to the Empire?

Edmund was one, deserving the title of the Empire's Shield.

He defended the Empire's northernmost fortress with unwavering resolve until death, a pity.

However, what surprised her was the young man succeeding Edmund as the "de facto ruler of the North"—Louis Calvin.

This nephew, of whom Eleanor had almost no impression before he went to the Northern Territory.

Yet now, in his early twenties, he became the most powerful figure at the Empire's northern margin.

After Edmund's death, the power of the Northern Territory was almost seamlessly transferred to him.

Eleanor rarely praised others, but this time, she couldn't help but muse: truly, later generations surpass the previous ones.

The rewards from the last great battle were still undecided.

And her duty today was precisely to secure his deserved share.

Not just the confirmation of Red Tide Territory's status, at least a promotion in peerage worth vying for.

This was a task personally assigned to her by her brother, the current Patriarch of the Calvin Family.

It was both a maneuver for the family's future and a bid for a crown in the Calvin-led Northern strategy.

Her brother's casual remark in the letter still echoed in her mind.

"If there's a chance, bring up the matter of the peerage... but don't try too hard."

Eleanor pondered the nuance of that thought.

Her brother's stance was becoming increasingly intriguing.

He wanted to reap some benefits from this Northern game, yet he dared not take any risks and even avoided truly binding himself with Louis.

The undertone was all too familiar: "If we can gain some advantage, great; if not, no matter. We can't spend real money on that frozen land."

Was it to prevent Louis from breaking free of control?

Or did he never consider the Northern Territory worthy of long-term investment?

Her brother's intentions were always hard to guess, and she didn't really need to know.

Eleanor donned her gloves and walked lightly out of the residence.

The morning wind remained cold, the corners of her cloak lifting slightly.

The carriage moved through the morning mist of the Imperial Capital, entering the grand avenue lined with Bronze Knight Statues.

Outside the carriage window, the imposing dome of the Imperial Hall was faintly visible, like the spine of a sleeping giant beast, silent and solemn.

Eleanor sat quietly in the carriage, expressionless, but a barely perceptible emotion flickered in her eyes.

Half a year ago, she similarly donned the cloak symbolizing the Calvin Clan, heading to the Imperial Hall.

Then, it was His Majesty the Emperor himself presiding over the meeting, the fragrance of dragon blood permeating the hall, under such overwhelming imperial pressure, no one dared to speak more than ten sentences.

Back then, Eleanor was merely a "mouthpiece," conveying her brother's views, regardless of the outcome?

That was naturally for that Emperor to decide.

Eleanor adjusted her gloves, a faint, weary smile touched her lips.

Now, she not only could speak but also influence the direction of the meeting.

Truly as a representative of the Eight Great Clans, she engaged in fierce exchanges with the other representatives.

With the Emperor gone, the old order loosened...

This is the stage for politicians.

The carriage stopped, and she slowly alighted, passing through layers of gold guards and banners, stepping into the Imperial Hall amid the resonating morning bells.

The Imperial Hall, still as solemn and eternal as the rumors.

This cathedral-like chamber, built with a colossal stone dome, overhead was a giant alchemy chandelier.

The blue flames still flickered from the central hoop, having burned continuously for 373 years, never extinguished, symbolizing the perpetual will of the Empire.

The walls of the hall were inlaid with twelve relic emblems symbolizing the ancient glory of the Empire, from the broken dragon shield of Dragonbreath City to the crescent spear of Whispering Ridge, all fossilized commemoration of millennia-old bloodlines.

Chapter 507: The Dragon Throne Council Without the Emperor (Part 2)

She stepped slowly into her seat, glancing at those familiar insignias, feeling not awe but irony.

After all, nowadays, most of these so-called symbols of order, the descendants of nobility, have their knives concealed within their sleeves.

Not even the eternal flame can suppress these restless ambitions anymore.

Moreover, the throne is absent.

To be precise, the "Black Obsidian Throne" carved from a whole piece of obsidian is still there, standing atop the hall's highest step, overlooking the mundane like a divine being.

But ever since Emperor Ernst August's disappearance, no one dares to sit there.

The Grand Prince, the nominal Regent of the Empire, now only sits in the high chair at the center of the long table, his face pale, his breath weak, his gaze barely focused.

Eleanor glanced at him, and a recent piece of intelligence flashed in her mind: "Someone attempted to poison the Regent King, unsuccessfully. Details are unclear."

Seeing his current state... it seems likely to be true.

In just half a year, someone couldn't resist, progressing faster than she imagined.

In the hall, the fragrance of dragon's blood no longer permeates, that solemn and noble, deterrent scent seems to have completely dissipated.

In its place is the invisible moldy smell of power, the damp atmosphere brewed by various factions.

Eleanor walked past the long table and sat at the Calvin Clan's seat.

She did not immediately peruse the documents in front of her nor nod to any acquaintances, just gently placed her hand on the white gloves, her gaze sweeping from left to right, passing over the attendees.

She was observing and reminiscing.

Half a year ago, Eleanor also sat at this table, even in the same position.

The Emperor was still present, and everyone was a hundred times more cautious than now.

But now?

Those who once dared only to bow their heads, repeating words like parrots in the Emperor's presence, are now sitting straighter, speaking louder.

Especially those noble representatives from the Empire's west and Southern Territory, whose realms are distant from the center.

Once cautious and careful, now their eyes are sharp and their smiles complacent.

Conversely, the originally imposing civil servant group representatives now mostly appear haggard, with sunken eye bags.

Mei Si, from the supervisory institute, is an exception, still sitting upright like an ice sculpture, nailed to his seat.

"Civil servants are depleting, while local powers are expanding." This was Eleanor's clearest conclusion at the moment.

With the Emperor absent, the Imperial Hall is no longer a stage of majesty but a long table for carving up interests.

Some are eager to try, some remain inactive, some feign calm...

Eleanor's gaze briefly passed over the Regent King's seat, that frail figure still trying to maintain posture, as silent as ever, yet still as... meaningless.

"This isn't a Dragon Throne meeting, it's a hunting ground of power."

She took a sip from the warm teacup.

After all, she's a hunter too.

Then a faint sound of footsteps emerged in the silence, breaking the nobles' tense breaths.

The Empire's internal affairs administrator, Lin Ze, emerged slowly from the shadows.

His face was slender and calm, his steps silent yet impossible to ignore.

Even half a year after the Emperor's disappearance, this old man still dutifully carries out the duties of the Empire's will representative.

Eleanor slightly bowed her head, her gaze calm; she's not close to this administrator, yet cannot help but respect him.

This is a head of the security council who hasn't been replaced under three emperors, rumored to be nearly two hundred years old.

Even now with the Dragon Throne vacant, the imperial tier without a master, once Lin Ze unfurled that scroll of secret silver paper.

The Imperial Hall remained silent until he began to read:

"Agenda item one. Concerning the Governor of the North, Duke Edmund, confirmed deceased due to a battle injury at the 'Grave Canyon Campaign'.

His achievements during his lifetime, stabilize governance under his command, and contributions to resisting the Barbarian Race disasters at the Empire's borders, are granted with imperial commendation level.

However, following his death, the Northern Territory's military and political vacuum, the province has yet to have a successor, and subsequent arrangements need to be discussed."

Beside the nobles' long table, a silent rustle arose as some nobles gently flipped through their documents or tried to conceal their stirred expressions.

"Agenda item two." Lin Ze continued reading without waiting for the echo:

"Regarding 'Northern Territory Barbarian Disaster' battle achievements and rewards, joint review submitted by the Imperial Capital's commendation office, military department, and supervisory institute.

Will evaluate commendation levels based on battle achievements, stability, and logistical contributions.

Among them, the Northern Territory independent noble knight order and Imperial Knight Order units performed outstandingly, included in the reward deliberation list."

Lin Ze's tone was neither high nor low, as if merely dissecting a frozen body and reciting its history.

Finally, he slowly rolled up the secret silver paper.

The meeting officially began.

At the start of the meeting, several border counts successively proposed some trivial suggestions:

Such as rebuilding the Northern Territory's post road system, engraving a monument for those fallen in the Northern Territory, providing limited tax exemptions for the Northern Territory, etc.

Some were quickly passed, while others were shelved due to "need further assessment".

The noble representatives behaved politely, their tone respectful, as if this was still an Empire with stable order.

The whole meeting proceeded in a calm atmosphere, no one taking the initiative to mention the Northern Governor vacancy or post-war power ownership.

This was the expected "lukewarm stage".

Eleanor Calvin sat quietly at the corner of the long table, lowering her eyelids, her posture so calm it almost merged with the table's carved decorations.

Suddenly, a measured yet well-placed voice broke the silence: "Louis's achievements and post-war contributions are evident to all, should they be awarded with medals and noble rank commendation?"

Everyone turned their gaze toward the speaker, Marquis Ashville, a gentle old noble from the southwest province, seemingly unrelated to the Calvin Clan.

Yet now, he was speaking for her.

Eleanor's eyes flashed with a barely detectable glimmer.

Days ago, she secretly visited him, trading Southeast port tax for today's opening statement.

That was precisely her first goal for this trip.

To secure the Empire's count rank for Louis, avoiding a struggle for power.

After all, her nephew Louis is too young, just over twenty, of pioneer nobility origin, rising from an unknown baron in just four years to now the Northern Territory's de facto ruler.

If further paired with the title of Empire's Governor, it would only expose him to everyone's envy-filled eyes.

Not mentioning "Governor" as a taboo, focusing solely on war achievements and noble rank elevation as the entry point.

In the Empire's current chaotic power structure, it's already the furthest step possible.

As long as this proposal isn't rejected, even without anyone seconding it, her task has already half succeeded.

Above the imperial tier, the Regent Grand Prince leaned against the ebony armrest, his face pale, eyes lined with green.

He is not one who can make decisions, at least not now.

He slightly tilted his head, quietly asking his side's "Royal Attendant" Lin Ge a few questions.

Lin Ge leaned closer, speaking into his ear; nobody knew what he actually said.

A few breaths later, the Regent King grasped the table edge and tried to stand, his voice weak but still keeping royal poise: "Louis Calvin... for his valor in the Northern Territory campaign, awarded the count rank."

The hall fell silent.

Then faint applause arose from several people, not enthusiastic, but also without opposition.

Yet many nobles showed cold expressions, with contempt hidden in their eyes.

"Count? Promoted again?"

"Only four years, the pioneer nobility's shortcut is quick indeed."

"Tsk, just guarding a Barbarian Race fortress can earn a noble rank... Seems that tumultuous times are indeed favorable for rising."

"Yet, the Northern Territory, that cold and freezing place isn't worth much. Being a baron in the South may be more comfortable."

They sneered inwardly.

Not directly opposing Louis's promotion, but using a hundred ways to express scorn, as they have always looked down upon the Northern Territory's nobility.

Eleanor saw clearly yet maintained the posture of a neutral observer, merely nodding slightly, as if expressing gratitude for the Emperor's "favor."

But she slowly released a breath internally.

Target achieved.

Count rank may not be Governor, but rising from province nobility to Empire conferment.

Means Louis legally gains transferable rights outside the province and military establishment qualifications.

Calvin Clan has placed this piece in the new game.

And just as she was preparing to leisurely drink a sip of wine, celebrating this phased victory.

A sudden voice interrupted her emotion.

Chapter 508: Surging Waves

While Elinor was assessing the victory with ease in her heart.

A representative who had been silent rose quietly: "Due to the sudden passing of Duke Edmund, and the instability in the Northern Territory, the defense line is as fragile as thin ice.

I propose that Sixth Prince Asta August be named as the new Governor of the Northern Territory to oversee the aftermath and restore order."

Everyone turned to look; it was the representative of Duke Simmons.

The old noble in a gold-embroidered azure robe rose from the side of the long table, his tone seemingly concerned for the Empire's safety, but in reality sharper than a blade.

And this proposal was like dropping a stone in a pool of still water, causing ripples to spread.

Immediately another noble stood up to second the motion, followed by a third, and then a fourth...

Most were from the central nobility faction, along with a few figures from the Imperial Capital's military system, and even some from the old Inspection House.

Their expressions varied, but their voices were uniformly aligned:

"This proposal is very stable."

"The Sixth Prince has pure blood, and has a titular territory in the Northern Territory..."

"The Governor's position is unsettled, the people's hearts have no allegiance..."

"The Sixth Prince is of royal blood, symbolizing stability..."

...

It wasn't a spontaneous idea; it seemed like a prearranged encirclement action.

Elinor lightly glanced at the attire and badges of the speakers, immediately making a judgment.

They came from different factions but responded to Simmons with remarkable coordination, clearly indicating an extensively planned joint offense.

What was more alarming was that those who should have retorted first... remained silent.

Mei Si, the head of the Inspection House, slightly pushed his thin-frame glasses, maintaining his usual cold restraint.

General Yoda, who previously had many objections regarding the Northern Territory, now seemed deaf, playing with a copper badge, calculating pros and cons.

And the Empire's finance director, known for his stinginess and caution, was entirely silent.

Elinor's brow subtly twitched, yet her lips curled into a silent, cold smile.

Underestimated.

She murmured in her heart, emotionless yet piercingly cold.

Simmons did not intend for the Sixth Prince, who had long been exiled to the Northern Territory, to truly take charge of it.

On the contrary, this strike hit the Calvin Family and Louis precisely.

Having a prince as a titular governor seemed respectable yet void, sufficiently blocking Louis's legitimacy to govern the Northern Territory.

Even if most northern nobles supported Louis, he could never truly rule the Northern Territory.

More crucially, this move disrupted Calvin's attempt to leverage the Northern Territory for power expansion.

Elinor knew where she went wrong.

It was too smooth, too smooth to forget that this was under the Dragon Throne.

From the beginning, the situation was smooth sailing; Louis's elevation met no opposition, empty power in the Northern Territory was readily established, and nothing hindered her recruitment of supporters.

Elinor even once thought this meeting would conclude at her steady pace.

But now she realized: other families were not indifferent to the Northern Territory, but had laid their pieces, waiting for this moment of her slack to act.

"...Damn." She cursed quietly in her heart.

Duke Calvin's letter seemed to float before her eyes: "The interests of the Northern Territory can be contested but not at too great a cost."

Indeed, she saved the cost of exchanging interests, but also fell behind because of it.

But Elinor would not be trapped on the board and simply give up.

She had served as the Calvin Family's Special Envoy in the Imperial Capital for over a decade, negotiating with various parties, building networks for her brother, and gaining benefits for the family.

She had seen many high figures fall, many powers perish, many nobles rise under the Dragon Throne only to quietly withdraw.

This wealth of experience immediately provided Elinor with a solution to avoid the worst outcome.

She did not intend to outright oppose the proposal to make the Sixth Prince a Governor.

That would be foolish, as if the Calvin Family was hastily jumping out to contradict the royal family and seize power.

She planned to engage from the angle of social norms, etiquette, and tradition, a perspective acceptable to everyone.

Naturally, Elinor had not prepared a backup spokesperson for this nor arranged noble allies to aid her subtly.

So she had to step in personally.

Elinor slowly stood, her movements steady as if prepared in advance, and glanced around.

She paused, her eyes lowered in a sorrowful manner, speaking in a slightly astringent tone: "Duke Edmund defended the Northern Territory for more than a decade, to his last battle, now his bones are not yet cold.

His youngest son just inherited the title, and should also inherit the Governor of the Northern Territory role, as the position has historically been held by the Edmund clan head.

It isn't that the Sixth Prince is unsuitable... but now the Imperial Capital doesn't even know the attitude of northern nobles.

To let a prince who has been in the Northern Territory for only a year have the Governor's title hastily might cause estrangement among those old northern nobles. In these tumultuous times, caution is more crucial."

As her words fell, the Imperial Hall was momentarily silent as the grave.

Some lightly set down their teacups with grave expressions, others exchanged whispers with their neighbors, but no one easily echoed Simmons's proposal anymore.

Elinor didn't say the Sixth Prince was incapable, didn't mention the Calvin Family, or dispute for power.

But with one sentence, "those old northern nobles might cause estrangement...", she turned the entire Northern Territory into a minefield that the royal faction could not freely touch.

The most exquisite part was by using "bones are not yet cold" she sparked the empathy of the noble assembly, the sentiment that today a royal decree could strip a Duke family of century-old achievements, and tomorrow they could strip any family of their land and honor.

Chapter 509: Surging Waves (Part 2)

Thus, whether it was those intertwined with the interests of the Calvin Clan, the nobles once sheltered by Duke Edmund, or representatives of other nobility worried about "the rabbit's death and the fox's lament."

After weighing decisions in their hearts, they chose silence or nodded in agreement.

Many among them didn't necessarily support Emily herself; they merely supported the self-preservation behind her words.

Just as the tide was turning, the representative from the Simmons family, who always wore a smile in his eyes, didn't look pleased.

He twitched slightly as he quietly glanced over the scroll on the table, as if deliberating whether to forcibly advance the original plan.

But before he could decide, Emily slowly delivered her sharpest blow.

"If His Highness the Regent King intends to pacify the Northern Territory, why not grant the Sixth Prince the position of 'Royal Reconstruction Envoy of the North', temporarily dealing with partial administrative powers, and deciding the governor's succession once the situation is clear."

She spoke lightly, as if truly considerate of the prince, without a hint of offensive intent.

But this was a masterpiece of hiding the blade within ceremony and propriety.

Endowing the title "Royal Reconstruction Envoy," which sounded prestigious, actually meant:

Giving the Sixth Prince a "dignified position" without actual authority to lead.

Temporarily leaving the governor's position vacant, preserving a line for future contention.

If it ever becomes necessary to remove the Sixth Prince's influence, it wouldn't become a major case for dismissing the governor.

This move retreats one step, blocks three steps, borrowing a step to resolve the entire situation.

A flicker of a shadow passed through the eyes of the Simmons representative.

He naturally understood what Emily's tactics signified.

It wasn't that they lost, but rather that Emily promptly patched the gaps, leaving no openings for a decisive strike.

If he were to forcibly refute now, it would appear as if he was pressuring the throne, disrupting the meeting's order.

If he retreated casually, it would confirm the sin of reckless advancement.

He was stuck.

And within the Imperial Hall, many nobles nodded lightly, while even General Yoda, from the military side, discreetly put away the bronze badge in hand.

The Regent King didn't speak, merely turning to look at the old chief steward Lin Ze by his side.

Lin Ze bowed slightly, whispering a few words into the Regent King's ear.

Moments later, the frail Regent King spoke, his voice hoarse yet indisputable:

"The position of Governor of the North shall remain undecided for now. Conferring the Sixth Prince as 'Reconstruction Envoy of the North,' assisting in matters, under the joint supervision of the Imperial Secretariat."

Everyone in the Imperial Hall rose and bowed.

Emily also bowed slightly, her face calm, yet her heart breathed a sigh of relief.

She won, though not completely, but it was enough.

However, from now on, it might depend on Louis himself.

The title of Royal Reconstruction Envoy, although light in name, actually represents the Empire's factions inserting an eye and hand into the Northern Territory.

How to deal with the maneuvers and compromises with him in the future would depend on Louis's own skills.

What the Calvin Family can do for him ends here.

To strive further, the cost would be too great, just as her brother said in his letter, "Don't exert too much effort."

But she wasn't worried; to rise from a pioneer in the Empire's southeast to the actual ruler of the Northern Territory in just four years, Louis must possess exceptional political acumen.

And as the meeting hadn't yet adjourned, the following proposals, though numerous, could no longer invoke the previous intense contention.

Most of the topics were related to the reconstruction of the Northern Territory.

Including how to repair the defenses of Frost Halberd City, whether to restart financial appropriations for the Northern Territory granaries, and whether the middle and lower nobles who accomplished merits in battle should be rewarded.

These issues, during the Emperor's lifetime, perhaps required careful weighing, but now were swiftly passed over.

Some neutral nobles proposed funding details for building the Northern Territory's defenses. Some members suggested increasing the proportion of stationed troops in the North on the grounds that remnants of the Barbarian Race still exist.

But in the end, it was merely recorded, left for financial review, and passed over with a phrase.

Only those families permitted to present accomplishments, showed a hint of pride on their faces.

Even though everyone knew, those so-called battle merits were mostly finely polished numbers.

But the real challenges were just beginning to emerge.

As the reconstruction of the Northern Territory entered the practical stage, the meeting inevitably brought up the issue of resource aid arrangements.

The atmosphere instantly became subtle, yet the nobles showed a trace of indifference.

The true issue lies not in the lack of resources, but in the absence of the Emperor.

Had the Emperor still been around, even if discontented, the nobles would have reluctantly responded due to the imperial authority.

But now, these great figures sitting around the long table, each harbors calculations and hidden tests.

"From which warehouse should provisions be allocated?" a Marquis furrowed his brow lightly.

"Shipped to the Northern Territory? Even if ten percent were allocated, getting three percent through would be a gift of God." On the other side, a Duke's representative sneered, shaking his head, the arrogance in his whispers barely concealed.

With the Emperor present, perhaps these people would yield, but the Imperial Capital without an Emperor would not truly "lean northward."

"Supporting the Northern Territory" slogan remains solemnly high, yet the actual resource requisition falls far short of the Emperor's formerly commanding enforcement.

After all, the Regent King is not the true ruler; even sitting on the throne's seat, feebly commanding the Empire's grand machine, he cannot dictate like the Emperor before.

Furthermore, there's an extremely awkward possibility.

Various parts of the Empire indeed respond to the call, delivering provisions and equipment, but these resources were deducted and siphoned off during transportation.

Some local officials seized the chaos to manipulate, others military corps engaged in "supplementing military supplies" customary maneuvers.

Even more audacious, some simply set off on order yet returned halfway, making the record flashy while nothing actually moved.

Moreover, the Northern Territory remains a leaderless state, with no authority to hold these losses accountable.

Those in charge of withholding resources naturally became more unscrupulous.

"How much of the resources finally reaching the Northern Territory remain?"

Emily coldly observed these nobles as they smiled discussing ways to rescue the North.

Yet in her heart, it was as if she already saw carts of empty boxes and rotten grain, piled before shattered docks and burnt fortresses, turning into ashes in the wind.

"Anyway, the Barbarian Race has nearly been settled, heard the snowfield has been quiet for months after the battle."

"Moreover, even if they do attack, there's the Imperial Legion watching over. Our Southwest's supplementary support is symbolic at best."

"The Empire is so vast; it wouldn't truly allow the Northern Territory to perish, right?"

The low murmurs of noble representatives, carried a half-true half-joking tone.

This is the real political atmosphere of the Empire at the moment, actually everyone weighing their own scales of gain and loss.

.....

Outside the window, not far away from the tower, came the low orders from soldiers changing guard, like echoes from a dream.

On the bed, Louis slowly opened his eyes.

This wasn't his familiar domed chamber in Red Tide City, but rather the cold, hard interior of a tower in Frost Halberd City. Even with thickly carpeted floors, the chill couldn't be concealed.

Today marks the twelfth day since Duke Edmund's passing; it's time for them to prepare to return to Red Tide.

Emily quietly lay on Louis's left arm, her skin as pale as snow, making her lips even paler.

The once proud and stern daughter of the Governor, beside him, was merely a fatigued, sleeping girl.

Her brow no longer furrowed, her breathing calm, seeming to have momentarily detached from the pain of losing her father and political strife.

Louis gazed at her for a long while, lightly stroking the strands of hair that fell upon her.

"...already strong enough." He silently thought to himself.

She was the daughter of Duke Edmund, the rightful bloodline to the Shield of the North, already prepared for her father's departure.

Only in the deep of night, occasionally she would tightly grip his hand, as if searching for the last support amidst some collapse.

Louis gently extended his hand, brushing away a strand of fallen hair from her forehead.

Emily's brow flickered slightly, yet she did not wake, she was too tired.

Louis then slowly raised his other hand, gently drawing through the air.

A translucent screen quietly emerged before his eyes, silently spreading.

Pale blue interface flowing with a subtle glow, a few faint blue strands passed, stirring a barely audible hum.

The familiar interface finished loading.

[Daily intelligence updates complete]

Chapter 510: New Daily Intelligence

Louis slowly raised his other hand and gently made a stroke in the air.

A semi-transparent light screen quietly appeared before his eyes, unfolding silently.

[Daily Intelligence Update Completed]

[1: A "Rift-spined Snow Scorpion" has been found in the shallow valley north of Dongxi Ridge.]

[2: The Imperial Capital's Dragon Throne meeting has officially passed the proposal to appoint the Sixth Prince Astha Augustine as the "Royal Reconstruction Envoy for the Northern Territory."]

[3: Signs of Fishmen activity have appeared near "Sunken Wave Reef" outside Breakwave Bay, numbers are yet to be clarified.]

Louis raised an eyebrow slightly, his gaze first falling on the first piece of information.

"Rift-spined Snow Scorpion... another resource-type creature," Louis muttered to himself, already accustomed to categorizing intelligence.

Such precious magical beasts found in remote cold lands often carry some extractable substances.

According to the description, the scorpion's gallbladder is rich in toxic glandular substances, yet its poison is not purely lethal, but acts as a catalyst to stimulate blood vitality and fighting energy fluctuations.

After being cooked or refined, it significantly enhances the cultivation of the knight class.

Louis took out a small booklet from his bedside and swiftly noted: "Dongxi Ridge · Rift-spined Snow Scorpion · Gallbladder · Fighting Energy Catalyst · Priority Capture", encircling it with a red frame at the end.

When returning to Red Tide City, the Beast-hunting Knight Team should take action.

Over the years, with the support of the intelligence system, Red Tide Territory has secretly accumulated astounding fighting energy boosting materials.

Demon Beast Meat, Enhanced Mead, Combat Meditation Incense, Blood-boosting Herbs...

There is even the Shadow Trial Arena, an almost hack-level fighting energy cultivation space.

What outsiders see as precious treasures, hard to come by, have almost become daily occurrences here.

Louis once even joked: "The biggest worry about being a knight in Red Tide is that your stomach can't hold this week's supplies."

Such words would probably sound absurd to knights from other territories.

But under Louis's command, this is nothing but the plain truth of daily life.

Those knights, from initial cautious observation to now loyal devotion, have relied not on empty slogans, but through the gradual allocation of resources.

These resources form cohesion, they form combat strength.

Unlike knights in other noble houses who queue for years or draw lots just for a taste of demon beast meat.

Knights of Red Tide know well, as long as they follow Louis, rewards are always on the horizon, and cultivation naturally advances.

Ah, the Lord's grace can't be repaid!

Louis looked at that piece of intelligence, a smile curling at the corner of his lips: "Scorpion gallbladder... can add to everyone's menu again."

Then, the second piece of intelligence slowly came into view.

[2: The Imperial Capital's Dragon Throne meeting has officially passed the proposal to appoint the Sixth Prince Astha Augustine as the "Royal Reconstruction Envoy for the Northern Territory."]

Louis did not appear surprised, only slightly furrowing his brows, as if confirming a result he had foreseen days ago.

"As expected..." he murmured softly.

This wasn't a sudden storm, but rather the ancient pot of the Imperial Capital starting to simmer once more.

With the Emperor missing for half a year, the empire's power center is shrouded in turmoil.

He already knew that neither the Royal Family nor other nobility could sit idly by while the Calvin Clan controlled both the Northern Territory and Southeast Province.

Even though the Northern Territory is filled with scars and scarcity, it still possesses considerable mineral deposits and Cold Land Magical Beast resources.

Louis chuckled self-deprecatingly, yet his gaze remained as steady as ice.

As for the Sixth Prince... Astha Augustine.

A nearly forgotten pawn now being placed back on the board, given the title "Reconstruction Envoy", clearly not for management but for balance.

"Still... better than directly appointing the Sixth Prince as Governor."

This indicates there has already been bargaining and compromise within the Dragon Throne meeting, the Calvin Clan temporarily withstood the sharp edge, with the title of reconstruction envoy essentially just a transitional fig leaf.

At least in formality, the Northern Territory remains vacant.

And that's enough because as long as that "Governor's Chair" remains unoccupied, he, Louis, is still the de facto sole ruler of the Northern Territory.

"But." Louis sat up straight, a hint of wariness in his eyes: "The Sixth Prince, after all, is of royal blood."

He wouldn't be naive enough to think a cowardly prince poses no threat.

Even a semi-exiled pawn, as long as that golden bloodline halo remains overhead, no matter how incompetent, can attract a swarm of sycophants.

Especially those Southern Pioneer Nobles who have but a superficial understanding of the Northern Territory yet pride themselves on being astute.

But Louis was not afraid, his mouth curling into a mocking smile.

"Now do I fear a prince who can't bring resources nor muster a Knight Order?"

The entire Northern Territory, from Frost Halberd City to Red Tide Territory, from the Southeast Grain Warehouse to coastal projects, has long been a political machine driven by him alone.

He controls resources, hearts, geography, and the unique edge of the [Daily Intelligence System].

Even if enemies plan in secret, he can always be a step ahead to see through their stratagem.

"The intelligence is still insufficient... I'll have to watch and wait."

Naturally, Louis did not let down his guard, there was just no further detailed intelligence for now, he had to wait, and so he continued to look down at the page.

[3: Signs of Fishmen activity have appeared near "Sunken Wave Reef" outside Breakwave Bay, numbers are yet to be clarified.]

Louis's gaze sharpened slightly.

This third intelligence is a type of threat warning, but for him, "bad intelligence is not necessarily a bad thing."

If he only finds out when the Fishmen come ashore to snap ship masts, it wouldn't be a warning, but a disaster.