

Winter 511

Chapter 511: New Daily Intelligence_2

Louis opened his notebook and recorded this on the priority intelligence page marked with a red line.

South of Ghost Vine Slope, on the west coast of Breakwave Bay, lies an uninhabited mudflat known as "Sinking Sands."

He has been strategically planning for this coastline repeatedly over the past three months.

Behind it lies rolling hills, forming a natural arc bay towards the sea, with no storm invasions all year round—a God-given harbor structure.

As early as last winter, Louis quietly found out that this beach nominally belonged to a former Empire navy noble who had migrated south long ago.

This person hadn't set foot in the Northern Territory for decades; the territorial documents had already turned yellow and moldy, leaving only a name.

Thus, he simply sent someone south via a detour, personally offering a thousand gold coins to acquire this future port core.

He wrote a few words in the notebook: "Sinking Sands → Dawn Port City."

To other minor nobles, it was merely a ragged mudflat.

To Louis, it was the first waterway trade throat for Red Tide Territory to step out of the Northern Territory and connect to the Southeast Province.

Previously, he had to send various mineral resources refined from Red Tide via winding land routes to Calvin Southeast Point every month.

It took a long time, cost was high, transport teams were easily attacked, and if the road was sealed by winter snow, supplies were almost cut off.

However, if "Dawn Port" could be built, water transport would solve this once and for all:

Supply ships could head south, reaching Calvin Southeast Port warehouse in just over a week.

It could open up the Northern Territory maritime trade route, absorbing migrants and foreign merchants.

It could also connect other Southern Nobles' ports, a political negotiation bargaining chip and link.

Of course, the ideal was ideal, but reality was like the mud on the coast, full of traps.

The ideal was very full, but reality was like Sinking Sands; if you step down, all around are traps.

Although the site selection for the new port was good, it was very difficult to build. The muddy terrain was soft and needed sand embankments to stabilize the foundation.

Lack of wood, nails, ropes, even lifting magical tools had to be mobilized from the Southern Territory; let alone artisans—there were few in the Northern Territory who understood port construction.

Others might have been discouraged long ago.

But Louis was well prepared, after all, the Calvin Clan controlled the most ports in the Empire, all this was easy.

He secretly mobilized manpower and materials over the past half year, waiting for this moment.

In just a few days, everything could start construction.

But the real problem came from the outside, as in the intelligence regarding the fishmen now.

Fishmen were once a wise sea race that traded shallowly with humans, but a thousand years ago, for unknown reasons, they regressed into half beasts, becoming greedy, deranged, almost impossible to solve.

They could climb ashore close at night, assassinating sentries, biting civilians, and secreting corrosive acid that melted wooden ships.

Yet the fishmen weren't the biggest problem.

The biggest issue was one of the Seven Pirate Lords, Xavier Ironjaw's lair, right at the northern end of this sea area.

This legendary "Steel Fang Mad King" was not only violent and brutal, but also had nearly a hundred small raiding ships under his command, plundering countless near-sea merchant fleets each year.

Once Breakwave Bay is opened, Red Tide Port could become his most prioritized hunting target.

But these objective factors couldn't stop him from entering the port, as he was prepared for battle himself.

The notebook flipped to the first page, circling "fishmen activity area," "Xavier's sphere of influence boundary," and "new port coordinates" together.

At that moment, Emily slowly opened her eyes, seeing Louis sitting by the bedside, organizing his personal documents.

"Awake?" Louis' voice was gentle as he looked up at her, "We're returning to Red Tide today."

Emily nodded lightly, but a trace of reluctance swept through her eyes.

Louis smiled slightly, reaching out to hold her hand: "Lady Irina and Little Isaac will be going back as well. We aren't leaving, just changing places to continue living. We'll have the chance to return one day."

"I know." Emily's voice was still somewhat subdued, "I'll go prepare."

.....

In the afternoon, the convoy was already gathered outside Frost Halberd Castle.

Louis, draped in the Red Tide cloak, had the Cold Iron Knight Order assembled in formation behind him.

He glanced at this fractured yet still standing castle, then finally waved a hand, leading the team to set out.

As for Frost Halberd City, he had delegated government affairs to the Silver Fang Knight Order to guard, selecting several senior officials to form a temporary council.

Louis required them to report on the situation once a month, until Little Isaac comes of age to succeed, when the rightful lord would take over everything.

Inside the carriage, Lady Irina gently pushed aside the corner of the curtain, gazing at the gradually receding silhouette of Frost Halberd City, a misty haze in her eyes.

She remained silent, her fingers tightly gripping a handkerchief embroidered with the Edmund Family crest, as if through this small gesture, she was storing her memories away.

This city carried the joyful years of her and her husband and also buried the solitary shadow of a generation of Dukes in the Northern Territory.

Meanwhile, nestled in her arms, little Isaac, barely over a year old, giggled and clapped at the wooden panel of the carriage window, his big eyes filled with curiosity at the distant scenery.

He didn't yet understand what separation meant; he only felt the carriage moving, with snow, wind, and novelty along the way, everything was immensely entertaining.

The cold wind rose slightly, and in the distance, the snow line undulated like sleeping veins.

And the wheels of the carriage had once again set off towards Red Tide City.

.....

In the remote territories of the Northern Territory, the wind and snow howled, and the manor under reconstruction still leaked cold wind.

In the makeshift study, near the brazier, the Sixth Prince, Astha Auguste, wrapped in a blanket, was perusing the post-disaster reconstruction register submitted by officials.

A hurried footstep was heard outside the door, and an attendant pushed the door open, his hand tightly gripping an envelope stitched with gold thread.

"Imperial Capital Gale Bird mail, Your Highness, it's... from the Dragon Throne council."

Astha was momentarily dazed, his expression shifting indecisively.

He slowly took the envelope, his fingers trembling slightly as he opened the seal.

"Specially granting Prince Astha Auguste the position of Royal Inspector Envoy for the Northern Territory, temporarily overseeing the Northern Territory's reconstruction and administrative coordination."

He stood still as if struck by lightning, repeatedly caressing the phrases with his fingertips until he confirmed it was not an illusion.

"Finally... finally, my turn has come..." he murmured quietly, then suddenly stood up, bringing a gust of cold wind.

"The Northern Territory, this forgotten snowy land, will become the starting point of my Astha Auguste's achievements!"

He then, like a victorious general returning home, traced grandiose plans on a tattered map.

Yet just as his blood boiled, about to order the reorganization of his forces and the establishment of a government, the steady footsteps outside the door abruptly halted his daydreams.

"Calm down, Your Highness." It was his mentor Sai Fu who entered, "I advise you not to get too carried away with this appointment."

Astha frowned: "Why? This is an official order from the Imperial Capital! I bear the name of the Royal Family, I hold the inspector's position, isn't that enough to intervene in Northern Territory affairs?"

Sai Fu said in a deep voice: "In the past half year, the Imperial Capital hasn't sent a single soldier, grain, or cavalry to the Northern Territory. Now suddenly appointing you is just them putting you out there to test the waters.

If you can hold down Louis Calvin, it's fortunate for the Royal Family; if you can't... they'll just discard you immediately."

"They never cared whether you succeeded." His tone was devoid of warmth, "Your Highness should understand, the real power in the Northern Territory is already in the hands of others.

Don't rush to make decisions, at least wait until the Imperial Capital's Special Envoy and resources arrive, then we'll see."

Astha lowered his head in silence.

The fire in his eyes seemed to be doused with cold water, his body slightly trembling, his palm slowly releasing its grip.

His gaze fell on the map, now vividly marked with plans and schemes, for a moment speechless.

.....

At night, the firelight in the study was dim, the wind and snow outside the window wailed mournfully.

Astha sat alone in the dilapidated hall, looking out at the endless snowfield, silent and wordless.

It seemed as though the world was mocking his delusions and impotence.

"This is the last chance; there won't be another... Once Louis finishes digesting the Edmund Clan's resources, I won't have an opportunity." Astha murmured quietly, his fingers slowly tightening.

Yet under the glow of the fire, there remained a point of light in his eyes that hadn't extinguished.

He thought of Louis Calvin.

This young noble, clearly previously unknown, yet remarkably quickly accumulating fame, power, forces, and public support, even Duke Edmund delegated part of the Northern Territory to him.

"If it was him, how would he do it..." Astha whispered, his tone filled with self-questioning and unwillingness.

He may not be unable to do it, as long as he is given time, as long as he is given space.

So on the surface, he retracted all his sharpness, feigning composure.

But privately, he concealed his actions from Astha, quietly summoning several small pioneer noble lords who had migrated from the South, and even harboring several tribes of the Barbarian Race willing to submit.

Under the name of post-disaster autonomy, he distributed some land rights, grain allocations, and armed permissions.

Not because he was benevolent, but to reveal the dagger when the time comes.

He believed that day would come.

Chapter 512: Mai Lang Territory in Felan's Eyes

After settling the affairs of Duke Edmund, Louis did not linger in Frost Halberd City, for the days of the autumn harvest were imminent.

This is the foundation upon which Red Tide Territory stands, not the sword of the Knight Order, nor the Empire's seat, but those fields of golden Mai Lang.

If the seasons are missed, or if mistakes occur during the harvest, grain production will decrease, which in the current Northern Territory, almost equals self-destruction.

"Let the Cold Iron Knight Order escort Emily, Lady Irina, and Little Isaac back to Red Tide City first to settle down. I'll return after the autumn harvest ends." On the return journey, Louis looked at Emily beside him.

Emily lowered her eyes, her hand resting on her rounded belly.

She did not pout or try to dissuade him, merely speaking softly: "I'll leave the autumn harvest to you."

Louis was stunned for a moment, feeling a warmth in his heart.

Emily clearly needed companionship more than ever at this time, yet she still sensibly shared his burden.

He gently held her hand: "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Emily nodded without saying another word.

The carriage rumbled down the mountain path, and the scenery ahead gradually opened up.

The entire valley was covered in heavy golden wheat, the ears drooping like waves of gold, rising and falling in the sunlight.

Hundreds of transparent greenhouses were neatly arranged, reflecting a silvery sheen under the autumn daylight.

"Is this... truly the Northern Territory?" Lady Irina stared at the scene before her, eyes filled with disbelief.

She had grown accustomed to the famines and desolation of the Northern Territory, yet never expected to see such abundance on the bleak permafrost.

Meanwhile, Felan, the leader of the Cold Iron Knight Order, rode forward with barely concealed curiosity.

Without beating around the bush, he spoke directly: "Lord Louis, may I stay? I wish to see firsthand how Red Tide Territory produces such astonishing grain on this permafrost."

Louis smiled gently, not refusing: "Of course. Seeing it with your own eyes brings peace of mind."

In truth, Louis was happy to do so; some things are best witnessed firsthand. Only by allowing these newly affiliated knights to see Red Tide Territory's strength can their doubts truly be alleviated.

.....

Thus Emily, Lady Irina, and Little Isaac, along with most of the Cold Iron Knights, had already set off ahead to return to Red Tide Territory.

Under the escort of the Cold Iron Knight Order, Louis did not worry about their safety.

After all, this group, claimed to be the strongest knight order in the Northern Territory, would suffice to ensure his family's safe arrival at Red Tide City, even during insect plagues.

He, on the other hand, left only a small number of attendants and headed straight for Mai Lang Territory.

At the valley's entrance, Green and Mike had already been waiting for some time.

Though Green was born a Knight Calvin, he now wore a civil servant's uniform, holding a thick stack of ledgers.

Mike, meanwhile, still carried the image of an elderly farmer with graying hair, his sleeves earthy with soil.

The two had been standing for half an hour, just to pay their respects the moment the Lord arrived.

"I've kept you waiting," Louis dismounted, his gaze lingering momentarily on Green and Mike.

One handles administration, the other handles production.

They have managed Mai Lang Territory methodically; not only is the harvest abundant, but the people's hearts are stable, and storage and transport are seamlessly coordinated.

Under their management, Mai Lang Territory is now not just a subordinate domain, but the most important cornerstone of Red Tide next to Red Tide City.

Louis felt genuine satisfaction towards the two.

Seeing Louis dismount, Green immediately stepped forward and respectfully said: "Lord Louis, on behalf of all Mai Lang Territory citizens, Green welcomes Lord back."

Mike followed suit, hands clasped, his face showing a rustic, unabashed smile: "Everyone's been looking forward to your arrival. The citizens heard you were coming for inspection and are working hard to show you."

"How's this year's harvest?" Louis didn't waste words, directly asking.

Green then opened the prepared ledger and reported: "Lord, this year's autumn harvest is expected to yield a total of 197,000 tons, over seven percent more than the initial year's 115,000 tons.

Among them, over 60,000 tons of green wheat, over 30,000 tons of rice, and around 100,000 tons combined of beans and root crops..."

This array of numbers and details struck everyone's ears like hammers, especially those Cold Iron Knights unfamiliar with Red Tide Territory.

Felan, initially relaxed with arms crossed, was already surprised by the sprawling fields seen throughout the journey, mentally prepared.

But with Green's report, his expression became somber, eventually freezing completely.

197,000 tons!

What concept does this represent?

In his mind, even the combined efforts of several dozen territories in the Northern Territory might not achieve such production.

Yet now, a newly cultivated land of just two years can independently support tens of thousands of people's food needs and still have surplus to aid others.

"This... this is simply unbelievable," Felan muttered, brow furrowing.

Though he's no civil servant skilled in ledgers, as a knight who fought all his life, he understands too well what food signifies: military strength, survival.

Such a number makes him suspect it was exaggerated by Louis.

Felan turned to Green, staring intently: "Are you sure these numbers are correct? Not exaggerated?"

Green's expression remained unchanged, instead standing straight, word by word: "Though it's not completely harvested, it's close enough. I'd stake my head on it."

Chapter 513: Mai Lang Territory Through Felan's Eyes (2)

At this moment, Felan saw a kind of confidence in the eyes of the young overseer.

Beside him, Mike chuckled and lifted his calloused hand: "My lord, if you don't believe me, come with me to the greenhouse and see.

Even in winter, vegetables can grow here, the canal water flows continuously, and the soil is as fertile as in spring."

Felan was silent for a while, thinking he had mentally prepared for the Red Tide Order's harvest.

But these numbers, these people, these proud expressions in front of him made him realize: he might have underestimated it.

"This... this is astronomical," Felan finally spoke, muttering to himself.

Green, Mike, and Louis couldn't help but show a trace of pride.

Green spoke with vigor, flattering as he said, "All of this is thanks to the Lord's foresight and guidance."

Louis shook his head, his expression calm: "No, this is the result of everyone's hard work together. I merely offered a few small suggestions; the real execution was by you all."

Mike chuckled softly, his calloused hand gently brushed his sleeve, the simple pride needing no words.

The group walked side by side into the fields, planning to take a look before formally moving in.

It was the first day of the harvest, with the horn blowing, villagers shouted in unison, tens of thousands waving sickles, the golden wheat waves rolled like a tide.

New long-handled sickles and hand-pushed mowers danced through the fields, far more efficient than the old-fashioned sickles, the air filled with the crisp sound of cutting wheat stalks.

Felan's gaze was firmly drawn by everything in front of him.

Born in the Cold Iron Knight Order, he had roamed the Northern Territory for many years but had never seen a scene like this.

"...What is that?" He pointed to a semi-transparent greenhouse not far away, glimmering silver under the sunlight, and surprisingly lush inside.

Green laughed as he answered: "That's a greenhouse, using geothermal and piping to maintain temperature, so vegetables can grow even in winter. What you're seeing are Southern vegetables."

Felan was stunned for a moment—in the Northern Territory, seeing fresh vegetables in winter was nearly fantastical.

Before he could regain his senses, the sound of "Boom! Bang!" echoed.

Accompanied by white steam, a machine shaped like an iron barrel was spewing steam at the field's edge, roaring and drawing water from underground, flowing it into the field channels through wooden troughs.

"What on earth is that?" Felan instinctively gripped his sword hilt, his gaze wary.

Green laughed heartily, patiently explaining: "It's a steam water pump, powered by burning fuel to generate steam that pushes a piston, continuously drawing well water up. So even in drought, it ensures the fields don't lack water."

Felan opened his mouth, his heart too shocked for words.

Louis looked at his expression, secretly smiling to himself.

This was precisely the effect he wanted, to let the Cold Iron Knight Order witness the foundations of the Red Tide Territory firsthand, and thus put their minds at ease.

.....

Felan originally thought the "Red Tide Bumper Harvest" was merely exaggerated rumors from Frost Halberd City.

After all, Duke Edmund had repeatedly mentioned in front of him that Louis had a talent for governance. He had only smiled, thinking it was nothing more than the ailing Duke paving the way for a successor.

But on the first day, standing on the slopes of Mai Lang Territory, seeing the vast golden wheat fields undulating like a tide, with tens of thousands shouting while starting the harvest, he silently retracted his inner disdain.

There was no exaggerated mobilization, nor an overbearing presence of miracles, only a steady, orderly, almost calm rhythm of harvest.

And as the days passed, Felan grew more and more silent.

He had thought the initial scenes of the harvest in those first few days were the peak, yet the autumn harvest rhythm never slowed, instead running like a tightly orchestrated machine day and night.

Harvesting by day, transporting in the afternoon, threshing by night.

Three-shift continuous farming was as precise and seamless as military deployment orders.

Children bundled sheaves along the field banks, women carried them in teams, the Red Tide Knights patrolled in formation.

No one shouted urging commands, and there was no chaotic noise; everything was in perfect order.

It almost didn't resemble harvesting grain at all, but rather a military operation without trumpets.

He once doubted this was merely a facade maintained by force.

Until one night, by the threshing floor, he finally whispered to Green beside him, "How do you make these people do this... how do you force them?"

Green didn't immediately reply but quietly watched for a moment at the people swinging flails amidst the wheat waves before speaking:

"It's voluntary because they're working for themselves. This is the power of Red Tide's system, the greatness of Lord Louis."

In a short sentence, it ignited something long dormant inside Felan.

He watched the townsfolk toiling at night, some sweating profusely yet singing happily, others taking out freshly harvested vegetables from the greenhouse to make soup during a break.

They weren't suffering; they were harvesting.

With their own hands, they were exchanging for a better future.

At this moment, Felan suddenly realized: what he couldn't understand wasn't these people.

It was this place, the order running on this land, as if it had completely changed from the Old North.

Torches stood tall around the threshing floor, lighting up the entire valley.

With every beat, the sound of separating wheat grains from stalks echoed like war drums.

The firelight flickered on their faces, revealing sweat and an indescribable sense of satisfaction.

Felan stood at the edge of the threshing floor, silent for a long time.

He never thought one day he would use the word "magnificent" to describe a threshing scene.

At this time, a craftsman pushed in a new drum thresher. Though its metal structure was not complex, its performance during trials was astonishing.

With just two operators, in one round, it could completely thresh an entire cartload, the grains flowing into the bags with a sound like mercury spilling.

"This thing, did you make it yourselves?" he couldn't help but ask softly.

"The third-generation modification from the Red Tide Workshop," Green answered next to him, "Originally, it was Mike who modified an old watermill, and Hamilton proposed the reverse axle design to use here, saving much effort."

Felan nodded lightly, not entirely surprised.

Because in the past few days, there had been too many things that amazed him.

Greenhouses capable of growing vegetables in severe winter, steam water pumps automatically drawing water, light reflecting panels that adjust angles according to the sunlight, geothermal pipes that can store heat...

The miracle of Red Tide lies not in one or two inventions themselves, but in continuous progress.

An autumn harvest quietly changed Felan's heart.

Initially, he didn't have expectations for the Red Tide Territory or Louis, even doubting in his heart: why Louis?

What qualifies a young noble to bear the heavy responsibility of rebuilding the Northern Territory?

He even asked Duke Edmund himself.

At that time, the Duke merely smiled and said, "Perhaps this young man... can bring something new to the Northern Territory."

And back then, he didn't understand what the Duke meant, simply considering it the helpless words of an elderly, sick person entrusting a legacy.

But now he understood, having seen this land with his own eyes.

How hope was cultivated with a hoe and sickle; how vegetables from the south grew from permafrost; how everything ran in order amidst the wind and steam roaring.

He had seen the farmers' pride, the townspeople's calm cooperation, the knights' composed and disciplined order maintenance.

He had also seen the drum thresher, the greenhouse, the water pump, and other novel tools.

But most importantly, he saw the will of the entire territory.

This was a will deeply rooted in the land, steadily advancing.

And its source, undoubtedly, was Louis.

At this moment, he no longer doubted the young lord's abilities.

In some corner of his heart, he even had to admit, though it may be somewhat disrespectful, that in the realm of governance, not even ten Duke Edmunds could match one Louis.

Because this young man did more than maintain order; he changed the underlying structure, reshaping the Northern Territory's hope.

For hundreds of years, the rulers of the Northern Territory focused on maintaining stability, but Louis was the first to try to change its essence.

Felan finally understood that what the Duke meant by rebirth wasn't about changing who sat in high positions.

It was about someone truly intending to rebuild the Northern Territory, starting from the land.

Chapter 514: Mai Lang Festival

The autumn sun was mildly warm, and the wheels rolled steadily on the main road in front of the warehouse.

The entire grain road was congested with loaded convoys, the sounds of hooves and shouts rose and fell, yet it was not chaotic.

At the front of the queue, there was a temporary registration point where dozens of clerks swiftly recorded the bags of grain into ledgers, attaching numbered cloth tags.

Each number corresponded to a village, a field, a laborer's name.

Green stood in front of the granary, loudly directing the logistics: "The northern area of Warehouse Four is full, move to Warehouse Five. Group Three should use the west slope... Make sure they write the numbers clearly."

He personally checked whether the cloth tags were securely attached, clearly written, and correctly categorized, and even confirmed whether moisture-proof mats were laid at each warehouse entrance before leaving.

Just then, a clear voice came from the bottom of the slope: "Green."

Green paused, then immediately turned around and stepped quickly to meet the person.

"Lord," he bowed respectfully, showing a rare sign of relief on his face, "The progress of the autumn harvest is smooth, we have already stored 40%, and it is estimated that more than 70% of the storage tasks can be completed today."

Louis dismounted, looking around at the busy yet orderly road by the warehouse: "Well done."

"This way, my lord, please." Green immediately led the way, guiding him through the long corridor of the warehouse while briefly reporting.

"The three newly built warehouses are now in use, the fourth and fifth have adjustable temperature structures, combined with the ventilated drying system and sealed bags, they can store main grains for at least two seasons, keeping the spoilage rate below 20%.

The ventilation system is maintained day and night by the workshop craftsmen, ensuring inspections twice daily."

They walked along the second-floor corridor, the sacks of grain within the warehouse piled up like a mountain, extending beyond sight.

Sunlight streamed through the exhaust vents at the top, with dust particles floating in the beams of light, as if the entire warehouse was permeated with the scent of harvest.

"Once storage is complete, we will conduct a unified count and make a public announcement." Green glanced sideways at Louis, "This year's numbers are enough to astonish the entire Northern Territory."

Louis nodded slightly, his gaze sweeping over the busy porters, registrars, and patrolling knights within the warehouse, smiling: "Then I look forward to the final results of this autumn harvest."

His tone was relaxed, yet it seemed like an acknowledgment of the entire Mai Lang Territory.

Then Louis turned his tone: "The preparations for the celebration... are they all in place?"

Green's expression turned serious, immediately responding: "In response to the lord, all supplies are in place.

The wine for tonight's harvest celebration has been transported from the main city to Mai Lang, with a special selection of 800 bottles of Mountain Grape Wine and 300 vats of Red Wheat Wine. The meats include cured beef and mutton, smoked ham, and salted fish, totaling over 600 pounds.

Ninety-six pots have been set up for hot soupe, with more than two hundred chefs rotating shifts to prepare, ensuring there is no shortage of food during the entire feast.

Additionally, medals, lists, and public announcements have been printed and will be sent to the venue setup points in advance."

"Well done." Louis interrupted him, but with a little smile, "You have indeed worked hard this year. Tomorrow night, let's celebrate together."

Green's expression shifted, bowing his head to respond: "I will comply with orders."

.....

By the next evening, the originally wild grass-covered clearing in the center of the valley had long been compacted and leveled, the entire ground shining with a pale golden color like dried oat flakes.

The main stage stood among it, a temporary high platform with a sheaf of wheat and sun pattern flag symbolizing the Mai Lang Territory hanging from high pillars at its four corners, fluttering in the wind.

Below the stage, laborers and craftsmen were busy with the final arrangements.

Several Red Tide Knights also removed their shoulder armor, rolling up their sleeves to help lift the wooden seating frames.

Under Louis's influence, they did not see this ceremony as a commoner's affair, but instinctively participated, happy to be involved.

This was a festival belonging to the entire territory.

Green held a heavy ceremony schedule book in one hand, continuously annotating and directing with the other.

And he had to ensure that this celebration of tens of thousands went off without a hitch.

Someone whispered: "This supervisor hasn't closed his eyes since last night, and started moving between venues early this morning."

Another village woman responded, "It's really hard on him, I heard it was the lord's order for him to personally oversee the entire process."

Meanwhile, more villagers quietly discussed the as-yet-unseen figure:

"Do you think... tonight, the lord will personally speak on stage?"

"Ah, what he said last year was so moving."

"We harvested nearly two hundred thousand tons of grain this year!" The old farmer's eyes gleamed, "If he could personally talk about next year's plans, it would be even more reassuring."

On the other side of the low slope in the valley, cooking smoke and the aroma of soup intertwined into a flowing golden line.

Beef stew pots, salted mutton soup pots, mushroom mixed stew pots...

Pots, each two meters in diameter, had been uniformly transported to the "hot soup zone" built with wooden sheds.

Signs hanging from the shed roofs clearly divided into sections like "Green Wheat Vegetable Pot," "Elderly Warming Soup," and "Knight Special."

At the edges of the pots were bubbling hot thick soups, the aroma was tempting, making people swallow unconsciously.

Children carrying firewood shuttled back and forth, some moving carbon, others running errands, chattering like a nest of hamsters scattered, yet quickly took their places under the scolding of the village women.

Housewives rolled up their sleeves, skillfully stirring the bottom of the pots, sprinkling salt, sauce, and grass root powder, as the soup gradually took on a thick golden oily sheen.

Through the crowd, a slightly hunched figure squeezed between the soup sheds.

It was Mike, walking along and constantly muttering instructions.

"Remember, the first round should deliver soup to the elderly and children," he said to a girl by a stew pot, "The second round is for the young and strong, the workers can wait, but the elderly and children can't go hungry."

Chapter 515: Mai Lang Festival (Part 2)

The girl smiled and nodded: "Got it, Uncle Mike."

He bent down again to check the heat: "Don't let the wind blow too hard, keep it simmering gently to bring out the flavor... don't add salt too early to the mushroom soup, or it might turn bitter."

Just as he finished speaking, a noise arose from the side.

A group of children gathered around the pot, pointing and talking, when a chubby boy secretly stretched out a wooden spoon, scooped a mouthful of steaming soup, and as soon as it neared his mouth, he let out a scream: "Hot, hot, hot, hot!"

Mike lifted him aside with one hand and patted his head: "Thinking of sneaking a drink before it's fully cooked?"

The boy nodded repeatedly, scared, and ran back into the crowd, causing a round of laughter.

"The kids are almost crazed with greed," a village woman laughed, "it's no wonder, we didn't have so many pots last year."

At this moment, far away on a slope, Felan quietly stood watching all this.

As the leader of the most important Knight Order in the Northern Territory, he had attended countless banquets in his life.

If he wished, he could, with his title and reputation, almost nightly enter the ballrooms of the nobility.

But such a scene, he had never seen and it was astonishing.

No luxurious crystal chandeliers, nor any graceful bands.

Instead, there was the bubbling stew, mothers seasoning, children running errands, and elders sitting on grass mats waiting for a bowl of hot soup filled with life.

Not the Imperial Capital, not a royal ceremony, nor a noble gathering.

It was a celebration belonging to the people.

And such a large gathering, is this really organized by a newly developed territory in the Northern Territory?

As dusk slowly descended, the temperature in the valley suddenly dropped, the autumn night's chill seemed to sweep down from the distant mountains.

But just at this moment, a blazing firelight suddenly pierced the darkness.

"Light the fire!" With Green's succinct command.

Three wheat column pyres were lit simultaneously, tongues of flame raced up the entwined stalks, instantly turning the entire square into a world of warm golden-red light.

Flames surged, illuminating the pattern on the Mai Lang flag, and the setups, blowers also activated at that moment.

Whooshing this burst out waves of white mist-like heatwaves, dispelling the cold completely.

For a moment, warm colors like morning light enveloped the land, the valley seemed to turn into a temple of harvest.

Drums immediately sounded: "Boom! Boom boom!"

Dozens of Red Tide drummers simultaneously brought down their drumsticks, the rhythm sped up, echoing throughout the valley.

This marked the official start of the banquet as people began to move.

Elders walked slowly, children hopped forward, and housewives held the hands of children.

Young men and women sat in small groups in the rear, laughter, voices of anticipation, shouting, all converging with the drums.

Elderly farmers arriving from distant villages wrapped in blankets, dressed simply, yet their eyes sparkled brightly.

"The front ten village cooperative teams, prepare to enter." With Green's command, the ceremony officially began.

Following the drumbeat changes, representatives from ten village cooperatives formed queues to enter and receive commendations.

Each person held aloft a stalk-decorated wooden staff, draped in representative shawls sewn by local women, either with green wheat as the base or decorated with red trim, rough yet carrying a simple solemnity.

"This is not just my honor," one of the fifty-something men, his voice trembling yet loudly said, "it's the hoe-by-hoe, sweat drop by sweat drop from our village cooperative!"

A loud burst of applause and laughter echoed around, villagers' shouts rising and falling.

"Thirteen Villages! Thirteen Villages!"

"We Four Villages are not too shabby either!"

"Next year, the top spot must be ours, Twenty-one Villages!"

On stage, villagers were too nervous to speak, while below the stage was bustling like a mountain flood.

Amid all this clamor, behind the high platform, a familiar red and black cloak slowly appeared.

Knights stood on either side, shadows cast by the fire were long and slender.

"It's the Lord!"

Suddenly a shout spread, sending the crowd into sudden silence.

Then a shout like a mountain flood and tsunami drowned all rhythm and sounds of flames:

"Lord!!!"

"Louis!!!"

"Our master is here!!!"

And as Louis ascended the high platform, he merely raised his hand, pressing his palm lightly down.

The drumbeats gradually ceased, the valley fell silent, with only the sound of the flames dancing.

"...Everyone," Louis' voice was not loud, yet he used magic to make it clearly heard across the valley, "from last autumn, until now, it's been a full year.

"During this year, we've cleared wasteland, dug irrigation channels, planted vegetables, raised cattle, and harvested wheat together.

Some stayed up lighting lamps at night to sow seedlings, some carried fertilizer to the fields in wind and snow, and some slipped into canals during irrigation...

I couldn't remember each name, but all your efforts are reflected in the fields."

Louis paused, his gaze slowly swept over eyes looking at him, some excited, some nervous.

"I am honored to announce to you that this year's total yield..."

He raised the handwritten page, loudly declared: "Two hundred thousand seven thousand tons. Doubling last year's harvest."

"Wow!!!"

Applause and screams erupted almost instantly, countless people raised their heads and arms, some laughed through tears, others cried holding children.

This was their year's sweat, their most direct and substantial glory.

Yet Louis' voice remained steady and subdued the whole field: "This year's rewards will be distributed according to the 'Cultivation Chart' and Spring Sowing performance.

Exemplary village cooperatives will receive tool supplies, tax reductions, excellent households will have priority promotion into management sequences.

The King of Agriculture will be granted high-quality private fields, model workers' children will receive educational exemptions, military service exemptions."

He gazed into the crowd, that last sentence was the most passionate: "Each of you, every drop of sweat, Red Tide will not forget, the entire Northern Territory will not forget."

Chapter 516: Mai Lang Festival Celebration (Part 3)

At that moment, the entire valley fell silent for half a second, followed by a fervent and extreme shout:

"Lord Louis!!!"

"Long live Louis!!!"

"Red Tide!! Red Tide!! Red Tide!!!"

Every face illuminated by the firelight, some were smiling, some were crying, but everyone was looking up at the person standing on the high platform.

Not because Louis was so strong, but because they knew he would always hang over the territory like the sun.

After the cheers, night fell completely, but the light of the fire tower burned even brighter.

On the south side of the plaza, in the soup tent area, a winding queue had already formed.

Every pot was stewing hot soup of different flavors: green wheat beef soup, salted lamb mushroom pot, milk-braised assorted vegetable stew...

The fragrance wafted through the air, constantly tantalizing everyone's stomach.

"Line up this way! Kids can cut the line, old man come over here!"

"Add another scoop! No need to save today, plenty for everyone!"

The villagers, holding wooden bowls and pottery cups, laughed and shouted, sweat and smiles intertwined.

On the other side, more than a dozen large tables were already filled with hot stewed beef bones, roasted lamb legs, and freshly baked green wheat biscuits. Red Tide soldiers patrolled and maintained order, ensuring distribution was orderly.

Initially, not everyone could fully relax, such as the residents who had just joined Red Tide Territory this year.

A middle-aged man stood by the pot, looking at the large pieces of rolling beef, hesitating to move forward.

"This... this is really for us to eat?" he murmured softly, "And no charge?"

His elderly mother behind him whispered, "Such a big pot, so much meat, this wine, this meal... never seen these given to us common folks before."

"It just feels... too extravagant." He finished this sentence, and suddenly the scene of his family surviving last year's snow disaster with moss soup flashed before his eyes.

"If it weren't for Lord Louis, where would we have this year?"

Then he recalled the village chief's words, shook his head sharply, and dismissed the thought of extravagance.

"We can afford to eat well! This isn't given for free, it's earned with our scythes and shovels!"

Then he downed the beef soup, burning and savory, almost bringing tears to his eyes.

On the high platform, representatives from the first ten villages were conducting a uniquely meaningful toasting ceremony.

Each holding a bowl of wine, they lined up and bowed, presenting gifts handcrafted by the village women to Louis: a golden wheat crown, a red-bordered cape, a braided sash... Although coarsely made, each was full of sincerity.

"This is made by our village... not luxurious, but we hope you accept it."

"We are full, and the children are full too."

Louis accepted each one without refusing, as these were all tokens of the villagers' goodwill.

Then he drank a cup of green wheat wine with each person, finishing it in one go.

A loud cheer erupted again from below the stage.

At this moment, a few children excitedly jumped onto the main stage, innocent yet unafraid, and spontaneously performed a little play titled "Lord Louis Brought Us Food."

They sang and danced, their actions exaggerated and comical, the lyrics simple yet innocent:

"Lord Louis brought us to farm~ there are mushroom slices in the beef stew~ kids are no longer hungry, and the elderly are warm~ Red Tide Territory is truly a treasure~ Lord Louis brought us food~!"

The firelight shone on their joyful faces, their voices echoed in the valley, accompanied by the scent of hot soup and the aftertaste of wheat fields.

Below the stage, laughter erupted, even the knights couldn't help but laugh.

Louis watched the group of children performing earnestly, his face showing a rare relaxed smile.

Initially, only a few children were singing for fun, but it was unclear who first joined in, and gradually more and more people began to hum along.

The tune was off-key, the rhythm uneven, but the lyrics were simple, the melody catchy, and it gradually spread through the entire valley plaza.

"...Red Tide Territory is truly a treasure~ Lord Louis brought us food~!"

In the firelight, someone raised a glass, someone danced, children ran in circles, and the elders gently nodded, swaying their shoulders to the beat.

Even the Red Tide knights were infected and clapped along with the rhythm.

This was not a noble ball, nor a church blessing ceremony.

This was a true folk festival, a feast of the land, a celebration of hard work.

Chapter 517: The Road and the Return to the City

On the morning after the festival, mist still lingered over the valley of Mai Lang Territory, with the remnants of bonfires emitting a faint smoke.

Most of the populace was still in slumber, with only a few cleaners occasionally picking up scattered decorations in the plaza, transporting festival utensils, and quietly restoring the square to its original state.

Green was already standing by the road leading to the mountain path, standing straight, awaiting the arrival of the Lord.

Louis sat astride his warhorse, with his sword hanging at his waist, and his cloak gently swaying in the breeze.

His gaze swept over the valley. Though he felt some reluctance to leave this scene of abundance, he had to depart today.

Because he promised Emily he would return to Red Tide City early.

After all, she's been pregnant for a while, and her father had just passed not long ago, so she needs someone by her side at such a time.

Since the most crucial task of the autumn harvest has been dealt with, the other less important matters of the territory can be set aside to focus on accompanying Emily.

Additionally, based on the Daily Intelligence System notification, the envoy from the Imperial Capital is about to arrive at Red Tide City to convey the contents of the Dragon Throne meeting and a promotion in title.

Therefore, he must return to ensure he shows appropriate attentiveness before the Empire, even though he already knows the general content of the envoy's message from the Intelligence System.

Of course, before leaving, Louis must personally instruct a few tasks to wrap up the autumn harvest.

He trusts Green, but for an important territory like Mai Lang, it's better to give a few more instructions than to fix mistakes afterward.

Thus, he summoned Green to his side: "Within three days, you must complete the reward distribution for the top ten villages and towns on the 'Farming Chart.'"

Ensure that the allocation maps for private fields are delivered to each village head, and that tools and livestock are distributed according to the list without any omission.

The exemption certificates and citizen children immunity rights must also be registered thoroughly, with notice tablets erected at the village centers to ensure public announcement of rewards and penalties.

Do not delay in distributing the rewards. Everyone must know, I remember every drop of sweat from the laborers."

Green nodded, the tip of the pen in his recording book slightly glowing.

Louis thought for a moment and continued: "The preparation work for winter must also begin.

Organize the canal repair teams, inspect the spring planting irrigation canals, bone fertilizer pools, and geothermal pipelines, and clear away the silt.

Additionally, the wear and tear of tools and livestock must be clearly calculated, and the supply plans before winter must be arranged early.

The entire autumn harvest process should be documented and transcribed into three copies of the 'Mai Lang Autumn Harvest Document,'

one to be sent to Red Tide Main City's Agricultural Office, one archived in Mai Lang Territory, and one for future institutional output to replicate the Mai Lang model to other territories."

Green quietly noted down each instruction, secretly admiring the Lord's meticulousness.

Louis paused for a moment, his gaze falling on the refugees nearby who were wrapping up:

"For those who joined the refugees after the autumn, there needs to be a separation and allocation. Priority should be given to ensuring that people from successful harvest villages remain in place, and the remaining people can gradually develop a second batch of wasteland.

There's also the preliminary drafting of personnel lists for winter agricultural training classes, selecting household children willing to switch to artisans or technicians..."

Green took a deep breath, noting down every point with his pen.

These are crucial for the Mai Lang Territory to continue operating even without the Lord present.

Louis patted his shoulder: "Green, these are my requirements. The rest is up to you, and I am assured to leave Mai Lang in your hands."

Green immediately bowed and responded: "Understood, my Lord. Mai Lang will certainly live up to your expectations."

Felan meanwhile stood on one side of the valley, holding the reins of his horse, quietly watching Green record and verify each instruction like taking notes.

Although he had never been a civil servant, he's been by Duke Edmund's side for years, and has somewhat grasped the logic of administrative operations through what he's seen and heard.

Seeing Louis giving each instruction in detail.

Grain, tools, straw, supplies, training classes...

Every link was clear and connected.

Truly, the smooth operation here is not coincidental, but due to Lord Louis's planning and execution.

This young lord is stable yet unpretentious, allocating and explaining perfectly, truly a good lord.

"Let's go, back to Red Tide City."

While he was lost in thought, Louis's voice came from beside him. Felan turned slightly to see Louis already mounted, his cloak gently flowing in the morning breeze.

Felan softly responded, gathering his thoughts, then mounted his horse, following behind Louis.

The journey to Red Tide City still has several days, but Felan felt a slight excitement in his heart.

It's said that the city is even more majestic and grand, a rare marvel in the Northern Territory.

Having seen Mai Lang, he couldn't help but feel a hint of anticipation for Red Tide.

.....

As the sound of hooves stepped into the mountain bend, suddenly a roar and clatter came from ahead.

The clear sound of hammers breaking rocks, the creaking of wheelbarrows, and the deep rumble of steam blowers intertwined, somewhat disordered yet lively.

Just ahead, a road construction team of several hundred was busy between the valley mouth.

Craftsmen swung hammers, shattering the mountain rocks piece by piece to fill the pits.

Laborers pushed wheelbarrows, transporting rocks and sand back and forth, sweat running down their backs.

Steam blowers roared into operation, their flue boxes huffing hot air, melting the sticky gel and pouring it into the stone crevices, gradually sealing the road surface.

Meanwhile, at a stone table on the side, civil servants were scribbling furiously, recording work hours and material consumption, with accounts neat and clear.

A small flag of the Red Tide Trade Bureau stood before the roadblock, and a notice board hung from the wooden stake.

"This road construction allows exchanging work for food, with accommodation and meals provided, for a duration of half a year."

Chapter 518: Roads and Homecoming (Part 2)

As Louis and his entourage appeared, the workers instantly became agitated.

Many of the newly settled refugees were especially excited. Originally, they had no skills, and if they were in other territories, they would have long been treated as unpaid slaves.

But in Red Tide, they were incorporated into the road construction teams: every day they had food, work points to offset penalties, and even received small amounts of iron coins and copper coins.

"It's the Lord!" Someone recognized him and whispered.

"That's... Lord Louis!" A young man clenched the iron hammer in his hand, his eyes filled with both nervousness and curiosity.

They had heard many boastful tales from the old craftsmen: such as the great Red Tide Lord, who could single-handedly defeat a hundred barbarians.

People were curious about what he looked like.

Would he really be as the rumors said, awe-inspiring, with three heads and six arms?

But when they saw him in person, they found he was just quietly riding on horseback.

His appearance was delicate, his figure slender, and his expression cold and steady.

None of the miraculous phenomena of legends, nor an unattainable pressure.

Only as Louis passed by, he simply nodded at them with a smile.

At that moment, it was as if the elusive winter sun had broken through thick clouds and warmly poured down on their hearts.

Everyone felt that he was smiling at them individually.

Thus, the refugees who had anticipated miracles did not feel disappointed.

Instead, in this unexpected ordinariness, they felt a deeper sense of emotion.

Looking at the half-completed road, Louis did not engage in much conversation, asking, "How is the progress on this section?"

A foreman quickly replied, "Lord Louis, in half a month, the mountain path will be fully paved, by then the convoys from Red Tide can directly reach Mai Lang Valley."

Louis nodded, said no more, and continued riding forward.

Then Felan, beside him, couldn't help but frown, "This mountain path... can obviously be traversed, why expend so much effort to repair it?"

Louis turned his head, his tone still steady, "Being passable and being easy to travel are two different things. If relying only on horseback, people can barely get through snow.

But with caravans, if they encounter rain or snow or mud, they'll get stuck halfway, and most of the Northern Territory is snowy days, roads are the lifeline of the territory. If goods and grain can't arrive on time, every harvest will rot in the fields."

He cast his gaze towards the refugees pulling stones with carts ahead, "So it must be repaired."

Felan was taken aback, looking complexly at the stone road forming ahead.

After passing the mountain path, they continued downhill, the dust and rubble gradually leveled out.

Before half a day's work, a newly built station came into sight.

This station was situated at the river valley convergence, green bricks and gray tiles, with the sign "Red Tide Station" hanging under the eaves.

In the courtyard were over a dozen large caravans parked, horses casually drinking water from long troughs.

A commercial convoy from the South, their wagons covered with waterproof cloths, faintly revealing the shapes of wine barrels.

Smoke curled up from the stove, the drivers gathered around the fire, sipping thin porridge, occasional laughter echoed.

When Louis and his entourage stepped into the station, they instantly attracted many gazes.

"It's Lord Louis!" Someone whispered, but there was no uproar, only respectful eyes watching from afar.

The middle-aged merchant leading the convoy saw Louis and bravely stepped forward to greet him, "Sir, we've met before, this time from the South, intending to sell red wine in Red Tide City."

After a few exchanges of pleasantries, the merchant couldn't help but exclaim, "Traveling north on this road, I have never found it so smooth.

In the Old North, it's common for wheels to get stuck in the snow, but now the road is uninterrupted. The roads in Red Tide are simply more convenient than those in the South."

Several people beside him echoed, "Yes, absolutely, goods can be sold in Red Tide, and everyone has money, they can afford things! I've heard fewer people are going to Frost Halberd City..."

These ordinary merchant conversations made Felan's heart tighten slightly.

Frost Halberd City, the city he had sworn to protect his entire life, once the heart of the Northern Territory, was now lightly described as declining.

He turned his gaze towards the station, filled with the coming and going of Red Tide residents, refugees, and merchants.

As the commander of the Cold Iron Knight Order, he should find joy in the Northern Territory's prosperity, yet he couldn't help but feel somewhat melancholic.

The Frost Halberd City he had guarded for a lifetime was losing its former glory.

While this new territory forged by Louis was rising as the new commercial center of the Northern Territory.

Felan was silent for a long time, eventually murmuring softly, "Maybe, this is just the changing times."

He was immersed in complex emotions when suddenly, Louis's voice reached his ears.

"Don't overthink it, Felan. Rest well, in two more days, we'll reach Red Tide City."

Louis casually said, eyes still calm, showing no sign of detecting his thoughts.

Felan nodded slightly, the touch of desolation in his heart was smothered, and he followed behind Louis.

...

Two days later.

The morning mist gradually dissipated, and on the distant horizon, the majestic silhouette of a city slowly appeared.

Red Tide City, the foundation of Louis.

It wasn't as splendid and magnificent as the old capital of the Empire, yet it had a feeling of robustness and solidity.

The high walls stood towering, climbing along the mountain, lined with towers, red banners fluttering vigorously in the sunshine.

The gray-white stone city walls reflected a cold light beneath the thin frost, cold iron beams deeply embedded in the stone layers, like armored steel, emitting a unique oppressive aura.

The gates were tall and heavy, wooden planks densely packed with cold iron nails, glinting like a forest of blades in the morning light.

The arrow towers had already been erected, fire pits on their tops emitting wisps of smoke.

From Felan's knightly perspective, the defense system of this city was already quite complete.

Although still incomparable to Frost Halberd City, fortified by a hundred years.

Yet considering this city had taken only a few years to form, he had to admit it was a miracle.

The gates of Red Tide City slowly closed behind them.

Along the way, the knights and Cold Iron Order members who had followed had hardly had a chance to properly admire the splendor and grandeur of Red Tide City before seeing Louis reign in his horse.

He didn't lead the way himself as usual, only simply instructed, "Bradley, lead them to their accommodations."

Having said that, he turned and left without offering a further explanation.

Everyone exchanged glances.

This was unlike Louis's usual style; at any other time, he was always calm and thorough, never neglecting the etiquette of hospitality, nor leaving the newly arrived knights stranded.

Just as people exchanged glances, the old steward Bradley smiled slightly, dispelling their doubts for the master.

"Everyone, don't mind." He whispered, "The Lord is eager to see his wife. After all, she is about to give birth."

"Ah..." Everyone realized, their faces breaking into knowing smiles.

"That explains it."

"No wonder."

"...Yes, he should go back and accompany Miss Emily."

Especially the few officers of the Cold Iron Knight Order, exchanging glances, their doubts immediately dissipated, turning instead to agreement.

After all, the child in the womb wasn't only Louis's heir but also the grandson of the deceased Duke Edmund.

For them, the Cold Iron Knights, this was very important.

As for Louis himself, he barely lingered.

His cloak fluttered in the wind, and he strode quickly towards the direction of the Earth Tower in the southern part of the city.

The castle blueprint for Red Tide had long been drawn, but due to the urgent need for road and defensive construction, labor and craftsmen had been diverted.

The castle construction had to be postponed; now he and Emily still lived in the initial Earth Tower.

But in truth, even that Earth Tower castle wasn't simple; it was built just two years ago, merely its appearance was lacking beauty.

He pushed open the heavy wooden door, finding the fire inside warm.

Emily was reclining on the couch, her belly eight months pregnant, her cheeks flushed in the fire's glow.

The maid quietly tended to her, offering water, spreading blankets.

Sif was beside her, chatting to relieve her boredom.

Seeing Louis return, a hint of relief appeared between Emily's brows, her voice soft yet gentle, "You're back."

Louis stepped forward, gently caressing her shoulder, "Yes, I'm back."

With only one month left until the child's birth, and winter pressing in.

Looking at Emily's swelling belly, he'd made up his mind—in the coming spring before the new season arrives, he won't roam far.

At least this winter, he would stay by their side, with her and the child.

Chapter 519: The Silver Plate Guild's Spy

In the afternoon of Red Tide City, the commercial square was bustling, wooden stalls lined up, festooned with colorful flags.

The aroma of stewed meat, the heat from baked pastries, the colors of southern brocade all intertwine, as lively as the Imperial Capital's marketplace.

In the bustling crowd, two merchants from the south were squeezed together, chatting idly.

"Phew, this north wind is cold, but this city is livelier than the East Gate of the Imperial Capital I've seen." The old merchant patted the wineskin by his side, astonishment in his eyes.

"Who would have thought? I thought the Northern Territory had long been finished. After two consecutive disasters, the whole Empire was saying only bones remained here. Who knew there would be a place that could sustain so many people!"

The other plump merchant twirled his mustache, his tone full of emotion.

They were a merchant caravan from the Southwest Province of the Empire, fellow villagers met and their eyes were full of tears, so they gathered their stalls together, occasionally chatting.

Silks from the south were displayed on the stalls, their glossy shine still flowing in the cold wind.

Passersby stopped to look, occasionally taking out silver coins to negotiate.

Behind them, a lean assistant silently sorted through the fabrics, never interjecting, observing everything with indifferent eyes.

"Let me tell you, if you really want to do business, this place is better than Frost Halberd City. Over there, even food is scarce, but here, people actually have spare money and dare to buy our wares."

The plump merchant lowered his voice, his belly shaking with laughter: "Well, indeed, food is the hardest capital."

The old merchant nodded, looking at the bustling crowd, sighing: "It's strange that the Northern Territory has such a place..."

As their idle chatter continued, night fell, and the lights in Red Tide City's commercial square began to dim.

The stalls were packed up one by one, the shouting gradually fading away, leaving only the sound of iron boots from patrolling knights.

The two merchants also packed the last few rolls of silk, placed them in wooden boxes, securely wrapped with canvas, bid each other farewell, their figures disappearing into the crowd.

The plump merchant and his men didn't choose the lively tavern but turned into a secluded alley to a remote dwelling, early collective housing built by Red Tide, undemolished, rented to visiting merchants mainly for its cheap rent.

The heavy wooden door closed, the candles were lit, the atmosphere changed dramatically.

The plump merchant, who was previously covered in oil, constantly laughing, immediately suppressed his smile, lowered himself full of respect and even a bit of trepidation.

"Sir, Red Tide City is indeed completely different from the Northern Territory."

When speaking, he dared not look straight at the lean assistant.

This man, silent and taciturn all day, finally lifted his head.

The firelight outlined a cold, hard face, sharp brows and piercing eyes carrying an intimidating menacing air.

His name is Anthony, a high-tier agent of the Jade Federation's Silver Plate Guild.

He now handles all Northern Empire affairs.

Because his predecessor Kalan mysteriously died in an action two years ago.

But the guild didn't abandon this land due to rumors of massive mineral veins buried under the permafrost.

If able to control undeveloped mines in the Northern Empire, it means going head-to-head with the Bihui Guild, potentially redrawing the power map within the Federation.

Thus, Anthony was needed here, known for his meticulous handling, specially assigned to clean up Kalan's mess.

The plump informant bent down, constantly reporting what he'd learned in Red Tide:

"I've been lurking in Red Tide City for over a year, came here as a merchant since the insect disaster. But this Red Tide City is becoming more and more strange.

The granaries are absurdly full, and people actually have money to buy silk, it's almost an illusion..."

And Anthony just listened without speaking, merely nodding lightly at times as a response.

Talking excessively leads to mistakes, caution is his nature, even long-term subordinates can't be fully trusted.

Red Tide City...

Anthony could see the clues within just a day's observation.

Orderly streets, strict security, publicly disclosed warehouse accounts, every facet meticulously in place.

This wasn't random "good luck," but a strong guiding hand behind it.

The main reason being the revered Red Tide Lord—Louis.

Before coming, Anthony had already examined Louis's information.

A seemingly insignificant son from the Calvin Family sent as a discard to the Northern Territory to cultivate.

Yet in a few short years, he continuously achieved feats, played important roles against insect and Barbarian Race invasions.

Even earned Duke Edmund's favor, recruited as a son-in-law, entrusted with actual Northern Territory rule before passing away.

"Such a character cannot be underestimated." Anthony murmured softly in his heart.

Originally, he had another secret mission here.

To establish contact with a hidden high-tier agent within the Empire.

However, the current situation in Red Tide City is far more complex than expected, acting rashly might expose his presence.

"Better to proceed with caution." This has been his only creed throughout his journey.

Thus, Anthony decided secretly: contact with the agent... temporarily shelved. Wait until moving to a more remote place, then act.

This time mainly exploring the Red Tide Lord's secret.

The subordinate's reports gradually ceased, leaving only the crackling candlelight in the room.

Anthony listened quietly, expressionless, until the other completely quieted down, he slowly spoke.

Chapter 520: Spy of the Silver Plate Guild (Part 2)

"I understand everything." The voice was deep but devoid of any emotion.

He paused, seemingly contemplating for a moment, then briefly added, "Tomorrow I'll wander elsewhere. You all carry on as usual, without any slip-ups. Go rest early now."

As soon as he finished speaking, he turned around and walked into the inner room without saying another word.

The room fell silent again, leaving only the subdued responses of his subordinates. Cold sweat formed on their foreheads, and they dared not breathe too loudly.

.....

Late at night, the flickering candlelight cast shadows across the dilapidated shack, and Anthony was still awake.

Spread out on the table was a thick stack of papers, previously gathered covertly by spies disguised as merchants, noting down fragmented intel: Red Tide's grain prices, goods allocation, knight patrol routes...

He had annotated and analyzed everything.

"The grain storage ledger and contract marks are clear... This system is tighter than that under the nobility of the Imperial Capital. It's not easy to target."

Cold thoughts surfaced in his mind, and just as he was about to devise how to plant spies...

Suddenly, an unfamiliar intent to kill pierced his heart like a blade.

Anthony's head shot up, his pupils contracting sharply.

As an Extraordinary Knight, his instinct instantly sounded the alarm.

In the next moment, "Boom!"

The wooden wall exploded, dust spilled, and the door was kicked off, crashing against the stone wall with a resounding smash.

Half the house tilted violently amid the tremors, dust showering down.

Anthony's heart clenched fiercely, but his body reacted faster than his mind, and his Fighting Energy ignited instantly!

Silvery flames burst forth around him, his figure blurred, and he darted swiftly to the corner of the room.

In the opposite corner, the iron cabinet exploded open, and three towering black-armored knights stepped out simultaneously.

"Creak, creak"

The sound of their heavy armor scraping was icy, their eyes hollow, but their bodies emanated a terrifying aura.

Each of them was an Extraordinary Knight-level battle puppet, modified with guild potions and runes.

Hot on their heels, over ten gray-armored guards also appeared, their eyes equally devoid of emotion, yet their movements were synchronized, like puppets.

Anthony shouted in a low voice, "Break out!"

Amid the roar, the battle puppets marched in unison, and silvery Fighting Energy surged forth, like a whirlwind sweeping through the room.

However, the enemy was quicker than he anticipated.

Through the shattered wall, several figures suddenly leaped in, their Fighting Energy burning into a glaring blue light in the night.

Their aura was sharp, steady, and ruthless.

Anthony felt a sudden chill in his heart.

"All above the Extraordinary?!"

Blue light and silver flames intertwined instantly, and the combat erupted without prelude.

An attacker descended suddenly, his long blade slicing through the air.

The black-armored battle puppet swung a giant sword to parry, erupting in a metallic clash and sending sparks flying.

Yet in the next moment, the edge of the blue Fighting Energy sliced through the puppet's armor.

The guild's prized modified knight, its chest exploded along with the steel, collapsing heavily, its body convulsing and shattering.

"What!" Anthony's pupils contracted sharply.

Before he could react, another attacker flickered through the gray-armored guards like a phantom.

The blade flashed like lightning, blue Fighting Energy tore through the air, leaving a mist of blood and shards of metal.

The guards' synchronized attacks crumbled in an instant, staining the stone floor with blood.

In a matter of seconds, the entire room had turned into a purgatory.

Anthony gritted his teeth and roared, Fighting Energy surged, and he rushed forward like a silver comet, forcibly creating a gap, attempting to escape through the side window.

Yet a mountainous pressure suddenly bore down on him.

Another blue figure appeared ahead, its blade slicing through the night air with a chilling whistle.

Anthony barely managed to block with his sword, feeling his arm tremble as if his bones would crack.

The next instant, his left knee was struck hard, sending him sprawling to the ground.

"Ah—!"

The intense pain brought out cold sweat all over him, yet his consciousness was forcibly suppressed.

He struggled frantically, the silver Fighting Energy burning in his chest, only to be immediately snuffed out by the encircling blue auras.

Next, a blade pressed against his throat, and several chains locked him down tightly, binding him firmly.

Anthony gasped heavily, his chest heaving violently.

It's over.

His heart was filled with despair.

Why did I get exposed? Was it the betrayal of the subordinate of that fat merchant? Or a spy sent by the Imperial Capital secretly stabbing me in the back? Or is it... the Red Tide Territory had been watching me all along?

His heart was full of question marks, but he ultimately had no way of knowing.

The enemy didn't give him a chance to speak, delivering a final heavy blow to the back of his neck, and his vision went black.

Anthony's body fell heavily to the ground, his silver fighting energy dissipating like smoke in the night.

The surroundings were silent, only the remnants of the wooden beams lightly swaying.

The blue-armored knight who led slowly sheathed his sword and took off his armored helmet, revealing a hard and cold face.

It was none other than the captain of the Cold Iron Knight Order—Felan.

He stepped forward, slightly bent a knee, his tone carrying a bit of ease: "Report, Lord, the mission is accomplished."

He paused, his gaze sweeping over the unconscious captive on the ground, adding somewhat helplessly:

"However... one of my men was careless and broke his leg."

The young lord, standing aside observing the battle, lifted his chin, his expression carrying a hint of a smile, yet his brows and eyes remained calm as always.

Louis shook his head lightly, his tone relaxed: "It's okay. As long as his mouth can still talk, it's fine."

Felan curled his lips: "That's good. As for the interrogation, we can handle that too. The Knight Order has the finest interrogators."

Louis raised his eyebrows and chuckled admiringly: "No wonder it's the strongest Knight Order in the Northern Territory, equipped with everything."

Felan bowed with a smile and ordered his men to drag the unconscious Anthony and the other captives away.

This scene was actually already in Louis's prediction.

Through the Daily Intelligence System, he had long learned that spies from the Silver Plate Guild were lurking in this city.

He didn't scare the snake away, but patiently laid the line, waiting for the big fish to surface by itself.

Now, Anthony, the person in charge of the Northern Territory, was finally caught, still carrying his unfinished secret mission.

"Just right." Louis murmured in his mind, a smile curling at the corner of his lips, "In a few days, the distinguished guests from the Imperial Capital will arrive, and I'll let them see the Red Tide's welcome gift."

Around the ruined house, some residents awoken by the commotion poked their heads out, whispers rising and falling.

"Is this... catching thieves?"

"Look, people from the Knight Order! And... the Lord!"

Someone recognized the tall figure and exclaimed in surprise, immediately drawing more people.

The street and alley under the night quickly filled with curious onlookers, the voices gradually converging.

"Lord!"

"Lord Louis!"

They waved, their cheers enthusiastic, with respect shining in their eyes.

After all, apart from the Government Hall, recently few people could see this lord in person.

Faced with this sudden crowding, Louis raised his hand slightly, his expression gentle as he said:
"Everyone disperse now. Just catching some bad guys, no need to be alarmed. Go home early and rest early."

With that said, he mounted his horse, his cloak fluttering, leading the whole group away.

.....

Winter wind howling, the procession stretched for miles.

The carriage adorned with black and gold motifs slowly rolled across the rugged mountain path, front and rear guards forming a square formation, flags fluttering, showcasing the Empire's majesty.

Thick snow covered the official road, the hooves often sinking deep into it, the animals pulling the carriage panting like oxen.

Occasionally, when the wheels slipped, the attendants had to get down to push and edge them, their legs deep in mud and snow.

Sitting in the wide carriage, Camille covered his mouth and nose with a handkerchief, frowning as he looked out the window.

In the distance were the ruins and broken walls covered by snow, occasionally a few charred wooden stakes could be seen, remnants of villages destroyed by pest and war.

"Truly a ghostly place." He couldn't help but mutter under his breath, his eyes full of disgust and impatience.

"Not staying in the Imperial Capital, and yet they sent me to the Northern Territory... Inspector Envoy? Ha, feels more like exile."

The attendants exchanged glances, not daring to speak.

The ceremony was originally supposed to be held in the Imperial Capital or at least in an agent city.

But now the Emperor's whereabouts were unknown, and the Northern Territory was a mess, Frost Halberd City yet to be completely rebuilt, eventually deciding on holding it in Red Tide.

Camille's heart was even more dissatisfied: "The Northern Territory is in such ruin, does it still require a permanent post? Frost Halberd City, that half-ruined fortress, is going to be my station for the next few years?"

But in truth, this assignment wasn't forced upon him, but he himself volunteered to take it.