

Winter 521

Chapter 521: Lunchbox

Camille Solin, a civil servant in the Imperial court, from the Inspectorate, currently serving as "Northern Territory Inspection Envoy."

In name, it is dignified, but in reality, it's a thankless task. Just ask, which official in the Imperial Capital would want to come to the Northern Territory now?

But many years ago, he didn't think this way.

Back then, Camille was just a bright-eyed young man in the Inspectorate, copying volumes, auditing accounts, writing reports, busy day and night.

He believed in the system, and with loyalty to the Emperor and his own efforts, he believed he could correct the course of power.

Until the first promotion was upon him, Camille saw the crack in that door, gleaming within, but what shone was not loyalty to the Emperor, but gold.

"Without this money, you won't even get on the candidate list," his superior patted his shoulder.

Camille wavered for three days, finally pushed open the inconspicuous little shop in the eastern alley of the Imperial Capital, where he had drunk with the owner several times.

Later he knew, that small shop was the Jade Federation's Silver Plate Guild's organization in the Imperial Capital.

The loan was just a small amount, enough to buy some decent jewelry to gift his superiors, and thus he smoothly got promoted.

From then on, the crack of the door to power was completely pried open.

Spices, treasures, indulgence on the soft couch, like effortless waves, pushed him from the shore into warm deep waters.

"There's nothing wrong, everyone does it." He convinced himself.

Later, the Silver Plate Guild began asking him to pass along a letter casually, or to let a page of accounts go...

He became the first link in the Silver Plate Guild's chain within the Empire.

And the power of money turned him from an "unknown little civil servant" into an "honorary viscount burning hot in the Imperial Capital."

The higher he climbed, the tighter the Silver Plate Guild squeezed.

Account books, receipt lists, private meetings, the singer's name log from that night.

Any one page could pull him from the splendor to the endless abyss within.

Just months ago, news arrived that the former Northern Territory Inspector Mei Si was dismissed from the Dragon Throne meeting due to "insufficient toughness towards the native nobility."

The Silver Plate Guild's contact laughed at Camille: "The opportunity has come. We will provide money and connections for you to become the permanent Northern Territory Inspection Envoy."

Leaving the gentle embrace of the Imperial Capital, heading to the permafrost where only desolation and broken walls exist?

A nightmare of heavy snow, beasts roaming, and Barbarian Race howling surfaced in Camille's mind.

That's not a world where a dignified person can survive.

But he knew well that refusing the Guild had never been his option.

The Silver Plate Guild held his leverage tightly, he could only swallow his reluctance and wear a mask of "willing to serve the Guild."

Camille regretted, deeply regretted, but this road had no return, he could only keep going through the dark.

The street-level contact painted him a picture before departure: "As long as you handle this beautifully, you'll be freed, maybe even get a position as a senior council member in the Jade Federation."

Senior council member of the Jade Federation...

That would be a position on par with, if not more solid than his post now as Special Envoy.

More importantly, in such a position, he could openly lead a lavish life, instead of today's sneaky existence.

Camille clutched onto this promise, as if a drowning man grasping the last straw.

He repeatedly painted that beautiful future in his mind, so he wouldn't completely collapse on this journey through the icy and snowy lands.

Before departing, the contact specially instructed him on the details of the rendezvous.

"This time, the person responsible in the Northern Territory will meet you in Red Tide City."

Then handed over a sketch portrait of a slim person, eyes cold, like a snake hiding in a cellar away from light for years.

Camille stared at the portrait for a long time, silently committing it to memory.

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The wheels of the carriage rolled over the official road, accompanied by the heavy rhythm of hooves, the outline of Red Tide City finally emerged from the distant morning mist.

Camille lifted the curtain, eyes haughty, a cold smirk on his lips.

Is this what they call the "Northern Territory miracle"?

It's just a newly built city, how can it compare with the splendor of the Imperial Capital? How can it be on par with the flourishing port cities of the South?

But as the convoy approached, his cold smile gradually froze.

The walls thick, towers densely packed, red flags waving briskly.

Streets straight, stalls orderly, citizens smiling, everything in perfect order.

Though it doesn't match the Imperial Capital, on this permafrost, this city indeed... stands out uniquely.

Cannot tell it's been newly built just a few years.

Camille was secretly surprised yet immediately raised his chin, covering that bit of emotion under arrogance.

"Humph, just so." He hummed softly, as if talking to himself.

Bradley personally greeted him at the city gate.

The old butler stood straight, his etiquette flawless.

But Camille merely nodded lightly, not lifting his eyelids a fraction.

A mere servant dares to pose like this?

In his eyes, no matter how well-mannered the Northern People were, they were just barbarians.

But the next moment, a group of children jumped out, holding flowers, shouting in unison: "Welcome, Envoy Sir!"

Camille's heart warmed slightly, such ceremony was quite to his liking.

Although Louis did not appear personally, this kind of reception did bring him some face.

After arriving in Red Tide City, Camille first enjoyed a period of attentive hospitality.

The roads within the city had long been swept clean, the stone slabs gleaming faintly in the morning light.

The room in the inn burned warm charcoal, the bed covered with silk sheets, even the curtains were newly woven fabric, with stitching impeccable beyond criticism.

Chapter 522: The Dinner Box (Part 2)

The table was laden with a sumptuous feast of magical beast roasts, especially accompanied by fine wine transported from the South.

All of this greatly satisfied Camille's vanity.

Yet his expression remained indifferent, his demeanor intentionally maintaining arrogance.

This was his way of governing as an official.

Only by putting on a superior demeanor could he avoid being despised by regional lords.

Only by making the other party believe he was always high above could he bargain for more advantages during negotiations.

Thus, he coldly watched all this, yet hesitated to utter even a word of praise.

However, deep down, he had to admit: Red Tide City indeed did a commendable job.

Though not as prosperous as the Imperial Capital, nor as grand as southern major towns, in this Northern Territory that should have only ruins and snowfields, building such a city was already deemed a miracle.

It was strange, though, that the contact person appointed by the Silver Plate Commerce Association had not appeared these past days.

Initially, Camille did not mind, but as time passed day by day, an indescribable unease gradually surged in his heart.

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Days later.

Louis finally held a banquet in the City Lord's hall to entertain this Imperial Inspector Envoy who had come from afar.

The hall was filled with candlelight, with glass chandeliers reflecting golden halos under the flame.

Red Tide banners adorned the walls, bathing the entire hall in a warm yet solemn atmosphere.

At the center of the long table, the aroma of magical beast roast pervaded, with fresh mushroom soup and beef stew served on silver plates, and southern fine wine undulating with an amber glow in crystal glasses.

Camille entered slowly, draped in a heavy fox fur cloak, his gaze aloof, his steps deliberately slow.

Bradley saluted in welcome, while Louis rose to greet him, his conduct appropriate.

Camille entered slowly, draped in a heavy fox fur cloak, his gaze aloof, his steps deliberately slow, as if the entire hall was laid out just for him.

Bradley saluted in welcome, while Louis rose to greet him, his conduct appropriate.

"Special Envoy, we in Red Tide have awaited your esteemed presence for many days."

Louis's tone was neither humble nor arrogant, carrying the dignity of a host without the slightest servility.

Camille nodded slightly, raised his hand to indicate, and leisurely sat down at a side seat at the main table: "Hmph, seems you understand etiquette."

After several rounds of drinks, Camille slowly put down his cup and cleared his throat.

"By the order of the Regent King and the Dragon Throne meeting, I have come to announce three matters."

He raised one finger, his tone bearing a condescending certainty: "First, acknowledge Louis Calvin's promotion to Count."

He then raised a second finger, his gaze sweeping across the room, like a silent warning: "Second, the territories under Count Calvin's domain are obliged to cooperate with the supervision of the Inspection Institute and accept the Empire's oversight."

Finally, he deliberately paused, the corners of his lips curling into a meaningful smile: "Third, His Highness the Prince will become the Special Envoy for the Northern Territory's reconstruction, fully in charge of the reconstruction affairs in the Northern Territory."

With these words, the candlelight in the entire hall seemed to quiet down for a moment.

Camille lowered his hand, half-closed his eyes, focusing on the young Red Tide Lord.

This was what he really wanted to see, how would this young man, who had risen through miraculous post-disaster feats and victories against the Barbarians, react at this moment?

Would it be anger? Resentment? Or sheer terror?

Unfortunately, he didn't get the reaction he wanted.

Louis merely gave a faint smile, raised his wine glass, and said lightly as if making casual small talk at the banquet: "I will certainly keep the decrees of His Majesty and the Regent King in mind."

His demeanor showed no panic whatsoever, the candlelight reflecting in his eyes, which were as deep and unfathomable as a dark pool.

Camille lightly tapped his wine glass with his fingers, a slight sinking feeling in his heart—this was not the reaction he expected.

Instead, this calmness stirred a faint unease in Camille's heart.

However, this unease did not last long. After discussing the official business, the two naturally transitioned into lighter topics.

Unexpectedly, this young Red Tide Lord also had quite a knowledge of fine wines, gems, and luxury goods. When discussing the vintage of southern wines or the cutting techniques of certain gems, he could speak with clear insight.

Camille, initially carrying an air of arrogance, couldn't help but admit, amid the clinking glasses, that the conversation was unexpectedly pleasant.

The opposite party, indeed, hailing from the Calvin Family, was different from these native barbarians, adhering to certain noble etiquettes.

Louis was neither humble nor arrogant, his compliments perfectly measured.

The two raising their glasses truly resembled "the aristocrats of high society," exuding a faint air of commanding the realm.

Camille found himself admiring this young man a bit more.

It's just that these younger ones, perhaps not understanding the rules, required a little "subtle hint" for expected tributes.

Camille laid down his knife and fork, looking at a plate of jewel-like desserts on the table, his tone nonchalant: "Hmm, these northern delicacies... they're quite sought after in the Imperial Capital. If someone could send them regularly, it would indeed be considered a 'token of regard.'"

As his words fell, he downed his glass of wine in one go, his expression seemingly casual but actually hinting.

As expected, his hint was not in vain.

Louis just gave a slight smile and waved his hand.

Bradley understood, bowed in salute, and had someone present an exquisite dining box, gently placing it in front of Camille.

The dining box was intricately carved from ebony, inlaid with gold lines on the surface, the box separated into two layers, appearing hefty.

Camille looked at the box with a smirk to himself.

Indeed, an understanding of the rules.

His slender fingers lightly touched the brass clasp, pressing slightly, a crisp "click" echoed, and the upper layer of the box slowly opened.

As the lid lifted, a dazzling light burst forth.

On the entire layer, various gems were spread, glittering under the candlelight, as if casting vibrant hues across the entire table.

Camille gently picked up a ruby the size of a fingernail, turning it under the candlelight before placing it back in the box, as if leisurely savoring it.

"Hmm..." he murmured, his tone carrying an unabashed appreciation.

Not bad, indeed not bad, this young Count has quite the taste.

He closed the lid, and slowly went to unbuckle the lower layer.

His actions remained elegant and composed, as if everything was within his control.

Since the first layer was so grand, the second naturally couldn't be inferior to these gems; he was quite looking forward to it.

With a crisp "click," the second layer was slowly pushed open.

However, what came to greet him wasn't the glow of gems, but a sharp, suffocating scent of blood.

Camille's action suddenly froze, the arrogance in his eyes instantly frozen.

Under the candlelight, a severed head was laid grotesquely in the box.

The blood had been wiped clean, but those eyes, wide open in death, still bore indelible terror.

Camille's heart sank, his breath erratically disrupted, for he recognized this face.

Before his departure, he was handed a sketch portrait.

That was of the chief responsible for the Silver Plate Guild's affairs in the Northern Territory.

Camille could no longer maintain his elegance, his fingertips slightly trembling, even his breath becoming frantic.

The earlier pride and complacency crumbled in an instant, leaving only a chilling dread.

His heart seemed to be clutched tightly by an invisible hand, blood roaring in his ears.

Why is it here?

Why is he dead?

How was he exposed?

Cold sweat trickled down Camille's spine as he suddenly realized a fact more terrifying than the severed head itself.

If the other party could present the head before him, then surely... his connection with the Silver Plate was already thoroughly discovered.

His identity as a spy was exposed.

This realization stabbed into his heart like an icy dagger, leaving him nearly suffocated.

Camille dared not look at the head any longer, gulping with a throat that couldn't utter a sound.

For a long time, he mustered the courage to slowly raise his head.

His gaze traversed the candlelight, catching sight of the young Count across the table.

Louis remained calm and collected, his lips holding a genteel aristocratic smile.

As if what the dining box held was not a bloody head, but merely an ordinary dessert.

The next moment, he raised his wine glass, lightly gesturing at Camille, his moves elegant and composed.

Chapter 523: The Ennoblement Ceremony

Half a month ago, Louis captured a crucial piece of information from the Daily Intelligence System.

Anthony, the Northern Territory head of the Silver Plate Guild, would personally come to Red Tide City to meet with the Empire's Inspector Envoy, Camille, for the first time.

This intelligence was a double surprise.

Firstly, Anthony's personal presence meant that the Silver Plate's power in the Northern Territory would be exposed right under their noses.

Secondly, the collusion between Camille and Silver Plate was no longer just superficial exchanges but deeply embedded infiltration into the marrow.

It was almost certain that this Inspector Envoy dispatched from the Imperial Capital had become a spy bought by the Federation.

Even better, they chose to meet in Red Tide City.

Louis read the intelligence and couldn't help but chuckle, "Really... convenient."

He wouldn't even need to cross the border for capture; they were walking right into his trap.

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When Anthony woke up in the secret prison, his limbs were tightly chained by heavy iron chains, and the stone chair beneath him was ice-cold and bone-chilling.

He slowly opened his eyes, his gaze sober and calm, without panic.

Facing the cold shine of imprisonment, he simply spoke calmly, "If you're going to kill me, get it over with."

Hearing his words, Louis merely gave a faint smile, "Leave it to you all."

Then he turned and left, since Master Calvin was kind-hearted and couldn't bear to see people suffer.

The torture began.

The Cold Iron Legion's interrogators had long learned various methods from the Snow Swearers, the Barbarian Race, and even the Imperial Army's interrogations.

Cold buckets of water poured down repeatedly, causing Anthony to shiver in the piercing cold.

The iron pincers slowly crushed the joints, causing the bones to emit a slight crackling sound.

Powdered poison was mixed into the drinking water, causing the nerves to be torn between numbness and burning, making it unclear whether the scene was a dream or reality.

Initially, Anthony remained calm, gritting his teeth, "...you won't get anything."

Yet the days passed, indistinguishable between day and night in the stone chamber.

The cold water and flames alternated, the pain of bones and nerves constantly multiplying.

Anthony's gaze finally began to cloud, his previously cold and hard lips no longer a cold smile but a slight quiver.

Under the waves of pain and drug invasion, Anthony, the Extraordinary Knight, finally cried out amid the darkness, "Stop... Stop! I'll talk! I'll say everything!"

The voice was hoarse but carried the suppressed collapse of a long time.

"Red Tide City... marketplace... secret agents... they're disguised as merchants from the South, permanently stationed in the market, using smuggling as cover..."

The interrogator coolly noted it down, then flicked his fingers, prompting the assistant to pour cold water again, "Don't stop, keep talking."

Anthony shuddered, his teeth chattering, "Several Nobility expanding in the Northern Territory... have been bought... they secretly transport grain and ore for us..."

He still harbored a lucky thought, a chance that a few pieces of intelligence might lead them to spare him.

But when the branding iron was pressed against his skin again, his throat finally tore open in a scream, "Southeast border... there's a resource outpost! ...once war breaks out, it can serve as a springboard!"

The interrogator wasn't satisfied, coldly demanding, "Details."

Anthony cried out, revealing coordinates, types of resources, even names of those in charge.

By the eighth night, his voice was nearly shattered, yet he was still coerced into giving more.

In an utter breakdown, he finally shouted:

"Inside the city, a secret chamber... there's a file bag! ...it contains contact codes, communication methods... and... Camille's documents and accounts... that's... definitive evidence..."

With his final words, he seemed utterly drained, his gaze without focus, his mouth continuously bleeding.

But the interrogators did not stop because of his collapse.

"What else? What else? What else? Details! Details! Details!"

They repeatedly questioned, even when Anthony had gone mad, seeking to extract every last bit of information from him.

Yet such a brutal method indeed had its price.

In less than half a month, Anthony couldn't hold on any longer, dying on the torture chair.

His scarred body collapsed on the torture chair, his eyes losing focus, his mouth still muttering those codes and names.

All he divulged had been compiled into thick volumes of documents, placed on Louis's desk.

Of course, his body wasn't wasted; his head was packed into a delicate meal box.

So when Camille and his entourage grandly arrived at Red Tide City, what awaited them was merely a few days of polite delay.

The official excuse was the busy autumn harvest, the Lord's official duties, but this was just a respectable pretense.

The real reason was that Anthony's screams in Red Tide City's underground prison hadn't yet ceased entirely.

Louis closed the parchment roll, the corners of his lips curving into a cold smile.

With all the evidence in hand, he didn't even need to speak threatening words; no need for anger or an aggressive stance.

Just quietly placing the bloodstained head in the box on the dining table.

It was enough for that high-and-mighty Empire Inspector Envoy Camille to instantly understand:

Here in the Northern Territory, it wasn't the Inspectorate, nor the Regent King;

Louis truly held the power to grant life and death.

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Back at the dining table, Camille still maintained the envoy's posture, trying to uphold that superior demeanor.

He swirled his wine glass, speaking indifferently, "This batch of gem cutting... is acceptable. But compared to the craftsmanship of the Imperial Capital, it's still somewhat lacking."

Then he seemed to casually bring up some secret regarding an Imperial Capital Countess, his laughter forced, conversing aimlessly and incoherently.

His voice still carried arrogance, yet his fingers trembled slightly from tension, nearly spilling the wine.

Chapter 524: Investiture Ceremony (Part 2)

Louis smiled without speaking, engaging in light conversation with him, maintaining a hint of youthful politeness, as if he hadn't seen through anything.

But the more he acted this way, the colder Camille felt inside.

He understood that he was sitting here safely only because the other party had no intention to act for the time being.

At the end of the banquet, Louis casually brought up the main matter of the rewards: "The ceremony starts tomorrow. Let's keep it simple."

Camille hurriedly nodded, his smile stiff: "Perfect, perfect."

His tone eager like a beast longing to end its shift early.

As he left the seat, he inexplicably forgot the meal box on the table.

Bradley reminded him: "Your gift, Special Envoy."

Camille was startled for a moment before suddenly turning around, his face flushing red as he awkwardly gathered up the box.

When he first entered the banquet hall, he had on an aloof expression, as if the mountains of the Northern Territory were under his feet.

But in just a couple of hours, his back slightly hunched, steps trembling, as if he were walking on ice, afraid the next step would plunge him into the abyss.

How laughable.

From arrogance to humility, all in just one night.

Louis watched Camille's hurried figure as he left with the meal box, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly.

He certainly wouldn't expose Camille as a spy right now.

Doing so would only corner the opposite party, making him desperate, which would be of no benefit.

There's no rush, after all, he already held all the evidence provided by Antony, ironclad proof.

At this moment, Camille was merely meat on the cutting board, ready for him to manipulate.

The real task was not to destroy him, but to use him.

For instance, to back the Red Tide at the Dragon Throne meeting in his capacity as the Inspector Envoy.

To enhance his achievements in the mouth of the Regent King.

In the Northern Territory's reconstruction efforts, to become a supporter of his policies.

The more Camille feared death, the more obedient he would be. The more he wanted to live, the harder he would work.

Louis took a slight sip of wine, his smile deepening.

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At Fierce Tide Square in Red Tide City, atop the high platform.

The ceremony platform was not extravagant, only two flags hanging.

One with the Empire's golden dragon emblem, the other with Red Tide's crimson flag.

Compared to the elaborate ceremonies of the Imperial Capital, it appeared quite simple.

Bradley stood in the corner of the platform, his brow furrowed tightly.

In the eyes of this old-fashioned steward, what should a ceremony of bestowment look like?

Colorful ribbons hanging, horns blaring, poetry and songs resonating, and drums shaking the streets.

Only then would it match the glory of a noble.

But now, on the high platform, only two flags flapped in the wind, with the townspeople standing crowded on the square.

Louis only said calmly, "Just a formality will suffice."

As a result, most of the procedure was forcibly cut.

Bradley sighed quietly to himself.

This was simply a waste of Louis's grand occasion.

This young lord had, within just four years, turned from a nearly abandoned Baron of Expansion by his family to carve out a territory.

Now recognized by the Regent King and the Dragon Throne meeting, promoted to Count.

If this were in the Imperial Capital, what a grand ceremony that would be?

Poets would praise his achievements in history, and the nobility would flock to present gifts.

Yet here in the cold Northern Territory, in his eyes, there was nothing but simplicity and haste.

Bradley couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for Louis, but on second thought, perhaps this "disregard for ostentation" was precisely what made his young lord so convincing.

Below the square, a sea of people.

Upon hearing the news of his ennoblement, the townspeople of Red Tide City flooded in, crowding Fierce Tide Square.

Fortunately, Red Tide Knights lined both sides of the avenue, barely maintaining order.

Children were perched on their fathers' shoulders, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the "Lord."

Elderly women leaned on canes, their eyes moist: "He really became a Count..."

Young craftsmen and farmers had burning eyes and rapid breaths, as if they too were going to be ennobled.

From the platform, despite the simplicity, there was a raw and fervent enthusiasm rarely seen even in the ceremonies of the Imperial Capital.

And just as the drums resounded and the ceremony was about to begin, a low murmur of surprise rose from the crowd.

The pregnant Emily, supported by Sif, slowly ascended the high platform.

The sunlight cast upon her profile, further highlighting the gentle aura bestowed by nurturing a new life, making it appear more solemn.

Sif held her arm, her expression carrying a faint chill, scanning the entire scene as if a guardian.

Though she did not favor such lively events, her eyes sparkled with an inextinguishable pride for Louis.

Emily walked to Louis's side, gently placing her hand on her abdomen.

She lifted her chin, gazing at the dense sea of people below the stage, a proud smile playing on her lips.

That smile seemed to silently declare: This is my husband, the Count who guards the Northern Territory.

Sif stood on the other side, hands clasped in front of her, her posture respectful.

The two wives stood on either side, and the silhouette of Louis on the podium instantly gained an unshakable majesty.

The scene ignited the emotions of the citizens below the square.

Some were moved to tears, others loudly shouted "Lord!", and some clasped their hands as if in prayer.

Yet, if one listened closely, those calls were actually interspersed with more genuine joy.

"The lady is about to give birth!"

"The Red Tide will have an heir!"

"Our future now has a backbone!"

For these people who had experienced war, famine, and displacement, titles were matters of the distant Imperial Capital.

What truly reassured them was the gentle smile of the expectant mother and the new life about to be born.

The arrival of the child meant that the Red Tide would continue, signifying a "true future" for this arduously cultivated land.

Thus, their applause and cheers, rather than being a grand tribute to a title, were more like blessings for the future child of Red Tide.

Emily evidently heard the crowd's cries.

She first paused in surprise, then smiled with pressed lips, slowly raising her hand, nodding slightly to the citizens below the square.

Her gesture was not exaggerated, yet it carried a natural affinity.

"...Thank you." She spoke softly, "This child is the future of Red Tide. And also your future."

With just a few words, it seemed to strike the hearts of all.

The square below fell silent for a moment before an overwhelming cheer erupted.

"Long live the Red Tide!"

"May the lady be safe!"

"This child will surely bring hope to the Northern Territory!"

The enthusiasm and sincerity made the entire Fierce Tide Square seem as if it were trembling.

When Camille saw this scene, his heart suddenly trembled.

In the Imperial Capital, he had seen countless enfeoffments and balls, heard the feigned applause and insincere praises of the nobility.

But he had never seen any lord of a territory so surrounded by heartfelt respect and love as Louis.

"This popular support... is terrifying."

Though outwardly maintaining the veneer of a Special Envoy, an indescribable fear welled within him.

His collusion with Silver Plate had been exposed.

Louis had not immediately torn into him but instead put the warning right in front of him.

This meant he still had some utility, at least for the time being.

He swallowed hard and forced himself to calm down: "Stay calm, Camille. As long as you're alive, there's a way."

The drum sounded again, and the ennoblement ceremony officially began.

Camille slowly unfolded the decree, his voice deliberately raised, carrying a touch of excitement:

"By the order of His Majesty the Regent King, from this day forth, Louis Calvin is elevated to Count of the Ironblood Empire!"

As the words fell, he took up the Imperial Longsword, lightly touching both of Louis's shoulders.

The sword's cold blade shimmered in the sunlight, symbolizing the protection of the Northern Territory and the defense of royal authority.

Then, the attendant presented the decree and the dragon-engraved ring.

Camille bestowed them upon Louis, chanting, "This is the power of the Empire granted to the Count of Red Tide, to oversee military and political affairs."

Louis kneeled on one knee, solemnly swearing, "I, Louis Calvin, pledge my loyalty to the Empire, to guard the Northern Territory, to comply with imperial orders!"

A tsunami of cheers erupted inside and outside the square.

"Lord!"

"Long live Red Tide!"

"Long live the Count!"

The roar resounded through Fierce Tide Square, lingering for a long time.

Camille barely maintained a smile outwardly, yet he was scared out of his wits inside.

He clearly felt this was not an imperial ennoblement ceremony, but a coronation.

The young man before him had become the true sovereign of the Northern Territory.

Chapter 525: Winter Supplies

The coronation ceremony proceeded very quickly.

With just a word from Louis, "Keep it simple," all the tedious steps were eliminated.

There was no Dragon Ancestor priest reciting poetry, no long procession, and even the planned celebratory feast was directly canceled.

This made Bradley frown deeply; in his eyes, this was a new milestone for Red Tide, deserving of a grand celebration.

Yet even with his dissatisfaction, he only murmured a few words of advice, ultimately sighing in acceptance.

Of course, apart from Bradley, there was no opposition within Red Tide City; all the civil servants, knights, and even the populace supported Louis's decision unconditionally.

As for the officials sent by the Imperial Capital?

Their gazes frequently fell on Camille; as long as Camille remained silent, they dared not raise any objections.

The truth was, Camille had no courage to resist at that moment.

Whatever Louis instructed, he would follow obediently.

Even with no celebration dinner prepared, Camille did not utter a word of complaint, instead sighing in relief.

The sooner it ended, the sooner he could leave this suffocating city.

On the morning of the second day of the ceremony, Camille took his leave.

He gave the reason that he still had to proceed to the Fourth Prince's station to announce his rewards and his identity as the "Special Envoy for Northern Territory Reconstruction."

Louis did not ask him to stay, only giving a faint smile and waving him off.

The carriage bumped and jolted over the snow-covered mountain road.

Camille leaned against the soft cushion, cold sweat yet to dry completely.

The scenes from this journey replayed repeatedly in his mind.

The severed head, the thunderous shouts... all transformed into fear that tightened his breath.

But he had, after all, risen through the ranks of the Imperial Capital's bureaucracy, and his mind quickly began working.

Fortunately, Louis did not tear the veil outright, which meant he still had value; as long as there was value, he could survive.

Thinking of this, he slowly exhaled a breath and his gaze gradually colded: "Well... since Louis needs me, I will pretend to be compliant.

Perhaps when I see the Fourth Prince, there will be a way out. Now, with the Empire's complicated situation, someone will surely need a pawn like me."

After all, there were already rumors in the Imperial Capital that the new twin stars of the Northern Territory were Red Tide Louis and Fourth Prince Astha.

Since Red Tide City could become so prosperous, the Prince Astha naturally wouldn't be faring poorly either.

Camille's heart still trembled, but he forcibly used this calculation to cover himself with a paper-thin armor.

The carriage continued towards the distance, the wind and snow roaring outside, the world desolate.

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Frost Dragon Territory—the domain of the Fourth Prince.

The disaster of the Barbarian Race had passed for over half a year, and plumes of smoke rose scattered over the originally charred ruins.

Next to the crumbling city walls, new wooden houses sprang up, and in the barren land, some began replanting, despite the dismal harvest.

Conditions here remained harsh, yet Astha did not give up.

He personally oversaw the coordination, gradually propping up the territory, gathering a new group of refugees by his side.

The main challenge still was food and supplies.

Initially, Red Tide City sent some grain and cloth to help him through the immediate famine.

But ever since he was appointed as the Special Envoy for Northern Territory Reconstruction, support from Red Tide noticeably dwindled.

His subordinates grumbled that Red Tide was deliberately suppressing the Prince.

Yet Astha did not get angry; instead, he showed some gratitude.

"Among the nobility, it's always a bloody scramble for power. To have any support at all, Louis has already been quite generous."

Moreover, the Imperial Capital had promised that before winter arrived, a large shipment of supplies would reach his territory for his allocation.

These supplies would be his opportunity to turn things around, alleviating food shortages and winning support from the nobility.

So when the transport convoy finally arrived at Frost Dragon Territory, Astha stood before the warehouse, watching the goods being slowly unloaded, with a hint of expectation in his heart.

But when he personally walked into the warehouse, his hope was instantly shattered.

The grain stockpiled in the warehouse was only a small portion of what he had anticipated.

"What... what's going on?" Astha murmured to himself, his gaze growing increasingly grim.

He had expected the supplies to be skimmed off by officials in the Imperial Capital, for the nobility never forego any chance for graft.

However, he had not anticipated that the amount of grain reaching Frost Dragon Territory would be so small...

A few hundred sacks of grain, enough to feed only a few hundred people for a few days, and the rest was just some old cloth and boxes of what seemed to be already moldy jerky.

The majority of the goods in the warehouse had almost no value.

"What's the meaning of this?!" Astha turned his head, his face grim, coldly questioning the person in charge of the transport, "Is this the sizable shipment you promised?"

The person in charge lowered their head, not daring to meet his gaze: "Your Highness, it's just that... just that problems arose during transport. The Northern Territory roads were blocked, and many supplies couldn't arrive smoothly..."

At this, Astha's fury burned even more, almost unable to resist grabbing him by the collar.

His mentor, Sai Fu, stepped forward, speaking calmly: "Your Highness, please remain calm."

Astha spun around fiercely, his eyes full of despair and anger: "Calm? How should I stay calm? Can these worthless things sustain me through a winter? This food isn't even enough to feed half the people of Frost Dragon Territory!"

Sai Fu analyzed calmly: "There truly were issues with the transport. First, there are indeed obstructions in Northern Territory channels.

Chapter 526: Winter Supplies (Part 2)

But the main reason is still the corruption of the Empire, which has caused these supplies to be delayed.

Moreover, those people in the Imperial Capital never intended to fulfill their promises. I'm afraid the Regent King does not care about the future of the Northern Territory."

Astha's face grew even darker: "So, how are we going to get through this winter?"

Sai Fu sighed: "In the worst-case scenario, half of the people in the Frost Dragon Territory will perish after winter. All we can do is take care of ourselves first. As for the others...we can't manage."

Astha said nothing, remaining silent for a long time.

These supplies are not enough to support his people, not even half of what they need.

Of course, he didn't care whether those ordinary people would starve to death in winter.

They are merely tools, pawns to gain more power for himself.

What Astha truly cared about was how to maximize the limited food resources to draw his allies to his side.

"I must accumulate enough influence in a short period." Astha muttered to himself, "These grains cannot all be given to ordinary people. They can only get a little bit, and the rest must be used to strike deals with the nobility."

He thought of those allies; without sufficient resources, these supporters would immediately turn to Louis.

"It's time to consider how to allocate." Astha slightly lowered his head, a hint of coldness in his eyes as he started calculating his next move.

Distributing the grains to those nobles, giving them enough assurance in exchange for their support."

He chuckled self-deprecatingly: "As for the commoners...if they have bad luck, who can blame them?"

Sai Fu looked at him, eyes carrying a hint of depth.

Once, this child was somewhat naive, always thinking about making the lives of the people better, pondering over the responsibilities of the Royal Family.

However, after arriving in the Northern Territory, Astha gradually broke free from the constraints of the Imperial Capital, starting to take control of his own destiny.

He has grown from an idealistic prince into a calm lord.

Understanding how to strategize, how to maximize his resources into his own power.

But Sai Fu didn't feel too disappointed, instead, he felt more recognition.

The game of power has never been something pure idealism could handle.

Astha's decision-making is precisely the quality he must have.

Sai Fu slowly turned away, silently approving of Astha's decision in his heart.

.....

Above Red Tide City, the cold wind mixed with the rustling of canvas drifted by.

Around Fierce Tide Square, the warehouses were filled with heavy bags of grain, neatly stacked wooden boxes, hefty beast skin packages, and iron barrels glistening with oil.

The supplies have not yet been distributed, but the scene was already orderly.

Pete dropped a bundle heavily behind the distribution platform, feeling a numbness in his palms as soon as he let go.

Gasping for breath, he took off his gloves to rest for a moment, but his eyes unconsciously fell on an open wooden box at his feet.

"Tsk, tsk, in Baron Preston's territory, even knights would have to wait for the harvest festival to get a bite of this... but there's so much here." Pete muttered in disbelief.

Inside the box were neatly packed golden wheat grain bags, each sealed with fine hemp cloth, tied with two circles of cowhide rope, and bearing a red label on top.

"Already surprised by a bit of good stuff?" A hearty voice sounded from beside him.

Pete looked up to see a middle-aged man named Jack, unkempt yet full of demeanor, wearing a pair of leather boots.

"Your shoes..." Pete was surprised.

Jack grinned, lifting his foot: "They were issued to us Red Tide elders yesterday, made by the cobbler's workshop from top-grade cowhide, non-slip in the snow, windproof when stepping on a barbarian's head."

Pete paused, still astonished: "That's... amazing, isn't it?"

"You call that amazing?" Jack clicked his tongue, raising his hand to point towards the warehouse, "Go have a look at those few baskets of dried meat and smoked fish inside.

And the salted meat, pickled radishes, dried mushroom packs freshly packed this morning... Our squad is responsible for packing one parcel per household."

Pete paused, looking at the packed-to-capacity row of carts not far away: "Is this also... distributed to the whole city?"

"Yes." Jack lowered his voice as he leaned in, "And not just that, children and the elderly get an extra parcel, a blue-labeled subsidy pack."

Pete was momentarily speechless.

He was once a free man with land, even having three cows at home, and in the early days, he could send some gifts to the tax official, though life was still tight, enduring hunger in winter.

But the catastrophe of the Barbarian Race destroyed everything. Half a year ago, he fled to Red Tide City, where he was exceptionally promoted as a grassroots resource officer due to his literacy and management experience.

Today was the first time in his life he had truly encountered a "government food distribution."

There were no yelling officials, no pilfering subordinates, and no layers of embezzlement.

Only cartloads of packaged goods, one neatly filled list after another, and a group of smiling leaders diligently at work.

Jack patted Pete's shoulder, his smile carrying a sense of pride: "A few years ago, there was no such treatment. At that time, I was still a slave.

In the winter, the best meal was two bowls of dried vegetable soup. If a few pieces of stewed broken bones could be fished out of the soup, then it was considered Dragon Ancestor's blessing. Not freezing to death or starving was already a great thanks to heaven."

Pete froze for a moment, intending to comfort him but found no resentment in Jack's eyes, rather they held a light of pride.

"It was the Lord who bought me from the slave market." Jack straightened up as he said this, his chin slightly raised.

"That day I was lying on the ground, skinny as kindling, and he was the one who gave me my first piece of bread."

He grinned, revealing yellowing teeth: "Now look at it, this warehouse, these supplies, and this entire Red Tide City..."

I've been following Lord Louis from day one, building this place bit by bit from a wasteland as an old hand.

You newcomers may not truly understand the hardships we endured back then and the goodness of the Lord."

Pete chuckled silently.

This man was clearly flaunting his seniority, doing so unabashedly and with justified pride.

He initially wanted to retort, to say at least he used to be a free man, owned land and cattle, how could he be overshadowed by someone who was a slave?

But Pete suddenly remembered those winters before coming to Red Tide Territory, even when he owned land and livestock, life wasn't particularly good.

The cows were starving to the point of showing ribs, and the house was so empty it echoed with the sound of scurrying mice.

The whole territory took turns eating thin porridge, and eating some dry food was considered a celebration.

On the coldest occasion, he even witnessed a neighbor's brother freeze to death inside his own house.

Back then, he thought of himself as a man of status, a free man better than a slave by one notch.

But looking now at the mountains of wheat, dried meat, firewood, and those ex-slaves in new boots.

Pete realized that the identity of a free man might not be worth a penny.

The real decision-maker of whether one can live with dignity depends on whose territory one stands on.

An absurd yet piercing thought quietly emerged: Had he known earlier, he should not have fought to keep that worthless land back then.

If he had fled to Red Tide City earlier, he wouldn't know how decent his life could've been now.

"But honestly, this year is indeed the best year." Jack's words pulled Pete back from his thoughts.

"Look over there." Jack raised his hand, pointing aside, "The warehouse is almost full, even Lord Bradley sighed in relief that it was expanded in advance, otherwise, it would have had to be piled up in the square."

Pete followed his direction, seeing dozens of young lads carrying firewood and beast skin packages back and forth.

Those were the students of Red Tide City, volunteering to help transport resources these days.

Watching the neatly stacked carts of timber, grain bags, medicine chests, and the workshop-produced beast skin coats and leather boots.

Pete couldn't help but ask in a low voice: "But...all these things, are they really going to be distributed?"

In response to being told this would all be handed out, Pete gazed at the industrious crowd, suddenly understanding the depth of it.

"The Lord said." He lowered his voice, mimicking Louis's usual tone, "Only when the people are well-fed and warmly clothed, willing to stay, can this city always exist."

Chapter 527: Orsus Calvin

The time for annual resource distribution has arrived, but the Fierce Tide Square isn't bustling with people.

This year, the city's population is too large, and if everyone lined up, it would be jammed for three days and nights.

Therefore, Louis ordered that resources be delivered by the grassroots material officers, guiding teams to distribute door-to-door.

Pete and Jack were among them, pushing wooden carts, turning along the snowy path past the warehouse, entering the southeast corner of Red Tide City.

This area is slightly lower in terrain, with houses built in haste three years ago—semi-underground wooden huts.

But actually, they aren't too simple, with thick straw and animal skins covering the top, windproof and warm, ventilation pipes emitting wisps of heat, conveying a sense of earthly stability.

Jack uncovered the frost on the burlap, revealing a list marked with household numbers, and introduced, "Most of the occupants here are refugees who followed the tide into the city six months

ago. Coincidentally, Red Tide City needed workers, hence settling them here; otherwise, this place would be dismantled."

Pete nodded, raised his hand, and knocked on the first wooden door.

"Who is it?" a hoarse voice answered from inside.

"It's the Government Hall, winter supplies have arrived!" Jack shouted loudly.

With a creak, the door was pushed open.

A hunched middle-aged woman poked her head out, seeing a large package, incredulously asked, "Are these for us?"

"Yes, it's Lord Louis's order." Jack placed the bundle at the door, "One per household, and this is just the first batch, with another distributed in half a month.

This includes wheat, dried meat, mushroom packets, salted meat, etc. Your house is marked with a blue label, so there's a subsidy package."

The woman was stunned for a while, her eyes reddened, squatting down to cradle the package, muttering continuously, "Life, it's indeed getting better and better..."

She trembled as she turned back inside, causing a commotion, soon followed by several children poking their heads out, their clothes though old, eyes sparkling brightly.

They hippity-hopped, saying, "Thank you... thank you, Red Tide Territory... thank you, Lord Louis!"

"Thank you, Northern Territory's Sun!"

Jack couldn't help but grin, softly responding, "Following the Lord, better days lie ahead."

Pete remained silent, just looked at those dirty little faces, suddenly feeling the package in his arms grew heavier.

Then they walked deeper, at each household, almost hearing a disbelieving exclamation: "These...all for our family?"

"This is not all? There's a next batch??"

"Lord Louis, truly a Dragon Ancestor Envoy..."

Those sacks of grains, dried meats, medicine boxes, and animal skin wraps could take months of wages to buy a small portion elsewhere, yet here they are delivered cart after cart.

Even more shocking was Jack always emphasizing: "This is just the first batch. There's a distribution in mid-winter and end of winter. You won't go hungry."

That one sentence always replaced each family's eyes with relieved tears.

Pete watched, tumultuous waves surged in his heart.

Stepping into these homes, seeing people trembling as they received the rations, he realized again, under the background of post-disaster Northern Territory, a dignified life itself has become the most luxurious gift.

By the time they reached the seventh household, dusk had descended.

This was an old wooden house, where a woman in her fifties sat on the threshold, sunbathing with her eyes closed.

"Materials have arrived." Jack shouted loudly.

The woman opened her eyes, seeing the Red Tide Emblem on the two of them, immediately rose tremblingly, "Is it...is it mine?"

Pete nodded, placing the material package at the door.

The woman squatted down, slowly opening the bag's mouth.

Sunlight shone into the neatly packaged wheat, smoked fish, vegetables, and even a bottle of cold-repelling potion.

She froze for a moment, then her eyes reddened.

"I've lived for over fifty years... first time a Lord distributes food, not snatches it..." she murmured.

Her fingers trembled, carefully stuffing each item back into the bag, tightening it, and tying another layer.

"I don't dare let neighbors see, otherwise if they snatch it away, I can't snatch it back...well, is this not a dream?"

Pete saw this but couldn't speak momentarily.

He suddenly remembered his mother, who, a few years ago, developed a fever from a cold.

Pete spent a lot hiring the Lord's doctor for a house call, who only said, "It'll pass."

But she didn't pass; if at that time, he could have got such a small bottle of potion...

Pete stood silent for a long time, feeling suffocated in his chest.

Suddenly, the woman raised her head as if recalling something, warmly asked, "I heard, the Lord's child is about to be born?"

Pete nodded, but no words exited his mouth.

Jack laughed and replied, "Yes! Our future little master of Red Tide Territory, is about to be born."

The woman looked at the ever-heavier snow sky outside, slowly raised her hand, sacredly forming an old gesture of Dragon Ancestor Faith on her chest.

"May that child be born safely, be as great as his father."

.....

Night deepens, the Earth Tower Castle at the center of Red Tide City is illuminated by fires burning through the night.

Emily, ten months pregnant, belly bulging high, quietly leaned on the wooden recliner by the hearth.

She looked up at the roof, even though this room brought her the greatest peace, her eyes still held deep anxiety.

"He moved particularly frequently today." She murmured softly, hand gently caressing her belly, "Is he feeling cold, or wanting to come out to see the world?"

Beside her, Louis wrapped in a cotton coat, looked less like a Lord, more like any ordinary husband accompanying during childbirth.

Chapter 528: Orsus Calvin_2

"I asked Lady Ilenea," he said, covering Emily's blanket again, "she said it's a normal sign. The child is just... too strong."

Emily laughed, but couldn't hide a trace of wetness at the corner of her eyes: "Are you very nervous?"

"Nervous." Louis sat beside her, holding her hand.

.....

In the early morning, the snow had not stopped, and the Northern Territory's chill penetrated through the thick walls.

But the Red Tide birthing room within the Main Castle had already warmed up.

This was a delivery room arranged according to the old traditions of the Imperial Nobility, presided over personally by the old midwife Ilenea, who came with the dowry from Frost Halberd City.

It was she who had personally delivered Emily before and was now once again welcoming the continuation of this lineage.

The curtains inside were tightly closed, the fire constantly burning, and a burner in the corner exuded the calming scent of vine frost leaves—a subtle yet gentle fragrance filled the air.

Emily lay on the bed, dressed in loose maternity garments, quietly breathing in the medicinal aroma while leaning against thick cushions.

Perhaps it was the warmth brought by the fire, or maybe the steady rhythm of the baby inside her, she didn't feel as nervous as she imagined.

Seeing her stepmother enter the room, she even smiled softly, reaching out her hand: "Mother, you came."

Lady Irina was also in the delivery room; she was Emily's stepmother, yet was as attentive and considerate as a biological mother.

The moment she stepped into the room, she immediately checked every detail of the delivery room: "Is the alcohol cloth refreshed? Has the knife for cutting the umbilical cord been boiled? The ratio in the incense burner... who mixed it?"

Ilenea gently replied: "Everything is proceeding according to plan."

"Please," Irina said solemnly, then looked at Emily again.

Before she could speak, Emily had already gently grasped her hand.

"I'm fine, truly." Emily smiled at her, "With you and Ilenea here... I'm very relieved."

Irina started, suddenly realizing that Emily was no longer the little girl who needed protection.

.....

Louis stood in the corridor outside the door, his gaze fixed unwaveringly on the door as if he could pierce the thick wood layers with his sight.

Behind the door, whispers and movement could faintly be heard; it was the female doctors preparing, Ilenea directing.

According to old Empire customs, men were not allowed to enter the delivery room before a child was born, otherwise, it would bring bad luck, even in a smooth delivery, it would cause future misfortune.

Being a transmigrator, Louis naturally didn't believe in these superstitions.

But although Emily wasn't superstitious, she still retained some traditions passed down from generation to generation in the Empire.

Therefore, Louis hadn't entered the delivery room, not for tradition, just to ease Emily's mind.

Three days ago, the Daily Intelligence System had predicted that today mother and child would be safe:
[1: Three days later, Louis Calvin's first son will be safely born.]

But he still couldn't be completely relieved; after all, prophecy-type intelligence could be broken.

So he stood still, even his breathing was kept extremely calm, waiting for that moment to arrive.

"Wow—!"

A clear and piercing cry echoed, like a ray of dawn piercing a long night.

It wasn't a tearing howl, but a loud and powerful proclamation of life.

Almost simultaneously, a female doctor inside shouted loudly: "Male infant! Mother and child are safe!!"

Standing at the door, Louis had a slow reaction to this.

He slowly exhaled a breath, his brows slightly relaxed, and his shoulders eased accordingly.

He stepped towards the door, tapping lightly on the open door.

Someone immediately responded from inside, it was the young midwife, her face still filled with irrepressible happiness.

"Lord, you may enter." Louis nodded, stepping into the delivery room.

Near the bed, several medical staff were handing the cleaned wrap to the maid at the bedside.

Emily had been resettled, leaning against the thick cushions, pale but smiling.

On the bed lay a small, tightly wrapped baby.

The baby softly hummed, not crying, just occasionally crinkling its nose, as if adapting to this world.

Louis stopped at the bedside, looking down at the child.

It was a warm bundle of life, features not yet formed, skin faintly red, eyes closed, the small nose occasionally jittered.

Louis looked down at the child, unconsciously holding his breath, he had imagined this scene countless times.

But when this moment truly arrived, he found himself unable to say a word.

The child was light, almost unrealistically small, like a soft warmth pressed against his chest.

He instinctively tightened his palm slightly, holding the child more securely.

Then, a joy never felt before, slowly yet firmly climbed over his heart.

At this moment, Lady Irina's gentle voice echoed beside him: "Give him a name."

Louis turned to look at her for a moment, then looked at Emily, still weakly leaning against the bed.

She was looking at him, her gaze tired yet filled with a smile.

Louis nodded without hesitation and said, "Let's call him Orsus."

"Orsus Calvin." He paused, reconfirming, "Meaning rising dawn, a person bringing hope in the darkness."

Emily smiled gently, her eyes never leaving the infant in her arms.

Irina stood by, looking at this newborn boy, nodding slightly: "It's a good name."

.....

With that clear baby cry, the silent, solemn servants and guards outside the delivery room finally breathed a sigh of relief.

Some whispered conversations, some with tears in their eyes, yet all restrained themselves from making noise, afraid of disturbing those inside.

Bradley stood at the end of the corridor, his usually calm demeanor, at this moment showing a noticeable hint of joy.

Soon, a maid hurriedly approached, whispering a report in his ear: "Mother and child are safe, it's a boy."

Bradley nodded slightly, then turned towards the young knight waiting beside the wooden pillar: "Weir."

"Present." Weir stood straight, his expression trying but failing to hide excitement and nervousness.

Bradley's tone brooked no objection: "First go to the tower to ring the bell three times, then to the Internal Affairs Hall, inform them to draft the announcement immediately, tonight the entire Red Tide City must know this news."

Weir swallowed, softly confirming: "Yes... it's a male infant, right?"

Bradley nodded, his tone uncharacteristically soft for a moment: "Male infant, mother and child are safe. Lord Louis's eldest son, Orsus."

Weir nodded heavily, turned, and ran away swiftly.

.....

Not long after, the bell atop the Main Castle's tower rang.

Dong! The first sound.

Deep and clear, piercing the wind and snow, reaching into the sky above Red Tide City.

Dong! The second sound.

People in the streets and alleys all stopped their work simultaneously.

Whether testing steam engines in workshops, sorting medicinal herbs under the shed, or student teams hauling wooden boxes in Fierce Tide Square, everyone raised their heads.

Dong! The third bell rang, followed quickly.

Three consecutive rings, the traditional signal of Red Tide: a major event has occurred.

"The young master has been born!"

The first to react were the officials at the Government Hall, upon learning of this news, they dashed out of the hall, running through streets and across alleyways, spreading this good news to all divisions.

From Fierce Tide Square to wood workshops to smoked fish workshops, from weaving workshops, city defense barracks, to the new granary under construction on the north side.

An increasing number of people halted their work, asking and confirming with each other, spreading the news from one to ten, ten to a hundred.

Thus, the entire Red Tide City felt as if it had been ignited.

The blacksmiths in the workshops removed their gloves: "Our Lord finally has an heir!"

An old woman living on the street corner opened her window, smiling so widely at the direction where the tower bell echoed from: "Bless... our Lord is finally a father."

This was not "some noble's child," but the child of their great Lord Louis.

It was that man who rescued them from ruin, who ensured they had food, boots, and dignity to live.

The citizens, some with red eyes, others bursting into laughter.

They rejoiced for the Lord, and also for themselves.

Because from today onwards, this city they built with their own hands has a future.

Chapter 529: Different

In the northwest corner of Red Tide City, on Fish Workshop Street, a low yet sprawling complex emitted steam in the cold wind.

This was the Red Tide Smoked Fish Workshop, now one of the three major industries in the city.

The smoked fish produced here daily now supplies the entire Red Tide Territory and is also sold to the Southern Territory through the Calvin Commerce Association's trade routes, even being hailed by Southern Nobles as a "rare Northern flavor," with excellent sales.

In the final days leading up to the winter holiday, the workshop was bustling with activity.

Washing fish, gutting, marinating, hanging, and smoking—each process advanced in order, with steam and charcoal smoke intertwining into a warm mist, and the heat carrying a charred aroma spreading through the air.

On the west side of the factory, a middle-aged female worker squatted by the smokehouse, checking the temperature of the racks.

She wore a coarse cloth scarf, moving efficiently, draped in the sheepskin jacket distributed by the Red Tide Workshop, with her sleeves rolled up high, her hands marked with traces of salt and fish oil.

Her name was Haley, she was the team leader of the smoked fish workshop and one of the earliest residents of Red Tide.

Two years ago, when the Barbarian Race raided the Northern Territory, the village where Haley used to live was destroyed overnight.

She, with her ten-year-old son Weir, hid in the forest for three days but was eventually captured by slave merchants due to hunger and cold.

They were taken as goods to the Frost Halberd Market, and she had prepared herself for the worst outcome by then.

But that day, a young man with a black cloak appeared; it was Lord Louis.

Without saying a word, he bought the entire group, including her and Weir.

Not only did he buy them, but he also provided them with food, jobs, clothing, and even independent houses.

Four years have passed, and now she is a supervisor at the Red Tide Smoked Fish Workshop, considered part of the affluent class in the Red Tide Territory.

Her greatest pride is her son, who is now a personal guard knight of the Red Tide Lord.

When others mention Weir, they are full of admiration for having such an accomplished son.

There were still three or four days left until the winter holiday, and today's schedule was still fully packed.

The young people in the factory were already counting down to the holiday, muttering about whether there would be honey in the winter supplies, and speculating whose turn it was to receive the fur boots, occasionally sneaking a taste of the smoked fish.

But Haley had no time to care about these things. She stood by the charcoal stove, keeping an eye on the temperature while skillfully adjusting the wet charcoal with tongs.

Every so often, she issued orders: "The third rack on the right, the fire is uneven." "Replace that batch of marinade, it's not fresh anymore."

The fire crackled, and faint white smoke rose from the roof.

At that moment, the bell rang.

Dong!

Short and deep, yet enough to penetrate the whole city.

All the workers at the smoked fish workshop simultaneously paused their activities, some even looking up at the roof, as if they could see through the heavy wooden beams.

The second and third chimes followed closely.

"It's three chimes!" someone whispered.

"It's something big," another person replied. "Could something have happened in the city?"

Haley stood by the stove, her hands pausing momentarily as a sentence Weir accidentally let slip during a meal flashed through her mind: "Madam is about to..."

Her eyes shifted slightly, excitement unable to be concealed on her oil-stained face: "Is it... Lord Louis's child? Born?"

Just then, the sound of hooves came from outside.

A Red Tide Knight stopped his horse at the factory gate, loudly announcing: "The Lord's son was born today! Mother and child are safe!"

As soon as his words fell, there was a moment of silence, followed by a burst of cheers.

"Born! The young master is born!"

"Wonderful, the madam is safe... God bless."

Haley said nothing, just let out a long breath: "Finish the work at hand, then stop for the day. We've completed enough for today. Go early tomorrow, don't miss the young master's ceremony."

.....

Early the next morning, people started gathering outside Fierce Tide Square to celebrate.

It began with just a few dozen people, but in less than half an hour, it swelled into a crowd of thousands.

Carpenters brought small cradles, blacksmiths presented handmade bracelets, hunters offered freshly skinned silver fox furs, and grandmothers brought bundles of dried flowers and herbs, said to ward off evil spirits and ensure restful sleep.

Children placed their most cherished wooden carvings in the center of the square, calling them guardians of the young master's growth.

The "blessing pile" in the center of Fierce Tide Square grew higher and higher, ultimately requiring officials to organize transport, carting them away for inventory.

Bradley reported to Louis with a complex expression: "The number of people exceeded expectations..."

Louis was silent for a moment, then donned a deep red cloak and went to the raised platform in the square.

He did not give a long speech, but simply looked at the faces gazing up at him: "I know you have come because of my newborn child, and I thank you for your blessings."

He paused, his gaze falling on a small cloak embroidered with the sun, and said: "We have long decided his name—Orsus Calvin. It symbolizes dawn, representing the future of the Northern Territory."

As soon as his words were spoken, genuine cheers erupted throughout Fierce Tide Square.

"Long live Orsus!"

"The dawn of the Northern Territory!"

"The heir of the Lord!"

"May the young master grow up safely!"

Haley was among the crowd, shouting as well, shouting with all her might.

Her eyes were full of fiery light, her throat parched from the cold wind, yet an unnoticed passion welled up from within her.

Not because the baby was particularly beautiful, nor because someone handed out money or food.

It was because she clearly remembered, four years ago in the slave market during winter, how she and her son Weir survived step by step.

Without Lord Louis, they would now be mere nobodies doing dirty work on some noble's estate, perhaps having long frozen or starved to death, with no one remembering their names.

Chapter 530: Differences (2)

Now she's wearing a new leather coat issued by the workshop, her home has coal for heating, and she has a small team of workers she can command.

Her son is the Lord's personal guard.

This cheer is not blind conformity, but a choice made with memory.

She glanced at the people around her, those Red Tide People standing in the snow with raised arms.

Whether indigenous, craftsmen from the South, or former slaves, every face was glowing.

Their cheers have a source, it's because their lives are visibly improving.

Louis on the stage never stopped the crowd, nor did he loudly command, but simply stood there watching quietly.

Finally, he calmly said: "Everyone, go home early, the snow will get heavier soon."

.....

When Haley left the square, it was almost dark.

She was about to enter the residential area in the city center when she suddenly heard the light sound of hooves on the snow.

Turning around, it was Weir.

He was leading his horse, cloak half undone, bangs slightly wet, fingers still gripping the sword hilt, but his expression much more relaxed.

"Why are you back now?" Haley questioned, after all, he hadn't been home for more than half a month to guard Emily.

"Lord Louis said to come home tonight," the young knight scratched his head and smiled awkwardly, "He said mother must have waited for several days."

Haley wanted to scold him a bit, but the words stopped at her lips and she just asked: "Have you seen the little master?"

Weir nodded: "Yeah... he can't open his eyes yet, but he's very spirited."

He paused and then said softly, "I will protect him."

The words came naturally, like a promise, also like an oath.

Haley turned her head slightly to look at him, her gaze softening: "The little rascal has learned responsibility by staying by the Lord's side."

The young knight said nothing, just coughed.

The two walked home through the wind and snow, one after the other.

.....

On the other end of the Northern Territory, outside the Frost Dragon Territory, cold winds were blowing through dilapidated ruins.

Compared to Fierce Tide Square in Red Tide City, there were no cheers here, no blessings.

Just a few citizens wrapped in rags walking down the muddy snowy path.

They carried hay, firewood, and a few vegetable roots, that's all they harvested today.

Few households in the village had smoke rising from chimneys, only a few thin figures clustered by the boiler.

They surrounded the furnace, looking dazed.

The boiling soup in the pot was as thin as muddy water, occasionally a few unknown black roots floated around in it.

A young boy huddled his neck, coughing violently, turning his cheeks blue.

His mother lifted her bowl, said nothing, silently poured the soup into her son's bowl.

No complaints, no grievances.

They've learned to endure hunger quietly.

A carriage jolted over the icy muddy road, wheels carving trails in the snow mud.

Camille sat inside, wrapped in mink fur, but looking far from warm.

He lifted a corner of the curtain, gazing outside at the citizens standing in the cold wind with hollow gazes, unsure what expression to show.

"Seems there's no hope here." Camille murmured, deeply disappointed.

Yet a vague emotion stirred within him.

Not pity, but almost ironic contrast.

He suddenly recalled Fierce Tide Square in Red Tide City a dozen days ago, standing on the stage at the knighting ceremony, with people shouting "Long live the Lord," the firelight illuminating the sky, cheers like tidal waves.

These people here were just living; they had no energy to speak, let alone cheer.

Camille slowly withdrew his gaze, leaning back into the soft cushions.

No matter his fear of Louis, he had to admit that in governing people, Astha and Louis were not in the same league.

After a while, the carriage slowly stopped, before the so-called "temporary council hall."

Two old government houses were roughly pieced together, the newly painted gray walls yet to dry, the scent wafting with the cold breeze.

Three flags stood in front, the middle depicting a faint golden dragon pattern, slightly faded.

"At least... there's a show of pomp." Camille lifted the curtain, a faint, imperceptible sneer curling at his lips.

A person stood under the porch.

The gray cloak was tied straight, hair neat, boots polished to a shine.

It was the Sixth Prince, Astha.

Despite standing in the snow, he presented as if he were in the court, poised.

He stepped forward, a perfectly timed smile: "Camille, representing the Imperial Capital's will and the hope of rebuilding the Northern Territory, how could I not personally welcome?"

He promptly extended his right hand.

Camille hesitated for a moment, quickly smiled in return, reached out to shake: "You're too kind, Prince. I'm just following orders."

His palm was slightly cool, but the grip firm, etiquette standard, just right.

Camille certainly understood the real intent behind the "personal welcome."

The Prince intended to win him over.

Before the forthcoming "Northern Territory Reconstruction Affairs Meeting," he urgently needed support in opinion and resources from the Imperial Capital.

And being the Inspector Envoy, he was the most suitable conduit.

"But sending me these things, thinking I'm truly an ignorant fool?" he thought.

Camille maintained a respectful demeanor, smiling as he followed Astha into the council hall.

Night had completely enveloped the Frost Dragon Council Hall.

Inside, however, was brightly decorated, firelight mingled with spices creating a warm illusion.

Dragon pattern banners hung high, surrounded by nobility and subordinate knights in lavish attire.

Most were vassal nobles of Astha, with a few clearly invited from surrounding territories.

Camille glanced around, quietly sitting to the right of the main seat.

The wooden long table had been polished to shine, silver utensils neatly arranged, candles dancing on the silver platters.

The dishes were exquisite, honey-glazed venison, wild mushroom stew, frozen apple cider mixed with snow sugar, and a large plate of Demon Beast Meat, clearly beyond a common person's reach.

Prince Astha personally presided, raising his glass: "No amount of snow can stop Camille's arrival today. For the trust and wish to rebuild the Northern Territory, cheers."

He uttered few words, drinking the wine in his cup in one gulp.

Camille smiled faintly, raising his glass in return.

From the food to the seating, from the spices to the manners, this banquet was all about showing goodwill and ability to him, the Inspector Envoy.

"A true Prince indeed. But... ultimately too forced."

He didn't deny the banquet's efforts, acknowledging Astha's best, but it was merely that.

The two kept their words measured, discussing the Northern Territory's rebuilding, Imperial Capital's policies, and the integration of the old nobility, maintaining a polite balance with underlying insincerity.

Astha's demeanor was elegant, his noble airs impeccable, yet Camille knew this composure lacked strength.

After the night banquet, Camille was escorted by attendants to his prepared VIP residence.

Pushing the door open, a flash of red caught his eye.

A symmetrically four-cornered, intricately decorated gift box quietly placed on the table before the fireplace, seemingly just delivered.

He paused, eyes slightly flickered.

"Oh... arrived quickly." He chuckled lightly, yet didn't approach immediately.

The moment the dessert box was opened flashed in his mind, a blood-red head appearing.

His palms suddenly cooled slightly, he sighed, forcing himself closer, slowly unveiling the box lid.

Fortunately, no bloody smell.

A few translucent gems, a pure gold bracelet, plus an unsigned letter: "Presented to the Empire's guest."

Camille chuckled softly: "I didn't ask for this... they're clever indeed."

He closed the box, sitting back in the chair, fingers tapping the armrest leisurely.

He saw through its essence, to survive in the Northern Territory, he could only obey Louis unreservedly.