

Winter 531

Chapter 531: Calvin Clan Meeting

Duke Calvin sat alone in the study, the letter in his hand neatly trimmed, the sender being his eighth son, Louis Calvin.

The letter arrived almost precisely every three months, sent from the Northern Territory's Red Tide City to the Calvin residence in the Southeast.

"Tsk... this kid does know the rules." Duke Calvin's tone carried a hint of sarcasm.

He leisurely unfolded the paper, his gaze sweeping over the familiar opening phrases:

"Grateful for the family's protection and support, the governance of Red Tide Territory is stable, operations for this quarter are smooth, public sentiment is calm, preparations for winter are adequate..."

And the latter part of the letter touched on the issue of gold coins.

"Recently, due to the needs of building a new port, the plan is to expand the shipyard, lacking skilled shipbuilders and technicians, hoping for the family's assistance in coordination..."

Once the port is completed, goods from the Southern and Northern Territories can directly reach by sea, saving lengthy transit times.

It is expected to save more than threefold in transportation time, enhance Red Tide's external trading capability, and simultaneously benefit the Southeast branch of the family business guild."

Duke Calvin unconsciously nodded in agreement.

This isn't a matter of a few horses or bags of grain; the transport capacity, routes, and even price negotiation rights from the Northern Territory to other provinces, especially the Southeast Province, would be affected.

But this son is truly ambitious, skilled shipbuilders aren't laborers one can casually pick up by the roadside.

The family has already dispatched two batches of people over, and now he says it's still not enough?

"You're bold in asking." The Duke snorted coldly, a hint of amusement rising in his brows.

Yet Duke Calvin truly had to consider it.

If Louis could indeed build that port, the greatly shortened North-South trade time would be a significant advantage for the family.

Moreover, Red Tide Territory would be thoroughly bonded with the family business guild, becoming a mutually beneficial community of destiny—a rather favorable outcome.

After weighing the pros and cons, Duke Calvin would ultimately send people over.

Personnel would be provided, equipment could be authorized, but conditions would certainly be attached.

Expansion of the port is permissible, but main navigation rights, commercial tax ports, and site control must reserve a share for the family.

Duke Calvin continued reading: "Has been officially enfeoffed as Count of the Northern Territory... the youngest child was born this month, mother and child are safe, grateful for the family's blessings..."

Having finished the letter, the Duke smirked and placed it back on the desk.

The letter was written neither too warmly nor too coldly, neither close nor distant, like a routine report.

Even the matter of "childbirth" was summarized blandly with a "thanks for family blessings," as if merely fulfilling an obligation.

"Appointed as Count, has a son now... while constantly expressing gratitude to the family, he is running ever farther away, quite shrewd indeed."

Unfortunately, this shrewd son evidently does not intend to truly draw close to the family.

Originally, sending him to the Northern Territory was merely to comply with the Emperor's order for expansion, utilizing a marginal resource for the count.

Who would have thought this piece of marginal resource now truly rooted in the Northern Territory, becoming a local power.

Now even Knights, Nobility, and business guild forces are beginning to gravitate toward him.

The spies he himself sent either have been absorbed or marginalized.

"Still thinks of himself as a Calvin?" Duke Calvin coldly laughed, sitting up straight.

To achieve this, it indicates this son indeed is capable, but it also signifies he has slipped beyond control.

The genuine intel he can obtain comes from the family business guild, each achievement Louis accomplished astonishes him.

Red Tide Territory now controls most of the Northern Territory's mineral veins and salt lakes, governing over a third of the Northern population, even old nobility in the North have been placated by him.

Louis has turned that wasteland into his own kingdom.

Duke Calvin leaned back in his high chair, tapping the table, beginning to reconsider the frequent question he recently pondered.

Who should be the successor as Patriarch?

Originally, this didn't require consideration.

The eldest, Gaius Calvin, whether in knight rank, military talent, or administrative skill, was the widely anticipated future patriarch.

But now? Gaius disappeared along with the Emperor, unlikely to ever inherit the Calvin Clan.

Looking at the third son, Eduardo.

Due to special reasons, he was sent personally at a young age to the Golden Feather Flower Church Court.

Yet precisely because of this, the child from the start was fated not to be the heir as patriarch.

Regarding the remaining ones...

Seldon, indeed shrewd, good at business, ruthless and decisive.

Yet his vision is too narrow, his scope limited, always seeing others as a bunch of brainless fools.

Even with Louis' rise causing such a stir, he thinks it's mere fortune, capitalizing on a trend.

"Small-minded, lacking big picture." He shook his head.

As for the other sons...

Duke Calvin sighed, rest his forehead against his hand, his gaze falling on the family tree beside the table.

How many sons did he really sire?

Ten or so? Twelve? Fifteen?

He couldn't quite remember.

Yet those who are truly noteworthy... countable on fingers.

"Conversely, the one least expected," he murmured, "now becomes the family's sole reliable pillar."

Louis, the Count of the Northern Territory, Lord of the Red Tide.

Mother a humble maid, yet now through his own might, from the most remote fief, he has forged a wasteland into the Northern core.

"Now... the most suitable child." It's the conclusion he hesitates to voice.

Sadly, the blood bears the name "Calvin," yet always seems intent on drawing boundaries.

Consistently maintaining that elusive distance, even drawing closer to the Edmund Family.

Chapter 532: Calvin Clan Council Meeting (Part 2)

The "pieces" sent to the Red Tide in recent years have almost been completely wiped out.

Some were absorbed and became Louis' confidants; some were estranged and couldn't gather any core information; some lost contact and didn't even send reports... their lives are unknown.

The entire Red Tide is like a tightly sealed iron barrel, even his feelers couldn't get through.

"Is it because you're too clever?" he murmured, staring down at the letter, his expression complex.

He folded the letter and slowly threw it into the fire.

The flames licked the letter, turning word by word into ashes.

Watching the words burn little by little, Duke Calvin's lips curled into a faint, cold smile: "Want to break free from the family? Don't forget who paved the road for you."

His tone carried a hint of sarcasm, yet couldn't hide a certain faint... pleasure.

This son, who was once a sideline he sent to the Northern Territory, is now a dignified Count, the most powerful military force in the Northern Territory.

Truly surprising.

"Your Grace." A low whisper came from outside the door, "The family meeting is about to start, and the esteemed members have taken their seats."

"Understood."

Duke Calvin slowly stood up, adjusted his sleeves, and regained his usual calm demeanor.

The meeting hall was set in a secret chamber deep within the mansion, the stone walls were thick.

Only the core family members were allowed to participate, with no record-keepers or aides allowed.

The official topic was to analyze the situation in the Imperial Capital after the Emperor's disappearance and to assess the Regent King's ability to govern.

But the true theme was simply: which Prince should the Calvin Clan support?

Supporting the right one would keep the Eight Great Clans' status rock solid.

Supporting the wrong one might mean losing even the territory of the Southeast Province.

Duke Calvin pushed open the door and calmly took the main seat.

The long table was already filled with a few of his brothers, several high-ranking elders of the family, and a few core sons of the next generation.

The candlelight reflected on each face, some ambitious, some shrewd, some silent...

But in Duke Calvin's eyes, their thoughts were almost written on their faces.

Especially his second son, Seldon Calvin.

This rising star, who rose through the family's trade routes, now controlled nearly thirty percent of the family's commercial profits.

Every move exuded confidence, sitting there as if the main seat would soon be his.

But he didn't understand that the real game had long taken a different direction, and he hadn't figured out who was a player and who was a piece.

Duke Calvin glanced at everyone and opened his mouth in a light, casual tone: "The winds in the Imperial Capital are rising; it seems the Regent King won't last much longer. Tonight, let's discuss where to place our bets among the Princes."

As he finished speaking, the hall fell into silence.

Seldon Calvin sat at the right end of the long table, his gaze slowly sweeping across everyone.

These people would ultimately become supporting characters in his future dominion.

He is the third son of the family, controlling three-tenths of the family's trade system and dominating four crucial inter-provincial trade routes.

In terms of actual power, apart from his father, there were few here who could overshadow him.

Eldest brother Gaius? Unconscious, life or death unknown, even the Emperor is missing.

Louis? Well, Seldon admits that guy is a troublemaker.

He carved out his realm with the barren Northern Territory, supposed to be dead land.

Now he's not only been ennobled as a Count but also controls several Knight Orders and half of the Northern Lords, even turning a few of the family's old trade lines to his advantage.

To have taken such a leap from a sideline to his current stature, it would be foolish to say he's not capable.

But he's already rooted in the Northern Territory.

So let him stay put in the Northern Territory, as far as possible from the Southeast Province.

No matter how much power, it's just a distant threat.

As for the remaining brothers?

Just a bunch of good-for-nothings with the family name.

Everything is set, only an opportunity to shine is missing.

And now is my chance to rise, Seldon understands.

"Father." Seldon spoke timely, his tone carrying a sharp edge: "I believe we must make a clear stance; supporting which Prince is the most critical issue right now."

As everyone's eyes gathered, he continued, "The Fourth Prince is on good terms with the Supervisory Office, and the Civil Servant system is solid, ensuring the Imperial Capital's security. The Second Prince commands the military and can secure the borders outside.

The Crown Prince is weak and incapable, like an empty shell puppet. The Fifth Prince is even less trustworthy; intelligence suggests he's flirting with foreign forces. If we bet on the wrong card... the family's century-old foundation will be destroyed overnight."

He paused deliberately, surveying the room: "So, I propose to support the strongest Prince among them."

"We are not philanthropists; we must support the side capable of seizing power."

This statement was decisive, logically coherent, and sounded very prudent.

Several elders on both sides of the long table nodded frequently, even some quietly praised, "Makes sense."

Seldon felt a surge of joy inside.

But Duke Calvin at the main seat remained unmoved.

He simply lifted his wine glass, took a small sip, but already formed an evaluation in his heart.

Too safe, Seldon has always been good at gauging the higher-ups' intentions, but precisely because of this, he could never take the stage.

These words were as good as not spoken, pretending to analyze the situation, but essentially saying nothing useful, only good at using small cunning.

Duke Calvin put down the wine glass, his tone calm: "I've noted your thoughts; let's hear others' opinions first."

Seldon maintained composure on the surface, but his fingertips couldn't help but grip his knee tightly, silently returning to his seat.

He understood that his father was displeased yet didn't want to refute him publicly.

"Brother." Count Albert was the first to speak; this duke's brother was always mature and steady.

"The Second Prince certainly controls military power, but he has offended quite a lot of people. The Supervisory Office, the Ministry of Finance, the Civil Servant faction, they all have grudges against him... if these three join forces in retaliation, it might be hard to predict the outcome."

"I think it's also worth paying some attention to the Fourth Prince," Ninth Son Bran interjected quietly from his seat.

"Ha," someone sneered, "The Fourth Prince? That bookworm who hides in the study all day writing 'Empire Governance Proposals'? This Empire values military merit and practical deeds, not fancy words."

The atmosphere became somewhat tense.

Until Elder Isaac slowly spoke: "Actually... there are also some voices discussing the Fifth Prince."

The long table fell silent for a moment.

This was the Prince who had been "missing for years and recently returned to the Imperial Capital," rumored to have secret dealings with the Golden Feather Flower Church Court, though there was no evidence.

"That path is too dangerous." The Duke finally spoke, but no one could discern his attitude.

No one knew that at this moment, what flashed through his mind was the contents of a secret letter.

That letter was personally sent by his sister Eleanor, delivered to a manor on the outskirts of the Imperial Capital.

This was precisely where he arranged secret connections with the Fifth Prince's faction.

And more importantly, Eduardo had long since converted to the Golden Feather Flower faith, becoming a core member of the Church Court.

And all of this, no one present knew.

As everyone expressed their views, the Duke turned his gaze to an elder at the end of the long table.

Carter Calvin, one of the oldest elders in the family, rarely spoke but carried enough weight.

Carter nodded slowly, his tone unhurried: "If we have to decide on someone, I believe... the Second Prince is worth a gamble. He has support in the military, his reputation is still noticeable, and he is recognized in the Imperial Capital."

Duke Calvin did not respond immediately.

He merely nodded slightly, his expression calm, showing no emotion.

But this gesture, seen by everyone present, was like a seal, lightly placed on the Second Prince's column.

Some people's eyes lit up, while others pondered secretly.

Nobody knew that at this moment, Duke Calvin's heart didn't truly agree with this statement.

This was false information, a baiting tactic.

The phrase "The Calvin Clan leans towards the Second Prince" was a bait he personally set out.

If within a few days, this rumor suddenly appeared in the Imperial Capital, something like "I heard the Calvin Clan plans to support the Second Prince"...

Then he would follow the trail and uncover which corner of this meeting hid the wolf.

Before the storm engulfing the Empire arrives, he must first clean up his own ship.

Chapter 533: Bradley's Day

In the harsh winter of the Northern Territory, inside the domed houses of Red Tide City, it is as warm as spring.

Bradley sat up, slowly moving his shoulders, emitting faint "click" sounds.

"Ugh... these bones are becoming more and more disobedient," he muttered, picking up a robe from the side of the bed and putting it on, then leisurely made himself a cup of warm tea.

Maintaining one's health has become a routine, not for longevity, but to handle affairs more clearly each day.

This elder, who has crossed into his sixties, was once the elder steward of the Calvin Clan in the Southeast Province, his life intertwined with the nobility.

He was supposed to have prepared for retirement four years ago, then enjoy a peaceful life within the Calvin Clan.

However, due to a command from Duke Calvin, he embarked on a journey to the Northern Territory to investigate the Demon Marrow Ore.

Upon arriving in Louis' territory, Bradley found that this previously insignificant young master was indeed doing a good job, but there remained several gaps and chaos in the area.

Louis personally requested him to stay and assist in developing the Red Tide Territory.

Bradley originally planned to help the young boy for a year or two until he found his footing, then return to the Southeast to retire.

But once he stayed, it turned into four years.

He witnessed with his own eyes the young man, Louis, single-handedly supporting the precarious situation amid heavy snow, plague, and riots.

How he transformed a group of refugees, slaves, and defeated soldiers into the orderly city it is today.

How in just a few years, he evolved from a Baron of Expansion to a Count, and indeed the de facto ruler of the Northern Territory.

Unwittingly, Bradley himself became the Chief Steward of Red Tide City, his position in the city second only to the Lord and his two wives.

"Ah, the impermanence of the world is truly remarkable."

Bradley finished his tea, massaged his still-stiff waist, and opened the door to step out of his room.

The Northern Territory was still blanketed in snow and the cold was biting, but Red Tide City was different.

Geothermal pipelines running underground, combined with the Fire-backed Turtle's greenhouse, kept the district's temperatures above the winter standard line.

While it couldn't be said to be spring-like with blooming flowers, at least it was not cold enough to make people shiver.

Bradley walked out onto the street, where two young knights from the Red Tide Knight Order were already waiting at the door, holding his horse and paving the way for him, saluting and saying, "Lord Bradley, the carriage is ready. What's today's schedule?"

A slight smile appeared on his lips: "Hmm, first go to the storage area to take a look at the main granary and the stock of salt meat, and incidentally confirm if the third batch of coal has been authorized for release.

Then swing by the medical facility to see if the newly received refugees have stabilized.

Afterwards, head to the heating center; recently, there's been an instability in the geothermal pipeline in the East District. Someone reported it yesterday, and the heat isn't reaching the farthest greenhouse.

Oh, remember to reserve the small conference room at the Council Hall before noon to launch the spring plowing scheme and start preparing for the Spring Festival."

Bradley tugged at his cloak and made a small joke: "That's it, let's go. The roads are slippery in the cold; tell the driver to take it slow as I'd like to live a few more years."

The carriage arrived at the central street, where each household's windows were adorned with wish candles, likely having been lit for a long time, with only the last few lingering flames remaining.

The first stop was the storage area, a row of semi-underground granaries not far from the inner city.

Bradley walked into the dispatch room with familiar ease, where a few officials on duty were sorting last night's distribution slips.

He didn't need to say much; as soon as he extended his hand, someone handed him the inventory.

The coal distribution rate reached ninety-four percent, the quotas for each district remained stable, and the remaining reserves were adequate.

Standing in front of the central long table in the storage area, his cloak still on, Bradley let his fingertips glide across a parchment scroll:

"This emergency winter adjustment form can be streamlined a bit, by removing repeated distributions and duplicate records."

He pointed to a line of data at the bottom of the table and said blandly, "Recently, there's been new settlers in the outskirts of the Southeast District; allocate ten barrels of coal as a backup before anyone asks."

The scribe in charge immediately nodded affirmatively, afraid that his pen might linger a moment too long.

Bradley then turned his gaze to the neatly stacked grain bricks, dried meat, and coal briquettes in the warehouse.

The entire storage area was methodically organized, with no signs of panic, clearly marked with the sources and destinations, a situation that didn't happen by chance.

Just half a month ago, a warehouse manager was caught by Bradley selling high-energy coal bricks under the table.

The man was one of the first veterans to follow Louis to Red Tide City, and in a lapse of judgement, committed this foolish act.

He pleaded and argued, begging for mercy at the council hall overnight.

But by the next morning, his body hung from an iron hook outside the warehouse door, with a notice listing his crimes.

After that, no one dared to reach out for more.

Bradley is not a bloodthirsty person, but on this piece of land in the Northern Territory, without harsh punishments, it's hard to curb corruption, after all, people here have been impoverished for too long.

Now, warehouse managers dare not take an extra block of coal, and scribes will proactively report corrections for even one erroneous line.

The rules have been etched into everyone's bones.

Bradley nodded with satisfaction and stepped out of the storage area.

As he left the storage area, the sky had become slightly brighter, but the misty snow still hung low.

Bradley draped on a thick cloak, stepped up onto the carriage, and slowly headed to the medical facility with his escort, the tracks left by patrol knights visible along the way.

Inside the carriage, Bradley was engrossed in reading through his records when suddenly he heard children's voices, "Good morning, Lord Bradley!"

Looking out the window, he saw two children crouched under the eaves roasting potatoes, their cheeks rosy, and one little girl stood up and waved to him.

Bradley looked up, his eyes crinkled as he raised his hand in return, "Morning."

A small scene, more meaningful than a thousand words.

If it weren't for the implemented system and stabilized heating, how could children be seen laughing on the winter streets?

Chapter 534: A Day in the Life of Bradley (2)

In front of the medical facility, a few physicians returning from night patrol were exchanging shifts, wrapped in thick felt, their faces showing the fatigue of an overnight vigil.

Upon seeing Bradley approaching, Dr. Murray, the person in charge, quickly came out to greet him respectfully.

"Last night, four new cases of fever were reported: two from refugee residences and two from local households. They have been transferred to the special hospital according to protocol." She paused, "No severe coughing or vomiting observed, preliminary diagnosis suggests common flu."

Bradley nodded, looking toward the wooden house, which had long been converted into a special hospital following the "Red Tide Epidemic Emergency Protocol."

"Have you tried the batch of medicine sent from the South?" he asked.

Murray nodded: "We have. It's most stable for the children. It controls body temperature an hour faster than the local medication of the Northern Territory."

"If the medicine is not enough, submit a request." Bradley's tone was firm, "Do not let paperwork delay treatment for anyone."

This was not a casual order; it was stipulated in the regulations.

The ordinance personally set by Louis clearly stated: "Winter epidemic control prioritizes efficiency; medication standard prioritizes the severely ill; there must be no suppression of batches or intentional delays."

Bradley added another sentence: "Are the case files compiled?"

"Submitted daily, unified processing by the archives; if a red line index is triggered, immediate transition to patient mode."

"Very well." He gently patted Murray's shoulder, "You're doing great."

Murray said nothing, only bowed his head, and waited until Bradley's carriage had gone far before he heaved a sigh of relief.

These seemingly ordinary procedures had long become a system.

After all, any minor illness could become a disaster in winter.

And now not only Murray, but the entire Red Tide medical team could execute each response accurately and calmly because they had clear guidelines to follow.

After leaving the medical facility, the snowfall lessened a bit, but the sky remained overcast.

The small road leading to the outskirts of the Artisan District was covered in uncleared snow, making it impassable for the carriage, so Bradley, cloaked, walked with two attendants.

Footfalls crunched on the snow, mingling with the cold air and the distant smell of coal smoke.

Most of the shops on the Artisan District street were already closed for the winter, with seals on their doors and snow piled high, except for the small building at the end of the street which still puffed white steam.

That was the Red Tide heating center, where the central team responsible for maintaining the entire town's winter geothermal system worked.

As one approached, one could hear the hissing of steam, like some living beast breathing in the snow.

A few technicians at the door, wrapped in sheepskin aprons, were squatting in front of an open pipe, adjusting gear valves, their faces red with cold, yet no one stopped working.

Bradley approached quietly: "Thank you for your hard work. I came to check on things."

The technicians turned, surprised, especially the youngest, who took a moment to react.

He stood up hastily, holding a wrench, his face flushed: "Th-thank you, sir!"

This young man was the deputy leader of the steam engine construction team, Hamilton.

Bradley smiled slightly, his gaze falling on the new installation.

It was a steam pressure regulator boiler half-buried in a brick foundation, with copper pipes and a thermal channel extending out crookedly like steel snakes emerging from the ground.

A sign welded on its side had writing blurred by high temperatures, leaving only "Red Tide Number One · Winter Use" barely legible.

"Is it thanks to this machine that the West District didn't freeze?" Bradley looked at the constantly steaming valve.

Hamilton, squatting nearby checking the pressure gauge, turned around, a hint of pride in his tone: "It... well, it can probably raise the temperature from twenty degrees geothermal to thirty-seven or eight degrees."

He scratched his head, adding: "But the technology isn't completely matured; it needs daily monitoring. If a pipe swells and cracks, the whole section must be dug up and redone."

Bradley did not laugh, but nodded.

This thing was far from elegant or precise, looking more like a monstrous concoction of steam, iron sheets, and heat welding.

But it was indeed useful, truly able to prevent Red Tide's warm shelters from turning into icehouses.

Bradley turned to look toward the end of the pipeline: "Oh, someone from the East District reported yesterday that the temperature in the warm rooms at the far end was low and heat wasn't reaching. Have you checked it?"

"Checked!" an older technician answered quickly, "That section of the pipeline is buried, pressure is insufficient; we're sending a part there today, it'll be restored tonight."

"Good." Bradley nodded, sweeping his gaze through the snow mist, "Thank you all for your hard work. Tonight, I'll have Logistics send another batch of hot meals."

He said no more and turned to leave.

...

When he returned to the administrative square, the sky had already darkened, but the conference hall was brightly lit, the fire and steam pipes warming the hall like spring.

Bradley sat at the main seat, a pot of still-warm tea at hand.

Artisan Office, smoked fish factory, education department... representatives from each district had arrived one after another.

The bustling meeting hall was filled with interwoven voices, and a few bowls of stewed meat were placed on the table, a night snack sent from the kitchen in advance.

Bradley turned a page of his notes, speaking briefly: "You all did well for last year's celebrations. This year's Spring Festival plans started earlier than usual, so it must be even better."

Subsequently, each district presented their Spring Festival plans.

The Artisan District representative stood up, enthusiastically rolling up his sleeves: "We've prepared a 'Winter Iron Punching Challenge!' Using thick steel plates provided by the workshop, punching holes on the spot to see who has steady hands and strength."

"What's interesting about that? It's not as good as last year's sword forging," someone laughed lightly.

"The smoked fish factory is hosting a 'Pickled Fish King Contest' this year, with each fishing household presenting a barrel, and the judging panel will find the best flavor! We want the taste of sea brine to fill the square!"

Chapter 535: Bradley's Day (Part 3)

"We've designed a new 'snow race', adding obstacle sections with vine jumps, net climbs, and ice slope climbs."

Bradley took note of every item, occasionally annotating, sometimes nodding.

He waited until everyone finished their reports before closing his notebook: "Lord Louis... unfortunately, will not be able to attend the festival performance part.

But remember, make it the brightest festival in the entire Northern Territory, not for the sake of appearance, but to let everyone know that Red Tide Territory will be better this year."

The hall was silent, followed by applause from everyone in unison.

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It was late at night, and the fireplace in the Red Tide Lord's Mansion was burning brightly, with the flames casting dancing shadows on the stone walls.

Louis sat in a chair, cradling the baby gently in one arm.

The child had not been born long, their features not yet fully developed, only occasionally clicking their lips, softly humming, and then falling back into a deep sleep.

The carpet by the fireplace was soft and thick, making the room so warm that one could almost forget it was a snowy, frigid Northern night outside the window.

Bradley stood to the side, turning page after page of a briefing:

"In terms of distribution, everything in the storage area is stable, and the coal supply will last until the end of the month without major issues. The medical center has completed influenza isolation, and medicines on Maryna's side are plentiful.

The Spring Festival preparations are going smoothly, with positive reports from each district, the evaluation system remains unchanged...

He paused for a moment and closed the briefing scroll: "There are no major hazards, everything is under control."

Louis looked up, gazed beyond the briefing, and smiled at him: "When you handle things, I'm at ease."

Bradley bowed slightly, his voice lowered a few degrees: "It's my duty."

The daily report should have ended here.

But Louis gently patted the sleeping child in his arms, looking up at Bradley: "For most of next year, I might not be in Red Tide City."

Bradley was taken aback.

Louis continued, "Over there at Dawn Port, the basic mapping has been completed. As soon as the snow melts, the first phase of piling and harbor excavation must begin.

So the matters here, I'll leave them to you. I hope that when I'm not around, Red Tide can stay the same."

Bradley nodded, "Rest assured, my Lord, I'll arrange everything properly."

He glanced at the child in Louis's arms, suddenly speaking softly: "When the little master grows up and knows he was born in such a winter, he should be proud of you."

Louis smiled and said nothing, gently swaying the sleeping child in his arms.

And before Bradley left the room, he couldn't help but look back at that warm scene.

Louis was still looking down at the child in his arms, his gaze soft like the fire on a winter night.

A wonderful warmth surged in his heart.

.....

It was already late when Bradley left the Earth Tower Castle.

Bradley walked into the public bathhouse, feeling as if the day's chill was about to completely melt away at this moment, one of his few daily times of rest.

The young attendant saw him and immediately came up, smiling and saying, "Master Bradley, your room is ready."

It was a small, inner room, with warm stones embedded in the walls, and hot spring water flowing continuously.

Beside the pool, there was a polished wooden tray, complete with a teapot, towels, and fresh clothes.

Bradley took off his cloak and slowly settled into the hot spring water, feeling as though his whole being had sunk into a certain warm tranquility.

In the mist, he let out a long breath, leaned his head against the stone wall, and closed his eyes.

"When I left the Southeast back then..." Bradley murmured to himself, "I thought it was going to be a tough assignment."

In the Calvin Clan, he was just a dutiful old steward, a tool that could be discarded at any time.

But here, in this snow-locked yet spring-like warm Red Tide City.

He was the Chief Steward, the deputy of the entire city's governance, known by the children as "Master Bradley."

His decisions determined how many families could keep warm on winter nights, whether they could have a bowl of stew on snowy nights.

His judgment affected whether the entire territory could still run orderly amidst snowstorms.

And more importantly, people expressed their respect for what he did, not for who he was.

Bradley opened his eyes, looking at the slightly yellowish light in the steam.

"Being in this land of ice and snow, and building Red Tide to what it is today with Lord Louis..." he said softly, "perhaps it is the best decision of my life."

When Bradley stepped out of the bath, the snow was still falling.

Yet he felt that every bit of warmth in the city, every light, seemed to echo that little, unspoken pride in his heart.

Chapter 536: Remnant Core of the Nest

The morning sunlight streamed through the glass window, casting reflections upon the curtains.

Louis opened his eyes and instinctively reached out to the side.

His arm soon encountered a familiar softness.

That was Emily's sleeping hair, carrying a hint of morning warmth and a familiar floral scent.

Her eyebrows now lacked the cold sternness of a young girl, replaced by a soothing maternal presence.

On the other side, a small baby lay nestled against her chest, sleeping peacefully, occasionally waving his small fists as if fighting someone in his dreams.

"Wow, starting cultivation at just a few months old?" Louis whispered with a smile, leaning down to kiss the child's forehead.

He slowly sat up, draped the cloak by the bed over his shoulders, and stretched in front of the floor-to-ceiling window.

The sky outside Red Tide City was not yet fully bright, but from the southern district workshops, the first wisp of white steam was already rising. It seemed the steam group was again testing some new invention overnight.

As usual, Louis gently raised his hand and made a simple gesture in the air.

Accompanied by a barely audible "buzz", a semi-transparent light screen silently unfolded before his eyes.

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

[1: Hamilton successfully prototyped the "Steam-powered Loom" in the Red Tide Workshop District.]

[2: The Fifth Prince Lampard has recently been seen frequenting the secret base of the Golden Feather Flower Church Court in the Imperial Capital for confidential discussions.]

[3: Deep in the Ancient Abyss Canyon, beneath the Snowfield Altar Palace, a dormant Mother Nest Remnant Core remains in a semi-hibernating state.]

"Oh?" Upon seeing the first intelligence, Louis raised an eyebrow, his eyes lighting up, "They actually made it..."

The steam-powered loom's significance goes far beyond just speed.

Its arrival means that fabric production will no longer rely solely on manual weaving.

Once perfected, Red Tide was truly entering an industrial era concerning the textile industry.

Louis could foresee the day when Red Tide City would bulk package its self-produced cotton, linen, and even dyed cloth, shipping them across the Northern Territory, and possibly around the world.

"This kid really created a new industry for me, I'll go check at the workshop by noon today."

Louis nodded happily, then continued to view the next piece of intelligence.

[2: The Fifth Prince Lampard has recently been seen, frequenting the secret base of the Golden Feather Flower Church Court in the Imperial Capital for confidential discussions.]

"As expected, the rumors weren't groundless." Louis murmured, the hint of a smile in his eyebrows quietly dissipating, replaced by calmness.

Rumors regarding the Fifth Prince Lampard had quietly spread among the Imperial Capital's nobility two months ago, but no one had proof.

However, this intelligence finally cemented everything.

Seeing this intelligence, Louis thought of his third brother, Eduardo Calvin.

This elder brother, sent to further his studies at the church by the Duke in his youth, seemed to hold a considerable position within the church.

Louis casually flipped through the intelligence notebook.

Most political intelligence recorded over the few months pointed in the same direction; the split in Imperial Capital's political arena was accelerating.

The military department, civil servants, church, nobility... each fracture continued to expand.

Louis's fingers brushed over several core intelligence notes:

The Second Prince, a graduate from the Empire's Military Academy, moved closely with the military, and his suggested alliance system of noble army corps was supported by some border faction nobles.

The Fourth Prince, backed by the inspectorate and the finance department, advocated for civil servant centralization and cabinet system reform, aiming to reconstruct imperial power.

The Eight Great Clans appeared neutral but actually supported different sides.

Shadows of the Golden Feather Flower Church Court and the Jade Federation increasingly frequented the Imperial Nobility's secret chambers.

This intelligence mostly comprised secrets that were the deepest and, for some, known only to one or two individuals.

All these secrets were laid bare before the Daily Intelligence System.

Louis closed the notebook, softly saying to himself, "So... the fractures in the Imperial Capital have fully torn apart."

In his eyes, the Empire was now akin to a temple still able to hold itself together; its walls untouched, but its foundation very fragile.

Were it to suddenly topple one day, others might be shocked by the upheaval, but he would not be surprised.

Louis glanced down at Emily by the bedside, and the small bundle in her arms, his gaze deepening, "I'm not yet strong enough to decide the Empire's future. But at the very least... strong enough to protect what I should safeguard."

He sighed softly, and then looked at the third piece of intelligence.

[3: Deep in the Ancient Abyss Canyon, beneath the Snowfield Altar Palace, a dormant Mother Nest Remnant Core remains in a semi-hibernating state.]

Louis's pupils contracted slightly, "How could it be."

Mother Nest Remnant Core!

That familiar yet nauseating name appeared again!

He looked down and repeatedly confirmed those words, "Existence of Mother Nest Remnant Core", "Snowfield Altar", "Semi-hibernating state".

Due to the intelligence being so brief, it was like a fang barely exposed under the ice layer.

But Louis knew one thing: "If it truly awakens... then the entire Northern Territory, and perhaps the entire Empire, might never withstand a second insect disaster."

Recalling the terrifying scenes back then, when the Mother Nest ravaged.

An entire Northern Territory turned to scorched earth, over four-fifths of the population perishing, dozens of cities vanishing, even the Dragon Blood Knight Order left in tatters...

Thinking of this, Louis began to feel a headache, raising a hand to pinch his brow, "This thing must be scattered along with its ashes."

He then retrieved the hand-drawn detailed map of the Northern Territory from the bedside drawer.

This was his own version, repeatedly organized and marked with battle lines and trade routes, considered the most comprehensive and detailed map of the Northern Territory now.

The tip of the pen landed on a patch of snowfield not yet marked with a name, which was indeed the Ancient Abyss Canyon.

Chapter 537: Nest Remnant Core (Part 2)

Seeing this place, Louis sighed: "The Ancient Canyon... is right near the planned route to Dawn Port."

It's a cliff snowfield that never thaws, with snow so deep you can't see the bottom, magical beasts frequent the area, and it's yet to be explored.

Louis tapped his fingers lightly on that open space, eyebrows furrowed: "This place... is almost the last blank spot on the Northern Territory map."

But by now, his mind had quickly drafted an initial deployment plan.

"Send out the White Night Knight Squad."

The White Night Knight Squad is a special knight squad he personally assembled, composed of the most elite selected from his knight orders, each one possessing the strength of an Extraordinary Knight or above.

Originally set up to deal with the unknown phenomena, extreme environments, and special magical disasters of the Northern Territories, it unexpectedly came into use so quickly.

"They are responsible for the first round of exploration, if they can find the entrance, then try to take a look.

If they can't enter the core area of the snowfield altar, they must still investigate whether there is any disturbance of magic energy or abnormality of demons around.

As long as they can prove there is no danger in the intelligence... then I'll go myself."

Louis leaned back into the chair and gently exhaled.

Now, he was no longer that local lord with only a dilapidated village but was the Count Calvin of the Northern Territory, holding tens of thousands of citizens, coordinating major towns in the Northern Territory, and shouldering the situation there.

The moment he truly went to that altar must be a moment of absolute certainty.

This time, he not only had to unveil the mystery but also ensure that no one dies under the second nest calamity.

"What's wrong?"

A soft whisper came from the side, it was Emily's voice, slightly hoarse with the breath of someone just waking up.

Louis swiftly put away the map in his hand, a gentle smile appearing on his face as usual: "Nothing, just routinely checking some border reports."

But Emily stared at him for two seconds, as if wanting to read more from his eyes.

She propped herself up and draped a thin blanket over her shoulder, her tone carrying some stubbornness: "You always keep things buried inside... if there really is trouble, you should tell me. As your wife, I can also help share the burden."

Louis chuckled softly, reaching out to gently stroke her hair: "Really nothing big, just some leftover nuisances from the Barbarian Race at the northwest border, not even urgent."

Emily nodded gently, although still slightly doubtful, she eventually didn't pursue further.

Just then, the baby in the crib next to them turned over on the soft blanket, making a soft sucking sound with its mouth.

Emily hurriedly picked him up and gently patted the baby's back with her hand.

"Look," she smiled down at him, "the little one can turn over now."

Louis moved closer, lightly tapping the baby's tiny nose with his finger, the baby sneezed groggily then grunted twice, and nestled back into his mother's arms.

"In a few days, I have to go to Dawn Port," said Louis softly, "The port construction is about to start, I need to go there personally."

Emily didn't hesitate, only nodded gently: "I know, it's something you must do. Let Sif go along with you too, you've been by my side all this time, I'm afraid she misses you too."

At this, Emily couldn't help but laugh, glancing down at the baby in her arms: "Bring back a brother or sister for him?"

"Two would be fine." Louis laughed as well, wrapping his arm around her shoulder.

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When Emily and the child fell back asleep, Louis removed his outer robe, sitting cross-legged on the thick rug beside the bed, his eyes closed in meditation.

He gently exhaled, his Fighting Energy circulating smoothly within his blood, with each breath lightly surging, strands of red Fighting Energy faintly appearing on his body's surface.

Thanks to the resources provided by the Daily Intelligence System now, his Fighting Energy had long entered the realm of the High-tier Elite Knight.

Added to the mysterious amplification acquired from the Burning Pain Vine Court, and the magic bonuses from the Primordial Heart...

His actual strength was roughly at the level of a Mid-tier Extraordinary Knight.

It can be said that now, Louis is one of the Red Tide Territory's strongest forces in a real sense.

A few breaths later, he opened his eyes, exhaled a mouthful of turbid air, and his breathing returned to calm.

Next, it was the beginning of a new day.

After washing up, he changed into the practiced deep red lord's robe and walked out of the entrance hall.

Breakfast downstairs was already laid out, hot wheat porridge, salted cheese, and a piece of lamb stewed with beans.

During the meal, Louis didn't speak much, flipping through a draft budget for the Spring Festival prepared by district affairs officers in between bites, occasionally jotting down some amendments on the edge of the paper.

After breakfast, he stepped out of the hall, at the end of the corridor in the snowy ground, a carriage had been waiting for a long time.

Lambert stood in front of the carriage, still wearing that dark knight's cloak.

He is now the highest commander of the Red Tide Army, controlling all territorial forces, deployment rights, and external military dealings.

But as long as there were no urgent military affairs, he still habitually stood by Louis's side, just like those days in the Calvin Clan, guarding that lonely child.

"The schedule is rather packed today, Lord Louis." Lambert respectfully bowed his head, opening the carriage door.

Louis nodded slightly, but stopped before boarding, turning to say: "Send out the White Night Squad, their target is the canyon south of Dawn Port."

Lambert's gaze sharpened: "Special mission?"

"Yes." Louis replied with an unchanged expression, "A knight reported an ancient altar over there with abnormal magical activity, possibly affecting the subsequent port construction. Have them approach cautiously, don't dive in recklessly."

This was a purposely fabricated reason by him, after all, the existence of the nest's residual core couldn't be easily exposed, even to the knights closest to him.

Lambert had no redundant questions, only struck his chest with his left fist and said softly: "As you command."

Louis nodded slightly, his gaze turning towards the distant steam smoke barely visible: "Let's first check out the steam engine experimental base."

"Understood." Lambert nodded in acknowledgment, then waved his hand forward.

The carriage driver silently obeyed, gently moving the reins in his hand, and the carriage slowly headed towards the workshop district.

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When the workshop's door was pushed open, the strong smell of steam rushed at them.

The boy clad in an apron spotted with oil was hunched over a complex device, holding a speed lever and a logbook in his hands, concentrating like he forgot the whole world.

Until Lambert lightly coughed, he suddenly looked up, seeing the flash of a red cloak entering the workshop.

"Lord, Lord Louis!" Hamilton almost jumped up, hastily removing his goggles, "Why did you come personally!"

Louis took a few steps closer, his gaze falling on the metal machine that was slowly turning, speaking warmly: "I heard you've recently come up with something new."

Hamilton blushed shyly, somewhat flustered: "Yes, yes... I tried modifying the crank and spring of the previous steam engine, using a connecting rod device to drive the weaving shuttle back and forth, enabling continuous operation."

He paused, his eyes gleaming: "Preliminary tests show the efficiency of single-person operation is more than five times that of traditional weaving."

After speaking, he ran a few steps to press the valve on the side, a soft sound echoed, the steam engine let out a "hiss," and the weaving shuttle on the machine frame began traversing swiftly like the wind.

The fibers on the weaving thread interlaced rapidly, and in just a moment a small section of the fabric was already formed.

Lambert's eyes widened slightly, taken aback.

Louis silently observed for a long while, then gently nodded: "The thinking is good, but it's still a bit rough, it needs more adjustments."

Hamilton nodded repeatedly: "I, I understand, I'll modify it immediately..."

Louis raised his hand to stop him, saying: "You can test a small production first, the workshop will allocate a trial team of thirty people for you. Don't rush for quick results, fix the problems one by one."

He paused, adding a sentence: "But you've indeed done very well."

Hamilton's face quickly flushed, squeezing out: "Thank, thank you, my Lord... I will surely not disappoint you!"

At this moment, he was like a young boy just affirmed by his teacher.

But what he invented was the seed capable of influencing the entire world's industrial revolution.

Chapter 538: White Night Knights

Snow fell on this silent place where even sunlight was reluctant to tread.

Knight Captain of the White Night, Thomas flipped over and landed, stepping on the ice-thawed frozen snow with a slight "click" sound.

The emblem of the sun crossing with a dagger was painted on his shoulder armor, symbolizing the honor of the White Night team.

Behind him, fourteen Extraordinary Knights also dismounted, waiting for his command.

Thomas looked up at the gorge shrouded in snow fog ahead, which was their destination for this trip.

"I reiterate the Lord's original words: do not trespass, do not take risks, prioritize survival. If anything abnormal is encountered, report immediately, do not delve privately."

Though Thomas was occasionally humorous in private, his tone was solemn at this moment, without a hint of jest.

All of the White Night Knights nodded tacitly, each understanding the situation themselves.

"Move out."

As soon as the words fell, fifteen figures swiftly merged into the white wilderness, advancing towards their target.

The climate of the ancient Abyss Gorge was overly harsh, almost killing all life in the wind, but for these Extraordinary Knights, it was nothing.

Along the way, they scouted the environment, avoided a high-tier frost bear that was in deep sleep, and bypassed several groups of icefield boars rummaging through piles of corroded bones.

It's a pity that hunting wasn't the objective this time; otherwise, it would have been quite a harvest.

Finally, nearing the outer perimeter of the target given by Louis, the air became unusually oppressive.

It was an imperceptible fluctuation, not strong, yet bone-chilling cold, like some decaying and chaotic will hiding in the wind, gnawing at the ear.

"There's something." A Scout Knight named Cain raised his hand to signal the team to halt.

He possessed a bloodline talent for foreseeing crises, a rare and precious asset, also the core of the White Night team.

Everyone subsequently prostrated low, all activating a fighting energy barrier, looking towards where his gaze pointed.

Amidst the remnants of snow and mist, several blurry "figures" were slowly wandering.

Crouching low on the ground, they crawled through the snow on all fours like beasts.

Those were not ordinary remnants of the Barbarian Race, nor were they regular Magical Beasts.

Their bodies were misshapen and twisted, skin bare and covered with pitch-black markings, with some sticky spores attached, eyes scarlet and devoid of spirit, muttering some indistinct phrases repeatedly.

"Cold Abyss... gnaw... hunger... return..."

The voices were deep and chaotic, yet carried a penetrating power that lingered in the air.

"They... were once humans." A knight judged in a low voice, "Now they are probably completely beastified."

Thomas's expression turned grim: "Ancient God of Cold Abyss... that's the forbidden belief of the Old Snow Country, once identified as an Evil God by the Empire."

He paused, his gaze sinking: "Capture them alive, find out what they are."

Thomas gestured, and the White Night team instantly dispersed into the snowy landscape like shadows, silently surrounding from multiple directions, adopting their standard formation for silently hunting Magical Beasts.

Several knights discretely retrieved a green-blue Magic Explosion Bullet from their waists.

These were frost leaf-concentrated Magic Explosion Bullets, non-lethal tactical ammunition developed by Hillco.

Containing "frost leaf juice extraction mist," they could instantly release a large amount of cold, paralyzing gas.

Extremely effective against out-of-control demonized targets, especially adept at weakening muscle reactions and neural feedback to induce unconsciousness.

"Three, two, one!"

Several frost leaf-concentrated Magic Explosion Bullets were simultaneously thrown, rolling on the ground in the target area, exploding with a loud bang.

"Boom!"

A mass of blue smoke erupted, spreading rapidly across the snowfield, immediately enveloping the beastified ones.

The steps of the beastified ones stumbled, their movements clearly slowed; one even shuddered intensely as if paralyzed.

But the next moment!

"Roar!!!"

A larger beastified one suddenly roared towards the sky, vigorously breaking free of the fog's constraints!

Its pupils were blood-red and glowing, veins bulging, saliva crazily flowing at its mouth, while fragments of fighting energy on its body transformed into tearing black smoke, forcefully repelling the fog!

"Useless?!"

As if a hungry tiger on the hunt, the beastified one leaped towards Thomas, its claws leaving afterimages in midair!

"Abandon capturing, prioritize personal safety!" Thomas shouted, his fighting energy bursting abruptly.

A circle of deep red fighting energy exploded from under his feet, scorching and fierce!

The longsword in his hand swung furiously, leaving a deep red trail in the air!

"Crack!!"

The pouncing beastified one hadn't landed yet, and its entire right arm had been severed by the fighting energy, falling to the snow, with its nails cut short, scorched black by the red flames.

"Don't linger in combat, finish quickly!"

"Understood!"

The White Night team instantly switched to combat mode, fourteen streams of fighting energy flames simultaneously exploding.

These creatures were not ordinary Magical Beasts but frenzied human-like beings triggered to extreme physical prowess by some bizarre force.

They were full of wildness, and their strength was terrifyingly formidable.

A beastified one charged angrily, muscles swelling like rock, its swipe causing a sonic boom!

"Bang!!"

Yet it was met head-on by a young knight in silver armor.

Fighting energy shield rippled in blue around him, with a heavy shield and great force colliding, emitting an ear-splitting roar.

The beast's body was shockingly blown two meters away, mid-air as the knight rotated his shield blade, blue light oscillating, sweeping like a crescent moon.

"Crack!"

The sound of breaking bones and roaring fury instantly perished.

Elsewhere, a black-haired knight lurking on the flank surrounded himself with swift fighting energy, his steps like shadows, his form like an illusion, in a blink already behind the enemy.

Whoosh, whoosh!

Two ice-blue daggers sliced through the air, precisely piercing the monster's spine and cervical artery.

Before it could react, its spine fractured, spraying blood.

Then another beastified one suddenly lunged at the rearguard's relatively weaker Scout Knight, roaring like thunder!

Chapter 539: White Night Knight_2

"Don't let him get close!"

The towering Shield Axe Knight shouted angrily, as fighting energy surged from beneath his feet like a volcanic eruption. Deep blue energy created ripples in the air.

He raised his shield axe high, bellowing as he swung down with force, causing the entire snowfield to tremble.

"Boom!!!"

The demon was smashed into the ground, bleeding and flesh torn, no longer moving.

These demons each rival High Tier Barbarian Race warriors, possessing immense strength, incredible speed, and being unresponsive to pain.

Those with severed arms still swung claws, and those with broken legs could roll and bite, like an undead curse.

But the White Night Knights squad coordinated neatly and efficiently.

Each strike, each block, seemed rehearsed a thousand times, like a tactical machine with interlocking gears.

The fighting energy's glow intersected in the night, either blue or red, cold yet brilliant.

And within less than half a minute, those frenzied demons were slain one by one.

The bodies lay limp in the blood-stained snow, without a trace of movement.

The bloodstains on the snow had not yet completely frozen, thick black, carrying a strange fishy odor.

Thomas knelt with one knee, using a short dagger to pick open the remains of one demon's carcass, his fingertip probing the torn shoulder muscle, feeling an unusual slippery texture, as if mixed with some spore membrane.

"It's somewhat similar in structure to the insect corpse." He whispered, his brow furrowing even tighter.

He raised his head, his gaze sharp like a knife: "You all heard, Cold Abyss Ancient God, return... These lunatics are praying to some presence."

One Knight added softly: "The gods worshiped by the Snow Swearers, the Ancient God of Cold Abyss."

Thomas's expression grew increasingly stern.

If these mutants truly are related to the Nest...

Then this altar is far from simply an abandoned ruin.

He stood up, calmly ordered: "Leave two heads and several tissue samples to bring back to Red Tide, especially the black blood and speckled skin. Bury the other bodies where they lie, dig them deep."

Several squad members swiftly and skillfully handled the scene.

Thomas called out a Knight's name: "Hayes."

A tall and slender young man stepped forward, he was the fastest Knight in the squad.

"Return immediately the way we came to a safe place. If we do not return today, write a report of what we encountered and send it to Red Tide City, hand it personally to Lord, telling him the Nest may still be alive."

Hayes nodded: "I understand."

Without any emotional farewell, he disappeared into the wind and snow the next moment.

Thomas slowly donned his helmet, the metal buckle clicked tight.

He turned to look at the thirteen silent Knights behind him: "We move onward."

No one responded, but everyone nodded quietly, following closely.

They advanced slowly along the crack on the flank of the ancient abyss canyon, the snow beneath their feet thick and icy cold, only the fighting spirit protection could sustain their mobility.

Suddenly, Cain at the rearmost quietly reminded: "Captain... look ahead."

Thomas's gaze tightened, and he looked in the pointed direction.

An unusual bulge appeared in his view.

It was a semi-circular curved surface, snow froze into a hard ice layer on it, the edges filled with unnatural fractures.

"Clear the upper ice and snow, use two small Magic Explosion Bullets, detonate at the edges, don't damage the interior."

"Understood!"

Two knights quickly stepped forward, kneeling to set the explosives.

"Bang!!!"

The muffled explosion thundered within the ice and snow, the shock wave lifted a large mist of ice.

In the swirling white fog, the shattered ice shell scattered like flying blades, the cold oscillations making the air seem to tremble.

When the dust settled a little, a massive stone tablet silhouette emerged from the snow.

Thomas sheathed the short sword at his side, quickly advancing forward.

His boot soles issued a dull crash upon the ice layer, as his fingertip brushed away the snow just blown apart.

The twisted runes carved into the stone tablet surfaced before his eyes.

Thomas immediately recognized it as text from the Old Snow Country era, yet more complex and ancient.

His heart sank slightly, he spoke softly: "Found it."

The squad members gathered slowly upon hearing this, yet maintained combat spacing, none making a rash move.

"Group up, clear the ice layer along the crack."

As shovels of ice chips were tossed aside, the entrance buried beneath the snow finally revealed its true form.

It was a half-collapsed stone stairway, weathered and worn by time and frost, yet still leading straight into the deep underground.

The moment it was opened, the air changed.

What wafted from the stone steps was not merely moldy decay, but an odor mixed with stench, blood, and the rot of some kind of raw flesh, making one involuntarily frown.

A knight took a long-handled torch from his backpack, lit it, and tossed it down the passage.

The torch drew a red arc of light, then fell into the darkness.

A few seconds later, the point of light didn't vanish as usual, instead, after falling for a few seconds, it was swallowed by a kind of dark mist, only a faint red glow sinking into the abyss.

Thomas squinted, watching the direction where the red light disappeared, and murmured to himself, "Bottomless."

He stood up, his gaze sweeping over the team members standing solemnly beside him.

No one showed fear, but their expressions were noticeably more cautious than before.

"Carter and Rick, stay above. If we don't return within thirty minutes... follow the plan and head back to Red Tide to submit the report."

"Yes." The two responded without asking further.

"The rest, follow me." Thomas didn't waste words, stepping into the darkness, producing a dull echo.

The remaining eleven White Night Knights followed in an orderly line.

Their footsteps echoed through the narrow passage, as if countless ghostly shadows were following them along the walls.

Each step further down, the air became more humid, the sound of the wind gradually replaced by a kind of "whisper."

It was a strange language, vague, hoarse, muttering, like fragmented poetry recited over and over, but all words had lost their meaning, leaving only absurd echoes.

Some knights turned pale, cold sweat beading on their foreheads.

Thomas immediately turned and said, "Stay alert, it's just residual mental pollution, not actual erosion."

Suddenly the scout knight raised his hand sharply, signaling everyone to halt.

On the rock wall ahead, faint under the frost, an ancient mural buried by the years gradually appeared.

Thomas stepped forward, under the illumination of the torch, a massive and ancient mural emerged from beneath the frost.

The painting depicted a man and a woman standing at the top of an altar, their expressions solemn.

Beneath their feet were two twisted beasts, like some out-of-control demons, with tusks and gaping mouths, as if about to tear the heavens apart.

"That... that woman..." a knight murmured.

Thomas's pupils suddenly contracted, his heart clenched by a cold hand.

The woman's face was strikingly similar to what they saw during the Doomsday Battle, the Doomsday Nest they witnessed with their own eyes!

"Is... is it the Nest?" a knight whispered, his voice trembling uncontrollably.

Though not identical, there was an astonishing sense of resonance.

As if she, through the mural, was watching every soul approaching her.

Coldly indifferent, judgmental, like a superior staring at ants.

A terrifying mental oppression suddenly descended.

Not just Thomas, but even all the Extraordinary Knights around turned pale!

They were not ordinary people.

Knights who had stepped into the threshold of transcendence, all with resolute will.

But even they felt their will being stripped away by some invisible force, their souls drawn into the abyss of those hollow eyes on the mural.

"Ugh...!"

A knight collapsed to his knees, clutching his head tightly, veins bulging at his temples, a trace of blood oozing from the corner of his mouth.

Two others struggled to draw their swords, almost plunging the blades into their own chests!

It was not an illusion.

But some ancient and sinister whisper, seeping into their consciousness through the mural and through the air.

"Everyone! Run the breathing technique!" Thomas shouted angrily.

All knights immediately circulated their fighting energy, using their own power to resist the invasive will, the scene akin to sparkling flames burning in a snowy night.

An invisible mental struggle burst forth in silence.

After several seconds, the whisper receded, and the oppressive feeling ebbed like the tide.

The knights knelt gasping, cold sweat soaking through their inner armor, none dared to look directly at the mural again.

Thomas's face was ashen, a drop of cold sweat hanging by his temple: "No... this is definitely not something we can handle alone.

Our task is to bring the information back and let Lord Louis decide."

He turned to his team: "Retreat!"

Chapter 540: Heavy Strike Against the Evil God

"It is my inability." Felan, the captain of the Cold Iron Knight Order, half-knelt, sweat faintly visible on his forehead, his face dark and as if it could drip water.

The edges of his Fighting Energy armor had not yet been retracted, evidently just having escaped a dangerous environment.

"I have penetrated to the end of the first flight of stone steps on the altar." He reported in a low voice, "Beyond that, the mind begins to blur, perception gets distorted. Even with Fighting Spirit Protection, it's difficult to maintain. If I forcibly break through, I might fall into madness."

In the temporary camp, silence fell for a moment.

Louis stood before the table, his gaze falling upon the map where a red line encircled the coordinates.

After a long time, he gently sighed, his tone without blame, but rather gentle: "Don't blame yourself, you've done very well. Even a Peak Knight might not be able to penetrate that mental blockade."

Felan was slightly startled, raising his head to look at Louis.

Since Duke Edmund's demise, there had been no true peak power left in the Northern Territory.

Felan was a high-tier Extraordinary Knight, the most powerful single combat force in the entire Red Tide Territory, and even in the whole Northern Territory.

This investigation was specially arranged by Louis, bringing him back from the northern front line with the purpose of probing the secrets of this eerie altar.

In the end... it also stopped at the doorstep.

In other words, currently, no one in the entire Northern Empire can independently unravel the truth of this ancient altar.

"This is no longer an ordinary ruin." Louis's gaze was stern, "It's an altar of the Evil God, we must launch a strategic assault!"

As the words fell, everyone shook.

But Louis had already picked up the pen and wrote a line on the tactical briefing: Tactical level adjusted to Magic Energy High-Explosion Bullet Type Three field trial.

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The wind and snow hadn't ceased, the world was of one color.

The snow in the Ancient Abyss Canyon had been cleared to reveal a vast slope platform, 300 meters close to the Snowfield Altar, where a giant black iron-colored installation was slowly being positioned.

It was a steel beast seemingly dragged from Hell.

Six heavily armored steel bulls, their necks thick as stone pillars, exhaling white mist, vigorously dragged the heavy chassis.

In the center of the cannon carriage, a massive metal tube as thick as a roof ridge was mounted.

Entirely black and shiny like ink, entwined with silver-white pattern slots and flow grooves, it flickered with faint magical micro-light in the cold glow.

This cannon tube was cast from ash-smelted sunk iron, a metal that doesn't corrode for a thousand years, resistant to high temperatures, and against energy backlash.

Craftsmen had forged it countless times in the steam forge, making it stable as a mountain.

The bore had been polished to a mirror finish, reducing friction loss and energy recoil when launching the Magic Explosion Bullet.

This was not a weapon of war; it embodied the peak of craft, the secret research of Red Tide Workshop over three years.

"Magic Burst Cannon Tube Launch Device... the world's only cannon that can withstand the third-generation Magic Explosion Bullet." The man standing beside Louis, his eyes glowing, said with a trembling voice, "My child, finally going to speak for the first time!"

The speaker, naturally, was Hillco.

He wore an incongruous white trench coat, with an untimely fervent smile on his face, hands clasped at his chest, rubbing repeatedly, as if awaiting not a trial but a celebration.

Louis stood beside him, on a snowfield high point several hundred meters away from the Magic Explosion Bullet, watching the cannon crew complete the final adjustment procedure.

Behind him was a whole row of knight guards forming a defense line, and the on-site security measures were meticulous to the extreme.

Not out of cowardice, but that a gentleman doesn't stand under a precarious wall.

Louis turned to Hillco and asked, "Are you sure it can penetrate that lower seal?"

"If even it doesn't work..." Hillco grinned, "Then I can only suggest the 'madness plan with dual bullet launch!"

Louis did not respond, just looked down at the map, formation, and wind direction indicators on the command table in front of him, then scanned the busy loading knights below.

They were an elite unit composed of specially trained Magic Explosion Bullet-using knights among the Red Tide Knights.

The entire team activated the seal-style loading procedure with extreme precision.

Because this is no ordinary weapon.

It is the ultimate achievement of Red Tide Territory's three-year secret production, a monster birthed from the collaboration of Red Tide Workshop and Mage Forest.

Red Tide's third-generation Magic Explosion Bullet, Magic Energy High Explosion Bullet.

The bullet was over four meters long, entirely in ink blue, with its structure intertwined spirally, both for pressure resistance and heat conduction.

Internally, it had a hollow double-chamber structure, with a core embedded with a "Condensed Energy Crystal Core" as its heart.

It was a black crystal, storing distilled and compressed Magical Beast Magic Crystal Liquid and Magic Energy Extraction Fluid.

Its activity was extremely high, constantly pulsating slightly, like a heart of some sleeping yet on the brink of awakening organism.

Moreover, the materials were not ordinary; they included ten rare Magical Beast Magic Crystals from the Northern Territory, with strictly controlled extraction ratios, overseen jointly by Red Tide Research Institute and Workshop.

More crucially, the "Demon Pattern Array Core" stabilizing the energy flow of the entire bullet could not be completed solely in the Red Tide.

It was Louis who personally wrote letters consulting three Grand Mages from Mage Forest, then reconstructed and adapted by the Red Tide Workshop.

The entire process was staggeringly costly, but what it brought was a Magic Explosion Bullet theoretically capable of precisely and stably releasing powerful shock waves and forming a dual effect of high-heat shock waves and Magic Energy oscillation layers at the blast point.

This means that: even if the target is a sealed area or a demonized structure, it can forcibly tear its surface defenses, exposing it to tactical sweep weapons.

Theoretically, it is sufficient to collapse a small mountain.

Thus, it required a dedicated launch device, special loading guard, and Hillco's on-site presence, to ensure infallibility.