

Winter 551

Chapter 551: Russell at Dawn Port

The outline of the breakwater has already emerged.

The guiding stone blocks are lined up, securing the port entryway like a line.

Gear transporters glide along the shore, steadily delivering the heavy wooden beams to their respective bases.

The rail crane swings back and forth on an overhead gantry, with thick ropes dropping to lift and place each granite block.

The chief craftsman manages the crew over there, while someone in the middle tests the locking mechanism of the crane boom.

Russell, as the technical director of Dawn Port, stands atop a hill, arms crossed, staring at the row of freshly driven piles.

He remains still until the pile driving stops, then nods slightly.

The workers on the shore see him and greet him, "Lord Russell!"

No one feels that this title is inappropriate.

Russell doesn't respond, just nods faintly.

Yet inside, a subtle feeling arises, this harbor, this dam, surprisingly brings a sense of involvement... even pride.

Russell was originally a port craftsman under the Calvin Family, and although counted as a chief craftsman, in the family system, a craftsman is ultimately just a craftsman.

But as a commoner, Russell was quite content, getting married, having children, and gradually earning his seniority.

He originally thought he would spend his life managing the embankments in the Southeast, and when older, send his son to Red Tide City to become a chief craftsman—such a life, though not glorious, would be successful.

Until one day, an order disrupted his plans.

The Calvin Family wanted to send someone to assist the 'Eighth Prince' in the Northern Territory to build a port, and by misfortune, he was chosen.

On the surface, it was said to be recognition, but he knew that such a task, in the family's eyes, was akin to exile.

Russell didn't sleep that night, bid farewell to his wife and children, and even arranged his affairs.

He thought it was a death sentence.

Let alone what he saw on the way north: permafrost, ruins, hunger-ridden people, and endless snowstorms.

Until he reached Red Tide City, did he realize the Northern Territory was not the barbaric land he had imagined.

That city... even more orderly and prosperous than many major cities in the Southeast.

For the first time, he began to think that perhaps things wouldn't necessarily turn for the worse.

But when he arrived at the site chosen for Dawn Port, setting foot in the muddy flats made his heart sink again.

He had worked on seven port projects in the South; stepping down he could assess how much stone would be needed to fill this area.

He knew which grounds could make a dam and which would collapse.

And this wasn't land at all, but muck that would swallow people.

"This mud could swallow an entire port." That was Russell's first impression of Dawn Port.

What worried him even more was the young Lord Louis, who looked too young to be true.

Russell had seen nobles meddle with engineering projects to disastrous effects.

Sometimes just a sentence like, "I think this dam line can be moved over there," could add half a year to a port's construction.

Judging from the site selection, Louis clearly knew nothing about port construction.

At that time, Russell stood by the muddy water every day, seemingly silent yet already planning an escape plan in case of failure in his heart.

After all, he didn't want to be buried in a noble's capricious project.

Just as Russell was determined to take one step at a time, Louis surprised him.

This young lord convened a small meeting with the management staff present, skipped unnecessary pleasantries, and went straight to the core of the issues, rejecting empty talk.

He broke the massive port construction goal into phased tasks, marking each step with timeline and responsible person, even listing risk contingency plans one by one.

The negative atmosphere hanging over them due to tidal flats, fish peril, and unstable morale quickly dissolved under this clear planning, replaced by a drawn-in collaborative momentum.

And in the ensuing days, Lord Louis never overstepped his authority.

Louis continued to visit the site every day but never interfered with construction details.

Whenever there were new suggestions, he only jotted them down in a notebook for Mike and Russell to decide if they were feasible.

"You are the real experts on this."

"If you say it can be done, then go ahead as per your plans."

Though Louis said this calmly, it carried an inherent sense of trust.

For the first time in front of a noble, Russell felt a strange kind of respect, not staged but treating the craftsmen as a true part of the team.

Next came a surprise for Russell—the Red Tide Craftsmen Corps deploying two new tools for port construction.

A device called the rail crane could glide smoothly along pre-laid tracks, using a winch to lift entire sections of beams.

The other was a gear transporter, utilizing steam power and chain mechanism, allowing two or three people to push several hundred pounds of stone forward without extra manpower.

The first time he saw the crane lift a heavy foundation stone and place it securely on its target line, Russell stood aside, almost doubting his own eyes.

He looked closely at the counterweight and pulley setup, confirming it was neither magic nor trickery but a solid product built out of components and calculations.

For Russell, who had been a craftsman all his life, this was a miracle without magic.

"It actually works," he whispered, feeling unable to express his assessment.

What surprised him even more was the origin of these tools.

Not from ancestral methods passed down by some master craftsman, nor private modifications by an old expert.

The craftsmen corps from Red Tide made it clear that the initial design sketches were drawn by Lord Louis.

Chapter 552: Russell at Dawn Port (Part 2)

"The rail hoist was personally tested by the Lord last year," Mike told Russell.

Mike is older than him, serving as the head of the craftsmen at the Red Tide Workshop. He has a loud voice, somewhat rough around the edges, but he consistently speaks with respect regarding the Lord.

"The cog chain of the transport vehicle was originally used in the grain sorting machine. It was devised by Lord Louis," he said.

At first, Russell regarded these things as mere boasts from Mike.

But the more he observed, the clearer it became, and he began proactively consulting Mike on operation methods, gradually accepting these Red Tide-style technologies.

Though what truly felt different to him was not the technology, but the system.

Every day, there were checklist reports at the construction site.

Who is responsible for tasks, where the progress is, whether the transfer is completed, whether errors are reported...

Lists were posted at the entrance of the workshop, visible to everyone.

"What's the use of this?" He once couldn't help but ask.

Mike pulled out several documents, showing him examples: "Lord Louis says, technology must be valued, but so should the system."

Yet Russell didn't put much stock in those so-called procedure lists or responsibility cards.

Having worked a lifetime, he knew what truly moved a project forward.

Not plans on paper, but onsite experience, feel, and shouting.

Russell even felt that this approach of reducing craftsmen's work into tables was somewhat pretentious.

"A construction site is not a school," he just thought back then.

But Russell wasn't in a position to stop Mike from applying this system to the port's construction.

At first, craftsmen from the Southeast Province couldn't adjust.

They complained about complicated paperwork, team leaders disliked fragmented tasks, and some resorted to their usual memory-based scheduling.

No major issues arose for several days.

Until an error occurred, a batch of foundation stones was delayed due to a scheduling conflict, forcing a segment of the wall to halt construction for a day.

Mike simply pulled out the list, adjusting schedules according to the timeline, marking related tasks for involved personnel, reforming the schedule and rework by the rules, and administering reasonable penalties.

From then on, no one underestimated those lists, and within two days, the procedure caught up, even ahead of plan by half a day.

Russell stood aside observing the list's effects become apparent, everyone's responsibilities clear, problems couldn't be shirked.

With clear handovers, no one threw blame, remedy was faster.

Moreover, every participant knew their work's true significance.

Not pushed to work, but actively seeing themselves as part of the entire project.

It was more stable, efficient, and less disputative than any site he'd seen before.

Russell had to admit, this stuff was quite effective.

That night, he sat alone in his room, flipping the day's procedure card for a long while.

Not only in work, Russell's life was far more decent than he imagined.

He now lived in a half-buried Red Tide domed house allocated by Dawn Port.

It looked inconspicuous from the outside, but inside it was dry, warm, and well-equipped, better than his brick house in the South by several folds.

Warm water for bathing at night, sometimes he could hear music and lines from the drama stage in the port area.

"Is there a performance arranged every day?" Russell couldn't resist muttering.

Initially, Russell paid no heed, but later during some idle nights, he stood outside listening to segments.

Afterwards, he simply squeezed into the crowd.

Most performances were tales of the Northern Territory, some newly written on how Red Tide Knights repelled Barbarian Race strikes, how Red Tide City's granary protected food during pest disasters.

Always circling around that young lord.

On stage, Lord Louis was the great Sun of the Northern Territory, combating enemies, guarding the North.

He sat within the crowd, watching the drama on stage, not knowing why, his heart tightened a bit, thinking, "Lord Louis is a different kind of Lord."

The pay didn't need to be mentioned.

The base salary was triple that of the South, settled monthly, with quarterly bonuses, special position allowances, and operational risk subsidies.

Most importantly, no one treated him like a servant.

Even Red Tide knights talked to him as "Lord Russell."

Having grown accustomed to years spent working with his head down, at first, he wasn't used to it, often turning back thinking someone else was being addressed.

Russell privately asked Mike, and several craftsmen from Red Tide side.

Mike, drinking, honestly said: "Over at Red Tide, things are better—detached houses, kids can go to school, work even includes subsidies..."

What shook Russell more was one evening when Louis called him forward:

"If you wish to stay in the Northern Territory, not only as chief craftsman of Dawn Port. I am thinking of offering you a position in Red Tide's craftsman department, as a deputy director, assisting Mike in managing a broader range of workshops, though I won't force you, take your time and consider."

That night, Russell returned to his room, sitting at the table, dazed for a long time.

Russell was not driven by wanting an official position or earning a few more Gold Coins, but he saw where he was genuinely needed.

Russell began to consider bringing his wife and two children to the Northern Territory, knowing the region was unstable, and Dawn Port was just establishing itself, needing to be observed more.

Yet he had begun seriously contemplating.

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The east side of the port district, cranes and stake trucks roared without pause.

On the other side at the Southwest inner bay, another quieter yet not relaxed area had quietly formed.

That was Dawn Port's shipbuilding workshop.

The tide was calm and gentle in the inner bay, terrain was high, less prone to flooding, within a hundred paces from the main port road.

At first planning, Louis designated this as the "ship slipway workshop base," for building the first batch of trial ships.

Now, two long tracks had been firmly embedded in the sand by craftsmen.

The tracks were grooved with oak, lubricated with beast oil, extending to the shallow water zone, and once the hulls were built, just pulling the anchor chain would let them slide into the sea with the slope.

The workshop itself was still being constructed, but the core area was divided into five workspaces, arranged in order for keel assembly, cabin enclosure, mast installation, and steam testing works.

The innermost vacant space was reserved as a material storage area, currently stacked with selected oak and pine timber, neatly piled, carrying the scent of seasoned wood and tar.

Oak was a key material for the keel, essential for shipbuilding, initially Louis thought transportation from the Southeast Province was the only option.

Yet that meant long-distance transport, cost doubling, and more troublesome, those timbers were nearly monopolized by the Calvin Family.

Even though Louis was Duke Calvin's son, controlling supply rhythm was difficult, easily hampered by others if there were any changes.

And this was precisely the situation he wished to avoid.

Yet just days before the Calvin trading team planned to head to Southeast for negotiations on timber matters, Louis learned through daily intelligence that the Northern Territory had quality natural oak.

Thus he dispatched a Special Envoy with grain from Mai Lang Territory, personally visiting that remote domain.

No bargaining was made, nor were long-term contracts mentioned, just offering a straightforward tempting condition: "Grain for oak."

Now the lord over there didn't even have time to hesitate, axes in the entire domain swung to smoking, and fully prepared oak logs arrived at Dawn Port.

In the Empire's coastal ports, the common ship types remained dual or triple-masted sailboats.

The structure consisted of a typical grease-coated wooden shell, reliant on wind to unfurl sails, plus a few skilled mariners to traverse the seas.

A few Southern nobility families attempted newer methods, installing Magic Energy Furnaces on ships.

Indeed faster, but too costly, most importantly, too unstable.

With slightly rough seas, fires would flare up from below the masts, sometimes even explode the ship's planks.

Teams that tried it wouldn't mention this thing again, preferring to spend double time navigating.

So when Louis proposed steam-powered ships without Magic, many craftsmen were indeed puzzled.

"Setting fire to water, making wheels turn?" This was the most frequently heard doubt in the port.

But Louis didn't bother explaining much.

He merely proposed three words: steam engine, gear transmission, paddle wheel propulsion.

This wasn't replicating a particular place's ship model, but his aspiration to develop a Red Tide-featured long-distance voyage ship prototype in the Northern Territory.

It might be cumbersome, perhaps immature, but unaided by Magic, wind could navigate through sea breezes and currents.

"I don't ask for immediate success," he told craftsmen, "but at least take the first step, this will be our ship."

Chapter 553: Dawn

On the shipyard at the southwest side of the harbor basin, the air was filled with a mixture of sawdust, tar, and steam.

Louis stood on the temporary trial water platform, his gaze fixed on the newly assembled experimental ship, Prototype No. 1.

It was the first small ship with a steam paddle wheel structure, completed by the Red Tide Craftsmen Corps and the shipbuilding team from the Southeast Province in three weeks.

The paddle wheels on both sides of the aft cabin were huge and heavy, connected to the steam engine by gears.

"Prepare to start," Mike said in a low voice.

The technician nodded, turned the valve, and the steam engine roared to life, spinning the paddle wheels abruptly.

Water splashed at the stern, but in the next moment, the Dawn violently shook, and the hull began to list to the left.

"The paddle wheel is off to the left!" a sailor shouted.

"Reduce the pressure quickly! The stern is shaking too much!"

The paddle wheels frantically churned the water, yet the speed was far less than anticipated.

Several sailors were dumbfounded, and someone even muttered, "It's not even as good as my old fishing boat at home... at least it doesn't spin in circles on its own."

Louis remained still, just watching the chaos of the water behind the ship.

Not far away, the old shipwright Bernard stood on the shore, frowning and murmured, "It pushes hard, but doesn't move fast..."

The deck began to emit the light creak of twisting boards.

"The lower deck is shaking!" someone shouted.

Louis finally spoke up, "Stop the engine."

The steam valve slowly closed, the paddle wheels gradually slowed down, and finally stopped with a creak at the midpoint, hanging in mid-air like a pair of wooden wheels that couldn't complete a dance.

Louis's gaze swept over the few cracks on the Dawn, "Suspend the steam propulsion, convert the Dawn to a pure sail configuration."

Mike urged softly, "My Lord, should we not try modifying it... maybe add a stabilization tank?"

Louis waved his hand, "I was too hasty, let's build traditional ships first and wait until the technology matures."

After the trial, Bernard and the shipwrights organized the site, while Mike and the Red Tide steam team were responsible for dismantling the damaged paddle wheel structure.

Louis stood on the shore, his gaze not showing much disappointment, as he had already anticipated it in his heart.

"The steam engine isn't enough, we still need to keep refining it," he said softly, "It's not the right time yet, but that kid will get it right sooner or later."

Louis asked Mike to sort out all the records of this experiment and send everything to the Red Tide Workshop for Hamilton to reference.

Meanwhile, over at the shipyard in the harbor basin, although the steam propulsion plan was temporarily shelved, this did not distance Louis from the shipbuilding workshop.

He simply switched to a more pragmatic approach, no longer obsessed with achieving a so-called revolutionary ship all at once.

He started giving suggestions from the basics, attempting a series of small but precise improvements on the traditional hull structure.

Of course, most of these suggestions came from his memories of knowledge from a previous life.

Louis never issued commands in a directive tone, often squatting by the blueprints, doodling in the corners with a pen, and then asking, "If we do it this way, would it save a bit of effort?"

The first change was to the sail system.

He suggested replacing the original three square sails with a combination of square sails and slant sails, and introduced a pulley system to reduce the resistance of raising the sails.

After testing, the efficiency of raising one main sail nearly doubled, an operation that originally required four people could now be easily done by two.

Mike nodded repeatedly as he watched, praising Lord Louis as a genius.

On the side, the old shipwright Bernard frowned and muttered, "Will this work?"

After all, the young lord was not a shipwright, and the failure of the steam ship further proved this point, as a shipwright with pride, he was somewhat annoyed by this behavior.

Bernard watched as Louis squatted by the side of the ship, drawing rope paths, then turned his head and asked, "If we replace the pulleys on the foresail with a double axle one, can we reduce climbing the mast once when furling the sail?"

He looked at the diagram for a while before understanding what Louis was saying, and replied, "In theory, yes, but it would increase the risk of slipping."

"Then let's try and see."

Bernard nodded in agreement, with a polite smile on his face, but was unconvinced inwardly.

He had seen nobles meddle with craftsmen's work, thinking they could improve hull structures after hearing a few shipbuilding principles, only to end up modifying a good ship to the point where it couldn't even catch the wind.

So he responded with experience, installing only one set according to the diagram, waiting for it to fail, so that this shipbuilding genius would naturally learn his lesson.

But the result was unexpected; the pulleys ran smoothly, the sails were hoisted and lowered effortlessly, and even the ropes didn't snag or slip.

The efficiency was as surprising as it was unbelievable.

"It actually works?" Bernard couldn't help but blurt out.

He turned back to examine those pulley slots, even more precise and smooth than his own designs.

That night, he secretly went back to the workshop and traced the diagram again, adding a few notes on the side.

The next day, Louis visited the workshop for inspection, glanced at the installed structure, and without any bragging, said softly, "This area might be further optimized... but you're the one who truly understands ships, what to change, you decide."

Bernard was silent for a moment, nodded slightly, "Understood, My Lord."

This time, he truly understood.

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Just as the tide receded from the southwest of the harbor basin, a dull "click" sound came from the rails over at the workshop.

Two thick oak tracks extended from the shipyard into the bay waters, their surfaces still crusted with salt frost from drying.

Bernard stood on one side, glanced toward the end of the rails, and said quietly, "The tide level is just right, and the embankment over there hasn't loosened, we can launch it."

Russell didn't respond, only turned his head to look at the center of the shipyard, where an unnamed ship was already set up and ready.

Louis named this ship Dawn.

It was the first ship officially put into use at Dawn Port, and the first ship body for dual combat and transportation born under the Red Tide Territory's construction system.

Chapter 554: Dawn_2

The hull was approximately seventeen meters long and five and a half meters wide, using local oak from the Northern Territory as the base.

The pulleys for the rigging were optimized personally by Louis, making it possible to raise the main sail quickly with just two skilled sailors.

The lower cabin was fully configured, with heavy items secured, living quarters towards the rear, and watertight doors fitted at both ends of the passageway, along with drainage channels.

A space for a steam engine was reserved at the stern, though not yet in use.

The protective elements weren't overlooked, with rail mounting points on both sides of the hull that could temporarily accommodate throwers or melee equipment.

The midsection was pre-installed with two Magic Explosion Bullet launchers, corresponding to sixteen spare bullets stored inside the cabin, fully sealed and shockproof.

The ship's bow was equipped with a detachable ram for damaging Fishman skiffs or intercepting vessels.

The crew used Red Tide Standard crossbows and spears, with dedicated hooks on the cabin walls for easy access.

Russell stood nearby, inspecting the seams between the bow and the keel, casting a glance at the ropes between the mast and the pulleys.

"Rail group, ready!"

Russell waved his hand backward, and several craftsmen activated the slipway steam winch.

"Clack! Clack! Clack!"

The heavy Dawn began to move slowly, sliding along the oak rail towards the dock.

A few short shouts of "Tighten!" came from the deck.

The shipworkers on both sides of the rail watched the docking points underneath closely, fearing any accidental sparks from friction.

But the sliding was smoother than expected; there was no tilt at the bow, and no major disturbance when the stern touched the water.

The waterline just covered the lower edge of the red paint mark, indicating that the center of gravity control was as expected.

Russell watched the hull float steadily, a weight lifted from his heart: "It works."

The craftsmen and sailors watching from the shore burst into cheers.

Louis stood on the wharf steps, his gaze calm.

Beside him, Eliot spoke quietly, "My Lord, everything went smoothly."

"At least it didn't sink," Louis replied softly. "Continue."

On the ship, the veteran shipworker Bernard had already taken over command.

He was accompanied by four seasoned crew members and two young technicians.

Today's test was not just about sailing but confirming that it was a combat-capable ship.

Bernard issued the order: "Raise the main sail by one segment, unfold one-third of the foresail, slowly turn the rudder, and perform a downwind test."

The helmsman quickly took position, and the rigging team engaged the pulleys. The new rail and counterweight systems smoothly raised both sails, the sails billowing out in the wind, and the entire hull began to slowly turn toward the outer side of the dock basin.

The hull traced several gentle arcs back and forth in the inner bay, control responded well, and directional correction was stable.

Several crew members began performing position-switching operations on deck, checking the efficiency of mobility between points.

On the other side, the knights alternated holding spears and crossbows, executing standard combat formation transitions in the limited deck space. Although they were only drilling, their movements were clean and orderly.

"The deck's proportion is reasonable, no collision when turning," Bernard reported. "The cabin's width hasn't been compressed too much, so switching positions is smooth."

The next was the long-range attack test.

"Prepare the Magic Explosion Bullets."

The target was a floating raft fifty meters away, gently bobbing with the water's surface.

"Ready, fire."

The first Explosive Bullet traced a low arc, landing slightly off but still exploding at the target edge.

A white mist erupted on the sea surface, the wooden frame at the center of the explosion shattered, sending a water column several meters high.

"A little off, adjust the angle again," Bernard said calmly.

The second shot hit the raft's center, and the shockwave of the explosion transmitted back through the water, but the Dawn showed no abnormal shaking.

On the shore, Louis squinted slightly, then said, "The shock wave didn't reach the cabin bottom; the shockproof layer is quite solid."

Eliot nodded, "It can now be applied in real combat as a long-range attack method."

The Dawn circled the dock basin three times.

Standing by the helm, Bernard seemed noticeably more relaxed than at first.

He adjusted the sails slightly, then followed the northern dock line for a small segment.

The wind wasn't strong but stable enough, surprisingly quick responses from the ship.

"We can go another round," he shouted loudly toward the shore, his foot subtly moving, the hull cutting into the next arc.

This additional test was his own suggestion.

It wasn't in the plan, but no one objected because everyone at the dock wanted to see it make another round.

After the fourth round, the sails were slowly furled.

The Dawn started its return, approaching the main dock through the original rail channel with no deviation.

"It's done," Bernard said softly.

The next second, a loud cheer erupted from the dock.

"Long live the Dawn!!"

"Long live the Lord!!"

Mike put down his pen, murmured softly, "Stable."

Bernard descended the gangway, walked to the shore, and performed a standard salute to Louis:
"Reporting, my Lord, the Dawn has successfully returned."

"Very good," Louis raised his hand, briefly issuing an order, "the Dawn is officially incorporated into the first batch of prototype ship models at Dawn Port.

Set up standard procedural files, including rigging configuration, material proportions, and assembly processes.

Based on today's trial records, all details are to be further optimized by the craftsman team."

Louis paused and ordered solemnly, "Within two months, I want to see six ships of the same type launched."

Mike and Bernard exchanged a glance and nodded in unison, "Understood."

Louis's gaze swept across the entire Dawn, finally resting on the polished Dawn Port emblem.

The first ship of Dawn Port, completing the entire process of design, construction, launch, and trial voyage for the first time.

Not perfect, but it succeeded.

He turned to Eliot, "The entire port is to halt work tonight, take a day off. Eat meat, drink wine, celebrate."

The dock fell silent for a moment, then a wave of cheers surged forth.

"Long live the Lord!!"

"There's a feast tonight!!"

A craftsman raised his hammer high, while a sailor jumped directly into the port basin, soaking himself, shouting, and laughing like a child.

Standing beside Louis, Mike muttered with a smile, "We should have the kitchen prepare in advance, otherwise not even a pot will be left by tonight."

That evening, the vacant lot on the west side of the port had rows of stove racks set up early, and a simple windbreak was erected by the sea.

The freshly caught sea fish were cleaned, strung together with smoked and dried meat chunks on iron skewers, emitting a tantalizing aroma.

Skilled cooks brought from Red Tide City oversaw ten young people flipping the cooking pots and pans.

Not far away, a makeshift barrel stand was set up, with drinks being poured into large wooden cups and passed around.

Louis did not stand at the forefront nor did he make a point of giving a speech.

He simply sat quietly on a high-backed chair aside, taking the wooden cup Eliot handed him, listening to the clinking of cups, the laughter, and banter around him.

This was genuine, belonging to the workers, a celebration.

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When Louis woke, it was not yet dawn.

He moved his arm, first feeling a warm touch, then sensing the soft and faint breathing against him.

Opening his eyes slightly, he saw a strand of white hair against his neck.

Sif's hair had grown longer, lying against her face as she slept, accentuating her Barbarian Race features in her profile.

She hadn't woken yet, her brows relaxed, her hand resting naturally on Louis's side.

Louis kept silent, only muttering softly, "Tsk, it's been almost half a month, and still no movement."

It was hard to discern whether his tone was one of disappointment or teasing.

The opportunity for Orsus's birth had been there, facilitating a plan for creation, but alas... nothing came of it.

Emily was stationed in Red Tide City, overseeing things and taking care of Orsus.

Sif accompanied him to the port this time, overseeing port operations, sea defenses, and part of the Fishermen's resettlement negotiations.

Louis carefully extricated himself, so as not to disturb the person in his arms, donned his outer robe, and walked to the window.

Outside, the sky was just lightening, with a faint sound of workers' footsteps and the movement of timber towards the port in the distance.

"Let's see what luck today brings."

He reached out his right hand, waving it in the air, as a translucent interface appeared, words quickly scrolling past his eyes.

[Daily Intelligence Update Completed]

Chapter 555: he Remaining Barbarians Prepare to Rebel

"Let's see how our luck is today."

Louis stretched out his right hand and waved it in the air, causing a translucent interface to appear. Words quickly danced before his eyes.

[Daily Intelligence Update Completed]

[1: Eighty miles north of Dawn Port, a large area of snowfield moss was discovered.]

[2: In the workshop district of Red Tide City, the steam-powered loom has entered small-scale production.]

[3: Remnants of the Barbarian Race in Border Guard Village are colluding with remnants of the Silver Plate Guild, hiding petroleum and magic explosion bullets, with plans for arson and explosion.]

Louis focused his gaze on the first piece of intelligence, his eyes brightening slightly.

This hardy plant can be dried and stored to make fodder for magical beasts.

The report also mentioned accompanying salt frost crystals, indicating it has a high energy conversion rate and could allow magical beasts to recover their strength quickly.

Currently, more and more magical beasts are being raised in Red Tide Territory; some are used to refine magic explosion bullets, some to pull heavy carts, and even some varieties can enhance the Knight's Fighting Energy and vitality.

If the moss can be supplied steadily, it would mean that these magical beasts can grow faster, serve longer, and reproduce more.

Louis muttered to himself: "I must have this in my hands."

Without further thought, he wrote a directive in the intelligence notebook: "List snowfield moss as a military resource. Collect, transplant, cultivate, and send samples back to the city for test planting and expansion."

For things like this, he naturally doesn't need to personally get involved.

The Red Tide Knight Order has squads specifically responsible for seeking and retrieving resources; all Louis needs to do is give the order.

Louis silently noted that this was good news; such intelligence on resources could directly be converted into strength.

[2: In the workshop district of Red Tide City, the steam-powered loom has entered small-scale production.]

Louis glanced over the second entry, showing no surprise; he had received a handwritten letter from Hamilton a few days earlier.

The letter reported: After improvements, the steam-powered loom could finally operate stably, and its output efficiency in single-person operation was more than six times that of traditional weaving.

The boy wouldn't exaggerate; Louis was very clear about this.

Hamilton would never embellish with empty words; writing down the number six meant that the machine's performance had been repeatedly verified.

It should have been worth returning to the city in person to confirm, but at the time, it was the crucial stage of shipbuilding in Dawn Port; he didn't get distracted and only sent back a brief letter directing the workshop to proceed with production according to trial standards.

Seeing this entry in the daily intelligence merely confirmed that everything had begun smoothly.

Louis internally noted that this represented the textile industry in Red Tide City truly crossing a threshold.

[3: Remnants of the Barbarian Race in Border Guard Village are colluding with remnants of the Silver Plate Guild, hiding petroleum and magic explosion bullets, with plans for arson and explosion.]

Louis stared at this piece of intelligence for a few seconds, his gaze calm, without surprise.

The line connected to the Silver Plate Guild had been severed by him last year.

After Anthony was captured, the entire Silver Plate Commerce Association's intelligence network in the Northern Territory was uprooted.

Those who needed to be killed were already killed, leaving only some stubborn remnants stirring up trouble in remote areas.

As for the Barbarian Race... Louis had long said that any spark of betrayal must be extinguished before it ignites.

Originally, he didn't intend to handle such small-scale uprisings personally.

As usual, the necessary executions were enough for a round of cleansing.

But Louis paused for a moment, still reaching for the map on the table's edge.

"Border Guard Village..." his gaze fell on an edge coordinate near Snow Ridge.

It was the village where the assimilated Barbarians were settled autonomously.

But autonomy was just an illusion; the Military Household System, collective management, and the constant presence of knights kept control tight enough.

Theoretically, nothing should happen unless someone stirs up trouble.

He said softly: "It's time to take a look."

Things at Dawn Port, like port construction and shipbuilding plans, were already on track; the trial sailing of the Dawn was successful, and the standardization of ship types began.

There was no longer much need for him to stay here.

And Border Guard Village... since its establishment, he hadn't visited once; it was an opportunity to see how well the indoctrination had gone.

The room was not yet fully lit, with only a sliver of gray-white morning light streaming through the window cracks.

Sif woke up amidst a slight wave of Fighting Energy.

She didn't open her eyes, just turned her head into the soft blanket by the pillow, with a familiar scent close at hand.

A moment later, she opened her eyes, half-asleep, looking at the figure not far away.

Louis sat on the thick carpet in the corner of the room, Fighting Energy faintly surrounding him like a layer of close-fitting and flowing light and shadow, pulsating gently with the rhythm of his breathing.

His hair was slightly damp, evidently having completed a round of training.

This was his routine morning practice, whether in Red Tide City or at Dawn Port, except during crises; he was always found cultivating before dawn.

Sif propped herself up, rubbing the corners of her eyes, her voice still somewhat hoarse: "Don't you ever feel tired doing this every day..."

Louis didn't open his eyes and only replied quietly: "As long as I'm awake, I train a bit."

Sif didn't respond, only staring at him for two seconds, then turned to lean against the headboard, tidying her disheveled hair.

When he finished and stood up, re-donning his cloak, she asked softly: "Are you heading to the port area today?"

"No." Louis fastened his cloak, glancing back at her, "I'm going to Border Guard Village."

Sif's movement paused, her gaze shifting slightly.

She knew what that place was; the border of Red Tide Territory, where the assimilated Barbarian Race had been incorporated into the military household and were under knight oversight, seemingly self-governing but controlled tightly in reality.

She had participated in the negotiations for surrender but had never truly been there.

"Is something urgent?"

"A knight has detected some disturbance." Louis spoke vaguely.

"You're going personally?"

Louis nodded: "It's a good opportunity to check it out. Everything at the port has entered the process; no need to linger here."

Chapter 556: The Remaining Barbarians Prepare for Rebellion (2)

He glanced at her, "Do you want to come along?"

Sif didn't answer immediately.

She lowered her head, pulled the blanket down a bit, revealing an old scar on the side of her neck, left during her escape.

However, the identity of being the Princess of the Cold Moon clan was no longer mentioned, even Visa had stopped bringing it up because she disliked it.

She had grown accustomed to others calling her "Lady Sif" or "Madam."

But it didn't mean she was entirely detached from that segment of history.

If they insisted on bringing hatred back into reality, then she must stand there herself and tell them: All the enemies are dead, don't become the next one.

Sif remained silent for a while, and Louis also didn't speak, merely waiting.

Eventually, Sif looked up at him with an unyielding expression, "I will go with you."

Louis nodded slightly, not saying much.

He understood that this matter was far more complex for Sif than it seemed on the surface.

But she agreed, and that was enough.

.....

Three months ago, outside West Ridge of Border Guard Village.

In Border Guard Village, a whole team of Red Tide Knights was dispatched to the northern section to support the construction of trade routes.

This news was unintentionally disclosed by a hasty-talking Red Tide merchant on the post road three days prior.

The person didn't know the specifics of the Gray Band caravan, assuming them to be fellow salt traders.

The next morning, Cohen ordered them to detour through the snow path, to take the southern exit, for they found a real window of opportunity to penetrate.

At this time in Border Guard Village, was a period of complacency among the people.

Some knights were deployed elsewhere, leaving only a few knights and local officials inside the village, and night patrols decreased from twice to once.

More importantly, no incidents had occurred, so no one was truly vigilant.

"Action." With just this word, they set off.

Three people, one cart, and an old ox.

The cart was covered with gray cloth, bearing the vague marks of the "Southern Territory United Free Merchants."

Cohen sat at the cart's end, one hand resting on a cloth bag, the other holding an old mission manual, wearing a solemn expression.

Recently, the entire line of the merchant guild in the Northern Territory seemed cut off.

Cohen didn't know what happened, no one informed them of any incidents, nor did anyone notify them whether they had been exposed.

They were just one group on the periphery, responsible for remote supplies, initial contact, propaganda, and have never been the center.

For this reason, they weren't swept up by the Red Tide Territory.

The two subordinates beside him knew nothing of these matters either.

Cohen had no plans to inform them.

All he knew was that the mission itself wasn't terminated yet.

"Stage Objective Three: Engage the retired Barbarian Race military household in Border Guard Village, implant identity deviation emotions, and prompt them to break away from the Red Tide order."

He had read this sentence more than ten times.

Cohen muttered to himself, "No one has signaled the end, which means it's not over."

The cart jostled a bit; the sacks of dry rations under the cart collided, emitting a muffled sound.

Inside were salted cakes, dry rations, old Barbarian totems, petroleum packets, and a small wooden box containing several Magic Explosion Bullets.

.....

Returning from night patrol, Sarik, as usual, hung his short crossbow behind the storeroom door, took off his belt, intending to stash away the day's ration bag into a corner.

He lived in a side room of the storeroom sentry, a small room shared by three people.

At this moment, the other two hadn't returned, and the room was unlit, only the ash of the stove glowed red in the stone-brick hearth.

He tossed the bag into the corner, casually picked up a kettle, but noticed from his peripheral vision that the bag seemed a bit different.

It wasn't the usual burlap sack from the military supply depot, nor did it have the Red Tide Standard seal.

It was a gray-line cloth bag, well-used, with frayed edges.

The stitching at the bag's mouth was somewhat loose, the sewing technique... it was the traditional tribal craft of winding three circles before locking the stitch.

The person who delivered this was a member of the caravan he met at the post station this morning, a tall, skinny man.

He didn't report it, nor did he feel obligated to do so.

Sarik sat by the window of the storeroom, breaking the dry cake into pieces, chewing slowly.

The next day, he intentionally took a detour through the small sentry path, wandering to the other side of the snow slope, pretending to be on patrol.

Under the gray cloth canopy, the man was still there, sitting by a wooden box, whittling dry fish, nodding slightly at him when he looked up.

"The weather has improved," the man spoke in the Barbarian language, his tone casual, like an old friend unseen for many years.

"Not bad," Sarik replied with just two words, not getting closer.

"Red Tide controls you quite strictly," the man smiled, "But... you don't seem like someone who wants to be leashed by them."

Sarik didn't respond.

Their contact became more regular.

Every three days, the caravan would bring a small bag of salted cakes or dry rations, along with some other supplies, and engage in small talk.

"You, having Barbarian bloodline, patrol for Red Tide?"

"They have you guarding the warehouse, but they don't trust you."

"You think you are a military household? They will just mold your children into another you."

"We can take you out."

Sarik didn't argue, nor did he agree.

Until one day, when Sarik detoured to the back of the storeroom, he saw that figure already crouched by the fence, holding a long package, seemingly waiting for a long time.

"The items tonight are not edible," the man said in a low voice.

Sarik didn't approach, standing three steps away, watching the man slowly place the long package on the snow, loosening the belt.

The layers of cloth unfolded, revealing the outline of a longsword.

The blade was broad and double-edged, with engravings in old Barbarian script, the hilt wrapped in animal sinew, and the end had a piece of dried bone feather hanging.

It was a standard longsword passed down through the tribe, issued only to the noble's eldest son upon coming of age or setting out for battle.

Sarik's pupils slightly contracted.

The runes on that sword, he recognized as the style used in his father's generation.

"This isn't something you'd see in the Red Tide," the man raised an eyebrow, fingers lightly tracing the sword's engravings, ".

Sarik remained silent, still staring at the sword.

"You think you're a military household? Just their servant." the man's tone turned colder, his voice lowering bit by bit, "When your father wielded this sword, they didn't dare step onto the snowfield. And now you guard their warehouse."

Sarik's fingertips slightly clenched.

The man noticed this and decisively plunged the sword into the snow, its tip embedding halfway into the ice, "Do you have the courage to pick it up? Or have you gotten used to days without a sword?"

This statement jabbed into Sarik's chest like a spike.

He stared at the sword for a few seconds, instinctively reaching out his hand, hovering it in mid-air.

"We are the remnants of the Frostblood, the embers still unfanned," the man enunciated slowly, "We want to restore the glory of the Barbarian Race. Not through words, but by reclaiming what's ours. Now, do you want to?"

Only the sound of the wind in the snowfield.

Sarik gazed at the longsword, his breathing became slow, something stirring little by little inside his chest.

He recalled the sight of his father leaving the tribe with his sword, remembered the sword's glow beside the ritual fire.

He finally took a step forward, gripping the sword hilt.

"I am willing," he said softly.

The man smiled but didn't say more, only nodded.

"Then let it begin with you. Find someone you trust, tell them we're still here."

Sarik's hand held tightly on the sword hilt, knuckles tightening, yet he didn't immediately pull it up.

He looked down at the familiar engraving, mind conjuring a belated doubt: "Do I truly hate the Red Tide?"

The answer was unclear.

He remembered when he shivered with cold and hunger, it was the Red Tide's grain convoy that entered the village.

Recalled the day his father's remains were missing, it was the Red Tide Knight who helped erect a stone.

Even now, he wore the cotton clothes they provided and ate their allocated rations.

There was no hatred, but certainly no sense of belonging either.

After all, the fate of being kept watch over for a lifetime was suffocating enough.

Sarik finally moved, wrapping the longsword back into the animal hide, clutching it to his chest.

He glanced once more in the direction of the storeroom, where the Red Tide flag was still flying.

In that moment, he knew he had stepped past that line.

Sarik didn't have to put much effort into gathering people around him.

The ones he reached out to were all well-known "problematic" individuals in Border Guard Village.

Some had refused to remove their hats during training and got beaten, some were detained for three days for privately holding tobacco, and another was recorded for violating orders twice by the interpreter officer for speaking the Barbarian language too frequently.

Sarik only said one thing: "We're planning something; if you don't want to be a guard dog forever, then come."

No one refused; they didn't hold gatherings, just said a few words leaning against the wall during shift changes.

Gradually, other villagers began to notice.

Who was getting close to whom, who frequently went to the broken warehouse to the west, who always took a detour during shift change...

It was not something that could be concealed.

But no one spoke, nobody interfered, nor did anyone report it upwards.

Chapter 557: Assault and Execution

The snow melted a bit in the morning, revealing several wagon tracks on the slope of the western section of the post road.

Cohen stood on high ground, squatted down, took out a map from his sleeve, and confirmed the route for the last time.

"According to the pattern, the supply wagons will pass through here. We'll burn the lead wagon, kill them all, and seize the grain."

Sarik said nothing, gathered with others by the side, moving barrels of petroleum, pressing roadside brush into makeshift barriers.

Among these people, only a few had initially followed Sarik.

Back then, there were less than five, secretly meeting at night, not daring to light a fire, speaking in the dark.

Later, more people joined gradually.

Some were sought out by Sarik, others heard the whispers and came of their own accord, staying on their own.

Cohen looked at these diligent people before him, feeling no sense of anticipation for completing the mission.

This was not a high-success-rate ambush; even if successful, it would only destroy a few grain wagons.

The Red Tide wouldn't lose their footing due to such a minor loss; they had many supply teams.

But Cohen wasn't really aiming to destroy anything; he just wanted people to feel that something happened here.

Not that the Red Tide was bombed, nor that the Barbarian Race won, but to let everyone know "the surrendered barbarians took action," "the Red Tide started killing barbarians."

As long as the news spread, the already scarce trust would break completely.

As long as the people in Border Guard Village began to guard against each other, the illusion of barbarian autonomy would be shattered.

That was their true objective.

Cohen put the map back into his cloak and took a couple of steps towards Sarik.

"Tomorrow, I'll guide the way. Your people should guard the corner; don't hesitate to set the fire."

Sarik looked up at him, didn't respond, but grasped the longsword strapped to his waist.

Cohen knew he understood, then turned to glance at these diligently preparing barbarians, who genuinely believed there was still barbarian glory.

But that was just a lie he made up. In fact, the Barbarian Race was already doomed the moment Tistu launched the war.

Cohen only knew he took on this mission, and the only thing left was to complete it; otherwise, he couldn't return to the Jade Federation to see his wife and children.

.....

The petroleum was spread evenly, all the way down from the corner slope.

"Ready." Sarik checked the fuse one last time.

More than a dozen barbarians nodded, hiding behind the snow, breathing as quietly as possible.

Not far away, the supply caravan of the Red Tide slowly entered the post road.

Three grain wagons, two leather-covered wagons, a dozen soldiers lined up on both sides, their armor ordinary in sheen, resembling a small, standby escort team.

Yet it made one's heart start to race.

Sarik wasn't sure if he should really act, but in the moment he hesitated, black smoke rose in the distance.

Without time to think, he heard his own order shouted: "Light the fire!"

The flames instantly erupted, engulfing the lead wagon, the roar sweeping back with snow debris.

"Charge!" Sarik drew his sword and led the charge, the sound of their footsteps accompanying the burning fuses of the petroleum.

The team pressed forward, clean and efficient, as if this plan had truly succeeded.

On the other side, standing on the slope outside the post road, using a pine tree as cover, Cohen was still holding the fuse that had not been fully released.

The sound of the petroleum explosion was still echoing in his ears, with thick smoke billowing from below, blurring his vision into a haze.

Cohen saw the first wagon was completely engulfed, its frame collapsing amid the fireworks.

Noises came from behind, someone shouting, and someone falling.

Those dozen barbarian households charged swiftly, their sword-drawing stance ruthless enough, their movements orderly, not like a ragtag group put together temporarily.

"Turns out they do have some backbone." Cohen murmured softly.

He had thought these people were tamed by the Red Tide, but didn't expect when action was needed, their response was even faster than imagined, they didn't fumble at the critical moment.

The scene looked like a proper rebellion.

It seemed as if the Barbarians had revolted, like the Red Tide had lost control, and they had struck at the lifeline of the supply line.

So this so-called Red Tide order was just like that.

Just a barrel of petroleum, a few swords, and some people who couldn't suppress their emotions were enough to make a crack on this line.

"These people are too confident, they didn't even set enough sentries. They forgot that those under their feet are not obedient citizens of the Empire."

This commotion was large enough; when the Red Tide people heard the news, would they think that the Border Guard Village collectively betrayed them?

Cohen slightly relaxed, put away the fuse, and prepared to retreat.

The route was all figured out, a detour along the snow path for three miles, then half a night to get back outside the tree line.

However, just as Cohen turned around, before he could take two steps, a short command exploded from behind the slope.

"Spread out."

Cohen immediately turned back and saw at first glance a flash of Fighting Energy, cold and dazzling.

The blue Fighting Energy sliced through the fire like a sword light.

The seemingly burning grain wagon's tarpaulin was suddenly lifted, revealing not frantic carters, but a line of neat Red Tide Knights.

They wore leather armor, but beneath the armor was a uniform blue aura, and each step they took left a shallow pit in the snow.

"Begin rounding them up, capture them alive as much as possible," the leader softly ordered.

The knights spread out, advancing simultaneously, the front row's short spears sweeping in arcs, directly knocking over a few charging barbarian households into the snow.

The rear row bent and lifted, the iron net-like barrier weighing down on another person, rolling him over completely, leaving no room to struggle.

Sarik froze in place, his hand shaking as it held the old longsword.

Earlier, he thought he could really seize the grain, only to now realize that the wagon was full of straw; the real cargo was none other than these knights.

Chapter 558: Assault and Execution (Part 2)

"Retreat!" Sarik shouted out only to be swept by a force of Fighting Energy at the side of his leg, making him kneel in the snow.

The cold climbed up through the wound, he couldn't feel the pain, just a numbness throughout his leg.

He looked up to see those Knights forming a semicircle, encircling him and his companions, blocking all paths of retreat.

The words "it's over" surfaced in Sarik's mind as he watched his companions being pushed into the snow one by one, like prey.

The last flicker of hope in his heart extinguished along with the blue Fighting Energy, leaving his heart like dead ashes.

It turns out they never had a chance.

Not far away, Cohen was also pushed to the snowbank by two Knights.

One spearhead knocked away the dagger in his hand, while the other directly shoulder-charged him in the chest, pinning him into the snow, flipping his arm and snapping his support.

Cohen suddenly realized they had been watched from the start, leading them step by step into a trap.

"You guys... had already..." his voice trembled, unable to finish.

The Knight did not answer, only cuffed his hands behind his back without any unnecessary motion, as if it was just a hunt.

The cold iron cuff clamped onto the bone of his wrist, and the intense chill crept up the chain; Cohen almost didn't notice he was shaking.

He wanted to struggle but found his strength seemingly stripped away.

His mind started to rewind.

Ever since they entered the vicinity of the Border Guard Village from day one, those Red Tide patrol squads were extraordinarily systematic.

Those seemingly casual village officials were actually prying with every word.

Originally thought to have avoided Knight monitoring, now thinking back, maybe they were led here deliberately.

A Knight tore a piece of cloth from his cloak, stuffing it in his mouth, uninterested in hearing any nonsense.

Louis stood on the slope, overlooking the wreckage on the post road.

The fire had long been extinguished, leaving only the smell of tar wafting in the night wind.

He looked at the few scorched wooden carts and the dozen or so Barbarian Race adherents suppressed in the snow, faces full of ash, some still draped in Military Household cloaks slanting over their shoulders.

Further away, those three so-called "trade caravans" were also dragged out. Hidden signals in collars, documents, and that Magic Explosion Bullet were all found without exception.

Louis murmured, "I thought it would be a big catch... It turns out it's just a few small shrimps."

Then he turned his head to look at those Barbarian Race rebels, their expressions a mix of anger, fear, and hopelessness.

Before the implementation of the autonomous village system within the Barbarian Race, Louis had not anticipated today would come.

Keeping a community enclosed within the village, distributing food, clothing, sending firewood and medicine, appointing Knights to maintain order, setting up patrols and lessons.

It indeed saved their lives.

During that winter, had it not been for Red Tide's allocation of granary, bringing these scattered Barbarians into the Border Guard Village, they'd have frozen to death on the snowfield, starved in the ruins.

Yet now it appears that mere survival was not enough.

Systems can suppress most people, but there will always be some trying to break free from the shackles, even if the attempt itself is futile.

Louis once asked himself, whether those adherent Barbarians truly accepted the Red Tide Territory's order or had merely resigned themselves.

Now, he had an answer in his heart.

On his way to the Border Guard Village, he once discussed this matter with Sif on the road.

Sif said, "The Barbarian Race desires iron, not kindness."

Her gaze was not at all gentle in the night, as if reminding him not to be naive.

And Louis responded with a relatively soft remark, "They obey us not because of fear, but because they are still alive."

Yet at this moment, he suddenly felt that perhaps he had himself been at Red Tide for too long, overestimating his charm, and the conscience of the Barbarian Race.

Throughout this year, he indeed, through the system, turned the Barbarian Race into seemingly controllable manpower.

They trained, served, patrolled within the Border Guard Village, even learning the language, customs, and service systems of the Empire and Red Tide.

Louis thought that by doing this, within ten years, they could be gradually integrated into the order.

Unexpectedly, trouble arose within a year.

He neglected one crucial issue: systems can suppress actions, but they cannot change hearts, at least not in the short term.

And human hearts always grow, deform in unforeseen crevices, eventually tearing apart the thinnest layer.

Louis sighed, his gaze swept across those faces kneeling on the ground, muttering to himself, "I was too naive."

Visa stood beside Sif, watching those Barbarian Race adherents captured on the post road, silent.

Her eyes reflected those kneeling figures and the already extinguished embers at their feet, with a wavering feeling inside.

Visa lowered her voice and asked, "Lady Sif... Our former enemies were indeed the Empire. But now Red Tide is different, letting them eat well, dress warmly, and survive, why do they still want to ignite?"

Sif didn't look at her, just scoffing, "Overfed and restless."

She spoke lightly, yet seemed to define the whole matter.

Visa did not respond; she understood this sentence but didn't entirely agree.

For a brief moment, she almost comprehended the impulse within those people.

It wasn't dissatisfaction with life but a deep-rooted obsession, which was the glory of the Barbarian Race.

She knew she had once had such moments.

But now she no longer wavered.

Visa fondled the Barbarian warrior's sword attached to her waist.

Yet the wind blew from the side, lifting a corner of her cloak, revealing the Red Tide Emblem worn on her chest.

She was no longer a Barbarian warrior.

She was Visa, the leftover of Cold Moon Tribe, also the shadow guard of Lady Red Tide.

If one must say which side she belonged to, it would be alongside Sif.

That girl who had once been with her in the wind and snow, now Lady Red Tide.

That was the reason she chose to stay.

Regardless of race, regardless of revenge, merely because she found a home beside Sif.

And under Louis's command, Visa lived a life she had never imagined.

She had her own house, a Red Tide-style Knight's dwelling truly built with stone bricks, whose roof wouldn't leak snow, with geothermal heating.

She had three meals, no longer relying on distributed food packs to gnaw on dried meat, but could sit down and eat hot soup and bread.

She was also addressed as Lady Visa.

Visa was grateful to Lord Louis.

A young man from the Imperial Nobility who was willing to offer someone like her trust, status, even the duty of protecting Sif.

Barbarian glory?

That thing shattered into pieces in that cell long ago, she no longer tangled with those past symbols and totems.

.....

On the hastily erected wooden platform, Sarik's feet were fixed with iron rings, a rough hemp rope already hung around his neck.

Standing beside him was the village chief, an elderly Barbarian elder, the proclamation paper trembling slightly in his hand from the wind.

The village chief's voice was hoarse and slow, with every sentence, like cutting a layer of his own skin.

"Red Tide Military Household System, Article Three. All adherent military households, rebels will be sentenced to extreme punishment."

Those few characters took him nearly half a minute to recite.

No one stood to defend Sarik and others, nor dared to.

Everyone knew the real judgment had long ended.

Beneath the platform, other dozen Barbarian convicts and three Silver Plate Guild spies were lined up.

Their wrists were forcibly tied behind with thick rope, shoulders forced forward, the noose around their necks hanging from the beam, pressing the skin pale.

They dared not move at all, as if a slight tremor would tighten the rope.

Some legs trembled, some had already collapsed, only to be dragged up by Knights.

The Silver Plate spy leader Cohen was still muttering something, tears streaming, yet no one paid him any mind.

Their expressions were no longer angry stares but hollow, numb, as if finally realizing that only death awaited them.

Four Red Tide Knights raised their long poles in hand, gently pushed forward, and the mechanism fell with a sound.

In an instant, beneath the coarse wooden plank was empty, bodies suspended.

No screams, no struggles.

Only the creaking of tightened hemp ropes echoed throughout the village square.

Sarik's shadow swayed on the ground, not moving at all after a few seconds.

Among the onlookers, other representatives of the Border Guard Village, external patrol Knights, and even some uninvolved Military Household members stood motionless in the snow.

These Barbarians had no anger in their eyes, only an indescribable sadness and fear.

Then Sarik and others' bodies were cut from the ropes, wrapped in burlap, transported one by one to the incineration pit outside the village.

Yet all who remained in the area dared not move because they knew it wasn't over; the implication decree hadn't been announced.

Red Tide law was clear: under the military household system, if anyone within the village participated in rebellion, the entire village bears the responsibility of supervision, with those who condone sharing the same guilt, and those who knowingly fail to report even more so.

Chapter 559: Punishment

The laws of the Red Tide clearly state that under the military household system, if a rebel appears in the village, the entire village is responsible for supervision.

Louis turned around and looked at the elderly village chief in front of the crowd: "Did you not know? Or are you unwilling to speak?"

The old man leaned on a cane, his face ashen, his lips trembling slightly in the wind.

His gaze flitted evasively past Louis, as if trying to find an escape route.

"I...I am just an old man. They usually don't tell me anything...I saw them leaving and they said they were going hunting...How could I have known they'd...do something like this..."

The Barbarian village chief explained urgently, his words were broken and his eyes were evasive.

"I truly didn't know, sir. If I had known, how could I not have stopped them? They...they were just talking, not serious. I thought it was nothing..."

The more the Barbarian village chief spoke, the lower he stood.

By the last few words, his throat seemed to get stuck, and he couldn't make any sound.

He was well aware he was lying; he knew everything, just pretending not to see.

Finally, he lowered his head, as if giving up.

"Understood." Louis's tone was calm.

There was no scolding, no extraneous words, just a nod to the executor beside him.

Within a few short steps, the noose was pulled up again.

When the aged body was hoisted into the air, everyone saw it clearly, but no one spoke, falling into a suffocating silence.

And Louis did not leave to end it all; he just raised a finger and gestured to the Red Tide knight beside him.

"Bring the others up." His tone was flat, without fluctuation.

Brought up were a few young Barbarian men, including the warehouse steward, the petroleum transporter, and a sentry on weekly shift.

They did not participate in the attack but coincidentally all had absences, switched shifts, or reallocated resources at crucial times.

"The interrogation begins."

Louis did not speak personally, but the knight recorder read from a script to ask questions.

"When did you register the heating oil barrel as damaged for disposal?"

The question was aimed at the warehouse manager, a Barbarian man in his thirties, who was sweating at the temples and stammered, "That...that barrel was indeed a bit damaged...I thought no one was using it, so I marked it..."

"But you didn't report the loss, nor follow the recycling procedure."

The man tried to argue, his voice laced with panic: "I...I didn't mean to, I didn't know they'd take it."

"So you knew they were going to act?"

"I...I heard something...but I didn't participate...I swear!"

Louis looked at him without saying a word.

The second person was the transporter, who just kept shaking his head: "I was only moving things! I didn't know it was petroleum!"

"Without an order, why would you do it? Did you check what was inside?"

"No..."

The third person was the sentry who was rotated off the post.

He was the youngest, glaring angrily at the questioning knight, not saying a word, clenching his teeth tightly.

"No words?" The knight glanced at him coldly.

He suddenly turned his head to look at the high platform and shouted, "You're slaughtering us! We were just..."

Before he could finish, a Red Tide knight stepped forward and struck the back of his head with a blunt instrument.

With a "thud," he fell to the ground, dragged straight to the gallows, with no chance to react.

The next steps were swift, the ropes had already been set up, with no unnecessary movements.

One by one, they were fitted with nooses, the entire process completed without a word.

Some tried to struggle, but the Red Tide knight standing on either side of the gallows pressed their shoulders like nails, preventing any movement.

"Execute." The recorder shouted the final command.

The sound of the stage mechanism falling was very light, but particularly clear in the surrounding silence.

Three shadows swayed slightly, then became still.

The wind stopped on the execution ground, yet the hanging ropes still swung gently.

No one cried out for justice for them; instead, many quietly looked at the figure standing in the wind by the execution stage.

Sif wore the Red Tide cloak, her white hair lifted by the cold wind like a taut line.

She just watched them, one by one, dragged up, nooses tightened around their throats, then the mechanism fell below their feet.

No expression on her face, she did not blink from beginning to end.

Even at the moment the bodies slowed and stopped swinging, she simply uttered lightly, "Too lenient for traitors."

The voice was not loud, but it made Visa standing beside her involuntarily clench his fist.

Yet, her heart was in turmoil; among those people, there were even familiar faces.

The sentry who had been knocked unconscious had once sat with her around a campfire in the snow, eating dried meat; he was also a warrior of the Cold Moon Tribe.

Now his body hung on a wooden frame, at his feet only the trampled execution platform.

And not far in front of them, dozens of representatives brought from other Border Guard Villages were also Barbarians who had submitted.

All stood in neat rows, heads bowed in silence.

They wore leather jackets distributed by the Red Tide, new winter boots on their feet, nameplates on their chests, engraved with numbers and names, representing their status as Red Tide People, not Barbarians.

Occasionally, someone would look up at the swaying body, then quickly lower their head again, their expression pale.

They knew that those hanging today were not just a few lawbreakers.

It was the mark they couldn't cross, the line many had secretly approached but never dared to breach.

Now that line had been dyed red, and no one dared test it again.

The handling was not over yet.

The laws of the Red Tide always had clear distinctions, and even those who remained silent would have to pay the price.

Chapter 560: Discipline (Part 2)

Those who were aware but did not report, even though they were not directly involved, were brought out for questioning one by one.

Some had simply walked too often near the granary, some were responsible for night watch but turned a blind eye, and some had once shared a drink with Sarik but said nothing.

Their fates varied, depending on their duties and relevance, some were whipped and then expelled from the Red Tide, forbidden to set foot across the border again.

Some were allowed to stay, but the cost was the wounds on their backs.

There were those who confessed on their knees before punishment, barely earning forgiveness.

Only one person at the last moment reported to the Knights about Sarik's abnormal contacts with the convoy. Under everyone's watchful eyes, he was named and commended, yet he always kept his head down, not daring to meet anyone's eyes.

As for the entire village... they were no longer allowed to remain.

The order from the Red Tide was simple, the No. 12 Border Guard Village was officially disbanded.

The remaining sixty or so people were organized in the cold wind and sent to other villages to re-establish their household registration.

No cries, no protests.

Those leaving kept their heads down, dragging simple luggage, following the transport teams, one after another.

The last corpse from the execution ground hadn't been dragged away, the smell of tar and blood lingered in the air. Louis stepped up onto the platform, standing in the cold wind.

Without a lengthy introduction or emotional induction, he merely looked down and surveyed those below the stage.

The village chiefs and representatives of the six Border Guard Villages were all gathered here, almost everyone had their heads bowed, not daring to meet Louis's gaze.

"This rebellion was secretly incited by the remnants of the Silver Plate Guild, a few made erroneous judgments, leading to this point."

Louis's voice was calm to the point of indifference, as though he was reading a meeting record. He didn't evoke emotions or perform rage.

"They are not your representatives, nor are they representatives of the Red Tide people. Most of you adhered to order and fulfilled your duties, which is the reason we can stand here this winter."

He paused, his gaze sweeping over the faces with lowered heads: "I won't give loyal people and foolish people the same reward."

Then he gently waved his hand, three Knights stepped forward, unfolded a parchment scroll, and loudly read out the orders:

"The supply grant for the six villages is as follows: Each village receives five blankets, seventy sets of winter clothing; rations will be distributed immediately in January.

Thirty young people are permitted to participate in the Dawn Port construction, preferentially hired based on the Red Tide household registration, with lodging subsidies and additional rewards.

Unapproved marriage applications will be selectively approved."

Upon hearing this, some quietly lifted their heads, faces displaying restrained surprise and a hint of disbelief.

They originally thought they came today to be reprimanded, even prepared to accept punishment.

But unexpectedly, the Red Tide Lord not only didn't move against them but instead brought rewards.

Yet the more it was so, the tighter their hearts grew.

Louis saw this clearly but did not intend to explain anything further, he just continued: "From now on, the Red Tide will no longer distinguish between Barbarian, Imperial People, or Foreigners.

Only between the trustworthy, and those foolishly thinking they can rebel."

Below there was no sound, except for the wind sweeping across the execution ground's still damp noose, making a slight "creaking" sound.

Then Louis announced the new policy: "The military household system will not be abolished, but some clauses will be revised by me personally, to be formally promulgated later.

Initial changes as follows: The number of Inspector Knights will be doubled, inspections monthly, no refusal allowed. No unauthorized personnel or goods transfers between Border Guard Villages.

Each village's registration will be re-verified, and military household clan registers re-compiled. Missing, outgoing, or employed individuals must declare their identity, those overdue not returned will be deemed as deserting and escaping registration."

Below, the representatives' expressions were heavy, some couldn't help swallowing hard.

Louis surveyed them once, finally leaving with one last sentence: "You are not livestock, I will not drive you with a whip.

But neither are you children, I will no longer tolerate mistakes. Red Tide has given you a way to live, it's not to be wasted."

He turned and left the platform, some sighed in relief, while others grew more tense.

That lord did not get angry, but decided a cooler, more comprehensive restructuring.

And from today, all villages will be recorded, observed, redefined.

Some representatives wanted to come forward, express a bit of loyalty, but found no one willing to be the first.

Louis didn't wait for them to regain composure, but went toward the distant waiting Knights' ranks.

The execution ground was already cleared, blood water crusted into mottled dark traces on the permafrost.

Louis put away the notebook with key points of the judgment, handed it to an attendant beside him.

He glanced at the silent standing Barbarian representatives not far away, then looked at Sif beside him.

"Let's go." He said, "It's time to withdraw."

"Mm." She nodded.

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The night grew late.

The warmth of the fireplace had yet to dissipate, candle flames flickering faintly.

Illuminating the rumpled bedding inside the room and the two figures huddled closely together.

Sif faced away from Louis, hair draped over her shoulders, half her face hidden in shadow.

Louis leaned against the bed, finally spoke: "Today you... spoke very little."

Sif didn't respond immediately, after a moment turned to him, her gaze unlike the near-hearted hardness seen at the execution site during the daylight: "I didn't feel as good as I imagined."

"I thought seeing them being hung one by one, would feel satisfying." Sif curled her lip, as if trying to smile, or merely a muscle twitch.

"Although I've stopped caring, why do I still feel heartache?"

They shouted about Barbarian dignity, loudly... I can understand that. I shouted too when I was young."

Sif lowered her head: "You gave them houses, provided clothes, even supplied grain, they won't freeze or starve to death."

She paused, her voice as light as snow falling: "You gave so much, yet they still betrayed you.

To think that without you, they would've all died in last year's snowstorm.

How dare they..."

But Sif understood, even speaking harshly, her heart still left some space for those people.

She wasn't free of hate for them, but neither wanted to see them hung on wooden platforms one by one.

Wanted to fight for them but didn't know what more to say to Louis, who had done his best, his name was too merciful.

She was no longer the Princess of Cold Moon Tribe, merely Louis's wife.

Louis sat beside her, never interrupted, just gently held her hand.

"You feel heartache because you are more awake than them."

Louis spoke in an even tone, without any bragging or preaching, just stating.

"The system in the Border Guard Villages indeed has issues." He bowed his head, his tone paused, "I originally thought keeping people together and sustaining them for a few years could teach a generation to obey... perhaps, I was too hasty."

He turned to Sif, looked into her eyes: "Next, I will make some adjustments.

Let them see an upward path. Loyal individuals will have advancement channels, the talented youths can be sent to Red Tide City for training.

The families willing to comply will not just be guarded, but can participate in governance not because of grace, but to let them know, defiance will be stifled, compliance... at least there's a way out."

Sif looked at him, her gaze much calmer.

"From now on, these Border Guard Villages," he slowly said, "will be managed by you. Not as the daughter of the Barbarian Race, but as the master of Red Tide.

This snowfield, will eventually become our land."

The room was silent for a few seconds.

Sif nodded, lowered her voice: "I will strive to help you."

Louis smiled slightly, didn't speak lofty words, just lightly kissed her forehead: "Then I thank you in advance."

Sif's ear tips turned a little red, she originally wanted to turn away from him but no sooner moved she was pulled back.

"You..." She bit her lip, didn't lift her head.

"Should we try again?" He murmured, "I remember you said, for Red Tide... one can strive a little harder."

Sif bit her lip, pushed him lightly, but without force.

Then the firelight grew a little warmer, the bed got a little messier.