

Winter 561

Chapter 561: Tolan's Choice

The snowfall gradually slows down, but the border remains oppressive.

At the gates of seventy-three Border Guard Villages, similar teams appear almost simultaneously.

Members of the Knight Order clad in long cloaks with the Red Tide emblem, followed by officials carrying document boxes.

"Everyone must attend."

The voice is not loud, but no one dares resist.

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In front of the abandoned totem stone at the village entrance, the interpreter unfurls a sheepskin scroll and reads aloud.

"Administrative Decree No. 765 of Red Tide Territory: 'Barbarian Autonomy Trial Clauses-Initial Revision,' effective immediately."

He reads each clause aloud: "First, military household status confirmation, assimilated under the unified registration number of the Barbarian Race, signing military household pledges, abolishment of hereditary system, replaced with functional system, annual assessment, three-year merit evaluation, promotion, or demotion based on performance.

Second, promotion system openness, anyone with military achievements, scholarly qualifications, or artistic talents can participate in the selection examinations for Red Tide officials, without limitation on background, not divided by clan.

Third, autonomy council trials, each village establishes an autonomous council group, can dispatch members to attend Red Tide border military and political meetings, raise inquiries and complaints.

Fourth, in Red Tide, establish mixed teaching camps, taught jointly by Red Tide Knights and veteran Barbarian Army, select youths to enter Red Tide military school for trials, those who excel can be classified into guards, engineering, command directions..."

The official reads quickly, seemingly not allowing villagers to slowly react.

Yet after he finishes, he pauses for a moment, changes his tone, and slowly adds a segment: "The Lord said, Red Tide does not differentiate backgrounds, only recognizes loyalty.

Punishment is for traitors, rewards for law-abiders.

You are no longer exiled barbarians, you are the shield of Red Tide, the protectors of this snowy land."

After the reading ends, the knights leave behind a wooden plaque with seven clauses written on it, erected at the village entrance: "Villages must have literate individuals explain the details of the clauses, within three days all villagers must comprehend."

The literate Barbarian adult is the village chief, formerly a tribal noble.

He accepts the duplicate, sweat seeping from his forehead, with three knights still behind him, he knows how he should explain.

"What's written here...is a good thing." He surveys the villagers' faces, "As long as we work honestly, life will become more stable."

"Remember, we aren't meant to be forever military households, those who perform well can be promoted. In the future, if a child from the village gets picked for military school, it's a matter of bringing honor to the ancestors."

"Hooray! Hooray!" The crowd applauds.

Most people actually couldn't quite understand, only catching onto a few key terms.

"The murderer was hanged."

"We aren't implicated."

"The Lord even handed out winter clothes."

By the fire pit, a burly man mutters softly: "As long as they don't drag the whole village to be buried together...that's good."

Another pats his shoulder: "Better to behave, Imperial People...aren't unreasonable."

They don't like these clauses, even feeling they're all nonsense.

But compared to the previous fear of the whole village losing their heads, they now find it bearable.

The women gather around the fire, draped in sheepskin jackets given by Red Tide, with their fingers showing the cracks left by washing clothes.

They react faster than the men, perhaps it's not a bad thing.

"Can we really get food?" An oldest grandmother squints and asks.

"Heard from the village chief, dry rations, winter clothes, and something about registration..." Someone beside nods.

"You say, if my boy could go to the barracks, does he never have to return to this village?"

No one answers, but someone quietly replies: "Able not to be a barbarian, who would still want to be a barbarian."

"Having food to eat, clothes to wear, a job can trade for salt and grain, isn't it better than before?"

They have no sense of clan honor and don't consider if those hanged deserved it.

For them, as long as they don't starve and the children have somewhere to go, it's better than anything else.

"Village chief says, obedient children can become officials in the future, similar to the old tribal chieftains."

"Really?" Someone's eyes light up.

"I can't manage anything else, but if my child can go, I'll send him first."

Few literate barbarians, but there are always some in each village.

They copy the content, return to their own homes, livestock pens, or small spaces behind kitchens, reading bit by bit, conferring with companions from old tribal backgrounds.

The conversation belongs not to villagers, but to the old Barbarian Race nobles.

Literate barbarians were mostly once tribal nobility, speaking in alliances, sharing blood and meat at feasts, leading entry into imperial estates post-siege battles.

Now their offspring must enlist, wives must queue for food, and they themselves must live under the gaze of Red Tide people.

Identity is grounded, voices lowered.

Their attitudes toward the 'Barbarian Autonomy Trial Clauses' vary.

Someone says: "This is captivity."

Another grits his teeth and says: "At least it's better than freezing to death in the snow."

More remain silent, fingers rubbed against the edge of copy pages, eyes linger in one spot for long.

It's not that they don't understand, it's that they understand too well.

These clauses aren't written harshly, even hinting at opportunity.

Service can earn military merit, military merit can change identity, children can be sent to Red Tide military school, arguably a way out.

But they know well, the Barbarian Race system based on bloodline is truly to be buried deep in the snow by these few Red Tide words written on the wooden plaque.

They are not fools, just transitioning from tribal rulers to Red Tide villagers, some accepted quickly, some still stuck in between.

Thus reactions vary, some see the paper as humiliation, feeling it's an iron plaque of taming, nailed on their forehead.

Chapter 562: Tolan's Choice (2)

Some people saw it as a lifeline, even if it was covered with nails, it was better than sinking back to the seabed.

Others, after a long silence, stood up, walked out, and headed toward the village chief's house.

They wanted to ask if their son's name could be added to the list of those going to Red Tide City.

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Tolan Coldtooth stood in front of the newly erected wooden sign of the "Supplementary Notice of the Barbarian Autonomous Regulations," draped in an old sheepskin robe, his hands behind his back.

At thirty-seven years old, he was the son of Elder Tormond of the former Coldtooth Tribe. He was literate from a young age, understanding both the Barbarian and Imperial languages.

When Border Guard Village was established, he led the surviving tribe members to voluntarily submit to the Red Tide. Today, he is also the village chief of this Border Guard Village.

He no longer wore the long braids of his tribe, instead he sported the short hair style of the Red Tide.

His beard was neatly trimmed, and though his robe had patches, it was not dirty.

Tolan stared at a line of text on the wooden sign.

"Adolescents recommended by the village chief can go to Red Tide to receive training."

He read slowly, scanning each word, then repeated it again.

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The fire hadn't completely gone out, but occasionally there was a dull pop from the hearth.

Tolan sat by the fire, holding tongs to add fuel, but his eyes drifted to the wall.

Hanging on the wall was a piece of faded cloth.

That was the flag Tolan had brought out from the tribe.

When Titus began his southern sweep of the tribes, Tolan's father, who was one of the tribe's elders at the time, only said two sentences to him: "Take the people southward. Keep the tribe alive."

That night, fire consumed the entire valley.

Tolan carried the flag on his back, leading fewer than fifty tribe members overnight across the mountains, retreating south along the frozen river.

Along the way, a few froze to death, a few fell behind, but the flag was always strapped to his back, never loosened.

Later, when they were almost at the end of their strength, Red Tide Knights discovered them while patrolling the border. After verifying their identities, they registered them as a submitting tribe, settling them in the newly established Border Guard Village to the north.

He didn't give that flag to the Red Tide, nor did he mention it to outsiders, it was just a simple memory.

Now he guards the village, farms, and hunts, sustaining life with the monthly rations and tools distributed by the Red Tide.

Life was neither glamorous nor free, but the house no longer leaked wind, and there was always something simmering in the pot.

Compared to those who died in the valley, whose bones are buried under the snow, this was already good enough.

Tolan understood very well who all this depended on.

The Red Tide did not give his tribe glory, but it gave his family everything they needed to survive.

Still, sometimes, in the dead of night, he would take out that old flag from the corner and hang it on the wall for a little while.

The fireplace crackled a few times.

Tolan shifted his gaze from the flag, turned, and called toward a corner of the room: "Kosa, come here."

The young boy in the corner lifted his head.

Thirteen years old, slender and tall, his frame not fully grown, but his body already showing some lines.

His Fighting Energy had long been awakened, reaching the level of an elite warrior.

Kosa was practicing writing, practicing the language of the Empire, reading aloud from the book "Our Great Lord Louis," as every household in Border Guard Village now had a copy of this book.

He put down his pen and walked toward his father.

Tolan gave him a glance and then laid out three items: a set of winter clothes, a bag of rations, and a parchment—a pre-written military registration form.

The three items were neatly placed on the table.

"This is your opportunity," Tolan said calmly.

Kosa didn't take them, he just lowered his head and looked at the paper, his lips pressed tightly, his voice very soft: "How long do I have to go?"

"It's best not to come back." Tolan paused and continued in the same tone: "Live by their rules."

Kosa's fingers twitched, but he still didn't reach out.

He stared at the registration form, then asked softly: "Can I still call myself a Coldtooth person?"

Tolan looked at him, his eyes unwavering, but his brows furrowed slightly: "That thing is worthless now."

Anger flickered in the boy's eyes: "But I'm a bloodline of the snow, a descendant of the north wind, a..."

Tolan interrupted him: "Will that bloodline keep you alive?"

For a moment, only the sound of the hearth filled the room.

Kosa lowered his head, his fingers fiddling with the hem of his clothing, unable to utter a rebuttal.

He wasn't foolish; he knew his father was right.

But that something pressing against his chest, like frozen snow, couldn't melt away.

Tolan folded the registration paper neatly, tucked it into the inside of his jacket, and patted his shoulder.

"Remember, don't show off, don't compete with others. If you live well, just keep living; if not..." He paused, "just eat more."

The woman at the door remained silent.

She was one of the orphans of the Coldtooth Tribe, Tolan's wife, Kosa's mother.

She stuffed a piece of dried meat into the child's bag, tightened his scarf, and smoothed his hair, but said nothing.

Kosa hugged his father and then his mother.

He didn't cry, but his eyes were a bit red.

The next morning, the snow hadn't melted, and the sky wasn't fully lit.

At the entrance of Border Guard Village, a Red Tide Army flag flapped in the wind.

Beside the flag stood three Red Tide Knights, cloaked and carrying regulation longswords at their sides, one of whom was checking the list in his hand.

Tolan led the way, cloaked in an old cape. He brought six youths, each standing beneath the stone pillar at the village entrance.

These youths ranged from eleven to sixteen or seventeen years old. Some were still yawning, some had clenched fists, and some looked bewildered, sneaking glances at their parents.

They knew they were leaving today, but no one knew what life would be like afterward.

Tolan didn't say much, just stood beside the line with his hands in his cape, his gaze sweeping across the faces of those youths.

His son, Kosa, stood second, his back straight, hands clasped in front of him.

The knight began to recite the regulations:

"The village presents a total of seven people to enter the initial training in Red Tide City's military academy. During this period, they are not allowed to leave the team without permission.

Those who perform well may be recommended for advanced camps or positions, violators will be dealt with according to military laws."

As soon as the words fell, Tolan stepped forward to distribute simple packs, rations, thermal cloaks, and identity copper plates to each youth.

The copper plates bore the Sun emblem of the Red Tide, without any tribe name or surname.

One knight walked to the front of the line, scanned it, and said, "If anyone wishes to withdraw, now is the time to speak."

No one moved.

All the youths kept their heads down, some's hands were trembling, some were gritting their teeth, but no one wanted to withdraw in front of everyone.

Tolan stood there, quietly watching.

Only when each of them carried their bags and stepped out of the village entrance did he let out a quiet sigh.

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The sound of hooves in the snow dissipated in the morning.

The flag of Border Guard Village was now far behind them, but Louis did not turn toward Dawn Port.

He had temporarily changed his plans, leading his team back west to Red Tide City.

This was the third time in almost five months that he had stepped into the Red Tide Main City.

The previous two times were just short stops to handle urgent matters and briefly see his wife and children. This time was the same; time was short, but he had to return.

He returned to Red Tide City late at night.

The bedroom door was gently pushed open, and when Louis entered, covered in dust from travel, his steps were light.

He carried the fatigue of long-distance travel, his boots not dried, leaving wet marks on the wooden floor.

Emily leaned against the bed, holding a sleeping infant in her arms.

The child, now over six months old, had a round, smooth face, soft hair, and his nose had begun to show some contour. While he slept, he occasionally smacked his lips, as if dreaming.

Emily was not asleep; she just rested with her eyes closed.

When Louis stood for a moment, she opened her eyes and smiled: "You're back."

Louis nodded and hesitantly stepped forward, squatting down to gently stroke the child's hair.

"I should come back more often," he said, "but I'm always... caught up."

Emily didn't answer, only reached to unbuckle the cape from his shoulders and hung it to the side.

Just as he settled beside her, she gently moved the child to the small bed and pulled a blanket over his legs.

"I know it's not on purpose," she spoke calmly, "just... sometimes, don't forget you're a father."

Louis lowered his head, holding her hand: "I know, I'm just too tired, sometimes I'm not even sure if I'm doing the right thing."

Emily didn't console him, nor did she ask more; she only tightened her grip on his cold hand: "The child is good, waiting for you."

He laughed softly, leaning against her shoulder, closing his eyes: "Then tonight, I'll tell him a story, the story of the great Lord Louis thwarting the traitors' conspiracy."

Chapter 563: The Lighthouse of Civilization

In the early morning of Red Tide City, the Main Castle had not yet fully awoken, but lights were already lit in the City Lord's study.

Bradley stood in front of the desk, waiting for the Lord whom he hadn't seen for a long time.

Louis walked into the study and nodded slightly when he saw Bradley, "You're up even earlier than me."

Bradley smiled and saluted, "That's what I should do, my Lord."

"Hmm." Louis sat down and asked, "How has the situation in Red Tide been in my absence?"

Bradley opened his notebook and began to report:

"Overall, there has been no major upheaval, all departments are operating as usual. The City Defense Department has completed the registration and troop deployment for the four-ring residential area in Red Tide, and the new residents have moved in smoothly.

The main city's sewage discharge system has been fully revamped, and a new diversion setup is now in use, running smoothly.

As for road construction, the main road to Mai Lang Territory is fully connected, capable of transporting large grain carts.

The mountain road towards Star Forge has been completed one-third, its progress slightly delayed due to complex terrain. The road to Dawn Port has completed its initial phase of hardening, and the work team is pushing forward."

Louis listened while flipping through the documents handed over by Bradley.

The papers were neatly written, packed densely with content, and included several reports and personnel allocation lists.

He skimmed over the key points, mostly nodding his head.

Occasionally, he raised questions, and Bradley could respond with precise figures without flipping through pages.

"The Cultural and Educational Department's literacy plan has been advanced to thirty-seven blocks. The evening street courses have been well received, especially in the workshop areas.

The first phase of the affairs assessment hosted by the Internal Affairs Department is completed, recording forty-two qualified officials, who have been assigned to various administrative nodes."

"In terms of security..." Bradley turned to the next page, "there have been no major incidents in the past two months, and incidents of theft and street brawls are on a downward trend."

The report was far from over.

From the Knight Order's training progress to the city's potion reserves, to the recent grain warehouse inventory...

Bradley proceeded smoothly, item by item, able to recount the general situation without needing to flip pages.

Louis continued listening, occasionally furrowing his brows then relaxing, overall things in Red Tide Territory were still moving in a positive direction.

"There is one more thing." Bradley took out a brief report stamped with a red seal and handed it over.

"Over at Hamilton's side, the loom has been finalized and entered small-batch production. It is named Loom Type One, powered by steam, with efficiency six to seven times higher than manual work."

"Eight units from the trial production have been assembled. The western area of the workshop has been cleared to serve as the site for the first weaving factory. A draft recruitment list is prepared for the initial round of skilled worker recruitment."

Louis took the paper, saying with some affirmation, "Looks like he didn't disappoint me."

Bradley smiled, "He also said that the time and trust you gave him is his way of repaying."

"Good." Louis placed the paper on the table, "Let's not announce this yet, I'll go back when the factory opens."

"Understood." Bradley paused, then continued, "Moreover, coordination between various departments is steadily stabilizing, tax collection at city gates and workshop supplies are clearly documented, no signs of disorder."

"Overall steady, new policies advancing smoothly." The old steward's tone was calm, but with a sense of pride on his face.

Louis gently closed the file on loom production, pushed it aside, and leaned back in his chair.

"Bradley, I have a question." His tone suddenly softened, "I'd like to hear your thoughts."

The old steward immediately straightened up: "Please speak, my Lord."

"About Border Guard Village, you are aware, even with the smooth operation of new laws, it ultimately only suppresses the surface.

The cost of reforming adult Barbarian Race is too high... then start with the next generation."

Louis's words carried a thought not belonging to this era:

"I want to bring those loyal Barbarian Race youths to Red Tide, not just to train their hands, but to teach them to become civilized people."

"If the children of the Barbarian Race learn, they will teach the next generation, and the generation after that, until they no longer see themselves as the Barbarian Race."

Bradley was silent for a few seconds, furrowing his brow slightly, his tone gentle yet hesitant:

"You mean to cultivate them into habitually listening to Red Tide? To fundamentally change their wild nature?"

Louis shook his head, neither confirming nor denying: "Bradley, this is not about taming them.

I want to try to see if a set of systems, an educational method can completely reshape the future of a tribe.

If successful, not just the Barbarian Race, I can use this method to educate elite young people in other parts of the Northern Territory, the entire Empire, even other countries."

"I want to make Red Tide a lighthouse of civilization."

After saying this, the study room fell into a brief silence.

Bradley's expression changed slightly; he certainly understood the weight behind these words, yet for a moment couldn't find how to respond.

He ultimately lived in this era, knowing the gambles among the nobility.

But the idea of "civilization lighthouse", "restructuring tribes", "educational systems rewriting the world", was somewhat too complex for him.

He finally only softly asked, "My Lord... can such a thing really be done? Can we bear... all this?"

Louis offered no rebuttal, only a faint smile, "Just because others can't do it, doesn't mean I can't."

Bradley bowed his head, asking no more.

He didn't quite understand what kind of future this young Lord wanted to build, but he was one hundred percent obedient.

Because the past few years had already proven that nine out of ten decisions by Louis were correct.

Then Bradley shifted his tone, slowly suggesting: "If so, perhaps some ceremonial rewards could be established, such as an honor title like 'Child of Red Tide Citizen'..."

Chapter 564: Beacon of Civilization (2)

"Even they can believe it's the right path."

Louis nodded: "The Northern Territory has never had hope because no one ever told them what the future means. So this time... we will give them a path upward."

Bradley silently performed a salute.

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The convoy moved slowly through the morning mist.

The carriage wheels rolled over the dirt road, emitting a low "creak" sound.

The wooden boards rattled, and the cold wind seeped through the canvas cracks, making the few youths inside the carriage shiver.

Kosa sat in the front of the carriage, hugging his knees, without saying a word.

His eyes silently watched the scenery ahead until that gray-white contour slowly emerged from the mist.

Red Tide City.

He had heard the name of this city.

From his father's mouth, from Red Tide officials, from those books...

But he never thought the city would be like this.

It was a winding stone wall, covered in frost over its gray-white base, and the cold light shimmered in the morning mist, like a polished war axe.

Numerous cold iron beams pierced through the walls, deeply embedded in the stone crevices, as if the walls themselves were made of cast iron.

Towers had been completed, piercing the sky with smoking braziers burning on their tops.

The firelight flickered, reflecting on the red flag flapping in the wind, with the sun emblem coldly staring at him.

Looking further ahead, the tall wooden gates were heavy and solid, with cold iron nails densely embedded in the door panels.

Kosa's gaze shifted slightly, gripping his knees tightly.

In a flash, he recalled his tribe's simple tent, the hearth with lingering ash, and the faded fabric flag on the wall.

The rough wooden pillars and mud walls, stone blocks crumbling under the frost, compared to this neatly arranged city whose walls alone could block the cold wind...

Like two worlds.

Saco instinctively lowered his head, his mind a bit chaotic.

He couldn't describe what he was feeling.

Anger? Shame? Fear? Or...

Envy?

"We have arrived." Someone said softly behind him.

Kosa lifted his head, looking again at the high wall.

Beyond were the rooftops, towers, and the rising white steam within the city.

In front of Red Tide's gate, there was no clamor.

No hawking cries, no pushing or shoving, not even a cough seemed out of place.

The moment Kosa jumped off the carriage, he instantly saw that patrol knight team.

Six men in a row, donned in red cloaks and gray steel armor, cold and uniform, with the city emblem on their left shoulders, marching in unison,

Every three steps, they shouted a command in unison, as if practicing on a training ground.

He instinctively stopped in his tracks.

He had never seen such a team, exuding an indescribable quality from their very bones, which could be called order.

Unlike the tribe's cavalry shouting in animal hides, or the Empire's border knights randomly waving flags...

Even when turning their heads, the Red Tide Knights followed a certain rhythm, compelling others to hold their breath.

What shocked Kosa even more was that when the knight team passed right in front of him, he instinctively held his breath, trying to sense the flow of fighting energy in one of them.

But he couldn't sense it.

No, he did sense it, a kind of calm, introverted, deeply restrained power.

Like a thoroughly polished blade, coldly sheathed, waiting for the moment to reveal its sharp edge.

Kosa's pupils slightly contracted.

Even if these men were on a routine patrol, they were at least of elite warrior caliber.

"How is this possible," he murmured to himself, "using such warriors just to guard a gate?"

Once called the most gifted youth in his tribe, he seemed insignificant in front of these men.

He looked around, noticing all the Barbarian Race youths like him lowering their heads, utterly silent.

A few Red Tide Knights were matching their records against the entry list, registering them one by one.

No one shouted commands, and no one used whips to urge them.

Yet the team advanced of its own accord, each person obediently showing their identity card at the gate, having their baggage inspected, then moving on with a numbered slip to the diversion point.

Standing before this orderly process, Kosa suddenly felt an indescribable unease.

He looked down at his worn-out boots, then glanced at a merchant who had just dismounted beside him.

The shoes that man wore were polished to a shine.

And the stationed Red Tide Knights, their chins under helmets chiseled like stone sculptures.

They seemed too clean, too tidy...

Kosa instinctively stepped back half a step, pulling his mother-mended cloak tighter.

But soon he snorted inwardly: "Hmph... It's just dressing well, what's so impressive about it."

The lineup was short, and soon it was their turn.

The leading knight handed a scroll to the gate-guarding knight to confirm identities.

Then a registrar approached.

He appeared to be in his thirties, his hair neatly combed, with a gently reassuring aura.

He glanced at the youths in front of him: "Don't be nervous, come a bit closer, one at a time, starting with your name and your parents' names."

The registrar smiled, as if comforting children entering the city: "From today, you are Red Tide People, understand?"

A Barbarian Race youth in the front row, unaccustomed to the Red Tide procedures, was momentarily speechless.

But the registrar didn't rush him, only saying gently: "Take your time, it's okay."

Finally, it was Kosa's turn.

"Name?"

"Kosa."

"Full name?"

"Kosa Han..." he bit his tongue halfway, then softly repeated, "Kosa."

The registrar showed no surprise, merely nodding and writing the name down.

"Age?"

"Fifteen."

"Original Border Guard Village number: Seventeenth. Recommended by, Village Head Tolan."

Upon hearing this name, the registrar paused, looked up at him, and smiled slightly.

"You're Tolan's son? I have interacted with your father a few times."

The registrar's tone was unhurried, like a casual chat between old acquaintances, then he casually added:

"I'm from the Old Bone Clan, same as you, formerly from the Snowfield People."

When he said this, he neither lowered his voice nor avoided eye contact.

That Barbarian Race origin, he spoke of it with frankness.

Kosa was stunned.

He never imagined that a Red Tide official would openly and unreservedly mention their tribal origin.

And no one frowned, no one avoided it, no one felt there was an issue.

This scene exploded a flurry of chaotic thoughts in his mind.

He thought he was sent here as a hostage.

As the defeated side, a bargaining chip ceded, a lamb chosen from the fold.

But now, he saw another from the Barbarian Race, not only unbowed but openly serving as an official.

Even saying, "I have interacted with your father."

It was nothing like what he had heard or imagined in the village.

In that moment, he first realized, perhaps... this place wasn't specifically designed to humiliate the Barbarian Race.

"Tolan is a smart man, his son shouldn't be any less."

The registrar's tone lightened: "Your father wrote saying you learn quickly, and your writing is good.

Rest assured, Lord Bradley personally instructed that children like you will be given special attention for development."

He even patted Kosa on the shoulder with the naturalness one would show a nephew, without the slightest doubt or any hint of distance.

The registrar's lineage, demeanor, even the subtleties of his every word, exuded a sense of perfectly measured warmth.

This was Bradley's careful arrangement, so that these Barbarian Race youths entering Red Tide City for the first time wouldn't feel like outsiders from the start.

Kosa suddenly felt at a loss for how to respond.

He never thought he would be accepted in such a way, even as a tribesman.

Even though he knew this was likely a strategy, a pacification, a gentle form of taming.

Yet when the person handed him the temporary copper badge stamped with "Red Tide Trainee Student."

He paused for a moment.

The badge was hefty, small, but inexplicably pressed against his heart.

Since when did he become someone unaccustomed to being treated well?

Chapter 565: The Shock of Civilization

After the registration was completed, the registrar waved to them, "Come on, I'll take you to your accommodation."

He introduced himself as he walked, "My name is Harlom, from the Old Bone Tribe. It's my third year as a resident of Red Tide, and I'm responsible for receiving new residents in the outer city."

Kosa walked at the end, his pace slow initially, his eyes scanning the surroundings as if he were a small animal unfamiliar with the environment, instinctively wanting to keep a distance.

But the longer he walked, the more silent he became.

The road beneath his feet was paved with grayish-white stone bricks, each one astonishingly neat.

There was no mud on either side of the street, no scattered fodder, nor was there any sewage.

The drainage ditch was a semi-covered stone trough topped with an iron mesh, with clear water flowing inside, without even a trace of foam.

Kosa instinctively tightened his steps.

In the distance, there were numerous voices, but no shouting, no scrambling, just a kind of orderly noise he had never heard before.

Kosa kept his head down and continued walking forward.

He could hear that the footsteps of a few young members of the Barbarian Race behind him had noticeably slowed.

Some were murmuring, some were awestruck, the shock and envy almost beyond verbal expression.

It was their first time seeing such a city.

Just the streets and buildings alone, Red Tide had thrown their randomly built wooden huts several streets away.

No matter your tribal bloodline or ancestral spirit protection, everything seemed too shabby here.

"It's amazing..." the boy walking to his right couldn't help but whisper, "This is Red Tide... this is civilization..."

He was someone named Besa, a year older than them, the nephew of a small clan's chief.

He hadn't talked much along the way, but ever since entering through the city gates, he had changed completely.

He started speaking with reverence, looking at everything as if witnessing a divine miracle, from the city walls and square to the copper hooks on the rooftops, even a neatly set stone brick moved him immensely.

"To live in such a place, I would do anything," Besa said, his eyes showing a hint of fervor, as if he had found a new faith.

Kosa listened, but said nothing, only silently gritting his teeth.

He didn't dislike Besa and could understand why he was so shocked; it was just that his transformation seemed too rapid.

Kosa felt he should not be like this, so he tried to convince himself in his heart: I'm just here to learn, not to surrender. My surname is Coldfang, and I am Tolan Coldfang's son.

In front of Fierce Tide Square, a tall building loomed in the morning mist.

The foundation was made of blue-gray stone, the edges wrapped in dark gold strips, the main beam constructed of cedar wood, with the eaves pressed very low. The sun pattern above the main door seemed almost as if it could emit light.

"That is the government hall of Red Tide City, where all sizes of policies for the Red Tide Territory are born," Harlom stopped and pointed at the building with pride, "The City Lord handles public affairs there regularly."

His tone was not high, yet it carried an unmistakable sense of respect.

Kosa said nothing, only silently gazing at the building.

In his past understanding, the residence of so-called power holders was, at most, a tent made of animal bones or a stone altar with totems.

Some clan leaders even filled them with human bones for horror, maintaining rule through intimidation, but here it was completely different.

Passing the square, a lively atmosphere washed over him.

Market stalls spread out in rows, sheltered by iron roofs, arranged neatly and tidily.

The crowd was not scarce, yet almost no noise was heard, only footsteps and occasional brief pricing inquiries.

"This side is the South Market business district," Harlom said as he walked, "These stalls all have licenses, and currency is unified, using Iron Coins, copper coins, and resource vouchers for transactions."

Kosa's gaze was drawn in; there was an old craftsman repairing boots, with several pieces of thick leather he had never seen before beside him.

Not far was a merchant store from the South selling cloth and spices.

Further away were stalls directly bearing signs from Red Tide Workshop, specializing in iron tools and pottery, as well as some industrial products from Red Tide that Kosa had never seen.

All kinds of goods in the world were available at Red Tide market, but these were not what shocked him the most.

What shocked him the most was that people proactively saluted Harlom, not the kind of avoidance with fear, but like respecting someone truly revered.

Even a little girl ran over and called him "Uncle Har."

Harlom even bent down and smilingly patted her head.

This scene left Kosa somewhat stunned.

He instinctively thought, that was a member of the Barbarian Race.

But no one pointed fingers, nor did anyone show disgust; everyone was accustomed to it.

Even the merchant dressed like a Southern Empire person spoke respectfully in front of him.

Yet he himself could not quite understand whether it was resistance or a kind of... inexplicable envy.

Kosa walked with his head down for a while longer, his eyes sweeping over the streets, channels, eaves, fire pits that seemed unreal in their neatness, and the calm expressions of the coming and going crowd.

For the first time, he felt an unfamiliar emotion rising.

It was a faint... inferiority.

This was not the first time Louis arranged such an "observational guidance."

Before this, whether it was old nobles' children from the Northern Territory, attendants from the Southern envoy, or inspector envoys sent from the Imperial Capital, as long as their identities were crucial enough.

Louis would arrange this kind of walk at the first moment they arrived at Red Tide City.

Not to listen to speeches, or to view reports, or to be intimidated at military camps, but to step into the city and feel the shock brought by civilization.

To let them see for themselves the clean streets, the classless mutual trust between civilians and Knights, the smiles on people's faces.

Chapter 566: The Shock of Civilization (Part 2)

Let them hear the officials of Red Tide calmly recounting how the system of Red Tide changed his life.

Let them feel disheartened rather than convinced.

The realization that their tribe's honor, family superiority, and border hardships were neither revered nor laughed at here, but simply disregarded.

This is cruel, but also extremely effective.

"It's not about telling them, but letting them feel the disparity themselves." This is the evaluation Louis wrote down himself.

Red Tide City itself is his greatest weapon.

People walking between Fierce Tide Square and the main roads need no persuasion; just by opening their eyes, they would understand.

Kosa didn't know the details behind all these arrangements.

Yet when he walked on the wide stone path and heard Harlow speak of his own background as a Red Tide official, the pride he held onto began to quietly collapse.

This method, Louis has tried many times.

Every time it works.

When they arrived at the Three-Ring Residential Area, it was nearly dusk, and the street-side fire basins were already lit, with warm orange glows spilling from iron containers, tinting the stone floor a pale gold.

"This will be your residence later," Harlow said, pointing ahead to the cluster of semi-subterranean buildings, "Red Tide-style domed houses; here is the living area for military families and staff, windproof in winter, ventilated in summer, with geothermal pipes inside, only requires the furnace to be fired twice a day to stay warm."

Kosa looked up at the roofs resembling half rock hills before him.

Dark gray and deep red bricks tightly fitted together, with hardly a seam visible, and a faint circle of dark gold lines around the curved roof ridge.

He didn't speak, just instinctively tightened the cloth bag on his shoulder and slowed his pace.

Harlow walked to the front and opened the door of one of the houses.

The door hinge moved almost silently, warmth flowed through the cracks onto one's face, making one squint involuntarily.

Inside, the house was clean and simple, the floor made of compressed stone slabs, with no extra furnishings in the center; the staircase was designed to curve into the wall, saving space without losing aesthetic appeal.

"This one is for you youths, six per floor, divided into upstairs and downstairs," Harlow said while moving to the lower level.

They followed downstairs, noting the storage room and kitchen flanking either side.

The stove was stone-built, with a copper ventilation pipe connecting throughout the house. Cooking utensils were neatly placed, with wood barrels and iron kettles in the corner, alongside a large, uncut slab of salted meat wrapped in oil cloth on the shelf.

"In winter, it won't frost or mold. Food can be stored for a month without spoiling." Harlow described as if it were a commonplace matter.

Besha, following behind Kosa, stared at the cooking station for a while before murmuring admiringly: "I've never seen such a clean stove."

He touched the warm stone on the wall, then fiddled with the copper pipe to feel the heat inside, eyes shining brightly.

"This house... in winter, you wouldn't feel cold even without a fire, right?"

No one answered him, but he didn't mind, becoming more excited with each viewing, even after a loop around the house then stood at the door and gazed out at the entire residential area.

"This is Red Tide..."

At that moment, something in his eyes, something Kosa had never seen before.

It wasn't awe, nor envy, but a kind of fervor.

Kosa said nothing.

He simply stood inside the house, gazing at the clean stone seams, extinguished stove, and copper decorations on the windowsill.

He recalled hearing stories in his childhood that only the Imperial Nobility could live in such a place.

Yet now, it was they, this group of Barbarian Race youths, carrying cloth bags, wearing animal skins, who had walked into such a house.

He remembered his original home, a shanty enclosed by wooden stakes, the roof leaking snow, smoke curling into the house.

During strong winds, he and his brother would use torn animal skins to block the corner of the wall, just to barely survive the night.

And here... here there was even hot water, a grill, dry rations, and a copper teapot.

Such contrast, for Kosa, was more piercing than the cold wind.

Kosa didn't know what others thought, but he couldn't tear his gaze away.

He murmured to himself, "It's just because the road is paved better, the houses are rounder... it's not that impressive."

But as he spoke, his steps grew slower.

Kosa suddenly thought, if his mother could live in such a house, perhaps she wouldn't always be coughing non-stop?

So, he said no more.

Harlow explained the rules of use, adding: "The food is on the table, eat and rest early. Someone will come to gather you all tomorrow morning.

The door closed.

The room fell immediately silent.

The air was filled with the scent of bread, with a slightly fermented sourness — the new "salted yellow cheese" from Red Tide City.

On the table was a basket of sliced bread chunks, along with a pot of warm water, a small jar of cheese, and some pieces of toasted dried cured meat, not particularly sumptuous, but for these youths who came from Border Guard Village, journeying through snow and winds, it was already an excellent treatment.

One tall Barbarian Race youth rushed forward first, grabbing a piece of bread and biting into it, his eyes widening instantly.

"Is this really what they eat every day?"

"Aren't Imperial People supposed to eat only beans every day?"

"What's this called?!"

The youths jabbered, gathering around the table, soon eating with faces full of satisfaction.

Kosa didn't move, just sat in the corner, watching them.

He wasn't as excited as them, nor did he entirely disagree.

Just that a feeling of relief gently arose in his chest.

Kosa had thought he came as a hostage, even to be humiliated.

But now he was just in a warm house, eating soft bread with a few peers.

Even being identified as Barbarian Race seemed less important now.

He couldn't help but bow his head, breaking off a small piece of bread and putting it in his mouth.

Chewing a few times, he suddenly chuckled lightly.

The roads indeed were paved better, the houses indeed were rounder, but... they seemed quite impressive after all.

.....

That night, Harlow returned to Red Tide City Hall.

Instead of heading back to his residence first, he waited outside Louis's study for a moment and was then granted an audience.

The room was brightly lit.

Louis, draped in a dark gray cloak, sat behind a long table reviewing a workshop budget draft, with Bradley standing to one side recording entries.

"Come in," Louis said without looking up.

Harlow walked in, bowed briefly, unable to conceal his excitement:

"Reporting, sir. The seventeen recommended youths from Border Guard Village have been successfully settled into city's Three-Ring Residential Area, emotions stable, registered for citizenship."

"During the tour of the square, market, and living facilities... the youths showed clear shock, surprise, and longing, displaying initial inclinations of acceptance."

He paused briefly, adding: "As you instructed, I didn't overly indoctrinate them, just let them see for themselves. The effect was better than imagined."

Bradley nodded, made brief records, turned to Louis: "Looks like the first scaled-down implementation of the civilization beacon plan was a success."

Louis closed the document in his hand, finally turning his gaze to Harlow with a somewhat satisfied smile: "Well done."

Harlow lowered his head at the words, his voice dropping even further: "I merely... acted according to your wishes."

If not for you breaking precedent three years ago, accepting me, someone from Barbarian Race, and letting me take up an important position... I wouldn't be standing here today, nor dare to imagine bearing such a task, I won't disappoint the trust you've placed in me."

Louis looked at him without responding, just tilted his chin slightly: "Understood, then go rest."

"Yes." Harlow bowed and retreated, the room returning to silence.

Bradley flipped through his records, speaking lightly: "Didn't expect taking him in three years ago, now he can nurture Barbarian Race youths."

Louis chuckled softly: "To set an example, Barbarian Race are people, he was the first, certainly won't be the last."

Chapter 567: Factory and Training

The steam engine hummed softly, the furnace was not yet fully heated, eight weaving machines lined up in the workshop, and the air carried the scent of coal ash and lubricant.

Dozens of craftsmen had already lined up neatly, standing in the spacious and bright weaving workshop.

They all wore uniform gray-blue artisan robes, with the sun emblem of Red Tide sewn on the hems.

Some looked excited, some looked around frequently, and some couldn't help but clench their hands.

"The Lord is here!" someone whispered.

In an instant, the gaze of the entire factory turned towards the entrance.

The next moment, the doors opened, and Louis walked in, wearing a gray casual garment with the sun emblem of Red Tide pinned to his chest.

There was no pomp, only Bradley and Hamilton accompanied him, along with a few knights.

No one had trained the workers on how to welcome, but the applause burst out naturally like a flood.

Like waves, it passed from the front row to the back, then back to the front.

"Welcome, Lord!" someone shouted.

"It is Lord Louis!" an elderly artisan's eyes turned red, his voice choked with emotion.

He raised his hand to signal for silence, but the applause burst out again, more enthusiastically than before.

Louis did not adopt a majestic demeanor, he just smiled, a hint of helplessness in his wry smile.

The next second, he slowly raised his hand, a slight ripple of magic power spreading out with his voice, sweeping through the factory like a gentle breeze: "I know you are very excited, I am too."

The voice clearly reached everyone's ears, and only then did the applause gradually stop.

He looked around, observing the rough yet determined faces, and his tone softened somewhat.

"Many of you, I remember. The first year, the second year, even when Red Tide City had no outer wall, you were there.

Some started by moving stones, transporting materials in the wind and snow; some fired bricks and built tiles, working fourteen hours a day; some slept in the workshop for three months, just to calibrate the first batch of gears to precision.

You paved roads, built aqueducts, installed fireplaces, and endured food shortages and winter work stoppages.

Red Tide has what it has today not because of me, but because you supported this city."

The factory was silent, the workers no longer applauded, instead their eyes reddened, subconsciously straightening their backs.

"And now, what I want you to do is weaving."

Louis's tone suddenly tightened a bit, his eyes burning: "But it's not for clothes. It's so that this city can afford its own cloth.

It's so that our children won't freeze, or wear rags to endure winter.

It's to sell the fabric of Red Tide all over the Northern Territory, even to the Imperial Capital, to let them know we can produce the best textiles in the world."

You are the old Red Tide People, who built this city bit by bit from the snow with your own hands, you're the most reliable group of people.

Today, having you work here is not just because of your skills, but because you deserve it."

He paused for a moment: "The wages and benefits here are among the best in Red Tide, and your status will rise along with your craftsmanship.

I hope that in three months, the first batch of fabric for export can be woven here. You are not just working, but writing the history of Red Tide."

After the last sentence fell, there was dead silence on the scene.

Then a loud applause suddenly erupted.

Immediately after, as if someone had released a tightly wound string, more people began to applaud, shout, and whistle, making the whole workshop boil with excitement.

"For Red Tide!"

"We will persevere to the end!"

"Ten machines are not enough, we need a hundred!"

The factory director Heaton, standing to the side, suddenly waved his arm and shouted: "Did you hear? We need to cover the Northern Territory with Red Tide's cloth!"

The crowd burst into laughter, and the applause erupted once again.

.....

The enthusiastic applause still echoed in the distance, but this row in the weaving area had returned to quiet.

The steam pipes trembled slightly, and a few unstarted weaving machines reflected soft light under the sun.

Louis and factory director Heaton walked side by side among the weaving machines.

"Is there a problem with manpower?" he asked straightforwardly.

"Currently sufficient. We will need to deploy four more batches of skilled workers from the technical camp later." Heaton replied quickly, "I've already understood Hamilton's blueprints thoroughly, and the parts warehouse is in sync for replenishment."

"Good." Louis glanced at the young craftsmen cleaning trial run debris, "When there are more people in the future, it doesn't matter where they come from, whoever does well gets promoted, whoever causes trouble gets kicked out, I don't need to explain the importance of this place."

His tone was calm as he spoke, with no room for negotiation.

Heaton paused, nodding solemnly: "Understood, trust me, I won't let you down, or let the factory down, and certainly won't let Red Tide down."

Louis looked at him for a moment, then nodded gently: "I believe in you."

The sound of steam once again came from afar, and the bell in the weaving workshop struck the hour.

This factory is just the beginning.

Next, the first weaving factory of Red Tide will take on the main role in the production of cloth for the entire Northern Territory.

Rough cloth, linen, cotton fabrics, and various daily-use textiles will continuously emerge from these steam looms and be transferred from the warehouse to all parts of the Northern Territory.

Not only that, but the weaving factory will also serve as a demonstration model to be replicated in the second and third factories to be established outside of Red Tide.

At that time, taking advantage of the harbor channel, Red Tide's cloth will be packed in whole batches and shipped to the Southern Territory in exchange for more salt, sugar, medicinal materials, and iron tools.

If we can open the Imperial Capital's guild market, there's even hope to directly connect with the Royal Capital's chamber of commerce and open up new trade routes.

Chapter 568: Factory and Training (Part 2)

Steam-powered looms signify more than just increased efficiency; they mark Red Tide Territory's first true step into mass production.

.....

The number of barbarian youths moving into the domed houses increased, now seventy-six in total, not just the original seventeen.

On their fourth day here, Halom brought another group of fresh faces.

As soon as they entered, they looked around warily, hands subconsciously reaching for their waists as if checking for their customary daggers.

Despite having been asked to surrender all weapons before entering the city.

Meanwhile, the old residents had gradually adapted to the rhythm of life in Red Tide.

"Don't be nervous." Beisha was the first to stand up, walking over to the newcomers and patting one of them on the shoulder, "We were like this when we first came, but you'll get used to it soon enough."

Beisha's expression was natural, his tone as though welcoming a lost relative home.

He even seemed a bit proud: "I can almost recite the great Lord's heroic deeds backwards now."

The newcomer stared at him, a bit puzzled: "Are you... one of them?"

Beisha grinned broadly, "I'm one of the Red Tide people now."

He spoke with conviction, even a bit of pride, while inviting everyone to eat.

Hot rye bread, stew, and roasted vegetables were neatly laid out on the long table, one portion per person.

The food wasn't luxurious, but for these barbarian youths who were used to nibbling on dried meat in the snow, it was a rare delicacy.

The new arrivals rushed over, grabbing bread and stuffing it into their mouths.

"Don't run off after you're done eating; go take a bath later," Beisha reminded them, "It's with hot water, not heated by firewood, but from underground pipes."

The new youth pouted, mumbling "You're kidding," but kept eating faster, not wanting to waste a single piece of meat.

Seeing him eat faster and faster, Kosa, sitting in the corner, just lightly snorted.

Kosa chewed on bread slowly, as usual, without speaking.

But his gaze was much gentler than when he first arrived.

Kosa still remembered standing suspiciously at the hot water bathhouse's entrance on his first day, like facing some sort of trap.

But when he actually stepped in and the hot water flowed down through the copper pipes, that warmth almost overwhelmed him.

Now, he had learned how to adjust the temperature, hang towels, and when to take clean clothes.

Their schedule was posted at the entrance, printed in standard Imperial language, with instructors checking daily if tasks were completed.

Initially, he resisted, believing it was a process of enslavement and conditioning.

But he started to realize that if he followed the rules, no one yelled at him, he ate well, stayed warm, and slept in draft-free houses.

"It's not so bad, actually," he muttered to himself.

Beisha, sitting beside him, spoke eagerly: "Next week, we'll visit the workshop; I hear the steam hammer there can break rocks."

"Do you really want to become one of the Red Tide people?" Kosa suddenly asked.

Beisha didn't hesitate at all: "Of course. I had no home, no land, nothing to eat before. Now I have a house, clothes, food... Red Tide Territory gave me everything, and I want to stay and become an official, like Lord Halom."

Halom had clearly become an idol to Beisha.

Upon hearing this, Kosa said no more, burying his head to continue eating.

.....

Besides living, the training was also somewhat different.

Once all the barbarian youths had gathered, the training at Red Tide officially began.

Kosa wasn't afraid in the least, having followed his tribe into actual battle before.

The Imperial and barbarian youths were interspersed without any distinction or special precautions.

Kosa stood at the end of the lineup, scanning those around him.

"The operation of Fighting Energy... almost identical to what I learned," he silently judged to himself.

Whether it was the standard Fighting Energy cultivated by Imperial Knights, or the primal battle spirit invoked by barbarian warriors, they all derived from the same power system.

Both channels internal energy to enhance strength, speed, and endurance, though its principles remain a mystery.

However, unlike the new barbarian youths, Red Tide youths' movements were orderly, rhythms distinct, having long adapted to this discipline.

When the instructor commanded a turn, there were no shouts, no whips; everyone complied.

Kosa was slow to follow initially, but a gray-haired boy beside him whispered a reminder: "Your step count is off, half a step to the right and you're good."

He grunted but wasn't adept at expressing thanks, so he said nothing else.

That day was their first combat techniques drilling session.

The leader's instructor was a burly man with a scarred cheek, wearing Red Tide Standard light armor, striding into the snowy ground to stand at the front.

"I'm Bruch, training officer for the youth camp at Red Tide Territory."

His voice was deep yet pierced the entire training ground, no one dared to speak, and not even a cough was heard.

"I don't care whose aristocratic brat you are. Once you step into this lineup, you're part of the Red Tide."

His gaze swept the crowd, landing on a few particularly wary barbarian youths.

"I won't teach you Fighting Energy operation; some of you know more than I do. Today, we start with combat techniques, beginning with the low stance slash."

He paused, face growing sterner: "Don't think these are just flowery punches and kicks. If your last step is unstable, the person next to you may lose their head."

"In Red Tide, discipline is a warrior's lifeline. You can lack Fighting Energy, but you cannot disobey orders. If you don't understand the orders, go herd sheep instead."

He finished by throwing his short sword with a clang into the snow, pointing at a row of training dummies behind:

"Ten low stance slashes per person, in groups of three, change styles in an hour, whoever fails doesn't eat dinner."

There was no commotion in the ranks; everyone complied.

Kosa initially thought Imperial training was just writing exercises and putting on airs, surprised that the first lesson was real combat technique.

Although the practice swords were wooden, they were terribly heavy.

His first low slash had too low an angle, hitting sloppily, the second was slightly quicker, the rebound leaving his wrist numb.

No one laughed at him because all the Apprentice Knights were not much different.

The gray-haired boy in his group even frowned, reminding him: "Your sword is too high; it will ruin the formation."

"Will ruin the formation," rather than "will hurt me."

Kosa began to understand what discipline meant to the Red Tide people.

During their practice of the fifth style, another squad encountered a problem next to them.

A barbarian youth deliberately slashed a beat too fast, misaligning his move, and the Imperial youth beside him could not keep up. The entire formation fell into chaos, with one nearly being clipped at the knee, crying out in surprise.

Instructor Bruch walked over, sternly stating: "If that slash was on a real battlefield, your comrade would already be dead."

The barbarian youth tried to argue: "I just wanted to speed up a little..."

"You prioritize speed and disregard orders, endangering your comrades?"

Bruch stared at him, voice still not loud yet chillingly firm.

"Punishment: ten rounds of continuous low stance combat; everyone else watches."

The entire training field fell silent.

The barbarian youth's face turned beet red, biting his lip and complying.

The Imperial youth who was harmed said nothing, silently returning to the formation.

"Discipline is not for show," Bruch glanced across the field, "If your last step falters, someone behind you pays with their life."

"Don't treat what we teach as slogans, nor your comrades' lives as trifles."

Subsequent training switched to battle array drills.

Groups of three, two in front, one behind, rotating slashes, practicing segmented mutual-cover basic techniques.

Movements needed synchronization, every strike required control over distance, angle, and timing, without a hint of error.

"This is not a duel," emphasized the instructor, "battle arrays are about mutual survival."

"If you want to continue like this, become a hunter, not a knight."

Kosa gritted his teeth, persisting; his movements were agile, slashes accurate, but coordinating perfectly with others was much harder than solo combat tenfold.

If the formation missed by an inch, the whole action collapsed.

But he gradually understood Bruch's intent, the significance of discipline.

Chapter 569: Knight Trainee

One hour later, the training session concluded.

Bruch walked past each squad, leaving brief comments.

When he reached Kosa, he simply said, "You have talent."

Just this one sentence, yet Kosa remembered it clearly.

That night he sat on his dormitory bed, his wrist still faintly aching, but he did not frown.

Red Tide did not treat him differently because he was from the Barbarian Race, teaching him real skills, practicing real tactics, and even punishing with real penalties.

This was a place that truly respected rules.

And he found himself beginning to... want to become a part of these rules.

Kosa took out a copy of "Red Tide Knight Promotion Regulations" from the bag beside his bed.

It was given to them during their first discipline class, one for each, which he originally dismissed as mere Imperial phrases and statutes.

Now he opened the first page, each regulation clearly numbered, without superfluous language or ambiguity.

All sons of military households can apply for promotion based on meritorious achievements in combat.

Those who complete the two-year training camp courses and pass the final assessment will be considered qualified candidates and may be included in the list of Red Tide Knights.

Outstanding performers may be recommended to enter the command system and serve as junior officers, assistant civil servants, or overseas special envoys.

Under Red Tide law, all registrants enjoy equal legal protection, with no increase or decrease due to birth, clan, or origin.

Kosa read very slowly, going through each regulation one by one, as if confirming some answer.

He remembered what his father said before departing: "Forget the past, you are a Red Tide now."

At that time, he was incredulous, thinking it was just the compromise of an old man who had given up tribal pride.

But now... if the rules were real, if promotions were open, if hard work could truly make him a real officer.

Then he was no longer a hostage stripped of everything, but taking the first step on a completely new path.

"No matter the birth." He muttered, almost unconsciously speaking out, "Then I have an opportunity too..."

Even if starting from zero, even with the blood of a Barbarian, he could become a part of this city.

He suddenly understood, his father wasn't surrendering, but was pushing him to another battlefield with opportunities.

Training started every day at six in the morning.

Even the warm houses and geothermal heat of Red Tide City could not change the chill of the snowfield.

Especially on the training ground, frost formed on the permafrost, the echo of weapons striking was particularly clear in the morning air.

Kosa was always the first to arrive, never late, and never careless.

He swung his sword more frequently than others, ran faster in circles, and did not stop practicing Fighting Energy even when his arm trembled.

He was not the only smart one, and not the only young Barbarian entrusting hopes.

But he didn't just want to integrate into Red Tide satisfactorily.

He wanted to become the strongest, not relying on anyone's favoritism, not relying on his father's instructions, but stepping onto the city's ladder by his own effort.

Kosa didn't boast, nor did he prefer attention, yet in every combat technique assessment, his performance never fell below the top three.

In the first combat exercise, his team won a complete victory; in the second confrontation evaluation, he independently defeated two Imperial young men collaborating against him; by the third time, even the instructors all remembered his name.

On a rest day, Kosa and four other outstanding trainees from the Border Guard Village were collectively brought to Red Tide Hall.

It was their first time being allowed inside this high building made of gray stone and dark gold.

Everywhere felt oppressive, from the mirror-like tiled floors to the wood doors edged with copper rivets, yet the source of this pressure was not easy to discern.

They stood in a line, Kosa stood at the end.

He expected a bureaucrat to offer encouragement or a reprimand, yet the legendary Red Tide Lord really appeared before them.

Louis wore a gray uniform, with a Red Tide Emblem pinned to his chest.

He didn't stand on a high platform, just quietly stood before them: "Thanks for your effort.

These days, are you getting used to living here? Is the house warm? Is the food enough?"

He didn't immediately talk about ideals or systems, nor did he first ask about their loyalty.

Instead, he cared about the most basic things.

Below the stage, the boys looked at each other; some felt embarrassed, some grinned, some lowered their heads saying nothing.

After a moment, one Barbarian boy quietly answered, "Very warm."

"The food... is quite good too."

Another nodded, even softer, "But the instructor is too harsh."

Bruch's face turned dark, while everyone laughed, knowing it was a joke.

Louis also smiled, "That's just his face; even I dare not provoke him when he's not smiling."

The atmosphere gradually relaxed, and several boys laughed quietly, even the ones who stood rigidly at first unconsciously loosened up a bit.

Louis slowly withdrew his smile, and his tone also became somewhat solemn: "I know some of you came voluntarily, some were persuaded.

You might still be wondering if you're here as hostages or to exchange for food."

He glanced around, seriously saying:

"But I want to tell you, no, you are not here for anyone, not for the tribe, not to please the Empire.

It's for yourselves, to live a better future. So your family won't be hungry in the winter.

In Red Tide, there is no distinction in birth and name, only one thing can decide your position, and that is effort.

Whoever trains the hardest, whoever scores the best, whoever can go furthest.

Chapter 570: Knight Candidates (Part 2)

You can return to your village in three years, armed with knowledge and power, becoming supervisors, or you can stay and become part of the Red Tide, becoming knights, craftsmen, or civil servants.

Every path is open, without any limits, but how far you can go depends on yourselves.

He paused for a moment, and finally said, "Red Tide does not nurture the lazy, but never fails those who are willing to work hard."

The young men exchanged glances, seemingly understanding, remained silent for a while.

Someone lowered their head, poking their toe, while another moved their mouth, as if wanting to speak but held back.

The most direct reaction came from the youngest in the group, who whispered, "I, I will work hard."

Immediately after, another older boy beside him nodded, "We won't disappoint you, sir."

The words were awkward, slightly stammered, but compared to the wary and cautious looks when they first entered the city, there was now a spark in their eyes.

And Kosa stood at the back of the crowd, looking at the short figure in front, feeling a slight heat in his chest.

If I really strive for it, maybe I can live a different fate.

Kosa wasn't sure how far he could go, but he was certain he wanted to give it a try.

Just then, a gentle female voice sounded in Kosa's ear.

The young men instinctively turned to look.

It was a young woman standing beside the political hall, with a tall, straight figure and distinctive attire.

On the Red Tide styled long dress, the Barbarian Race patterns were faintly embroidered, and a silver feather amulet was worn at her waist.

The silver-white long hair and high nose deep features made every young man from the Snowfield recognize her almost at a glance.

Sif, Princess of the Cold Moon Clan.

A name from the old tribal legends, now standing in the political hall, looking at them with a gentle expression.

Her gaze swept over each person, her tone warm, "I was once one of you, born in a clan, never thought I would stand here one day.

I know, having just arrived in this city, you must feel uneasy, confused, perhaps even defiant.

But you don't need to rush to change anything. As long as you're willing to learn, willing to keep moving forward, there will always be a place for you here."

She paused, her eyes earnest, "Red Tide won't look down on you because you're from the Barbarian Race, nor will it strip away your deserved future because you come from a clan.

If you encounter any unfairness in Red Tide, you can come directly to me.

No one should be born inferior here."

This statement, though not loud, dropped like a stone into the lake, jolting every young man's heart.

Kosa stood in the crowd, looking at the familiar yet unfamiliar figure, suddenly at a loss for words.

He did not shout slogans, nor did he loudly declare.

He simply bowed his head slowly, his right hand touched his chest, and his left hand on his heart, performing an old ritual belonging to the Barbarian Race.

A few young men followed suit, which was the highest etiquette towards this Barbarian Race princess.

After the young men had left, the room returned to a brief silence.

Louis stood by the window, watching the departing figures: "How do you see these few?"

"They have potential." Bruch held his hand behind his back, "Especially Kosa, his training record is the most stable, combat technique correction speed is fast, and fighting energy runs most smoothly; there's hope for him to advance to Transcendent level."

Halom nodded in agreement, "He basically wakes up on time, organizes his belongings, follows the schedule. I let them try leading the new recruits, and they performed well."

Louis gently hummed, then turned around, looked at the two:

"Pick a few to focus on training, directional guidance. Add a junior-level political knowledge course, give them a chance for field patrol training.

If they persist, they can become a captain, an instructor, the next Halom."

Bruch raised an eyebrow, "...Are you planning to let them join the headquarters?"

"I want to try." Louis looked at him, "But the premise is their loyalty to Red Tide. Not the kind spoken out loud, but the kind in critical moments, without hesitation, unwavering."

Sif, who had been silent, walked over, gently added a sentence, "Then you must let them know that Red Tide will accept them, not just as tools, nor just as test subjects."

Her tone was very calm, yet seemed to fill in the unspoken half of what Louis hadn't said.

Halom and Bruch quickly responded, "Yes, sir."

Louis casually picked up a booklet recording the training camp's attendance, casually asked, "Bruch, besides these Barbarian Race trainees, what about the overall training of other Apprentice Knights?"

Bruch was prepared and took a roster from his waist pouch, respectfully handed it over: "Just summarized, sir."

"According to the Blood Stone assessment, as of this month, across the whole Red Tide territory, including offspring of newly joined knights, and some refugee children, there are a total of 139 of age young properly confirmed with knight lineage."

"Among them, 34 have successfully entered the introductory stage of Fighting Energy, categorized as junior apprentice knights. The rest are in basic training."

Louis nodded, "...Stable advancement, no premature elongation, right?"

"None." Bruch replied crisply, "All according to progress classified training. For those with slow progress, we arranged enhanced boarding and night classes."

Halom added from the side, "There are also a few children from knight families, who perform well...but there are no policy preference. Treated equally with those from commoners and refugees."

Upon hearing this, Louis raised his eyes, looked at him, "Let them know, advancement depends on ability, not on surname."

Sif glanced at him, without interrupting, just lightly nodded.

Bruch then folded his arms and replied, "Understood."

Louis closed the roster in his hand, calmly said, "Keep it up."

After Bruch and Halom withdrew, the study was quiet for a moment.

Louis sat by the table, reopened the training camp booklet, drew red lines under two names inside it, these two were seedlings with Transcendent potential as suggested by the Daily Intelligence System.

He slightly raised an eyebrow unconsciously, his fingertips lightly tapping the paper.

Since stepping into the Northern Territory, he has known, relying solely on himself cannot rewrite the situation.

Continuously cultivating apprentice knights, promoting genuinely loyal new Red Tide forces.

This is the most basic and indispensable bargaining chip in this era.

After all, knights are the true decisive factor on the battlefield in this world.

Even though the Red Tide now possesses new weapons like Magic Explosion Bullets, they are merely means in the end.

The ones who operate them are still people.

And in a world governed by Fighting Energy and Transcendence, knights are the finest weapon operators.

No matter how peaceful the surface of the Northern Territory appears, the sky of the Empire has already begun to cloud.

In the daily intelligence system reports over the past two months, the "keywords" regarding the Imperial Capital are becoming increasingly dense: military department factions, church fund movements, the prince privately mobilizing knights, council abnormal motions...

These events are unfolding, possibly culminating in a colossal upheaval larger than the Northern Territory.

"If self-preservation is possible, it's certainly best." He muttered, "But if not..."

Then Red Tide must also possess the qualification to protect itself.

His gaze swept over the list, showing a faint smile on his lips.

In these years, more than one transcendent seedling like those circled on this roster has appeared.

Even if they are just in embryonic form, they already represent Red Tide gradually nurturing its own "heritage."

Suddenly, a thought crossed, he turned his head to look at the close guard Weir beside him, the only Peak Knight seedling.

"What realm are you in now?"

Weir seemed taken aback, hesitated, "Sir, are you asking me?"

"Yes."

Weir appeared slightly awkward, softly said, "Elite Knight High Tier, nearing the limit... feels like, another step and I'm Transcendent."

"You should have said earlier." Louis raised his eyebrow.

"I... you've been busy recently, I thought I'd wait a bit."

"You really are too honest." Louis chuckled and shook his head.

"But don't delay any longer, come with me to the Shadow Trial Arena once."

Weir was surprised, "Sir is going?"

"Yes, on the way to Dawn Port, might as well check the results."

Weir straightened his posture, "Yes, sir."