

Winter 571

Chapter 571: Castle Construction

The night settled outside the house, with only a faint red glow left from the furnace.

Louis sat at the desk, flipping through the thick workshop daily report and labor list.

Now that two-thirds of the mountain road has been repaired, the transportation line is open, and soon most of the laborers will be idle. We can put these people to use.

"Once the mountain road is completed, we can use this manpower for other tasks, and if such a large group of people is jobless, it will cause problems."

Louis took out a new parchment, pressed it flat on the table, and paused with the ink pen between his fingers before he began to write.

The clean draft gradually took shape on the paper, showing the circular fortress outer wall, the positions of the four towers, facing the main street and square.

These are images he has been envisioning in his mind for a long time.

A gentle sound came from the doorway, and Louis turned to look.

Emily leaned against the door frame, draped in a pale blue thin robe, loosely tied at the waist.

Her blue hair was simply tied at the nape, with a few strands hanging near her neck, gently swaying in the furnace light.

She did not enter, just leaned against the door, one long leg naturally crossed over the other, her expression carrying a gentle fatigue.

"What are you drawing?" Emily asked, her voice curious but kept low, not wanting to wake the child in the cradle.

Louis turned back to continue drawing, "The design plans for the new castle."

He added another stroke, marking the height of the furnace tower on the south side, "The mountain road of Red Tide Territory is almost done. A large number of artisans and laborers will be free, and you can't leave them idle; they have to do something."

Emily smelled, intrigued, and hurried a few steps closer, leaning over to look at the paper, where the outline of a surrounding fortress was already visible.

She opened her mouth slightly, letting out a small yawn, "Introduce me."

As he continued to sketch, Louis introduced to Emily, "The main tower is set on the western highlands, overlooking the entire city. The furnace tower is near the geothermal belt, used for heating, with walls enclosing all sides, leaving a road to Fierce Tide Square."

He spoke slowly, like he was deliberating each position in his mind.

Emily, listening while looking at the design, saw the candlelight reflecting on her face.

The lines on the design were tidy and concise, with just a few strokes creating a grand and magnificent castle, resembling this familiar person, who seldom talks but always delivers his best.

Emily chuckled softly, walking around behind him, leaning in to look at the paper, "You draw so well, I always feel like you know everything."

Her breath was so close, almost touching his shoulder.

Louis only raised an eyebrow slightly, "There are plenty of things I don't know. It's only that I thought of doing them before others."

Emily said nothing more, her fingers gently smoothing the wrinkles on Louis's outer garment on his shoulder.

Louis noticed how close she was.

The warmth of the furnace mixed with her breath, carrying a faint floral scent.

He did not turn around, just said softly, "I'm currently drawing the communication tower..."

Emily responded softly, but her gaze was no longer on the drawing.

She reached out, straightening the askew pen holder beside him, her fingertips pausing briefly on the back of his hand.

"It's too late, you need to rest." She said softly.

Louis raised his eyes, meeting Emily's, neither speaking.

He reached out to extinguish the candle wick, leaving only dimness in the room.

The sound of snow lingered outside the window, and the room was silent, with only intermittent humming.

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Morning light seeped through the thick curtains, spilling into the messy room.

Mike opened his eyes, first seeing the large beam across the ceiling.

The room was large but chaotic like a construction site.

Wooden boxes piled up to half-wall height, papers scattered on the table with unfinished ale, and even tools brought back from the workshop were stashed in the corners.

On the other side of the bed, the old wife was still curled up, murmuring half-dreamingly, "You've just been back two days, and you're working again?"

Mike sat up, putting on the jacket dusted with sawdust, "Lord Louis asked me, said there's business."

The old wife sighed, pulling the blanket over her head, "You see Lord Louis more often than you do me."

Mike chuckled, not replying, casually grabbing a few pieces of leftover bread from last night and sipping some cold tea.

The taste wasn't great, but he was used to it, especially when even a piece of bread is a luxury in other parts of the Northern Territory.

As he stepped out the door, the sky was not fully lit, and cold wind immediately blew into his collar.

Mike tightened his cloak, ducking into the waiting carriage at the door, "Directly to the administrative building, please."

The driver immediately whipped, the wheels clattering crisply over the cobblestone road.

For the convenience of work, Mike's house was close to the Artisan District.

The streetlights were still sparse, but smoke pillars were already rising from the distant Forging District, carrying the smell of coal.

The main street of Red Tide was gradually becoming lively, with many apprentices and artisans recognizing him and stopping their actions to wave at the carriage window:

"Good morning, Lord Mike!"

"Is everything steady over at the port?"

Mike lifted the curtain, nodding his response to them.

The carriage's heat was insufficient, but somehow he felt a long-lost sense of calm.

At Dawn Port, he had been busy for months, but now everything has stabilized, responsibilities handed over to Russell, and his old bones were no longer needed there.

These years, Mike had watched Red Tide Territory transform from wasteland to roads, bridges, and city walls.

Reflecting on his participation in all of this, a stir of warmth welled up inside him.

Five years ago, he was an old craftsman abandoned by Frost Halberd City's old guild, but now he was the chief engineer of Red Tide.

"Lord's kindness is certainly not just for show." He muttered to himself, with a smile sticking at the corner of his mouth.

Chapter 572: Castle Construction (Part 2)

The tower's silhouette of the administrative building gradually becomes clear in the fog.

It is the most orderly place in Red Tide City, with newly paved stone bricks and a brightly polished emblem at the entrance.

Mike pushed the door open and entered. The conference hall was warm, with the stove burning vigorously.

Louis sat in the main seat, Bradley stood beside him, and a young clerk was organizing scrolls.

Mike paused for a moment, quickly took off his gloves: "Sorry, Lord, did I keep you waiting?"

Louis looked up: "No problem, you arrived just in time."

Mike glanced at the piles of parchment on the table, suspicious in his heart.

Having returned from Dawn Port only three days ago, he barely caught his breath before being called into the main hall, and this setup does not look like a routine report.

Louis did not waste time on pleasantries, instead he directly spread several drawings on the table.

The corners of the thick parchment were weighted with stones, and Mike leaned over to look.

The drawings were already densely filled, not casual sketches but a complete set of plans.

It was the prototype of a circular fortress, with outer walls embracing the main castle; the south tower near the geothermal areas; the west tower standing on high ground overseeing the entire city.

Cross-sections, towers, basement layers, pipeline directions, all were drawn neatly, layered upon each other as if ready for workshops to directly apply.

Mike held his breath, his fingers uncontrollably reaching out to touch: "This... are you planning?"

Louis stated directly: "To build a real castle. The mountain roads are nearly completed, craftsmen and labor are freed up, it's time to start."

"Castle?" Mike repeated, his eyes gradually brightening from surprise.

Louis nodded.

"Finally." Mike couldn't help but smile, a smile filled with irrepressible excitement, "To be honest, Lord, I've disliked those few earth towers the most over the years.

Although winters are not cold, does that look like the heart of a territory? Red Tide Territory is now the first in the Northern Territory, and the Lord resides in such cylindrical buildings."

Bradley spoke beside him: "Indeed, this matter should have been done earlier, the Lord finalized the draft of the plan last night. Inviting you here today to confirm procedures and timelines."

Louis picked up a pen, the tip lightly tapping on the parchment: "Outer wall thickness is five meters, starting from the northern section."

Then he followed the ink line, leaving a clean arc: "The rock layer here is sturdy and can bear load. Once the foundation is stable, extend south.

Outer wall is a double-layered structure, with inner layers carrying energy and exhaust pipes, outer layers made of cold iron. Tower tops covered with copper, conducting heat and preventing ice.

Geothermal pipes need to be laid in advance, under the first floor, along the entire northern side as a circle. This is the furnace tower, close to geothermal area, can try steam heart for heat supply."

He looked up at Mike: "Can it be done? Would it be too forced?"

Mike scratched his beard: "Add a few layers of diversion pipes, but it's achievable. If the fire pressure is too high, add a buffer valve. As for the steam heart, I'll try getting Hamilton to assist."

Louis nodded, making a mark on the drawing.

Bradley watched from the side, adding a word: "What about the grain storage area? Would it be too close to the heat?"

Louis thought for a moment, added another partition wall outside the wing building: "Add a ventilation shaft on this layer, channel the heat away, and there won't be a problem."

Bradley nodded, saying no more.

Louis continued drawing upward.

"Here is the west tower and the main castle," he pointed to the tower's outline, "The main castle is my own residence, also serving as a watchtower. Tower top needs an observation layer and signal platform."

"Put a spiral staircase up," Mike supplemented, "That way, it's easier to operate during emergencies."

"East tower for communication, hoisting Gale Birds and signal flags. North tower for garrison, storing reserve weapons and Magic Explosion Devices. Main road enters from the south gate, directly to Fierce Tide Square."

Mike listened, nodding constantly, eyes fixed on the drawings: "The width of this main road?"

"Eight meters," Louis replied, "can handle parallel carts."

"Then what material?"

"You decide the material."

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Their conversation was brief and clean, and the annotations on the drawings grew increasingly dense.

When all designs settled.

Mike stared at those design drawings, after a long pause finally said: "This layout is too smooth... defense, heating, transportation all thoughtfully considered.

Lord, this is not a craftsman's possible mindset, if you were a craftsman, you'd be the world's number one craftsman"

Louis just said coolly: "Enough flattery."

"Haha," Mike embarrassedly scratched his hair, "I'm serious."

Bradley looking at the drawings was equally excited: "If truly built according to these plans, it'd become the Northern Territory's first castle, simply a wonder."

Mike laughed: "That's appropriate, worthy of the Lord's greatness."

Louis put down the pen, pushed the drawings to them: "Any more questions? If not, take them back for refinement."

Mike shook his head, a rare serious expression: "No questions, Lord. Even if I die on the construction site, I will build this castle for you."

Louis glanced at him, laughed: "I cannot bear to see you die, if you fall, I'd have to personally oversee."

"Then I'll give it my all!" Mike rolled up the drawings, tied them with a rope, his entire person lightening with excitement.

When he stood, the chair slid backwards with a muffled sound.

"I'll go to the workshop to organize personnel." Mike smiled and saluted, his speech filled with uncontrollable excitement: "This time, let them see the wonder drawn by the Lord."

Louis just nodded: "Go ahead."

Mike responded, turned and walked briskly out the door.

The moment the thick door closed, only the soft burning of the stove remained in the air.

Bradley stood still, waited until Mike's footsteps completely faded away, then pulled out a letter from his chest.

The envelope bore a deep blue wax seal, the seal pattern a dragon.

"This arrived last night," his voice deliberately lowered, "a letter from His Highness the Sixth Prince Astha."

Louis took the letter instantly, opened it directly to read.

His gaze swept across the letter face, lips slightly moving, as if reading the contents:

"Next April, the Frost Dragon Territory will host the Northern Territory Reconstruction Meeting. Hosted by the Imperial Capital's Special Envoy Camille, regional lords need to send representatives to discuss the future of the Northern Territory and territorial reconstruction plans..."

Louis placed the letter down, fingers lightly tapping twice on the tabletop.

"So, next April, the next Northern Reconstruction Meeting is set in Frost Dragon Territory?"

Bradley frowned slightly, tone lowered: "Without consulting you?"

Louis shook his head, yet his tone was calm, even tinged with a bit of merciful ease: "No, he directly wrote in the letter, invited Red Tide Territory on behalf of all Northern Territory lords, even calculated the timing for me."

Bradley's expression grew colder: "Although he is the Imperial Capital-appointed reconstruction envoy, isn't Northern Territory's current administration, grain routes, and military maintenance all depending on you, Lord? His arrangement... seems like he's the Lord of the North."

Louis chuckled slightly, the smile bore no dissatisfaction, rather with a hint of careless indifference.

"It's normal for him to want a bit of presence. After all, Frost Dragon Territory's days aren't easy." He folded the letter again, placed it aside, "Frost Dragon Territory isn't far from Red Tide, the journey convenient, let's go take a look."

Bradley nodded, still somewhat discontented: "Shall I draft a reply?"

"Mm." Louis nodded, "Just write that I will attend punctually."

Bradley noted it in his notebook.

Louis reclined back into his chair, looking out the window: "I was planning to hold a meeting in another two years anyway, necessary to meet them eventually, staying in Red Tide Territory all day isn't ideal, maybe a glimpse of other cities brings some marvelous discoveries."

"Then I'll prepare," Bradley closed the notebook, bowed left.

Inside was left Louis alone, pondering the letter's contents.

He wasn't worried about this prince using authority to seize power, for on this permafrost land, whoever holds the grain, holds the order.

The Empire gave Astha a title but not a cartload of flour, this kind of envoy is destined to live only off appearance.

So be it, might as well see how many nobles in the Northern Territory are truly loyal to him.

Chapter 573: New Intel and Shadowvale

When Louis awoke, the usual quiet was absent by his side.

He turned his head to see Emily, half-asleep and half-awake, coaxing the child beside her pillow.

However, the five-month-old baby was not crying but merely looked at him with moist eyes, silently pondering the three great questions of life.

Louis smiled gently, leaned over, kissed Emily's forehead, and said softly, "Let me take over, you can sleep a bit more."

Emily nodded, handed the baby to him, and nestled back into the pillow, quickly drifting back into light slumber.

Louis picked up the baby, who snuggled softly in his arms, with pudgy fingers clenching his lapel, not very strong, yet gripping tightly.

"You're up earlier than I am," Louis chuckled softly, hummed a few notes, rocking the baby gently before raising his hand to draw in the air.

A familiar buzzing sound quietly resonated, and a translucent screen unfolded before him.

[Daily intelligence update completed]

[1: Duke Remont is secretly mobilizing his third legion's forces, unreported to the Imperial Capital.]

[2: Kosa Hanch, possesses potential as a Peak Knight.]

[3: An old team under the North Sea "Mad King of Steel Teeth" is heading to Dawn Port for reconnaissance, arriving in three days.]

Louis sat on the edge of the bed with the baby in his arms, glancing at the first line with a nonchalant expression.

"Another one," he remarked calmly.

Since the Emperor's disappearance, he had seen countless intelligence reports regarding the actions of the Empire's high officials.

Who was mobilizing troops, who was expanding, who was forming alliances—new variables emerged almost daily.

The powder keg of power was already full, just waiting for a spark to ignite and shatter the entire Empire.

However, this time was different.

"Spencer Remont..." he quietly recited the name, taking out a booklet from the bedside table and turning to the page on Duke Remont.

The youngest duke in the Empire, thirty-six years old, current head of the Remont family, whose territory is located between the Northern Territory and Southeast Province, known for his strong and conservative military stance, currently siding with the Fourth Prince.

Louis noted after this paragraph, the secret mobilization of his third legion's forces, unreported to the Imperial Capital.

"We'll have to deal with him sooner or later," he said softly.

He underlined the words "mobilizing without reporting" and closed the booklet, proceeding to review the next piece of intelligence.

The second piece of intelligence caught his attention, and his eyes lit up slightly.

[2: Kosa Hanch, initial assessment indicates potential as a Peak Knight.]

"Kosa Hanch..."

He remembered this name.

This Barbarian youth was one of the outstanding trainees from the first batch that came to Red Tide from the Border Guard Village, whom he had met just four days ago.

With his tall stature and steady aura, he didn't talk much during training but was nearly always in the top three in every assessment.

Unexpectedly, he was the second one after Weir with potential as a Peak Knight.

Louis gently stroked the baby's soft hair, contemplating for a moment, "Red Tide finally has a second promising Peak Knight candidate."

He was not particularly concerned about the Barbarian's identity, as history had already proven that Red Tide Territory's system was the strongest tool for assimilation.

"It just takes time," he said softly, "have Bruch and Halom pay more attention to him. Once he has sufficiently integrated, bring him around like Weir, to feel the warm glow of the Northern Sun."

Thinking of this, he glanced down at the baby in his arms, who was chewing his small fist, eyes rolling around, clearly fully awake.

"Did you also feel your old father's glow?" Louis asked him with a smile, "When you're a bit bigger, I'll let you try the Blood Stone too."

Of course, the baby couldn't understand, raising his small hand and waving it around, evoking a chuckle.

[3: An old team under the "King of Steel Teeth" is heading to Dawn Port for reconnaissance.]

The third piece of intelligence made Louis's eyes flicker slightly, but just for a moment.

"The Mad King's old team... they've indeed set their sights on us."

He pondered slightly, his eyes becoming more profound.

Kavier, the one known as the "Mad King of Steel Teeth," a pirate king of the North Sea, was one of the most troublesome presences along the Northern coast.

Not only was he brutal and violent, but he was also famous for his hundreds of small raiding ships, prowling the North Sea like a wolf pack, yearly plundering countless merchant ships, fishing boats, and isolated ports, with the Imperial Navy failing to successfully intercept them countless times.

Once the Breaking Waves Bay opens to shipping, Dawn Port, as an emerging trade hub, would inevitably become one of this Mad King's primary targets.

The arrival of his old reconnaissance team does not necessarily mean he's personally going to act, but it undoubtedly means that Dawn Port's existence has entered the black sail's sphere of influence.

Louis was not flustered, although he furrowed his brow slightly.

"But ultimately, it's just a division. Even if Xavier truly comes with his fleet, there's no need for fear."

We'll face soldiers with generals and water with earth. As long as they dare approach, let them understand that Dawn is not their hunting ground."

He stood up, gently placed the child back in Emily's arms, and said softly, "Tomorrow, I should go to Dawn Port."

Emily nodded lightly, as the baby in her arms waved a small hand in the air, as if still yearning for his father's embrace.

The light outside was already bright; a new day had begun.

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Before departure, Louis summoned several core operatives.

The first was Bradley.

"The harvest season is coming, and I might not be back," Louis's gaze scanned the agricultural report spread before him, "order people to tally the estimated crop yields from each land in advance, especially pay special attention to Mai Lang Territory."

Chapter 574: New Intelligence and Shadowvale (Part 2)

Bradley stood to the side, quickly taking notes: "Yes, My Lord."

"We must begin stockpiling supplies for winter now," Louis continued. "Granaries, salt, fuel, winter fabrics... get a portion ready for the Red Tide first. As for the rest of the Northern Territory's supplies, we will decide when I return."

Bradley nodded solemnly: "Understood, I will personally oversee it."

Having given these instructions, Louis then called for Hamilton.

The young craftsman was wearing an oil-stained leather apron, his hair slick with sweat and clinging slightly to his forehead.

Upon seeing Louis, he nervously rubbed his hands together, speaking softly: "My Lord, about the... steam-powered loom... we've already started mass production."

"Excellent," Louis nodded, approval evident in his eyes. "You've done well, Hamilton."

Hamilton shyly lowered his head: "Actually... it was Mr. Mike who helped me a lot, I... I just modified the design..."

Louis smiled: "Next, I want you to focus on the direction of propulsion systems."

The youth looked up, hesitantly: "Do you mean the land steamship side?"

Louis nodded: "However, I heard you've hit a bottleneck with the ship's steam engine?"

Hamilton scratched his head: "Yes... for ships, the thermal output isn't enough to drive the screw propeller, especially with heavy loads."

"Then try prioritizing the steam car on the ground," Louis suggested. "It doesn't need to be done in one go, start with what's manageable."

Hamilton's eyes suddenly lit up: "I understand, I... I'll try to draft a new design in the coming days."

"Don't rush, take your time. But don't let your thoughts stagnate."

"Understood, My Lord!"

Next was Bruch, who was now in charge of training the apprentice knights, summoned by Louis.

Bruch, a burly man, stood at attention as he entered: "My Lord, is there something you need?"

"From now on, raise the management level of the training camp," Louis said somberly, "Focus on three types of people: those on the verge of breakthroughs, those with unusual discipline, and those of barbarian origin."

"Especially that Zacco," nodded Louis. "I think he has potential and strong explosive power, you need to keep an eye on him."

Bruch frowned: "Zacco? The one of barbarian origin?"

"That's why you need to keep an eye on him," Louis softened his tone. "If someone of barbarian origin is isolated before being acknowledged, they'll instinctively withdraw to their tribe, and we'll never truly retain them."

Bruch took a deep breath and nodded firmly: "I understand, My Lord, I'll arrange for Harome to assist."

"Good," Louis responded.

Bruch gave a slight bow and turned to leave.

Finally, Louis donned his cloak and stepped out of the main hall, where the elite accompanying team was ready.

This team, selected from the Red Tide Knight Order, consisted of eighteen members, fifteen of whom were high-tier elite knights, and three were transcendent.

Each was equipped with full battle attire and battlefield magic burst grenades, moving in unison.

Such a knight team could almost traverse the entire Northern Territory unchecked.

Louis walked to the door, glanced over them, and nodded slightly: "Set out."

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In the early morning, as the mist had not yet fully dispersed, the silhouette of Shadow Valley faintly emerged before the knight team.

A group of over ten riders advanced slowly, with coarse stone posts and simple wooden fences set at the road's edge, the distant mountain retaining the weathered look of an ancient tomb cave.

However, the outpost, traps, and signal beacons on the outskirts had long since transformed it into a secret stronghold for the Red Tide Territory.

Louis reined in his mount at the high point of a hillside, looking down.

The valley's entrance had three lines of defense, the outward appearance deliberately simplistic, yet ingeniously concealed.

The outermost was a chevaux-de-frise disguised as old wooden posts with tripwire alarms. The middle zone hid multiple buried magic burst traps capable of targeted attacks on large groups.

The inner circle housed two chosen patrol knights, who changed shifts frequently, their routes crisscrossing, able to detect anomalies at a moment's notice.

"More standardized than before," he commented quietly. Before the escorts could report, footsteps echoed from the entrance of the Shadow Valley camp.

Alian, cloaked, rushed over, with a slightly travel-worn face, yet clearly excited.

This person, the chief administrator of the Shadow Valley, and one of the earliest loyal followers of the Red Tide Territory, now bowed respectfully: "Lord Louis, I didn't expect you to come in person today."

"Just passing by," Louis dismounted, tucking his gloves into his belt. "How are the recent promotions going?"

"Reporting as follows," Alian drew a brief ledger from his cloak, "Over the past three weeks, three broke through to extraordinary knights, and seventeen to elite knights.

One individual lost his resolve during the low-temperature sensitivity trial but successfully advanced after we adjusted the rhythm and potion ratio."

His speech was measured, yet carried an inherent confidence, evidently satisfied with the current process.

Louis glanced through the roster, nodding in approval.

Breaking through to the transcendent level is no easy feat; many elite knights never cross that threshold in their lifetimes.

Yet here in the Shadow Valley, three have succeeded in just one month, a result unparalleled in the Empire.

Not to mention the numerous successful elite promotions, each representing future potential.

Among these individuals, a few will undeniably grow into the backbone supporting the Red Tide, and they will surely remember who gave them this opportunity.

True loyalty is not won by oaths but earned through trust and the grace of changing one's fate.

And these knights, forged in such a manner, will one day reciprocate this loyalty, even with their lives.

In Louis's heart, it was clear that investing so much in this spiritual forge was indeed justified.

Alian cautiously suggested: "If you have time, I suggest that you personally observe the latest round of altar training... the process has been adjusted since your last visit."

Louis smiled: "I plan to, coincidentally Weir is attempting his breakthrough this time as well."

"Weir?" Alian was taken aback, then looked at the usually silent young guard with surprise, "Has he reached the critical point?"

"Nearly," Weir, somewhat bashfully, scratched his head, "Actually... just a bit more, and I haven't dared to mention it."

"That truly is..." Alian rarely showed surprise, "So young, stepping into the extraordinary, in this batch of Red Tide, you're the first."

Louis lightly patted Weir's shoulder: "He's no less than anyone else. Let's take this opportunity to see the actual results of the spiritual forge."

"Understood." Alian's smile became serious, "I'll take you there immediately."

Alian personally led the way, with Louis and his group following into several core areas.

First was the Shadow Moss Cultivation Room.

In the semi-enclosed greenhouse, three types of Shadow Moss were meticulously planted in separate zones.

The catalyst type for refining breakthrough potions, the anti-illusion type for fumigation defense, and the focus type as the key ingredient for "mental shock grenades."

A few pharmacists were sealing the extracted viscous liquid into transparent bottles, packing them into wooden crates marked with batch numbers.

Louis approached to observe, picking up a bottle of potion and gently shaking it in the light.

The color was stable, the concentration even, clearly of high quality.

"Very good," he nodded softly, his expression amiable, "This batch of catalysts turned out well."

Alian replied with a smile: "After we adjusted the formula to a more stable range, the yield increased by nearly ten percent."

Next, they entered the Lizard Beast Control Zone.

In a spacious stone cave, two Soul-devouring Lizard Beasts, fitted with control devices, were undergoing mental control training.

One was growling as it released shockwaves, with several knight trainees observing the interference range and wave distribution from behind.

Finally, they arrived at the Central Altar District, in the Will Breakthrough Training Room.

In the central dome of stone structure, a low-temperature crystal platform stood quietly, surrounded by conduits for magic energy and protective curse patterns, with several auxiliary knights performing preliminary checks.

Louis stood at the threshold, surveying for a moment, softly musing: "Transforming this from a wasteland into what it is now was indeed challenging."

Turning back to Alian, he smiled: "The overall process is now very mature. You've done well."

"I am honored by your trust, My Lord," Alian's tone softened, offering a slight bow.

Louis patted Weir's shoulder, speaking with a mix of warmth and expectation: "Go in, we all have faith in you."

Chapter 575: Weir's Bloodline Talent

The preparations for the trial room are underway.

In the core area of the Shadow Trial Arena, the stone hall known as the "Willpower Altar" is now completely sealed.

Several technicians in alchemical white robes are busily adjusting the concentration of the potions and the temperature control devices around the central stone platform.

A faint white mist begins to drift in the air of the altar, the vaporized spores of the Shadow Lichen, gently drawn into various air circulation ducts as the indoor temperature gradually decreases.

This space was originally the main ritual hall of the ancient Snow Swearers, with crumbling ritual engravings covering the walls.

The circles of blue phosphorescence flicker slightly in the dense fog, creating a kind of almost tangible mental pressure.

Amidst this nerve-racking atmosphere, the knights undergoing breakthroughs sit cross-legged, immersed in painful struggle, completely unaware of what is happening outside.

Their fighting energy flickers indistinctly around them; some tremble uncontrollably, while others murmur softly under the influence of hallucinations, cold sweat covering their foreheads.

This state is precisely where mental disruption exerts its effect, forcing them to break through.

In principle, the breakthrough process is divided into three stages.

The first is fumigation stimulation.

The vaporized spores will enter the body directly through breathing, tingling the nerves, amplifying mental perception, and forcing the subject's willpower core to be exposed in a boundary state of extremity.

The second stage is the catalyst injection.

The knights will be injected with a catalyst formulated from Azure Patterned Honey and Frost Blood Redberry, to stabilize the fighting energy circuits within the body, alleviate the side effects brought by the spores, and activate latent bloodline factors.

The final stage is the Tidal Breathing Technique guidance.

This is a technique that requires intense concentration, used to guide the circulation of fighting energy throughout the body and complete the final breakthrough under the triple states of "extreme cold + high pressure + hallucination".

However, in practice, none of this is as beautiful as the theory.

When the fighting energy core is stimulated, it brings about strong hallucinations and a sense of mental disorder, often causing fragments of fear memories to emerge, testing the knight's steadiness in maintaining the flow of fighting energy at the brink of death.

Even with the antidote, the knights themselves will repeatedly collapse during this process, some even failing completely and having the trial forcibly terminated.

Standing in the observation room, Louis looked at the knight who had just fainted and was being carried away by the technicians, frowning slightly.

"Is the intensity still too high?" he murmured to himself.

"For ordinary knights, it is indeed too harsh," Alian responded gravely, "but this is already the best breakthrough method I have heard of."

The atmosphere fell silent for a moment.

At this moment, a technician nodded to them: "Sir, we are ready."

Louis turned to Weir and smiled, "Don't take too long. If you don't break through in five hours, I'll leave first."

"Huh?" Weir was taken aback.

"Just joking." Louis patted his shoulder lightly, "Relax a bit."

Alian, however, was slightly surprised: "Five hours? It usually takes two or three days on average for an elite knight to break through to transcendence. If it's not completed after the fourth day, it's considered a failure."

He paused and added, "The shortest recorded time on our side is twenty-eight hours exactly."

Louis just smiled without further explanation.

Of course, he knew these common facts, but he also knew that Weir was different.

The young man who had grown up by his side since childhood was recognized as a prodigy by the Daily Intelligence System, and he had already shown flashes of talent.

Moreover, according to Weir himself, he was already at the doorstep, just a final step away.

Although his previous remark about "waiting for five hours" was intended to ease the atmosphere for the other party,

secretly, a subtle sense of anticipation rose in Louis's heart.

But instead, it made the young man's face tense for a moment, clearly making him more nervous.

Noticing this, Alian gently advised, "Relaxing a bit will make it easier to pass."

Weir nodded nervously, took a deep breath, and stepped into the stone gate.

The moment Weir stepped into the stone hall, he sensed something was off with the air.

The instant he entered, a faint white fog filled the air, cold slowly creeping up his nasal passages into his mind, like fine needles gently probing at the depths of his consciousness.

Although the breathing technique had not officially begun, he could already sense a sign of mental tension.

Several alchemists were adjusting the final temperature controls and potion nozzles on the outskirts, and the vaporization devices operated smoothly as the scent of Shadow Lichen dispersed.

Weir steadily walked in and stood firm before the stone platform marked with a sensory circuit.

He instinctively glanced towards the observation room; sure enough, Louis was still standing there, nodding gently at him.

Gaining a sense of assurance, Weir took a deep breath, sat down slowly in the cold fog, and adjusted his posture.

The meditative breathing method naturally emerged in his mind, and he smoothly guided the fighting energy within his body to flow in sync with the cooling tempo of the trial room, readying himself for the next phase.

But in the next moment, a sudden mental pressure hit him like a tidal wave, and flames exploded in the depths of his memory.

It was the night the village was raided, with Snow Swearers riding into the street, torches sweeping across rooftops.

Weir was still young, and his mother desperately dragged him out of the burning house and they fled.

His later memories grew increasingly hazy, only recalling iron chains, whips, and the bloody wooden cage.

The guests who came to select slaves surveyed him with eyes akin to choosing livestock.

Chapter 576: Weir's Bloodline Talent (2)

"The goods are decent, the price can be negotiated."

"Teeth are fine, bring them back for some training."

Those scenes of humiliation that had etched themselves into his bones now surged back under the spore stimulation.

Weir could barely breathe, his whole body weighed down immobile by the heaviness.

But suddenly, a warm light broke through the gray hallucination.

It was as if some warm power was slowly unfolding at the deepest part of his consciousness.

He opened his eyes and looked, at the edge of the chaotic illusion, a figure stood in the sky, reaching out to him like the first ray of sunlight shining into the abyss.

It was Louis, his silhouette was blurry, yet in Weir's heart, it appeared extraordinarily bright, like some existence that couldn't be looked at directly, above the mundane, above all.

It wasn't just the image of the Red Tide Lord, but the only target in his life truly worthy of loyalty, beyond doubt, unshakable.

Just like how dawn illuminates the snowfield, it will inevitably rise without prayers.

At this moment, all the oppression seemed to find a fulcrum.

Weir took a deep breath, suddenly speeding up his breathing rhythm, the fighting energy within him boiled like fiery flames.

Fighting energy broke through the critical point, bursting into a circle of crimson flame in an instant, then condensed to rotate around him like fire.

The whole stone hall seemed to echo his awakening, red light exploded in the mist, reflecting Weir's tightly closed eyes and clenched jaw.

Finally, he broke through.

The red light in the trial room gradually faded, leaving behind only a faint heat wandering in the low air.

Weir quietly sat where he was, still surrounded by the lingering afterglow of fighting energy.

He felt as if he had gone through an unspeakable storm, his whole body peeled back and reshaped again.

The fighting energy in his chest circulated with unprecedented smoothness, as if even his heartbeat synchronized with it.

He slowly opened his eyes, the first sight he saw was that familiar figure.

Louis stood behind the glass, slightly surprised, yet unable to hide his relief.

"Did I... succeed?" Weir whispered to himself, his throat a bit dry.

Meanwhile, light discussions were heard from outside the training area door.

"Impossible? How long?!"

"He hadn't even been inside for half an hour, right?!"

"Did something go wrong?"

"No," Alian's voice was filled with shock, "Being able to maintain red fighting energy overflow in this state shows he's completed the transcendent breakthrough."

"So he really did it in less than thirty minutes?!"

For a moment, even the alchemy assistants tuning the fog temperature control system stopped their actions and spoke dumbly, "The Lord just said he wanted to experience the steaming phase himself, and I barely set the temperature to standard... yet that guard directly completed the breakthrough?"

Louis chuckled softly upon hearing this, shook his head with an expression of helplessness, though his eyes clearly showed surprise and relief, "Forget it, I won't join in the excitement today."

Alian stared at the direction of the trial room for a long time, finally murmuring, "I remember... the fastest recorded time took twenty-six hours. And he did it in less than half an hour."

The door slowly opened.

Weir stood up, walked out step by step, the fighting energy on him had been retracted.

A faint scent of medicine and spores still lingered in the air, but it mattered little to him now.

He walked to the crowd, stood as usual, without showing any excitement.

Until Louis approached him, raised a hand, and patted his shoulder, "Well done."

Weir opened his mouth, but did not speak.

This affirmation weighed heavier than any honor in the world for him.

From this moment on, he truly stepped into the ranks of Red Tide Territory's top forces, able to contribute more to Lord Louis.

Weir bowed his head, solemnly said, "Thank you, my lord."

Louis smiled, "Don't be polite with me."

Weir nodded, unable to conceal the excitement in his eyes, "How does it feel?"

"Much stronger, my lord," Weir earnestly replied, "The flow of fighting energy is so much clearer than before... and I've awakened my bloodline talent."

Those around him were stunned. The percentage of those awakening bloodline talent was not high, barely thirty percent among extraordinary knights.

"[Bloodline Talent: Absolute Defense]," Weir whispered, "I can sense it... once activated, the fighting energy automatically spreads into a protective domain centered on me, able to defend those by my side."

The scene fell quiet momentarily.

"A range-type defense then?" someone murmured in amazement.

"That's really suitable for a guard..."

Alian muttered, "Most bloodline talents lean towards offense... such pure defensive types are extremely rare."

Yet Louis's expression showed little surprise, as peak knights were almost destined to awaken bloodline talents, and Weir already had that potential.

He turned to Alian, "Wasn't a temporary training field set up on the east side of the canyon? Take him there, test the specific effect."

"Yes!" Alian recovered and promptly obeyed.

The group quickly moved locations.

The canyon terrain was enclosed long ago used by the Shadow Valley team for practical training, perfect for a talent test.

Several simple wooden viewing platforms stood at the training field's edge, surrounded by dozens of Red Tide Knights.

Everyone knew this would be a rare talent combat demonstration.

Weir stood at the center of the field, took a deep breath, and gently catalyzed his internal fighting energy.

[Bloodline Talent: Absolute Defense] Activate!

With the rhythm of his breathing, a ring of faint crimson radiance appeared on his body, rapidly expanding into a semi-transparent shield centered on him, covering a range of about four meters, encasing him along with several nearby Red Tide Knights.

Chapter 577: Weir's Bloodline Talent_3

The shield was as thin as a water curtain, yet incredibly stable.

The air and sounds seemed subdued, and even the dust on the ground settled down quietly.

The first test knight stepped forward, an extraordinary knight wielding a spear, with a burly stature and intense fighting energy.

He concentrated for a moment, channeling the fighting energy to his arm, unleashing a burst of blue flames along the spear, fiercely stabbing at the shield.

"Boom!"

Sparks exploded, and the spear tip was bounced back as if struck by a heavy hammer. The tester retreated three steps, the spear in his hand buzzing incessantly, his palm faintly numb, and an expression of astonishment on his face.

The second knight switched to a wide-bladed heavy sword, infusing it with fighting energy with both hands, swinging a horizontal slash with an edge that was palpable.

The shield's surface rippled faintly, dissipating the entire slash, with not even a hint of light penetrating through.

"That strike, in actual combat, would be enough to cleave through a rock wall." He gritted his teeth as he spoke.

The third tester was an elite specializing in penetration and rapid combo attacks, channeling fighting energy to his fingertips, delivering three piercing strikes, each carrying red spiral fighting energy.

As before, the shield only rippled, with no flaw in sight.

Low murmurs of awe rose from the observation platform, with everyone's gaze nearly focused on the glowing red barrier around Weir.

"This is unbelievable..."

"These are all genuine extraordinary knights, and yet they had no effect."

"And he just broke through!"

"With such talent, if used to protect Lord Louis, it would be a blessing from the heavens."

"Next, we'll conduct the magic test." This time, Louis stepped forward personally.

He lifted his right palm, a strand of red magic power gathering at his fingertip. Even a slight fluctuation made many people subconsciously hold their breath.

Louis did not use full strength, not wanting others to know his true power, only using the most basic magic power to initiate the compression of the fireball technique.

"Boom!"

The fireball shot towards the shield, and before it even made contact, it was repelled by a red light, instantly dissipating.

Then he sequentially tested the ice cone combo, wind pressure slash, followed by a small lightning explosion.

Each spell was steadily blocked by the shield, with not even an aftershock managing to penetrate through.

The final lightning explosion fell, the shield shook violently, its light vibrating like ripples.

Weir's face turned pale, sweat beaded on his forehead, yet he still stood erect.

Seeing him struggling, Louis finally withdrew his hand slowly.

The scene fell into silence once more.

"Using magic of this level... it still didn't break?" someone exclaimed softly.

"This is no ordinary shield anymore..."

"And he's only at the initial transcendent stage!"

"And those few spells of Lord Louis just now already far exceeded what any knight could withstand."

"The precision in magic power control... it doesn't seem like it was just a casual strike."

Louis slowly withdrew his hand, ignoring the exclamations, his gaze lingering contemplatively on Weir.

He silently evaluated the characteristics and practical value of this shield in his mind.

Weir's 'Absolute Defense' could instantly cover several people, creating an exceptionally rare safe zone amidst the battlefield chaos.

The dual resistance to physical and magical impacts means it wouldn't just be a personal survival tactic, but it could become a critical fulcrum for commanders to form formations, relocate wounded, and break through encirclements.

"This ability could save many lives on the battlefield in the future." he said softly, his tone bearing the certainty that came after contemplation.

Weir spoke softly, "I always felt this was some kind of arrangement."

He lifted his head to look at Louis, his eyes filled with a near-fanatical conviction, "This is the power bestowed upon me to protect you."

Louis smiled upon hearing this, "Then from today on, you will be the last shield by my side."

Weir stood upright, his shoulders instinctively tensing, as if he had taken on some kind of oath.

He bowed deeply, his voice firm, "Yes, my lord!"

Chapter 578: Plunder and Growth

The hull swayed slightly as the mast and iron cable occasionally clanged.

A few pirates squatted on the deck, repairing cracks, their tools clanging against the planks, carrying the scent of damp and salt.

The Mad King's latest order was to take a detour to the southern route, intercept a merchant fleet from the Green Tide Guild, seize the designated cargo and people, and then deliver them to his flagship deep at sea.

Bag was the captain of this small team, but he had no idea what the cargo was. It was sealed so tightly that even they hadn't caught a glimpse.

Some crew members said it was an alchemical product that could ignite the entire sea. Others claimed it was an offering the Mad King intended to present to some god of the old religion.

No one cared about the truth; it was merely seasoning for their dull days at sea.

The fact was that they had hijacked a Green Tide Guild ship, yet received no loot.

Moreover, a third of their fleet was lost in the attack, with even the first mate falling in that wave.

Now, thirty bodies of their brothers lay in the waters of Breaker Bay, traded for a pile of bottles, jars, and a few captives.

Bag sat in the cabin, picking fish bones from his teeth while slowly chewing:

"Thirty brothers traded for a bunch of ghostly trinkets in iron boxes and a few men—not even half a woman. The Mad King might want treasure, but we don't even have half a barrel of rum."

After speaking, he kicked out in frustration, causing a barrel to topple over, spilling the rum mixed with the scent of blood into the seams of the planks. The pirate crew quickly moved to set it upright.

"Boss is right." A nearby pirate leaned against the barrel, swinging a flask, his tongue slightly slurred.

"Thirty brothers drowned in that godforsaken place for nothing. The Mad King is truly insane. Just finished with the Empire and dared to provoke the Federation; does he not fear getting bitten off?"

"Hmph, it's not the first time." A scar-covered helmsman beside him used his teeth to bite off a cork, downing a large gulp.

"The Mad King wants to stuff the entire ocean into his pants but has no understanding of those alchemical things. We lost people and still don't know what exactly we transported."

"Maybe he knows." The old ship's doctor, sitting by the water hatch, spoke slowly, "We are simply not worthy to know."

As soon as the words left his mouth, laughter erupted on deck.

"Not worthy, my ass?"

"Am I unworthy of taking a shit?"

"If the Mad King sends me to deliver those ghostly jars again, I'd rather tie a rock and jump into the sea!"

"Who knows? Maybe he really wants us to jump."

"Hey, seriously, anyone know what's inside those iron boxes? Could they be the Mad King's own broken teeth?"

"It's definitely not gold coins."

"Then it has no value."

As they shouted, someone propped a foot on the railing, looking out over the distant gray sea.

"I remember, on the way back after making a delivery last time," began a young pirate, hesitant but speaking nonetheless, "we saw a rundown port at the edge of the frozen sea on the southern route. I wonder if it's finished."

Everyone fell silent for a moment.

"You're sure it wasn't a hallucination?"

"There was never a port there before."

A pirate suddenly recalled, "Wasn't it because we had to complete a mission that we held back and didn't raid it?"

"Oh, oh. My hands were itching then, wanted to rush up and grab some women. But the mission took priority, so I just had to watch." Bag, drunk, but remembered it too.

"Heh, heh, but isn't this the way back now?" A pirate turned excitedly toward Bag, "Boss, this time, can't we go in and take a look?"

"Brothers." Bag leaned against the railing, his voice hoarse and drunk, "Haven't forgotten, have we? Thirty brothers, and what do we bring back?"

A belly full of seawater, a few broken jars, and the Mad King's remark, 'Well done.' Can't come out this time and come back empty-handed, right?

Tonight, alter course, head that way. Whether it's a new port or a ghost den, let's go in and take a look. If they really dare receive goods, stockpile rum, and women...don't blame us for being impolite."

He shrugged his shoulders: "The rum is yours, the gold coins are mine, the silver coins everyone shares, and the women...grab them quickly."

Amid laughter, he gritted his teeth, adding: "This trip, let's scoop something for ourselves too."

The crew erupted into cheering waves.

"Rum!"

"Women!"

"Silver coins!"

"Boss did good!"

"Mad King wants the jars, we want the beauties!"

Bag hummed under his breath, as if in response or perhaps cursing, "Empire's new port? Perfect for the brothers' feast."

.....

The sea fog was as thick as a sticky spider web, with the light barely reaching two steps ahead.

"Light sighted to the south!" Suddenly, a shout came from the top of the mast, the scout's voice tinged with unconcealed excitement.

Upon hearing the cry, Bag flipped from the side of a barrel, slipped underfoot, and grabbed the mast to avoid falling.

He exhaled, his nostrils filled with the scent of rum: "Where is it?"

In the distance, a flicker of light danced in the fog, appearing and disappearing like a beckoning prostitute, drawing them in.

They approached slowly.

Most of the crew could only vaguely make out the outlines undulating in the fog, the swaying lights, some still wondering if it was the firewood of a fishing village.

"So close and no movement, it's most likely empty." A limping helmsman muttered.

"Bull, look at those warehouses in rows, calling it a fishing village?" Another shook his head, eyes fixed firmly on the glow in the fog.

Bag ignored them, lifting his old but polished brass telescope for a clearer view.

The lighthouse was sizable, the seawall extended straight into the sea, the warehouses neatly arranged along the shore, and there were indeed figures patrolling with torches atop the tower.

Chapter 579: Plunder and Development (Part 2)

"Damn..." Bag muttered under his breath, his voice tinged with traces of alcohol and gritted teeth, "Who the hell said this was a shabby little port? This doesn't look like a port... It looks more like the offshore treasury of some dog official from the Empire."

He kicked the side of the ship, feeling a slight urge to retreat, but it quickly dissipated. Despite the alcohol filling his head, his mind was still functioning.

"Saying we won't fight now? Then I might have to jump into the sea myself tonight." Bag said quietly, his mouth twisting into a grin, "If this bunch of drunkards hears I've backed down, they'd tie me to the mast and feed me to the seabirds."

He suddenly turned back, raising his voice, filled with both alcohol and fury: "Don't charge during the day, do it at night! We'll launch a surprise attack under the cover of darkness."

The helmsman had just nodded and hadn't turned around when the cabin erupted into chaos.

"Brilliant, boss!"

"Hey, his brain hasn't completely burned out, he really has a way with things!"

"Now that's a strategy!"

"Killing at night, clean and sharp!"

Some started clapping the deck, while others directly raised their axes and spun in a circle as if they were about to dance.

The air was filled with drunkenness, the smell of sweat, and excited shouts.

Bag had intended to curse a bit more, but with all the chaotic flattery, he couldn't help but let his lips curl upwards.

"A bunch of drunkards, another compliment and I'll start believing I'm an Imperial general." He cursed, but didn't stop them.

He even stepped forward, looking at that light in the mist, which seemed more and more like a seductive woman.

Bag chuckled, raising his hand: "Turn the rudder west, slow down. No noise, wait for my command."

.....

The meeting hall was located on the high third floor of Dawn Port's administrative building. The building's exterior walls were painted red and blue, completely different from the wooden huts of the past.

The only unchanged feature was the emblem of the sun meeting the tides hanging on the exterior wall.

From the window, the entire port basin and newly built breakwater could be seen, with several ships docked at designated spots, as the fog gradually dispersed, revealing the port's outline.

Louis sat in the main seat, wearing an everyday uniform without any insignia.

Eliot, Russell, Bernard, and Rhys stood by the table, ready to report on the progress of their respective work.

Everyone was fully prepared, knowing that today's reports were not only about the future of Dawn Port but also directly related to their standing in Louis's eyes.

In the corner of the meeting hall, a conference board from the wooden hut era was still preserved.

The surface was wiped clean, with the six phases of port construction and current progress listed in Red Tide scripts.

Red lines marked the completed parts, while the unfinished parts were attached with note papers, appearing somewhat cluttered in places.

Even though the board's content was clear, Louis insisted each official report in person.

"Data is data, judgment is judgment." Louis glanced at the seated individuals beside the table and didn't waste words: "Start with the port engineering."

Russell stood up and reported: "Currently, the basics are ninety-five percent complete. The breakwater structure is stable, berths and tracks have been put into dispatch, and the sewage channels are smooth.

The cargo handling area is not yet finished; materials were delayed by two days, expected delivery within fourteen days."

Louis nodded slightly and then asked: "What about the transportation tracks? Will they freeze and crack in winter?"

Russell looked down at the board in his hand: "Pressure tests have been conducted. Problematic areas have been reinforced with modified buffer adhesive, it will hold."

"And the welded seams?"

"We've inspected a part of them, temperature differences have little effect, and arrangements have been made to check all remaining seams."

"Hmm, treat it seriously." Louis murmured, "Simply saying there's no issue won't stop a snowstorm."

Russell didn't retort, just nodded.

"Next one." Louis gestured with his hand.

Bernard stood up; he was now the shipbuilding chief, having spent a lifetime building ships. Sitting at the meeting table to officially report for the first time, he looked a bit nervous.

"Uh... The batch of warships named Dawn, nine have been constructed." He swallowed, "All have undergone launch tests and have been through several combat drills... During simulated enemy attacks, they successfully intercepted twice and showed good pursuit accuracy."

He paused, glanced quickly at Louis, and added another sentence: "Average hit rate is above eighty percent."

"Tested in extreme seas?"

"Scheduled for ice field test next week. The ribs are of double structure, with buffer space inside."

Louis nodded.

Seeing him silent, Bernard mustered the courage to continue: "For our two new models, Dawn and Tide, the blueprints have been finalized... remodeled based on your previous ideas."

He hesitated for a moment, then added softly, "Larger, with more draft, capable of carrying people and cargo, with reserved steam engine space in the aft compartment... also based on your last sketch."

"Can it withstand sudden gusts in sea fog?"

"Yes, the keel is made of Cold Iron. I used to not believe in these fanciful ideas, but now I'm truly convinced. Your previous designs seemed odd at first, but all worked after trying them."

Bernard scratched his head, looking a bit embarrassed, "I've spent decades building ships, first time sitting at this table. To be honest... a bit uneasy."

Louis gently said: "As long as you explain clearly. Take it slowly."

He paused, "Keep an eye on the blueprints, the rhythm of the shipyard mustn't be disrupted. There's no rush, but no lapses allowed."

The third to stand was Eliot, as stalwart as ever in demeanor.

"Three rounds of fleet training completed. Current tactics cover night combat, long-range projection, and boarding operations. Sailors are in stable condition."

"Casualties?"

"Three minor injuries, fractures, no fatalities. Medical team keeps pace, and food supply is stable."

Louis didn't respond immediately, tapping the table as he thought, then said: "Increase the frequency of knights' hot meals, serve hot soup during night shift changes."

Eliot nodded.

The last was Rhys, now the city dispatching officer and one of the earliest refugees to join Louis.

Louis initially discovered her management talent through the Daily Intelligence System and promoted her as a temporary coordinator for Red Tide Territory's construction, gradually advancing to this day.

Dressed in official robes for the first time, his demeanor was somewhat reserved, but he spoke faster than the others, as if accustomed to switching between multiple affairs.

"The urban area layout is stable, and coordination among residential areas, workshops, and markets is smooth. Three bathhouses, two theaters, and two groups each for laundry and infirmaries. Population over three thousand, security is relatively stable."

"Anyone still sleeping outside?"

Rhys shook his head: "Currently none, but some workers are still housed in wooden huts; seventy winter shelters are still lacking."

"Building material status?"

"Inventory is at fifty percent."

"Submit the plan to me in three days. If insufficient, transfer from Red Tide City."

Louis paused and added: "Don't let people worry about leaking roofs this winter."

Rhys replied: "I'll have someone keep an eye on things these two nights, especially in corner housing areas. If any stove issues arise, our warehouse has spare brazier baskets, enough for a few days."

Louis nodded: "Good job, keep an eye on it, ensure no one is left behind, especially in schools and hospitals."

"Understood, I'll reconfirm with the hospital administrator and also check on the school." Rhys nodded in response.

After Rhys sat down, several officials who hadn't reported yet took turns standing up to report on matters like port patrol scheduling, shipyard logistics, supply procurement, and external district site selection.

Their tones, although not as seasoned as the main executives, were clear and their answers based on practical experience.

Louis didn't interrupt, simply listened quietly, occasionally jotting down notes.

Although he had been away from Dawn Port for some time, the city hadn't loosened up; in fact, it was more orderly than he had anticipated.

Once the last person sat down, Louis swept a gaze around the room and said: "There are three months left before the sea freezes. Our goal is not just to complete a project, but the foundation of all Dawn Port.

City, port, shipyard, citizens, everything must remain tight. Ensuring everyone's stable winter is our most crucial task moving forward. Though there are many tasks, as long as plans are clear and protocols are precise, nothing is impossibly unmanageable."

After the words fell, the meeting hall was silent for a moment, followed by the sound of chairs being moved in unison.

The officials gradually stood up, first nodding, then applauding in unison.

The meeting then adjourned, and the crowd gradually filed out of the hall. Some were exchanging whispers, while others had already taken out notebooks to modify scheduling sheets, all walking with quicker steps.

Once the last footsteps faded away, the hall returned to silence, leaving only Eliot behind as Louis had requested him to stay.

Chapter 580: Hunting Pirates

The night deepened, and the firelight in the conference hall gradually extinguished.

Everyone left the hall with documents and orders in hand, Eliot was about to follow them out.

"Eliot, stay here." came Louis's voice from behind.

Eliot paused, then promptly turned back to close the door, leaving only the two of them in the room.

Louis looked up, smiled slightly: "Don't stand like that, we're not in an interrogation, sit down."

Eliot hesitated for a moment before taking a seat, sitting straight and appearing somewhat reserved.

Despite their long acquaintance, he still held a genuine respect for Louis from the bottom of his heart.

"What's the status of the fleet's armament?" Louis asked in a calm tone, as though inquiring about daily matters.

"All Dawn-class main ships are fully armed, six vessels, and one light cruiser," Eliot reported clearly.

"Each Dawn-class ship is equipped as a warship, with twelve main cannons in two rows, eight secondary cannons, and fitted with rotating crossbow cannons and magic energy blast cannons.

Each ship has eighty crew members, forty sailors, twenty gunners, and another sixty knights organized into groups, responsible for boarding and defense.

The ammunition and Magic Explosion Bullets are sufficient for three rounds of full fleet salvos, the shore cannons and crossbows positions have been calibrated, ready to support any sea engagement at any time."

Louis nodded slightly, mentally calculating.

Everything was nearly as he envisioned, even slightly better than expected; the fleet's configuration finally had the credibility it needed.

"Very good." Louis moved to the window, pushed open a pane; the cold wind carrying salt brushed in.

He then turned to Eliot and said, "Last night, a merchant convoy came to me seeking help, saying they were attacked by pirates in the Northern Bay, several ships were raided, including one carrying the merchant's family.

After plundering the goods, those pirates fled southward, eventually our reconnaissance ship spotted their tracks at the edge of the fog, appearing to head in this direction."

Louis sounded as if discussing something trivial: "They probably think we're their next catch."

He paused, his gaze falling on the port lights outside the window, where the defense system he personally helped design at Dawn Port appeared faint in the night.

This defense system focused on practicality, with chain crossbow towers, stone throwing platforms, and boiling oil traps set on the outer dam's edge, and the inner port built with thick wooden and stone walls with fire protection trenches; some fortresses even equipped with Magic Explosion Bullet chutes.

While it doesn't compare to the magical defense of the Imperial Capital, it's sufficient to resist non-large-scale Fishman and pirate assaults.

While everything seemed flawless on paper, Eliot still felt a touch of anxiety.

This would be Dawn Port's first real encounter, rather than a drill.

He promptly stood up, expression stern: "Sir, should I order a stand-by?"

"Of course we need to stand by," Louis smiled, gesturing for him to sit down, "But don't be too tense. It's not that serious."

He returned to the table, tapping the tip of the pen lightly on the desk: "This time, we may as well treat it as an experiment. The firepower, steering speed, communication, boarding coordination of the Dawn-class... It's time to see if our ships can hold up against the waves."

"It sounds like a battle, yet you speak so calmly."

"Because we're prepared." Louis answered with a smile, "Just proceed at the regular pace, no need to be nervous, this is an opportunity, not a threat."

Other ships can use Magic Explosion Bullets directly to destroy enemy vessels, but that main ship must be preserved, no one is allowed to mistakenly harm it.

Its structural integrity is crucial for the Test Knight's boarding and jump coordination, more importantly, the captives on that ship, I want them alive. Anyway, those pirates can't escape our firing net."

Eliot nodded, his voice filled with respect: "Understood, I will arrange the fleet's rhythm well, ensuring not to let you down."

"Good." Louis stood up, patted his shoulder, "Relax, if it really comes to action, I'll be on board too."

Eliot's face changed slightly, hesitated for a moment, then spoke: "Sir, forgive my presumptuousness. You shouldn't board the ship yourself, no matter how small the risk, you shouldn't expose yourself on the sea."

Louis stunned for a moment, then waved with a smile: "I'm not that fragile, Eliot. If I don't see it with my own eyes, how could I know how your efforts have paid off?"

Eliot was silent for a while, eventually lowered his head: "Understood, Sir. Just... please make sure to stay safe."

"I assure you, I won't take any risks, just want to see if they perform as I desired." Louis chuckled, waved his hand to signal him to get busy.

After Eliot left, he didn't return to his room for rest but went directly to the docks, summoning the deputy and helmsmen to begin adjusting the night's departure deployment.

Only Louis remained inside, he reached out to close the window, keeping the cold wind outside.

The reason the merchant convoy sought his help was naturally made up; the real reason was to cover the intelligence source.

Moreover, according to yesterday's Daily Intelligence System alert, the ship didn't just carry plunderers; the intelligence indicated the presence of an alchemy master.

An alchemy master, a title so rare that it's counted in the entire Empire, and even the world.

Hillco perhaps with his infinite resource support, or perhaps with his achievements on Magic Explosion Bullets, already had alchemy master's prowess.

Such individuals hold rare formulas and principles, whichever side they specialize in, they are invaluable assets.

If that person could be captured, Red Tide would advance technologically in that aspect measured by years.

This is why he laid the net with the Dawn fleet.

If it were only for eradication, a round of Magic Explosion Bullet bombardment would suffice.

But he needed that main ship to capture the alchemy master, also to test Dawn's firepower, pressure resistance, and combat coordination.