

Winter 581

Chapter 581: Hunting Pirates (2)

"A double advantage." He murmured softly, with both calculations and anticipation.

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The night was heavy, and the sea fog rolled over Breakwave Bay, like brewing a silent storm.

Twelve black-sailed ships rose and fell among the waves, shadows of masts intertwined, and the beast bone decorations on the ship's prow creaked against the tides.

Bag stepped onto the railing, his flask swaying in his hand: "Hahaha, sixty brothers, twelve ships, enough to give them a fright."

The crew responded, shouts mixed with the sound of the waves, some were banging on the barrel lids with their drinks, others gesturing with long knives.

Laughing and cursing echoed one after another, filled with a long-suppressed agitation.

"Boss, are we really moving now? The fog is so thick, no one can see anyone." The deputy helmsman leaned over, softly reminding.

"Can't see them? That's perfect, they're in the light, we're in the dark, a heaven-sent opportunity!" Bag pulled out a grin, "If we take Dawn Port tonight, I'll let the brothers drink for three days!"

With those words, the fleet erupted.

Sailors banged on the oars, whistles and shouts mingled into chaos.

Bag raised his spyglass, aiming at the distant shadows.

The fog rolled on that side, the port lights flickered on and off, as if taunting them.

Didn't see any patrol ships, nor hear any alarm bells, empty enough to fuel the fervor in his heart.

He bared his teeth, abruptly turned and shouted: "All ships hear my command! Maintain formation and follow me into the port!"

Twelve black-sailed ships moved instantly, sails billowed, the sea cracked beneath their hulls.

Roaring oars echoed in the fog, crew shouting, cursing, shoving one another, the atmosphere like boiling petroleum.

"Drink the Imperial People's blood tonight!"

"The Mad King's tooth is still here!"

Bag laughed, flinging his flask, spilling strong liquor into the sea: "Advance! Send them to hell!"

The fleet roared forward like beasts in the fog, oars thundered, sails trembled, their laughter and roars intertwined.

Yet in the next moment, a low, strange sound came from far across the sea.

Boom!

A magic explosion bullet detonated on the sea ahead of them, fiery waves surged up, the nearest ship was overturned instantly.

Firelight from the explosion spread in the darkness, seawater vaporized into white mist from high temperatures, shattered wood rained down like rain.

The pirates aboard that ship barely managed even a scream, the hull split into two, half the deck ripped away by the shock wave, the mast consumed by flames, sinking like a giant fiery stick into the sea.

The air was filled with the scent of charred wood and seared flesh.

Another ship nearby was hit by the lifted wave, the mast fell, several sailors tossed directly into the fire.

Someone floundered in the water shouting for help, but was swept away by the shock wave of the second explosion.

Bag staggered from the blast, nearly falling, gripping the railing tightly, eyes wide, staring at the fire, his throat dry as if scorched.

"Boss, is that a magic explosion bullet?!" Someone shrieked, voice trembling.

"Yes, but the power... something's wrong!" Bag gritted his teeth, eyes reddened by the firelight.

Flames churned, the fog completely torn apart, he saw clearly.

A complete ship disintegrated in the explosion, the planks turning to ashes.

He had seen Jade Federation's magic explosion bullets before, but those would at most flip the deck, whereas these seemed as if they were going to upheave the entire sea.

He swallowed hard with the salty air, muttered lowly: "They're damn bombing the sea."

Explosion light extended constantly, one after another, yet not aiming at their main ship, instead exploding around their fleet.

Every explosion accompanied by ripping screams and the sound of breaking boards, a tightening ring of fire enclosing them.

More explosion lights flashed in the distance, one after another, yet not directly targeting their main ship, instead tracing an arc on the sea, landing in the surrounding waters.

Explosions connected into a ring, shock waves and the waves lifted by high temperatures pressed in, only then did they understand, this wasn't a misfire, it was an encirclement.

The pirates' laughter vanished completely.

Some were scared to their knees, others gripped the mast desperately, the previous arrogance blown away, leaving only fear.

"Steady! Everyone steady!" Bag bellowed, voice almost swallowed by the waves, "They're not aiming at us, they want to trap us here!"

The fog was illuminated by the explosive fire, turning the sea outside Dawn Port into a massive ring of fire, with the flashes of gunfire forming a complete encirclement.

"We've been tricked!" Bag turned sharply, his voice hoarse, "All ships, listen up, break out with all your might! Don't let them trap us like dogs!"

His response was the continuous sound of explosions and roars.

Bag's heart pounded wildly, sweat and seawater mixed together as he looked up to see a gigantic silhouette appearing behind the fog, the gunfire from the dam lining up to illuminate the outline of Dawn Port.

Through the fog, an ironclad ship broke through the waves, its metal hull reflecting the firelight, the massive mast casting a shadow on the sea.

The Dawn appeared right in front of them, like a steel beast crawling out from the deep sea.

The searchlight at the bow illuminated the sea, piercing the fog with white light, and for the first time, the pirates could clearly see the massive object, with its thick armor and densely packed cannon ports. It slowly turned, aiming its main guns at them.

"What... is that..." someone murmured, their voice trembling.

Bag hadn't even had time to curse before the flash from the gun barrels.

Boom!

Six Dawn-class warships were neatly arranged, their metal hulls reflecting a cold light under the glare of the fire.

But strangely, their artillery wasn't aimed at Bag's flagship.

Explosions formed a circle around them, forcing their ship closer and closer to the center.

"They didn't miss..." Bag felt a chill rise from his feet, "They did it on purpose, they want something on this ship, or they want us alive."

"Fight back! Fight back for me!" he roared, ordering the crew to man the cannons.

A few old ship cannons and crossbows mounted on wooden frames fired in unison, the projectiles hitting the ironclad of the Dawn, merely sparking a few firecrackers.

The sound of crossbow bolts clashing against metal was as slight as toothpicks breaking, utterly meaningless.

"Damn it, this thing can't be pierced!" the deputy helmsman shouted, looking in horror at the ironclad that didn't even react.

The Dawn continued to close in, the shadow of the giant ship towering over them like a mountain.

The pirates frantically loaded gunpowder, reloaded crossbow bolts, only to find their firepower was a joke, all attacks easily swallowed by that thick armor.

"What kind of hell is this..." someone said, voice trembling.

Bag's face turned pale, the helm in his hand creaked under his grip, and he truly regretted now.

Regretted not completing the mad king's task honestly, regretted that moment of greed.

If only he had delivered the goods back to the Mad Fang ship, he might still be drinking rum now instead of watching death approach.

Bag gritted his teeth fiercely, the approaching ironclad ship reflected in his pupils as he hoarsely roared, "Break out! All ships, charge with all your might! Don't wait to be trapped!"

"Full speed! Charge!" The sailors were in chaos, ropes flying around, sail lines snapping in the gale.

But the undercurrents entangled them like chains, the hull fixed at the center of wind and waves.

The pirates pushed, crashed, and cursed each other. Someone frantically tried to ignite a cannon to fight back but was overturned by the shock wave.

The sound of oars, roars, and explosions intertwined into a cacophony.

The gun ports on the Dawn flashed again, but this time the shells hit the crest of waves in front of them, the resulting fire wall nearly capsizing the vessel.

Subsequently, six Dawn-class warships gradually closed in, the sound of metal hulls rubbing against each other echoed through the sea fog, like invisible chains tightening.

The boarding bridges were lowered, iron chains smashing into the sea, splashing waves, as the Red Tide Knights leaped onto Bag's flagship.

Their voices were loud and cold, "Heads down, crouch! Or be slain immediately!"

The pirates were in disarray, someone dropping their weapon in terror, someone hesitating a moment to fight back, only to be torn apart by blades cutting through with Fighting Energy the next second.

Blood permeated the air, firelight reflecting off the Knights' armor plates, like a merciless judgment.

"Heads down! Heads down, crouch!" a Knight shouted, the pirate beneath him frightened into kneeling and holding his head.

Those still holding weapons had their throats or chests slit by Fighting Energy within moments, unable to let out a complete scream.

Bag watched the scene before him, his face ashen.

He understood in his heart that this was no longer resistance, but slaughter.

He shook all over, laying down the curved sword in his hand, kneeling slowly to hold his head.

The cold sea breeze swept past, the blood droplets splashing onto the back of his neck.

Two Red Tide Knights stepped forward, dragging Bag up and binding his arms with a coarse rope.

The sound of the rope tightening echoed in his ears, but Bag had neither the strength nor the courage to resist, his spirit utterly extinguished.

Chapter 582: Alchemy Master

The sea is burning, the firelight breaking through the fog, reflecting on the hull of the Dawn, red like molten metal.

Louis stands before the observation window in the command cabin, quietly watching the sea being torn apart by cannon fire.

After each volley, the recorder beside him bends his head, noting the hit rate, cabin temperature, and armor defense strength.

The writing on the paper grows denser, the scratch of the pen tip drowned out by the deep rumbling.

Without asking, Louis can gauge the results from the frequency of vibrations and the helm speed response: precise firepower, smooth sailing, undistorted armor.

Everything exceeds his expectations; the performance of the Dawn not only matches the design but even surpasses calculated values.

Louis feels a satisfaction rising in his heart; this ship is among the first batch of Red Tide ships, and future designs will only improve with experience.

Beside him, Bernard stares through the observation glass, the fiery sea before him nearly making him forget to breathe.

The Dawn's cannon fire flickers in the fog, each volley like a thunderclap, shaking the entire sea into a frenzy.

Just within their sight, a pirate vessel is hit by a Magic Explosion Bullet, the whole ship ruptures as if lifted from the inside, tongues of fire leap from the ship's belly, turning the surrounding seawater dark red.

Planks and silhouettes are thrown into the air, disintegrating in the flames.

Another pirate ship tries to evade, but is hit in the stern by the Dawn's secondary cannon.

Amidst the flashing explosions, the sea rolls, debris tumbles in the waves.

Bernard can almost hear the wood splintering from afar.

He never imagined that a ship he built could wield such power, like a giant beast awakened, pressing numbingly against his chest.

Bernard subconsciously grips the railing tightly, his throat rolling: "God... its firepower is really... is this really our ship?"

Louis doesn't answer, only calmly watches the main ship being forced into the encirclement, pointing out some flaws he sees:

"The steering response is two seconds faster than expected; adjust firing rhythm for the next round, see if rapid-fire causes steam pressure imbalance."

"Yes, my lord." The recorder swiftly notes it down.

On the other side of the command deck, Eliot is issuing new firing commands.

His voice remains calm, but Louis can hear the tension in it, as if cautiously trying to make everything perfect.

He whispers to Weir: "Don't let him get too nervous."

"Understood." Weir nods and relays the order.

The battle continues for nearly five minutes. Six Dawn-class ships advance in a ring, their fire rhythmically pressuring the pirate fleet.

The pirates' counterattack shells hit the Dawn's hull, only scattering sparks without leaving a trace.

Eliot glances back from the command deck, his expression tight.

After a brief hesitation, he walks towards the observation window, lowers his voice: "My lord, shall we proceed with the boarding action?"

Louis doesn't turn, only watches the rolling sea of fire: "Decide for yourself."

Eliot pauses, takes a deep breath, turns back to the command deck, orders aloud: "Boarding team, prepare to move!"

As the signal flag rises, the ship vibrates, the boarding bridge is lowered.

The Red Tide Knights cross the iron bridge onto the enemy ship, their shouted commands clear: "Kneel with your heads down! Or face immediate execution!"

A few minutes later, the boarding bridge lowers again, the Red Tide Knights cross the iron bridge onto the enemy ship, their shouted commands clear: "Kneel with your heads down! Or face immediate execution!"

In the fog, firelight flickers, blades shine accordingly.

Eliot stands at the edge of the deck, staring at the main ship's combat until the last pirate is subdued, then he finally lowers the command flag in his hand, exhales deeply.

"It's over," he says softly.

Louis doesn't immediately respond, only watches the still-smoldering wreck: "Firefighting, salvage, sea lockdown. No remaining boats are permitted to leave."

"Understood," Eliot replies.

As the cabin door opens, the wind carries the smell of gunpowder inside.

Louis looks up towards the port, the firelight already illuminates half the sky.

The dock is crowded with people, laborers, guards, and craftsmen.

Most of them have heard rumors of pirates outside the port tonight and secretly sneaked out to watch the excitement.

Louis does not stop them.

In his view, allowing these people to witness the power of the Dawn firsthand is a good thing.

Those who once hammered iron plates, transported timber day and night, now watch their creation burning power across the sea.

Initially, the spectators quietly observed, fearing the fall of Dawn Port.

But when those few black sail ships are shattered and explosive fires roll across the sea, silence is immediately broken.

Someone starts to applaud, others raise their arms, shouting, cheers spread from one end of the dock to the other.

"Long live the Dawn!" "Long live Dawn Port!" "Long live Lord Louis!"

Eliot steps forward, still somewhat tense: "Everything is under control, my lord."

Louis watches the cheering crowd, his expression calm, but he quietly breathes a sigh of relief internally: "Well done, tonight Dawn Port can sleep peacefully."

The sea outside the port continues to burn, fog lights flicker, white smoke rises.

The Dawn quietly floats between fire and fog.

On the shore, a young shipwright watches the silhouette of the ship, his eyes shining, murmurs: "The ship we built... can swallow the sea."

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Merian is locked in a damp cell, hands and feet shackled in chains, curled in a corner, back against the cold wooden wall.

The walls seep water, the lighting is dim, the air mingles with the scent of alcohol.

Every time the waves hit the hull, the chains lightly sway, as if reminding him, he isn't dead yet.

Chapter 583: Alchemy Master (Part 2)

He was born in the Jade Federation, a commercial federation where the rich live lavishly and the poor are like dust.

People there regard money as blood, with social class almost engraved into their bones.

Merian's brother was sold to pay off the family's debts, becoming a chanting puppet, a slave transformed by alchemy, stripped of will.

That scene cast a lifelong shadow over him.

He was different from his brother, showcasing an astonishing memory from a young age.

The Green Tide Guild discovered him, took him away, praising his extraordinary talent.

In his youth, the Green Tide Guild selected him to take away, and since then, he has been confined to a laboratory among reagents.

Decades have passed, and now he is nearing sixty, nominally a Great Alchemist of the Jade Federation, with considerable academic prestige.

But before the guild, he remains just a researcher who obeys orders.

Merian is timid, never debates, and doesn't dare to resist.

Wherever the guild sends him, he goes, never asking why.

When the Northern Territory sampling task was issued, he didn't even dare hesitate, just nodded, signed, and was taken aboard a ship.

That obedience had long become instinct, like a deeper shackle.

And this time, setting out, Merian never imagined trouble would arise.

On the day the ship set sail, the sky was overcast; he just held the sample box in his room, silently praying for the task to end quickly.

Afterward, things became blurry, only fragments remained in his mind.

Collisions, screams, firelight, dense fog, and that scorching bloody smell.

He doesn't remember how he survived, only recalls that moment, his mind went blank.

All reason, research, companions, dignity, were submerged by fear, leaving only one thought, which was survival.

Now he can only stare blankly at the iron chain by his feet.

The memory surged back repeatedly like a tide, making him afraid to breathe too deeply.

Suddenly a low explosion sounded from outside the ship, like someone ignited thunder under the sea.

The entire cell shook violently, dust and wood chips fell from the ceiling.

Merian lifted his head, eyes fixated on the door's crack.

Outside came short footsteps, followed by metal clashes and agonizing screams.

His breath stopped, throat parched, that sound chaotic, hurried, like the whole ship being torn apart.

Countless possibilities flashed through his mind.

Could it be other pirates? Or perhaps the Federation sent someone to rescue him?

The thought barely emerged and his heart briefly held hope, but it was soon drowned by new fear.

What if it's not a rescue?

If the attackers outside saw him, deemed him useless, would they kill him outright?

The footsteps grew closer, accompanied by heavy impacts.

Merian curled tighter, body pressed against the cold wooden wall.

The iron chain beside him shook uncontrollably, only then did he realize it wasn't the ship swaying but himself trembling.

Soon, the door was smashed open, firelight flooding in.

He instinctively squinted, only to see a group of iron-clad people walk in.

The sound of metal plates scraping echoed in the cramped cabin, their footsteps steady and orderly.

Someone stretched out a hand to unlock his chain, not roughly, yet without warmth.

Merian was lifted up, almost supported as he was led out of the cell.

He looked up wanting to see their faces, but saw only shadows under the visors.

These were neither Federation soldiers nor pirates. He had never seen this armor style, faintly red amidst the black.

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As the fog dispersed, fragments of wood and charred canvas still drifted on the sea surface.

Dawn Port's dike remained intact, a night-long battle hadn't inflicted any damage on the port.

Because the battle happened not in the port area but in the offshore undercurrent belt.

Marine soldiers and craftsmen were orderly preparing salvage work, several small boats glided along the sea mist, retrieving debris to see what could be found.

By the next day's noon, Eliot hurried with a report.

"The battle results have been cleaned up, sir," Eliot said, with a barely contained excitement on his face.

"This experiment was highly successful, all data recorded. Dawn's main cannon accuracy maintained at over ninety percent, armor pressure test passed, ship operation stable, no instance of loss of control."

Louis nodded slightly: "Very good."

"Additionally," Eliot opened a scroll, "the captured pirates have all been interrogated.

They come from the Steel Tooth Mad King's fleet, this action was an independent fleet of his, aiming to seize a Jade Federation merchant ship and transfer the cargo and personnel to the Mad King."

Louis raised an eyebrow: "Jade Federation?"

"The target might be some kind of alchemy material, we've also taken it, and one person claims the Mad King is hiding around the Ice Abyss Islands in the Northern Sea, but the intelligence is uncertain.

And this attack on Dawn Port was a private action, lacking the Mad King's official orders."

"Display those executed for all to see." Louis' tone was flat, "Hang them outside the port, could reassure the residents a bit, letting them know this port is not something anyone can touch."

"Understood, sir."

Louis turned, his tone becoming lower: "After winter next year, we should take the initiative to strike. If Steel Tooth Mad King's forces are not eradicated, the route to the Southeast New Province will never be safe. Eliot, make solid preparations."

Eliot's expression jolted, then he straightened up: "Yes, sir. I believe the Dawn's fleet can withstand any enemy."

Louis smiled faintly, refocusing his gaze.

Just then, Eliot recalled another matter, hesitated briefly before speaking: "There are also a few rescued Federation Commerce Association personnel, sir."

Per your orders, they've been arranged to rest in the port administration's infirmary, we haven't conversed much with them. If you'd like to see them, I can arrange it now."

"I'll go after the meeting concludes."

"Yes." Eliot nodded, bowed, and retreated.

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Louis rode along the port road, wind blowing from the sea carrying salt and fishy scent.

Dawn Port loomed in the morning mist, the sound of hammers striking still audible from afar.

It was becoming a rising port city, dikes firm, docks aligned, new workshops' rooftops still emitting white smoke.

Hooves clacked crisply on cobblestones; Louis's mind was calculating that intelligence.

[1: Merian Schmidt, an Alchemy Master from the Jade Federation Bi Chao Guild, on the pirate ship near Dawn Port.]

Beyond that, the system provided no further intelligence.

Yet the term Alchemy Master was enough to tempt any Lord, such people barely appeared in the Northern Territory, let alone for him to encounter.

If truly retained, the Red Tide City's alchemy systems could advance ten years.

Louis had already decided, even if he doesn't want to stay, he must be retained.

But he knew pressing too hard could backfire.

If such a timid researcher were frightened, even the smartest mind would be useless.

Thus he decided to employ gentler methods.

The infirmary was suffused with the scent of herbs and sea salt.

A few rescued wounded from the pirate ship leaned against the wall, faces pale, lowly groaning.

While Merian sat in the corner, expression dazed, fingers unconsciously rubbing his clothes.

Louis recognized him at once; after all, the others were young, clearly alchemy apprentices.

On the other side, Merian sensed someone approaching, slightly lifted his head, used peripheral vision to scrutinize the young man in black noble attire.

The man bore a smile, yet conveyed an undeniable sense of pressure.

Merian immediately lowered his head, dared not look further but began calculating internally; this person should be the leader here and appears not to be bad.

If he interrogates, should he use a fake name? Then use money to ransom himself out? He had already composed several arguments mentally.

But the young man stopped before him, directly stated: "Merian Schmidt, Great Alchemist. Alchemist under the Jade Federation Bi Chao Guild, correct?"

Merian stiffened completely, facial color changed drastically.

Chapter 584: Merian and Xavier

"Merian Schmidt, Great Alchemist. An alchemist under the Jade Federation Bi Chao Guild, am I right?"

The air froze in that instant.

Merian's heart tightened suddenly; he had never mentioned his name, and no one had asked. Even those young alchemy apprentices only knew him as a researcher.

Yet the person before him stripped all his identities away with just one sentence.

His mind raced: Who could have said it? Was it those captured apprentices? Or had the guild already betrayed him?

He wanted to argue, to say it was just a misunderstanding, but his throat felt like it was clogged, unable to make a sound.

Fear crept up, inch by inch.

This sense of powerlessness was not unfamiliar. In the research institute of the Green Tide Guild, whenever his superiors questioned him coldly, he had felt this suffocation, only this time it was more complete.

Though Louis' gaze wasn't sharp, and even carried a hint of patience, his calm demeanor made it hard to breathe.

He observed the Great Alchemist before him and quickly weighed things in his mind.

This man was obviously timid, not even daring to make eye contact. If threatened or forced, Merian would only break down completely. Better to use another approach.

So Louis changed to a softer tone: "Actually, the Green Tide Guild already sold you to me. I spent a hefty sum to get a Great Alchemist."

Merian stared blankly at him, as if not quite understanding the meaning of the words.

So it was true after all; he had indeed been sold, and it perfectly matched the guild's profit-above-all-else nature.

The person before him obviously held control over his fate.

If he really had been sold to him, his only way out was to prove that he still had value.

He had stayed in the guild for decades, knew how to please those in power, and understood that only by showing his usefulness could he survive.

Merian hesitated for a moment, his voice trembling: "I... am skilled in biological alchemy. I can study the cycle of Magic Essence within organisms and adjust the adaptive structures of parasites... I understand the mechanism of regeneration reactions..."

Louis listened earnestly, his eyes shifting from coldness to interest, appearing calm on the surface, but in truth, his heart was tumultuous.

He was not an expert in the field of alchemy; he only knew bits and pieces from old books and reports.

But even he understood that the term "biological alchemy" represented astonishing potential.

It was not mere potion-making but research that could touch the foundations of life.

He mentally tried to piece together those fragmented concepts, such as making potions that could stop bleeding and heal injuries faster, making magical beasts obey orders, and enabling knights to last longer in battle...

These concepts might remain vague when it came to genuine alchemy outcomes, but just these alone could revolutionize the technology of Red Tide Territory.

If this knowledge could be mastered, even at the most basic level, it could double their survival advantage in the Empire.

Yet, he also wondered: Why would the Green Tide Guild send such a person out to sea?

An alchemist capable of researching the origin of life wouldn't be sent out casually.

Numerous questions flooded his mind: was it internal conflict? Some Federation conspiracy? A special mission? And why had pirates kidnapped him?

But soon Louis cast aside these questions; after all, they weren't really important to him.

Merian was now in his hands, in the Northern Territory, the Empire's most remote corner, tens of thousands of miles away from the Federation.

Even if the Jade Federation mobilized an invasion, they couldn't reach here. If they sent a small special force, his Knight Order could swallow them up.

Thinking of this, the undercurrent of excitement in his heart finally began to calm.

After listening to Merian stammer out some terms that Louis didn't understand, Louis smoothly picked up the conversation and calmly praised:

"No wonder it was worth the bloody price I paid to get you from those misers of the Green Tide Guild. It seems the deal was worthwhile."

Merian's heart sank, his gaze dim; the humiliation of being traded like an object churned in his chest. He felt terrible inside but didn't dare to argue.

He'd spent nearly his entire life trapped in a laboratory, never venturing into the political arena, completely vulnerable to lies and schemes.

He couldn't discern whether this statement was true or false, so he chose to believe it.

Louis noticed the change in his expression and smoothly switched his tone: "I'm curious, why did the Green Tide Guild send you to the Northern Territory? A researcher like you should theoretically be kept in the deep-level labs of the Federation."

Merian hesitated for a moment but cautiously spoke: "It's a long story; a few hundred years ago, the Abyssal Descendants, also known as the Fishmen.

They were once an ocean race with language and social structures, mastering alchemy and underwater crafts, even leaving behind formulas for rune alloys.

But later, the group fell into perpetual madness, with only a few retaining partial wisdom. The guild suspects that this downfall wasn't natural decay."

As Merian spoke, his voice grew quieter: "And my task was to extract the not-yet-completely-crumbling magic energy nerve cores from the Fishmen's brains and send them back to the Green Tide Guild, for research on the so-called Rationality Retrospection Potion.

They want to find a way to restore Fishmen's rationality and make them obedient to humans... At the time, I thought it was just academic research."

Then he cautiously glanced up at Louis: "I didn't expect to be sold to you."

Louis' expression remained unchanged, though internally, he memorized every word.

He was astonished by the gravity of this task, directly relating to ancient secrets.

Louis paused in silence, then asked blandly: "So... was the extraction completed?"

Merian shook his head, looking fearful: "No, we were kidnapped by pirates just as we arrived in the Northern Territory. The samples, equipment, and personnel couldn't be preserved."

Chapter 585: Merian and Kavier_2

Louis sighed softly, as if in regret, yet seemingly unsurprised: "Then there's no rush. You focus on other things first. When the conditions are ripe next year, we'll discuss sampling again. Red Tide City has plenty of alchemy materials and manpower."

His tone softened, becoming gentle: "I will prepare a laboratory, assistants, and resources for you. Here, you can continue your research without constraints. Red Tide respects knowledge and those who allow knowledge to blossom."

Merian listened, but hardly absorbed a word.

At this moment, his mind was filled with only one thought—to survive. As long as he wasn't thrown into the sea, he would nod and agree to anything.

He repeatedly agreed, bending slightly, as if afraid his voice might provoke the other.

Louis looked at him, smiled slightly: "Go rest, Master Merian. There's no rush with the experiments."

Once the door closed, Merian's shoulders finally relaxed, as if all his energy had been drained.

He felt a sense of confusion, yet there was an absurd relief.

His life, after all, was preserved.

So be it, moving from one laboratory to another was merely changing locations to continue working.

As for the Green Tide Guild and the Jade Federation... he had never truly been attached to that place.

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The night pressed down on the sea, waves battering the hull of the ironclad ship with a low echo.

A few lamps burned on the deck, their light flickering in the wind.

Kavier Ironjaw stood before the helm, half his face shrouded in shadow, the other half, a metal jaw, reflecting the cold light of the fire.

He silently bit on an iron pipe until there was a crack, and the pipe broke.

He casually tossed the fragments into the sea, his voice cold as the wind: "A week has passed, and not even a signal?"

The adjutant stood not far off: "Yes, sir. The sawbone unit has not sent back any signal."

Kavier chuckled, a hoarse, brief laugh.

He bit down hard on his metal jaw with a cold clenching noise that made one's heart chill.

Then he slammed a fist onto the railing, sending rust and splinters flying, making the adjutant instinctively step back.

"Possible?" he repeated in a low voice, yet without anger.

After a moment of silence, he looked up at the distant dark sea, his tone slowed, "What did I tell them before they set out?"

The adjutant hesitated for a moment, then said in a low voice: "Retrieve the target, return immediately."

"Then they didn't die at the hands of the Empire," Xavier said blandly.

He didn't think a fool like Bag could cause any real trouble; if it was indeed his doing, there was no way he couldn't even send a signal.

Moreover, the Northern Empire didn't have any real naval power, or he wouldn't have been able to roam here for so long.

The intelligence for this operation was provided by the Ashen Guild.

Those people had long planned in secret to seize the Great Alchemist from the Green Tide Guild and make him serve the Ashen Guild.

They gave Xavier the route, the ship type, and the operation window. If he could capture the target alive, he could exchange for more funds and port privileges.

The internal traitor in the Green Tide Guild was cooperating with this operation, leaking the Great Alchemist's itinerary.

Numerous possibilities flashed through Xavier's mind:

Was it the Empire's doing?

Did another guild beat them to it? That would mean the Ashen Guild had leaked their own plans before acting.

Or was the Ashen Guild secretly erasing traces?

The more he thought about it, the more chaotic it became, his head aching as if struck by an iron hammer.

Xavier squinted his only eye, muttering: "Could the guild be playing me for a fool?"

The Ashen Guild, those merchants who claimed to control the Federation.

Xavier understood that his ascension as a mad king was not due to madness, but knowing whom to bow to.

His fleet, warships, and base all depended on the Ashen Guild's support.

He was no more than a pawn on their chessboard.

If this mission failed, he knew what would happen; the guild would say "funding terminated."

And so, funding would be cut, his selling points would vanish, and his subordinates would fall apart within months.

Kavier inhaled a breath of cold wind, his throat letting out a short metallic scraping sound, like a laugh that wasn't one.

"Dispatch reconnaissance ships, search full line; even if it's just a piece of sailcloth, find it for me."

"Yes, sir!" The adjutant immediately bowed and retreated.

The wind blew stronger, swaying the deck lamps back and forth.

Kavier stood alone, fingers tapping lightly on the railing.

He knew he could not show unease.

The mad king could go wild, but could not show weakness.

With the wind whistling and the ship vibrating, no one dared look at him.

.....

The administrative building of Dawn Port stood silently amidst the wind and snow.

Lights shone through the window panes, warming and brightening the conference hall, the air rich with a sense of accomplishment.

Louis sat in the main seat, his gaze sweeping over the few present, his expression calm.

He had stayed at Dawn Port for two months, and these two months of construction had brought new results to this new city; it was time for another meeting before his departure.

"We won't beat around the bush, let's talk about results directly," Louis began.

Russell was the first to stand and report, his voice carrying a southern accent: "Ninety-nine percent of the port engineering is complete, the dikes, berths, and rail systems are all in use.

The cooling facility in the cargo processing area was topped out last night, only exterior decoration remains. The winter antifreeze layer on the tracks has been reinforced, and pressure testing has passed."

Louis nodded slightly: "Safety first, check again."

"Understood, sir," Russell bowed in response, though his eyes held a hint of pride.

When it was Bernard's turn to speak, the old craftsman tightened his coat slightly: "The series of ships for Dawn have all completed their trial runs, and the experimental ships Dawn and Tide are also assembled.

But due to the current sea ice not melting, trial tests have yet to be conducted; full tests are planned for the spring tides."

Louis nodded, with a tone of appreciation: "Very good. Don't rush to build new ships, you can rest a bit first."

Bernard managed a slight smile, his tense shoulders relaxing a bit.

Eliot sat close to the fireplace and only stood up after listening to the reports of the two:

"The harbor defense fleet has completed three rounds of drills, mainly training for night battles and sea assaults. The cannon placements have been maintained, the sea defense line can withstand a medium-scale attack."

"Excellent." Louis smiled slightly, "Dawn Port's stable winter relies on your preparations."

Next was Reda's turn, holding an account book, her speech clear: "The winter houses are all completed, the remaining materials have been transferred to the public warehouse.

Grain is sufficient, the transport ship from Red Tide City arrived at the port last night, and McDonald's harvest has also arrived, enough to support the entire winter. The bathhouse, infirmary, theater, and laundromat are running normally."

Louis leaned back in his chair, his expression relaxing a bit: "Very good, Reda, keep it up."

She smiled slightly and solemnly replied, "Yes, sir."

The atmosphere in the conference hall gradually lightened.

Russell was reviewing construction drawings, Bernard confirmed shipbuilding progress with his assistant in a low voice, Reda was organizing livelihood accounts.

Louis glanced around, sighing with satisfaction: "It seems that Dawn Port can finally settle down this winter."

He stood up, draping his coat over, his tone as calm as ever: "Next year, we need more than just port construction. Once spring arrives, the merchant fleet must set sail. And if those pirates are still around then, we should deal with them."

Eliot immediately rose and saluted: "We are ready at any time."

"No need to be too tense," Louis chuckled, "You'll be busy when the snow melts."

He paused, his gaze softened: "You've worked hard these two months. For the port to reach this point, it wasn't through miracles, but through each of your hands."

Everyone stood and saluted, their tone unified: "Yes, sir."

After the meeting ended, everyone gradually departed.

Louis remained in the hall, gazing at the snowline outside the window.

The lighthouse beam swept over the sea, outlining the shape of Dawn Port.

He murmured softly: "Winter is approaching, it should Red Tide, otherwise Orsus might not recognize his father."

Chapter 586: Intelligence and Autumn Harvest

Louis woke up just as the sky was breaking into dawn.

His mind still carried the fatigue of last night's journey, having rushed back to Red Tide Territory from Dawn Port, the overnight travel had him fall asleep almost instantly.

He rubbed his temples, and instinctively looked to the side.

Emily was sleeping beside him, her blue hair scattered on the pillow, breathing lightly, her eyelashes slightly trembling.

The little baby in her arms was curled up, half surrounded by her arm, like a small animal being protected.

Louis looked down at them, his expression softened for a moment, then he gently got out of bed.

He put on a thick robe and walked to the window to push open the wooden frame.

The morning fog enveloped the entire Red Tide City, the snow-covered streets and alleys stretched to the distance.

Red domed houses were barely visible in the mist, like undulating waves in layers.

Then Louis raised his hand and waved, after a familiar soft hum, a light blue screen spread in mid-air.

[Daily Intelligence Update Completed]

[1: Second Prince was attacked by a mysterious high-tier Extraordinary Knight during a hunt, lost his left arm, and is now in a coma.]

[2: Fourth Prince Astha August has recently, under the royal name, taken rare magic stones to win over Count Holmes.]

[3: A tribe of Frost Giants has appeared in the northern valley of Red Tide Territory, possibly seeking refuge for the winter.]

He looked at the first item, his brow slightly furrowed.

The severed arm wasn't just flesh, it was connected to the ten or so legions that had pledged allegiance to the Second Prince, and to the networks of the military affairs office.

Even if the arm could be reattached, the injury would strip him of half his sharpness.

If the Second Prince falls, then the political forces in the Imperial Capital will immediately become unbalanced.

Will the legions continue to support a crippled prince, or will they each act independently, siding with other princes?

And once the military splits, the Empire will no longer have a complete defensive line, meaning foreign forces could take advantage and infiltrate.

The cracks in the Imperial Capital are bigger and deeper than they were half a year ago, as if someone is secretly cutting the Empire's veins with a knife.

Louis silently assessed in his mind; he could almost foresee the scramble between legions, the ripping of military power, and the reckoning within the Royal Family.

He mentally crossed out the possibilities one by one: an internal reckoning at the military affairs office? Intervention by the Church Court? Nobles bribing assassins? Or the Federation probing by proxy?

The intelligence didn't reveal "who," only coldly wrote the outcome.

This slash is not an ending, it's just the beginning.

The possibility of internal chaos in the Imperial Capital next year is very high, the time left for the Northern Territory for self-defense and integration is running out.

Louis sighed deeply, his own pressure was growing heavier.

Why all the fighting and killing? Isn't it better to work together to build a beautiful Empire?

[2: Fourth Prince Astha August has recently, under the royal name, taken rare magic stones to win over Count Holmes.]

"Astha..." Louis's lips moved slightly, a faint cold smile appeared.

To him, Astha could never overturn the situation.

His every move would almost always be presented to Louis through the Daily Intelligence System at the first opportunity.

"No matter how high Sun Wukong jumps, he cannot escape the palm." Louis thought, but his expression grew with impatience.

Yet watching that person bounce around was beginning to annoy him.

Finding a suitable time to deal with this thorn would be good, though not now; right now, he still has other purposes.

As for Holmes, that was one of Duke Edmund's political legacies left to him.

Unfortunately, Count Holmes died this year, succeeded by his ambitious son, who appears finally showing intent to use the prince as a stepping stone.

"Interesting," Louis murmured, a cold smile in his eyes.

He restrained his smile and his gaze fell on the third item.

[3: A tribe of Frost Giants has appeared in the northern valley of Red Tide Territory, possibly seeking refuge for the winter.]

For Louis who had just arrived in the Northern Territory, Frost Giants were deadly enemies, requiring carefully set traps to hunt them down.

But now, even an elite knight squad from Red Tide can clear these giants, they're no threat at all.

However, Louis tapped a few spots on the map, rapidly calculating another possibility in his mind.

If these giants could be captured alive, handed over to Merian the alchemist for research, taming or conversion, they would gain long-term combat strength far beyond short-term benefits.

Even if taming fails, the giant's bodies would be excellent fertilizer and raw materials in the Northern Territory wilderness, the bone meal containing magic essence residue can improve the cold land's soil, alchemists could also extract useful magic energy components.

Louis silently noted: "First send a reconnaissance team to infiltrate for observation, try not to alarm them. If numbers are controllable, prepare a capture plan."

Turning off the Daily Intelligence System, he let out a soft breath, reflecting on today's intelligence, amid internal and external distress, only he is constructing the Empire.

A slight sound of movement came from behind.

Louis sat beside the bed, naturally reached out to feel the baby's forehead.

The child let out a small sound in its dream, its hand tightly gripping his finger.

Louis touched its cheeks for a moment, then went to the window, facing the snowy morning light to begin his routine cultivation.

He sat cross-legged, hands overlapped in front of his chest, slowly guiding his breath.

The rhythm of his breath seemed to align with the rise and fall of waves, the fighting energy within him flowed like tides, vibrating within his veins, slowly recirculating along his meridians, he could clearly feel the strength in his body growing bit by bit.

This lasted for a full hour until his internal breath completely stabilized, only then did he slowly conclude his practice.

After a brief rest, he closed his eyes, his mind entering a state of meditation.

His thoughts sunk into the pure magic power world, time seemed to stand still.

Chapter 587: Intelligence and Autumn Harvest (Part 2)

The Primordial Meditation Technique automatically unfolded in his mind, creating a void world shaped by consciousness. Louis slowly engaged his mind, guiding the points of light; the flow of magic power was smooth and pure.

Another hour passed, and the forces of Fighting Energy and magic power intertwined within his body, responding to each other.

His Fighting Energy had now stabilized at the level of a High-tier Elite Knight, just one step away from becoming an Extraordinary Knight;

The magic power had long surpassed the limits of an ordinary Mage, stepping into the realm of the Grand Mage.

In terms of casting purity, most Grand Mages from the Mage Forest may not necessarily match him.

Coupled with the blessings of the Burning Pain Vine Court and the Power of the Nest, his overall combat power was no less than that of a junior Peak Knight.

Across the entire Red Tide Territory, and even the Northern Territory, he was indisputably the top battle strength.

Of course, to conceal his strength, outwardly, Louis still appeared to be just an Elite Knight and rookie Mage.

Louis smiled contentedly. From a talentless nobility Knight to his current strength, the journey would have been impossible without the Daily Intelligence System and his relentless determination.

After finishing his cultivation, the room gradually brightened.

Emily and Sif were already awake, with the child babbling on the bedding, learning to speak.

The three of them ate breakfast together, enjoying a peaceful atmosphere.

Louis tidied the child's clothes, whispered a few instructions, and then put on his coat and went out.

The outside wind carried the scent of snow as he boarded the carriage and headed for the Red Tide administrative area.

Along the way, he passed by a construction site of a new fortress.

It was still in the early stages, with massive stone foundations already erected, bustling artisans, hoists moving up and down, with the roaring steam engines and the sound of hammers intertwining.

Although the building was not yet fully shaped, the future grandeur was evident in its structure.

The carriage continued forward, crossing the stone arch bridge of the main street, and stopped in front of the administrative hall.

Bradley was already waiting at the door.

His expression was as serious as ever, but upon seeing Louis, his face showed rare signs of a smile.

"Long time no see, Lord Louis," he greeted with a bow.

"Long time indeed, Bradley," Louis responded with a smile, patting his shoulder, "You've worked hard."

The two entered the office together, the warmth greeting them.

The files were neatly stacked, the air filled with the scent of ink and paper.

Bradley looked through the thick ledgers, the light from the furnace highlighting the deeper wrinkles left by time on his face.

Then he opened the ledger report on this year's harvest results: "The data for this year's autumn harvest has been compiled.

Due to the combined efforts of farmland expansion, greenhouse investment, and tool innovation, this year's total autumn harvest reached three hundred ten thousand and fifty tons, an increase of half over last year.

One hundred thousand tons of green wheat, five tons of rice, fourteen thousand tons of assorted legumes and root crops.

Additionally, newly categorized greenhouse crops have been included, totaling fifteen thousand tons, used for town supply and medicinal feed reserves."

Louis did not respond immediately, just tapping his fingers on the desk, steady and leisurely. His gaze was calm, as if calculating, or weighing.

On the surface, tranquil, but inside, a subtle satisfaction arose.

The harvests from Mai Lang Ridge and various camps steadily increased, exceeding even his own expectations.

This was the result he valued most—the grain, which was both the root of Red Tide's survival and the weapon for future expansion.

Louis silently calculated the growth rates across different areas, images of once barren hills now covered in golden wheat flashed in his mind, a prosperity earned through order and planning.

"Very good," Louis praised, "Food is our foundation. It's the root of Red Tide."

Bradley nodded and continued, "According to your instructions, the remaining internal reserve will maintain sixty thousand tons in official storage. The remaining one hundred fifty thousand tons will be assigned as external allocation quotas."

"Sell one hundred thousand tons,"

Bradley was slightly startled, and Louis immediately continued:

"Previously it was relief, free distribution. But now the Northern Territory's disasters have eased, they also have their own output and production resources, so starting today, no more handouts.

Of course, we offer a preferential price; Northern Territory territories can use money or materials to exchange for grain. Since the distance is short, Red Tide's grain price can be half that of South's shipped grain.

Priority supplies to Duke Edmund's allied territories and early allies of Red Tide, the rest limited purchase. Anyone who wants to stockpile or resell must pay the price."

Bradley looked at the young man before him, unwittingly feeling a complex reverence.

The once invisible boy within the family now comprehended how to govern the entire Northern Territory through rules, merging power, public sentiment, food, and fate into an invisible hand controlling the whole region.

Louis continued, "Divide into three tiers: ally price, regular price, high price.

Ally territories at cost with slight taxes, as a symbol of trust and mutual aid, neutral territories at normal trade prices, they owe us nothing, nor are they sheltered by us.

As for the rebels and hesitators, if they want grain, they must pay triple the price. Red Tide will not nourish enemies."

Louis paused, seemingly mentioning casually, "Count Holmes, list at the highest price."

Although Bradley did not fully understand, he quickly recorded it in the ledger: "Yes, Lord, Count Holmes at highest price, I'll publish the specific ratios to make them clear."

Louis's gaze remained on the snowy scene outside the window, the purity of the snow reflecting:

"Red Tide must first stabilize itself. It is no longer a philanthropist but the manager of the Northern Territory. Anyone who wants to survive must follow my rules."

Bradley nodded quietly, inside a surge of realization that the young Lord before him was not just the master of Red Tide, but the stabilizing pillar of the entire Northern Territory.

Louis's tone then softened, "Bradley, how is the recovery in the north-east of the Northern Territory?"

Bradley composedly replied, "Reporting to you, Lord, the overall situation is good. Post-war ruins have been almost entirely repaired, transportation lines restored smoothly.

The population is steadily returning, with some areas restored to two-thirds of pre-war levels. Like the area around Red Tide Territory, now even more prosperous than before the war."

Louis nodded gently, as if measuring something, "Very good, it seems we can maintain it, and it's time to move forward."

He paused, his tone deepening, "It's time to extend our reach beyond the Southeast Province, to control the entire Northern Territory."

Bradley looked up, his face showing delight, "It's about time, Lord.

You've been too steady these past two years, using food to maintain the Northern Territory's support for your policies. But if you want to truly grasp power, relying solely on food is not enough. Once you take this step, no one in the Northern Territory will stand shoulder to shoulder with you."

"Then let's begin." Louis turned, "With order and benefits, we'll make the entire Northern Territory's direction follow Red Tide."

Bradley straightened his posture, his expression solemn, "Yes, Lord."

Louis smiled, his tone relaxed, "Don't need to be so serious, Bradley. Tell me, do you have any suggestions? If it were my father, Duke Calvin, what would he do?"

Bradley thought briefly, then replied, "The Duke is... He was always good at using marriage alliances to win people's hearts, especially in the Southeast Province, where nearly all nobility are relatives or in-laws of the Calvin Clan."

Louis's smile froze slightly, as images of the old Duke, with dozens of children, a man whose childbearing was as prolific as laying eggs, flashed in his mind.

He instinctively thought of his one-year-old son, how to form alliances?

Although he worked diligently every day, it was possible he might never have a second child in his lifetime.

After all, the Bloodline Power makes Knights strong, but also renders their reproduction nearly extravagant. Among the Empire's nobility, many have only three or four offspring in a lifetime.

Thinking of this, he couldn't help but smile bitterly. His father, Duke Calvin, had thirty-odd children, leaving the entire Empire guessing what tonic he took.

Bradley also sensed something, the atmosphere turning awkward for a moment.

He coughed lightly, continuing, "Of course, Lord, you don't need to emulate him. Red Tide has its own path."

"Actually, I already have plans."

Louis smiled slightly, gently pulling out several sheets of paper filled with notes and annotations from the desk.

Chapter 588: Drafts and Alchemy

Bradley took the few drafts, his eyes immediately caught by the conspicuous title: "Draft Charter of the Northern Territory Materials Council and Joint Defense".

"Listen while you read," Louis spoke with a tone of thoughtful caution, "I'll explain the key points."

"Bradley, you know, I'm not in it for power for power's sake. All of this is for the Red Tide and the Northern Territory to live a little longer, to live a little better.

We can't rely on external aid or luck anymore. The Northern Territory rebuilds every year but can't unite, only repeating the same mistakes."

Bradley nodded as he flipped through the pages.

"The first point is food," Louis paced slowly, "as we discussed before, unconditional relief will stop here, reverting to discounted compensation.

With this as the core, we will propose the establishment of the Northern Territory Materials Council and the Northern Territory Trade Alliance at the next Northern Territory Rebuilding Conference, setting standards for transactions and ensuring returns for aid."

"Will they agree?" Bradley inquired tentatively.

"More accurately, they have no choice," Louis replied calmly, the corners of his lips barely lifting.

"There might be some resistance at first, but once they secure stable trade routes and we achieve financial circulation, no one will be at a loss, and no one can operate outside the rules—that is balance.

The nobles and chambers of commerce under the Red Tide are all incorporated into a community of interest. I'm merely making them understand who can make this chain operate."

Bradley silently took a deep breath. Such a concept required not only power but also immense influence and control.

If it were someone else, he would definitely think this is arrogance, but coming from Louis, it seemed entirely natural.

"What about the financial flow?" he couldn't help but ask.

Louis pointed to the second page: "The Red Tide needs a sustainable financial cycle. The Council is in charge of the settlements, with the Trade Alliance ensuring trade circulation."

He paused, smiling: "In the later stages...we can issue our own currency, the Red Tide Coin.

Not to replace the Empire's currency, but to establish a credit system.

Let the Northern People believe they are no longer dependent on the Imperial Capital but on the production and trade of the Northern Territory itself, achieving internal circulation. Moreover, doing business with the Federation is not impossible. This way, even if the Empire collapses, the Northern Territory can still stand on its own."

Bradley's breath hitched, almost doubting what he heard: "The Red Tide... mints its currency?"

"It's merely a concept for now," Louis explained, "but getting the Northern Territory accustomed to using Red Tide's units of measurement is part of the control. What circulates isn't gold or silver, but trust."

Bradley's heartbeat quickened.

Before him, this young lord had transformed from a city-controlling pioneer to the architect of the entire Northern Territory, perhaps owning other ideas he dared not imagine.

As for trading with the Empire's Federation, he wasn't too surprised, as most of the Empire's major nobles did so, and the Imperial Capital could only turn a blind eye.

"The second item, joint defense," Louis continued, "sign the 'Northern Territory Joint Defense Treaty', establish a military academy, integrate military supplies and training into the Red Tide system, with joint defense exercises and military supply approvals executed by the Council."

He slowed his speech: "There are too many wars in the Northern Territory, Bradley. Every noble has their own banner, meaning every misunderstanding could turn into a battle.

It's been quiet for a few hard years; I don't want to see such winters again.

The purpose of joint defense is for them to learn cooperation under the Red Tide's order, no longer fighting individually, but surviving together."

Bradley's hand trembled slightly: "That means handing over the military power of each noble..."

"Unified management," Louis completed for him, his tone flat, "They are in charge nominally, we manage in reality.

Military supplies, provisions, and training come from us, and over time, their troops recognize only the Red Tide's insignia.

Of course, this is just a future vision; the first step now is to bind them together with commerce and food."

Bradley swallowed, sweat beading on his forehead as he realized the scope of this conquest plan.

"The third item, Beiwang Hall and the Minstrel Network," Louis turned the page, "The former is intelligence, the latter is for public opinion.

Festivals and the historian system, all need to be under Red Tide's jurisdiction. The songs people hear, the stories nobles listen to, will ultimately lead to one person."

Louis clarified: "Of course, this isn't brainwashing, but storytelling. We don't alter the truth, just change who narrates it.

When people believe the Red Tide can provide them a peaceful living and opportunities for their children, they will naturally speak for this order."

Bradley stared at the text, a sense of dread rising in his heart.

He had never seen such indoctrination, nor did he know if it would succeed, but even this draft was already so shocking and revolutionary.

"This...this is about reshaping the thoughts of the Northern Territory," he murmured.

"Thoughts, order, interests," Louis answered gently, "All three are indispensable. Order without thoughts is tyranny, faith without interests is hollow. We need them to both believe and benefit."

Bradley put down the draft, took a deep breath, and asked again: "What about the implementation? How do you plan to make them accept it?"

Louis smiled slightly: "Start with our own allies. Implement for a year, then present the data, and expand."

"Data?" Bradley was puzzled.

"The most powerful political weapon," Louis's smile deepened, "Numbers are more persuasive than speeches. If production grows and trade increases within a year, they'll come seeking to join."

A sense of admiration arose in Bradley's heart, he hadn't expected Louis to think this far ahead.

Chapter 589: Draft and Alchemy (2)

Louis continued, "As for external packaging, the first phase will not be termed a board system, but a sustainable ration trial."

He simultaneously introduced prototype benefits, demonstration city tax reductions, open commercial rights, and trade concessions, enticing the nobility with advantages.

"Yes, sir." Bradley noted every word, secretly thinking how the rhetoric was refined to an art form.

"Once they taste the benefits, they will never part from us." Louis's voice was calm yet sharp. "When resources, commercial rights, and military supplies are all tied to Red Tide, they will realize that opposing Red Tide is equivalent to contending with the entire Northern Territory."

"If this regulation is successfully implemented, the Northern Territory will see no more turmoil," Bradley said softly.

"It's not the end of turmoil," Louis corrected with a touch of humility in his tone, "it's about clarifying choices. I hope they choose order, not me."

He sighed lightly, "If I had Duke Edmund's strength, I wouldn't have to go through such trouble setting all these arrangements."

Bradley was taken aback, then bowed his head, knowing Louis was being modest again.

Louis chuckled gently and said softly, "This is just a rough idea of mine, and certainly, there are many immature aspects that will require you and the Government Hall people to improve step by step."

"Yes, sir." Bradley responded with a serious expression.

The two discussed details for a long time, from the chamber's quota proportions to port warehouse regulations and the structure of the boardroom, even meticulously examining emergency tax rates.

Only when the mid-day sunlight slanted into the study did Louis put away the drafts.

"Go about your business, Bradley. I have some things to attend to," he said warmly.

Bradley bowed and turned to leave.

Louis looked at the documents on the table for a long time before finally putting on a coat, opening the door, and stepping into a carriage heading to the outskirts of Red Tide City, towards the Alchemy Workshop.

.....

The morning wind slipped through the window cracks, carrying a hint of coldness from after the snow.

Merian awoke from the dream, his chest rising and falling violently, fingertips clutching the bed corner tightly.

The dream was still about that lightless room of the Green Tide Guild.

Moist air, the echo of chains scraping, footsteps resonating amongst stone walls.

But when he opened his eyes, he was met with sunlight, real sunlight.

The curtain was lifted slightly by the wind, warm yellow light spilling onto the wooden wall, and the air was filled with the scent of burning wood in the fireplace, along with the smell of freshly baked bread.

Merian was dazed for a few seconds, his mind blank.

Then he slowly sat up, looking around.

The door wasn't locked, the window was open, and there were no shackles at his feet.

That strange freedom made him initially more anxious; it was too quiet, too bright, even fear had nowhere to hide.

He suddenly remembered, in those years at the guild, he had hardly ever really seen sunlight.

Ever since being taken into the underground research institute as a teenager, his life had been trapped beneath layers of stone doors.

Every corridor was guarded, even sleep and diet were recorded.

The only places he could go were the laboratory, dormitory, and report room, with almost no opportunity to set foot on the ground.

On rare occasions when assigned outside tasks, there was always someone following the entire time, not allowing him to talk to any outsiders.

That life of isolation and surveillance went on for decades, and only now did he realize he had long forgotten what freedom meant.

He lifted the blanket, the smooth wooden floor was cold but not damp.

In the corner, there was a small plant, with green leaves and a few white moss flowers, a common hardy variety in the Northern Territory, with dew drops glistening on the leaf tips.

He reached out to touch it gently, murmuring softly, "It's January... I'm still alive."

The voice was almost inaudible, as if afraid of breaking this unreal tranquility.

A light knock on the door came at this moment, with a cautious young servant's voice, "Master, breakfast is ready."

The title "Master" made him tremble slightly; there was no cold command in the tone, only respect.

For a moment, he didn't know how to respond, only whispering, "...Thank you."

The servant placed the breakfast outside the door, then left.

Merian gazed at the bowl of hot porridge and two slices of buttered bread, silently for a long time.

The aroma made his throat tighten, yet he found it strange; in the Federation, he had never tasted such a flavor from the food, which typically consisted of nutritional potions and pastes containing various elements to sustain him long-term, though the taste was bound to be unpleasant.

Then he sat at the seat by the window to savor the meal; outside was a courtyard of three-story buildings, with his residence located in the most luxurious part of Red Tide City.

The buildings were structured with wood and stone, featuring warm-colored exteriors and broad windowsills, with small fountains and neat vegetation in the courtyard.

Three servants were responsible for his daily life, cleaning, and meal delivery.

The guards stationed in the distance rather than at the door, resembling courtesy more than surveillance.

All of this was beyond Merian's belief; while in the Federation, he had spent a lifetime underground, yet now in a corner of this Northern wilderness, he possessed a house of his own, so luxurious.

Before arriving at Red Tide, he could never have imagined living such a life.

For a month, this tranquility left him somewhat uneasy, often waking up thinking he was still in a dream.

All of this was arranged by Louis.

In the days at Red Tide, no one restricted his freedom, but Merian still dared not venture far, mostly pacing between the laboratory and residence, only occasionally watching the city center lights from the third-floor terrace at night.

After breakfast, Merian put on a white robe, somewhat clumsily, and when fastening the last button, his hand still trembled slightly.

Chapter 590: Draft and Alchemy (3)

But when Merian pushed the door open and stepped out of the house, sunlight poured through the crack, and for the first time, he did not reflexively retreat.

At that moment, he suddenly felt an illusion that he seemed to have truly left the shadow.

Then came the faint sound of hoofbeats; it was the carriage prepared for him, and the coachman was already waiting at the door.

Merian donned his cloak, gave a few low orders, and then boarded the carriage.

The carriage was warm, with thick fur blankets.

He still felt a little uneasy, his fingers occasionally tapping lightly on his knee, until the rhythm of the wheels rolling over the cobbled street gradually calmed him.

The carriage moved through the streets of Red Tide, with workshops along the road emitting white steam.

The air was filled with the scent of flowers and plants; this was a Northern town he had never imagined.

In almost any Federation person's impression, this place should have been barren and backward, but the orderly sight surprised him.

The carriage stopped in front of the Alchemy Workshop.

This was a brand new building, its exterior broader and brighter than the Federation's underground experiment towers.

The workshop was clean, well-ventilated, and fully equipped, even the material of the refining furnace was the same as the main city of the Federation.

This was a separate studio specially established by Louis for him.

Equipped with a fireproof wall and ventilation tower, a complete set of glass instrument racks, temperature-controlled alchemy furnace, an independent herb room, and a dedicated experimental record assistant.

Every detail showed the designer's meticulous care.

Upon his arrival, several young assistants came up, their expressions respectful.

One of them handed over a newly sorted list of herbs, with an excited tone: "Master, these are the samples re-refined yesterday according to your instructions, the purity has increased by three percent."

Merian was a bit stunned, still somewhat unaccustomed after a month.

He originally thought those assistants were arranged to monitor him, but their eyes contained nothing but genuine respect.

"Very good... very good." he said softly.

After the assistants dispersed, he surveyed the studio alone, his mind still unsettled.

The equipment and arrangement of herbs were orderly: silver leaf grass, meditation stone, Sea Blue Crystal, green dew extract, and that rare Frost Leaf Vine, all neatly on the shelves.

There were even several new materials similar to Frost Leaf Vine he had never seen in the Federation, seemingly refined from Northern specialties.

The preciousness of these materials made him almost think he was still in the core experimental layer of the Guild.

What surprised him most was that the resources of this Empire border town were no less than one of the Jade Federation's eight major commercial houses.

However, when he checked the samples, he felt a bit puzzled.

Despite the quality of these materials, the products seemed somewhat rough, with proportions and integration less than expected.

For the past month, his main work was to recombine these materials, reorganize the reaction paths, and correct flaws in the Red Tide alchemy system.

Merian constantly modified formulas on the experimental records, marked temperature and time, trying to improve the stability of the finished products with more meticulous techniques.

Unknowingly, the furnace fire dimmed, and sunlight moved from the window crack to the doorway.

It was only when Merian put down his notebook that he realized it was near afternoon. Just then, a gentle knock came from outside the door.

"Master," an assistant carefully pushed the door to look in, with a tone of respect, "Lord Louis has arrived and wishes to see you."

Merian's hand paused.

The faint tension in his heart resurfaced; the young Lord, since their first meeting in Dawn Port, had never truly been seen again.

"I..." he opened his mouth, wanting to say something, but swallowed it back, hesitating for a moment, "I understand, please tell him I'll be there shortly."

The assistant nodded and retreated.

Merian raised his hand to tidy his attire, his chest slightly tight.

He knew there was no avoiding it, he must face it regardless.

Then came steady footsteps at the door.

Louis walked into the laboratory, his expression gentle, with a courteous smile.

"Master Merian," he spoke calmly and kindly, "I hear your work has been fruitful lately, and I wanted to come and see for myself."

Merian hurriedly stood up, nearly knocking over the bottle rack on the table, quickly saying: "No, no such thing, my Lord... just some recombination trials, still quite rudimentary."

"Don't be nervous," Louis smiled, his gaze sweeping over the notes and bottles, "Can you introduce your research from this past month? I would like to hear you speak about it."

Merian took a deep breath, nodded, and slowly opened his notebook.