

Winter 611

Chapter 611: Crimson Fireworks (Part 2)

"That guy! It's him! The Lord of the Red Tide!" Carl's roar was exceptionally piercing amidst the chaos.

He swung his war axe fiercely, and blue fighting energy exploded from him like a wave of flames, "Kill him with me!"

As soon as the words were spoken, five shadows imbued with deep blue fighting energy simultaneously leapt up like five hungry wolves pouncing on their target.

Charging with Carl was the core force of Wulu's subordinates, the strongest warriors of the Barbarian Race.

In their clan, they were all boiling-blood powerhouses capable of tearing apart battle arrays singlehandedly, and among Barbarians, their names represented the glory of countless victories.

The air was shaken to a low hum, the floor tiles cracked inch by inch, and flames interwove with blood light.

But Louis stood still, his gaze calm like a mirror.

Seeing this, Carl felt a surge of joy, thinking the young Count had been scared silly.

"Got him!" He could almost see the burning corpse the next moment.

However... just as the attack was about to land!

[Bloodline Talent·Absolute Defense] activated.

Weir took a deep breath, and with the rhythm of his breathing, a faint red glow appeared on his skin.

In an instant, the glow diffused into a semi-transparent shield, enveloping him and Louis, like a flowing red water curtain.

The surrounding air suddenly fell silent.

The wind stopped, dust suspended in air, even the sound of explosions seemed swallowed.

The moment blue flames collided with the red veil, five impactful strikes hit simultaneously.

Boom—!

The shockwave lifted by the impact collapsed the hallway's arched roof, with stone debris and blood flames flying everywhere.

The tiles under Weir's feet shattered into a web, his knees slightly sunk, face pale, yet he stubbornly held on.

That shield was as thin as water, yet as strong as steel.

The five blue lights exploded on the outer layer of the shield, but didn't leave a single crack.

The two under the red glow seemed isolated in another world, the only peaceful space in the chaotic battlefield.

"How is this possible! This can't be!"

Carl and his men stared at the shield in shock, unable to believe that the full force strike from five extraordinary warriors had been blocked.

It was their tribe's most powerful joint attack, a force enough to slice through anything!

Though unaware of what skill this was, the Barbarian warriors, seeing Weir's pale appearance, understood that this defense couldn't last long.

Once again, they roared, swung their weapons again, and ignited their fighting energy at full strength, aiming to shatter that red shield.

Weir gritted his teeth to persevere, his blood boiling within him, urgently said, "My lord... we should retreat, I can't hold for long!"

He slowly retreated, intending to protect Louis as they left, only to see the young man still standing steadily, expression indifferent.

Louis merely glanced softly, his tone calm, "No need."

He raised his hand, and a dark red fireball ignited in his palm.

The simplest magic, yet deeply potent as if it could devour everything.

For at the heart of the flame, lay the subtle black vine patterns writhing with the power of "Burning Pain Vine Court".

He did not chant; the flame spread through the air like a silent flower.

The next second, the bodies of five extraordinary Barbarian warriors were simultaneously engulfed in flame, the sinister flame invaded their marrow along their fighting energy, causing heart-wrenching pain.

Yet they could only grit their teeth and roar back.

The roar shattered the air, like the dying screams of a beast.

"Ahh! Kill him!"

"Break it! Break it for me!"

Their voices were hoarse to the point of distortion, as if they wanted to resist the flame with their shouts.

Their fighting energy burned, blue flames entwined with blood as they violently smashed against the red shield over and over.

The air trembled, the explosion sounds, cries, and roar of flames interweaved into a cruel symphony of death.

The sound of shattering bones, the screams swallowed by flame waves, rose and fell continuously.

"This can't be! This can't be!" Carl bellowed furiously, blue fighting energy exploding once more, accompanied by angry sounds of pain and fear.

Weir watched through the shield as this unfolded, the red light reflected in his eyes, and he could almost hear the air trembling.

He felt that power devouring their fighting energy, blue flames slowly dimming as the fire began to devour their lives.

They were being burned alive... he whispered to himself, his trembling hands subdued by awe.

Outside, Carl's figure wavered, his roars gradually turning into hoarse howls.

"Ah! No! No—!" His fighting energy was being drawn out by the sinister flame, the blue light dimming piece by piece, and his strength was waning.

That sense of being hollowed out drove him nearly mad, but he still raised his war axe, ceaselessly striking the protective layer.

The next moment, his body was consumed.

The other warriors let out heart-wrenching screams, their voices merging into a hellish chorus.

Someone howled, "Mother!"

Someone clawed at their burning chest with bare hands, fingernails breaking, flesh charred black.

The blue fighting energy was finally consumed by the crimson fire.

Their fighting energy completely unravelled, armor burning, flesh evaporating, bones turning to ash.

The screams were sporadic until they ceased entirely, leaving only the low hum of fire.

And from the start of the battle to the end, it took less than a dozen seconds... a process from resistance to despair.

Weir froze, chest heaving violently, ears filled only with the sound of his heartbeat and that deep rumble.

He looked toward the afterglow of the flame.

That was no longer the level of mere earthly magic power, but a force capable of making the soul tremble.

"This magic power..." he murmured under his breath, gripping his long spear, his expression complex, then that complexity turning into fervor. "Lord Louis is actually as powerful as a Peak Knight."

Weir's eyes gleamed with light, serving such a lord was the honor of his life.

And just a few steps away, Wulu was using the chaos to stealthily advance, gripping a short knife and dagger, seizing the chance to ambush enemies from the shadows.

Chapter 612: Blood-Red Fireworks (Part 2)

His movements were swift and ruthless, targeting the weaknesses of the knights' guards, slashing throats, stabbing hearts, and slicing necks, each strike completed amidst a flash of blood.

Just as he was about to approach a knight from behind once more, he suddenly looked up.

In that moment, he saw the destructive firelight, five entire extraordinary warriors swallowed in an instant.

Wulu froze, his mind blank.

'That is... Carl... they were all our strongest... how could one person wipe them all out?!'

Wulu's heart almost fell into the abyss, his hand gripping the dagger trembling.

At that moment, he finally understood that their so-called perfect assault was nothing but a joke.

The reason the Barbarian Race dared to gamble their last breath was because they thought Frost Dragon Territory lacked high-end combat strength.

Their advantage lay in the number of strong warriors.

But Louis, single-handedly broke all these premises.

The glow of the fire illuminated Wulu's terrified face, and he murmured, "A young noble... how could he possess such power..."

The hope in his eyes was extinguishing bit by bit.

In the distance, the light of the fire drew more attention.

The panicked screams gradually merged into a noisy cacophony, the entire estate shrouded in that unusual aura.

Amidst the chaos, Astha lifted his head, looking towards that firelight.

Even through the fireworks, he could see the figure of that young lord, calm and stern, like a monument standing firm in the storm.

He should have been afraid, yet at that moment, the first reaction in his chest was anger and jealousy.

"It's him again... everyone's eyes are on him. Even this attack has become his stage..."

And his thoughts were immediately interrupted by the shouts of slaughter.

The guards shouted, "Your Highness, be careful! They're closing in!"

Six extraordinary Barbarian warriors quickly approached in the chaotic estate, aided by the firelight and smoke.

Blood and firelight flickered on their armor, their fighting energy a dark blue, carrying a cold and violent murderous aura.

Beside Astha were over a dozen personal guard knights, three of whom were extraordinary knights, and one of whom was the elderly Sai Fu.

This old man once served as the deputy corps commander of the Imperial Sixth Legion and was also Astha's mentor.

Sai Fu's sword-drawing action remained precise, an instinct of an old general seasoned on the battlefield.

Golden fighting energy ignited on him, like burning flames, as if he had returned to the past battle array of the Imperial Sixth Legion.

Though his strength had waned, that momentum still instinctively slowed the Barbarian warriors' pace.

"Your Highness, fall back!" he roared, the golden fighting energy exploded on him like burning flames.

The six Barbarian warriors charged in like beasts, blue fighting energy clashing with golden light, causing the air to tremble.

Sparks and blood flames intertwined, a piercing sound of blades cutting through the air came from the end of the corridor.

The first wave of impact, three personal guards were torn apart, blood splattering on the stone wall.

The second wave of impact, Sai Fu faced the leader, golden light burst, consuming each other with blue flames, causing the air to crack into an ear-piercing roar.

"Go—!"

Astha stumbled back, his eyes full of terror and twisted resentment.

He could not understand why the Barbarian Race appeared here, why they wanted to kill him?

Clearly, he planned this attack as part of the Red Tide operation?!

Yet on the edge of fear, a more vile thought flashed through his mind.

If he could let Sai Fu, let the personal guards delay them for a moment, he could escape, wait for the knight support from the perimeter.

"Block them! Go—!" he screamed, his voice shattered.

The pride and royal dignity of bygone days were long gone, replaced by naked survival instinct.

The six Barbarian warriors burned with fighting energy, growing braver with battle, like beasts out of control.

In less than ten seconds, the knights fell one by one, their blood staining the stone bricks.

Yet in the chaos, Astha staggered and fled, slipping on the blood beneath his feet, his eyes seeing only himself.

Sai Fu roared again, meeting two warriors, sword blade tearing the air, golden light and blue flames weaving into arcs of destruction.

Moments later, with a dull boom, Sai Fu was struck, slammed into the wall heavily, blood sprayed from his mouth.

"Your Highness! Go!" Sai Fu strained to shout, his voice swallowed by the firelight.

As Astha turned back, his gaze was cold and fearful, his face showing no hesitation, only unmasked terror and cowardice.

He did not even look at Sai Fu, but instinctively growled, "Stop them! You worthless lot, stop them!"

Then he turned and pushed away an injured personal guard, using him as a shield, while he desperately retreated.

Blood slid under his feet, he almost crawled and stumbled away from the firelight.

Sai Fu half-kneeled in the rubble, blood trickling down his sword blade, his gaze locked firmly on Astha's retreating figure.

He was not surprised by Astha's escape, he knew long ago this young man was unworthy of being called a king, but still hoped to see this young man he watched grow up escape.

Astha surrounded by six Barbarian warriors amidst chaos and flames, shrieked wildly, his eyes filled with madness and unwillingness.

He kept shouting, "Save me!"

But those around had long scattered, the bodies of his personal guards piled at his feet.

In the next second, a war axe swept across, Astha's chest was cleaved open, a mist of blood shot skyward.

He fell to the ground, blood seeping from the corner of his mouth, his hands still reaching forward in vain.

In his eyes reflected the figure of Louis, that youth calm amidst the flames like a god.

Jealousy, venom, and deep unwillingness flashed in his gaze.

As his breathing ceased, his pupils were fixed on that direction, as if wanting to etch that figure into his soul.

Sai Fu stared at the scene, his whole body turning rigid.

Blood red reflected in his eyes, tears and blood mingling, trickling down his sideburns, softly murmuring, "It has finally come to this step, after all..."

Meanwhile, across the entire estate, chaos spread faster.

The garden's fountain long shattered, water and blood forming shallow puddles.

Nobility and servants fleeing tripped over each other, someone fell into the pool, struggling desperately.

A few maidservants and attendants dashed towards the hallways inside the house, trying to avoid the fire, only to be trapped by collapsing beams.

Guards outside shouted "Get inside quickly!"

Barbarian roars fluctuated in the night, their fighting energy flickering in the dark red firelight.

Some hid in side rooms, some rushed into servant quarters, doors shattered, cries and cries for help echoed back and forth.

The whole estate inside and out became a burning maze, no corner was safe.

The banquet hall spewed heat waves and dust, wails, roars, and the clash of weapons intertwined, even walls cracked under the fierce fighting energy collisions.

The firelight turned the night sky red, blood and flames in the city intertwined into a hellish scene, less than ten minutes since the Barbarians stormed the feast.

It was then that the sound of warhorses roared from the south gate direction.

The Red Tide Knight Order, commanded by Lambert, resembled an iron flood returned from hell, horses crushing accumulated snow, iron hooves thundering.

Fighting energy burned in the night, like crimson flames, lances shimmering cold, the knights formed an array like a tide.

They resembled divine beings descended from the heavens, draped in red cloaks, fighting energy flowing between battle armors, the firelight made them shine like gods.

"Charge—!" Lambert roared.

The Knight Order swept forward like a flood, lances stabbing out, blade light slicing through flames.

Each clash erupted in the piercing sound of metal, the Barbarian roars drowned by the roar of Red Tide fighting energy.

Red flames and blue fighting energy tangled in the night sky into a magnificent turbulent stream.

The Red Tide Knights' line pressed in like a wall of fire, forcibly tearing apart the Barbarian formation.

Lambert wielded his longsword, a sweeping strike sent fighting energy surging like a storm, several Barbarians were flung away, blood spilled on the spot.

Reaching Louis, Lambert dismounted, blood still dripping from his armor.

He knelt on one knee, speaking softly, "My lord, I arrived late."

Louis gazed at the night sky lit by fire, his voice deep, "Gather the net, leave a few important people, kill the rest."

The nobility watched this scene, as if witnessing a miracle.

They looked at the Red Tide banner, at the young lord standing firm amidst the flames, sobbing uncontrollably.

Chapter 613: Evidence

Lambert's cloak was lifted by the wind, ashes covered his visor, and he lowered his voice: "Finish up, leave a few alive, clean up the rest."

The Red Tide Knight Order launched a bloody suppression operation.

Nearing dawn, a sliver of white appeared on the horizon, and the knight order stationed outside the city and the logistics team gradually arrived.

The crowd stopped amidst the ruins, the air filled with the stench of char and grease, so pungent it made one nauseous.

They looked at the scene before them: the scorched courtyard, toppled statues, metal twisted by fireworks, blood-soaked snow, the entire manor seemingly consumed by the fires of hell.

Young soldiers gulped, their voices trembling: "What... what happened here?"

The Red Tide Knights were at that moment using long spears to meticulously raise the remains, with the occasional dying shriek of a barbarian quickly silenced with a coup de grâce.

In the end, the Red Tide only kept a few prisoners who appeared to be of significant status.

The barbarian leader Wulu, bound by iron chains, along with his two aides, while all other barbarians were executed.

Once the casualty report was completed, Lambert stepped forward and half-kneeled before Louis in salute:

"My lord, the tally is finished. The nobility has suffered heavy casualties. Among over thirty nobles attending the meeting, nearly half were affected, with seventy-five knights dead.

Three nobles died within the manor, two were shot by arrows while fleeing. The highest-ranking noble was Viscount Bolton, and the Sixth Prince, Astha... has also been confirmed dead."

Louis was slightly taken aback upon hearing this, his brows furrowed lightly, evidently surprised.

His original plan was to use this attack to detain the prince and force him to fully submit.

Unexpectedly, Astha died so easily, what a disappointment.

Louis remained silent for a moment, calculating the chain reactions Astha's death might cause, slowly calming his expression, a trace of cold thought flashing in his heart.

Dead is dead, the goal is achieved, the effect remains, the impact limited.

The princes in the Imperial Capital are embroiled in their own struggles, unlikely to pay heed here; Astha's death might only serve as a brief topic at a banquet, with no one dispatched for investigation.

As for the Northern Territory, Louis did not believe anyone would dare meddle in this matter.

Louis's gaze swept over the ruins, the blood-red morning light reflecting in his eyes, calculating the next steps.

"However... a show still needs to be staged," Louis said softly, "since the Sixth Prince is dead, there must be an explanation."

He turned to Lambert, speaking plainly: "Gather all uninjured nobles, we need to hold a meeting and give a result to this attack."

Lambert nodded in response: "Yes, my lord."

He turned away to begin directing the knights to gather the nobles.

The flames cast on Louis's side profile, his expression as cold as ice, no one knowing what he was thinking.

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At dawn, the blood mist had not dissipated, the smell of tar and the stench of corpses mingling like an unresolved nightmare.

The Frost Dragon Territory manor had temporarily been cleared into a clean area, yet fragmented bodies still piled around.

Red Tide knights stood surrounding, blood on their armor not yet wiped off, an eerie air of killing intent lingering, the atmosphere heavy as if solidifying.

The nobles stood in a circle, their attire disheveled, expressions fearful, with a few young noble women sheltered at the back, tear stains still fresh, yet they were the lucky ones — some nobles had died in the attack.

"Who dared to attack the prince's meeting?!" An elder noble's voice trembled.

"This isn't rebellion... it's outright murder!" Another roared, but the sound seemed powerless in the vast ruins.

The crowd clamored, debating yesterday's events.

Just then, Louis slowly ascended the flame-scorched steps, unarmed, hands behind his back.

"Ladies and gentlemen, last night's tragedy not only spilled the Northern Territory's blood but also shamed the Empire! We must find the culprits! Without someone's assistance, these barbarians could not have entered so easily!"

Louis's tone was mournful yet carried a sharp edge, as he scanned those around, no one daring to meet his gaze: "If we don't find the true culprits, we all risk becoming the Empire's laughingstock! We would also fail our friends seeking revenge!"

The nobles initially responded in agreement, echoing Louis's words.

"Indeed, it must be thoroughly investigated!" Yorn shouted first, clearly terrified the previous night, "The big boss is right! Such a despicable conspiracy must be unraveled!"

"Someone's playing with intrigue!"

"Punishment is necessary!"

Voices rose one after another, many nodding in agreement, seemingly incited by Louis's speech.

Yet under the fervent response, hidden currents flowed, their unease growing, fearing involvement in a conspiracy.

Some nobles exchanged furtive looks and whispered among themselves, others furrowed their brows sensing something amiss.

Several elder lords cleared their throats, yet said nothing more.

The discussion spread like chaotic streams.

As the clamor reached its peak, Louis simply raised his hand, gently pressing down.

The gesture was slight, yet like an invisible pressure descending.

Voices instantly fell silent, the lords lowering their heads, uneasily quiet.

The surrounding chaos contrasted starkly with the current order.

Though Louis was merely an invited guest, in silence, he had seized control of the order here.

The manor's ruins under his feet seemed to become Red Tide's dominion.

And among the Frost Dragon Territory's nobility and knights, they subconsciously believed he should preside over the situation.

Chapter 614: Evidence (Part 2)

At this moment, Lambert rushed in front of Louis, his voice deliberately loud: "This was found on the body of the Sixth Prince Astha."

He held up a blood-stained wooden stick high, displaying it before everyone.

This stick had the blood oath markings of the Barbarian Race carved on it, a sacred item only held by allies.

The nobility exchanged glances, their murmurs spreading quickly: "This is a sacred item of the Barbarian Race... How could it be on the Prince?"

"Could it be that..."

"Impossible! How could the Sixth Prince..."

Louis remained silent, casting a casual glance at Camille standing in the corner.

This glance sent a cold sweat trickling down Camille's back.

He immediately recalled the secret letter that had appeared on his bed a few days ago: "When chaos descends, point to Astha, Holmes, Klan, Bolton, Harlov, and Hyman."

His breathing quickened, his heart beat like a drum, back then he didn't understand, but now he finally knows this game had been set from the very beginning.

Had Louis anticipated this far already? Truly terrifying.

Moreover, he knew he had no choice if he wanted to survive.

Moments later, Camille steeled himself and raised his hand with difficulty, his voice trembling: "... I have a clue, Prince Astha once hinted to me.

He allied with Holmes, Klan, Bolton, Harlov, and Hyman, and even contacted the Barbarian Race...

He planned to control the Reconstruction Council and wanted me to ease things for him in the Imperial Capital's Surveillance Bureau. At the time... I had no choice but to temporarily agree, might it be related to this affair."

Though his acting was somewhat abrupt, all eyes were focused on the still surviving nobles.

The few exchanged glances, their expressions rigid.

Holmes forced a smile and spoke: "I... I barely know the Prince's retinue, if there was any interaction, it was only out of courtesy!"

Klan, pale-faced, added: "We too are victims of this attack! All my knights were killed!"

Harlov and Hyman kept nodding repeatedly, mumbling: "We have nothing to do with the Barbarian Race, never..."

Their voices rose and fell, filled with panic, their words becoming more fragmented, not even convincing themselves.

Their defense, dispersed by the cold wind among the ruins, seemed especially powerless.

Louis coldly scanned them: "If truly innocent, then prove your innocence. Search and see what clues exist."

The four of them turned ghostly pale, wanting to say something but unable to speak.

Lambert, accompanied by several Red Tide Knights, had already moved forward, ordered to search their residences.

And they could only lower their heads, unable to refuse.

At that moment, the clinking of chains sounded, Wulu was brought up, his face ashen, steps unsteady.

He knew his wife and daughter were in the hands of the Red Tide, and now the prospect of the Barbarian Race was completely shattered, all he could do was confess everything to exchange for a slim chance of their safety.

Louis spoke lightly: "Speak, who gave you the orders?"

Wulu raised his head and glanced at the young Lord, that look reminded him of the Wolf King on the Snowfield.

He lowered his head, his voice hoarse, confessing everything: "It was the Sixth Prince... He instructed us to use the strength of the Barbarian Race to disrupt the Red Tide, saying that as long as chaos was created, we could exchange for grazing rights, grain, and salt and iron.

But knowing that all important nobles of the Northern Territory gathered here, we seized the opportunity to prepare to attack the Frost Dragon Territory during the council."

The nobility was instantly in uproar, their discussions echoing in the ruins, yet not as noisy as before.

Some inhaled sharply, while others murmured: if this were truly related to the Prince, then there would be no explanation.

Several elderly nobles frowned, their tone probing: "Perhaps it's the Barbarian Race's trickery... dragging the Prince into this, causing infighting."

Yet an oppressive unease lingered in the air, some exchanged furtive glances.

This was Astha's domain, the Barbarian Race came too conveniently, claiming there was no connection, even they couldn't believe it.

Some hearts flashed other thoughts: Could this matter actually be related to the Red Tide Count? But no one dared to voice it.

Louis frowned slightly: "Don't speak nonsense! The Prince, as an imperial bloodline, could not do such a thing?"

Wulu struggled to raise his head, blood at the corner of his mouth: "I have evidence."

It wasn't long before he was taken away, soon to be brought back.

Behind him, several Red Tide Knights were carrying a heavy iron box.

Inside neatly lay the Frost Dragon Territory Special Envoy insignia, a vow parchment, grain and salt dispatch orders, a hand-drawn Frost Dragon Territory map, several signed documents, and two contract letters.

Lambert knelt on one knee to report: "All were found in the Barbarian Race's hiding place."

Everyone's gaze focused on the insignia, the Frost Dragon Territory Special Envoy insignia, a token authorized by Astha, allowing the bearer to issue formal orders on behalf of Frost Dragon Territory.

The backside of the insignia bore Astha's seal, not seeming counterfeit.

Another contract bore the Barbarian Race's totem as the heading, detailing both parties' oath terms: "Sworn by the blood of ancestors, all who sign this document shall share honor and disgrace with allies, violation leads to clan annihilation and name eradication."

The signature included Astha's name and the seal of Frost Dragon Territory.

There was also a document stating: "The Sixth Prince of the Empire, Astha August, promises: After the Northern Territory Council, the Barbarian Race may obtain grazing rights north of the Frost Dragon River.

If assist in creating Red Tide chaos, will be rewarded with winter grain, salt, iron, and settlement permission." Signed Astha August.

Upon seeing this ironclad evidence, everyone was stunned, they looked at each other, fear and suspicion filling their eyes.

Astha's signature, the Frost Dragon Territory insignia, the blood fingerprint on the contract, each was like a heavy hammer striking their hearts.

"If it's truly counterfeit, why are the seals so complete?"

"How could the Barbarian Race understand these document formats..."

The debates rose and fell, the air filled with the scent of burnt and blood, mixed with an indescribable emotion.

At this moment, they were already seventy to eighty percent convinced.

Some secretly glanced at Louis, but the young Count appeared calm, his gaze lightly sweeping over the crowd, as if everything was under control.

However, Lambert's voice broke the silence once more: "There are also two surviving naturalized Barbarians, Frostfang and Nak, willing to testify."

The two were brought forward, faces grey, draped in tattered guard cloaks.

Lambert spoke sternly: "They were originally from the Barbarian Race, later incorporated by Sixth Prince's Knights as guards. On the night of the attack, it was they who personally opened the secret passage at the north gate."

This statement was like a boulder thrown into a pond, stirring up an uproar.

The nobility turned, looking at the two Barbarians with disbelief and disdain in their eyes.

Frostfang trembled all over, his hands shackled, knees barely supporting him.

He kept his head lowered, lips quivering, almost inaudible: "We... we acted on orders... Orders from the Prince..."

Halfway through, a flash of fear crossed his eyes, unable to continue.

Nak was in worse condition, his face still bloodstained, eyes bloodshot, nearly standing by force.

He trembled, stuttering to supplement: "It... it was the Prince who gave us the insignia and tokens... instructed us... to assist the Barbarian Race in entering the city."

After finishing, he collapsed heavily to his knees, forehead pressed against the cold stone, sweat and tears mingling as they dripped.

Their voices were pathetically weak in the silent ruins, yet they pierced the hearts of the crowd like nails.

The nobility exchanged glances, under the afterglow of the flames, their expressions complex, belief and disbelief intertwining on each face, freezing even the air.

Not long after, Lambert's search knights returned, presenting several letters found in the noble's residences.

The thick wax seals clearly marked with the names Holmes, Klan, Bolton, Harlov, Hyman.

The letters detailed the seating arrangement of the council, the speaking order, the deployment of knights, and guidance on the public opinion regarding the Red Tide, accompanied by a note: "If the Red Tide is attacked, it is the will of heaven, seize the opportunity to take power."

Chapter 615: The New Lord of the North

Not long after, Lambert's search knights returned, presenting several letters found from the nobility's residence.

The letters clearly stated: Holmes, Klan, Bolton, Harlov, Ximan.

The letters detailed the seating arrangement, speaking order, knight deployment, and guiding public opinion on the Red Tide.

Finally, a note was attached: "If the Red Tide is attacked, it's God's will, seize power in the momentum."

Everyone present fell into deeper shock.

The faces of the four nobles turned ashen, their legs went weak, almost collapsing to the ground.

"This isn't my letter!" Holmes's voice trembled, his lips twitching.

"That's just a draft of the meeting!" Klan was so anxious that he almost shouted, veins bulging at his temples.

"Someone forged my seal!" Harlov was sweating profusely, his voice shaking.

"You are slandering us!"

As they spoke, they became increasingly muddled, even directly kneeling, trembling hands holding the letter, frantically explaining that they were wronged.

"We never intended betrayal!"

"The Sixth Prince was the initiator!"

A few panicked defenses echoed in the empty ruins, torn apart by the cold wind, appearing particularly powerless.

Harlov lowered his head, his palms clenched tightly, nails digging into flesh,

Ximan's eyes dodged, glancing towards Louis yet not daring to look directly.

Their inner fear and regret spreading, wishing they hadn't gotten so close to that mad Astha.

If found guilty of colluding with the Barbarian Race, their family, fiefdom, and surname might be erased after tonight.

Moreover, truly they were wronged, they never colluded with the Barbarian Race, only wanted to cause some trouble for the Red Tide.

Lambert replied coldly: "Every letter carries a seal and signature, if not personally written, how did it come about?"

Their breathing became rapid, almost pleading, quietly defending themselves: "Please investigate thoroughly... maybe someone framed us..."

Their voices grew increasingly low, finally turning into silence.

Other nobles looked at them with eyes full of disbelief, as evidence and the Barbarian Race all matched.

Now the evidence was becoming more complete, all pointing to Astha's folly, which led to this bloody attack.

The air was filled with scorch and blood, the firelight illuminating everyone's faces.

The accused nobles breathed rapidly, their lips pale, clearly wanting to defend themselves, yet unable to speak.

Surrounding nobles exchanged glances, expressions complex.

Some were angry, some relieved, others bowed their heads, fearful of being drawn into this judgment.

In the corner, the injured Sai Fu hadn't spoken since the beginning.

He had understood what Astha did behind his back, sometimes executing territorial matters by himself, he knew Astha was consolidating the Barbarian Race, but never thought it would come to this extent.

His heart was like dead ashes, ready to take responsibility upon himself, believing he taught wrong.

Sai Fu's gaze turned to the side, where Astha's wife and two children shivered.

He knew, this burden shouldn't fall on Astha, else the Prince's reputation would be destroyed, and his descendants couldn't survive.

Without child himself, he always raised Astha as his own...

Blood, honor, the Empire's dignity, all mixed into a heavy weight on the heart at this moment.

After understanding everything, Sai Fu slowly stood, his voice hoarse yet resolute: "It was me! It was me acting behind the Prince's back, colluding with Holmes, Klan, Bolton, Harlov, Ximan, unrelated to the Prince."

Louis was slightly stunned, he knew through the Daily Intelligence System that all this was done by Astha behind his back.

He hadn't expected this old man to go to such lengths for the Sixth Prince, even forsaking his afterlife name.

His heart passed a complex emotion, a bit of surprise, also a bit of indescribable admiration.

The surrounding nobles were also shocked, speechless.

Now that the evidence was complete to this extent, everyone understood, the one really able to mobilize the Barbarian Race, plotting this event was none other than Astha, yet this old general willingly took all the blame.

People whispered in amazement, some shook their heads in disbelief, more breathed a sigh of relief.

If it were really the Prince colluding with the Barbarian Race to attack the nobility, the matter would be too frightening, only stirring the already unstable Northern Territory's political scene into further chaos.

And now an old general willing to take all the charges is not necessarily a bad thing for them.

Everyone turned their gaze to Louis.

After all, only Louis could make the next decision, which would determine who could survive.

After a moment of dead silence, Louis finally stood, calmly stating: "The Sixth Prince died for the country, is a martyr of the Empire, yet traitors and conspiracies must be settled.

He announced: "General Sai Fu, induced by the Barbarian Race, misjudging the situation, causing meeting turmoil, now confessed to his crimes, but because of contributions to the Empire, sent to the Imperial Capital for trial.

Astha's wife and children are escorted back to the Imperial Capital for settlement.

Holmes, Klan, Harlov, Ximan, as instigators and collaborators, considered joint culpability, executed immediately."

Sai Fu relaxed hearing Louis's sentence.

Knowing Louis was being lenient, returning to the Imperial Capital, given his family's influence, he had a chance to survive, while Astha's wife and children in the Imperial Capital were also assured.

On the other side hearing the word "execution," the four initially didn't react, stupefied.

Holmes muttered: "Execution...?" his voice faint, as if still waiting for someone to plead for them.

Until the Red Tide Knights stepped forward pressing their shoulders, cold armor scraping sounds startled them awake.

Chapter 616: The New Lord of the North (Part 2)

Holmes was the first to react, kneeling with a thud, repeatedly kowtowing: "No, my lord! I'm innocent! I did nothing!"

Klan's face flushed red, his eyes bloodshot: "Please give me a chance to explain, I was just following orders! It was His Highness who..."

But before he could finish, the Red Tide Knight kicked him heavily to the ground.

Harlov struggled and roared: "You brat have no right to judge the honored nobility of the Northern Territory! My grandfather took an arrow for the Duke!"

His voice was high-pitched, filled with a desperate will to survive.

The last person, Heman, had a numb expression, trembling as he closed his eyes, murmuring softly as if accepting his fate: "I just..."

The four were pressed to kneel on the ground, one after another.

Beseeching, cursing, silent, emotions intertwined.

Until the first sound of the blade broke through the air, blood splattered in front of everyone.

Lambert's movements were clean and swift, each stroke as fast as lightning.

When the second blade fell, Klan's angry voice abruptly ceased.

The third blade was accompanied by a fearful wail.

By the fourth blade, Heman only let out a gentle sigh.

Blood flowed along the cracks in the stone tiles, forming lines, the smell of blood in the air grew stronger.

The onlooking nobility, some interested, others gloating, some shivering with heads down, dared not look again.

Those nobles closer to the front row whispered to each other, mixing "they truly deserved it" with "the punishment was too severe."

Lambert sheathed his sword and silently stepped back.

The whole venue was silent, left only with the sound of wind and blood dripping.

Everyone understood, Louis's blade was not just a punishment, but a declaration of the beginning of new rule in the Northern Territory.

Louis merely looked at the blood light with indifference, his expression unchanged. Flames danced behind him, casting a golden-red silhouette.

After this moment, he was no longer just the Red Tide Lord, but the true master of the Northern Territory.

A king in the North, succeeding Duke Edmund, was thus born.

.....

Four days had passed since the night of the Barbarian Race attack. The Northern Territory reconstruction meeting was still postponed.

The burned manor was temporarily repaired, new wooden beams propped up the roof, charred stone pillars still bore traces of fire.

Through the shattered skylight, wind and snow poured in, rustling the Ironblood Empire's dragon banner.

The nobility appeared tense, some even attending with bandages.

Every footstep echoed heavily and oppressively on the stone bricks.

On the main seat sat the young lord—Louis Calvin.

He was clad in a black and red military coat, the emblem of the Shield of the North gleaming on his chest.

Nominally still just a Count, and without any formal position in the Northern Territory reconstruction meeting, yet he sat in the main seat, and no one dared say a word.

For everyone knew, that seat meant for the Sixth Prince, now had no one but Louis to sit upon it.

Astha's body had set out south to the Imperial Capital with the convoy escorting Sai Fu.

The hall was silent, only the sound of the fire crackling gently in the fireplace.

Louis slowly stood, glancing over everyone before speaking: "The situation of the Empire, everyone is aware.

The Regent King is isolated, royal power has waned, the southern provinces are turbulent, the Western Territory has a grain blockade, and the Northern Territory is the Empire's last shield."

Louis paused, his tone more measured: "The Sixth Prince has passed, but we must take up his responsibility, to protect the Northern Territory.

If we continue to govern separately, the Northern Territory could become ruins at any moment. Therefore, I propose that we should unite and safeguard this land together."

"Count Calvin is right, the Northern Territory must unite!" Yorn patted the table, nodding in approval.

But the old Northern noble, Marquis Cory, only let out a vague "Hmm."

Viscount Harl swallowed his drink, forced a smile, and said, "Yes, yes, protect the Northern Territory..."

The vassal lords of the Southeast's Red Tide were the first to respond enthusiastically, their expressions sincere and excited.

They had long recognized the benefits of the Red Tide system, praising Louis as the one who could truly lead the Northern out of winter.

Yet the old noble faction had complex expressions, corners of their mouths barely tugging, responding lowly, not daring to express openly.

The air was filled with both reverence and hesitation, yet no one could oppose the logic of his words.

Some sighed softly, others pursed their lips, their gazes shifting between the table and Louis.

The firelight cast on everyone's faces, rendering their expressions into a blur.

Then Louis announced the meeting officially began.

Lords from each faction proposed their reconstruction plans one by one, the air immediately grew tense.

The representative of Holmes's remaining party was the first to rise, cupping his hands as he said, "The various territories of the Northern Territory should restore autonomy, with each family recruiting their own soldiers, and the Empire merely supervising, no need to establish new administrative bodies."

As soon as he finished, several old nobles nodded in agreement: "Indeed, the Northern Territory has always been self-sufficient!" "This is our tradition!"

Yorn frowned slightly, leaning on his chair, he said softly: "The result of self-sufficiency is not being able to afford a meal. Do you not understand your strength? Dare you say you wouldn't buy cheap grain from the Red Tide?"

His two rhetorical questions made the room awkward.

Next, a middle-aged Count from the Southern Expansion faction stood up, his tone trembling: "I believe, the Imperial Capital should send an inspection group to retake control of finance and defense, to demonstrate royal power!"

Once he finished, the whole room plunged into a moment of quiet, then burst into murmurs.

"The Imperial Capital? They can't even take care of themselves."

"Sending people now to the Northern Territory would just increase the freeloaders."

Some snickered disdainfully, while more just shook their heads and sighed, clearly finding the idea too disconnected from reality.

Chapter 617: The New Lord of the North (Part 3)

Amidst the noise, Louis slowly stood up, placing his palm on the table, and calmly said, "Each domain is welcome to voluntarily join the Northern Alliance for reconstruction."

Share resources, coordinate defenses, unify trade routes—we are not depriving you of rights, but rather connecting the fate of the Northern Territory."

His gaze swept across the room: "This is not an order, but an invitation. Today's terms are the best, and everyone should consider carefully."

"An alliance... That doesn't sound bad."

"The Red Tide system might indeed allow survival."

After a moment of silence, a few nobles began to converse in low voices.

Louis looked around at everyone, nodded slightly, and then gestured to Bradley.

Bradley stood up, unfurled a parchment scroll, and said with great conviction, "Ladies and gentlemen, the concept of the Count's alliance is not just empty talk, but has specific implementation plans.

All territories willing to join will immediately enjoy trade priority and resource aid. This is not charity, but cooperation."

He looked down at the scroll in his hand and spoke eloquently, "The Northern Territory Materials Council will be responsible for settling the flow of supplies.

You may receive allocated grain, lumber, and iron ore, and benefit from the low-cost trade brought by the Red Tide transport network. Those who join the alliance will also be exempt from certain taxes and get priority for winter supplies."

Low murmurs came from the crowd, with some nobles showing interest, while others frowned, calculating.

The nobles skilled in commerce were already calculating the profits, knowing that the Red Tide's industries were efficient and convenient, and most importantly, affordable.

However, the cautious ones thought: If the council controls grain and iron, how much autonomy will they have left in the future?

"In addition," Bradley's tone shifted, "the military defense system will be collaboratively coordinated. Your troops will still be individually commanded, but can receive weapons, potions, and training support from the Red Tide.

We will jointly establish a military academy and share military supplies. Simply put, the nobles' soldiers will no longer fight alone."

Several weak lords from the frontier exchanged glances, clearly moved by the promise of military support.

Yet some old nobles snorted coldly. Collaborative defense? That's nothing but the Red Tide controlling our knights.

Bradley continued, "Furthermore, we will establish a commercial league and Northern View Entertainment Hall. The former will ensure trade security, while the latter guarantees the flow of information and daily entertainment activities, as well as festival order.

Your names, achievements, and stories will be sung by bards throughout the Northern Territory."

One vain noble chuckled softly, "Sounds... quite beneficial."

Bradley rolled up the scroll and bowed slightly, "This is the proposal put forth by the Red Tide: cooperation, mutual support, coexistence."

Louis smiled faintly, "Ladies and gentlemen, I will not force you. This is voluntary.

But as Bradley said, the door to the Northern Alliance is always open to you, only the terms will not always be this generous. If today's opportunity is missed, it will not come again."

With his words finished, the hall once again fell into silence.

The agenda drew to a close in a tense atmosphere, as the Red Tide's secretary stepped forward, unfurling an oath parchment, shimmering in the candlelight.

Yorn was the first to step forward, signing his name without hesitation.

Moved lords followed suit, with over a dozen stamping their family crests, their expressions either resolute or apprehensive.

The rest bowed their heads in silence, fingers rubbing their knees, unwilling to lift a pen, some shaking their heads slightly, some biting their lips, observing.

When the last pen was laid down, the conference hall fell into deathly silence.

Of the notable nobles across the Northern Territory, half had signed.

Chapter 618: Reymont's Ambition

Grey Rock Fort, Upper City, Balcony Garden.

The air in late spring is fresh, the flora in full bloom, neatly trimmed rose walls laden with pale pink buds, and the fountain on the lawn gently emits a mist.

In the distance, the sounds of birds and hooves can be heard, the entire upper city like a peaceful painting.

Duke Spencer Raymond stands at the center of the garden.

His deep blue, gold-trimmed suit is spotless, the golden threads glinting in the sunlight, the collar as white as snow.

He stands with a straight posture, his smile tempered and gentle, as if no act of discourtesy could exist in his presence.

Today, Grey Rock Fort is hosting a charity ceremony.

Noblewomen, guild representatives, and maidservants surround him, long tables set up in the courtyard, laden with bread and warm soup.

Raymond raises a silver cup, saying warmly to everyone, "Let them remember, Grey Rock not only possesses great power, but also warmth."

Applause ensues.

The children from the orphanage are led into the garden, holding flowers and handmade cloth dolls.

The smallest girl runs too hastily and almost trips, but he gently steadies her.

At that moment, everyone around holds their breath, his actions natural, as if he truly cherishes these children.

He takes the bouquet of white roses, and says softly, "This is the best gift."

He then pins the flowers in the vase on the table and turns to smile at the noble representative.

More enthusiastic applause bursts from the crowd, a lady tearfully exclaims, "Your Excellency is the kindest noble of the Empire."

Raymond nods slightly, instructing for the reserve warehouse's boxes to be opened.

Bags of flour, medical kits, and leather boots neatly arranged inside glimmer softly in the sunlight.

The attendant distributes the supplies according to the list, while he patiently asks each headmaster about their needs, even personally signing the relief agreements for the next quarter.

Nobles and merchants exchange whispers, even the maids quietly praise his nobility.

As the last child presents their flowers, musicians begin to play music, the light melody drifting through the air.

Raymond stands at the highest point of the garden, overlooking the crowd, akin to a perfect statue, bright and flawless, making people dare not gaze directly.

At this moment, a knight steps quickly into the scene, whispering a few words in his ear.

Raymond, still smiling, sets down the silver cup and says, "Apologies, everyone, I must take my leave. The food for the needy is prepared. May you be safe."

He concludes the conversation politely and perfectly, turning to leave with the knight, footsteps softly echoing on the stone floor of the long corridor.

The sunlight pursues him until that noble figure disappears into the shadows.

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The heavy door of the study closes, the light dimmed instantly.

Raymond removes his gloves, sits by the fireplace, and takes the envelope handed over by the knight.

He unfolds the letter and carefully reads it, his gaze finally resting on those few lines.

"The Frost Dragon Territory meeting has ended. Sixth Prince Astha has perished. Louis presides over the Northern Territory's reconstruction."

He pondered for a long time, his mouth slightly curving, the smile faintly carrying a complex emotion.

"This Red Tide Lord... is indeed more ruthless than I imagined."

The knight reports quietly by his side, "The intelligence received by my subordinates also confirms this. Barbarian Race attacked the Frost Dragon Territory, the Red Tide Army reacted with lightning speed.

It's said that Louis fought against heavy odds, slaughtering the barbarian chief in one battle, the old nobility all kneeling. After the meeting, he used a pledge ceremony to make the Northern Territory lords sign an alliance. Now, the banner of the Red Tide is spread across the North."

Raymond remains silent for a long time.

The firelight of the fireplace reflects in his eyes as if seeing a rising figure in the distance.

"He used blood to subdue the Northern Territory... Even enemies must call him savior." His tone is deep, "But that's not salvation, that's control."

The knight hesitates for a moment, then speaks quietly, "I've heard that Louis handles affairs tirelessly, hardly resting. He is reconstructing the military system, reorganizing guilds, even the Northern Territory refugees call him the Sun."

Raymond chuckles lightly, his speech slow: "The Sun? Ha... He's performing for the masses as a monarch."

The knight continues to report, "I've obtained more detailed intelligence. During the Northern Territory meeting, a Barbarian Race attack occurred, Sixth Prince Astha died on the spot, almost all the old nobility were cleared away.

Louis, by the mandate of the Northern Territory reconstruction, remove the Northern Territory system, reconstructing military defense, grain control, and trade routes. Now, the hearts of the Northern Territory people have all returned to the Red Tide."

Raymond lowers his gaze in contemplation: "A Barbarian Race attack? Almost laughable. Astha died so cleanly, like a perfectly arranged drama.

He is performing a play for all to see his image of saving the Northern Territory. Such a person... is what the Empire should truly be wary of."

Raymond is not angry, only a cold hue emanates from his eyes.

"Smart, ruthless, greedy, dangerous. Like a wolf wearing human skin."

This young Count is no longer just an ambitious man, but one whose strength matches his ambition.

Louis now almost entirely controls the Northern Territory, leaning on the military power and allies left by Duke Edmund, backed by the Calvin Family's prestige, can rank among the top twenty in the Empire's power structure, and this is a conservative estimate.

That position is enough to unsettle any great noble.

And what's more worrying is, he is barely twenty.

A young man rising on the Empire's border already capable of tilting the entire Empire's power structure.

Raymond admits to himself: This is truly a fearsome young man.

He turns to the knight, speaking with a low chill in his voice: "From today onwards, increase Grey Rock's intelligence funding by one-third, directed towards the Northern Territory. Keep a close watch on this man."

"Yes." The knight accepts the order and departs.

The study returns to silence. Raymond leans against the window, looking at the overcast sky, and murmurs softly: "An overlord, a young, fearsome new Wolf King."

Chapter 619: Remont's Ambition (Part 2)

Raymont pondered for a moment, and an entire map of the Empire unfolded in his mind.

If the Northern Territory completely fell into Louis's hands, Gray Rock's trade routes and mining lines would be at his mercy.

"We cannot let him expand too quickly. Let him gain confidence first, then let him become unbalanced."

Raymont quickly sketched a framework in his mind, using trade and alliance to restrain Red Tide. Once the Northern Territory's resources flowed to Gray Rock, he would tighten financial support in the name of the Imperial Capital.

If that Red Tide Lord truly wanted to continue expanding, Gray Rock would secretly support a righteous correction, letting the young man face reality.

Raymont exhaled softly and turned to pick up his coat.

"Go tell the butler," he said blandly, "I won't be returning for the charity banquet, just say it's official business."

A reply came from outside, the butler's voice steady and respectful: "Yes, my lord. I will arrange for the banquet as usual."

"Good." Raymont nodded, straightening his cuffs, his gaze regaining that composed nobility.

He stood up, donned a black cloak, and tightened his gloves.

Two trusted knights accompanied him, passing through the spiral passages of the fortress, heading downward.

The air gradually became humid, mixed with the smell of rust and blood.

The hall at the bottom was as bright as those above ground, illuminated by neatly arranged alchemical oil lamps.

Rows of cages extended along the walls, the iron bars blackened by smoke.

Within the cages, children curled up, some shivering, some motionless, others screaming in agony. Thin metal tubes protruded from their backs, with medicinal liquid coursing through the pipes.

Shattered paper and discarded copper needles scattered the ground.

Several Alchemists silently navigated the pathways, adjusting valves and recording data, their expressions focused, as if tending to a group of modified specimens.

That eerie sense of order was more chilling than chaos.

Behind the arched iron grating at the center was the heart of the entire hall, a giant dragon's remains submerged in a bizarre pool of blood.

The dragon's body was so massive it nearly filled half the room. Its fangs curved like scythes, partially embedded in the stone floor. Its tongue bone was fractured, and residual air bubbles gently emerged from its throat cavity.

The pool of blood had a diameter of nearly twenty meters, the liquid a deep red, shimmering with a dark silver sheen under the alchemical lights.

The dragon's spine resembled an exposed mountain ridge, with broken bone wings suspended by dozens of chains, dipping and emerging from the blood, creating viscous waves.

Its chest cavity was open, filled with alchemical tubes and talisman arrays, with silvery liquid surging along the bone lines.

Several unconscious children lay beside the blood pool, their bodies restrained, their chests barely rising and falling.

An Alchemist tested the drug flow beside them, flipping one of the children over to inject a new liquid.

The child's fingertips twitched, a hoarse moan escaping his throat, then quieted down again.

A pump beneath the dragon's chest continued to operate, extracting luminous bone marrow. The pump's heavy, rhythmic sound seemed to breathe life back into the dead creature.

The entire hall subtly trembled, with dark red ripples spreading across the blood pool, as if the dead dragon was being revived.

The origins of this laboratory could be traced back over forty years.

Back then, Gray Rock Fort was still under construction, and Spencer's father, Duke Aldric Raymont, discovered this legendary ancient dragon's remains while building defense lines.

Indeed, it existed only in legends, never seen by anyone.

For military experimental purposes, he and the Alchemy Consultant Corps refined a potion capable of temporarily enhancing fighting energy on the battlefield, named Dragon Marrow Extract.

This potion allowed knights to burst with fighting energy in critical moments, maintaining three minutes of maximum combat power.

But its side effects were extremely terrifying—excruciating pain, complete exhaustion, even death; using it over three times was certain death.

Old Raymont regarded it as a last-resort battlefield secret, strictly prohibiting mass production, leaving only a warning: "This is not a power humans can wield."

However, after Raymont inherited the title, he saw not the risk, but an opportunity.

The Imperial Capital was amidst great upheaval, the Emperor missing, and factions seizing control. He keenly sensed an unprecedented gap.

An opportunity that could propel him to the core of the Empire's power, even to dominate the entire continent.

He knew well this chaos would forge new order, and new order would certainly require strength.

Gray Rock held the secret of dragon marrow, and he couldn't watch this bargaining chip slip through his fingers.

To him, morals, prohibition, and limits were nothing more than disposable paper.

As long as it could push him one step up, he would stride forward with a smile, even if a sea of blood lay below.

Thus, he burned his father's warning, leaving only formulas and experiment logs, ordering the Consultant Corps to restart the research, codenamed the "Gray Rock Blood Refining Project."

He wasn't satisfied with tactical potions but sought to build a strategic factory for mass-manufacturing power.

Transform the Dragon Marrow Extract into a stable catalyst, reshaping human flesh and nerves, allowing ordinary people to permanently possess fighting energy circuits.

All adult subjects died in the experiments, only boys aged ten to fourteen could survive temporarily.

Hence, the "Gray Rock Charity Garden" above ground, nominally an orphanage, became the laboratory's material repository.

The children were recorded, numbered, then sent underground to become new materials.

Alchemy Master Millar stepped forward and bowed: "My lord, the second-generation samples have been injected. Thirteen have successfully adapted, with four exceeding expected fighting energy awakening levels, expected to be ready for combat testing in three days."

Raymont asked calmly: "Side effects?"

"Still present. Average lifespan might be less than half a year."

"Half a year is enough." Raymont nodded slightly.

He turned to look at the row of numbered children in cages, his gaze as calm as if reviewing weapons.

"The potency still seems inadequate. Increase the dosage, and disregard the side effects."

Millar bowed his head, his voice slightly trembling: "As you command, my lord."

Raymont added coldly: "Remember, it cannot be exposed."

Then he left the underground hall without looking back at the children in the cages.

When he returned to the surface, the sun was already slanting into Gray Rock Square.

In the distance, the children's hymns could be heard, the air fresh, golden light shining on his immaculate attire.

Raymont smiled as he walked out of the shadows, raising his hand to greet the crowd, still the "benevolent Duke."

No one knew that just a few hundred meters beneath his feet, those children's hearts still beat together, propelling his Empire forward.

.....

The late spring morning light spilled through the carriage window, filling the interior with a warm glow.

The fire flickered gently in the corner, the air carrying a faint scent of pine wood.

Louis woke from a light sleep, first hearing the rhythm of wheels against the ground.

The slight sway made him open his eyes, the firelight casting a pale golden hue in his eyes.

Louis first raised his hand and rubbed his eyebrows, exhaling deeply, the air carrying the warmth of charcoal.

He stretched his shoulders, leaned back on the seat, his gaze lingering on an old map in front of him before finally settling on the mark of Frost Dragon Ridge.

This was the third day since leaving Frost Dragon Ridge.

The Northern Territory's establishment meeting had just ended, and he practically left right after the meeting.

There was nothing there to keep him, nor any social necessity. Already, in the Chongqing meeting, he gathered all the chips he could.

The Sixth Prince's antics unexpectedly helped him, allowing him to gather over half of the nobility in the Northern Territory.

The Red Tide system could attract a quarter of the Northern Territory's nobility. Now that over half had joined, it was a much better outcome than expected for him.

To be honest, even if all Northern Territories nominally submitted, it would have been a burden; he didn't have the resources to immediately support so many territories.

The wisest path was to stabilize the nobles within the system first, then gradually eliminate those not yet joined from the Northern Territory power circle, waiting for their decline and demise, then smoothly annexing their territories and populations.

"The door is open," Louis muttered to himself, "but that's just courtesy. What's missed is missed forever."

Then Louis raised his hand and activated the Daily Intelligence System, a pale blue light screen shimmering in the air, lines of information floating, reflecting in his eyes.

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

Chapter 620: Frost Halberd City Under Reconstruction

Louis skillfully activated the Daily Intelligence System with a wave of his hand.

A faint blue light screen silently appeared in the carriage, and a line of intelligence slowly unfolded:

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

[1: Good news from Dawn Port, the first ground steam transport vehicle from the Red Tide Workshop has been successfully trial-made, marking the Northern Territory's entry into the mechanized transport era.]

[2: Unusual fleet activity detected in the Northern Sea, with Mad King Xavier's reconnaissance ships appearing multiple times outside Dawn Port.]

[3: Duke Raymond has extracted an activator for Fighting Energy using an ancient dragon carcass, called the second-generation Dragon Marrow Extract.]

"I told you, he could do it." Louis stared at the light screen, a slight smile appearing on the corner of his mouth.

He always knew Hamilton could succeed, after all, he's recognized by the Daily Intelligence System as a genius, though he didn't expect it to be so soon.

That vehicle is not just the workshop's achievement, but another big step in Red Tide's industry.

The furnace's light reflected a glimmer in Louis' eyes: "The supply line, trade line, military line... they can all start moving."

He had long had a plan in mind, waiting for technological improvements to stabilize before commencing mass production, allowing Red Tide's goods and grains to traverse the snowfields.

In the future, there will be even larger iron-rail trains, linking the ports and the Northern Territory's cities into a steel artery.

In wartime, they are the behemoths of supply and troop transport; in peacetime, they are the lifeblood of merchants and craftsmen.

The resources of the Northern Territory will flow through these machines, no longer constrained by seasons, storms, or horses.

Louis can foresee steam trains roaring across the snowfield, while the workshop continues to ascend the tech tree, producing tanks, armored trains, and ocean-going steam fleets.

This means Red Tide will completely revolutionize the Northern Territory's roads, trade, and military supply, from transport to defense, from production to war.

In future wars, Red Tide will no longer rely on the blood of knights, but will be sustained by the roar of machines.

In this world, alchemy has long been pushed to extremes by the Jade Federation, from potions to biological modifications, their schools are numerous, with vast branches.

Yet in the field of machinery, their progress has always been slow, possibly because this is a Magic World, so there's been no development in this area.

Red Tide's steam technology is an uncharted path, making it truly unique.

This is Red Tide's secret weapon, and it is its advantage.

Louis looked up at the line of text on the light screen, feeling a sense of satisfaction.

[2: Unusual fleet activity detected in the Northern Sea, with 'Mad King' Xavier's reconnaissance ships appearing multiple times outside Dawn Port.]

Louis glanced over it, remaining very calm.

To him, this is not a sudden threat but a confirmed entry finally printed in the long-term intelligence chain.

He already had a heap of intelligence on Xavier, such as the Ashen Guild secretly providing him with ship cannons and fuel, leading him to attack Jade Federation Guild ships multiple times.

His main area of activity is concentrated around the Ice Abyss Islands and the Northern Sea Corridor.

The intelligence even recorded details of his private life; he is not as deranged as rumored, with his family living incognito in a prosperous small town within the Jade Federation, leading a respectable life.

Kavier is not mad but a pawn of the guild, also constrained as a pirate leader by the ledger.

Based on intelligence and Bag's interrogation, he had already dispatched people for multiple secret reconnaissance operations and intelligence simulations, gaining a clear understanding of the fleet's firepower layout and supply rhythm.

Therefore, Louis is not panicked.

The original plan was to personally clear them out in the spring, but this time, to attend the reconstruction meeting, he first instructed Dawn Port to build more ships and not to act recklessly.

Fortify defenses, set up artillery positions, and once he arrives, eradicate them in one fell swoop.

Louis withdrew the smile from the corner of his mouth: "Since you've shown yourself, I will choose the time, place, and your end myself."

[3: Duke Raymond has extracted an activator for Fighting Energy using an ancient dragon carcass, called the 'second-generation Dragon Marrow Extract.']

When Louis saw this line, his brows gradually furrowed.

"... Dragon carcass?" he repeated softly.

Such creatures have long been legends.

No one has seen a living specimen for millennia, yet someone dug up a carcass from grayrock?

Louis did not believe the intelligence could be wrong; the Daily Intelligence System would not fabricate illusions.

He leaned back in his chair, pondering for a moment.

The existence of dragons implies that some ancient force is awakening.

And Raymond, that extremely rational madman, is attempting to exploit it to the fullest.

A complex emotion rose in his heart, not fear, but vigilance.

"This potion can turn a mortal into a knight... the side effects must be significant, but what if it could truly be controlled?" Louis exhaled slowly, "He wants to take a shortcut, and shortcuts often lead to the Abyss."

More spies must be dispatched to monitor Grayrock Province. If a sample can be obtained, spare no expense.

However, Louis did not hold much hope; that thing will not be easy for anyone to see.

This is reality; Raymond will surely lock the most critical secrets within the deepest tunnels.

Just like Red Tide's artisans' development center, the steam engine's core test segment, the Fighting Energy cultivation room, and even some key assembly lines have been designated as restricted areas.

Heavily guarded by knights, no one can enter those sealed locations without his permission.

Raymond is deep-minded, skillful, one of the most powerful and ambitious nobility in the Empire.

And through the Daily Intelligence System, Louis has approximately pieced together his true intentions.

Not only controlling Grayrock Province but also attempting to take hold of the entire Empire, possibly seeking even greater power.

Louis had already sent spies to collect information from Grayrock, but those reconnaissance missions always failed to reach the core.