

Winter 621

Chapter 621: Frost Halberd City Under Reconstruction (Part 2)

Fortunately, he has the Daily Intelligence System, an almost bug-like weapon.

Only then could he piece together scattered clues into a complete picture; otherwise, he would never know until his death how ambitious his neighbor truly was.

He really doesn't have a better method; he certainly can't just launch an attack.

Given Red Tide's current military strength and resources, he can't afford such an action; a direct confrontation would be extremely costly and uncertain in outcome.

So he can only pin his hopes on two things: first, the daily intelligence, as far as possible, identifying the gaps in Raymond's defenses.

Second, let the development speed of Red Tide's military catch up with his ambition, quickly deploying tanks and cannons, after all, knights cannot be mass-produced, but tanks can.

The current situation of the Empire gives Louis a sense of urgency, as if watching a timed device, knowing the fuse has been lit but cannot extinguish it immediately.

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Louis sat in the carriage, gazing at the gray-white sky outside the window.

He had left Frost Dragon Ridge for several days, and his destination now is Frost Halberd City, passing by, he decided to take a look.

In the distance, smoke still rose from the ruins of the old Frost Halberd, the furnace ignited by dismantling the old stones.

The air mixed with the scent of charcoal and moldy wood, the clash of iron echoed in the valleys from time to time.

The outer wall of the new district was still unfinished, the wooden door frames creaking in the wind.

The temporary soldier watchtower constructed from iron plates and permafrost, the snow and wind beat against the flags of the Empire and Frost Halberd.

This city was once the heart of the Northern Territory, it was the nerve center of the North, the military-political hub of the Empire.

And as the capital of the Northern Territory, its location was naturally superb, situated at the fortress area where the frozen rivers and ridges intersect, controlling the trade routes to the south and the western commerce paths, it was the node for all supplies and defenses.

Louis quietly watched the smoking ruins, his expression calm.

He knew why he had to rebuild this city that had been razed.

Firstly to fulfill a vow, Frost Halberd is the symbol of the Edmund Clan, the old duke entrusted the Northern Territory's name and legion to him on his deathbed.

Rebuilding Frost Halberd is not just a continuation of trust but also a political promise.

If he abandons it, it would not only breach trust but also label him as a usurper in the eyes of the Northern Lords, rather than an heir.

Furthermore, Louis remembers that day, the old duke's weak voice: "It cannot end with me."

At that time, he swore an oath to Duke Edmund: "One day, I will rebuild Frost Halberd City. Not as an appendage of Red Tide, but as the true heart of the Northern Territory."

He must fulfill this promise.

Although Red Tide Territory is strong, it is ultimately not the capital, while Frost Halberd City bears the legitimate banner of the Empire.

If he wishes to unify the Northern Lords, this city is indispensable.

After rebuilding, under his protection, with Isaac's governance, he can rightfully become the Lord of the North.

Isaac, as the sole heir of Duke Edmund, is destined to be the future Lord of the North, this is part of his pledge to Duke Edmund, though perhaps not many can believe it, he truly thinks this way.

Louis knows that his future inevitably involves expansion and expedition; he may not necessarily take root in the Northern Territory; his ambition is the entire Empire.

Previously, he lacked this ambition because the Empire was still stable, but according to the Intelligence System, the Empire is now precarious, he could seize an opportunity to carve out a dominion, perhaps even become Emperor.

Frost Halberd City is the legacy of old Duke Edmund, also the trial of the new generation Duke Edmund.

Moreover, Frost Halberd's terrain is the hub of the entire Northern Territory; it can defend, gather, and is indispensable for future wars.

The rebuilt Frost Halberd will become the front-line supply depot, military center, and transportation fortress.

And Red Tide will continue to serve as the brain of the Northern Territory, orchestrating commands and operations.

Additionally, it will serve as an experimental zone for Red Tide's system implementation.

Frost Halberd is an ideal test site; it has both old nobility and war refugees.

Rebuilding it means embedding the Red Tide system into a larger region; newly joined nobles in the Red Tide system see hope, see the future.

The Northern Lords and populace revere Frost Halberd, viewing it as the soul of their homeland.

If the ruins are never rebuilt, the morale of the Northern Territory will also collapse.

The process of rebuilding Frost Halberd itself is a political and faith revival, making the Northern Territory great again.

The carriage passed through the rebuilding city gate, the knights saluted upright.

Louis lifted the curtain, looking at the construction site where the new and old intersected, feeling calm in his heart.

Two figures stood in front of the city gate.

Viscount Orion Arden and Harold Greer, along with guards and craftsmen, lined up in the snow to welcome him.

Viscount Orion Arden is the overseer of New Frost Halberd, brother of Lady Irina, from the old nobility.

After the war, he was appointed as the acting manager of Frost Halberd, responsible for the entire city's reconstruction affairs.

Harold Greer, on the other hand, is the deputy director of the Red Tide Craftsmen Bureau and was one of the craftsmen Louis exchanged for with Duke Edmund, considered a veteran craftsman of Red Tide, though it's not been long, Red Tide has developed too quickly, and even the old craftsmen from a few years ago have risen to prominence.

Orion gave a half bow, his voice carrying some enthusiasm: "Lord Louis, you've finally come again."

With gloves full of coal ash in hand, Harold spoke a bit nervously: "Your timing is perfect, my lord; we have just begun laying the foundation."

Louis nodded lightly, his gaze passing over the construction site behind them, where bricks, wooden beams, and furnace flames interwove into the outline of a new order.

He stepped into the city that had just begun to be built. The roads were still muddy, mixed with cold wind between the collapsed walls and charred beams. Although there were furnace fires, they couldn't hide the marks of ruin.

Orion followed behind him, feelings still complex in his heart.

Though he admired Louis's achievements, he still doubted whether the determination to rebuild Frost Halberd was genuine.

After all, the scene before him resembled a temporary work camp more than a city.

The cost of rebuilding was too high, and it might not be unfeasible to choose a new location to rebuild.

Louis, however, stopped, his gaze falling on the distant ruined tower and the muddy ground beneath his feet, his voice calm yet as if painting a map of the future:

"Three years from now, this muddy road will become the main ring road of the city. On both sides will be domed gray stone houses, warm in winter without the need for coal fires.

Further ahead will be Snowfall Square. The Northern Territory Council will meet there, rather than in Red Tide."

Orion was taken aback, instinctively looking toward that empty land, as if the outline of the future truly emerged amidst the snow curtain.

Sparks flew under the wooden shelter, the smell of scorched coal mixed with the cold wind. Harold half-bowed and reported: "The furnace ducts are first laid from the command tower, connecting to the first residential area in spring, with valves using Red Tide style pressure distribution, materials coming from Star Forge."

Louis pointed to the junction of the furnace and the main pipe: "Add another set of pressure relief rings here to avoid thermal expansion cracks at night."

Several craftsmen exchanged glances, their expressions tense, fearing they had overlooked something. Harold hurried forward to respond: "Understood, my lord! We'll change it immediately!"

Louis's tone was calm, without reprimand, only a slight nod: "You have done well, but treat any deviation as an enemy."

The craftsmen nodded quickly, their hands and feet moving swiftly to take notes, leaving black marks in their trembling coal-dust-covered hands, adding a tense respect to the air.

Orion was again taken aback; the details, this count knew them better than the craftsmen.

During the ensuing site inspection, Louis traversed various reconstruction facilities.

He paused before a temporarily built casting furnace, quietly inquiring about the fuel ratio and wind pressure adjustment, personally inspecting the sealing of the valves and pipelines.

He then moved to the side of a newly built drainage channel, crouched to check the flow rate of the snow water, indicating to leave an extra buffer zone at the corner.

Several local craftsmen unfamiliar with him, seeing his familiarity with the blueprints, all stood in awe, while Harold puffed out his chest proudly.

"The furnace here is too close to the residential area; if the wind direction changes, it'll push the smoke back. In winter, switch to underground ventilation and remember to insulate it."

"Yes, my lord." Harold responded loudly and immediately took note.

They continued onward, passing the newly built rail bed, half-constructed warehouses, and factories piled with stone materials.

At each place, Louis offered adjustments or improvements, missing nothing from structural support to pressure distribution in the pipes.

The craftsmen took notes as they answered, and even Orion began to feel that the work camp was gradually taking on the shape of a city.

Finally, they arrived at the center of the city, where a stone pillar had been erected. The monument stood about two people high, its base chiseled from the stone of the Northern Territory, the surface retaining its rough stone grain.

The emblem of Duke Edmund's family, an eagle spreading its wings, symbolizing watchfulness and honor, was inlaid on the monument's face.

As the cold wind swept by, snowflakes struck the monument's surface, light and shadow revealing faint golden patterns, carrying an ancient majesty.

The inscription had been carved, written personally by Louis:

[Here once burned, here shall be reborn, in memory of those who sacrificed for the Northern Territory.]

Orion looked on silently, his eyes slightly moist.

He finally understood why Duke Edmund would entrust the Northern Territory's legacy to this young man.

Perhaps only he could bring this ruin back to life.

Chapter 622: Xavier's Retirement Plan

The morning mist of the Red Tide had not dissipated, and the distant mountains were painted with a touch of white by the early spring sunlight.

The testing facility outside the city was hidden in the valley, where the scent of steam mixed with coal smoke carried a tar-like smell on the wind.

This was one of the most secret places in the Red Tide.

High walls surrounded it, the sentry posts were strict, and knights with guns stood on both sides.

Seeing the Lord's exclusive vehicle approaching, they all stood at attention and saluted, their expressions solemn.

The carriage stopped in front of the main gate of the testing facility.

Bradley got out of the carriage first, adjusting the collar of his coat: "Be careful, my Lord. After all, we're still in the testing phase."

Louis merely smiled slightly, lifted the curtain, and stepped down.

In the center of the testing facility, a massive iron vehicle stood silently.

Smoke still gently wafted from its furnace, snowmelt from the previous night clung to the iron wheels, and the sunlight reflected a layer of dark red gloss on its metallic surface.

It had a chilling beauty, like a peculiar steel beast, with the emblem of the Red Tide engraved on its side.

The vehicle was cast from Cold Iron and refined copper, with a rounded boiler cabin at the front towering over two people tall, and copper pipes winding like veins.

The body of the vehicle was tightly locked with heavy rivets, the front equipped with two pairs of iron wheels embedded on temporarily laid gear tracks, the rear part being cargo and operation cabins, appearing bulky and rough.

Hamilton stood by the vehicle, covered in work clothes, his face full of coal dust, his eyes filled with anxiety, holding plans crumpled and soaked with sweat in his arms.

"Lord Louis!" Seeing Louis, he rushed forward to salute, his voice trembling slightly, "Everything is ready."

The other craftsmen, noticing the Lord's presence, also put down their tools and saluted, their expressions a blend of reverence and pride.

Louis stepped forward, carefully examining the iron vehicle, nodding in approval: "Well done, Hamilton."

"It... it's all thanks to the plans and ideas you provided, my Lord," the young man stammered, the coal dust unable to hide the blush on his face, "I just followed your vision and... brought it to life."

"Everyone has inspiration," Louis said calmly, "but the ability to turn plans into reality, that is a unique talent."

Hamilton's mouth opened slightly, yet he couldn't utter a word, but his eyes shone like a furnace flame.

Louis ascended the iron ladder, entering inside the vehicle cabin.

The cabin's space was surprisingly spacious. Although the arrangement was still rough, with unpolished marks still visible on the iron walls, the structure was tight and precise.

The orange-red flames danced in the furnace, steam pipes wove a web, and the rhythm of the piston chamber resonated through the air.

"Dong... dong... dong..." It sounded like the iron heart was beating.

The control panel comprised of refined copper and wooden boards, the three pressure gauge needles trembling slightly.

Beside it was the main control valve and the hand brake lever, the casing still bearing scorch marks.

Louis bent over to observe, each part almost not matching his mental picture, yet he had no doubt in this genius youth's creative abilities.

"Let it run," he said softly.

Bradley's face slightly changed: "My Lord, boarding the vehicle yourself might be a bit dangerous."

Hamilton quickly nodded in agreement: "Yes, Lord Louis, this time... this time let us operate it."

Louis turned, his tone calm: "Haven't you already tested it?"

"Y-yes, we've tested it twenty-three times, and the results have all been stable," Hamilton replied, stuttering.

"Then that's settled." Louis smiled faintly, "I trust you all."

This single sentence made all the craftsmen present hold their breath, the feeling of being trusted warmer than the furnace fire.

Hamilton quickly regained his senses, taking a deep breath: "Add coal, increase pressure to the first mark!"

The flames in the furnace suddenly surged, the red glow illuminating every face. The craftsman pulled down the control lever.

"Sss—!" White mist ejected from the exhaust vent, the ground slightly trembling.

"My Lord, i-it might shake a little," Hamilton nervously reminded.

Louis sat firmly, signaling to everyone to grip the handrails, his voice steady: "It's okay."

Emily gently held Louis's hand, she was also riding for the first time, somewhat nervous.

Weir watched the front of the vehicle with wide eyes, his breathing becoming rapid with excitement.

"Start!"

The iron wheels slowly began to turn amidst the rumbling, the gear tracks meshing with a low metallic sound.

"Dong... dong... dong..." The light from the furnace spread along the body of the vehicle, as the iron vehicle, like an awakening giant beast, began to move slowly.

Emily gasped softly: "It's really moving..."

Weir, in shock, said: "No horses needed? No magic?"

Louis chuckled: "Hamilton, explain the principle."

"The principle, the principle is actually very simple," Hamilton explained while nervously adjusting the valves, stuttering.

"It's s-steam pushing the piston, then... then driving the flywheel, through gears transferring power to the axle... and then the drive rod spins the wheel axle, allowing it to move on its own."

As he explained more and more rapidly, his voice couldn't hide his excitement and shyness, as if reciting a secret from his heart.

Emily and Weir glanced at each other, nodding, yet clearly not understanding those technical terms.

Emily muttered quietly: "It sounds like... magic."

Louis, pretending to be indifferent, nodded, composed: "Hm, I understand."

In reality, he didn't understand at all. In his mind appeared the image of a vehicle shuttling through the city streets from his past life.

He had merely sketched out the rough structure from memory, but the one truly awakening this iron beast was the shy young man before him.

The iron vehicle advanced slowly around the facility, the iron wheels crushing over ice and snow, meltwater dripping along the tracks. Furnace fire intertwined with steam, white mist twirled into the sky by the wind.

Everyone watched without blinking at that colossal iron shadow, even their breaths became lighter.

Chapter 623: Xavier's Retirement Plan (Part 2)

Bradley stood aside, his palms sweaty. It was only when the iron car slowly came to a stop three hundred meters away that he breathed a sigh of relief.

What followed was a long-repressed cheer.

The craftsmen raised their arms, their cheers echoing.

Someone excitedly patted a companion's shoulder, the glow of the furnace flickering on their faces.

Hamilton, however, stood frozen, his face flushed, gripping the roll of blueprints tightly.

It wasn't until Louis turned his head and nodded in acknowledgment to him that he hurriedly responded, lowering his head to softly say, "Th-thank you, my lord..."

The dust on his face was dissolved by sweat, slipping down his neck, a light in his eyes that couldn't be concealed.

Louis disembarked, his gaze sweeping over the body of the vehicle.

The residual flames from the furnace were still flickering, heat still rising from the vent.

Louis reached out and stroked the metal shell, calmly saying, "Some parts are still not ideal, they need further improvement."

"Yes, my lord! I understand!"

Louis nodded, turning to look at him: "The next goal is to put this thing on the tracks. We're not just building a transport car, but a train. And—a war machine."

Hamilton was stunned, his lips slightly parted, his heart almost overflowing with heated blood.

He instinctively hugged the blueprints tighter, the lines on them drawn by Louis's own hands.

These were what he had relied on in countless studies, experiments, failures, and retries.

Hamilton nodded forcefully, "Yes, Lord Louis! Your blueprints... I will make them come alive!"

The red flames in the furnace reflected on their faces, steam turning into white mist in the wind, rising to the sky.

For the next two days, Louis stayed in Red Tide City, personally organizing affairs and military plans.

He delegated the workshop schedules, tax issues of other territories, and the annual allocation table of the Red Tide Academy to Bradley, leaving only a few letters as clever strategies.

Bradley stood before the desk, saluting, "Everything will be handled properly, my lord."

Louis nodded, putting on his coat, "Thank you for your hard work. I must go to Dawn Port; this year's plan can't wait."

He took one last look back at the city lit by steam light.

Then he boarded the carriage, heading south to greet the pirates.

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The cold tide had not yet arrived, but thin fog was already rising over the sea.

The moon was like a broken copper plate, hanging low over the dark bay near the shore, ship shadows everywhere, sails folding into black wings, forming a forest at sea.

Thirty-seven black sails quietly gathered into a formation, the sound of anchors sparse but aligning in rhythm.

Ten reinforced ships, modified by the Ashen Guild, lay in the inner circle, the metal hoops on wooden gunwales creaking, and the revolving cannons on the ship's sides like sleeping sharp teeth.

The deck was stained dark red by bonfires and the smell of alcohol, flames elongating the shadows only to be torn apart by the sea breeze.

In the very center, the Wave Eater took up most of the view.

Nearly twenty meters of ship-body thicker than neighboring ships, the bow's iron shield blended with ancient runes, a massive explosion cannon bound by thick cord rings atop the deck.

This cannon could tear apart a dock in an instant.

Beside it were piled alchemy fuel jars, their mouths sealed with wax, bodies inscribed with explosion-proof talismans and straw mats, arranged neatly with a ceremonial feel.

Kavier "Iron Jaw" stood at the helm of the Wave Eater.

Half his face sunk in shadow, the other half exposed in firelight revealing a metal prosthetic jaw, rivets reflecting the flickering firelight.

When he raised his cup, the rim was first offered to a seagull, letting the gull take a sip before he began to drink heartily.

A banquet was underway on the deck, drummers beating rhythm, blade craftsmen forging short blades by the fire, several sailors jostling each other to drink to the last drop then refill.

Someone poured a whole barrel of strong liquor beside the fire, igniting the alcohol, flames soaring as faces full of bloodlust were reflected.

A tall and thin pirate raised a bottle, shouting, "Tomorrow we'll drink Dawn Port's wine! Rob their women!"

Sparking a round of clamorous cheers.

Another shirtless man slapped a table, roaring, "Damn the Red Tide! Drink their blood dry!"

Sailors thrust daggers into the wooden tables, shouting bets, clinking rusty cups loudly.

Someone climbed the mast, shouting, "The Mad King brings us fortune!"

Below, a chorus of responses.

Wild laughter, curses, singing mixed with the sea breeze, like a pack of untamed beasts celebrating on the eve of a storm, coarse, reckless, filled with the scent of alcohol and blood.

Kavier stood above, letting their din sweep across the deck.

Someone shouted his title, "Mad King!"

He responded by raising his cup, his metal jaw reflecting the firelight, as if smiling.

At this moment, three distant reconnaissance ships approached the shore, their signals flashing on and off.

The chief scout jumped onto the deck and reported to the captain in a terse manner, "Dawn Harbor's defense has weakened, the outer harbor dikes are being repaired in two places.

The warehouses are filled with alchemical fuel and powder, loading operations will be completed within two days.

Escort ships are dispersed in three places, a ship in the south line is undergoing repairs, there are not enough hands on the western line. Harbor signals rotate with clear patterns, predictable."

He took out tidal records and a rough harbor map, adding, "The depth of the inner harbor channel is about seven and a half feet, enough for large ships to invade.

There are about three hundred knights stationed at Dawn Harbor, night watch halved. If we launch a raid before dawn on the second day, we can first break the defense, then cut off the storage area..."

Kavier only nodded after hearing, his gaze bright and sombre, a slow smile creeping up his lips.

"Excellent," he said, his voice like the edge of a blade, "that's the meat we sink our teeth into."

Then Xavier stood tall on the deck like a madman, his laughter overpowering the sounds of tides and drums.

He suddenly raised his cup, the liquid splashing onto the deck, flashing once in the firelight.

His voice hoarse and fervent, "Brothers! Those self-proclaimed noble dogs of the Empire are waiting to deliver grain and oil to us!

In a few days we'll drink their wine, burn their ships, take their lives! Pull off a big score and earn a whole damn year!"

The deck exploded with howling laughter, someone drew a knife and knocked it against the wooden table, someone splashed wine into the sky, shouting:

"Long live the Mad King!", "Screw their Red Tide!", "Drink it all tonight, kill them all tomorrow!"

Laughter mixed with the sound of tides and drums, like waves crashing against the deck.

Xavier spread his arms, towering above the sea fog amidst the roaring of these beasts, his whole form like a shadow forged by fire and wind.

However, when the banquet dispersed and only scattered firelight and the last guards remained on the deck, Xavier's smile instantly faded into a mask of calm.

He pulled open a hidden door by the helm and walked into the cabin, where the lights were dimmer, maps and sand tables spread out on the table, the shadows beside the candles cutting his face into sharp relief.

The madness he showed earlier was an armor he crafted meticulously.

Kavier knew these people who lived by plunder only believed in violence and madness; if the leader pirate showed even a hint of hesitation, they would tear him apart like a pack of wolves.

So he masked his true rationality with alcohol, laughter, and madness, making them believe he was still that fearless Mad King.

Only in this quiet cabin did he shed his outer layer, revealing that calm and calculation.

Kavier checked the three reports one by one, tides, port, cargo, all imprinted in his mind.

At that moment he was calculating an escape route, not for the fleet, but for himself.

The failure of the last mission nearly cut off all funding for the Ashen Guild.

And relying on looting and empty promises of brotherhood wouldn't sustain thirty-seven black sails.

Sailors needed meat, cannons needed lead, oil needed money, once the stores ran dry, they'd first turn on the captain.

Kavier coldly stared at the map on the table, his fingers tapping on the edge of the sand table.

A smile nearly devoid of emotion graced his lips, it was a smile of calculation.

"If this bunch doesn't have meat to eat, they'll eat people. So I must devour them first."

Kavier already had it figured out, make one last score.

Then sell off the treasure hidden over the years, buy a small city in the Jade Federation, become a filthy rich local bully.

As for these brothers? He'd leave them adrift like floating debris.

Of course, Kavier's plan wasn't a slap-dash gamble.

Dawn Harbor had only been built for two years, many ships, little experience, currently shipping the first batch of precious alchemical minerals.

Escort ships shuffled around, the defenses switched guards chaotically, it was the ripest moment.

He etched letters and numbers beside the sand table, muttering lowly, "Three fake merchant ships to draw away escort ships, main force outflanks from the mist, gobble up all the cargo."

Then feign death, escape with a few men. The rest can float away with the tide."

His fingers tapped lightly on the wooden board, the rhythm cold and hard.

The shell of madness peeled away completely at this moment, leaving only the calm predator.

No matter how formidable the Red Tide's knights were, the sea was still his domain.

The tides wouldn't pause for anyone.

What he didn't know was that the Lord of the Red Tide had already seen through his inner calculations thoroughly with intelligence.

Chapter 624: Schemes on Both Sides

The firelight flickered on the cabin floor, slicing the room into light and dark.

A sheepskin bag soaked in saltwater lay on the table, its corners still carrying the scent of the sea.

Kavier untied the rough sealing rope and read out in a coarse voice: "The first batch of merchant ships from Red Tide Territory will set sail in two days, ten ships in the fleet, dispersed arrangement, destination Southeast Province."

Kavier first grinned broadly: "Finally, it's here."

"Ten escort ships..." he silently mouthed these words to himself.

There was no joy or fear in his eyes, only the cold calculation of every gain and loss.

Though the escorts were many, they were merely a drag chain.

The real profit lay in the holds filled with precious minerals.

The sheepskin map lay spread on the table, candlelight trembling on its surface.

Kavier picked up a rusty iron nail, pressing it onto a route, then traced three words on the map with his finger — Riptide Zone.

"A natural graveyard." Kavier chuckled softly, his laughter low but chilling.

The Riptide Zone was a necessary path for the convoy and the graveyard Kavier had chosen for them.

Small islands on both sides were hidden, and the waters were complex; he had already dispatched ten iron-claw fireboats to station there.

Each boat with a team of two, carrying oil jars and hook ropes, would strike from the shadows when the tide shifted, locking onto the enemy ship's keel, capsizing them in the dark currents.

Kavier calculated the time; in the afternoons these days, the tide swelled, its breath perfectly overlapping with the Red Tide fleet's course.

That thirty-minute tide shift period was an excellent window.

The tide rose a foot, reversing the water flow direction, allowing his fleet to swiftly advance from the northern line, avoiding the patrol lights and secretly infiltrating behind the enemy.

Kavier used the tip of a knife to draw that route on the map, stopping the blade at an isolated reef, murmuring softly: "Here is where we close the net."

He also marked several small dots at the edge of the map, where barrels of oil were pre-buried.

When the escort ships approached, he would ignite the sea's surface, the rolling smoke obscuring the enemy's vision, covering the main force's assault.

Kavier's hand rested on the map, his expression void of waves as he looked at those symbols.

Everything was like a calculation.

Even betrayal, failure, escape, were precisely integrated into the plan.

Kavier measured the tides, calculated time, gauged the spread speed of flames, knowing the burn time of each oil jar, the loading and retreat radius of each fireboat.

Kavier's caution seeped into every detail: backup winches, folding planks, sealed tokens, down to which subordinate should carry how many dry rations.

Every route had a retreat, every point a backup plan.

Even the guards of the Dawn lighthouse had been paid off; if he lit certain signal lights, the alarm would be delayed by one minute.

That minute was enough for him to complete the harvest.

And if the action failed, he would abandon the ship and set a fire at the reef mouth, showing the enemy the burning remnants, then slip with trusted men into the Raven's Nest Town he had long prepared, change names, and live another life.

In the cabin, the firelight reflecting off his metallic chin gave off a cold gleam, making him look less like a pirate and more like an accountant writing a death ledger at sea.

To him, so-called brotherhood was merely a tool for making money.

On the deck came the shouts and laughter of pirates, slapping barrel lids, clashing blades, hurling curses at the sea breeze, and singing crude songs.

Bumping and jostling, strong spirits splashed on the wood, mixing with the smell of salt and fire.

It was an arrogant clamor, like beasts roaring at each other before a storm.

And the cabin door was half-closed; Xavier stood at the helm, his gaze piercing through the window slits towards the crowd in revelry.

Moonlight cast a cold light on his metallic chin, his calm more terrifying than the din on deck.

Kavier silently wrapped up all the arrangements, as if wrapping a sharp weapon, with not a shred of hesitation or mercy in his heart.

The shouting and laughter outside became noise, leaving only the wind and waves responding to his thoughts.

The night wind pushed open the half-door, bringing the smell of liquor and blood.

Kavier quietly took a breath, muttering: "Let them laugh while they can, there's not much time left."

Then he tidied his composed expression, raised his hand, and pushed the cabin door wide open.

The sea breeze mixed with the scent of alcohol hit him; he paused briefly at the door, his mouth twitching slowly, donning that manic grin again.

A moment before the somber calculation was buried in laughter, as if he had become another person.

Kavier walked onto the deck, where the scent of spirits and firelight intertwined.

Seeing him appear, the pirates shouted in unison: "Mad King! Mad King!"

Kavier raised his cup, shouting loudly: "Brothers! Let everyone remember the name of the Mad King! Kill them all, burn their ships!"

"Kill, kill, kill!" Cheers rolled, drummers beat on barrel lids, blades clanged against masts.

The firelight bathed half of his metallic face in red, his smile distorting in the flickering light, like fervent prayers or pre-sacrifice hymns.

"Weigh anchor!" Xavier commanded, and the horn immediately sounded.

Thirty-seven black sails slowly turned, anchors lifted from the water, stirring the waves.

The fleet set sail into the night fog, heading towards the graveyard he had personally chosen — the Riptide Zone.

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The night sea was like ink, the north sea wind carrying the chill of broken ice.

The thirty-seven black sails had already reached the outskirts of the Riptide Zone, seventeen of them hidden in the shadows of two barren islands.

This was an ambush point Xavier had personally selected.

There were undercurrents in the sea below, and the angle of the islands shielded the ships' shadows.

For this position, he sent people three times to survey, accurately recording even the reef height and water depth at low tide.

Chapter 625: Schemes on Both Sides (2)

The island was lit only by dim lamps, the firelight covered by canvas, and the sailors lowered their voices, as if silently awaiting some kind of ritual.

Some were sharpening their knives on the deck, while others hung fish bones in front of the mast, praying to the Sea God, without any noise.

They were usually boisterous, could get drunk to the point of being dazed, or fight over a piece of bread, but at this moment, each person knew exactly what they should do.

The gleam of blades flickered in the flames, and no one cracked a joke anymore.

This was the time they prepared for life and death, all indulgence and rawness collected at this moment.

They believed unconditionally in this mad king.

After all, countless times of pillaging, his intelligence was always accurate, each gamble with their lives always yielded a whole cabin of spoils.

Even though the sea surface was empty now, with no shadow of an enemy in sight, still no one doubted.

Thirty-seven black-sailed ships were silent in the mist, only the low roar of waves crashing against rocks.

Louis stood at the helm of the Wave Eater, the metal prosthetic jaw glinting faintly.

He could hear the suppressed murmurs and quick breaths from the lower deck, the panting before a beast pounced.

The map unfolded in Louis's mind, tides, wind direction, and ship spacing were all calculated.

The plan devised over two months was set to harvest tonight.

Before dawn, three escort ships of Red Tide finally appeared at the entrance of the Tide Rift.

Their sails were faintly visible in the fog, with the emblem flags of Red Tide hanging from their masts.

Further behind them were seven convoy escort ships patrolling scattered, forming a thin but changing defense line.

Louis squinted, gazing at the rhythm of that route, the corner of his mouth slightly lifted.

He did not fear those escort ships.

Thirty-seven ambushed black sails were enough to suppress the firepower of these ten enemy ships, not to mention the countless successful raids beforehand had assured him he had never miscalculated.

As soon as the order was given, the prey would fall into the net.

At the tail of the escort fleet, a line of cargo ships was slowly entering, the true target, carrying precious cargo.

The sound of the horn spread from the Wave Eater, deep and rhythmic.

Almost simultaneously, semaphore flags rose atop each ship's mast, the commander gestured in all directions to confirm the order transmitted.

This was the order to attack, the seventeen hidden black sail ships awoke all at once.

The entire fleet moved like a beast pulled by strings, the sea surface stirred with a dense shimmering wave.

And three fireboats dashed first out of the shadows, like arrows rushing toward their target.

According to Louis's deployment, the three vanguard fireboats were not to face the enemy head-on.

But rather engage from the flanks, while the escort ships were distracted by the firelight, darting straight at the cargo ships, overturning their route, then set fire to block, creating chaos.

That was the mad king's most adept hunt, disrupting the formation, using burning fear to devour the enemy's order.

The pirates' eyes flickered in the firelight, unable to suppress their excitement, muttering curses, licking their lips, as though smelling the scent of money and blood.

"The long-awaited has finally come." A sailor chuckled under their breath, gripping their knife handle tightly.

All knew once the fire started, this deal could feed them for a whole year.

All hearts betting their lives were ignited by the phantom of spoils.

Louis stood at the rail, the corner of his mouth slowly curved upward, like a hunter waiting for the trap to snap shut.

As the fireboats swiftly drew near, shark petroleum was poured into the sea.

In the next instant, the sea surface flared with orange-red light.

The flames soared, tongues of fire licked at the fog wall, like a burning giant snake.

The Red Tide escort ships were trapped within, the explosions deafening, the night sky ripped open.

Three escort ships were hit consecutively, deck armor blown apart creating breaches, the hulls began to tilt.

The pirates threw Magic Explosion Bullets for additional attacks, the blasts on the sea surface consecutively sparked firework.

In just a few breaths, the three escort ships had been shattered to pieces.

Of course, Louis did not order to continue pounding, Magic Explosion Bullets were too precious, without absolute certainty, he never wasted them lightly.

Roaring cheers surged to the heavens: "Long live the mad king!"

They howled, as though victory was within reach.

Louis's laughter swept through the wind and waves, cold and insane, upon this burning sea of night, he believed this time would be his rebirth.

However, the calm sea surface suddenly changed.

Buoys in the mist suddenly lit up with a red light, one after another, drawing regular arcs across the sea surface.

Soon after, explosions rang out in succession, shaking the wooden planks and causing the ropes to jump wildly.

The ambushing ships immediately lost balance: ten were directly blown over in the first wave of impact, turning into overturned shells, with black oil quickly spreading across the water surface.

The shockwave from the explosion stirred up the sea waves, accompanied by heart-wrenching screams.

Some were catapulted off the deck, landing in the oil-soaked sea, immediately emitting brief screams, the sound swallowed by the flames, while others were hooked by broken iron hooks snagging their collars, pulling them into the burning water.

From the bottom of the cabin came the sounds of painful pounding and cries for help, someone constantly pounding on the wood and shouting, "Let me out!"

But the only response was the echoes of the waves and explosions.

Meanwhile, the flames spread along the waves, illuminating their terrified faces.

And on the distant Dawn, Louis was watching the chaotic sea with a telescope.

The explosion's light reflected on his face, yet his expression remained as calm as ever, his fingers tapping lightly on the telescope tube, as if he were counting.

The sea breeze beside him blew the edges of his cloak, the firelight casting clear outlines in his eyes.

"Hit rate is ideal," he said calmly.

This was Hillco's design "Thunder Shock Formation," an alchemy buoy system set according to the tidal flow direction.

Each node can resonate in a chain, forming an explosive link once triggered.

The mad king's fleet formation was too dense, he personally sent the ships into the minefield.

Of course, these were not temporary deployments.

As early as half a month ago, Louis had foreseen from the Daily Intelligence System that Xavier would launch an attack on the Crack Tide Belt, so he ordered people to quietly lay this layer of killing arrangements under the sea.

Those buoys, hidden markers, and fuses, all were buried beneath the tides, silently waiting until this night.

Even those three frigates were specially built as bait, with no one inside.

Louis nodded, put away the telescope, his gaze still directed towards the fiery sea in the distance: "Not bad."

Within ten minutes, those ten ships were completely destroyed.

And survivors on nearby ships threw down ropes, some caught them, while others were swept away by the wave of fire before reaching them.

More pirates stood at the ship's edge, too afraid to approach, only able to watch helplessly as their brothers on the sea were engulfed.

The air was filled with the smell of tar, blood, and burning, even breathing carried a stench.

All this happened very quickly, as if pressed fast-forward by some unseen hand.

The debris and corpses floating on the sea tore the once confident atmosphere into silence.

"Damn it! It's a trap!" the adjutant screamed.

Kavier gripped the railing tightly, his eyes suddenly cold.

He knew it was a trap, yet couldn't believe it, this plan he had meticulously devised, no one knew the details except him.

How could anyone have ambushed them in advance?!

Kavier's anger and unease churned in his chest, as if about to tear through his heart.

The Dawn frigate suddenly turned around, its armor unfolding to reveal a barrage of cannons.

The next second, cannonballs reversed with the sea breeze.

Hidden swivel guns fired upwards from below, the artillery raining down, sinking yet another half-destroyed black sail.

Kavier clenched his teeth to suppress shock and anger, muttering quietly, "Calm down... it's not over yet."

Panic was forcibly suppressed, he suddenly turned and bellowed, "Continue releasing shark petroleum! Deploy smoke screens! Adjust formation, flank them! Initiate the second wave attack!"

The vice ship immediately tilted oil, the fire curtain rose, orange smoke rolling and spreading.

Even with the loss of eleven ships, Xavier still judged the situation with his experience, preparing to forcefully break through.

The seawall collapsed amidst the roar, seawater poured into the harbor, the firelight illuminating his silhouette.

Kavier still believed that with his skill, this battle could still be won.

Soon all the black sailboats raised their sails, charging towards those few old cargo ships.

These were not new recruits, but seasoned pirates, although their side had lost nearly a third of their strength, such a scene was not enough to make their legs go weak.

The pirates nimbly attached winches, stabilized their ships, and hooked the sides of the cargo ships' rails using short ropes, some even prepared planks in advance to board the deck wave after wave.

Chapter 626: Crushing Overwhelming Force

As Xavier gave the order, the fleet leaned over and accelerated, barrels of petroleum rolled out of the hatch, and the sailors swiftly unsealed them, lit the fuses, and poured them out.

The hot oil slicked across the waves, and thick smoke rose from the sea, spreading towards the direction of the dock with a pungent smell.

The sails vibrated under the taut ropes, and the wooden hull emitted a low creaking sound within the tidal waves.

Every ship was advancing at maximum speed, with crew pulling ropes and adjusting sails with the wind.

This was the top speed of the old Northern Sea sailing ships, devoid of advanced technology but still fast like a strong gust in the hands of seasoned sailors.

Successive horn sounds rose from the deck, and the semaphore signals of the various ships simultaneously switched.

The two flank escort ships began to glide from behind the thick smoke, forming a pincer formation under the cover of the smoke and the current.

Kavier stood atop the foredeck, hands gripping the railing, his eyes never leaving the merchant ship Dawn.

Magic Explosion Bullets loaded; he bent down to confirm the angle, relying solely on experience to judge angle and wind direction, not instruments.

With a low rumble, the cannon muzzle spat white flame, the cannonball sliced through the smoke screen, hitting the bow of Dawn with precision.

The blast shook the sea's surface into undulations, almost knocking one over.

But when the smoke cleared, Kavier saw those ships firmly anchored, with only a few shallow dents on the ship sides.

That was armor made of thick Northern Territory oak and Cold Iron, with a surface alchemy coating to scatter the impact.

"How is this possible..." he cursed softly.

The cannonballs were almost ineffective against the opponent's hulls, while the fleet of Dawn didn't even flutter a sail.

Their cannons and technology were provided by the Ashen Trade Company, considered the world's forefront, though limited in range and relying solely on experience to estimate distance and calibrate wind direction.

It was enough against regular merchant ships or coastal defenses, but against these modified warships of Dawn, it was hopelessly inadequate.

Several artillery crew members exchanged bewildered glances, even delaying their reloading actions.

"Continue! Keep loading! Don't stop!" Xavier suppressed his anger, waving his hand forcefully.

His heart pounded violently in his chest, gripping the railing tightly, staring at the hit areas, his gaze growing darker by the moment.

Yet the subsequent shots left only superficial marks on Dawn's hull, not even tearing off chips.

One could see clearly that the outer layer of those hulls shimmered with a faint golden coating, seemingly absorbing all the shocks.

Xavier began to feel a chill that ran up his spine to the back of his neck.

This meant that even if this planned attack succeeded, his plan could not possibly succeed.

For the first time, he felt a strange sensation, as if he were not the Hunter, but the prey caught in a trap.

Dawn's fleet lined solid as mountains, their sails taut, the hulls unmoved within the currents.

At this moment, on the other side, Louis stood at the command post, gripping a telescope tightly.

Beside him, the flags whipped in the wind; he watched his own fleet lined up steadily, a satisfied smile on his lips.

Dawn's ships resembled fortress-like walls, the coatings reflecting a dim light; each cannonball that landed left only superficial marks on the hull.

He was exceedingly pleased with the ships' defensive performance, a testament to the immense resources invested to create vessels surpassing this era.

"Excellent." Louis lowered the telescope and gave a quiet order to Eliot standing beside him, "Fire."

The officer immediately raised the command flag, shifting the fleet into a full salvo formation.

"Boom, boom, boom!"

The roar erupted instantly, with Dawn fleet's Magic Explosion Bullets firing in unison.

At this moment, the entire bay lit up with white light, the firelight tearing the sky like lightning.

Dawn's Magic Explosion Bullets, though petite in size, could dive underwater a few moments after impact and then explode, sending shock waves straight through the hull's bottom.

Kavier watched helplessly as two flank ships on the left wing were hit in succession, the hulls were lifted, masts broken, decks fractured, and sailors blown into the sea.

Immediately following, four black sail ships were hit by fire, flames surged from the holds, licking up the masts.

The explosion sounds were continuous, the entire night sea seemed to tremble.

Dawn's fleet stood firm as mountain ridges, their firing rhythm unbroken, each salvo precisely hitting vital points, the impact points nearly overlapping.

This was naturally Hillcot-made sea-special Magic Explosion Bullets, their casing cast in rune iron, internally packed with Alchemy Explosion Accelerator and Magic Crystal catalysts, creating a cavitation effect underwater, enough to rip the keel. Struck ships couldn't withstand ten breaths before capsizing.

"Damn it! What is this!" Xavier's adjutant shouted, but the voice was almost swallowed by the thunderous noise.

The pirate fleet utterly fell into chaos. The left-wing fires rolled over the sea, flames bent by the tides, lifted by the wind.

Each salvo would see a few more ships hit, the explosion's light reflecting on the sea like blossoming red flowers on the water.

Xavier gripped the railing tightly, fingers white. His ears buzzed, heart pounding violently in his chest.

The intensity of firepower and precision was something he had never seen nor imagined during his decades of sailing the seas.

"Bank right, break through from the outer wing!" he ordered in a trembling voice.

The escort ships immediately adjusted their course, but just then, another round of Magic Explosion Bullets landed.

In front of Xavier's eyes, two ships were shattered into halves, debris flying, fire waves raising water mist.

Voices, explosions, and the cracking of wood blended together, as if the entire sea were moaning.

"Break through!" Xavier shouted hoarsely.

He knew this battle was irretrievable.

Chapter 627: Overwhelming Force (Part 2)

The firepower of the Dawn far exceeded expectations, and his fleet had lost formation.

Although he still didn't know where exactly he lost, he understood that if he didn't flee, it would be a total defeat.

He gritted his teeth and ordered, "All ships that can move, retreat south at full speed! Ignore the rest!"

The Wave Eater turned and accelerated, petroleum at the stern was thrown into the sea to cover their tracks. Thick smoke and flames obscured the view, and he no longer looked at the chaotic sea behind.

The remaining burning ships were left behind, the cries of the crew and explosions were dispersed by the wind.

But Xavier only wanted to escape, no matter the cost.

However, the fleet of Dawn Port did not stop.

Several light pursuit ships broke out from the array, sails instantly unfurling, the sound of the wind slicing through the night fog like a knife.

Louis's order was clear and calm: "Leave no survivors except for the main ship."

So the Dawn squadron led by Eliot quickly advanced, the fire line advancing like a tide.

Every cannon shot landed closely along the trail of the Wave Eater, with columns of water from explosions constantly rising behind the ship.

Kavier looked back, almost able to see the glowing Red Tide Emblem on the bow of the Dawn.

It was a sense of oppression, as if even the god of the sea seemed to stand on the enemy's side.

The fleet of the Dawn pursued swiftly, like a wall of steel pressing forward, slicing the waves into straight lines.

Kavier's mind was in chaos, finally realizing that the combat power of the Dawn was beyond his understanding, a gap that could not be bridged by numbers and firepower alone.

But now it had come to this, only the last resort was left.

The deck was in chaos, pirates instinctively sensed something was wrong.

Someone shouted to abandon ship, some jumped into the sea, others desperately shook the cannons, trying to fire another round of counterattack.

Kavier then mustered his emotions, then threw his head back and laughed, his laughter hoarse:
"Mutually assured destruction! Let them sink with us!"

His voice was like tearing iron, crashing in the flames.

Several lieutenants looked at him, their faces pale, understanding that the mad king was going crazy again.

"Ignite the oil tanks below deck!" He roared, hurling a torch to the ground, oil splattering, flames immediately rising.

Several pirates frantically tried to put out the fire, but he drew his sword and shouted them away:
"Anyone who wants out, get out!"

The ship began to sway violently, the fire quickly spreading, the flames lighting up every face of despair.

Just when everyone thought the mad king was going to go down with them, his gaze suddenly returned to calm.

Kavier quietly said to two confidants, "To the aft, prepare the dinghy."

The tone was as calm as giving an ordinary sailing order.

Amidst the chaos before the explosion, he and his confidants quietly slipped to the stern, lowering the dinghy that had long been prepared.

The flames below deck had already reached the bent wooden beams, and the sound of wood cracking came from above deck.

He took one last look at the burning deck, at the screams, curses, and flames, a nightmare he directed himself.

"Full speed, flee north with the current." He ordered, once again becoming that calm commander.

The dinghy sailed away from the battlefield with the current, the sound of the oars almost drowned out by the echoes of explosions.

The Wave Eater suddenly exploded behind, the entire ship torn in two, flames shooting into the sky.

The few sailors who escaped struggled on the sea, drawn into the sea of flames by the shock wave.

Kavier did not look back, he knew he was defeated, utterly defeated.

Not even he knew whether he lost to strategy, tactics, firepower, or to the young lord he had never met.

"Avoid that fire line, full speed!" he whispered to the confidant steering.

The dinghy rocked on the waves, finally leaving the light of the war zone.

Just as he thought he had escaped, a metal net was cast from the side, firmly entangling the dinghy.

The confidant was pulled down by the net, Xavier without even a chance to react, was thrown into the sea.

He gulped down two mouthfuls of salty water, struggling to lift his head.

A few Red Tide Knights were already looking down at him from the deck, their spears glistening coldly in the moonlight.

The sea returned to silence.

Only the wreckage and charred wooden pieces floated on the sea, the smell of petroleum lingering in the night wind.

Of the thirty-seven black sails, twenty-three had become ashes, the remaining few either sunk or broken, only masts swayed in the waves.

The fleet of the Dawn was arrayed in neat formation, the firelight illuminating the sea.

Louis stood on the deck, looking down at the pirate king dragged onto the deck.

The man was disheveled, a metal jaw burned red, eyes full of ash and blood.

"Spare me... I admit defeat... I beg you..."

He lay on the deck, throat continually forcing out pleas for mercy, intermittently, hoarse and tearful, unable even to form complete sentences.

Louis didn't speak immediately, just quietly watched him.

Kavier slowly raised his head, finally seeing him clearly, the young count stood tall, black hair lifted by the wind, cloak still stained with soot.

On that young face, there was no anger, the firelight reflecting in his eyes, like a mirror that could not be penetrated.

His heart suddenly tightened, the whispered name flashed in his mind: "Red Tide Count... Louis..."

At this moment, he realized he was not facing an ordinary lord, but a plunderer who appeared only in the eye of the storm, just wrapped in the shell of nobility.

Suddenly Louis smiled faintly, the smile cold and with a hint of malice.

He bent down, tone as calm as casual gossip: "I know about your wife and daughter, in the Jade Federation's Serell Port."

Kavier froze suddenly, first stunned, then breathing heavily, the color on his face slowly draining away.

He lifted his head, pupils shrinking to pinpoints, voice so hoarse it almost shattered: "You... how do you know..."

Chapter 628: Crushing Defeat (Part 3)

Louis did not answer, just had a playful smile on his lips; after all, this intelligence meant nothing to him.

After all, he couldn't possibly go to Jade Federation to grab the pirate's wife and daughter; it was just a little malicious amusement of his, wanting to see how this Pirate King would react.

Kavier's hand trembled, wanting to prop up his body but was powerless; for the first time, real terror and panic appeared on his once cold and insane face.

"Don't move!"

He wanted to pounce, roaring like a beast, but two Knights of Dawn had already pinned his shoulders, steel boots crushing his body with a blade at his neck.

"I beg you... spare them..."

Kavier struggled and screamed, but his voice was immediately suppressed, a few pleas shattered into broken gasps, finally blown away by the night wind.

Louis still only smiled playfully: "Take him down. Dig out all his treasure locations, not a single one left."

Kavier's pupils contracted sharply, his entire body trembling as if stripped of the last layer of defense.

Louis withdrew his gaze, turned away, no longer paying attention.

The knights dragged the mad king away, boot soles grinding against the bloodstains on the deck.

Kavier's struggle grew weaker, the light in his eyes extinguished completely like a snuffed-out spark.

A few steps away, Dawn's temporary cage had been set up, iron stakes fixing the captured pirate.

A few knights escorted Xavier into a simple interrogation chamber.

Kavier sat on the chair, still cunning; the miserable scene earlier was just an act, he had long put his own safety above his family's.

And he knew Dawn's Lord wouldn't kill him easily, at least not yet.

As long as he held onto the key treasure coordinates, he could still bargain for his life.

He glanced around, calculating quickly; as long as he could delay by speaking, as long as there was a chance, he could think of a way to escape.

But he soon realized, this interrogation was different from what he had seen before.

The knights didn't have whips, nor tongs; the instruments they presented made him feel cold from the heart.

"Seal his mouth, don't let him shout around," Eliot ordered, his tone calm.

The fog canister was ignited, pale white smoke was enveloping his mouth and nose under a mask.

Kavier frowned, the bittersweet taste instinctively made him uneasy; he wanted to plead but could only make low gasping sounds.

Another knight took out a slender syringe, the thing gleamed silver, reflecting coldly under the lamp.

"What is that?" he asked hoarsely, a trace of unease in his voice.

No one answered.

The needle pierced his arm, almost without pain.

What followed was a chill, crawling up his neckside from the blood vessels.

After a few seconds, his heartbeat started to become erratic, and he could hear his own breathing becoming heavy.

Glimmers appeared at the edges of his vision, like shadows floating in the fog.

Kavier tried to hold back, telling himself it was just intimidation, but the body's reaction was faster than the consciousness.

Fragments of memory began to surface, his mind like being torn apart, light and sound crisscrossing.

He heard the bell of his hometown port, saw the shadow of his wife holding a lamp, and then saw the reefs of Ice Abyss Islands, the outlines of those hidden chests.

"Speak," his mask was removed.

Kavier clenched his teeth, trying to steady his breathing, forcing himself not to talk.

"At... North Reef No.3..." but the words surged out of his throat involuntarily.

He abruptly shut his mouth, bit through his tongue, the taste of blood spreading.

But the tongue was no longer under control, whenever the syringe gently tapped again, his voice flowed out by itself, the coldness like an unseen thread pulling his memories outward.

"East Reef, White Bay... the bottom of the hidden deck, second layer..." his eyes were filled with terror, sweat on his forehead streaming down his cheeks.

"Stop! Stop!" he shouted, voice shattered, yet it could not be stopped.

The knights calmly noted every coordinate, occasionally exchanging glances.

With the liquid's injection, his thoughts were torn into countless pieces.

When the last bit of resistance was broken, he slumped on the chair, his gaze vacant, still unconsciously muttering: "Barrel... bottom of the second barrel..."

Eliot glanced at the record book, gesturing to end it, the Alchemist put away the instruments, the fog canister extinguished, the air slowly cleared up.

"This thing... is truly a work of genius," a knight remarked.

Kavier's body slightly trembled, gaze hollow, his mouth still twitching.

He was no longer cunning, nor insane, only silent fear remained.

He knew he had given up everything, yet couldn't remember why he spoke out.

Outside, the night wind carried the smell of ashes, debris floated on the sea.

The knights departed in batches to excavate those coordinates, Louis silently watched on the deck, without a word.

Chapter 629: Harvest and Voyage

The night fires have been extinguished, and Dawn Port has returned to tranquility.

The sea water beneath the dam mixed with the smell of tar and blood, but the roar of battle has ceased.

The Dawn fleet triumphantly returned to port, nine warships entered neatly, none sunk, only two had minor damage on the sides, requiring slight repairs.

The outcome of this battle will shake the entire North Sea.

Of the thirty-seven black sail ships under the Mad King, twenty-three have turned to ashes, the remainder all captured by the Dawn fleet.

And during the night battle, the pirates were utterly defeated, leaving very few survivors.

Except for a few important leaders who were captured alive for interrogation, the rest were executed at sea, their bodies scattered by the tide.

The news of the Dawn fleet's safe return spread like a storm through Dawn Port, many of the people came out spontaneously to welcome them.

As the Red Tide flag appeared in the mist at the bow, workers and townspeople on the dock began to cheer spontaneously.

The cheers surged like waves, hitting the piers and stone embankments, shaking the planks to trembling.

"The Dawn is back!"

"Red Tide undefeated!"

"For the Northern Territory, for Dawn!"

More people joined in the shouting, their voices rising wave after wave.

Children jumped around at the edge of the dock, waving homemade small flags.

Artisans lifted their oil-stained cloth hats with their hands, shouting the names of each ship: "Dawn!", "Sunrise!", "Tide!"...

Many workers had seen the flames ignite on the sea surface, they knew how the Dawn fleet fought in the night fog.

The memories were forged by their own hands, so they felt they had also participated in this glorious war.

Of course, this was the result of Louis always fostering a sense of collective honor among them.

As the hulls docked, the loud drop of anchors into the sea echoed in the harbor, and battle flags fluttered in the morning wind.

The artisans and knights of Dawn Port swarmed onto the dock, some checking damages, others transporting the spoils, the air was filled with the excitement and busyness following victory.

Louis and Eliot stood side by side atop the embankment.

Eliot watched the bustling crowd below, a feeling of indescribable reverence rising in his heart.

He had always admired the young lord, now he almost held him as a belief.

He understood that if he had commanded this battle, he could have won with the Dawn fleet's strength but never so effortlessly.

Every time an enemy ship appeared, every change in wind direction, Louis seemed to predict it in advance.

That sense of control, almost foresight.

Eliot whispered, "My lord, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe anyone in the world could anticipate the battle this precisely."

Louis glanced at him gently, "Stop flattering, Eliot."

The governor of Dawn Port smiled and shook his head, but his tone was sincere, "I'm not flattery. Like you, my lord, there's no one in the Northern Territory who can foresee and command like this."

Louis thought, what you say is nonsense, does this world have a Daily Intelligence System?

But he couldn't reveal this secret, so he turned his head and switched topics, "How goes the interrogation?"

Eliot quickly answered, "All have been questioned, my lord. Now we're searching his treasure spots according to confessions, quite a lot, the cunning rabbit has three burrows.

And the two devices you provided are really useful, we hardly began questioning and he confessed everything."

Louis chuckled softly, "That's good."

.....

The salvaging continued for a full half-day.

Divers repeatedly submerged to the seabed, air hoses swelling in the waves, pulling out wreckage with iron hooks.

The first batch of salvaged iron boxes weighed hundreds of pounds, sealed in whale fat.

Once pried open, silver coins poured out like a flood, the sunlight on the dock reflecting off that sea of silver, blinding people.

Every coin was engraved with the Ashen Guild's emblem.

There were even account books recording transactions, clearly specifying the guild's North Sea support amounts.

In the tidal sand of White Bay Cave, artisans dug out three wooden barrels, the second with a concealed slot at the bottom.

After chiseling it open, the barrel was filled with gold bars and blue magic crystals, gleaming coldly, the gold bars engraved neatly with serial numbers, the crystals sparking like stars in firelight.

A sailor exclaimed, "This one barrel can repair three ships."

And on the old fishing boat North Reef No.3, scrolls and sea charts piled to almost fill the entire cabin.

Knights carefully unfurled them, the marked red routes extending from Ice Abyss Islands to unknown seas, perhaps this was the Mad King's most important treasure.

Finally, in the ruins of the Mad King's flagship Wave Eater, they salvaged the core of the explosive cannon and several bottles of alchemy petroleum.

As the sun rose, the embankment was already piled with boxes of spoils.

Gold Coins, Silver Coins, Gold Bars, Magic Crystal, Contracts, Sea Charts, Account Books...

The Mad King's life was disassembled into neat iron boxes.

Under the opened box lids, cold light flickered, the sea wind stirring the clinking of metal, as if singing the echoes of victory.

The air mixed with the smell of tar and salt, reminding everyone that this wealth was salvaged from mountains of corpses and seas of blood, every piece stained by the great pirate's crimes.

Not far away, a clerk in a black robe was quickly recording the inventory results.

"Thirteen thousand three hundred ten gold coins, forty-four thousand five hundred silver coins, eighty gold bars, three hundred seventy-two magic crystals, twelve account books, nine contracts, seven sea charts."

He listed each item, and the scribe beside him swiftly transcribed.

Eliot clicked his tongue repeatedly, marveling, "The Mad King was truly wealthy, richer than most lords in the Northern Territory."

Louis smiled and patted the box with his hand, "Indeed, a bite full of oil."

Chapter 630: Harvest and Voyage (Part 2)

He took the transcript handed to him by the clerk, casually flipping through a few pages, his eyes scanning over it.

"The most precious thing here is actually the core of the Thunder Cannon and a few bottles of special alchemical petroleum." He spoke, his tone carrying a hint of satisfaction, "Send it back for Hillco to study, see if they can excavate something new."

He picked up a roll of sea charts and spread it out on the box lid, his fingertips lightly tapping on the marked red lines: "Verify these routes, if accurate, they will be of extraordinary significance to Dawn Port."

Eliot immediately responded, calling on the clerk to execute the task.

Louis continued flipping downward, uncovering several letters sealed with emblems, including correspondence from Jade Bank, commercial contracts, and a few letters bearing the ash seal.

He sneered coldly: "Keep these. Might be useful someday."

The clerk promptly stored these letters, cautiously packing them into a waterproof leather bag and sealing it with wax.

Louis looked at the stack of neatly arranged boxes and smiled: "Since the pirate matter concludes, it's time for Dawn to truly set sail from the port."

Eliot immediately stood upright, his expression serious and excited: "As you command, my lord. The Dawn fleet is always ready, all supplies, crew, and loading are prepared."

Louis turned to him: "Prepare, the first voyage of Dawn Port is about to begin."

.....

On the fourth day after defeating the pirates, all ships underwent proper repairs, and the Dawn fleet was set to embark again, this time targeting the Empire's Southeast Province.

The morning light broke through the heavy sea fog, illuminating the orderly Dawn fleet docked at the port.

This colossal sea fleet has been on standby at the port for several days; today, it finally will welcome its first voyage.

This is not merely a simple transportation action; it symbolizes the independence and rise of the Northern Territory, marking Dawn Port's leap from a remote port to the Northern Territory's economic hub.

Countless efforts, decisions, and transformations culminated in this day, the sail of the Dawn signifies the future influence extending to the Empire's coastal cities, especially the Calvin Clan in the Southeast Province.

The pirate treasure was exceptionally abundant, enough to make many lords in the Northern Territory envious.

But to Dawn Port, these spoils are merely insignificant bonuses, far less significant compared to the meaning embodied in this voyage.

The construction of Dawn Port aims to break the Northern Territory's trapped fate.

Whenever winter arrives, ice and snow lock all land routes, halting nearly all trade between the Northern Territory and the South.

To transport the Northern Territory's minerals to the South and return Southern goods to the Northern Territory, carriages traversing the rugged mountain roads often require months, with round trips lasting up to a year.

With every food shortage, every break in resource supply, for the Northern Territory, it feels like a blade hanging overhead.

In this trapped situation, the Northern Territory lacks autonomy, unable to free itself from the Empire's feeding, always trapped in extreme cold and poverty, only able to trade soldiers' lives for food aid.

However, this sea route is the Northern Territory's dawn.

Its cost is only one-fifth of land transportation and capable of delivering goods to the Empire's Southeast Province in a mere two months.

Moreover, the warship escort method renders sea navigation safety far superior to land, especially for a supply-dependent area like the Northern Territory, sea transport is undoubtedly the most reliable form of transportation.

"Dawn Port isn't just a port, it's the first step of the Northern Territory from dependence to independence."

Louis stood atop the embankment, gazing back at the bustling port, sighing inwardly.

The fleet preparations commenced days ago, now undergoing final readiness.

Louis's gaze swept over the busy port workers, focusing on the cargo being loaded onto the ships.

The main items were minerals produced in Carlson Territory, Chi Pulse Stones, Demon Marrow Ores, Flint Marrow Oil, and Ember Sunken Iron.

Each of these precious minerals presents substantial value in the South.

Besides, there are some cheap weapons produced by steam engines, inexpensive fabrics, and some magical beast furs.

These ores and resources have long been the primary income source for Red Tide.

And today, after months of preparation, they will be shipped for the first time to the Empire's Southeast Province, bringing unprecedented wealth to Red Tide and the nobility under its system.

Sailors' rough shouts and cargo loading noises emerged from the ships, heavy wooden boxes being loaded onboard, sailors' faces covered in sweat, yet each one's movements seemed exceptionally steady.

"Hurry up, mates! Get those grain boxes up here! We must set sail today, no time to dawdle!"

A bearded sailor shouted at a nearby young sailor, his tone rough, filled with urgency.

"Got it, Smith! Don't just yell, lend a hand!" The young sailor quickly jumped onto the deck, joining others to move the heavy box into the cabin.

On the other side, several sailors were inspecting the main cannon on the ship, "Fill the gunpowder for the secondary cannon, ensure main cannon aiming accuracy, adjust the gunner's position to optimal."

Everyone understands, this isn't just a transportation mission, it represents their future.

As everything completes in preparation, the port's atmosphere grows ever tenser and more exciting.

The salty sea breeze and scorching air permeate, crowds densely gathering on the docks, almost making Dawn Port's pier packed beyond capacity.

These workers, who had personally helped build the ships, proudly observed the vessels about to embark.