

Winter 631

Chapter 631: Harvest and Voyage (Part 3)

Many of them had polished the Dawn's keel, forged the deck's rivets, and carried those barrels of heavy fuel.

Now they were going to watch the ship they built sail out of the Northern Territory's waters for the first time.

Sunlight spilled over the sea, illuminating the excited and proud faces.

"Quiet! Quiet, everyone! Lord Louis is going to speak!" Eliot shouted loudly.

The harbor quickly quieted down, and everyone turned their eyes to the top of the embankment.

Louis stood on the wooden podium at the highest point, the sea breeze rustling his cape, as he gazed over the entire bay.

Behind him, the Red Tide flag of the Dawn flapped loudly in the wind.

He paused for a moment, then his voice, amplified by magic, echoed clearly through the harbor:

"People of Dawn Port!"

The crowd fell silent, even the sound of the waves seemed to fade.

"From the first wooden hut of Dawn to this port today, it took us more than two years. This is a miracle created by your hands.

This voyage will take Dawn's ship towards the Empire's Southeast Province, bringing goods from Beijing to each port.

We no longer rely on charity, nor do we wait for relief. With our goods, our craftsmanship, our blood and sweat, we will carve our own route on the sea and bring hope to the Northern Territory.

At this point, he smiled slightly, with a hint of warmth in his voice: "This is the first sea route of the Northern Territory, and a journey of the Red Tide. May all the crew return safely."

The crowd erupted.

Applause and cheers burst forth like a tide.

"Long live Dawn!"

"Long live the Red Tide!"

"For the Northern Territory!"

Some waved their hats, others raised flags high, and young boys climbed onto crates and derricks, waving vigorously.

Tears glistened in the eyes of many craftsmen, who cheered not just for the lord but also took pride in their creations.

Eliot stood on the bridge of the Dawn, took a deep breath, and raised his right hand, "All hands, weigh anchor, prepare to set sail!"

The anchor chain tightened, gears roared beneath the deck.

As the heavy anchor lifted from the sea floor, the port's bell tolled at the same time,

Nine resonant chimes vibrated through the bay, long and solemn.

Then, military music began to play.

The bright tones of brass instruments pierced the air, and the melody of "Song of the Northern Territory" echoed in the sea breeze.

"For frost and fire, for the people of the North..."

It was the song of the Northern People, most of them could hum a few lines.

The sailors on the deck and the workers on the dock sang in unison, voices rough but synchronized, accompanied by drums and horns.

The Dawn slowly weighed anchor, its masts towering, and the sails billowing in the wind like unfolded white wings.

Behind, the Dawn and the Tide... followed closely, the fleet slowly sailed out of the harbor.

"Attention! Maintain formation!"

"Good wind on the port side, raise the sail another foot!"

Commands, orders, and the roar of the sea waves mixed together.

For many sailors, it was their first voyage afar, their faces full of excitement and nervousness, hands gripping the ropes, sweat sliding down their foreheads.

Someone chuckled softly, "The weather's really nice today."

Another young sailor grinned, "Don't get too excited, just don't call for your mother when the waves hit."

A burst of boisterous laughter erupted on the deck, laughter that masked a little bit of fear in their hearts.

The captain walked among them, patting the shoulder of a young sailor, "Relax, kid. You are the first batch of sailors trained by the Red Tide, every step you take today will be written into the history of the Northern Territory."

The young man was stunned, then straightened up and nodded vigorously.

As the fleet slowly sailed away, a dazzling light suddenly erupted above the harbor.

Alchemy fireworks shot into the sky, bursting high into giant crimson rings, and then turning into countless golden specks, sprinkling onto the sea surface, illuminating all the sails of the fleet.

"Look, it's fireworks!" a sailor exclaimed.

The sun-shaped flames reflected a golden path on the sea, leading straight to the south.

Chapter 632: White Bear Knight

The fleet from Dawn Port has set sail, with white sails gradually disappearing into the sea fog under the morning light.

Louis did not stay at the port to celebrate. That was merely the beginning of a long voyage, with the destination being Red Tide City, the brain of the Northern Territory.

So the carriage went southward, and he returned to his familiar desk, facing a mountain of documents and orders, starting a new round of administrative work.

Bradley pushed open the door, holding a heavy ledger, and bowed slightly, saying, "Sir, this is this year's harvest report."

Louis looked up without speaking, signaling him to continue.

"This year is also a bountiful harvest," Bradley opened the first page, "Total production is about 340,000 tons. Although the growth rate has slowed, the granaries remain full."

He paused and sighed lightly.

"There are three reasons: greenhouses and steam storage continue to be effective, but the added production sees diminishing returns. New land in the border areas is affected by cold waves and pests, so yields did not meet expectations. And there was a delay due to frost fog during the closing phase."

Louis remained silent for a moment, his gaze falling on Mai Lang Territory on the map, the heartland of Red Tide's grain.

"So," he spoke faintly, "growth this year has stopped at a steady point."

In fact, Louis could understand, as there is only so much land, and miracles of doubling cannot happen every year.

Growth in food production has reached its limit, a combination of divine will and human effort.

"Yes, Sir." Bradley closed the ledger, "However, the reserve line remains secure. The three-year granary target for the Northern Territory has been met, but..."

"But we cannot allocate as loosely as in previous years." Louis interjected calmly, "The Empire's chaos is not over yet. Our grain remains the most important asset in the Northern Territory."

Bradley nodded slightly: "My suggestion is to maintain Red Tide's reserve unchanged in plan, but to differentiate more finely in quotas and prices."

For allied territories, continue to supply at low prices or with subsidies, for those not allied... slightly higher, not enough to anger them but enough to make them envious."

Louis smiled, a hint of sarcasm in it: "There's no need to worry about the nobility not involved in the Red Tide system, since they have chosen their side, we have no need to be polite with them.

Grains supplied to them should only be slightly cheaper than those from the South, with no further favors granted.

If a non-Red Tide lord wants lower prices, that's just a dream. Outside the system, there are no favors; loyalty is the cheapest currency."

Bradley listened, a smile flickering in his eyes: "I understand, Sir, it should indeed be so."

Then Louis said nothing more, possibly deep in thought, and the hall was silent, only the crackling of firewood in the fireplace breaking it.

After a moment, Louis looked up, breaking the silence: "Starting next year, we need to push Red Tide's grain production technology and governance systems into those territories that have already joined the system."

Bradley's expression changed slightly, with a hint of hesitation he said: "Sir, Red Tide's technology and systems are valuable... aren't they too precious to be shared lightly?"

Louis looked out at the gray-white sky, calmly saying: "I judge that in the coming years, the Empire may fall into great turmoil.

To survive in chaotic times, we need special means to gather strength quickly. As long as we hold the core technology in our hands, no matter how fast they learn, they won't grasp the essence."

Bradley pondered for a moment, finally nodding: "Understood, Sir."

The two then spread out new parchment, drafting a rough promotion plan for next year's spring cultivation on the table.

"Before this winter, we must complete the signing of files and contracts," Louis succinctly listed several key points, "The stewardship council must firmly control the main authority over seeds and greenhouse materials.

From early spring to late summer, proceed with stage-by-stage trials, planting, replication, and evaluation. Each stage must have a performance ranking with clear rewards and penalties."

Bradley took notes on the side, softly adding: "And what about the grain storage in each territory? Should we standardize it as well?"

"Absolutely." Louis nodded, "Every signing territory should at least build a standard granary, and connectivity between grain routes must be ensured."

He paused for a moment, then wrote a new line on the paper: "Law and inspection must go hand in hand. Inspectors must not be bribed by the nobility or serve too long; if such signs appear, they should be replaced immediately."

Bradley looked up, with a hint of determination between his brows: "What if the nobility delays or colludes to resist?"

"Cut off supplies and audit them." Louis's tone was calm, "If they play tricks, let them ponder the meaning of loyalty amid hunger."

"Of course, this is just a framework," Louis closed his pen, "The details still need to be filled in and executed by you."

Bradley collected the draft, responding solemnly: "Sure, Sir."

As he turned to leave, Louis suddenly called: "Bradley."

The old steward paused, turning slightly.

"Take care of yourself." Louis's tone carried a trace of genuine warmth, "In the days ahead, there are many places where you'll still be needed."

Bradley was slightly taken aback, then showed a heartfelt smile: "I will, Sir."

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At the street corner, a vendor set up a copper stove, with the smell of roasting meat and sweet wine mingling.

Children from common families gathered around a candy cart, watching the syrup flow like golden threads under the winter night lights.

On the other side, nobles emerged from the theater, brushing snow from their cloak edges, passing by workers and apprentices without any barrier.

Further away, an old artisan played the accordion in front of his stand, with a few soldiers holding hot wine jars, clapping in rhythm and laughing.

In the lit shop windows along the street, a seamstress was showing customers the latest style of Red Tide coats, reportedly designed by Lady Emily herself.

Chapter 633: Polar Bear Knight (Part 2)

The melody from the cabaret was light and melodious, but it abruptly stopped when the patrol trumpet sounded, replaced by the soft sound of a street artist's instrument.

This is the night of Red Tide City. Its prosperity differs from the decadence of the Imperial Capital; it is a kind of ordered freedom.

Whether worker or noble, all can enjoy the night under the same lamp.

Even the poorest vagrant can drink a cup of inexpensive yet warming wine under the light.

A carriage slowly passed through the square. Merian leaned against the cushion, watching the lights flicker above the crowd.

Eventually, the carriage stopped in front of the theater. An attendant lifted the door, and the cold wind, along with snow, rushed in, causing Merian to shrink back instinctively.

Then he straightened his posture and gave a slight smile, like a gentleman who had learned to handle scrutiny.

Merian was guided to the top-floor banquet hall, a place reserved for the most honorable people of Red Tide City.

Music, the aroma of wine, conversation, and gentle laughter interwove into a soft background.

Several Red Tide nobles, research officials, and Knight Order leaders sat around a long table, with their glasses reflecting the light and snow shadows.

A young female singer lightly sang "Northern Territory Dawn" on stage; her voice was as clear as water flowing down a glacier.

At this moment, Merian was the focal point, and he was gradually getting accustomed to such occasions.

Though occasionally still reserved, he was beginning to understand how to respond to jokes, when to raise a glass, and even initiate small talk.

Some jested about the new upheavals in the Northern Territory Council, while others praised how the Red Tide workshops could operate during the snow season.

Merian merely smiled, occasionally chiming in, recounting interesting stories he had heard in the laboratory a few days ago.

For example, Hillco's apprentice accidentally blew a metal pot into the ceiling during an experiment.

"That child is now reassigned to chimney repairs," he said casually, eliciting laughter.

During the feast, a noble raised their glass in flattery: "If it weren't for Lord Louis's perceptive talent in recruiting Lord Merian, the Northern Territory might be missing half a miracle."

Merian returned the toast with a smile, his tone calm yet sincere: "Red Tide has given me everything: space for research, freedom, and a warm room. Thanks to Lord Louis."

The others nodded in agreement upon hearing this.

Then the topic shifted; some spoke of the opulence of the Imperial Capital, while others marveled at how the Northern Territory could now have such a city, as if in a dream.

Merian looked at the light reflected in the wine, a soft warmth rising in his heart.

Yes, he was no longer the prisoner curled up in the shadows.

Though not yet completely at ease, he had learned to enjoy, enjoy the respect, enjoy his place in Red Tide City.

The banquet lasted until late into the night.

Merian did not drink much, politely exchanging words with a few officials before departing early.

When he stood at the theater entrance, the snow had intensified, and the lights pierced through the curtain of snow, illuminating the clock tower at the street's end.

Returning to the alchemy building, the fireplace was still burning.

Merian looked at the desk piled with notes and sample bottles; the recent experiments were difficult.

The Frost Giant project that Louis assigned him was too complex, mainly because the giants' sanity was highly unstable, and every adjustment of the potion ended in failure, nearly causing disasters during several outbreaks.

But Louis did not blame him; he merely said, "Research other directions first."

At that moment, Merian felt a complex gratitude.

In the Jade Federation, failure to complete a task would have likely resulted in punishment.

Grateful, he decided to proactively shift his research focus: from the high-risk giant control to more controllable large magical creature domestication techniques, planning to use the developed technology to further the giant experiments.

Thus, Merian began new experiments in the magical beast enclosure outside the city.

The experimental site was near the North Shore Frozen Tundra, surrounded by iron cages and thick wooden walls.

Merian's chosen target was a ferocious snowfield white bear, a top predator in the Northern Territory.

With fur that resists cold, highly dense bones, and capable of tearing metal doors barehanded, no one had ever successfully domesticated it before.

The first few days of the experiments ended in failure almost daily.

The bears frenzied, destroyed cages, and injured apprentices.

An overdose of potion only exacerbated its aggression; the sonic induction device shattered glass but didn't calm it.

During those days, the entire experimental area was permeated with the smell of blood.

But Merian did not stop; he repeatedly adjusted formulas, reduced induction frequencies, and filled the experiment notes with dense annotations.

In the cold wind, his hands were reddened by the cold, yet his gaze remained focused.

At night, he often sat by the furnace, contemplating the boundary between control and instinct.

Until one accidental moment... that day, while formulating a new potion, Merian mistakenly poured the remnants of a small bottle of "Frost Heart Solution" into the catalyst.

It was a potion previously used in the giant experiments, typically highly dangerous in dosage.

But that time, after the potion was injected into the white bear, its roar didn't last long.

It first panted softly, then quietly lay down, emitting low whimpers.

The scene fell into a dead silence.

Merian held his breath, watching those violent eyes gradually dim. It wasn't death, but a form of submission.

"Record the reaction time... thirty-seven seconds," he noted quietly.

That night, Merian did not return to the city. The snow fell all night, and the lights in the experimental zone shone on the calm body of the white bear.

Weeks later, the experiment finally succeeded.

The white bear, under domestication instructions, could execute simple battle commands—charge, halt, and guard.

Learning the news, Louis decided to watch personally.

In the morning, the snow mist rolled over the military testing ground.

Nearly a hundred knights gathered outside the demonstration field, their breath turning into white vapor in the air.

In the center stood the massive silhouette of the white bear, its thick silver-hued fur and shoulder height imposing over the crowd, draped in Red Tide Standard light armor, the Red Tide Emblem engraved on its chest, merging metal and fur to make it even more knightly.

Its exhale swirled into white smoke, its eyes gleaming with a pale blue light.

Merian stood by, slightly nervous, while Weir couldn't contain his excitement.

Louis noticed Weir's eager expression, chuckling lightly: "Wanna give it a try? Then go ahead and see if it listens."

"Yes, my lord!" Weir laughed, jumping directly onto its back.

The beast growled lowly but did not resist, its limbs steady on the ground.

"Charge!" Weir commanded.

The white bear leapt forward, its chain-like muscles rippling under its fur, shattering the snowfield and kicking up a wave of white.

It crashed instantly into a three-layer thick iron shield ahead, splintering the shield wall, scattering wood and metal fragments.

In the snowy mist, the beast roared, and Weir raised the Red Tide flag high, its fabric flapping loudly in the wind and snow.

After circling, Weir ordered, "Stop!"

The white bear's stride gradually slowed, coming to rest steadily before the shattered shield wall, steam rising from the armor plates on its chest.

A wave of astonishment burst from the audience.

Louis smiled, his two young guards, Cody and Gray, beside him, watching wide-eyed.

"Want to give it a shot too?" Louis asked lightly.

The two exchanged glances, immediately responding, "At your command!"

They clumsily climbed onto the beast's back, which merely shook its fur, as if tolerating a child's play.

During the following trial rides, it remained steady throughout.

In the wind and snow, laughter and horn sounds intertwined, creating a lively scene.

Even after dismounting, Weir was still unsatisfied, saluting with a smile: "Sitting on its back is like sitting on a moving fortress."

Merian looked up at Louis, his voice tinged with undeniable excitement: "With continued training, it could perform more complex action commands, turning, evading, coordinating attacks, even switching rhythms between orders. But it requires time and repeated guidance."

Louis nodded, his gaze fixed on the massive white bear, clearly contemplating further possibilities.

A new type of troop had been added to the Northern Territory's military formation.

The white bear, cold-resistant, incredibly powerful, and suited for snowfield charges, could serve as both assault vanguard and heavy haulers...

"Approve the expansion of the research, establish the Red Tide Beast Corps, and form the first White Bear Knight Order," Louis ordered, his tone calm but unable to hide his excitement.

He then instructed Bradley to allocate funds and rewarded Merian with a box of gold coins and rare materials.

When Merian accepted the reward, he couldn't help but laugh out loud. A year ago, he didn't understand the use of gold coins, but now he knew how to make them bring joy.

Chapter 634: The Dawn Fleet Arrives

The morning sea was shrouded in a light mist that glimmered gold in the sunlight.

Nine warships moved slowly among the waves, like nine silent steel giants.

The Dawn led at the front, with the Dawn and Tide to its left and right, while the other Dawn-class escort ships followed closely, forming a formation as precise as a moving wall.

The gilded Red Tide Emblem at the bow shone brightly in the sun, reflecting a dazzling light, as if it were a burning sun.

On the deck, sailors moved with rhythmic steps, their hands gripping the ropes.

They wore windproof jackets with the Red Tide Standard, and the brass buttons on their chests shone bright under the marine fog.

Someone adjusted the signal flags at the masthead, while others polished the railings on deck, laughing and passing water to each other as they debated whether there would be extra butter on the bread for lunch.

A kitchen apprentice carried a food bucket by, joked at: "Kid, don't let the soup be too bland today."

The apprentice scratched his head and replied with a smile, "No problem."

The sailors would take turns resting, some napping against wooden barrels, others gathering to play dice, and some humming old songs from the Northern Territory.

Even in the open sea, they adhered to their routines, conducting patrols every third watch, changing sails every second, and reporting daily on wind and currents.

No one slacked off, and no one complained.

"This ship really puts people at ease," an old sailor laughed, "Back on the Empire's ships, whether you lived to see the next port all depended on fate."

"Thanks to Lord Louis," another old sailor laughed beside him.

Both were veteran sailors recruited at Dawn Port. Initially, they thought serving on a ship from the Northern Territory would be unreliable, but it turned out to be the most reassuring ship they had ever been on.

The deck's wooden planks creaked softly under their feet, blending with the wind and the waves into a gentle yet steady symphony of navigation.

Meanwhile, Alwyn Sether stood on the observation deck, wearing a long coat with the Red Tide Standard, with metallic shoulder guards that gleamed in the light.

He was the chief commander of the Dawn fleet, born in the Empire's Southeast Province. He served on ships of the Calvin Clan in his early years but later fell out of favor with the nobles and became a knight under Louis, being one of the first Red Tide Knights.

He initially thought going to the Northern Territory was a dead end, but under Louis, he found prosperity.

In just a few years, he advanced from Official Knight to High-tier Elite Knight and volunteered to be the chief arbiter of this voyage.

To him, this journey was almost a return home with honor and triumph.

Alwyn squinted, his gaze crossing the thin mist to lock onto that distant silhouette of land gradually waking up.

The sea breeze brushed across his face, carrying the faint scent of salt and warmth.

"That's the spire of Vero Port!" the lookout suddenly shouted loudly.

After a moment of silence, the entire ship erupted in cheers.

"We've reached the Southeast Province!" "We can see the port!"

The crew rushed to the deck to gaze at the increasingly clear city.

The distant tower stood tall in the morning light, flags fluttering in the wind, and the lighthouse at the port twinkled like starlight.

"It took us only a little over two months from the Northern Territory... We actually did it!" a helmsman shouted excitedly, almost at the top of his lungs.

Applause broke out on the deck, with someone blowing a horn, its sound akin to a victory announcement, traversing the sea breeze and reaching every warship in the fleet.

The Dawn responded with a whistle; soon after, the Tide gave a deep echo.

The horns of the nine warships rose and fell in turn, forming a majestic maritime ensemble.

The waves rolled beneath the hull, and the fleet maintained its perfect formation as they sped forward.

Alwyn looked down on everything, a subtle smile on his lips, that smile hinted at a sigh of relief after surviving a peril.

Recalling the journey, several life-threatening dangers had been overcome, and looking back, his heart still fluttered slightly.

It was the twelfth day of the voyage, the stormy night, where the wind felt as if it might tear the sky apart, and the waves were so high they seemed they could overturn the heavens.

The Dawn tossed up and down amidst the turbulent waves, the deck washed as if it were the icy surface of the Northern Territory.

The sailors could barely see each other's faces yet continued their tasks according to routine; this was a scenario they had practiced and rehearsed during their time in the Northern Territory.

For three days and nights, the fierce storm raged, and they survived by adhering to every rule in the "Twelve Laws of Navigation."

When the storm passed, silence reigned over the sea, and Alwyn watched the fleet emerge from the waves, murmuring quietly, "If it had been an ordinary Empire fleet, they would have perished that night."

The second peril occurred in the sea of dense fog.

That night, the sea was as quiet as a grave, the fog so thick one couldn't see their own hand, and the fleet was scattered, with a cargo ship drifting off course.

The masthead of the Dawn lit up with signal lamps, the alchemical sound array humming in the darkness, a new Red Tide technology, allowing the ship to echo like a heartbeat in the fog.

Alwyn used sonar commands to guide, listening to the echoes drawing closer little by little.

When the silhouette of the lost ship emerged once again, the entire fleet erupted in cheers long suppressed.

The third peril was the sudden pirate attack.

That afternoon, the sky was a ghastly white, and a band of speedboats bearing black flags surged out of the sea fog from the flank, like a pack of blood-scenting sharks.

Even before Alwyn could issue a command, the Dawn's secondary cannon had already turned its direction.

The cannon roared, the deck trembled, and fire and smoke burst instantaneously.

The Red Tide battleships were like a cold iron wall, the fire arcs precise, tearing the pirate ships into splinters.

The Dawn and Tide quickly encircled, their actions as precise as a drill; the entire battle took less than half a moment, leaving only floating wreckage on the sea.

Alwyn recalled the pirates' terrified cries; they thought they could prey on merchant ships but encountered a naval legion instead.

Chapter 635: The Dawn Fleet Arrives (Part 2)

The Red Tide Fleet swept through almost crushingly, dismissing these small sea bandits.

Alvin watched the white smoke rising from the cannon muzzles, a surge of respect welling up in his heart.

The Northern Territory never established a port due to unsuitable terrain and rampant piracy, and it was now safely passed thanks to the weapons and systems designed by that Lord.

On other calm days, seemingly uneventful, the Red Tide's power was most eloquently demonstrated.

The ship strictly followed the "Red Tide Navigation Log," with duties in the third-class cabins, labor and food distribution, night prayers, and safety bells, everything in order.

The sea breeze at night was painfully cold, yet the sailors could still smile and drink their soup.

No theft, no fighting, even the sick could handle light duties in rotation.

An old sailor leaned against the rail and sighed, "On a Red Tide ship, you can sleep at ease."

Alvin remembered these moments, his heart tightening.

He looked at the steady progress of the Dawn, understanding that it was not luck, but the constant protection of that Lord.

And they did not disappoint, completing their mission.

Alvin looked towards the distant port, raised his hand, and shouted a high command: "Pass the order to all ships, form ranks and prepare to dock!"

The helm turned slowly, the gigantic ship as stable as a mountain, cleaving the waves.

The metal armor of the nine warships reflected dazzling light, like nine spears departing from the Northern Territory, piercing towards the Southeast Province's coast.

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The morning sea fog had not fully lifted, yet the waters outside Vero Port were already boiling.

The port's lighthouse guard, Knight Darlin, squinted, seeing a glimmer of gold rising on the distant sea line.

Initially an illusion reflected in the fog, the light gradually formed a tidy metal outline under the sun.

The waves lifted by the ship's bow rolled layer upon layer, like a snowfield advancing.

"Is that a fleet?" Darlin murmured.

As the sunlight completely pierced the fog curtain, the outlines of nine warships appeared.

They formed a formation like nine giant beasts, their hulls inlaid with gold, flags burning with the red tide emblem.

Darlin's breath hitched: "Is this... the Empire's fleet? No, I haven't seen that flag before."

The signalman's voice beside him trembled, "Sir, should we sound the defense bell?"

Darlin gritted his teeth and shouted, "Light the red signal, full port alert!"

The lighthouse's red light flickered in the fog, defense ships whistled, the dock's whistle sounded in succession.

Workers were ordered to evacuate, all cargo operations at the port halted instantly.

People looked up at the sea, seeing nine warships steadily approaching, their masts towering, hulls as heavy as mountains.

"Too many... a full nine capital ships!" someone exclaimed.

Darlin rode down the lighthouse steps, barely having time to align his armor, rushing straight to the Port Affairs Hall, drenched in mist.

"Lord Herman! A whole fleet has arrived offshore, at least nine capital ships! No notice received!"

The Port Affairs Hall's head, Herman Kelvin, was handling documents, looked up at the sound, his brows furrowed: "Nine ships? What a joke, the Imperial capital's fleet doesn't have such a large formation..."

Herman stood up, walked to the balcony, and looked towards the distant sea line.

In that moment, he almost forgot to breathe, nine warships with red flags lined perfectly, the metal emblems on their bows shining in the sun, like nine burning suns.

"That is... the Red Tide's banner?" Herman muttered, then realized, "Louis Calvin... that is the eighth young master's, no, Count Calvin's fleet!"

He immediately ordered, "Open the port channel! All hands prepare to receive the Red Tide expeditionary envoy!"

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The port's bell echoed in the sea breeze.

The dock's workers and merchants all laid down their work, looking up to gaze at the steel torrent.

The Dawn led at the front, the Dawn and Tide flanking, with the other Dawn-class escort ships following closely.

The nine gigantic ships entered the port side by side, the wooden breakwaters moaning against the surging waves, the metallic sheen reflecting on the sea, as if the port were enveloped in a red glow.

The Dawn docked first, anchor chains plunged into the water, the roar shaking the entire dock.

On the deck, Red Tide knights stood in solemn formation, their armor glinting, expressions calm.

"My God... that's not the Empire's ship, it's from the Northern Territory!"

"Northern Territory? That permafrost land? They've actually built such a fleet?"

Herman personally led the team to greet them.

Arwin, draped in a Red Tide cloak, slowly disembarked from the Dawn's plank. His boots made a crisp metallic sound on the dock, and his entourage followed in sync.

Herman was the first to bow: "Welcome to Vero Port."

Arwin smiled in return: "On behalf of Lord Louis, we bring greetings and goods from the Northern Territory."

As crates of cargo were hoisted and placed steadily on the dock, sunlight reflected the Red Tide seal and numbers on the crate surfaces.

The port recorder hurried to the front and pried open the crates with a crowbar.

Herman stood frozen in place, almost unable to believe the piles of goods and minerals before him.

The crates were filled with rare minerals from the Northern Territory.

Qi Vein Stone, Demon Marrow Ore, Flint Marrow Oil, Burnt Ember Iron.

Every item radiated a dazzling brilliance; these resources, extremely precious in the South, were now laid before them.

Subsequently, various weapons and fabrics, along with neatly stacked magical beast furs, piled up like mountains, awe-inspiring.

"Are these... all transported from the Northern Territory?" The port recorder's hand trembled slightly as he looked incredulously at the fortune before him.

He quickly calculated with his fingers, his voice low but undeniable: "This must be worth... at least half a province's trade volume!"

A low murmur of astonishment burst from the crowd, and the port's atmosphere seemed compressed into a heavy weight, hanging heavily on everyone's hearts.

Herman remained rooted in place, his face a mix of longing and anxiety.

Since the Northern Territory previously lacked ports and could only transport by land, they had never seen so many rare resources from there.

Moreover, these were not just Northern resources; they symbolized the rise of Red Tide's power.

The fleet Louis Calvin brought far exceeded his previous expectations in scale and strength.

Once everything was arranged, he turned back to the Port Affairs Hall, quickly walked to the desk.

Herman picked up a quill, his handwriting slightly trembling, swiftly writing a letter to the Duke.

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As night fell over the port, the bonfires on the dock reflected off the water, the flickering firelight illuminating the busy figures.

The workers continued methodically transporting the crates of goods, the crew cleaned the deck, the night wind carried the scent of salt.

"Arwin?! You... you are Arwin?"

A voice of surprised shout reached Arwin's ears. He turned at the sound and saw that familiar face, a faint smile on his lips.

It was Tolan, his cousin, also a knight, who had originally been the one to take him aboard the ship.

Arwin stepped forward, gently patting Tolan's shoulder: "It's me, Brother Tolan."

Tolan's eyes carried a hint of complexity, suddenly recalling past events.

"Back then, on the Calvin Clan's ship, you offended quite a few people. You were supposed to be executed.

It was me... I pleaded for you, used some old connections, and finally got you to accompany Lord Louis to the Northern Territory.

Didn't expect, old friend, that you could lead such a large fleet back."

Gratitude appeared on Arwin's face, nodding slightly: "Indeed, thanks to Lord Louis, and thanks to you for your help."

Then he lowered his head and took out a pouch of gold coins from his waist, gently handing it to Tolan: "I owe my present to your help back then. Without your plea, I would have disappeared long ago."

Tolan was momentarily stunned, a flicker of surprise in his eyes, quickly waving his hand: "Too valuable, Arwin, I cannot accept."

Arwin smiled, still insisting: "Without you pleading for me back then, I might be a corpse at sea now."

Tolan reluctantly accepted the gold coins, his eyes showing a touch of complexity: "Alright, since you insist, I won't refuse."

He then half-jokingly said: "Had I known, I would have gone with you to the Northern Territory back then."

Arwin raised an eyebrow, smiling in response: "It's not too late now, join me, there's a place for you."

Tolan thought for a moment, shaking his head: "Forget it, forget it, the Northern storms are too fierce, I'll stay here."

He suddenly leaned closer, lowering his voice, jokingly whispered in Arwin's ear: "But, if Lord Louis becomes the Calvin Family's Patriarch someday, then we could work side by side again."

The two exchanged a momentary glance, laughing aloud together.

Tolan took it as a casual joke.

While Arwin laughed, he silently remembered this remark, feeling that maybe, one day, this joke might actually come true.

Chapter 636: Three Letters

The night fog drifts up from the sea onto the high tower, with the slightly salty moisture condensing into fine droplets in the crevices of the windows.

The air in the study is slightly cool, the candlelight flickers, shadows continuously deforming on the walls.

Duke Calvin sits behind his desk, which is spread with secret letters from the Imperial Capital and various places in the Southeast Province.

He opens them one by one, replies one by one; this is how the Southeast Province operates.

The next one is a letter from Verro Port, he opens the wax seal and the ink on the letter is still not entirely dry.

"Nine warships of the Dawn Fleet have successfully arrived at Verro Port, carrying goods including Qi Vein Stones, Burnt Ember Iron, and Demon Marrow Ore, totaling half the annual income of a province..."

Duke Calvin's gaze halts here.

Ships symbolize the power of circulation, while nine main battleships signify the opening of an independent trade route.

"Nine ships..." Duke Calvin repeats softly, "In just a few years, even the Permafrost of the Barbarian Race can have a port constructed."

He knows that Louis has been constructing ports in the Northern Territory, with the family sponsoring craftsmen to assist with the construction.

But he didn't expect Louis to have created such a large-scale operation, and obviously there's an intention to hide his own strength.

Duke Calvin leans back in his chair, his gaze sweeping past the sea fog outside the window.

He then takes out a map of the Northern Territory from the drawer, on which Crimson Tide, Mai Lang, and Dawn Port are marked — marks he drew personally.

Although none of the spies he placed managed to infiltrate the higher-ups of Crimson Tide, there are some officials from the lower levels, so some basic situation of Crimson Tide is known.

Centered around Crimson Tide, Louis' influence has indeed expanded rapidly in recent years, even worthy of being called the true new generation Northern King.

In Duke Calvin's mind flashes the intelligence from the past few months.

Prince Astha died on the frost plains, the banner of the Frost Dragon Territory exchanged for the Crimson Tide's banner, he even suspects that all of this is controlled by Louis behind the scenes.

The reason is that after this, the Red Tide Knights took over the Northern Territory defense line, and no nobility dares to oppose Louis anymore, the chaos in the Northern Territory is completely suppressed.

"If asked who can profit from this event..." his fingertip taps lightly on the paper, "Who else could it be but him?"

Duke Calvin retrieves old files from four years ago, an authorization letter sent to the Northern Territory, written on it:

Louis Calvin, led forty knights to the Northern Territory, allocated 800 gold coins, and dispensed two carts of grain.

The Duke looks at that line of words, a slight smile appearing at the corner of his mouth, a smile devoid of warmth.

"I was indeed generous back then." He whispers, the candlelight reflecting wearied shadows on his face.

"The Northern Territory now belongs to Calvin, it's a good thing. It's just that it doesn't obey me."

He looks at the family pedigree on the wall, his finger pauses between the names of Gaius and Louis.

One disappeared with the Emperor in the Imperial Capital, the other established a kingdom in the Northern Territory.

"Irony." Duke Calvin's sigh echoes in the room, "Since he has escaped control, a new way of cooperation must be found."

He stands and walks to the cabinet, taking out a few account books of financial exchanges.

On the surface, the trade between Crimson Tide and Calvin Commerce Association is prosperous, but in fact, the balance is skewed.

Crimson Tide almost no longer needs the family's port operations, yet the family's fleet relies on Crimson Tide's cargo sources for maintenance.

He attempted time and again to regain control of Louis, intervening in Northern Territory affairs, but each time was softly rejected, politely yet firmly.

He sent finance officials to the Northern Territory Calvin Commerce Association to audit, but was replied with "Crimson Tide accounts are only open to the Lord of the North himself."

He tried to restrict shipments under the guise of following family commerce allocation, but they changed to an independent shipping line...

After several times, he finally understood Louis is not betraying, but wanting independence, breaking free from the Calvin family's control.

Compared to the Calvin family, he aligns more closely with the Edmund family.

Duke Calvin closes the account books, his tone somber: "This time I want him to make the choice himself.

Either rejoin the family system, accepting Calvin's dispatch, or be completely excluded.

Cannot let him freely mobilize commercial taxes anymore, otherwise, he will step by step break free from control."

Duke Calvin picks up the pen to write down the directive: revise the trade terms of Crimson Tide, using a partnership framework, not included in family direct management.

He lays down the pen, leans back in the chair, and his gaze falls on the Imperial map on the wall.

Regent King is gravely ill, the factions in the court are restless.

The Finance Hall has already split into two factions, military orders are changed thrice a day, even the border garrison tests the authenticity of orders.

The Second Prince controls the Military Department, eager to establish alliances between nobility and legions.

The Fourth Prince secretly communicates with the Cabinet Office attempting to consolidate power within the cabinet.

And the prince favored by the Church Court is quietly laying pieces in the eastern territory.

The whole Empire seems to be pulled simultaneously by several dark cords, cracks may tear open at any time.

The Southeast Province still counts as stable, yet also begins to be drawn into the struggle.

Port nobility guard against each other, gold prices and grain prices are chaotic.

Calvin family's merchant ships are taxed outside, audited inside, even the family's Knight Order has to be drawn to support the Imperial Capital.

The Duke looks at the map, his fingertip lightly tapping on the Imperial Capital's mark.

"How many days can the Regent King hold on?" he muttered, "When he falls, I fear the Empire's sky might collapse."

He knows the order on which the Calvin family relies precariously.

If the Second Prince succeeds, military power will swallow commercial power, if the Fourth Prince gains power, the Cabinet Office will level the nobility...

Whichever way it goes, the Calvin family will be cornered.

"The Empire's sky is collapsing." Duke Calvin murmurs, "And Calvin must find ground to stand on before the rubble falls."

Chapter 637: Three Letters (Part 2)

He was about to reach out to extinguish the lamp when there were two knocks at the door.

"Come in."

A person pushed the door open, bowed, then whispered, "Your Excellency, Edmond has brought some people back to the mansion."

The Duke looked up, the candlelight reflecting a faint glow in his eyes.

He quietly watched the shadow at the door, speaking in a steady voice, "Is that so... I'll go over now."

.....

Seldon Calvin sat at the desk in the inner chamber of Vero Port, holding the confidential letter.

The paper crinkled slightly from sweat as he stared at the line: "Nine warships have arrived at the port, the flag is Red Tide..."

The candlelight cast a gloomy look on his face.

Nine warships, nine main forces.

Seldon knew very well what this meant: Louis's Red Tide was no longer just a political appendage, but an economic powerhouse.

"The permafrost of the Northern Territory... has become a gold mine," he murmured.

At that moment, Seldon genuinely felt anxious for the first time.

His father's attention was shifting.

Louis, a brother who was treated as forsaken, now wielded a power that could unsettle the Imperial Nobility.

Goods from the Northern Territory flowed steadily into the South, while the Calvin Clan's caravans depended on the Red Tide's goods.

"If this drags on, my father will only remember Louis's name, that waste,"

Seldon sneered, the image of his father's indifferent face appearing in his mind.

"Ever since Gaius disappeared, I thought that chair was cemented for me, but now..."

He looked up, his gaze sweeping across the mirror on the wall, his shadow elongated by the candlelight.

"Louis... a waste presumed forsaken, yet somehow he stood up."

Seldon recalled investing 8,000 gold coins, five trade routes, thirty Knights to support Pal, only for everything to become a futile corpse.

While Louis took merely 800 gold coins, yet brought back the entire Northern Territory.

The disparity was suffocating.

"The Empire's political scene is in such chaos, yet he managed to build a fleet on the wasteland... And what about me? I didn't even dare show my father a single loss on a ship."

Seldon admitted for the first time, he was afraid.

"Perhaps... Father's already considering bringing him back."

His thoughts drifted back to four years ago. That night, Louis set out for the Northern Territory.

Seldon still remembered standing in the tower, watching the carriage disappear into the mist.

The Knights he sent, carrying a bottle of colorless poison, had orders to cause an accident along the way.

Unfortunately, it failed, but then he felt it was nothing, just a trivial move.

"I should have acted directly back then." He murmured, shaking his head with a bitter smile, "I thought I was playing chess, but in reality, I had already made a grave mistake."

In the following years, Seldon continually sent spies, merchants, apprentices, Knights... none returned.

It was as if those people had been swallowed whole by the Red Tide.

The family map on the wall hung quietly, the region of the Northern Territory marked by his own hand in deep red lines, denoted as "Red Tide Territory."

Seldon gazed at that color, his breathing heavy: "Impenetrable... that place has become his Kingdom."

"I must reclaim the title of Patriarch." He gritted his teeth, his voice almost inaudible.

He forced himself to calm down and reassess the situation.

With Gaius missing, his father advanced in age, he controlled thirty percent of the trade and port networks, while Louis, though a Count, remained in the Northern Territory.

As long as Father did not publicly accept him, he remained the most eligible heir of the family.

"He can have the Northern Territory, but the Calvin throne can only be mine, but I need a plan..." He chuckled softly, though the smile lacked any warmth.

.....

The night draped over the Imperial Capital, enveloped in cold fog.

The candle flickered, casting shadows on the piles of account books and letters on the desk.

The Fourth Prince, Rhein, leaned over, reviewing fiscal reports from his estates.

He wrote his last annotation, setting the quill down when a gentle knock sounded at the door.

"Enter."

An attendant walked in, hands presenting a letter: "A personal letter from Director Mei Si of the Supervisory Institute."

Rhein broke the seal, the letter contained only one line:

"The proposal Your Highness presented will be brought up at the meeting when the time is right."

The candlelight revealed a fleeting smirk at the corner of Rhein's eyes.

"Indeed, the sound of gold coins, more persuasive than any vow."

Rhein murmured, "Mei Si... truly a greedy rat."

"Karen, what do you think?" He turned, looking at the old man quietly standing behind him.

That was Karen Sol, former commander of the Empire's Third Legion.

Now Rhein's mentor and guardian, the Emperor's former system required each Prince to have an Imperial officer as their mentor, like Sai Fu for Astha.

"Mei Si is an opportunist." The old man spoke evenly, "Offer advantages, and he will align. Yet such people, adept at shifting posts swiftly."

Karen looked at Rhein, "Your Highness needs to act swiftly, settle him before the Regent King falls."

Rhein leaned back in his chair, his gaze steady: "I understand. But..."

He reached out to unfold the Empire's map on the table.

The candlelight illuminated the densely packed factional chart, marking the emblems and directions of the Eight Great Clans.

"This state of the Imperial Capital," he said softly, "like a quietly crumbling tower."

The map's margins were annotated with lines of script:

Ministry of Finance: The two factions divided; one loyal to the Regent King, the other tilting towards himself;

Ministry of War: Completely controlled by the Second Prince;

Supervisory Institute: Initially neutral, now inclined towards Rhein;

Church Court of Dragon Ancestor: Hollowed out after suppression by successive Emperors.

Rhein withdrew his gaze, speaking gently: "The Empire must maintain its facade before decay sets in. And as long as the Regent King lives, I have time to orchestrate."

He did not reside in the palace, nor did he often visit his ailing elder brother.

The Regent King, his brother from the same mother, was both his greatest obstacle to the throne and greatest assistance.

He hoped that his brother could endure a while longer, allowing the Empire's order to pretend to remain stable, enabling him to gather further strength.

"Currently among the Eight Great Clans, how many are on our side?" Rhein asked.

Karen replied, "Three openly, possibly more secretly."

He enumerated, "The Diaz Clan, through the Supervisory Institute, has clearly supported Your Highness.

The Simmons Clan has temporarily submitted, the Kaladi Clan harbors grievances toward military power, so they will be on our side."

He paused, then continued, "The Calvin Clan outwardly aligns with the Second Prince, but their attitude is ambiguous; the old Duke always bets on the final victor.

The Raymond Clan is a hardcore faction, always supporting the Ministry of War.

The Holden Clan is falling apart, Berres remains watchful.

The Edmund Clan is virtually defunct, all Northern Territory power lies with that Calvin Count."

Rhein tapped the table lightly, fell silent for a moment.

"That young Count..." he spoke slowly, "in his twenties, solely controls the Empire's largest province."

Karen nodded slightly, "The Red Tide's system is indeed efficient. Everyone capable is mobilized, not relying on nobility's favor."

Rhein chuckled softly: "Coaxing him might draw in the Calvin Family as well. Yet... these are just words."

Karen responded calmly, "Do not forget, he is a Calvin son. Foxes within a fox's den would not easily acknowledge a master."

Rhein refolded Mei Si's letter, sealing it with wax.

"Fox?" his tone indifferent, "Then deal with them as one would with a falcon."

Rhein stood up, instructing Karen, "Reply to Mei Si, informing him the funds will be transferred tomorrow. Also, have Intelligence look into the Northern Territory Count's movements."

Karen nodded slightly, turned to leave, the room returned to silence.

Rhein sat back in the chair, gazed at the map illuminated by candlelight.

The Imperial Capital, the Northern Territory, the Southeastern Port, the Border Fort, all connected by lines, resembling a sprawling net.

He murmured softly, "If the Regent King lives three more years, perhaps I'll ascend to that position."

"If he doesn't last three years..." he paused, his expression calm. "Then let's see who makes the first move."

The wind seeped through the crack, making the Empire map flutter lightly in the breeze, as if heralding the start of a fracture.

Chapter 638: Calvin Commerce Association

The morning light in the Northern Territory still arrives late. Snow accumulates silently outside the window, and the light filters through heavy curtains, giving off a faint whiteness.

Louis Calvin was already awake.

He turned to look. On his left, Emily was curled up in the bedding, her blue hair scattered on the pillow, her lips bearing a faint smile.

On his right, Sif was asleep holding his arm, her silver-white hair having been cut short again, spread across her neck, her eyebrows lightly furrowed, seemingly dreaming.

Louis looked at them, his expression unconsciously softening.

In the room, only the sound of their breathing and the gentle crackling of the fireplace could be heard, warm enough to make one reluctant to disturb.

Louis gently got up, donned his robe, avoiding waking them.

Candle flames burned beside the fireplace, the air filled with a faint scent of pine resin.

He raised his hand to summon that familiar blue light, its faint energy wave spreading in the air.

[Daily Intelligence System Update Completed]

[1: Fourth Prince Rhine bribed Inspector Mei Si, who agreed to propose the restoration of the Electoral Prince system at next year's Dragon Throne meeting]

[2: Duke Calvin decided to separate Louis from the Calvin Commerce Association, framing it as a partnership, and to draft a new contract.]

[3: Sif is pregnant, and in ten months will give birth to a daughter for Louis Calvin.]

Louis stared at the first item, his eyebrows slightly raised.

The Electoral Prince system originated from the founding Emperor's period.

At that time, the Eight Great Clans were known as Electoral Princes, the earliest vassals to follow the founding Emperor, and they were granted the sacred power to elect the Emperor at the founding of the Empire.

Each family had vast territories, independent legions, and seats in the council, pillars of imperial politics.

Whenever the throne was vacant, they would elect a new king at the Dragon Throne meeting based on the royal family's bloodline through voting or alliances.

That meeting often lasted several days or even weeks, filled with deals, marriages, and oaths.

The original royal power was not granted by God, but established by these eight families together.

For this reason, the Electoral Prince system was once regarded as the highest symbol of noble order.

Later generations of Emperors successively dismantled territories, abolished princes, and rebuilt direct legions, uprooting the Electoral Prince system, leaving only the name of the Eight Great Clans but no longer allowing them to touch the throne's succession.

Today, the eight families are already broken and uneven, some bloodlines dwindled, some power declined, some listed among them but not as prosperous as the new nobles.

Proposing the restoration of the Electoral Prince system in such times may sound like restoring dignity to the old nobility, but everyone knows it's irretrievable.

The Royal Family will not recognize it, nor will the equally powerful new nobles.

Even the few remaining families may not truly have the courage to sit at the same table and split the world again.

So this is more like a deliberately raised banner.

Stalling time, stirring ambitions, disrupting situations, causing suspicion between the Military Affairs Department and old nobility, also delaying the resolution of the true succession struggle.

Louis quickly grasped the essence, murmuring softly, "Rhine... it seems you're really anxious."

To him, such infighting in the Imperial Capital is far from the Northern Territory.

As long as the situation continues to be muddled, the Northern Territory instead has more time to firmly root its foundation, which is a good thing for him.

"You all continue the chaos, I'll continue building the Empire as a Count."

Then Louis' gaze fell on the second item.

[2: Duke Calvin decided to separate Louis from the Calvin Commerce Association, framing it as a partnership, and to draft a new contract.]

"Partnership?" He lightly smiled, his tone carrying a hint of coldness.

He had long anticipated this moment.

The Duke's trust had never truly existed, and the so-called separation was merely a belated ritual.

The consequences of this approach are almost predestined; the Calvin Clan will view the Red Tide as an independent economic entity outside the clan, and the clan's commercial network will be forced to contract.

In the short term, the Red Tide's trade channels may be constrained, but Louis is not anxious.

He is well-prepared; the independent trade system in the Northern Territory, the financial system controlled by the Red Tide's boardroom, and most of the Calvin Commerce Association in the Northern Territory still rely on the Red Tide, enabling him to continue operating even without the Calvin Commerce Association's support.

Louis knows this is just a test by the clan: to see if he will return to the clan's system or become completely independent.

For him, the choices are already clear.

The Red Tide must become more independent, completely removing the Calvin Clan's control.

As for completely integrating into the Calvin Clan, since coming to the Northern Territory, it has never even been an option for him.

He slightly raised his hand, bringing up the financial chart of the Red Tide, watching a series of steadily growing figures, his lips slowly curving upward.

However, he also understands that this freedom gained from separating from the clan is not without cost.

The Red Tide is still reliant on some channels of the Calvin Commerce Association in the Imperial Capital, especially for food and luxury goods imports in the South.

"Seems, still too dependent on them."

He began listing in his mind.

Rather than passively waiting for the clan to pull the strings, it's better to take the opportunity to completely decouple.

But he also knows, at least in the coming year, the Red Tide will continue to rely on some channels of the Calvin Commerce Association.

Imperial currency circulation, port goods transshipment, Southeast Territory luxury goods imports.

These are still controlled by the clan, and if relations sour now, the Red Tide will fall into both financial and circulation dilemmas.

"Can't tear things apart just yet." He pondered, his fingertips tapping the table.

"Stabilize for a year, expand the shipment line from Dawn Port, find a few more outlets."

Several names flashed through his mind, Federation Commerce Association, North Sea Freeport, even the Church Court's smuggling lines.

"Later, let's convene a meeting." He murmured.

Chapter 639: Calvin Commerce Association (2)

It's time to plan the next step, allowing Red Tide to gradually emerge from the family's shadow towards true independence while maintaining dignity.

The moment he saw the third piece of information, he was stunned for a moment.

[3: Sif is pregnant and will give birth to a daughter for Louis Calvin in ten months.]

He was dazed for a few seconds, then slowly, a smile appeared on his face, spreading bit by bit until even his eyes became gentle.

"...Really?" he murmured softly, his heart suddenly racing.

He turned back to look at the bed.

Sif's silver hair was scattered, still clutching a pillow in deep sleep, her eyelashes slightly fluttering.

At this moment, Louis only felt a warmth swelling in his heart.

He couldn't help but walk back, bending down to get closer, wrapping one arm around Emily and the other around Sif, holding both in his embrace.

Emily shifted slightly in her sleep, half-opening her eyes to look at him, teasingly saying, "Lord Louis, are you trying to take advantage so early again?"

Sif rubbed against his chest, sleepily opening her eyes.

"Louis?" Her voice was soft, tinged with drowsiness.

"It's nothing," Louis said with a gentle smile, his tone so tender it almost carried a laugh, "I'm just...happy."

He lifted Sif's chin with one hand, gently dropping a kiss on her lips, then turned to plant a deeper kiss on Emily's forehead.

Both women were momentarily stunned, their faces turning red.

"Louis, why are you so...unusual today?" Emily said half-mockingly, half-complainingly, but leaned in closer.

Sif lifted her head as if to ask, but was gently pulled back into his embrace, her forehead pressing against the side of his neck.

"Nothing," Louis said softly, "I just feel...especially good today."

He lowered his head and kissed again, this time deeper, lingering longer.

The three tangled tenderly for a while, until the wood in the fireplace had burned halfway through, and the firelight gradually softened.

Louis got up, put on his robe, and as usual, cultivated for more than an hour before washing and dressing. With the help of both women, he tidied his cloak and collar.

As he walked out of the bedroom, the aroma of bread and meat soup wafted through the hallway.

At the breakfast table, Emily smiled as she served him soup, and Sif occasionally glanced sideways at him but quietly cut his bread.

After breakfast, the guards were already lined up at the door.

Louis donned his cloak and turned to instruct, "Weir, call Bradley and Guildmaster Desland for a meeting."

...

In the office, Louis stood by the window, his back to the firelight, watching the bustling crowd outside as he pondered.

Before long, Bradley and Desland were escorted into the study by the guards.

The two appeared cautious, knowing that anything requiring Louis to hold a sudden meeting was certainly not simple.

"Information has come from the family side," Louis began, his tone carrying a bit of coldness, "Duke Calvin is preparing to renegotiate the trade agreement and revise the Red Tide trade terms, framing it as a partnership, not under direct family control."

He paused, his gaze sweeping between the two, as if observing their reactions.

"This means that Red Tide must either return to the family system and accept their orders or be completely excluded, unable to utilize family resources anymore."

Bradley lowered his head. As the old steward of the Calvin Clan, he naturally understood what this meant. He was now leaning towards Red Tide.

He spoke in a deep voice, "So what is your intention, sir?"

"My intention," Louis replied slowly, "is that Red Tide will not look back."

Desland's palms sweated, his breathing slightly erratic.

He too came from a steward background in the Calvin Commerce Association and now, as the Trade Bureau Chief of Red Tide, was very grateful to Louis for his promotion, thus having no reason to side with the Calvin Clan.

Louis sensed their tension and softened his tone.

"There's no need to be anxious," he said lightly, "I foresaw this conflict long ago."

Since the day the Red Tide Trade Directorate was established a year ago, I said one thing, Red Tide must be able to survive without the family."

Bradley looked up, seemingly recalling that indeed there was such an arrangement: "You indeed had plans early on."

Back then, everyone thought he was pushing for financial reforms; no one realized that it was actually the first step towards defamilialization.

"I knew that as long as Red Tide kept growing, the family would eventually intervene," Louis continued, "They came a bit earlier than I expected."

So I proactively engaged members of the Commerce Association, with 80% of the Northern Territory division's core quietly integrated into the Red Tide system.

I had their families live in Red Tide City, their children attend schools, their workshops employ and subsidy are all issued by the Directorate, so they naturally understand to whom they should listen."

Desland took a breath and whispered, "Also, almost all Northern Territory goods have been redirected through the Red Tide Account Book; grain, coal, Demon Marrow, hides, and ore all circulate within the Directorate system."

"Exactly," Louis nodded, "More than half of the Northern Territory's taxes and settlements are on our books, and even external nobility bypass the family commerce association to trade directly with Red Tide."

He turned to look at the two: "I've been gradually stripping the Calvin Commerce Association's system for years, and I anticipated completing it in two years, but I didn't expect them to cut ties now, maybe they sensed something."

Ultimately, it's also my responsibility for being too cautious and not laying out alternative routes early enough.

So we need to discuss how to respond next."

Bradley pondered for a moment before speaking first: "I suggest we privately draw clear boundaries between the Red Tide Commerce System and the Calvin Commerce Association.

We need to first identify who sincerely serves Red Tide and who still belongs to the Calvin Clan faction."

He paused and continued, "We can also contact the external Nobility of the Northern Territory closely collaborating with us as they depend on our resources.

If we can sign agreements directly with them, bypassing the Calvin Clan, we can still maintain the trade line."

Desland shook his head and cautiously added, "But we still depend on the Calvin Commerce Association's shipping lines in the short term, especially the maritime transport at Dawn Port, and we still need their port to transship goods.

But as you said, we cannot be fully dependent. We must quickly find alternative main trade routes to ensure future autonomy."

Louis nodded, "Hmm."

Bradley suddenly thought of something and said with slight excitement, "I do have a candidate: Count Harvey. He's one of the representatives of the Empire's New Nobility Alliance and is in competition with the Calvin Clan in trade routes.

If we can cooperate with him secretly, we can spread the risk while opening a new route to the sea. Not to mention your close relationship with his second son, Yorn."

Louis paused, recalling that chubby boy, and then laughed, "How could I have overlooked that?"

Bradley also laughed, "That's because you were too focused on the affairs of Red Tide and didn't consider this angle."

Then Desland quietly added, "Perhaps... we could also reach out to foreign trade associations. Although risky, establishing a secret trade line could be another path."

All three fell silent for a moment, with only the occasional soft crackle from the fireplace.

Louis slowly smiled, "That path is technically illegal. The Empire's laws deem such actions a severe crime, but like the ban on slave trading, everyone knows it's a rule written for the commoners. In reality, no one truly follows it."

He picked up his cup, taking a sip of cool water, "Especially the great Nobility, they have countless trade associations and estates abroad, even the Calvin Clan has established several branches outside long ago."

He looked up at the two, his tone relaxing a bit, "In other words, this danger is just a seemingly intimidating façade."

Bradley nodded, while Desland chuckled softly.

Finally, Louis set down his cup, glancing between the two, "As for other arrangements, you two proceed with the plans. I will handle the external negotiations.

I'll talk to Yorn and may leverage Count Harvey's connections to explore the situation with those foreign trade associations."

Bradley and Desland exchanged a look, then replied in unison, "Yes, sir."

Chapter 640: Discussion

After twilight, the Red Tide City was lightly brushed by snow, and the halls on the upper floor of the Earth Tower castle were glowing with golden firelight.

The fireplace was burning, with tongues of fire reflected on the stone walls. Silver platters held stewed mushrooms and roasted cod, filling the air with a warm fragrance.

The attendant quietly set the dishes aside, with cups and goblets clinking lightly.

Louis sat at the main seat, his cloak draped on the back of the chair, looking up at the ceiling, pondering something unknown.

He seldom held banquets; governance, meetings, and paperwork nearly occupied all his daily time.

Tonight was an exception, for one person.

The door was pushed open, bringing in a gust of cold air.

"I heard there might be fish tonight? Boss, you've finally remembered your brother!" Yorn Harvey's voice was louder than the wind.

Snowflakes clung to his coat, his hair was tousled by the cold wind, and his face was flushed, yet his smile was unrestrained.

Louis looked up, unable to help but smile: "You're always thinking of food."

"Not just any fish, I wouldn't eat that. Since it's your treat, it must be no ordinary fish." Yorn strode in, pulling off his gloves.

In fact, it wasn't Louis inviting him to Red Tide City, but that he had already stayed in Red Tide City for a while.

His reason for being in Red Tide City was quite simple: Affairs at Silver Ridge Hill had long been integrated into the Red Tide council system, with documents requiring only signature confirmation, and the mining areas were inactive in winter, leaving him with quite some free time.

Moreover, compared to the cold Silver Ridge Hill, Red Tide City is the true entertainment city of the Northern Territory. While he claimed to be here for work reports, he was mostly here to avoid the cold and enjoy the winter.

In fact, many nobles like Yorn handed over their territorial affairs to Red Tide officials and ventured into the city to spend the winter and stay warm.

Nowadays, Red Tide City has almost become the real center of the Northern Territory.

Singing halls, taverns, schools, theaters, hot springs... everything makes them willing to stay.

"Please sit." Louis gestured, signaling the attendant to pour wine.

Yorn pulled up a chair and sat, wiping the water drops from his hands, with a bright smile on his face.

The firelight flickered on their wine glasses, with fragrance wafting through the air.

"Boss, this place is truly paradise." Yorn raised his glass, downing it in one go, exaggeratedly sighing, "At the mines, it's hard to even get a sip of warm wine. In Red Tide City, even the air is sweeter than elsewhere."

Louis chuckled: "Then you should thank the council."

"Thanking the boss is even quicker." Yorn grinned, "Even my servants say that the fires in Red Tide are hotter than the Sun."

The two of them first talked about recent happenings in the Northern Territory.

Louis mentioned: "The mineral production at Silver Ridge Hill is good this year; you've done well."

Yorn immediately became animated, as if finally getting the chance to boast.

He began to eagerly share his governance experiences, with a laugh saying, "The shifts at the mines were too chaotic, so I let the council schedule them; the workers' meals were too poor, so I had the chefs from Red Tide write the menus..."

"Later I realized, boss," Yorn said, gesturing as he spoke, "professional matters should be handled by professionals. Nothing more needed than handing decision-making to the Red Tide officials, then awaiting invoices, gathering taxes, signing a few papers, done!"

Louis chuckled: "So this is your governance insight?"

"That's efficiency!" Yorn said earnestly, "I practically learned it from you. Now even the miners call themselves Red Tide People."

Louis raised his glass with a smile: "This is the Northern Territory we want."

Flames flickered inside their glasses, casting warm hues on their brows and eyes.

A moment later, Louis shifted his tone slightly and asked casually: "Is Count Harvey's health okay?"

Yorn put down his glass, shrugging: "Doing okay, just indulges in wine a bit. Without it, he'd probably be bedridden."

Louis chuckled lightly: "I heard your father's expanding warehouses at the port in the Southwest province?"

"Yes indeed." Yorn's tone suddenly became serious, "I thought about having him build a port in the Northern Territory, but he's stubborn, always claiming it's too cold to conduct business here. I wish I could drag him to Red Tide to soak in a hot spring."

Louis listened with a laugh, then his tone deepened: "In fact, I was thinking of discussing this with you. Red Tide plans to open a trade route to the South. A stable port and transfer site are needed."

Yorn put down his glass: "Your Calvin Commerce Association controls the largest port city; no need to look for my dad, right?"

Louis smiled slightly, raising his glass, tone calm: "More paths, never a bad thing."

Yorn was momentarily stunned, then burst out laughing: "Boss is right; more paths just make the way smoother."

Louis continued: "I plan to collaborate with the Harvey Family. Red Tide Commerce Association will supply goods, the Harvey Family will provide port clearance and storage."

The Northern Territory will export leather, cold iron, and precious minerals, while the South will offer spices, silk, wine, and food. We'll jointly establish a commerce association, splitting the profits. Also, at the Dragon Throne meeting, Red Tide will support the Harvey Family's new noble alliance proposal."

Yorn was stunned for a few seconds, then his smile was as bright as sunshine.

"Boss, you should have told me sooner!" He patted his chest, "Leave it to me! I'll write a letter back home tomorrow; if my dad doesn't agree... he won't have a chance not to agree."

Actually, he praises you in his letters, even tells me to get closer to you, saying the future of the Northern Territory lies with that young Louis. I was quite surprised hearing that."

Yorn then scratched his head, unable to resist mumbling: "However... my dad does have some odd questions, always asking about how big your port is over there. I really have no answer for him."

Louis smiled lightly, then took out a letter and handed it to Yorn: "Deliver this letter to Count Harvey for me; everything he wants to know is inside."

Yorn took the letter, then patted his chest: "Don't worry, leave it to me. After all, we're brothers; my dad is your dad too."