

Winter 641

Chapter 641: Discussion (2)

Louis was somewhat speechless; no matter how he heard it, this sentence sounded strange, but he still raised his glass, "Then let's toast to the family first."

"To the boss!" Yorn echoed loudly, his voice drowning out the fireplace.

The two of them raised their glasses, the firelight flickering in their cups.

Laughter, firelight, and the smell of wine mixed together, and the temperature in the hall gradually rose.

Yorn patted his chest, laughing heartily, like a young man who never tires.

But as Louis watched him, he felt that this cold Northern Territory also had some life in it.

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Winter was approaching, and the streets of Red Tide were covered with a thin frost from the first snow.

The streets were bustling with activity.

Vendors were hawking hot wine, leather boots, and cured meat, while children dragged wooden boxes and ran in the snow, lanterns in their hands swinging to and fro.

"Northern Territory sheepskin, soft as spring breeze, just one copper coin per piece!" "Hot cod soup! Just off the pot!" The cries of the vendors rose and fell in the streets and alleys.

Workers in fur coats emerged from the workshops, their waists adorned with bulging purses, their laughter bold and genuine.

And the knights also traversed through the crowd, haggling with the craftsmen, completely without airs.

Layton noticed that there were no expressions of fear or poverty on these people's faces; they carried themselves confidently, like masters of their own destiny.

In his mind, he marveled at how this city, busier than the Federation's ports, had established itself.

A border exiled by the Empire, yet in just a few short years, it had grown to such a scale.

As a secret liaison for the Jade Federation Bi Chao Guild stationed in Red Tide, he hid under the guise of a steward for the Southern traveling merchant Salt Cold Fleet.

In theory, Layton's task was merely to observe and record the resource potential of the Northern Territory, establish covert trade route nodes, and report back to the Federal Council.

Sometimes it was also necessary to spy on the Northern Territory's political and military news to provide intelligence for the guild.

But nowadays, the Red Tide had made it difficult for him to see it simply as a mission, and he even began to integrate into this society somewhat.

"This is more than just a miracle of the Northern Territory," he thought, "In the Federation, a city becoming so affluent out of thin air."

Layton entered the Cold Salt Pavilion, which was his stronghold, outwardly just an ordinary shop, but in fact, a guild intelligence node.

Inside, the lights were bright, the fireplace roared, and the air was filled with the faint scent of salt and fish oil.

Layton took off his gloves, instructed the servant to close the door, and was about to sort out today's accounts when he heard light footsteps outside the door.

Several men in ordinary merchant robes came in one after another, smiling and exchanging pleasantries, their accents local.

Layton didn't pay attention initially and continued flipping through the bills.

The next moment, the curtains were quickly drawn, and the men moved in unison, restraining him.

At the doorway, two fully-armed Red Tide Knights appeared, "Layton Fromm, the Red Tide Lord wants to see you," one said softly.

Layton froze for an instant, realizing his cover was blown.

His first instinct was not fear, but confusion—how did they know my name?

He was quickly pinned to the ground, a thick cloth covering his head, surrounded by hurried footsteps and terse commands.

"Take him away."

The world fell into darkness, and Layton couldn't hear the wind and snow outside, only feeling his body being dragged, the stones beneath him jostling.

He was pushed onward, then shoved into a carriage.

The carriage was cramped, rocking slightly with the rolling of the wheels; he couldn't discern the direction, only knowing the carriage was going uphill, turning, moving farther from the bustling city.

In the blind darkness, Layton's mind raced: Was there a problem with the cargo list? Did someone in the Federation Guild leak information? Or were the accounts from the Cold Salt Pavilion audited?

A gust of cold wind swept by, and he was pushed to sit on a chair.

Someone tore the black cloth off his head.

The light stung his eyes.

Layton squinted upward, seeing not a dark cellar, but a spacious and bright study.

On the wall hung a map of the Northern Territory, a fire burned in the corner, and a clock with metal gears ticked softly.

Behind the desk sat a young lord, black-haired, calm in demeanor, yet not severe.

The firelight played on his face, making him seem more like a patient scholar than a lord ruling over the Northern Territory.

Louis Calvin.

He was younger than Layton had imagined, and more approachable, even exuding a bit of a relaxing composure.

The fear in Layton's heart was eased somewhat by this composure, giving rise to a bit of optimism.

Maybe if he acted like an ordinary merchant, he might still get away with it.

He hurriedly plastered on a smile, his voice trembling: "Sir, you... you must have mistaken me for someone else? I'm just a small merchant selling salt, here to make some modest business in the Northern Territory."

Louis didn't respond immediately; he simply gestured for him to sit down, observing him peacefully, as if waiting for him to finish his lies.

The silence bore no hostility, yet it felt inescapable.

"Layton From the Green Tide Guild," Louis finally spoke, his voice so calm it was almost gentle, "Welcome to Red Tide."

Layton's heartbeat almost leaped from his chest, his breath tightened, his throat dry as if blocked by dust.

His mind was a mess.

Finished, exposed, which part went wrong?

Louis's gaze calmly watched him, without a trace of emotional fluctuation, yet more terrifying than any threat.

Layton's spine chilled, his breath increasingly rapid, his inner fear entirely magnified—it was the gaze of a hunter on its prey.

In this moment, Layton suddenly realized, the young lord before him was not as gentle as he seemed.

Behind that serene smile lay a chilling sense of control, as though his every move was within the other's grasp.

But now he could only force himself to raise his head, his mouth stiffly twisting into a smile, voice trembling: "You... you really must have mistaken me... I'm truly just a nobody."

His voice lacked conviction, his eyes flickering with panic, like a beast cornered.

He wanted to find an excuse, but even he could hear the panic betraying him.

Louis didn't answer, just watched him with a smile.

The smile was calm, gentle, but it was hard to discern whether it was sincere or probing.

The candlelight reflected off his profile, his black hair gently falling over his shoulders, his expression serene.

Yet, the more Layton looked, the more flustered he became, that smile was not comforting, but a kind of overlooking composure, as if everything was within his expectation.

"Rest assured," Louis finally spoke, "I'm not interested in spies."

His tone shifted, adding lightly: "But I am interested in guilds."

Layton seemed like he finally grasped his lifeline, quickly responding with a trembling voice: "Y-yes, my lord, I understand."

Louis slowly rose, turning to look at the snow outside the window: "Tell your guild we have Cold Iron, Demon Marrow, and other minerals you need. We don't plunder, only trade, and we hope you do the same."

Louis turned back, his eyes reflecting the firelight, seemingly able to see through the forces behind Layton.

"Of course, I also know you can't make the decision," he continued calmly, "So deliver this letter to your superior, let him consider it carefully."

Louis picked up a letter from the table, the envelope stamped with the Red Tide seal, pushing it gently to the edge of the table: "I trust you'll bring the right message back."

Layton opened his mouth, his throat dry, could only nod: "I... understand, my lord."

Louis lightly waved his hand. Several Red Tide Knights approached, pulling out a cloth to blindfold Layton again.

"Take him back," Louis said calmly.

Layton felt himself being lifted again, pushed out of the study, footsteps echoing in the corridor.

He heard the heavy door open, cold wind pouring in, then was shoved into a carriage.

The carriage drove along the stone path of the Main Castle, the sound of wheels crunching over snow audible.

Until the night's darkness swallowed the distant firelight, the carriage stopped in his familiar neighborhood.

Someone untied the ropes, coarsely ordered: "Get off."

The cloth was pulled away, biting cold wind slapped his face.

He stood at the entrance of his own cold salt shop.

The clerks stood dumbfounded at the door, their expressions surprised.

Layton's face pale, gasping, whispered urgently: "Pack up... immediately! We must leave this city."

No one dared to ask why, servants hastily packing ledgers, lists, valuable goods.

That night, Layton hurriedly left the city with his entourage, headed Southward.

Regardless of what the letter said, he was already exposed.

As the carriage passed through Red Tide's streets, he couldn't help but turn back to look.

Under the night sky, the Main Castle's tower flickered in the snow mist, the firelight inside still burning, as if there was a person standing there.

He vaguely saw the young lord standing at the window, with that calm smile.

Layton's breath caught, his heart almost leaping from his chest.

He abruptly turned his head forward, not daring to look again, only urging the driver: "Quickly! Faster!"

The carriage wheels splashed snow foam, running faster and faster, as if trying to escape that smiling gaze.

Chapter 642: Count Harvey

After Layton was escorted out of the Main Castle, the night had not yet dispersed. Louis did not rest, merely ordering the guard to send another message.

Soon after, a second person with a hood over their head was brought in.

The person was breathing heavily, with a strong scent of spices and Southern wine on their collar.

Louis raised his hand, and several knights stopped their actions: "Uncover."

The hood was pulled off, and the man blinked. Upon seeing who was sitting before him, his face turned pale instantly, and he unconsciously took half a step back.

The man opened his mouth, instinctively wanting to blurt out a familiar excuse: "I'm just a humble spice trader..."

Louis merely looked at him with a smile.

...

That night, the lights in Red Tide Main Castle burned late into the night.

From merchants of the Red Glow Guild, to representatives of the Ashen Guild, even the hidden couriers of Star Fall, four or five members of the Federation Guilds who had been hiding in Red Tide for years.

The lights in Red Tide Main Castle burned deep into the night, as they were brought in one by one, and then taken away one by one.

Throughout the entire process, there was no sound of interrogation, not a drop of blood.

Louis did the same thing with each person.

He first pointed out their real names and the guilds they belonged to, then briefly stated their activities in Red Tide, Dawn Port, and Silver Ridge Hill over the years...

Finally, he asked them to sit down and pushed a letter sealed with the Red Tide stamp towards them.

"Rest assured," Louis spoke in a consistently gentle tone, "I will not execute legal merchants in Red Tide; Red Tide needs trade."

Facing him, those self-proclaimed seasoned guild members broke out in cold sweat under Louis' calm gaze.

"There is just one thing..." Louis tapped his fingers lightly on the tabletop, "From now on, we can send out goods, and you can make money. But backstabbing, leaking information, setting up lines for enemy nations, that's not acceptable."

"If your superiors are wise, they'll understand. What I'm offering is a way to profit long-term, not an enemy."

Someone couldn't help but speak, "Is this... a threat, sir?"

Louis chuckled, "It's a polite reminder."

He did not raise his voice nor show anger, but personally pushed the letter in front of them.

"The letter is very clear. Red Tide is opening trade quotas with the Federation and various guilds, but it requires reasonable prices and clean channels.

Take it back, relay the message word for word. If they accept, the goods of Red Tide are always open to you. If they refuse..."

He paused, though his tone was light, it sent a chill down their spines, "Then please tell them to stop reaching into the Northern Territory."

When the last person was led away with their head covered again, only the crackling of the fireplace remained in the study room.

"If they have any brains," Louis murmured softly, "they'll see this as a win-win."

Red Tide is not exclusive, it does not reject the Federation's Gold Coins, nor the guilds' merchant ships, but Red Tide wants to operate by its own rules.

This is also something Louis has always wanted to do, or he wouldn't have kept these Jade Federation spies here for so long.

Some spies had been doing business here even before Red Tide City was established, back when it was still the Red Tide Territory.

As long as these spies didn't cause any real damage, Louis, with his Daily Intelligence System, merely turned a blind eye to them.

It was just that the Calvin Clan cut off the trade routes, hastening his plans.

Louis stood up, walked to the window, and looked at the lights in the snowy night of Red Tide City:
"Father, I've made my choice, I hope you won't regret it."

.....

The sea breeze in the Southern province always carried a salty scent, but in Count Harvey's study, there was no hint of it.

The thick stone walls blocked the sound of the sea, and the fire in the fireplace burned steadily, its flickering light reflecting off the ledgers and documents.

The desk was piled with tax reports, freight bills, quota lists, a half-empty silver wine jug, and the red wine in the glass shimmered with a glow.

Count Harvey held a pen in his left hand, approving documents, while sipping wine with his right.

It was a habit he couldn't break after many years; a few sips made his mind clearer, allowing him to reconcile numbers, names, and port tax contracts perfectly.

When he didn't drink, his mind would get restless; this flaw had been with him since his youth.

He was not born into a truly noble family.

His grandfather was a Viscount on the verge of bankruptcy, addicted to gambling, nearly squandering the family estate.

When his father took over, there weren't even enough servants left at home, only an empty old manor remained.

Those times taught him from a young age what it meant to be unable to move an inch without money.

Relying on the perseverance of father and son over two generations, the Harvey Family revived.

His father made his first fortune through smuggling wine and spices, establishing a trading firm at the harbor, and supplying the Imperial fleet with provisions.

Harvey himself studied in the Imperial Capital, not at the Knight Academy, but in finance and law, and after graduating, he followed his father in managing docks, clearing accounts, and dealing with Empire officials.

At that time, he developed the habit of drinking while accounting; spirits could suppress anxiety and help him focus.

He rose to the rank of Count entirely due to the Emperor.

Back then, when Ernst August first took office, he implemented heavy harbor taxes and trade route reforms. The old nobility mostly opposed, but he willingly took the risk of the coastal tax reform, advancing military expenses and harbor repair funds for the Royal Family.

The Emperor appreciated his courage and skill, personally appointing him as the Count of Southern Port Affairs.

From that day on, he realized he was no longer a nobleman by blood, but a political merchant by means.

This background permanently instilled in him a near-neurotic vigilance.

Harvey doesn't believe in luck, he only believes in numbers that match on the ledger. He doesn't believe in the glory of bloodline, only in ships that can weather storms.

While approving documents, he felt somewhat agitated inside.

The Emperor had disappeared, the Regent King was gravely ill, and the Princes were engaged in overt and covert battles.

Chapter 643: Count Harvey (2)

The commands from the Imperial Capital kept coming, the coastal tax system changed again and again, and the preparatory agenda for the Dragon Throne meeting was getting thicker with each page.

The old nobles schemed against each other, while the new ones were used as buffers; no one wanted to be the first to fall.

Harvey put down his quill and sipped his wine, "Ha... a table full of messy accounts."

The current crisis is far more complicated than the tax reforms on paper.

The coastal routes were repeatedly requisitioned by the Imperial Capital, and a merchant ship had to pay taxes three times; the southern pirates were resurging, and secretly, some were even supporting them.

Inland nobles took advantage of the chaos to cut off trade routes, forcing him to make concessions, while creditors from the Imperial Capital demanded repayment, and the Military Supply Department's IOUs continued to pile up.

The entire trade in the South was like a ship riddled with holes, on the verge of capsizing at any moment.

Harvey knew his situation too well; although the Harvey family was bestowed the title of Count, their foundation was still weak.

At the slightest disturbance, once the old nobility joined forces, they would be the first to be thrown out of the game.

The current books could still be maintained, thanks to the export taxes from the three ports and the income from the vineyards.

But once the Imperial Capital dispatched a new supervisor, cutting off the revenue share, the fruits of his ten-year labor could vanish overnight.

Even worse, he had to maintain ambiguous relationships with various factions.

The envoy from the Imperial Capital wanted him to swear allegiance to the Second Prince, while the Superintendent was pulling him towards the Fourth Prince's camp...

He had to maintain every connection, appease every side; a wrong move would alert the others.

"The messier the Imperial Capital gets, the more we, who seat at the table with our money, need to band together for warmth," Harvey murmured, as if reminding himself.

As he spoke, he signed his name on the document.

Just then, there was the soft sound of footsteps and a knock on the door from outside.

"Come in," he said calmly, putting down his wine glass.

The servant entered, greeted him respectfully and presented a silver tray with two letters on it.

One bore the sun emblem, the mark of the Red Tide Territory in the Northern Territory, and the other a familiar ship emblem, belonging to his own Harvey Clan, written by Yorn.

Harvey raised an eyebrow, recognizing the sun emblem; it was a letter from Louis Calvin.

With a count personally writing to him, he was quite curious about what the Lord of the North wanted to discuss with him.

However, he temporarily set aside that letter and first picked up the one with the ship emblem.

"Let's see what that kid wrote this time," he sighed, leaning back in his chair.

This second son really gave him a headache, considered his child in late age, spoiled from a young age, somewhat duller than his older brother, not lacking in intelligence, just a bit flighty.

The path laid out for him was supposed to be foolproof, guarding the family port, inheriting a small Baron's domain, living a life of wealth and not causing trouble.

But the kid, full of passion, went ahead and signed up for the Northern Territory expansion.

That place was practically a heap of dead bodies; he truly thought his son wouldn't make it back then.

Who would've thought not only did he survive, he even cozied up to the Lord of the North.

In just a few short years, he earned a Viscount's title; this ability to cozy up was somewhat reminiscent of his own younger days.

He chuckled helplessly as he opened the envelope.

The letter's tone was light, its wording chaotic, full of Yorn-like enthusiasm.

"The Red Tide Lord Louis wants to cooperate with us! He's the most capable person I've ever met!... He suggests our family can provide southern ports, Red Tide can supply leather, Cold Iron, and whatnot... profit-sharing! It's a surefire, no-loss deal!"

Count Harvey laughed halfway through, shaking his head with a sigh, "This kid... he's a Viscount and still so naive."

He actually understood why Yorn wrote it this way.

After all, that Lord of the North gave him so much, constant support, land, resources, honors; it's all like falling opportunities from the sky.

To be fair, even if personally arranged, he could never have elevated him from a Baron of Expansion to a Viscount within just a few years.

Thinking about this, Harvey felt a bit conflicted, half proud, half sighing.

He set down the letter and picked up the one with the sun emblem.

It was from Louis Calvin, with neat handwriting and a clean wax seal on the cover.

The letter unfolded, the handwriting was orderly, the wording calm and composed, with the restraint and order of a negotiation.

Louis addressed him as "Uncle Harvey," his tone calm and appropriate, neither humble nor arrogant.

The entire letter contained no excessive flattery, nor did it exude any sense of pressure, as if it were a lord who understood his own weight stating his case.

He first briefly explained the current situation in the Northern Territory, that Red Tide City had become the core of northern commerce, with stable output and expansion in scale;

He then outlined the cooperation intention: Red Tide was willing to exchange leather, Cold Iron, Demon Marrow, and various minerals in exchange for the Harvey ports' pathway for grain, spices, textiles, and wine, and to establish stable transit warehouses.

The letter even listed several suggested plans: including product profit-sharing ratios, winter transport subsidies, port maintenance costs, and future expandable trade limits.

Each item was clear to the clause number, evidencing the presence of an entire management team's logical and organized backing behind the letter.

Moreover, Red Tide promised: to speak for the "New Nobility Alliance's" reasonable proposals at the Dragon Throne meeting.

If the Empire's situation worsened and the war spread, it would also prioritize securing the Harvey Family's supply shipments and port channels.

The concluding sentence was succinct yet profound: "If the Northern and Southern families can join hands, even in turbulent times, stability will be more assured."

He read it through and gently set the letter down, his gaze lingering in the firelight, his thoughts gradually entwining.

"The Calvin Clan is the Empire's top port trade route overlord, this child being a son of Calvin, yet bypassing his own trade guild to seek me out?" he murmured inwardly.

This was no ordinary invitation for cooperation; it was akin to fanning one's own father's face.

Either there was internal strife in the Calvin Clan, or this young count was already planning to establish his own faction.

He sipped his wine, countless thoughts flashing through his mind.

He had always competed with the Calvin Clan's ports, silently wrestling for years.

And Louis, having saved Yorn, pulled that foolish boy from a pit of corpses, and helped him gain the Viscount title; such a debt of gratitude couldn't be ignored.

Moreover, the Emperor had long been absent, with the Princes forming alliances; the old nobility waiting for a chance at resurgence, while the New Nobility Alliance was suppressed in the Imperial Capital. He, as a count who rose from wealth, frankly stood on shallow roots, and his position remained unstable.

"Whichever side you take feels like staking one's life," he murmured internally. "But the young man in the Northern Territory turned wasteland into a place of warmth and survival, better than half the old nobility. At least for now, he needs a partner, not prey."

He understood all too well that tying himself to the old nobility was merely passive vassalage.

Opening a separate line with Louis meant an additional card, an extra escape route.

Moreover, if Louis failed, he could always claim it as merely attending to his son's regional cooperation.

He tapped the table, making a decision: talk first, then take sides.

"Draft a reply," he instructed the secretary, "use a friendly tone, neither humble nor overbearing. Express interest in the cooperation proposal, willing to send a representative to the Northern Territory for detailed discussions, starting with a single route, a single batch as a trial."

He gazed into the fire, but his thoughts did not stop.

Harvey kept weighing the significance of this step in his mind; this letter was not just a business talk, but a test, a silent bet.

He knew he wasn't in a position to openly clash with the Calvin Clan, nor could he easily be dragged into the Prince's factions.

But Louis was different; the north line, historically, was separate yet resiliently independent of the Imperial Capital politics.

If he could hold his ground in such a place, it proved he didn't rely on imperial authority and could create his own order.

Such a person understood both the game of power and how to survive in the dirt.

If he could connect with this northern line, no matter who emerged victorious in the Imperial Capital's future, the Harvey family in the south would still have room to negotiate.

Harvey's heart was half icy calculation, half intrigued admiration.

Young, bold, and strategic; such a lord was rare in this decaying empire.

"He bets on the future of the Northern Territory, and I'm betting on him," Harvey murmured.

Count Harvey decided to be more cautious, not rushing to stake all his chips, but he had to first secure this line.

He raised his glass, as if to toast the distant figure in the flames: "Let's see how far you can take the Northern Territory, Louis Calvin."

Chapter 644: Another Year of Spring

The small town in the Western Empire was swallowed by the night, the streets so quiet that only the footsteps of the patrolling knights could be heard.

No one would guess that the Jade Federation Bi Chao Guild was hiding the Empire's top secret liaison point in this remote town.

An alchemy lamp hung over the desk, the firelight flickering, reflecting the mountainous stacks of ledgers and encrypted files.

Selina Groveur sat behind the desk, browsing through the latest intelligence from the Imperial Capital, the spiral emblem on her chest glinting dark gold in the dim light.

There was a sudden rush of footsteps and a knock on the door outside.

"Come in."

The door was pushed open, and Layton Fromm walked in with a cloak covered in frost, his steps flustered.

Selina looked up at him, somewhat surprised, "It seems your mission encountered a problem."

Layton swallowed, "The Northern Territory... is exposed."

"Exposed?" Selina's eyebrow moved imperceptibly, leaning back in her chair, "I asked you to bring back intelligence, not trouble."

Layton gave a wry smile and took out a letter from his bosom, its seal stamped with a sun emblem of gold and red. It was the emblem of the Red Tide.

Selina did not reach out, instead coldly said, "Speak."

Layton took a deep breath, "The Red Tide Lord, Louis Calvin, personally met with me. He said the Red Tide doesn't kill spies; they only do business. Then he asked me to bring this letter back to you."

Selina remained silent for a moment, finally reaching out to take the letter.

The letter unfolded, its content not threatening, but more like a formal trade proposal. The words in the letter were not aggressive, but rather a sincere invitation for the Bi Chao Guild to do business with the Red Tide, outlining exchanges of ores, fuel, leather, and cold iron for salt crystals, food, wine, and alchemical materials.

The last sentence read: "The Red Tide does not oppose guests from the Federation; it only hopes the Federation learns to respect the rules of the Northern Territory."

The alchemy lamp dimmed, as if the air in the room solidified.

Layton kept his head down, cold sweat dripping from his brow along his temples, even his breathing had become softer.

Selina did not speak immediately, only tapping the edge of the letter with the back of her finger, her gaze calm.

"So," he said slowly, "he saw through your identity, exposed our stronghold, yet he neither killed you nor confiscated the goods, only let you bring this letter back?"

Layton nodded with difficulty, "Yes, my lord. His... demeanor was very calm, as if he had been expecting me."

Selina gave him a glance, without reproach, he looked up at the Empire's map on the wall.

Half a year ago, on that barren buffer of the Northern Snowfield, he personally circled a name with red ink—Louis Calvin.

This name had been constantly appearing in his ears over the past few years.

A family outcast sent to the Northern Territory to pioneer, supposed to rot in the permafrost with a bunch of unlucky nobles, yet he fought several battles in just a few years.

Contributed in the Snow Swearer eradication battle, dragged half the Northern Territory from the Abyss during the insect disaster and the Burial match.

Married into the Edmund Family, and after Duke Edmund's death, smoothly took over the other's military power and territory.

The intelligence officer had only one comment on this - the Northern Territory now has only one voice, and that is Louis Calvin.

Selina unfolded the letter again, reading it carefully.

The letter held no threats or unnecessary words, only calmly laying out a complete collaboration framework.

The Red Tide could provide a long-term stable supply of cold iron, demon marrow, and other rare Northern minerals, in exchange for salt crystals, cold ores, gold coins, and alchemy potion ingredients from the Bi Chao Guild.

Included were terms for winter storage and transport subsidies, grading and pricing of goods, breach and extension terms, each numbered, each estimated profit calculated to a point even he couldn't fault.

Selina roughly calculated, indeed a clean and good business deal.

But he wasn't blinded by the figures, only turned slightly to ask, "Repeat the current status of the Northern Territory."

Layton immediately collected his panic, lowered his voice, and quickly reported, "In the Red Tide jurisdiction, grain prices have remained unchanged for three seasons, rising orderly; the Red Tide system has expanded to surrounding territories, with over half of the Northern Lords joining.

The workshops operate day and night, goods flow continuously on the routes from Dawn Port to the inland. While the rest of the Empire is in chaos, only there are they stacking up goods."

These were basic details about the Red Tide, nothing confidential, conclusions any ordinary merchant in the Red Tide could draw.

Selina listened quietly, nodded, no longer questioning Layton, having made up her mind.

"He understands governance and the human heart. He can transform a wasteland into territory, and he knows when to offer a step down, turning enemies into business partners."

He is both a ruler and a businessman.

Once such a person truly stands firm, even if the other party doesn't take the initiative, the Jade Federation must proactively redraw a Northern Trade Route.

Selina leaned back in her chair, thoughts gradually calming, reassembling logic, layers of judgment forming in her mind.

The Northern Territory had been in turmoil for years, not even having a port, not worth investing in. Now if Louis can truly maintain output, he becomes the Northern Territory's golden vein.

Royal family infighting, old nobility watching, new noble alliances splitting, each guild with its own intentions, some even aggressively wanting to directly intervene in the heir's struggle.

The Bi Chao Guild hasn't invested much in the Empire, nor does it want to disrupt it, only desires a stable environment to conduct business.

If there truly is a rift between the Calvin Family and Louis, then this letter is the best evidence, indicating the Red Tide needs to break away from the old system and require new support.

Northern minerals are rare and refined, some difficult even for the Federation to mine.

If stable supply can be obtained through the Red Tide, the Guild can not only suppress the Ashen Guild but also establish an independent business line.

Refusal would likely lead to future exclusion, cooperation would immediately open up another path.

Chapter 645: Another Spring

"Investment? No, it's business. We want ore, he wants prosperity." He silently recited in his heart, "This is a match made in heaven."

Sainar bent down again and wrote the order on the document: "Approve contact with Red Tide. Let Lyton maintain communication, and dispatch one trade envoy to establish a station in Red Tide under the name of the Cold Salt Caravan. Transactions are limited to minerals and alchemy materials, not involving military supplies and intelligence."

Finally, he left a short commentary in the documents: "Louis Calvin, a king of the Northern Territory worth taking seriously."

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The first rays of sunshine illuminated the dome-covered houses of Red Tide Main City, the city bell rang, signifying the start of the festival.

Inside the Smith family's house, breakfast was still on the table: freshly baked rye bread, warm milk, and a pot of stew.

Smith was holding a bowl, smiling as he watched his daughter with hands covered in honey.

"Today is the Spring Festival," Lady Mary said while wiping her daughter's mouth and laughing, "After we eat, we'll go to the square to watch the program."

Yini was so excited she could hardly hold the spoon: "Really? Can we stamp seals? Can we eat sugar cakes?"

"Of course," Smith said with a smile, ruffling her hair.

Mary looked at the morning mist rising outdoors, such a morning was like a dream.

No hunger, no fear, only steaming hot breakfast and children waiting to play.

Mary tidied the dishes, pushed open the door, the white breath dispersing in the morning light.

She wore a thick coat, held her husband Smith's hand, while their daughter Yini ran ahead, laughing and waving her school attendance card.

"Slow down, don't fall!" Mary shouted, her voice drowned by the laughter of the crowd.

On the street, the steam from the bread stalls mingled with the scent of fish, vendors shouting, "Three copper coins for roasted fish! Honey water on special today!"

The children lined up to stamp seals, and the workshop's whistle occasionally sounded far away, as if accompanying the festival.

Smith laughed, holding his wife's hand, "Remember the winters in Frost Halberd? Back then, we were reluctant to even buy bread."

Mary nodded, her gaze soft, "It's different now."

They stopped at South Market Square, bought some grilled fish, and watched the blacksmith at the craftsman stall.

Sparks flew, the sound of hammers as orderly as a piece of music.

Yini widened her eyes, watching the blacksmith take the festival commemorative medals out of the mold and hand them to her, making her jump with joy.

The afternoon square buzzed with activity, stalls lined up one after another.

Mary saw children playing ring toss, throwing copper coins, and the little puppets they won were held high.

It was a wooden stall, the rings woven from hemp rope, the boss was a short old craftsman with a gray beard, seeing Yini, he teased, "Little girl, want to try?"

Yini nodded excitedly, so Smith took out ten iron coins and handed them to the boss.

Yini held the ring high, tongue slightly out, carefully aiming at the cloth doll in the red dress.

The ring flew out, spun in the air and landed steadily.

"Got it!" The old craftsman laughed heartily, "This kid has talent, surely blessed by God!"

Smith took the doll and casually asked, "How's business lately?"

The old craftsman wiped the sweat off his forehead, "Not bad, these years everyone has money, and when the festival comes, kids are willing to spend. We should thank Lord Louis."

Smith followed, "Thank Lord Louis."

Mary also nodded and smiled.

The sun shone on the crowd, blacksmiths, fishermen, merchants, soldiers...

The people of Red Tide City were all smiling, the laughter warm and true, though snow was still falling, everything felt warm.

Mary looked at the crowd, her heart suddenly bittersweet.

She remembered when she was still a merchant's daughter in Frost Halberd City, life wasn't as stable as outsiders thought, sometimes even hungry in winter. Marrying him, a Knight Captain, improved life a bit, yet resources were always scarce.

And thinking about her initial fear hearing about moving to Red Tide, Mary gently laughed, seeing those worries were truly laughable now.

Once thinking this wasteland was only snow and death, it is now her warmest home.

Now she has her own home in Red Tide, a two-story dome house, warm with a flowing heat pipe beneath the ground all night.

The home has a granary, a fireplace, and a wooden box stored with Gold Coins.

She understood that prosperity isn't piles of gold and silver, but tomorrow's meals without worry.

Mary usually worked part-time as a deacon in the orphanage, managing ledgers and distributing rations.

Because she was literate, and knew arithmetic, she was called Miss Mary, with a monthly salary of two Silver Coins.

Her husband Smith was still stationed on the outer defensive line but managed to return to the city for two months each year, those months were her most peaceful times.

And her daughter Yini, now six years old, was attending school in Red Tide.

She wasn't good at writing yet, arithmetic only to ten, but every day she excitedly read the wall notices to Mary.

Mary whispered to Smith, "I never imagined we could have such a life."

Smith grinned, "It's all thanks to Lord Louis."

Mary nodded but did not respond, just looked at her daughter's excited face, thinking this was the true spring.

The afternoon festival activities had just begun, their family of three played while eating.

Children's laughter came from the puppet theater at the street corner, young craftsmen dressed as monsters ran around the parade.

Street-side had a small adventurer's challenge, children must cross suspension bridges, crawl through barrels, finally ring the copper bell to get candy.

Yini rushed ahead, and ended up falling off the suspension bridge, making Mary laugh till tears came out.

They still watched performers blowing fire and painting lanterns at the temporary stalls...

The sky was getting darker, the bell rang, Mary took her daughter's hand and said to Smith, "Let's go, it's time for the square."

Along the way, the crowd grew denser, the air full of laughter and the scent of wine.

"I heard Lord Louis is going to speak tonight," someone nearby said excitedly.

Smith was taken aback, then laughed, "It's rare to see him, last time was during last year's outing."

Yini tugged at Mary's hand, her eyes sparkling, "Mom, can I see Lord Louis later?"

"Of course you can." Mary laughed, squatting down to tighten her daughter's scarf, "But be good, don't run around."

They followed the crowd into the center of the square, the fire pillars yet to be lit, the surrounding flags snapping in the wind.

The crowd was dense, almost shoulder to shoulder, with children held in adults' arms to avoid being separated.

"Haven't seen so many people gather like this in years," Smith sighed, looking at the flags around.

Mary was pushed back step by step by the crowd, couldn't help but smile and nod, she felt some anticipation in her heart.

The Lord, maybe he would say something.

At this time, a familiar voice sounded beside, "Lady Mary?"

She turned back to see Pete, the resource officer who often came to the orphanage delivering grain and coal, a young officer still carrying a bag of snacks, with his usual smile.

"Mr. Pete! What a coincidence." Mary was a bit surprised.

"Yeah, I'm here to help maintain order," he joked with a smile.

Smith also nodded with a smile, "Thank you for your hard work tonight."

Pete waved his hand, "It's what we should do."

As the words fell, the fire pillars were lit in the sound of trumpets, flames rising, illuminating the whole Sun Square.

The crowd's noise instantly turned into a roar, "Lord Louis!"

The lights on the high platform lit up, cutting through the snowy fog, that figure stepped forward from the flames.

He didn't wear golden armor, nor were there attendants, just wearing a Red Tide cloak.

The young lord's expression was calm, he surveyed the crowd, his eyes gentle, when he raised his hand, the noisy square quieted down.

Children looked up, adults held their breath, soldiers put down their wine cups, even the wind seemed to lighten a bit.

Mary looked at Louis on stage, her heart inexplicably warming.

At this moment, all the lights seemed to converge on this young lord.

Mary suddenly understood why people always said, "The lord of Red Tide is like the Sun."

Chapter 646: Becoming the Sun of the Northern Territory

Nightfall has fully descended, and the giant bonfire at the center of Fierce Tide Square has been lit.

Flames lick the sky, illuminating the banner of Red Tide and casting a glow upon the snow.

Figures densely packed in the square form several layers of circles: craftsmen, knights, soldiers, merchants, civilians, apprentices...

Mary's family stands among the crowd, Yini rides on her father's shoulders, holding a small Red Tide flag.

The light of the flames illuminates every face, as if the whole city is ablaze.

Louis, clad in a Red Tide cloak, ascends the steps, followed by Bradley, Lambert, and several knight representatives.

He wears no medals, bears no ceremonial guard, only a simple sword resting by his side.

When he appears, the cheers in the square nearly overturn the snowy night.

"Long live Red Tide!"

"Long live Lord Louis!"

"Red Tide will never extinguish!"

Voices rise and fall, overlapping into a deafening tide.

The young knights raise their swords in salute, children wave small flags, and the elderly wipe away tears.

The entire city is boiling, the cries rolling like waves from the heart of the crowd, lingering for a long time.

They are so excited because this lord not only kept them alive, but also gave them their first dignified life.

A few years ago, many among them were starving in the snow, serving as servants in the old nobility's estates, or fleeing amidst war.

Now they have warm houses, ample food, jobs with pay, and schools where their children can learn literacy.

To them, all this should have belonged only to the nobility, yet Louis allowed ordinary people to possess it too.

It's for this reason that in their hearts, he is not just a lord, but like a sun illuminating the long night.

Moreover, Louis had not appeared in public for a long time, an entire year during which many only saw his name in rumors and notices. Now, seeing him stand in the firelight felt like beholding a savior.

Louis raised his hand, gradually quieting the noise.

Despite having experienced countless such scenes, seeing the crowd's enthusiastic cheers and the respect shining in countless eyes, his chest still tightened slightly.

He gently breathed in, calming his emotions, took a step forward, and used magic to spread his voice through the night:

"Another spring has arrived, and in the past year, we have had no wars, no famines, no exiles. This is a great thing in the Northern Territory."

Laughter erupted from the crowd, and some eyes turned red.

Louis paused briefly, his tone resolute and powerful: "Your hard work has brought peace. This is the glory of Red Tide, belonging to me, and to each one of you.

It belongs to those who sweat in the workshop, to those who unload at the port, to those who never rest before the furnace..."

Applause and cheers rang out once more, surging like waves over the square.

Soldiers raised their swords in respect, craftsmen waved their hats, children's laughter interspersed with shouts, merging into a warm frenzy.

Louis watched all this, a momentary soft light flashed in his eyes, he nodded slightly, raised his hand in gesture, and the applause and cheers were gradually subdued by his calm presence.

At that moment, the square's cacophony seemed to be smoothed by some invisible force, people's attention once again converged on the lord.

His voice slowly deepened, yet clearer: "I know, many of you have lived well this year, with bread, with warm houses.

But in other places in the Northern Territory, our brothers and sisters still search for firewood in the cold wind, still boil weeds in icy water.

They don't know that in the Northern Territory, there is a city called Red Tide, where children can eat hot porridge every day."

The crowd quieted, faces under the firelight slightly lowered, elderly women tightly held their children, afraid they might endure past hardships again.

The air was filled with a heavy mood, as if everyone's past had been reopened.

Pete felt his chest tighten, recalling that winter when his mother froze to death in the cold night, that impotent memory still stung painfully.

Louis looked over the crowd, his tone becoming firm once again: "The meaning of Red Tide is not for us to enjoy alone, but to let the entire Northern Territory regain happiness. Therefore, I need your strength.

In two days, the administrative square will announce a new spring recruitment order. We will dispatch new construction teams, new physicians, craftsmen, apprentices, guards to rebuild villages and towns buried by snow across the Northern Territory. Whoever wishes to go, register."

He raised his hand, pointing toward the distant dark horizon: "Over there, people are waiting for us to bring them sunshine. If Red Tide has a savior, then the savior is every person willing to act.

Go forth! You become the sun of the Northern Territory, to illuminate those still in darkness!"

He gently lowered his hand, his tone returned to calm: "The sunlight of Red Tide shouldn't warm ourselves alone."

The crowd erupted once more into enthusiastic applause and cheers, many deeply moved by his words.

Mary looked down at Yini, thinking the child is still too young, or she herself would do something.

And Pete stood not far away, fists clenched, eyes shining with determined light.

Applause and cheers lingered, people's faces carrying tears but full of smiles.

Firelight flickered, illuminating their faces, lighting up the entire square.

The flame representing hope swayed in the wind, reflecting every person's figure.

The Spring Festival night reached its most feverish peak at this moment.

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On the first morning after the Spring Festival ended, Red Tide City was gently wrapped in the spring snow and the after warmth of the hearth.

Chapter 647: Becoming the Sun of the Northern Territory (Part 2)

The streets still bore last night's streamers and lanterns. Young lads swept the wood shavings in the square, and vendors had already set up their stoves, the scent of bread and hot soup wafting through the air.

The bell tower chimed seven, awakening the entire city.

White mist rose from the chimneys of the workshops, the sounds of hammering, steam whistles, and street hawkers intermingled. Merchants pushed carts through the alleyways, the clinking of copper coins crisp and clear.

Outside the south gate, the agricultural official patrolled along the geothermal channel, melting snow flowing smoothly along it.

New Spring Plowing Mobilization Orders were plastered everywhere, farmers lined up to receive seeds and iron tools, with children helping to carry them, their laughter clear and bright.

This marked that Red Tide had welcomed spring once more, with all things revived, and the city was coming to life again.

Louis stood at the window of the top floor of the government building, overlooking the awakening city.

Though the snow hadn't completely thawed, Red Tide had already started functioning again. The furnaces, farm channels, ports, and trade companies all operated under his gaze.

Bradley pushed open the door, holding a thick stack of documents and letters in his arms, his face carrying the calm expression of a man long accustomed to busyness.

"Spring plowing progress report, my lord." He placed the documents on the desk.

"The farm channels in the southern district and western suburbs are cleared by eighty percent, and two-thirds of the seeds have been distributed. The Agricultural Bureau has also delivered the supply list. Other territories without geothermal heat have also started their preparations."

Louis nodded, opening the documents and scribbled a few notes casually: "Having done this for so many years, just follow the procedure."

Bradley then pulled out a letter bearing the Green Tide Guild's seal and handed it over: "This one is a reply from the Green Tide Guild."

He knew Louis was concerned not just about the letter itself but about the attitude behind it.

The responses of these guilds would determine the future direction of Red Tide on international trade routes and the alchemy trade.

Louis took the envelope, his fingers gently stroking the wave-embossed wax seal.

The contents of the letter were sparse, simply covering the following points:

They confirmed receipt of the mineral samples sent by Red Tide and expressed recognition of the quality of the resources from the Northern Territory, willing to trade food, alchemical materials, alchemy products, and small mechanical equipment in exchange.

All transactions are to be confidential, conducted solely under the name of the Cold Salt Caravan. No credit settlements for now, only direct bartering of goods.

If the cooperation proves stable, they will send technical advisors and may set up a small alchemy processing point.

Layton Fromm remains the contact person, and if all goes well in three months, the guild plans to establish a meeting point in Red Tide City to prepare for a deeper cooperation proposal.

The letter ended as always courteously: "The Green Tide Guild shall not interfere in the politics of the Empire or the Northern Territory, nor engage in warfare. We only pursue order and profit."

Louis closed the letter, his gaze flickered slightly, and he roughly surmised the intent behind the letter. It was not a refusal but a cautious willingness to collaborate.

The Green Tide Guild was testing Red Tide's stability. They wanted profit but were unwilling to gamble recklessly, recognizing Red Tide's potential while maintaining a distance, like extending a hand to warm by the fire on a cold day, desiring warmth yet fearing the sparks might burn.

Louis chuckled softly: "Cautious merchants."

Bradley asked, "Shall we reply, my lord?"

"Of course," Louis folded the letter, nodded, and then inquired: "How many guilds are currently preparing to work with us?"

Bradley responded: "Red Glow Guild and Green Tide Guild have confirmed cooperation, Starfall Guild shows strong willingness, and the other guilds have yet to respond. Besides, Count Harvey has agreed to pilot trade, with a single route trial run."

Louis smiled faintly: "Without any advance arrangement, just a temporary invitation, it's already quite a good result. It seems I, the new Lord of the North, still have some face."

Bradley smiled and took out a notebook: "So regarding these matters, how should we proceed?"

Louis leaned back in his chair, speaking calmly: "First, establish a concealed department responsible for guild affairs. Find reliable people, those who understand accounting and discretion.

The principle must be clear: fair division of profits, both parties keep a set of accounts, no involvement in human trafficking, and all contracts follow Red Tide's laws, with arbitration rights belonging to Red Tide."

He tapped the table lightly: "Also, during negotiations, we must pay attention to what we lack the most: food, potions, alchemical materials, especially those alchemical devices that can expand our workshops. Even one advanced piece of equipment can equate to half a workshop."

Bradley nodded, frowning slightly: "We must be discreet, as the Federation is an enemy state. If word gets out, it would be difficult to manage with not only the Calvin Clan but also in the Imperial Capital. Though everyone is doing it, it can't be blatant."

"I know." Louis's gaze drifted outside the window, his tone somber, "And Red Tide still needs to rely on Calvin's channels for the time being. During this transitional period, we can't sever ties, but we should gradually disengage."

Bradley leafed through his notebook: "What about the port? Dawn Port has recently been quite full."

Louis answered: "Continue expanding Dawn Port, reinforce the main port's loading and unloading lines.

Construct two or three more small ports, closer to resource areas, to alleviate the pressure of loading, unloading, and transportation. They can also serve as transfer stations for federation trade caravans."

Bradley contemplated and added: "Perhaps we could let the Trade Bureau and the Port Affairs Hall jointly manage it, with layered responsibilities. Externally, we can claim it's just an expansion of transport lines."

"Very well." Louis nodded, a faint smile at his lips: "Handle the specific arrangements, keep it steady, and avoid attracting attention."

Then he opened another document, casually asking: "How's the registration for the Red Tide support team going?"

Bradley pondered briefly and replied: "The announcement was posted this morning, my lord. However, it's still uncertain how many people will sign up."

.....

At dawn, Pete awoke.

He deliberately looked in a copper mirror, smoothing his hair, and changed into the autumn-issued uniform.

It was the standard clothing Red Tide handed out every winter to grassroots officials, but he hadn't worn it until today.

Being frugal had long become habitual, with a cautious thought always lingering in his mind.

After all, everything Red Tide provided them was so good, too good, making him fear losing it.

The Civil Affairs Bureau's small badge on his chest was glaringly bright.

Pete looked at himself in the mirror, smiled, feeling like a real official today.

Today, he left two hours early, hoping to get to the square to register without having to squeeze through crowds.

Lord Louis's speech from last night still echoed in his ears, the kind of blood-boiling feeling kept him up all night.

"The sun of Red Tide should not just warm itself," particularly this phrase burned like fire within him.

But when he stepped onto the street, he was stunned; the streets were packed, footsteps creating a path through the snow.

People streamed in from all directions, the buzz of conversations rising and falling: "I heard this time it's to aid the other territories of the North, ordered by Lord Louis himself."

"Going to rebuild those villages buried in the snow."

"Then I'll go too! If I can lend a hand, it'd mean I've lived a worthwhile life!"

Pete felt his heart surge with passion. In the line, he met some acquaintances, clerks also working in the Civil Affairs Bureau, who joked with each other:

"This time we can truly do something for the lord with real action."

"Indeed, it's not just about bookkeeping, people need to know we in the Civil Affairs Bureau have passion too."

They laughed as they walked forward.

Unknowingly, Red Tide's administrative square loomed ahead.

The square had been cleaned and leveled, the snow glistening bright white under the morning light.

Soldiers stood neatly on either side, the Red Tide Emblem on their chests, eyes fixed straight ahead.

Red flags fluttered in the wind, bearing the familiar Sun emblem.

Notice boards every few dozens of steps, white papers fluttered in the breeze, densely filled with enrollment regulations.

Pete looked up at the line of text, feeling a sudden surge of warmth in his heart.

Today he finally could do something he truly desired.

Chapter 648: Seven Days of Training

Pete finally squeezed through the crowd, getting bumped several times on the shoulder, exhaled a white breath, and finally stood in front of the notice column.

On the column was posted the recruitment document for the Spring Aid Team, various positions listed clearly: construction team, craftsman, physician, apprentice, guard. Conditions, term, family allowances were all written plainly.

The command in the bottom row was simple and direct: go light up those still in darkness.

Pete stared at that sentence, his heart slightly tight, feeling like "Alright, it's my turn to do something now."

A registration booth was set up in the center of the square, with officials from the Department of Civil Affairs busy maintaining order.

The wooden sign indicated the queue classification, and Pete lined up in the logistics team.

Some around were shouting to cut in line, others complained about the crowding, until a scribe stepped out to calm the scene, restoring order.

When it was Pete's turn, he steadied his breath, and stood in front of the desk.

A scribe in his thirties looked up at him, speaking calmly: "Name, department, resume."

"Pete Hollan, Material Bureau, third-class warehouse officer." He answered simply.

The scribe flipped through the records, then looked at him: "Third District winter dispatch... You have experience, you understand this task isn't just about moving things."

Pete nodded: "I've heard some things, but not in detail."

"What we're exporting isn't labor, it's methods of doing things." The scribe explained directly, "The people going need to know bookkeeping, ration distribution, channel arrangement, maintain order, and teach others to do the same. Simply put, it's about being able to independently lead a small grassroots position."

Pete digested for a few seconds: "So after registering now, am I officially selected?"

"Not that fast yet." The scribe shook his head, "There will be selection and training later. You have to pass written and oral exams before being integrated into the team." *freewebnovel.com*

His tone was ordinary, yet carried a bit of reminder: "Do well, and you might get promoted upon return."

Pete nodded, signed his name, the handwriting trembling a bit but not out of control.

The scribe confirmed then put away the form page: "You've become a candidate. Wait for notice, and report back."

Pete held the booklet as he came off the platform, looking back at the flag bearing the Red Tide Emblem, the light shining piercingly.

Whether for the desire to stand out or to let more people live like the Red Tide, Pete was utterly determined; he must pass this time.

.....

Pete was notified as one of the first batch of candidates selected.

As soon as the news came out, his colleagues stirred up a fuss, patting him on the shoulder, whistling, saying things like "Pete's going to soar" and "Treat us when you return."

Pete's ears burned, but he couldn't help but smile, feeling ignited, eager to rush out of Red Tide right then.

When the gathering time arrived, he went early to the administrative center.

The assembly place was on the north side of the administrative center square in the old training hall, filled with hundreds of candidates.

The badge numbers on their chests divided them into craftsmen, physicians, administration, construction, logistics categories.

Each sat upright, expressions serious, but that seriousness wasn't of mission sense, more like Lord naming them, they must do their best.

On the high platform, Bradley and representatives from various departments were already in place.

Bradley's gaze swept across the hall, instantly quieting the room: "You will become the Red Tide outside of the Red Tide, the seeds of order."

Next, everyone stood to swear an oath.

The pledge they had already seen on the booklet, countless people had memorized it by heart: "Witnessed by the furnace fire, heart set on order, where the Red Tide resides, chaos shall not arise."

After shouting, Pete felt lighter, as if formally accepted into a larger collective.

Just as the echo of the oath was still spreading in the air, the sound of boots came from the entrance.

Louis entered, draped in that scarlet cloak, his expression as calm as ever.

The firelight shone on his profile, devoid of arrogance yet compelling people to straighten their backs.

Pete heard someone beside him sucked in a breath, and someone else whispered, "Lord..."

Such admiration was nearly written on everyone's face.

Louis walked up to the podium, and began: "Time is pressing, I'll say a few words briefly."

As soon as he finished speaking, the entire room fell silent.

Louis continued: "You're going out to save people, not to build walls for the nobility. The targets are those children freezing purple, the subjects without food."

You may encounter aristocratic obstruction. They'll mock, yell, tell you not to care about these peasants, but don't pay attention. Whoever maliciously hinders you, record them, report back, and Red Tide will handle it..."

Louis was still speaking, but the murmuring exclamations below could hardly be contained.

Pete was no different; growing up in the Empire, it was his first time hearing an aristocrat say such things.

Don't pay attention to the nobility, serve the commoners.

But Louis's tone was as calm as talking about the weather, without provocations yet irrefutable.

Pete felt his heart beat tightly, unsure if it was fear or excitement.

Actually, with every sentence Louis spoke, he nodded, not because he understood completely, but because the Lord's way of speaking instinctively made him feel following was right.

Moreover, he understood one thing—that the Lord genuinely stood by their side.

And that the Lord hated those bullying nobles, which was enough.

Finally, Louis's tone softened: "If you handle this well, your achievements will be established consequently, future promotions, transfers, and even independently hosting local affairs, all will depend on your performance this time.

Hope you're not just preaching but achieving real results so Red Tide will remember your names."

Chapter 649: Seven-Day Training (Part 2)

Applause surged like a tide.

In the crowd, Pete's heart was suddenly jolted by something, not out of fear, but ignited.

Perhaps one day, he may truly accomplish what the Lord said.

He stared at Louis on stage, his chest seemed filled with fire, the feeling almost made his scalp tingle.

"I can do it... I can do it too..." Pete kept repeating in his mind, not even knowing why he was suddenly so determined.

Distributing food, bookkeeping, counting inventory, he usually just thought of it as a stable job.

But now, for the first time, he felt that what he did could change someone's life.

When Louis said, "Your merits will be established along with it," he couldn't help but picture:

The territory's people recognizing him, telling their children, "That uncle is the one who first fed us."

Completing tasks abroad, upon his return, all his colleagues in Red Tide stand at the administrative entrance, patting his shoulder, saying, "Pete's back, this kid did well."

He even imagined a bit further...

Maybe in a few years, he could be like those high-ranking officials of Red Tide, carrying his own seal, sitting behind a desk approving construction forms and granary quotas.

Thinking of this, his ears turned red, quickly lowering his head to avoid letting those around him see his expression.

But the anticipation... couldn't be suppressed no matter what.

Pete knew, some people do it for promotion, some for merit, some to earn a dignified future for their families.

And him? He wanted it all.

He aimed to return here, back to where Lord Louis stood, proving he's more than just a storage officer.

Proving he's worthy of this city, worthy of the Red Tide emblem.

Applause continued to echo in the hall, Pete raised his head, looking towards the high platform.

"For the Lord... I must achieve results, return, and make Red Tide remember my name."

.....

After Louis left the training hall, the residual heat of the furnace still clung to the wall, like the authority he left behind.

The heat floated in the empty training hall, people however had been led to the next room to continue classes without the slightest pause.

The seven-day course was as tight as if bound by an iron ring, from rescuing, establishing systems, to stabilizing public sentiment, restructuring land — every step was seamlessly aligned.

Though the instructors rotated, the real lecturer was never present, yet all syllabi and processes carried Louis's influence.

The first to third days covered aid to people's livelihood, rescuing and stabilizing them.

They were required to learn from the basics, but not rough tasks, instead doing it Red Tide's way:

"Regulations for Temporary Winter Granary Construction" taught them how to find the safest terrain in wet snow, how to damp proof under the ice layer.

"Frostbite and Hypothermia Treatment Manual" broke down rescue actions into nearly foolproof steps.

"Residence and Population Registration Template" required them upon arrival to establish a complete list within one hour.

"Emergency Stove Point Map" enabled them to set up the most basic heating points even in villages and towns without houses.

The stove fires remained lit all day, flickering shadows casting on every face, even Pete's back ached from sitting upright.

He sat on the wooden stool, palms slightly sweaty, always feeling the instructor might call his name at any moment.

The three days' courses weren't unfamiliar.

How to set up granaries, rescue from frostbite, write registration forms, he had done all these over the years.

But here, all experiences were rendered into clear systems one by one.

The instructor's voice clanged against the desk like iron: "The first goal of the Red Tide rescue team is to ensure no deaths in a village during the coldest three days."

Pete nodded, he understood the weight of this sentence.

He remembered his days hauling grain sacks on the coldest winter nights, remembered the helplessness seeing the refugees coming for aid at Red Tide turning purple from frostbite, and recalled the days before Red Tide gasping for survival.

The fourth and fifth days covered system output, essentially transplanting Red Tide.

The training hall seemed suddenly capped with a layer of heavy snow, even the air became stagnant.

The instructor spoke slowly, but every word was solid, covering grain rights reform, household registration law, open accounting, work time system, storage room and geothermal stove minimum standards...

"Aid isn't just delivering grain," the instructor said, "it's enabling that village to account, farm, and allocate independently next year."

Thus they were taught how to teach others literacy, how to distribute grain according to spreadsheets, how to lead locals to dig the first drainage trough, set up the first storage room.

Those actions seemed light on paper but determined whether a village could stand by next year.

Pete gazed at the blueprints, suddenly comprehending that they were not providing temporary aid and then leaving, but were ensuring that land would never go hungry again. He realized for the first time: "We are replicating Red Tide itself."

The sixth day discussed local politics, restructuring from the root.

The whole day avoided tools, avoided engineering, entirely focused on power. The instructor wrote a striking line of black text: "The aid target is the common people, not the nobility."

Most importantly, the nobility were prohibited from interfering with grain distribution, accounting checks, commanding, and meddling with labor division, customs must be properly performed, but no power can be delegated.

Pete and the others were taught how to maintain appearances, how to let nobility stand at the forefront of ceremonies but cannot command, how to let them attend meetings but not intervene, how to reward with symbolic cooperation grain but without ceding actual power.

The instructor calmly summarized: "Give them face, but let them be hollowed out in terms of system."

Pete felt his scalp tingle listening, the arrival of the aid team was to subtly embed Red Tide's administrative framework into the old noble territories, rewriting order with systems rather than swords.

The seventh day discussed long-term strategy, paving paths for the next three years.

The entire wall transformed into a map of the Northern Territory, military and political officials using long rods to tap the villages and towns within the snow line:

Where the winter death rate was highest, where the potential supply lines were, which villages and towns once stabilized could drive surrounding four to six villages, and which nobles were most likely to be abandoned by public sentiment.

Then the instructor unveiled a new three-year plan, compared to previous courses seemed more like an overall blueprint for Red Tide:

Year one, stabilize population, secure right to survival. Ensure no one dies from cold and famine.

Establish grain distribution points and temporary household registration offices; regroup villages and towns, preventing further exodus.

All rescue actions revolve around one purpose, letting the common people survive, and knowing it's Red Tide keeping them alive.

Year two, export systems, dismantle old authority.

Promote Red Tide's household registration, quota, and accounting law. Teach the common people literacy, accounting, and labor division.

The old nobility superficially retain titles, but tax rights, grain rights, and labor rights gradually peel away from their hands.

Encourage villages and towns to rely on Red Tide officials rather than the Lord.

Year three: complete subordination, integrate into Red Tide order.

Villages and towns voluntarily submit account books and yield tables; use Red Tide's resource vouchers as primary settlement;

Red Tide station permanent clerks and inspectors, not announcing mergers, but the de facto administrative subordination becomes established.

The Northern Territory seems sewn into one whole, Red Tide becomes the sole center.

The instructor mildly summarized amidst pauses: "These three years are not three years of aid, but three years of reshaping. After three years, the Northern Territory will be accustomed to Red Tide, nobles will rely on Red Tide, villages and towns will voluntarily lean towards Red Tide.

You are not aid officials, but sowers of future order of the Northern Territory."

The training hall was silent as if even breathing was weighed down by snow.

In the closing moments of the training, the instructor shut a thick booklet, tone somewhat softened: "Although time is short, you are inherently grassroots officials trained by Red Tide. Rescuing, accounting, stabilizing situations, you have done it all.

These seven days just helped you reorganize these concepts, if any issues arise, feel free to open the Red Tide booklet, all questions are answered there."

He scanned around, "After heading out, remember that you represent the face of Red Tide. Bless your journey, may your steps brighten the Northern Territory anew."

Seven days later, Pete sat in the departing carriage.

The wheels rolled over the mud marks of melting snow, emitting a muffled sound, with a slight stickiness.

He held that booklet flared at the edges, as if still staying at the long table of the training hall.

Pete's mood was indistinct.

The anticipation of doing something genuinely keeping others alive, along with aspirations of promotion and wealth.

Confusion also existed, what would the first village be like? Would local nobles interfere?

The outer walls of Red Tide City gradually faded into the mist, the familiar red flag atop the city swaying in the wind, yet blurred to a shade of warmth, pasted against the gray-white sky.

Pete suddenly realized, from this moment onward, he would no longer work beneath the banner.

He aimed to take that color to places where others couldn't see the firelight.

Chapter 650: The Fifth Prince's Ambition

The heavy stone walls shielded the cold wind and the clamor of the outside world, leaving only the almost inaudible sound of the burning lamp oil.

Regent Prince Arlence sat leaning by the chair, draped in a snow-white animal pelt, yet his face appeared even more bloodless than the fur. The shallow bruises under his eyes resembled frost marks, slowly descending.

His chest rose and fell at times with a slow, at times with a rapid frequency.

But there were no signs of poisoning, no swelling, nor any fatal symptoms recognizable by the physicians.

If not examined carefully, one might even mistake him for a sleeping person, rather than a regent prince struggling daily with impending death.

Moreover, a new Dragon Throne Council was set to convene in two days.

This grand council concerning the Empire's future was supposed to be presided over personally by Arlence.

And now, the only reason he could barely remain conscious was due to his sheer willpower holding on; otherwise, he would have collapsed months ago.

Today, there were more renowned physicians than usual: imperial physicians, grand mages, Dragon Ancestor priests, Windstopper medical officers...

They surrounded Arlence, taking turns examining him, touching his forehead, checking his pulse, using magic power for observation, inspecting through prayer...

Ultimately, they all lowered their hands without exception, their expressions heavy.

"His Highness exhibits no abnormalities."

"It's unlikely he's poisoned."

"It seems more like... his life force is being drained, leaving no trace."

As these words fell, the bedroom was so quiet that even the flicker of the fire sounded piercing.

Under the shadows, a young guard stood rigidly.

He had only been transferred here three months ago, responsible for close attendance, which was supposed to be a negligible role, merely serving, reporting, and exchanging cups of water.

Witnessing the Regent Prince, who could stand for half an hour at morning councils, now appearing to be scattered by the wind even while seated.

Today, His Highness was unable even to lift his eyelids at times, lying stiffly on the bed, motionless.

The golden patterned small box on the table was half-open.

Within it lay the ochre leaf spirit essence fruit, still and silent, the deep red and ochre hues interwoven like roasted flesh, its skin tightened to the point of cracking, its shape resembling a shriveled heart.

This was no ordinary fruit, said to be a rarity that might emerge from the southern forests once every hundred years.

In nearly a century, only two had been found in the entire Empire; its existence was more akin to legend than to produce.

And its potency was tremendous, capable of forcibly activating spiritual power, stimulating the soul, allowing the dying to momentarily return to a state of clarity, akin to enveloping a dying flame in a layer of fiery shell.

But what it could offer was merely a momentary spiritual revival, with no ability to combat physical decline or the passage of life.

The air retained a trace of sweetness and sourness from the fruit pulp being bitten, an unpleasant taste resembling some sort of high-tier alchemy potion's scent, stinging the nostrils and serving as a reminder that its nature was entirely a temporary facade of consciousness.

Arlence consumed that small bite.

At the moment of biting, the young guard witnessed the Regent Prince's gaze being back from utter dispersion, as if a drowning man was yanked out of icy waters at the last possible second.

Arlence lifted his head, his voice weak but commanding: "...Adjust the lamps brighter."

This brief clarity was almost miraculous for the young guard.

"Yes, sir." He hurriedly stepped forward to adjust the lamp wick.

The firelight increased a little with his action, illuminating half of Arlence's face.

It was a face exceedingly weak but devoid of illness.

Pale yet clean, hollow yet free of the contortion of pain.

As if someone was silently extracting the flame from within, while the skin maintained its original form.

The young guard's heart thumped heavily.

If this wasn't an illness... then did the awakening from the fruit signify that His Highness was truly recovering?

He couldn't quite pinpoint what felt wrong, but he pieced these fragments into an answer he was willing to believe: His Highness was improving.

This was also the message he needed to send.

Given his secondary identity, he couldn't miss a single clue about the Regent Prince's life or death.

Late at night, he quietly retreated to the corridor outside the bedroom.

Snow wind poured in through the window's crevice, blowing fine dust across the stone bricks.

Only after verifying that no one was paying attention did the young guard extract a thin metal plate from his boot.

His fingertips trembled slightly from the tension, yet he endeavored to keep it straight:

「After the Grand Prince consumed the ochre leaf spirit essence fruit, his mental state noticeably improved. All renowned physicians declared him free of poison and malady. Regent Prince His Highness is no longer in peril.」

After carving the secret message using fighting energy, he took a deep breath, placed the metal plate into a signal box, and pressed the covert pattern.

Inside the mechanism, a gentle sound proceeded, a discreet gray-feathered pigeon emerged from a hidden compartment beneath the corridor, fluttering its wings.

In the next moment, it soared upwards, crossed the palace walls, and silently vanished into the heavy winds of the night.

The young guard gazed at the distant point of the flying shadow, easing half the tension in his chest.

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On the other side of the Imperial Capital, night winds swept across the high walls of the Fifth Prince Lampard's residence, the lights glimmered with faint golden glows behind thick windows.

The gray-feathered pigeon landed on a wooden post in the dark alley, the signal box lightly collided, emitting a gentle sound.

The gatekeeper recognized it as a secret pigeon, his face shifted slightly, quickly taking down the signal box and delivering it to the inner courtyard.

Before long, the secret message was presented before Lampard.

He was sitting on the long chair behind the desk, upon hearing it was a secret pigeon from the palace, he lifted his eyelids slightly: "Place it here."

The attendant handed over the metal plate.

Lampard was originally indifferent, but as he read the content, his brows gradually furrowed.

Regent Prince's recovery of spirit? No poison or illness? Awakening from fruit?

Lampard's fingers paused at the edge of the signal plate, his tone cold like it had been submerged in well water: "Prepare the horses."

The attendant was taken aback: "Your Highness, now?"