

## Winter 651

### Chapter 651: The Fifth Prince's Ambition (2)

"Now." He set down the metal piece, stood up, and swiftly donned his robe.

Lampard walked through the side yard and across the wooden bridge, entering the depths of the estate.

At the end of the stairs, there was only a wooden door sealed with an iron lock.

Lampard raised his hand, and the guard at the door immediately unlocked it.

As the wooden door was pushed open, damp cold air hit him, the basement was dark and silent, like a secret waiting to be uncovered.

Lampard stepped into the shadows and said softly, "Light the lamp."

The flame ignited, and he walked further inward alone, his expression unchanged.

The deeper he went, the colder the air became, and the passage at the end of the stairs was narrow, with walls on both sides engraved with ancient crown patterns, only here the patterns were inverted, petals pointing downward, resembling an overturned prayer.

The light shone on the ground, revealing scenes that tightened one's heart.

The entire floor was covered in densely packed "reverse crown demon patterns" of the Golden Feather Flower Church.

Each line seemed carved by a knife into the stone, unnaturally deep, with a faint golden glow between the patterns, pulsing like a living creature.

The walls were filled with inscriptions from the old era, the writings blurred by time, yet carrying certain fervent strokes, as if the inscriber was at the boundary of extreme devotion and madness.

The candle stand burned with a pale blue flame, not a normal fire color, but a symbol of some alien race's power.

The cold light pressed against the stone walls, making the entire underground space feel immersed in deep sea.

The air carried a faint metallic scent, like remnants left after blood has dispersed for too long.

At the end of the corridor, a round stone platform stood silently.

The platform body was carved from a whole piece of rock, with intertwined patterns spreading across its surface like golden cracks, faintly glowing, as if something within was breathing.

This is a place that would make ordinary people feel an unbearable headache just approaching.

Lampard's gaze was calm, never stopping.

And in the center of the stone platform, a man sat cross-legged.

He sat barefoot in a lotus position, his figure robust like a boulder carved by mountain wind.

His skin wasn't just bronze-toned, but faintly emitted a fog-like black aura, slowly escaping from the gaps of his collarbone, arms, and spine, like a bound curse breathing beneath the flesh.

A deep red ritual robe draped over his shoulders, the edges slightly curled where touched by the black aura, losing its original color as if scorched.

Most striking were the golden bone needles on his back, their gold stained and dim, thin black threads continuously seeping from their roots.

The man's eyes remained closed, his eyelashes motionless.

Yet around him, the air seemed slightly distorted, as if invisible hands were attempting to break free from within.

Lampard stopped before the stone platform, took a deep breath, and his voice respectful yet lowered further, "Divine Envoy, I have come to report the Regent King's situation."

He slightly raised his gaze, looking at the unmoving figure on the platform, speaking straightforwardly:

"The Regent King is consuming the Essence Fruit. His current condition... doesn't appear to be deteriorating as rapidly as two years ago. The Essence Fruit keeps him in a state of... barely maintaining clarity. Weakness seems to be held at bay by it."

The tone lightened towards the end, he knew well that this should not occur.

According to the initial progression of the curse, the Regent King's condition had visibly deteriorated monthly since two years ago, from standing during morning court to short sittings for discussions, until now, almost unable to leave the bedchamber.

All of this stems from the Divine Grace Curse personally bestowed by Salomon Divine Envoy: [Curse of Seamless Death].

Divine Grace is the supernatural ability unique to the Golden Feather Flower Church Authority Country, akin to the Empire's bloodline talent, though Divine Grace is granted by the bishops.

What Salomon Divine Envoy activated is: [Curse of Seamless Death]

This is a curse, invisible, tasteless, undetectable, not recognized by neutralizing spells, untouched by magic potions, prayers, and ritual techniques; it only slowly weakens the target without causing immediate death.

In the center of the court, under the protection of the knights, it can silently kill a Regent King, leaving no trace.

The only two drawbacks are its slow pace and the caster must sacrifice an equal amount of life energy.

Lampard knew this well.

At this moment, he saw the skin of Salomon Divine Envoy exposed outside the ritual clothing, even darker than a few days earlier, blood vessels faintly rising, like ink slowly flowing along the bloodstream.

This isn't a fabricated miracle, but a real cost, as the Regent King weakens, Salomon descends with him.

However, he understood that this curse was the best method he had to subdue the Regent King.

Poison?

He had tried it once two years ago, planting an extremely covert poison amidst the circulation of dinnerware and exchange of maidservants.

The result only alarmed a few guards, but the Regent King remained unharmed after layers of reagents, silver needles, and prayers, without a hint of discomfort.

The Royal Family possesses the Empire's best comprehensive detox system, from meals to maidservants, from silver needles to reagents, each stage must be flawless.

Honestly, unless the entire court could be paralyzed, poisoning was merely a joke.

Suicidal assassination?

The Second Prince's attempt proved its value; sacrificing a high tier transcendent Death Warrior only cost the Second Prince an arm, though it shook the foundation, the cost was too great, and the First Prince is not as frivolous as the Second Prince.

Death Warrior attack?

The Imperial Capital's guards and defense formations aren't just for show, losing ten squads wouldn't necessarily penetrate the royal palace center, instead it would raise everyone's vigilance.

Only this curse, without traces, untraceable, yet undoubtedly fatal.

This is one of Golden Feather Flower Church Court's aids to him.

Lampard continued, "I'm worried the curse might be disrupted by the Essence Fruit. Divine Envoy, would this affect... the outcome we pursue?"

Salomon Divine Envoy did not open his eyes, nor did his breathing change, only responded in a barely detectable whisper, "It won't; it'll only prolong the time a bit."

Lampard's brows furrowed slightly, "How long will it drag?"

"Not more than two years," Salomon Divine Envoy's voice was devoid of emotion, "the curse's knife is in his heart; it will eventually fall."

Then his lips seemed to twitch slightly, with a almost invisible trace of sarcasm, "What? Can't His Highness wait?"

Lampard did not immediately respond; he recalled his plans, the church's arrangements, the future promised by the Golden Feather Flower Country, and the imminent vacancy of the throne.

In his mind, the clues aligned again, not just a simple power grab, but his true plot brewing for years:

Lampard never sought to inherit the Empire, but to divide the Empire.

To lead the Imperial Capital into disorder, every step he pushed was precise and hidden:

Using the curse to wear down the Regent King, depriving the Imperial Capital of its authoritative core, but not letting him die immediately, allowing ample time;

Inciting conflict among the Prince factions, muddling the succession order.

Secretly funding pirates, rebel armies, continually worsening imperial security.

The military department must rupture, so after the Second Prince's assassination, military power will become leaderless, each faction doing as they please, some legion commanders have already approached him.

The economic chain must break, Duke Calvin willing to support division, if he turns towards him, half of the Empire's finances would collapse instantly.

Duke Calvin would support the division; he believes the Imperial Capital's downfall is inevitable, and his second son Eduardo is the core of the Golden Feather Flower Church Court.

Lampard has even begun contacting other provinces in the east, even the Northern Territory... after all, Louis Calvin, is also a "Calvin."

Ultimately, he aims not to establish an empire but to form the Eastern Empire.

Supported by the Golden Feather Flower Church Court, a church-state unified vassal state.

Because he never had the foundation to swallow the entire Empire, lacking military power, noble alliance, financial and tax base, nor sufficient faction support in the Imperial Capital itself.

Lampard's only stable backer is the Golden Feather Flower Church Court.

He never intended, nor could he rule the entire Empire; he desired a narrower, yet more secure throne.

Not an emperor, but the church-recognized "Lord of the East."

The more Lampard recalls, the more he feels the path beneath him solidifying step-by-step.

Thus, Lampard softly said, "Then I leave it to you, Divine Envoy."

Chapter 652: Before the Dragon Throne Council Begins

The morning light descended from above, illuminating the Second Prince Kaelin's pale face.

He sat on a stone chair, his upper body bare, the lines of his shoulders and chest muscles still sharp, yet veiled as though with a layer of ash.

The bandage on the left side had been removed, the newly stitched scar extending along the fractured shoulder line.

His Fighting Energy sputtered within, like a broken bellows, leaving only shattered echoes, unable to muster strength.

The physician knelt by his side, fingertips on his pulse, cautiously as if protecting an unstable ember.

"Your Highness," he tried to keep his voice steady, "you're recovering well... at least, much better than we initially feared."

Yet this consolation only deepened the furrow on Kaelin's brow.

For ordinary people, that would be good enough and sufficient to continue living without hindrance to labor.

But for a Knight whose life was based on swordsmanship and Fighting Energy, not recovering to his peak meant losing half of his life.

Kaelin did not respond, nor did his expression change, but his eyes were filled with coldness.

It was a while before he spoke, his voice hoarse: "...What is the situation with the First Prince now?"

The physician hesitated visibly for a moment before answering, "The Regent King took the red leaf essence fruit, his spirit is much improved. At least he'll... he can hold through tomorrow's meeting."

Kaelin nodded, the movement heavy, as if suppressing some deeper emotion.

But there was no relaxation in his eyes, only a constantly spreading shadow.

"Leave." Kaelin murmured.

The physician hurriedly bowed and left, the door closing behind him.

The silence behind the door lasted less than three breaths before Kaelin's breathing changed markedly.

First rapid, then heavy, like suppressed animal instincts stirring in his chest, ready to tear open the skin at any moment.

Suddenly Kaelin lifted his foot and kicked over the nearby chair hard.

The wooden chair rolled on the stone floor, crashing against the wall, the sound of splintering exploding in the room.

Kaelin seemed not to hear it, striking the wall with his fist even harder.

His right fist hammered into the stone wall, fragments scattering, yet he continued without stopping.

Until his left shoulder suddenly throbbed with pain, the muscles around the seam of his severed arm felt as though scraped by a blade, the agony climbing up his neck through his nerves.

Kaelin gritted his teeth, a low sound emerging from his throat, like the suppressed roar of a wounded beast.

What he feared most was this, being seen as powerless and unable to control himself.

But with only himself in the room, his anger had nowhere to hide.

Kaelin's gaze turned to the black wooden box on the table.

Inside, only a little dried, fragmented red-brown residue remained, something he used to maintain the image of a peak Prince.

Originally he had two spirit fruits: one given to the Regent King.

Not out of mercy, but to ensure the Regent King could hold through the Dragon Throne meeting, endure the coming years, blocking the ambitions of the Rheine faction civil servants.

The other he kept for himself, relying on it to barely maintain the guise of a half-step Peak Knight in front of outsiders.

But in truth, now he... could barely stabilize at the initial Extraordinary stage.

That disparity made his chest feel tight, as if his dignity were forcibly torn apart.

"Damn it..." he bit out the words softly. Then another: "Damn it..."

It was supposed to be a leisurely hunting trip, a rare relaxation, without the War Department's accompaniment, devoid of any political connotation.

Kaelin had even relaxed for once, which led to his oversight.

The Royal Family's private riding team had gathered at the forest's edge, the warhorses snorting white breath, iron hooves firmly set.

The route was kept to the utmost secrecy, known only to a select few within the Royal Family, not even his closest aides knew where he was at that moment.

Kaelin rode at the forefront, his Fighting Energy at half-step peak, his inner strength surging vigorously enough to tear the air apart.

He believed it was only a matter of time before he became a Peak Knight, never thinking he would be hunted one day, especially not on an unannounced outing.

The team delved into the dense forest along the predetermined path.

Not oppression, not killing intent, merely a barely detectable anomaly.

If it had been a regular day, he would have been vigilant immediately, but that day he relaxed for just a second... and in that moment, he could not evade it in time.

A faint glint of metal slipped out from the grass.

It was the glint of an assassin moving fast, his strength lesser, yet carrying a life-risking resolve upon his blade.

Kaelin perceived the danger the instant he noticed it, already beginning to tilt his head, yet was still a half-breath too late.

The blade slashed downward from the shoulder.

Despite such a large movement, it was entirely silent like some Bloodline Talent, its angle precise, not seeking to penetrate defenses, but aiming to kill.

"Swish!"

The metallic sound of cutting through bone exploded in his ears, his left arm flew away along with the armor, blood splattering onto his steed's mane.

The pain whitened his vision, throwing him heavily from horseback, his spine crashing onto a tree root.

His Fighting Energy meridians were disrupted, the shock energy rebounded, bringing him close to suffocation.

The assassin advanced again, his speed appeared slow in Kaelin's eyes, yet his intentions were as ruthless as severing an entire lifeline, like certain Bloodline Talent.

He didn't come to battle, but to end the target.

Kaelin raised his sword to block, but his right arm trembled from pain, unable to steady his grip; another fraction of a second, he would die by that blade.

The assassin's eyes bore no hatred, no anger, only the cold execution of orders.

Just as the second blade was about to fall, the Royal Family's guards finally reacted.

"Protect His Highness!!"

Three Extraordinary Knights charged, one of them collided with the assassin, pinning him against the tree trunk.

The moment the assassin was captured, a strange choking sound emerged from his throat, like some previously prepared initiation.

Chapter 653: Before the Dragon Throne Council Begins (2)

In the next moment! The entire person collapsed as if life had been drained away, silently dying.

No struggle, no last words, not even a pained expression.

Died cleanly like a shadow erased of traces.

Kaelin leaned against the tree, blood continuously dripping, his hands trembling too much to hold the sword, yet his mind was exceptionally clear.

An assassin weaker than him could actually lie in wait on a path he had to pass, could seriously wound him in one strike, could commit suicide instantly after capture.

This is no coincidence.

There's only one explanation: someone had informed the assassin of his location beforehand.

At that moment, fear transformed into suspicion for the first time.

In the days following the assassination, the entire Imperial Capital seemed normal, yet to Kaelin, every corner felt strangely cold.

It's not that no one investigated.

On the contrary, his people, the military department, the Department of Inspection, and even spies secretly sent by several noble families, all investigated for half a month.

The woods were searched thoroughly, traces of fighting energy compared, every breath the assassin took before dying was recorded.

But nothing could be found.

No origin, no identity, no organizational mark.

It's as if the assassin was born for that strike and died for that strike.

But to Kaelin, finding nothing was itself the biggest flaw.

Because there aren't many people capable of manipulating assassins of this level, and even fewer who could send such an assassin to kill him.

The Department of Inspection sent people, yet found no effective clues.

Within the military department, whispers stirred, and what was said most was:

"His Highness was wounded on the fighting energy channel, afraid he won't return to his peak."

"The Empire needs a capable successor."

"Kaelin is no longer suitable to inherit."

Each sentence was like nails, nailed to his chest.

Even more unsettling to Kaelin was the Fourth Prince Rheine's camp's reaction—shock, sorrow, concern, proactively avoiding suspicion—perfectly done.

Too perfect, too much like it's covering something up.

Kaelin sat in the room, looking at his bandaged broken shoulder, feeling stabbing pain climbing up the nerve pathway to the nape.

All the fragments in his mind gradually formed a line: travel itinerary precisely leaked, assassin weak yet trained to the precision of killing a High-tier Extraordinary Knight in one strike.

Such an assassin isn't easily found, investigated for a long time yet still no leads, and military department rumors targeted at him, Fourth Prince's camp behaving too correctly.

No evidence, but he doesn't need evidence.

Kaelin's heart already reached a conclusion: it was the Fourth Prince Rheine.

Suspicion tightened in his chest like a hand gripping his windpipe.

Never had he been so certain, if he doesn't control the military department, if he doesn't hold power, if he doesn't take the initiative in the Dragon Throne meeting.

The Empire will surely fall into the hands of the Fourth Prince and the Civil Servant faction.

And that would be the Empire's end.

Suspicion like a cold needle pierced in the chest, but what truly made Kaelin realize he had been pushed to the edge of the abyss wasn't suspicion itself, but the cracks starting to appear in the military department.

Kaelin never imagined those legion commanders who survived numerous battles alongside him would abandon him.

In a siege battle at the Empire's southwest border, torrential rain flooded mud into armor, he led the knights to bite down on the Federation Mercenaries' breakthrough spot.

The battle line almost broke several times; he personally carried the injured flag bearer to the frontline, planted the flag back into the mud to stabilize the position.

When the southern alliance of small countries provoked the border, he led a cavalry unit in a rapid march through the mud for a night raid on the enemy camp, causing that supposedly impregnable legion to suffer complete defeat.

That night, the officers following him saw with their own eyes how he continued commanding with a broken sword in a puddle.

The year the Eastern border had friction with the Golden Feather Flower Religious Authority Country, the Holy Flame Army attempted to infiltrate during domestic turmoil.

He and these officers fought tirelessly for five days on the banks of the Holy River, pressing back the opponent's vanguard to beyond the river.

These officers survived those battles. They saw him at his strongest, saw how he used himself as the final shield.

That's why they stood behind Kaelin, nearly seventy percent of the Imperial Legion stood behind him.

But now standing behind him... less than thirty percent of legion commanders remain, and most are older legion commanders.

The rest, those new leaders and noble armed forces discussed privately, yet he understood clearly:

"The Empire cannot be dragged down by princely struggles anymore."

"His Highness's injuries... afraid he cannot lead the army again."

Their tone was tactful, yet they were all pushing him in one direction, that is, to leave the successor's position.

The military department is no longer unified.

It became loose, fragmented, chaotic before his eyes, like a giant beast deprived of reins, with only him desperately holding it together.

He stared at his broken left shoulder, chest as if forcibly stuffed with ice.

Pain, humiliation, anger... all emotions twined into a rope, choking him to the point of breathlessness.

But none of this exceeds the fear deeply hidden within him.

If I fall, the Empire will crumble.

But long ago, Kaelin never thought like this, he wasn't meant to reach this point.

Kaelin wasn't initially keen on power, nor did he view succession as a mission.

He always believed the father Emperor was steady as a rock, the Empire had its own order, he only needed to be a prince who could fight, could guard, could bear a side for the Empire on the battlefield.

The only one he truly respected, even admired, who deserved to inherit the throne was one person.

And that was the Third Prince.

## Chapter 654: Before the Dragon Throne Council Begins (3)

The young man who rose to fame, his brother with the strength of a Peak Knight, commanded the battlefield with ease; both inside and outside the Imperial Capital called him "the one most like the Emperor."

He stabilized the army's spirit, understood the people's sentiments, and dared to take responsibility—he was recognized by both nobility and commoners as the true successor.

Kaelin never envied him.

As long as that genius was alive, he was willing to always be the one on the front line, bleeding for the Empire.

Until the Third Prince was assassinated in an extremely humiliating manner.

It was the first time in his life that he realized that power was not so simple.

What followed was the disappearance of his father, and the Empire's authority scattered everywhere.

Kaelin suddenly discovered that the responsibility he thought would never fall upon him was forcibly thrust onto his shoulders.

Responsibility turned into obsession, obsession turned into an irreversible fixation.

The more Kaelin thought, the more he was convinced: the Crown Prince was too weak to live long, the Fourth Prince was only cunning and deceitful with no military spirit, and the others simply weren't qualified.

Only he could stabilize the front lines, lock in the nobility, and make the military department unified again.

If he didn't take control, the Empire would surely perish.

This thought burned in his chest like fire, keeping him awake in the pain and driving him to delve deeper.

Kaelin took a deep breath, but it felt like breathing ice shards, piercing his chest tight.

He knew very well what to do next, no need to make lists, no need for repeated weighing.

His heart had long led him to the end of the road, leaving only one direction:

At tomorrow's Dragon Throne meeting, he must suppress Rhine.

Must make the military department believe he's still the "Prince who can fight."

Even if he has to rely on the Spirit Fruit to hold on, as long as he can sustain at the critical moment, it's enough.

Must regain absolute command of the military department, or else the military's heart might be divided by other successors at any time.

The Regent King must hold for a few years; if he falls, the Fourth Prince could openly take over everything in a power vacuum.

Must find the people behind the assassin, even if the answer is already lurking in his heart.

Most importantly, must make everyone believe, only I can save the Empire!

This is not ambition, but a decision forced by fear.

And this decision is firmer than any ambition.

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As the light from the pattern-carved window fell into the residence, the Fourth Prince Rhine sat behind the desk, perusing heavy tomes.

He disassembled every issue into controllable shapes, handling them one by one.

The room was quiet, only the sound of a feather pen softly brushing against paper could be heard.

The footsteps outside the door stopped very lightly.

"Your Highness." It was his mentor, Karen, voice restrained, as if afraid to disturb something.

Rhine looked up: "Enter."

Karen entered with a secret report box, placed a sealed gold piece on the desk: "A confirmed report from the Regent King's palace... the spirit essence fruit was personally delivered by the Second Prince's Personal Guard."

Rhine's pen paused at his fingertips, he glanced at the secret report, then chuckled lightly, his tone carrying mockery and a bit of amusement: "Brotherly love, truly moving."

Karen nodded slightly, expression steady, he could discern that the laugh bore no warmth, only calculating calm and barely hidden ridicule.

Rhine placed the secret report on the desk, leaned back in the chair, as if discussing an irrelevant matter: "The Regent King can hold out for another day or two, better than collapsing tonight."

Karen pondered for a moment, then said in a deep voice: "Your judgment is that him holding out instead favors the situation?"

Rhine shook his head: "Chaos is most fearsome when it arrives too suddenly."

He knew very well that if the Regent King passed away tonight, the military department would immediately force a coup.

The Fifth Prince and several regional factions would swiftly seize the chaos to act.

The civil servant system would be pushed to the forefront, and the Imperial Capital might split.

That's not the chaos he wanted; he wanted controllable chaos.

The brief clarity brought by the spirit essence fruit just happens to maintain a day's stability in the situation without changing the final outcome.

Rhine gently tapped the desk with his knuckles, voice calm: "The Second Prince giving the spirit essence fruit is to delay the Regent King's decline. He believes if the royal power remains stable for a day, he has an extra day to win hearts in the military department."

Karen slowly said: "This step... do you see it as an obstacle or a buffer?"

Rhine instead gave a light laugh: "Precisely the opposite."

Because the Regent King will not die in the short term, the Imperial Capital will not lose control immediately, the Regent King will inevitably die in the long term, and the royal power cannot be stabilized.

There's more time for the nobility and legion commanders to be gradually gathered by him, while the Second Prince cannot seize complete control of military power.

"Able to hold but unable to intervene in the political situation... this is the state most suitable for us." He closed his eyes as if he were talking about unrelated matters, "Tomorrow is the chance."

The Regent King seems able to hold out, yet cannot stand steady, and the military department cannot obtain legitimate authorization at the meeting.

Karen continued to ask, as if helping Rhine organize his internal thoughts: "Looking at the trends, you have the upper hand, but the situation is not yet at a decisive victory, is this correct?"

Rhine responded lightly: "High, but no more than fifty percent."

The nobility is watching, the military department does not listen to him, regional Lords are unwilling to bet rashly, any bit of an accident could reverse the situation against him.

Of course, Rhine cannot gamble on how long the Regent King can live, he must prepare backup plans.

"Tomorrow, as long as the meeting cannot reach a conclusion, we win."

Tomorrow, when Inspector General Mei Si's proposal to restore the Electoral Prince system comes forth, although it will be a temporary neutral option that all factions find hard to accept, it will make people realize the need to choose sides.

Rhine's gaze fell outside the window, his tone sank slightly: "A shattered Empire is never what I wished for."

Karen raised his brows slightly, did not interrupt, just quietly listened.

"It's just that the current situation," Rhine slowly said, "can no longer be stabilized by power, only by time... as long as another two years pass, royal power will naturally fall into my hands.

And it will be in a peaceful manner. No bloodshed, no battles, no further tearing of the Empire."

Karen looked at him, nodded slightly.

Rhine spoke calmly yet with a deeply concealed resolve.

To slow the Empire down, prevent a rapid unraveling, let various forces exhaust their possible impulses in the buffer.

Let the royal power, above the chaos, return to him in the quietest manner.

Chapter 655: The Chaotic Dragon Throne Council (Part 1)

The morning mist slowly dissipated from the stone paths of the Imperial Capital.

Eleanor Calvin sat upright in the carriage, her fingertips resting on the wooden frame of the window, tapping gently with the light jostle of the wheels.

She had been residing in the Imperial Capital for over a decade, and was well acquainted with the undercurrents here.

Yet, today's Dragon Throne meeting brought her an unusual sense of calm.

It felt as though, no matter how fierce the storm, it wouldn't affect her.

Last night, a secret letter arrived at the Kite Tower residence from the southeast coast.

It was a handwritten order from her brother; the content was brief, essentially stating: "Do not take a stand, do not express opinions, watch how others act."

There was no mention of supporting anyone, no attempt to seek anything.

Not even a note of caution, as if the entire power struggle in the Imperial Capital was irrelevant to the Calvin Clan.

Eleanor closed the letter. As the long-time representative of her family, she understood her brother's true intentions after reading it.

The Southeast Province, distant from the Imperial Capital and connected to the Church Authority Country and overseas trade routes, no longer prioritized central disputes.

No matter who ascends to the throne, they would ultimately need to rely on the ports and trading fleets of the Southeast to maintain the Empire's lifeline.

Therefore, they need not take sides, compete for power, or stand out.

The Southeast Calvin Family has always been like this, never vying for temporary brilliance, engaging with multiple sides, only backing the winner at the last moment.

They might not win much, but they never fail.

With this posture of always being in the midst of the wind yet never being swept away, they are called fence-sitters and old foxes among the Eight Great Clans.

But to the Calvin Clan, anything that ensures the family's longevity for millennia is irrelevant, even considered a compliment.

Of course, the stability of the Southeast was never passively formed; it was always preemptively planned.

For example, even if they openly stand opposed to the Church Authority Country, they have quietly discussed feasible escape routes through the Fifth Prince.

That is not an alliance, but a plan to provide the family with one more direction and option.

Hence, with the Emperor missing, the Imperial Capital in disarray, the Military Council and Civil Service Academy at loggerheads, and the nobility across the regions restless,

the Southeast Calvin Clan remained as stable as a harbor far from the tsunami, untouched by even the waves.

The carriage continued toward the Imperial Hall, as Eleanor leaned against the carriage wall, exhaled gently, her mood becoming increasingly relaxed.

The topics for today's meeting were whether the Regent King could still handle state affairs, whether the Military Council could expand its military authority, and whether to revisit the succession order.

Any one of these three issues could shake the Imperial Capital enough to topple castles.

Eleanor knew for certain that today, the Fourth Prince Rhine would make his move; his actions were too obvious, almost the entire Imperial Capital knew what he was brewing.

The fact that all the princes would be present slightly heightened her vigilance.

It implied that the issue of succession was tacitly acknowledged as open; the Regent King needed the princes to stabilize the situation; the Military Council wanted to capitalize on their influence; the Civil Servant faction wanted to provoke sparks through them.

This would be a meeting forcibly torn apart.

When the carriage stopped, Eleanor looked up. The shadows of twelve ancient emblem plaques extended long on either side of the steps in the morning light, as if these old symbols were secretly witnessing the division of today.

The attendant opened the carriage door, Eleanor adjusted her cloak, disembarked, and walked into the Imperial Hall.

The eternal flame still burned quietly deep in the dome, but it lacked the usual commanding presence.

Eleanor's gaze swept quickly over the various representatives.

The Western Territory nobles huddled too close, seemingly confirming their stakes for the last time, the Southern Territory representative's fingers rubbed incessantly at their cuff, displaying uncontrollable nerves, while the emerging alliance formed a tight circle.

Unlike three years ago when the Emperor was present, although the nobility still sat upright, of course, due to noble etiquette.

They no longer pretended to be submissive, their voices clearer than before, as if the array used to control echoes had been deliberately weakened.

Low murmurs scattered in the hall, voices fragmented like gravel rolling over stone.

Then the Imperial Hall suddenly fell silent for a moment as a certain military figure's unique and steady aura entered the hall.

Kaelin Auguste took his seat.

His entire presence was like a Battle Blade newly drawn, not overly sharp, yet compelling others to recoil in the cold light.

And his left arm moved naturally, showing no trace of old scars.

Externally, he appeared intact, calm, strong, even more fitting of an imperial successor than before.

Eleanor keenly observed the reactions of surrounding nobles; the Military Council and legion representatives noticeably relaxed their shoulders, while the expressions of the Civil Servant faction darkened slightly, several local nobles quickly restrained their expressions, and the new nobles even inadvertently showed reverence.

The usual judgment of the Imperial Capital reemerged; as long as the Second Prince stood firm, he remained the banner of the Military Council.

But Eleanor saw deeper; the Second Prince's entire demeanor was excessively rigid, it wasn't composure, it was as if he was overexerting himself.

And shortly after the Second Prince took his seat, Rhine Auguste, the Fourth Prince, also entered the prince's area.

His entrance was silent, without any oppressive atmosphere, yet the Civil Servants instinctively adjusted their seating, gathering around him as a focal point.

Upon sitting down, he began reviewing dossiers, his actions poised and deliberate, as if he would control the entire pace of the meeting.

He didn't glance at Second Prince Kaelin, but it made Kaelin's suppressed anger even more palpable.

The two were like a cold blade and a hard hammer, destined to clash today, Eleanor thought silently.

At the edge of the prince's area sat a third person, Lampard Westrione.

Chapter 656: Chaotic Dragon Throne Council (Part 1)

On the surface, he seemed ordinary, unlike the insignia of the Military Department, nor the center of the Civil Servant faction.

He was just quiet, natural, and stable, so much so that none of the ministers spared him a glance.

Others didn't realize it, but Elinor saw clearly that he was the most dangerous one among the three princes.

Lampard didn't need to speak up in the meeting because his plans weren't even in this hall.

More crucial was the invisible thread between the Calvin Clan and him, known only to Elinor.

Elinor tidied her cuffs, deliberately avoiding looking at him.

After all, in this place, even a single glance might expose the Calvin Clan's true plans.

Elinor let her gaze sweep over but made a calm judgment in her mind: This was a simultaneous, tri-fold fracture.

And today, the Calvin Clan would remain silent. We only need to watch who moves first, who falls first."

The everlasting flame swayed on the dome, the blue light falling on her cheek, giving away none of her thoughts to others.

When everyone was seated, a floating sound of footsteps emerged from the depths of the Imperial Hall.

The everlasting flame on the chandelier swayed slightly, the faint blue light traced the steps, guiding all eyes in the hall to one direction.

Regent King Arnolds entered the hall.

The air tightened slightly, as though the Imperial Hall suddenly remembered the order it ought to maintain.

Elinor first noticed his gait.

Straight, steady, neither tremulous nor floating.

His shoulders were level, breathing even, demeanor calm as if his frailty had never wavered him.

If she hadn't known beforehand, she might almost have believed the Regent King's condition had improved recently.

It seemed the effect of the ochre leaf essence was nearly perfect on him.

And the uninformed nobility reacted: "The Regent King looks well today."

"It appears he can endure the whole meeting."

These whispers quickly spread among the seats, soothing several previously restless expressions.

Half a step behind the Regent King, Steward Linz quietly accompanied him.

His stride matched the Regent King's precisely, posture upright, expression unchanged, as if supporting the Empire's etiquette and face upon his own shoulders.

These two were like beams painstakingly propping up the Empire's dilapidated house, but at the slightest touch, cracks would reveal.

The Regent King slowly seated himself upon the Black Obsidian Throne.

At this moment, the hall finally fell completely silent, everyone waiting for him to speak.

However, Arnolds did not immediately speak, merely settled in serenely, hand resting at the seat's side, breathing steady to the point of restraint.

This brief silence, more unsettling than any command.

At this point, Linz stepped forward, standing before the Black Obsidian Throne.

The echo array of the Imperial Hall remained operational, but its suppressive force was far lesser than when the Emperor was present.

The blue light of the everlasting flame spilled from the dome, casting every face colder and clearer, leaving no one able to fully hide their expressions.

Linz unfurled the scroll, his movements steady, as though maintaining an order on the verge of dispersal.

His voice wasn't loud, yet bore the unique authority of a long-serving Royal Attendant, as if any command spoken by him would automatically hold power:

"Gentlemen, the Dragon Throne Conference begins, this time being particularly special, proposed by His Highness the Regent King, for all princes to attend and discuss imperial matters together."

Once his words fell, an unnatural stillness filled the hall, not solemn, but tense.

Because everyone understood the implication behind those words:

All princes present meant the issue of succession had now been laid bare.

Elinor could almost feel the air quiver slightly at this moment, as if some old imperial rule was breaking now.

Linz continued to read the agenda, his tone calm as always: "Item one, border military affairs report. Item two, the current state of Imperial finances. Item three, provincial autonomy applications. Item four, discussion on the execution method of royal power."

With each item read, the nobles' gazes sharpened as if touching upon each of their fatal weaknesses.

Border military affairs fell within the Second Prince's sphere of influence, Imperial finances involved the interests of various families, provincial autonomy was the last line of defense for the nobility, and the execution method of royal power touched upon the core of succession...

Elinor noticed an increasingly stark contrast; the steadier Linz's voice was, the more agitated the hall's atmosphere became.

As if his effort to encapsulate order only highlighted the tension in that order, ready to crack at any moment.

Just as Linz was about to announce "begin discussions in sequence," a chair leg slid softly against the stone surface, breaking the silence abruptly.

The Second Prince, Kaelin, stood up.

His actions were crisp, neat, and without hesitation, and not a soul saw any vulnerability in his stance.

The clamor of the Imperial Hall seemed clenched by a hand, tightening in an instant.

Kaelin's voice overrode the protocol, calling out as on the battlefield: "The Military Department must immediately gain emergency control power."

A single sentence ignited a spark of unrest like wildfire across the hall.

Kaelin gave no room for anyone to react, continuing to dominate the floor, advancing step by step: "Several border defenses have fallen in the past month. Continuing to debate minutiae now is digging a grave for the Empire."

His tone wasn't fervent, yet pressed relentlessly from the front of the hall to the back.

Representatives from the Military Department and legion nodded immediately, as if someone finally spoke on their behalf, with some new border nobles even displaying expressions that seemed to say, "Finally, someone speaks the truth"...

Kaelin raised his voice, ensuring all could hear: "The Regent King's condition is still not healed, military power requires temporary custodianship. I suggest the Military Department temporarily assume command until the situation reverses."

#### Chapter 657: Chaotic Dragon Throne Conference (Part 1)

This is a blatant power grab, and the Imperial Hall exploded in that instant.

The people in the Military Affairs Department, having misjudged his recovery by seventy to eighty percent, all straightened their backs, like they had been reignited.

The old nobility's gazes sank, as any expansion of military authority would first tread on them.

The civil servants were tense, that alertness of "the system being forcibly bypassed" was instantly heightened.

Rheinhardt lifted his eyes, his movement unhurried, but it was as though his gaze was slicing through the air.

His glance didn't truly meet Kaelin's, but in that moment, the calm sharpness far surpassed anger.

He did not speak but gently closed the dossier in his hand, as if he had figured something out, and though not a big action, it tightened the backs of all the civil servants.

On the other side, Lampard remained motionless, his posture steady, as if he had been waiting for this moment all along.

His eyes showed no ripple, not even a hint of interest.

The local nobility, whose nascent thoughts of autonomy were quickly retracted under the strong pressure of the Military Affairs Department.

The new nobles turned pale; the expansion of military power meant they would be the first to be consolidated, the first to be sacrificed.

The pressure line rose too fast, causing all voices to converge in an instant, leaving only tense breathing.

Eleonor sat quietly, his fingers gently tapping by his knee, as if marking a silent beat to the chaos.

He brought the dispute forward to the very first moment.

The Fourth Prince Rheinhardt's fingers paused lightly on the dossier, a subtle and concealed indication only readable to those with intent.

Thus, when Lin Ze prepared to speak, trying to bring the proceedings back to order.

Someone first stood up from the Civil Servant Seat, the Deputy Minister of Finance: "Military orders belong to the imperial authority. If easily delegated, the Empire ceases to be an Empire."

Immediately, a second civil servant stood up, pointing directly at the heartland of the Military Affairs Department: "The Military Affairs Department has yet to clear traitors and Federation spies within its ranks. Under such circumstances, who will be responsible for the military orders?"

This openly questioned the stability of the Military Affairs Department, considering that just half a year ago nearly ten officials with ties to the Jade Federation were captured.

The Civil Servant Seat fell silent, not out of fear, but as a unified expression of their stance.

That organized silence felt more like a gust pressing against the Military Affairs Department than any outcry.

A representative from the Military Affairs Department couldn't hold back a low curse.

Kaelin pressed his hand hard on the arm of the chair, the table emitted a dull sound, as if it would crack in the next moment.

The third person to stand was a civil servant from the Inspectorate. Without any preamble, he pointed directly at the sore spot: "The Second Prince recently recovered, is he suitable to assume such a heavy responsibility?"

This time, it was directly pointing out that it was the Second Prince who wanted the military authority, not the Military Affairs Department.

As these words fell, the entire Imperial Hall seemed to be clamped in the middle.

The air tensed rapidly, even the blue glow of the eternal flame seemed to pause a beat.

Kaelin's expression remained unchanged, still cold, steady, and resolute, yet Eleonor could see this was him holding on.

Lin Ze warned: "Enough is enough."

But the civil servants did not look at him.

For the first time in a hundred years, the civil servants openly questioned a prince's capability in front of the throne.

Just as this spark had yet to hit the ground, Kaelin stood again, the stone surface lightly echoing with the vibration of his chair legs.

He pressed down his anger, unable to hold it completely, his tone heavy, carrying the directness and sharpness of a battle-hardened soldier: "I don't need you to determine whether I am suitable."

This was a firm voice, not loud, yet it was like a stabilizing force driven into the heart of the Imperial Hall.

Kaelin continued to sweep his gaze across the Civil Servant Seat, his eyes as cold as the winds of the Northern Territory: "The Empire is losing ground, and the casualties at the frontline of the Military Affairs Department are real; you sitting here picking words won't regrow the lost lines of defense."

He pressed down on each word, each sentence striking the face of a certain faction.

The expressions of the civil servant leaders turned icy, yet they did not retort.

The Second Prince's presence was too overwhelming, this was the true imperial soldier's anger being ignited.

Kaelin's breathing became faster than before, his shoulders slightly tensing in restraint.

Anger was pushing upward, while rationality tried to suppress it.

This was an extremely dangerous state, still strong but on the verge of losing control.

Kaelin continued: "What I want is the authority to control military orders. Not sitting here waiting for another batch of Empire lives to be lost."

These words almost tore the veneer of decorum off the meeting.

He didn't shout, but the entire Imperial Hall seemed to be pulled onto a tighter line.

The Regent King remained silent, head lowered, lost in thought.

Rheinhardt still had his eyes downcast, fingers tapping lightly on the edge of the dossier, unhurried, unpanicked, yet sharp as if waiting for an opportunity.

Lampard was still like a transparent figure, but his eyes seemed to enjoy watching the cracks continue to spread.

Just as this tightly drawn line was about to snap, Lin Ze spoke loudly: "Silence——!"

The old man's voice was amplified by the echo array in the Imperial Hall, like a heavy iron hammered into a stone wall, even causing the light of the eternal flame to tremble slightly.

Everyone instinctively quieted down.

The whispers from the Civil Servant Seat were forcibly cut off; the rage from the Military Affairs Department was suppressed back into the chest; even the breaths of the local nobility paused for half a beat.

Lin Ze stood upright, his gaze steady but carrying an unusual edge, it was a warning of "continue, and things will spiral out of control here and now."

He leaned forward half a step, slightly bowing in the direction of the throne to express apology and that he was still within the bounds of propriety, before raising his voice:

"No faction may expand disputes before the throne on their own. All discussions will proceed sequentially."

Every word and sentence seemed to drag the Imperial Hall from the turbulence back into the framework of etiquette.

Lin Ze was not defending the civil servants, nor the Military Affairs Department, he was defending the shaky, remaining order that belonged to the Empire.

And everyone understood: a step further, and it would be chaos.

Lin Ze's reproach temporarily returned the Imperial Hall to the edge of control, but this was not the end of the chaos.

At this time, the Fourth Prince Rheinhardt finally gently closed the dossier.

This was the signal, his turn to act had arrived.

Chapter 658: Chaotic Dragon Throne Council (Part 2)

At this moment, the Fourth Prince Rhine finally gently closed the dossier.

This is the signal; it's his turn to act.

Inspector General Mei Si almost immediately stood up: "The reason for everyone's debate is simply because the Emperor is missing, and the imperial power is suspended."

He then threw out a statement potent enough to ignite the whole room: "I propose to restore the Electoral Prince system, where the Eight Great Clans jointly elect an Imperial Guardian."

Mei Si's voice was steady, yet it seemed to make the air in the Imperial Hall freeze instantly.

Mei Si's gaze swept across every noble representative and Prince in the hall, his tone unchanged: "This system once maintained the balance of power during the most perilous times of the Empire.

And so today, with the Emperor not returned and the Regent King weakened, we can establish a guardian elected by the Eight Clans to temporarily exercise imperial power, stabilize the states, coordinate various regions, and ensure the Empire is not fragmented."

The pace of speech was not fast, yet it struck like a hammer on the heart of everyone present.

On the surface, this speech looked very gentle, as if suggesting a rational middle-ground plan.

But everyone in the Imperial Hall understood.

This isn't a temporary substitute for imperial power but a legal alternative established in advance for the Emperor's absence.

It's not mediating factions but pulling the Eight Great Clans back to the core of imperial power.

It's not a temporary expedient but a reboot of the system.

This is an extremely offensive matter, but the reason Mei Si dared to stand up at this moment was not due to his position but because he already held enough chips.

Before the meeting, Rhine offered him benefits that were difficult to refuse: independent scrutiny rights of the Inspector General for Empire officials, primary adjudication rights on the provincial autonomy proposal, and a confidential fund allocated from secondary fiscal accounts.

But these are just surface chips; what truly made him nod was another portion of promised future belonging to his family that Rhine whispered.

Mei Si, now nearing the twilight of his years, had been unable to endure long travels and prolonged affairs for several years; he understood more than anyone present that he couldn't last for many more years.

His pursuit was no longer for the position itself, but for a security that could prevent his family from being swallowed in the next round of power reshuffle in the Imperial Capital.

Rhine offered him this, promising to preserve the nobility title of the Mei Si family in future restructurings and allow his descendants into the core of the Inspector General.

In the possible future restructuring of the civil servant system in the Empire, reserving two inheritable positions for the Mei Si family.

These carefully crafted promises wouldn't alert any factions, yet were enough to ensure a family could still stand on the Imperial Capital's steps after the chaos.

For a man nearing twilight, this was his last legacy he could leave behind.

It was precisely because of this that he was willing to propose a motion at this moment capable of shaking the Empire's foundations.

The air in the hall was completely frozen, and every pair of eyes was waiting.

Not waiting for Mei Si to say more, but waiting for others to express their positions.

The first sounds came from nobles leaning closer, whispering tentative exchanges.

Their voices were not frantic but were the skilled techniques nobles used when facing enormous changes.

They were not arguing but swiftly assessing risks:

"Restoring the old system... means we'll be constrained by the Eight Great Clans again?"

"If imperial power is pushed by the Eight Clans, how much voice do we provinces have left?"

"Is this a plot the Eight Clans had set up in advance?"

They weren't afraid of the redistribution of imperial power; they were afraid once the old system is restored, the hard-earned autonomy space of the local provinces over nearly a hundred years would be swiftly swallowed.

The negotiating power of emerging territories would be pressed to a minimum, and all power balances would tilt back towards the Eight Great Clans.

This fear is a clear judgment of future interests.

The silence of the Eight Great Clans was not hesitation but the most typical "watchful suppression" of power tiers.

Any statement from them would be interpreted as a declaration of interests by other clans.

Thus, they must be steady and cautious, indicating their stance with the smallest gestures.

Eleanor maintained an ambiguous smile, neither supporting nor opposing, keeping herself within the safe boundaries of all choices.

Raymont's representative exchanged a glance with Simmons' representative, signaling "interest."

Diaz's representative and Kadari's representative remained silent, maintaining a diplomatic posture.

Holden's representative and Beres's representative furrowed their brows, with the old nobility instinctively resisting institutional rewriting.

As for the Edmund Family's representative, he was dozing off; the old man hadn't received any instructions from Louis and couldn't make a statement.

Their silence itself was the heaviest pressure of the Imperial Capital.

As these silent attitudes continued to pile up, they were enough to cause the entire balance of the Imperial Hall to begin to tilt.

The tension in the air wasn't emotion but the sound of the interest structure starting to fracture.

Just as this pressure extended to the end of the noble seats, someone finally couldn't resist testing the boundaries.

The Western Territory representative stood up, still polite in tone but precisely pushed the issue to its core: "Lord Mei Si, does this mean the major provinces will once again be controlled by the Eight Great Clans?"

This wasn't anger but a border test, confirming whether the Eight Clans would use the old system to make a comeback.

Then the third corps commander added fuel: "If the old system is resurrected, will the military expenses and grain taxes of the local provinces still be decided by the Eight Clans?"

This was the second test, more incisive, and closer to the pain point.

These two doubts combined, truly started to tilt the focus of the Imperial Hall.

Finally, a noble from the Western Territory couldn't hold back, slapping the stone table: "The era of the Eight Great Clans has passed!"

This slap on the table was the true breaking point of the Imperial Hall.

Sound waves rolled open under the dome, the echoes shattered into chaotic reverberations, not a roar but a shared nightmare of the entire provincial system.

Chapter 659: Chaotic Dragon Throne Council (Part 2)

This sentence made every local noble simultaneously recall one thing: if the old system returns, they will turn from negotiable local rulers back into mere blood components within the system of the Eight Great Clans.

This is the foreboding of death to their vested interests. They know that if they don't speak up now, next time they won't get a chance to speak at all.

So, nobles outside of the Eight Great Clans continually began to voice their concerns.

The new nobility from the Southern Territory half-stood and raised their voice: "The local provinces cannot support your games in the Imperial Capital!"

The voice of the border marquis immediately pressed down: "Whoever dares to touch the northern front military budget, we will first declare autonomy!"

Local nobles were no longer whispering but stood up row by row: "The provinces are not vassals of the Eight Clans!" "We demand true autonomy!" "Don't let the old system crush the new emerging territories!"

Order began to tear apart, the Imperial Hall felt like it was being split from the inside by a huge force.

The fear of new nobility soon joined the chaos, initially tremblingly: "The old system resurrects... we'll all be dead..."

Then came the ceremonial-breaking shouts: "Your era is over!" "The Empire needs reform, not regression!"

Virtually everyone stood up, each face showing real, stark fear.

The eternal fire flickered on the dome, casting blue light on their faces, revealing a group of shadows waiting to see how the Empire would fracture.

The noise turned into a thunderous mix of shattering, collision, and oppression, like the entire Empire stepping to the brink of an abyss prematurely at this moment.

Just then, a motion suddenly lowered all the voices.

The Second Prince stood up, his voice not loud yet like an anvil hitting the ground: "Royal power is borne by the Royal Family."

No rhetoric, no explanation, no contention, this sentence directly shattered the foundation of the Electoral Prince system.

The civil servants understood that this was a warning that royal authority is no tool.

The old nobles understood, as the Ministry of Military Affairs and the legions would not allow the Eight Clans to touch the throne.

The Eight Great Clans understood too; that was the boundary.

He then added another sentence, even colder: "The Emperor's disappearance does not mean you can carve up the meat."

When this statement landed, the Imperial Hall felt as if crushed by a huge stone.

Local nobles were choked, new nobles fell silent, and even the Eight Great Clans paused for a moment.

No anger, yet full of pressure, but it did not suppress; after a brief silence, the arguments resumed.

Lin Ze tried to regain control of the situation, shouting: "Silence—!"

The voice exploded in the array of reverberations, like a heavy clock hitting a stone wall.

But this time no one paid attention, local nobles continued to shout, new nobles broke etiquette, old nobles lost composure.

This was the first time since the Emperor's disappearance that even the superficial order could not be maintained.

"Quiet down." Then a weak voice came.

In front of the Black Obsidian Throne, Arons supported the armrest with his hand, the noise pressing him breathless.

His movements were slow, but he still stood up.

The light of the eternal fire shone on his face, making him look like a candle that could extinguish at any time but stubbornly remained lit.

This silhouette alone quieted the entire hall.

The instant freeze was the remnant of royal power.

Arons spoke, his voice not loud, but amplified by the array to be clear: "The Emperor... has not died."

The hall felt forcibly held down, some gasped, some froze.

He lifted his head, eyes exceptionally bright due to the spirit essence fruit: "Royal power remains within the succession sequence. If the Emperor has not passed, any electoral... is usurpation."

Mei Si's proposal at this moment turned from "option" into taboo.

Arons' voice was unstable, yet no one dared to ignore it: "The Empire... does not permit today's chaos, does not allow the Eight Clans to vie for power, does not permit the military department to establish autonomy, does not allow provinces to cross the line, does not allow the new nobility to go mad."

Every sentence was like a knife thrust into the chest of the factions that had just been yelling the loudest.

His voice trembled yet was steady: "Before I die, the Empire shall not be divided."

This might be the Regent King's last time to suppress the entire scene, the dying lion's last roar.

Arons slowly sat back on the throne, holding the armrest to stabilize his breath: "Today's discussion, all temporarily postponed, next agenda, listen to my convening."

No one opposed.

The Imperial Hall wasn't silent due to order, nor due to the nobility's dignity, but due to the shadow of royal power pressing down.

The doors of the Imperial Hall were pushed open, the layer of silence wasn't fiercely torn apart, but gently pried open by the cool breeze outside.

Footsteps flowed into the outer corridor, yet maintained a restrained restraint, each person striving to keep emotions within the bounds of etiquette.

The chaos did not dissipate but changed its form, shifting from public argument to implicit probing.

Kaelin walked ahead, his steps remaining stable.

His breath thinner than when he entered, yet deeply hidden, like a general just dismounted from the front lines, pressing fatigue, injury, and anger beneath his armor, letting no outsider see a hint.

At this moment, Kaelin had already unraveled the situation in his heart; Rhine initiated the layout, Mei Si and the Eight Great Clans were the pushers, the Electoral Prince system was already established, the civil service faction pressing him.

If the Ministry of Military Affairs does not tighten, he will have no chance to turn the tide.

Before the next meeting, he must regain control of the Ministry of Military Affairs.

He must deploy faster, harder, and more directly.

His obsession is not agitation, but like a battlefield realization that the supply line has been cut, a cold contraction.

On the other side, the civil servant ranks quietly dispersed.

Rhine was surrounded by attendants as he walked out, his pace steady, with no hint of joy nor defeat.

He exchanged a few words softly with the civil servants beside him, as if merely concluding the routine affairs of the afternoon.

Though no results were advanced today, he successfully placed the old system within negotiable range.

Royal power remains suspended, the division among the Eight Clans deepens, provinces probe the center, new nobility begins unease—all he needs for a deadlock base moved forward one step.

The chaos cannot accelerate to be out of control, but must extend until no one can restore the center.

This is Rhine's battlefield.

No need for loudness, as long as the situation remains positioned where no one can win, he becomes the ultimate controller.

Lampard was the last to leave the venue.

His steps were as natural as taking a stroll, his posture incredibly calm, even the attendants paid him no particular mind.

Yet he dropped three critical lines in his heart: central prestige has collapsed, provinces begin to detach, the Eight's rift is enough for religious forces to intervene.

Next, his actions won't be in the Imperial Hall but among the local nobility.

The Empire's division will naturally emerge in the next chaos rather than be forced today.

The Eight Great Clans dispersed from the Imperial Hall without any clamor.

The power of these clans is never expressed through shouting but through their next actions.

Other local nobles also left the Imperial Hall maintaining etiquette, but with even lower tone, they could no longer suppress the anxiety in their words:

"If the old system returns, the provinces' bargaining rights will surely be cut."

"The Imperial Capital's finances can't support long-term warfare."

"Provinces need to establish interconnective lines first."

This is the first time openly discussing the possible incompetence of the central authority as nobles.

The framework for the Alliance of Provincial Autonomy took shape at this moment, naturally converging through consensus.

The new nobility also did not flee in disorder, but they all understood internally that if the old system was reintroduced, the new nobility would be the first batch to be eliminated.

Elinor stood in the outer corridor, quietly observing all this: subdued discussions, rapid probes, cautious actions, forced contractions.

No shouting, no arguing, no loss of control.

Yet precisely because everyone moved in this restraint with a unified direction, it further indicated the Empire was beginning to fracture.

Elinor mentally began framing the start of a sentence: "The situation in the Imperial Capital needs reevaluation."

The remnants of royal power still exist, provinces start to loosen, the silence of the Eight divides, new nobility prematurely withdraws, the Ministry of Military Affairs threatens to lose control any moment.

Duke Calvin, that old fox, excels in discerning the situation ten steps ahead through just one sentence's beginning.

She only needs to organize these clues into material enabling the other party to make judgments, rather than providing conclusions.

The real letter she will write once back at the Kite Tower residence, where the clan will decide how to arrange next.

Today's meeting is merely the beginning of chaos, and the Calvin Clan in the Southeast must adjust their sails beforehand for the impending fracture.

The Empire's first crack has already become irreversible.

#### Chapter 660: The Birth of Louis's Daughter

The cold of the early morning quietly seeped into the room; the fireplace still held its warmth, yet could not dispel the quiet atmosphere after the snow outside.

Sif lay on her side next to Louis, her short white hair had grown to shoulder length, spreading a few strands on the pillow, her breathing steady, yet her brows and eyes still carried that wild sharpness.

The bulge of her belly, ten months along, was pronounced, but it did not diminish her stance; instead, it made the strength in her body more evident.

Louis glanced at her gently, his fingers paused slightly beside her belly.

It should be any day now.

Suppressing a fleeting moment of tension from the depths of his heart, he quietly got out of bed, donned a thick robe, and walked over to the window.

The rooftops of Red Tide City were layered thinly with white from mist and snow, and chimneys from steam workshops in the distance were emitting fine smoke.

Louis raised his right hand, lightly flicked his fingers.

A familiar light buzzing sound arose, and a translucent blue screen spread out in the air.

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

[1: The Remont family continues to persuade Seventh Legion Commander Ackman Greer with offers of land revenue, trade route shares, and future rewards. According to agent reports, he has begun meeting privately with the family's representative.]

[2: The Dawn Port caravan safely arrived at the Jade Federation Bi Chao Guild. The goods were sold smoothly, and the guild master highly praised the mineral quality, expressing a desire to strengthen long-term cooperation.]

[3: The Red Tide machinery group completed the first generation steam war chariot prototype; its performance is stable and ready for trial use.]

[4: Sif's pregnancy is going well, today she successfully gave birth to a baby girl.]

Louis's gaze lingered on the first line of intelligence for a few seconds. Since the Dragon Throne meeting ended, the Empire's political situation felt like a giant stone thrown into the depths of the ocean, sinking further each day.

But Louis has the daily intelligence, a golden finger as if with divine sight, allowing him to oversee the movement of power dynamics from the Northern Territory, far from the Imperial Capital, in an almost god-like perspective.

The three Princes are now showcasing their talents, frantically wooing the Empire's nobility and legion commanders.

The Fifth Prince, on the other hand, moves further afield, trying to gradually approach the Calvin Clan, aiming to enclose the entire Southeast Province.

However, the most conspicuous and dangerous force is not these Princes but the Duke Redet of the Remont family.

Louis exhaled slowly, his fingertips tapping lightly on the edge of the light screen.

Redet still seems to bear the banner of the Second Prince, but in reality, he has long extended his reach into the Imperial Army, probing from the Seventh Legion to the Southwest Reserve Army.

The legion commanders still outwardly support the Royal Family but secretly speculate on where to place their bets in the future.

More troublesome is that the Seventh Legion is stationed on the edge of the Northern Territory.

Nominally guarding the extreme cold frontline, it practically serves as the Empire's dedicated eye on the Northern Territory.

Though Louis has made the entire Northern Territory stable as a solid iron plate, that eye consistently watches him, unable to threaten Red Tide but always capable of stirring up trouble.

The Empire never trusts the Northern Territory, so that eye will never be withdrawn.

Now, the Empire's military might is like an old net pulled to its limit, a slight tug, and it will snap.

Everyone is waiting for the breaking point, perhaps the fall of the Regent King, maybe a legion's loss of control, or perhaps a Prince suddenly revealing his true agenda.

What Louis understands clearly is that Redet does not intend to just be a subject; his actions clearly aim at establishing independent military power, hoping to seize the largest piece once the Empire fractures.

Louis's seemingly calm demeanor hides an increasingly intense sense of crisis.

The Northern Territory seems distant from the Imperial Capital, placed outside the turmoil, but should chaos truly erupt, whether willing or not, the Northern Territory will inevitably be pulled in.

If Red Tide cannot firmly establish its foundation, when the threads of the Empire unravel, the Northern Territory will be uprooted like a tree, swept away by the storm.

Thus, he must move faster than everyone else. Granaries, mineral veins, railroads, arsenals, schools...

Each seemingly steady advancement is actually a step on the edge of time's blade.

He must have Red Tide equipped with a full set of systems, capable of independent operation, independent armament, independent supply, before the Empire fully fractures.

"The Northern Territory must achieve complete independence before chaos erupts."

Louis repeats this phrase in his mind, as if issuing a final command to himself.

As long as the Red Tide system stabilizes, he can position the Northern Territory outside the blizzards, no longer swept along by the rise and fall of the Imperial Capital.

This path, Louis must now accelerate without delay.

When Louis turns to the second line, his emotions are even calmer than towards the Empire's political situation, even with a hint of hidden calculation.

[2: The Dawn Port caravan safely arrived at the Jade Federation Bi Chao Guild. The goods were sold smoothly, and the guild master highly praised the mineral quality, expressing a desire to strengthen long-term cooperation.]

The successful opening of the Federation ports by Dawn Port indicates that his year-long construction of foreign trade routes has finally begun to take shape.

Red Tide's minerals, cold iron embryos, fur, and other goods can command good prices in the Federation, showing that the Northern Territory's industrial system for the first time truly holds active external value, independent of anyone, parasitic of none.

"The guild master is satisfied..." Louis murmured inaudibly, meaningful.

More crucial is that this route is not just a breakthrough for Bi Chao Guild alone.

The cooperation plans with Red Glow Guild and Starfall Guild have also been completely finalized, with two caravans dispatched by Dawn Port preparing for departure.

If these three sea trade routes are concurrently successful, Red Tide's foreign trade system can formally break away from the Calvin Commerce Association's old network, establishing a stable cycle independent of the Empire.