

Winter 661

Chapter 661: The Birth of Louis's Daughter (Part 2)

As for Count Harvey, on the surface he used investing in Yorn as an excuse, having traveled back and forth twice, but the supplies he sent were not only of superior quality, their prices were also pressed to an extremely low level.

This attitude clearly was not out of pure goodwill, but an attempt to bet on the future of the Northern Territory in advance, leaving himself an escape route.

As long as the Federation continues to maintain this cooperative stance, the hold of the Calvin Commerce Association over the Northern Territory will completely loosen.

Even if they realize it, they will have no time to meddle in the Northern Territory's trade routes, and the Red Tide will take advantage of this gap to gradually extract the economic chain of the Northern Territory from Calvin's grasp.

"This line of action must be continued," Louis mused to himself, then proceeded to read the next entry.

[3: The Red Tide Mechanic Group completed the prototype of the first-generation steam combat vehicle; performance is stable, ready for trial use.]

It's been over a year since the first steam train test-ran in the Northern Territory.

Now the combat vehicle prototype has finally made its debut, marking the second step for the entire steam system.

Louis didn't truly understand its principles or know about its actual performance; all he could do was sketch a crude shape of a tank from his memory for the mechanic group, hoping to give them some direction.

As for how exactly to build it and what it should look like, he had to leave it to the craftsmen to slowly explore.

Naturally, Louis needs to find a time to go see the progress himself and then decide on the next steps.

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

Upon seeing this entry, Louis felt as if something had lightly nudged his heart.

Louis had been telling himself all this time that Sif was as strong as a snowfield she-wolf, but when it came to pregnancy, nothing was certain.

He knew her physique was far superior to that of ordinary people, but it wasn't until the moment of delivery that he realized he had always been apprehensive deep down.

A rare joy arose from his chest, like a fire being stoked with dry wood.

He seldom allowed himself such emotions, yet at this moment, he couldn't suppress it.

Sif was safe, the child was safe, and this was the best and most crucial news he could receive these days.

No matter how chaotic the Northern Territory was, or how dangerous the Empire was, at least he still had them waiting for him here.

Louis rubbed his brow and exhaled lightly, as if trying to let this joy slowly settle: "...Very good."

In the next moment, his gaze returned to that familiar focus and decisiveness.

The safety of his family was the reason for him to move forward, not an excuse to stop.

Having just shut down the daily intelligence light screen, the threads about the Prince, the legion, the guild, and the harbor were still turning in his mind.

Yet his cultivation never stopped because of political situations.

The Fighting Energy gradually circulated along a familiar path, like a tide surging within his flesh and blood, warmth spreading from his chest to his limbs.

While cultivating, Louis suddenly heard a soft sound from the blanket behind him.

The sound was not loud, but it pierced his attention like a thin needle.

Louis opened his eyes and turned his head to look.

Sif shifted slightly on the bed, her brow gently furrowed, as if something was pulling her from deep sleep, taking an instinctive breath.

Initially, Louis thought she was merely warmed by the hearth, ready to stand up to adjust the airflow, to cool the room down a bit.

In the next moment, Sif's breathing noticeably skipped a beat.

She gripped the side of the bed, her cheeks dampened by a few strands of cold sweat, sticking to her neck.

"Louis..." Sif's voice was somewhat hoarse, but she deliberately lowered it, as if afraid of disturbing something, "I'm... going into labor."

Louis almost instantly stood up, his calmness during cultivation was abruptly severed.

He walked to the bedside, holding her shoulders, feeling the controlled tremor beneath her muscles.

Sif held her breath, sweat already forming at the corner of her forehead, yet she forced herself to relax her brow, trying to maintain her customary calm.

"It's fine, I can endure it," she whispered, her gaze sharp as when she faced battle.

Louis didn't say much else, just turned to open the door: "Notify Healer Ilena, prepare the delivery room at once. Also, bring Emily."

The maid, stationed not far away, changed her expression upon hearing this. She hurriedly bowed in acknowledgment, almost sprinting down the hallway.

Inside, Sif tried to sit up by herself, but her movements were stiff due to the strain on her abdomen.

Louis turned back to support her, helping her adjust her position.

He could feel the extreme tension in her, this tautness exceeding even when she wielded a war axe clad in beast-skin armor.

"Don't push yourself," Louis said softly.

Sif barely curled the corners of her mouth: "I don't want you to see me too disheveled."

"You were quite disheveled when battling two snowfield boars," Louis joked, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

Sif snorted, about to retort, but a burst of pain exploded from her abdomen, causing her fingers to involuntarily clutch the blanket.

Given Sif's imminent labor, Louis had arranged for Healer Ilena to be in the room next door, so soon Ilena was summoned into the room.

The middle-aged healer, though not tall, moved efficiently. Her hair was neatly tied back, and her apron was tidily organized with needles and small scissors.

As she entered, she first assessed Sif's complexion and breathing, then decisively ordered: "Take her to the delivery room."

Unlike Emily, Sif came from the Barbarian Race and didn't care about the Empire's old customs or the notion of men avoiding delivery rooms.

However, Ilena insisted on her own rules.

"It's not for you," she spoke calmly while checking Sif's pulse, "it's for her. Only the necessary people should stay in the delivery room; the closer they are, the easier it is for her to get distracted."

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Louis looked at Sif.

Sif glanced at him, breathlessly signaling with her eyes towards the door: "Go ahead. I'll be fine."

Louis gently held her hand, but finally stepped out.

Emily had already hurried over from the end of the corridor, wearing a robe, her blue hair haphazardly tied, clearly having risen in haste.

Upon hearing the situation, without any hesitation, she quickly entered the room, closing the door behind her.

It wasn't until the door closed in front of him that Louis truly realized, there was nothing he could do.

He could only stand under the corridor.

The corridor wasn't cold; the oil lamps on the wall and the fireplace near the birthing room kept it warm, yet his hands were extremely stiff.

The sounds coming from behind the door weren't loud, but each one struck his nerves.

There were Elena's calm and steady instructions, Emily's gentle reassurances, and occasionally Sif's stifled groans escaping from her throat.

Louis stood there, his back straight, as if facing an invisible enemy.

He knew Sif was strong, knew her bloodline, physique, and Fighting Energy were far beyond ordinary, but pregnancy was never a battlefield where strength could exhaust all risks.

Even though today's Daily Intelligence System told him things would go smoothly, he couldn't help feeling anxious inside.

Louis clenched and unclenched his fists, walked to the end of the corridor, then returned, over and over, never stepping more than ten paces from the door.

Thankfully, the time didn't stretch to a torturous extent.

After an unknown amount of time, the aroma of burning incense gradually wafted out through the door creak, carrying a soothing herbal scent.

Finally, a voice with a slight smile came from inside the door: "A baby girl! Both mother and daughter are safe!"

Such simple words, yet they seemed to drain the strength from Louis' back.

He stood there, leaning back slightly, as if released by an invisible bowstring.

The door was opened a crack.

Elena poked her head out, her face showing professional fatigue, but couldn't help but smile: "Lord, you may come in."

As Louis stepped into the room, the firelight enveloped him.

Sif was half leaning against the headboard, her forehead still damp with sweat, her white hair tousled, her complexion not a sickly pale, but a relaxed exhaustion.

Seeing him, she managed a very faint smile, cradling a small bundle in her arms.

Emily cleared her throat lightly and tactfully led the others out of the room, closing the door behind, leaving only the crackling of the fireplace.

Louis approached, Sif slightly raised her hand, offering the bundle to him a bit.

"Look." Her voice was a little hoarse, yet uncharacteristically gentle, "Our daughter."

The baby was wrapped in soft cloth, only a small, rosy face exposed.

She seemed not yet fully adjusted to this world, her eyes barely open to slits, either startled by the firelight or instinctively scrutinizing something.

Louis looked down at those small eyes.

The Empire was in turmoil, the situation after the Dragon Throne conference like a shattered chessboard, each piece rolling with sharp edges.

Yet she came at such a time.

Precisely because of this, Louis was more determined not to let her get swept into those damned storms.

"The name..." Sif leaned against the pillow, her voice somewhat airy, "You decide."

Louis was silent for a moment.

The fire danced in his eyes, reflecting a soft glow.

"Orelia." He said softly.

The name rolled around in his mouth, neither embodying the wildness of a Barbarian Race name, nor the extravagant long names of the Imperial Capital's nobility, its pronunciation gentle, carrying the sense of peace and light.

Sif repeated it, slowly enunciating each syllable: "Orelia... our daughter."

After saying this, she truly seemed to relax, her head gently resting on Louis' shoulder, her tired eyelids drooping.

Louis supported her shoulder with one hand, carefully holding the small bundle with the other.

The baby moved slightly in his arms, emitting a nearly inaudible nasal sound.

The fire was bright, the wind and snow still battered the walls outside, yet remained distant.

"Welcome to the Red Tide." Louis said softly.

He knew that the outside world would not become gentle because of a child's birth.

But at least in this castle, in the fire-lit room, tonight there was a small place that was genuinely warm and peaceful.

Chapter 663: Results of the Red Tide System

Red Tide City, Grand Council Hall.

The morning light spills down from the dome's crevice, illuminating the entire hall supported by Cold Iron beams.

On the walls, one after another, the Red Tide flags hang down, the flag corners gently swaying, as if rising and falling with each breath.

Unlike any past year, this place has become the heart of the entire Northern Territory.

On the main seat, Louis sits quietly; his daughter was born only a few days ago, yet on the third morning, he still stands before this long table without any hesitation.

His gaze falls on the giant map of the Northern Territory behind him, the latest surveyed version.

On the map, the red of Red Tide has spread from the Southeast like ink bleeding, nearly making the entire Northern Territory the same color.

Those once scattered territories are now tightly clasped by this piece of red.

The tiered seats in the hall are already fully occupied.

These people are not mere civil servants of Red Tide but the real backbone of the Northern Territory now.

The heads of departments, deputies, coordinators, all are pillars capable of independently managing territories.

A few years ago, some of them were only serfs, workshop apprentices, or even slaves sold into the Northern Territory.

But now they wear the deep red cloak of Red Tide, with emblems of various departments of Red Tide engraved on their shoulder badges.

They were all handpicked by Louis himself, forming the new power echelon of the Northern Territory.

Today they are not here to discuss minor matters; they are here to confirm whether the Red Tide system has achieved its first-year goals.

To truly make the Northern Territory the hinterland of Red Tide, rather than a bunch of old territories barely held together.

The hall is so quiet that even the sound of the secretary turning pages seems abrupt, and when everyone is present, the meeting officially begins.

Bradley stands up first, his actions steady as he reports: "Red Tide system, first-year integration report, presented to the Lord today."

He opens the thick book and softly declares: "First item, the operation of centralized authority."

"The Red Tide system is fully operational, and all seven departments have completed the first phase of joint office work. Local regions have no legislative power; decrees are issued uniformly by the central authority. Local resident officials report quarterly, with three rounds completed this year, each without absence.

The central authority of Red Tide issued a total of three hundred and twenty-seven decrees, all executed without delay or unauthorized alteration."

As the words fall, everyone in the hall seems to shift their posture simultaneously.

The officials from the old Nobility domains are particularly silent, having witnessed firsthand the eradication of those so-called local methods and old practices within a year.

Bradley closes the book: "From an administrative efficiency perspective, Red Tide has now become the only central authority in the Northern Territory."

His tone doesn't emphasize it, but everyone in the hall understands; this is an established fact, not a future plan.

"There are approximately one hundred and sixty territories large and small in the Northern Territory," Bradley taps the corner of the book, and the corresponding secretary writes down the number almost simultaneously.

"This year, fifty-four territories are fully incorporated into the Red Tide system, around one-third."

Upon hearing the number fifty-four, a few officials from newly merged territories inhale softly.

Being seated here itself signifies their territory's complete integration into the Red Tide system; hearing the scale firsthand still inevitably stirs them.

Bradley raises his eyes to look at the main seat: "There are three categories of new integration methods."

He reads one by one: "Eighteen territories actively seek inclusion, mostly forest lands after disaster; these areas, after the winter disaster, can hardly support themselves, lacking both grain and labor. Without relying on Red Tide, it's tough for them to survive this winter.

And last year through disaster relief, twenty-one territories entered managed consolidation."

Several of the officials who organized the disaster relief maintain a composed expression, fully aware that so-called management actually means that the lifeline of those lands is firmly held by Red Tide.

"Fifteen territories naturally integrated within a year due to commercial route binding."

Desland softly exhales beside him; this is the result of his six-month efforts.

Bradley flips to the next page, adding: "Additionally, most of the territories that announced participation in the Red Tide Collaboration Circle during last year's Northern Territory reconstruction meeting have transitioned from mere cooperation to complete integration in the past year."

A few secretaries immediately record the words "reconstruction meeting."

That was the first consensus meeting after the Northern Territory's chaos, marking the true rise of Red Tide.

Bradley closes the book, his voice steady yet heavier: "Currently, the assessment is that the bones of the Northern Territory are still hard, but only the twenty or so old noble families can truly reject the Red Tide system."

This statement brings some subtle laughter in the room; those present are the planners of Northern Territory policy, hence aware of the consequences for the nobles who have yet to join the Red Tide system.

Bradley finally concludes: "Most territories... Lord, their reliance on Red Tide, during this year's integration, has already far surpassed their dependence on the Imperial Capital."

Louis speaks, his voice low yet commanding the entire room: "Everyone, well done."

His words carry no emotion yet seem to seal this heavy integration report with an official stamp.

No one has yet relaxed as Bradley unfolds the next volume beside the map, waiting for the Lord's expression.

Louis slightly nods, not as praise, but as confirmation.

That gesture makes the shoulders and backs of the seven department heads straighter.

He raises his hand to signal: "Continue."

Bradley moves to the map beside Louis, marking another point outside the Red Tide red area on the map, his tone steady without pause: "Secondly, the planning direction for territories fully integrated into the Red Tide system."

Chapter 664: Achievements of the Red Tide System (Part 2)

The scribes immediately changed paper, and the quill pens fell once more.

"Part one, Desolate Mist Plain Zone, fourteen territories."

Bradley marked the light-colored area on the map that was first covered by the Red Tide Grain Store system: "Originally, it was the poorest part of the Northern Territory.

But it was also the first area to complete the transformation of the grain store system, and it can now be considered the second grain store in the Northern Territory after Mai Lang."

Bradley lightly tapped the page: "Three reasons for integration: one, spring plowing is entirely dependent on Red Tide seeds, Ice Claw, and geothermal greenhouses;

two, the account book method and grain store allocation are implemented most thoroughly. Three, post-disaster relief made the local populace highly reliant on Red Tide."

In the tiered seats, a young official who recently returned from a survey in Spike Wind Village slightly lowered his head.

He remembered how, more than a year ago, the villagers looked at unfamiliar Red Tide officials with wary faces.

Some even feared that after the grain store was taken over, they would be heavily taxed and preferred to hide in the woods.

But when the first batch of grain bags and greenhouses were set up, the resistance quickly loosened in the face of the reality of food and warmth.

He remembered how those children looked the first time they lined up outside the geothermal greenhouse to receive their morning porridge, their hands frozen red, eyes bright.

This is how Red Tide gradually won people over, step by step.

Bradley continued: "Including Gray Wheat Hill, Spike Wind Territory, White Mane Territory, Old Loine Territory, and fourteen others."

He paused here: "The early spring test fields in the Desolate Mist Zone have already proven that Mai Lang's system is correct, that unified production management yields fifty percent more on average than the old system."

At this point, Director Mike from the Agricultural Department stepped forward half a step, a bit nervous, to add: "The Agricultural Department has an additional report."

Louis raised his hand to signal him to continue.

Mike, not knowing how to read, memorized the numbers himself, but their weight was truly astonishing: "In the Northern Territory, seventy-six large grain stores newly built this year are all managed uniformly by Red Tide. All warehouse entry and exit procedures follow the Red Tide Account Book, with Northern Territory lords only playing a supporting role.

Spring sowing breed distribution... This year is also fully orchestrated by Red Tide. Seeds, geothermal greenhouse materials, and irrigation tables are distributed uniformly according to Red Tide's plan. The instances of territories distributing on their own have greatly decreased."

Bradley nodded, instructing the scribes to mark this item as important, then added: "The current situation has achieved a three-tier structure from Red Tide grain stores to town grain stores to village stores."

Several officials from the Grain Department couldn't hide a bit of pride on their faces; this is what they achieved after a year of travel throughout the Northern Territory.

Having completed the report on the grain-producing territories, Bradley turned to the next page: "Second part, New Mining Belt Zone, composed of thirteen territories."

The Director of the Mining Department, Valentine, spoke in a rough yet confident tone: "These are the first batch of semi-industrial zones following the replication of the Forge Star model by the Red Tide Mining Department."

Bradley read out: "Black Coal Canyon, Furnace Smoke Valley, Hammer Sound Town, Red Sand Slope, North Mine Field, among others.

Three reasons for integration: steam pumps saved the mines from flooding, rail tracks stabilized transportation, and the Mining Department's unified purchase of raw ores crushed the old mine owners' coffers."

An official from the New Mining Belt Zone let out a sigh of relief.

He remembered the look of despair when the mines were flooded, and also the day the first steam pump was activated; miners circled it again and again as if they were watching a monster. Indeed, technology changes the world.

Bradley continued: "Currently all mines are using the Red Tide Account Book, the Craftsman Department has set up three standard smelting points..."

Louis nodded with satisfaction, gesturing for Bradley to continue.

Bradley turned the page: "Third part, Red Tide Warehouse Management Area. Frost Tooth Castle, Cold Cry Town, Black Peak Outpost, Falling Pine Lake Village Group... a total of nineteen territories.

This area suffered the most from the winter disaster and has the highest dependency; many lords fled after the winter disaster. After Red Tide took over, they turned it into a warehouse management area, storing strategic materials like food and minerals."

Trade Bureau Director Desland added: "These are also future towns along the railway line."

Bradley nodded: "The Craftsman Department has dispatched technical officers to repair bridges and roads; the Defense Department established three border garrisons; the Inspection Department is piloting full-coverage management."

He then added: "Two rebelling old nobility have been reasonably settled. All their subordinate soldiers and officials have been transferred into the Red Tide hierarchy."

Several members of the Inspectorate present grinned, as they knew very well what "reasonable settlement" implied.

"These areas are already in fact directly governed by Red Tide. The words of the local station master carry more weight than those of the old lords."

These words made several young officials stand a little straighter.

The villagers also resisted when they were first taken over, but when the Red Tide dispatched the station master with the first batch of grain vehicles, the resistance collapsed as naturally as dead branches breaking under the weight of snow.

Bradley turned to the next volume: "Fourth part, Southern Line of the Harbor Bay, eight territories. Breaking Wave Bay, Old Shipyard Zone, Sea Breeze Castle, Stone Coast Village, among others."

Desland stepped forward to add: "These are all preparatory zones for the new port."

Bradley nodded: "The new port is under construction, the Port Affairs Office has marked its flag, and maritime taxes and fishing port scheduling are managed by Red Tide, preparing to transition to direct jurisdiction by the Port Affairs."

Then he added: "Due to the work-for-food policy, the people in the Harbor Bay region have shown high cooperation."

Bradley concluded the report: "Other areas are used as supply nodes, border posts, or processing zones. Though not fully annexed, they have become semi-integrated within the Red Tide system."

Louis listened quietly, as if committing every word to memory.

Finally, he nodded to indicate the continuation of the next report.

Inspectorate Director Erin rose from her seat, her movements neat and nimble.

Holding a roll of black-leather account books, she walked to the front of the long table and slightly bowed: "Lord, the Inspection Department's disciplinary report for this year is presented as follows."

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Her voice has never been loud, yet it carries a kind of chill that leaves no room for distraction.

"First item, case filing status." She opened the ledger, and the clerks immediately picked up their pens. "A total of seventy-one cases were filed by the Inspection Department this year."

Someone on the tiered seats took a gentle breath; this number meant that a case was uncovered almost every four days.

Erin continued: "The cases verified and executed for punishment are as follows..."

She read them out one by one: "Embezzlement of disaster relief grain, thirty-one cases; withholding of spring planting seeds, twenty-two cases; unauthorized tax setups, covertly collecting reconstruction fees, twelve cases; harboring Evil God worship, six cases, including five altars."

When "Evil God worship" was mentioned, the entire hall noticeably grew colder, as if the chill seeped into their skin.

Most of the people present had experienced the insect disaster, something that could not be lightly mentioned.

Erin closed the first half of the ledger and continued: "Second item, punishment methods. Immediate dismissal of sixty-three people; public shackling for nineteen individuals; legal execution of nineteen people."

She paused, then opened the last page: "Among them, the most egregious case involves a Red Tide official responsible for aid supplies.

Having accepted a bribe from the local Lord, he embezzled grain distribution for two whole months, forcing disaster victims to sell their children for food, and was promptly executed by the Inspection Department."

"Third item, ledger implementation status. This year marks the first time in the Northern Territory that ledger formatting has been unified, open, and transparent."

Erin turned the pages and continued the report: "Fifty-four territories fully integrated into the Red Tide system, execution in place. Thirty semi-cooperative territories executed only half, with massive data inconsistencies.

Territories refusing to cooperate have decreased from sixteen to eight, but all eight have no ledgers or have directly falsified them."

A small commotion emerged from the tiered seats. Clearly, these eight territories were stubborn thorns in the Red Tide system.

Erin lifted her gaze and looked at Louis: "The Inspection Department suggests that starting from spring, we implement comprehensive ledger control over the eight non-cooperating territories and replace their leaders and town officials.

As for the eight non-cooperating Lords, freeze their personal lord dividends, revoke Red Tide-granted warehouse rights and mining rights, and prohibit them from leaving the country until ledger integration is complete.

Additionally, we suggest halting all disaster relief and spring planting aid, listing them on the Red Tide blacklist, and no longer allowing them to enjoy priority rights for grain, trade routes, and mining within the Red Tide system.

For the thirty semi-cooperative territories, the Inspection Department suggests halving their dividends and suspending their priority trade routes and priority warehouse rights until ledger execution meets standards."

She paused again and supplemented: "All these punishments are within the scope permitted by the contract."

Once these words fell, the atmosphere in the hall seemed to lower another degree.

The officials present could all understand that this was a severe blow to the Lord themselves.

Louis listened, not hesitating: "Granted."

Everyone present understood that once this order was given, the eight territories had no retreat, and the thirty semi-cooperative territories had no room for ambiguity.

While the atmosphere lingered in the aftermath of the punishment decision, Education Director Lanna stood up from the tiered seats.

Holding the education booklet embossed with feather pen patterns, she walked to the long table, saluted, then raised her head.

"Lord, the Education Department's cultural integration and infrastructure achievements for this year are presented as follows."

Her voice was not as cold as Erin's nor as steady as Bradley's, but with a clarity and softness unique to educators.

Yet at this moment, no one regarded her as a kind teacher.

After all, Louis had said that the roots of Red Tide must be planted in the children, and the weight of this department is no lighter than granaries or mines.

"First item, establishment of town schools." She opened the first page, and the feather pens almost simultaneously dropped beside the clerks.

"This year, a total of seventeen town schools were established. Distributed across the Desolate Mist Plain, new mining zones, Snowfield Northern line, and Harbor Southern line."

She paused: "School curricula are unified into four categories, literacy lessons using Red Tide simplified characters, arithmetic lessons, tailored vocational training, and the early simplified edition of 'Red Tide Story.'"

Upon hearing "Red Tide Story," someone raised their eyebrows slightly.

Lanna explained: "Also, a formal edition of 'The Great Lord Louis,' currently narrated as a fable to illustrate the early deeds of Red Tide, helping children understand order and mutual assistance."

She supplemented: "Feedback from multiple local schools shows that children are accepting far faster than expected."

Most Northern Territory children in the past were not even fluent in speaking, but now the first batch of students can use Red Tide simplified characters to write the village's grain ledger."

A very light whisper emerged among the tiered seats, an irrepressible sense of surprise and relief.

Lanna turned to the next page: "Second item, standardization of relief ceremonies."

The porridge-serving days have all adopted Red Tide Sun patterns. Each porridge-serving site must recite one sentence, 'Red Tide and you all endure the cold winter together.'"

She lifted her head and looked at everyone: "The people have already started to associate the Red Tide flag with survival. This is the most crucial first step in cultural integration."

Lanna turned the page again: "Third item, planning for the coming year. The Education Department plans to, in the next year, increase territory under Red Tide system control and establish a touring teacher system, teaching literacy and basic arithmetic to territories not yet integrated.

If the outcome is ideal, within two years, the literacy rate of children over nine years old in Northern Territory can be raised to thirty percent, and over sixty percent in areas within the Red Tide system."

She finally closed the booklet, bowed slightly: "Above is the completion of the Education Department's report."

Craftsmen Director Mike stood up from his seat, his voice carrying the roughness unique to craftsmen: "Lord, the Craftsmen Department's major achievements for this year, have exceeded the original plan.

First, forty-two bridges were newly built in the Northern Territory; old roads were repaired, totaling two hundred and thirty miles.

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Second, the tracks have expanded from seven to twenty-one, mostly within the Red Tide territory.

Third, the standard smelting sites have increased to six, with the output of the mineral belt nearly one and a half times higher than last year..."

After Mike stepped down, Desland, the head of the Trade Bureau, stepped forward immediately.

This gaunt middle-aged man spoke at a steady pace, but with a sharp tone: "The achievements of the Trade Bureau this year, trade routes were unified, and the system of post stations was formed."

He presented the data: "The original seven major trade routes have now been expanded to twenty-one, all under the control of Red Tide. Taxes have been reduced by thirty percent, and the speed of goods circulation has reached nearly double of last year..."

Next, a woman wearing a white-gray cape stood up.

She is Cyril, the head of the Health Department, a medical apprentice brought by Louis from the Calvin Clan, now managing all medical lines in the Northern Territory.

"This year, the Health Department established nineteen fixed medical points and thirteen mobile medical convoys throughout the Northern Territory. Managed thirty-seven cases of epidemics without any spread..."

Listening to a whole round of reports, everyone could tell that this year was not about barely maintaining but was about a comprehensive and vigorous growth.

The framework of the Red Tide administration not only stood firm but began to spread outward with new branches and new extensions.

Overall, the first year was not just successful but exceeded expectations.

With this sentence landing, the hall suddenly became quiet as if even the air paused for a moment.

Everyone instinctively looked toward the main seat.

Louis slowly stood up, his movements unhurried, yet naturally drawing all the attention.

He didn't display authority, just a slight smile, "Ladies and gentlemen, you have done very well."

With one sentence, quite a few officials slightly relaxed their shoulders, but before they could take a breath, Louis continued:

"This year's Red Tide administrative plan exceeded expectations. The market system ran smoothly, the ledgers were unified, the granaries were stabilized, the trade routes fully connected..."

Someone in the hall couldn't help but straighten their chest.

Louis scanned the audience: "This year, we caught the falling sky of the Northern Territory. We ensured countless people had food to eat, work to do, roads to walk. We let them know that with the Red Tide, winter won't starve them."

On the tiered seating, many officials from post-disaster areas slightly lowered their sights; those scenes were all too clear to them:

Bony children trembling while holding bowls of hot porridge, miners silent the first time they tasted hot soup, Snowfield women crying speechless over the first mouthful of dry rations.

Louis's voice wasn't loud, but carried a certain strength: "Countless people in the Northern Territory survived because of your work. This is not a flattering remark but a fact."

Someone's Adam's apple moved slightly.

"This is not just my achievement." He paused, "It's every one of you, that brought the Northern Territory up from the ruins."

These mere dozens of words made more than one person in the hall have scorching eyes.

No one dared to speak, but that pride rushed upward from the ground.

Then Louis softened his tone: "But our task is far from over. The second year of Red Tide will be more difficult and larger."

Everyone sat up straight, showing seriousness.

Louis raised his hand to point at the large map of the Northern Territory: "We need to turn these red lines into real vital arteries. To connect every road, every mineral line, every school, every warehouse into a single system."

Then he shifted his tone: "As for dividends."

The air in the hall visibly moved.

Louis's smile deepened: "Every official has their share. This year's profit distribution will be done according to the rules. Take what you can, it's your due."

Someone almost couldn't resist looking up at him.

"As for the dividends for each territory, it's the same." Louis's voice was calm, yet as steady as a nail, "Give what should be given, don't be stingy."

"The Red Tide administration doesn't rely on force, but on making people realize that following us won't let them suffer. Only this way, they won't complain.

Next year we will continue to make Red Tide stronger, making the Northern Territory truly a complete whole."

"Ladies and gentlemen." Louis looked around, "Keep up the good work."

No one shouted, nor did anyone bang the table in the hall.

But everyone simultaneously stood, bowed respectfully, their movements as synchronized as a giant banner unfolding in the wind.

They bowed to Louis not because of protocol, nor out of fear.

Most of the officials were mere civilians, refugees, miners, apprentices, and even sold slaves three years ago.

It was Louis who lifted them from under the old Nobility's feet, letting them for the first time eat their fill, dress warmly, and sit here handling affairs.

And they followed Louis's example, saving the starving, opening schools, establishing hospitals, lighting up the soup kitchens...

Of course, all this was because Louis gave them positions and opportunities.

So they saluted Lord Louis, for standing here today was Louis's work that let them stand upright.

Chapter 667: The First Breath of Spring in Cold Sand Territory

The winter in Cold Sand Territory had just receded not long ago, yet the wind outside the castle still carried a hint of chill.

As dawn broke, fog rose from the slopes, and the remnants of snow slowly melted along the cracks in the castle walls.

Baron Hold, Lord of Cold Sand, sat in the small hall of the castle; the coarse wooden chair, aged over the years, let out a slight squeak as he sat down.

"Being a lord has become such a hardship..." Hold muttered under his breath, the lines on his face furrowed, as if fearing others in the castle might overhear.

In truth, no one would hear him; apart from his attendant, there were barely any willing to stay in this castle.

Cold Sand Territory was long impoverished. For the past three years, the mines were flooded, and the granaries grew emptier with each passing year.

If not for the salt, grain, timber, and ironware sent by Red Tide, this place would have collapsed long ago.

Yet Hold was unwilling; he was the Lord of Cold Sand, supposedly the highest ruler of the domain.

But now? Officials sent by Red Tide came to inspect the accounts; the warehouses bore Red Tide seals, and even spring sowing had to follow Red Tide's schedules.

When people in the domain encountered troubles, they sought Red Tide's officials, not him.

"A Lord... turned into a mere decoration." He scratched his disheveled hair, his face furrowing even more.

But Hold was well aware that without Red Tide, he wouldn't have survived last winter.

The last few bags of grain in his warehouse remained only due to Red Tide's relief.

Even the winter medicinal soup his son consumed was supplied by Red Tide's medical team.

Yet when it came to rebellion, Hold dared only to think about it, without the courage to act.

"Should I keep an extra cart or two of ore?" Hold cautiously considered, but quickly withdrew the thought, "Forget it, the warehouse has seals; even a missing bag would be noticed."

He pondered again: "How about... falsifying the accounts?"

Immediately, the image of Inspection Department officials surfaced in his mind, imagining himself hung at the city gate, having heard of consequences faced by other lords who falsified records.

Hold's entire body shivered as he extinguished the idea completely.

"How about driving off Red Tide's officials?...No, don't be ridiculous; I only have a dozen knights, a squad would be more than enough to handle me."

The more Hold thought, the more dejected he became, slumping back into his chair: "Being a Lord is truly difficult. If only Duke Edmund were still here."

As he rubbed his brow, the attendant urgently knocked on the door: "Lord, Pete, the aide from Red Tide, requests an audience."

Hold's heart skipped a beat.

Pete? Red Tide's aid supervisor? Coming at a time like this? For what?

"Oh no, are they here to investigate me?" His throat tightened, "Has the letter I sent to Collins been intercepted?"

Recalling the letter filled with complaints, his face turned pale for a moment, yet outwardly he feigned composure: "Show him in."

After the attendant left, Hold quickly tugged at his sleeves, pretending to sit upright, though sweat had already formed in his palms.

He didn't wait long before Pete stepped into the small hall.

The middle-aged Red Tide official wore a deep red shawl and offered simple gestures, yet exuded a sense of reliability.

"Lord Hold." Pete's voice wasn't loud, yet commanded respect.

Hold feigned impatience, his face cold: "What brings you here?"

Pete didn't rush to speak but signaled to the attendant.

Two attendants pushed a waist-high wooden box inside, its weight making the stone slabs emit a muffled sound.

Hold froze, heart skipping a beat, fearing it was interrogation equipment, he shrunk back an inch against his chair.

The box was placed beside the table, its latch snapped open by Pete's hand.

The moment the lid lifted, Hold's breath halted...

Inside was not documents, nor seals, but an entire chest of blinding gold coins.

Sunlight slanted through the window slits, illuminating the gold, making the small hall seem ablaze.

Hold stood frozen, even forgetting to move his Adam's apple.

Pete placed a ledger atop the gold, his tone steady as if reciting routine business: "Lord, this is Cold Sand Territory's dividend for the year."

Hold's lips trembled: "...Dividend?"

"Two thousand gold coins." Pete personally flipped the ledger to the settlement page and pushed it toward him, "This is the Red Tide settlement, there won't be any errors."

Hold fixed his gaze on that page.

The words "Two thousand" etched clearly in his mind.

He reached to touch, yet his hand trembled so much he couldn't even grasp the ledger's corner's edge.

In his life, Baron Hold hadn't seen a sum of gold this formidable.

Cold Sand Territory was perpetually poor, the income for a baron of such a small domain was more of a formality in the family annals, rather than tangible wealth in hand.

Yet now, this chest of gold sat before him, solid, real, its brilliance hard to divert his eyes from.

Even a wild thought flashed through his mind: "Is this heaven playing tricks on me?"

Pete began to explain: "The rails expedited shipments sixfold, and the steam pumps ensured no downtime for the mines. Red Tide acquisitions were at stable prices, naturally elevating the domain's income."

Hold listened, his mind blank, feeling somewhat dizzy.

He whispered in repetition: "Two thousand gold coins... In my lifetime... I haven't even seen one thousand..."

Pete opened another ledger: "Additionally, the domain received winter frostbite subsidies, farm equipment grants, road and bridge repair bonuses, and school construction aids."

Hold struggled to process, feeling as though his chest was blocked by something, which suddenly felt unobstructed.

Pete concluded with a final gesture, pulling from his bag a thinner catalog, laying it before Hold like a finishing blow: "This is the list of items the Red Tide Commerce Association can supply, with discounts for Lords within the Red Tide system..."

Chapter 668: The First Breath of Spring in Cold Sand Territory (Part 2)

Holder's breathing, which had just calmed down a bit, was thoroughly disturbed again as he stared at the booklet, as if looking at some kind of forbidden magic.

Pete opened the directory, allowing him to clearly see rows of items: Federation fine cloth, forged steel sword, gems, glass goblets...

These are high-priced items that only the great nobility can afford to use.

Holder was completely ignited: "This... these are things I never even dared to imagine before! Pete, can I buy this set of glass cups? Can I also buy this sword? Even this alchemy gemstone castle?"

"You are the Lord of Cold Sand, naturally you can buy them," Pete's tone remained calm, "The Red Tide Commerce Association has them in stock. Discounts have also been reserved for you."

Holder seemed to be struck by lightning for the second time, standing up from his chair: "Lord Louis... Lord Louis is the one who truly changes the Northern Territory! I used to even... ah, how foolish I am!"

He began to incoherently fantasize: "I will replace the entire set of tableware in the banquet hall with a new glass set! And order a Federation cloak for the lady... no, two! The children must have one too! The Cold Sand Territory must gain respectability!"

Pete saw that he was completely immersed in the imagination of gold coins and a bright future, and then added: "Lord, Red Tide hopes that Cold Sand Territory can host the spring festival locally this year, to enjoy with the people."

This is an important step of Red Tide cultural integration, to make Cold Sand Territory integrate into the system faster.

But such words, Pete need not tell Holder.

And Holder didn't have the mindset to think about deeper reasons, upon hearing it was a celebration, he slapped the table, shaking the gold slightly: "Do it! It must be done! Our Cold Sand Territory must show its atmosphere!"

Pete nodded: "I will write your reply into today's report."

Holder nodded quickly: "Write it, write it, you must let Lord Louis see the sincerity of Cold Sand Territory!"

.....

Today is the official day of Red Tide's spring festival.

The morning fog of Cold Sand Territory still wrapped around the gray stone fortress walls, but the persistent chill that lingered in the stone crevices and alleyways seemed to be driven away by some kind of warmth rising from the people's hearts.

At the crack of dawn, the main street was no longer winter's dead silence.

No one knows which blacksmith shop first hung up a deep red flag with a golden sun emblem.

Soon after, like some silent command spreading across town, households hung wooden plaques painted with sun emblems on their wooden doors, or tied bright red linen strips.

Looking around, among the gray stone walls and leftover snow, the bright Red Tide red appeared like flickering flames, thoroughly igniting the small border town.

White steam rose from large iron pots set beside the street, containing oatmeal and meat soup specially prepared for the festival.

Though there's not much meat, the scent of lard and herbs seeped through the breeze into every window crease of each household.

"Hot! Freshly baked rye loaf! Spiced! Thanks to the generosity of Lord Louis!"

The peddler's cries broke the morning tranquility, carrying the unique festive cheer.

The old baker who usually huddled his neck and wore a bitter expression today stood with his back straight.

He wore an apron around his waist and had a rough iron Red Tide sun badge pinned to his chest, distributed by the Red Tide aid officer a few days ago, polished brightly with grease.

His stand was filled with things that could truly fill the belly:

Rye bread the size of a fist baked to a crispy crust, each topped with a red dot made from red fruit jam symbolizing "sun shine."

A few smoked hard strips of salted meat hung on a wooden rack, emitting an enticing smoky aroma, with barrels of pickled cabbage.

"Who dared imagine celebrating like this before." The old baker wrapped the bread in oiled paper for the customers, tracing a sun gesture over his chest, "If not for Officer Pete bringing in a convoy of flour, this oven fire would've long gone out on a winter's night."

Under the nearby wooden shed, heaps of onions and root crops brought by Red Tide caravan awaited.

This in previous Cold Sand Territory was a wealth enjoyed only by nobles in the castle.

The people on the street increased, those were the miners who had just finished the night shift.

Unlike the previous winter, they weren't covered in coal dust, eyes numb like walking corpses.

Today, almost everyone had a red cloth strip pinned to their wool hats or rough cloth collars, or sewed a crude sun pattern.

"Cut me two fingers' width of salted meat, and weigh a small bag of coarse sugar for the kids, today's spring festival, let the home have a touch of sweetness." A burly miner carefully placed a few worn copper coins on the wooden counter.

His companion beside him joked with a smile: "Old Tom, buying festive food so early?"

"Indeed." Old Tom grinned, revealing yellow teeth, pointing to the giant Red Tide flag fluttering on the tower of the distant administration hall.

"This year's so cold, if not for Lord Louis sending Officer Pete, we would be buried in frozen graves now. This money is spent joyfully, celebrating us escaping from God's hands!"

While the miners were expressing emotions, a neat sound of footsteps came from the street entrance.

Pete, accompanied by other aid officers, was walking down the street.

He wore the deep red Red Tide uniform, the cloak though somewhat old was washed clean, the copper button on his shoulder shone faintly in the morning light.

"Officer Pete! May the sun shine upon you!"

"Officer, these are freshly baked loaves, have a taste, no need to pay!"

Chapter 669: The First Breeze of Spring in Cold Sand Territory (Part 3)

As soon as the townspeople saw him along the way, the originally noisy market didn't quiet down, but instead, surged up with a wave of greater enthusiasm.

The men took off their hats in salutation, their movements filled with a sincerity never before seen.

The women smiled and lifted the baskets in their hands, eager to stuff the best food into his hands.

The children, like little tails, followed him, the bold ones even daring to reach out and touch the hem of his cloak.

Pete smiled and nodded to each one, politely declining the gifts, but accepting the heavy respect.

He took a deep breath of the air mixed with the scent of wheat and smoke, something in his chest gently warming.

A year had passed.

Pete subconsciously rubbed the inconspicuous wear on his cuff, his thoughts drifting back to the time a year ago when he first set foot on this land.

The Cold Sand Territory back then was not like it is now. It was like a mute town, lifeless, even the wind that blew through it carried a whimper.

He remembered it was a gloomy afternoon when the Red Tide convoy just entered the town gate.

No welcome, nor any insults.

Only pairs of eyes hiding behind the door slits, window boards, and broken fences.

In those eyes was a murky numbness, and deeper within lay a kind of wary vigilance, like watching a wolf.

At that time, the distance between him and these territorial people was so close, yet so far.

Close enough he could smell the moldy odor coming from their old clothes, yet far enough that no matter what he said, they would only look at him with terrified eyes and then shut the door tightly.

In their eyes, Pete in his red uniform was merely another lord come to exploit.

They feared him, as they feared the cold winter and death itself.

Pete did not back down.

He recalled the words of his instructor in the Red Tide academy: "Don't expect them to understand you at first; you must engrave your rules into their bellies with your actions."

So he began to use the skills he learned in Red Tide, solving the despair on this land item by item.

The first thing was to bring the dead mines back to life.

The shafts were flooded with bone-chilling underground water, and the old lord's overseers would only wield whips to force people into the water, resulting in nothing but a few more floating corpses.

When Pete arrived, he did not wield a whip but instead wrote an urgent letter to Lord Louis.

Half a month later, several steel monstrosities spewing white steam were transported to the shaft—steam pumps.

When the machine emitted a deafening roar, tirelessly drawing black water from the deep shaft night and day like a giant beast, those numb miners all knelt on the ground, thinking it was some kind of divine miracle.

"Stop kneeling," Pete shouted loudly, standing in the mud, "This is Red Tide technology! The water is gone, start work tomorrow, and there will be wages!"

The second thing was to straighten people's spines.

Previously, the miners had to carry heavy mining baskets, climbing step by step out of the pit, and many were crippled with back troubles before they reached thirty.

Pete summoned people from the craftsmen's department to lay rows of tracks wrapped in wood and iron along the mine tunnels.

When the first cart full of ore smoothly slid out of the tunnel along the track, the miners touching those tracks, their hands were shaking. They discovered for the first time that work didn't have to cost them their lives.

The third thing was to let everyone know where their money went.

This was the hardest step. Pete erected a large wooden board at the entrance of the administrative hall, posting on it an open ledger in Red Tide's standardized format.

Every tax, every sack of relief grain, every copper coin's usage was written clearly.

"The former lords' taxation was robbery, Red Tide's taxation is rule," Pete said, pointing at the ledger to the gathered territorial people, "Every grain of wheat you hand over is on here. Anyone who dares to tamper with it, the Inspection Department's knife will cut them."

When the territorial people saw those numbers truly transformed into repaired roads, the built standard Red Tide granary, and the winter rations distributed into their hands, the ice named vigilance finally melted completely.

Not to mention the newly completed town school.

In the past, the children of miners could only roll around like weeds in the coal slag, now, they sit in bright rooms, following teachers sent by Red Tide, reciting, "Lord Louis saves Northern Territory..."

When the old miner, his face black with coal, heard his son read the words from the book for the first time, this man who had never shed a tear in his life, hugged Pete's boots and cried uncontrollably.

This is how it was, step by step, item by item.

Pete used the power and wisdom bestowed by Red Tide to forcibly intervene in their lives, turning this mire into solid ground.

That wary vigilance like watching a wolf dispersed, replaced by an almost blind trust and reverence.

They began to realize that this stern Officer Pete was different from the former lords who only wielded whips. He was truly someone who would put bread into their hands, the one who on a snowy night would check to see if the roof had collapsed.

This reverence is not just for Pete personally.

Pete could feel that whenever he mentioned the name "Lord Louis," the light in these territorial people's eyes would become even more devout.

Because Pete had told them, "I am merely an executor, the one giving you steam engines, tracks, food, and schools is Red Tide, is the great Count Louis Calvin."

Thus, this gratitude flowed through Pete to that distant, sun-like name.

Chapter 670: The First Breeze of Spring in Cold Sand Territory (Part 4)

Now Pete walked down the street, enjoying the feeling of being surrounded by crowds and followed by their gaze.

This feeling was wonderful.

He was no longer a humble adjutant; he had become the backbone of these thousands of people, their guardian in their eyes.

This sense of accomplishment made him feel that all the cold he had endured and all the nights he had stayed awake were worth it.

The more he enjoyed this honor, the deeper his gratitude grew towards that person.

Pete instinctively looked at the distant red flag fluttering in the air and took a deep breath in his heart.

"Without Lord Louis, I am nothing."

It was Lord Louis who gave him this uniform, these resources, and more importantly, the Red Tide method that could change the world.

He had merely followed the blueprint drawn by Lord Louis to construct such a miraculous town.

All the prestige he possessed was but a reflection of the brilliance of the Red Tide.

"May the Sun always shine upon you, my Lord."

Pete silently prayed in his heart, straightened his back, and walked more confidently towards the end of the street.

There, the medical officer stationed by the Red Tide was posting the winter health report.

Death toll: six people.

Pete stopped and his gaze lingered on that number for a long time.

Those unfamiliar might think it was just a cold statistic, but for those who had lived in the Northern Territory for over a decade, this number was practically a miracle.

In past winters, this number was usually no less than two hundred, sometimes even more.

Whenever blizzards blocked the roads, Cold Sand Territory became an isolated island, where the elderly would quietly pass away on cold kang beds, miners succumbed to coughing disease in the dead of night,

and children who couldn't afford medicine died of fever. Back then, the end of winter often came with the thriving business of the coffin shops, the funeral processions stretching from the street to the alley.

But this year, only six.

And Pete knew well who these six were, three were elderly, and the rest were already terminally ill.

Not one died from the cold, not one from hunger, and not one was left to freeze because they couldn't afford treatment.

All this was thanks to that medical station at the street corner, adorned with the Red Cross and Sun flags.

The doctors sent by the Red Tide charged no consultation fees, and that bitter medicine was forced into the mouths of every frail lord's subject daily.

"Lord Louis said human life is more precious than gold in the lands of the Red Tide."

This, the Red Tide achieved.

"Mom, look! I have a Sun!" A crisp child's voice broke the people's reverie.

A group of children wore ill-fitting thick cotton coats, holding small wooden windmills painted with the Sun's emblem on their blades.

They weaved through the crowd, singing a short song composed by the bard from the relief team: "The red flag rises, ice melts away, the Lord's grace is like a spring breeze passing through..."

Their cheeks were rosy, no longer a frostbitten bluish purple from the harsh cold.

The adults watched these children, their gazes becoming distinctly gentle.

On both sides of the street, torches soaked in pine resin and banners bearing the emblem of the Red Tide swayed in the breeze.

This was more than just a festive decoration; it was a complete allegiance.

Every person here, from the badge-bearing baker to the grateful miners, to Pete's upright silhouette, they all became the steadiest cornerstone of the Red Tide order in this market full of red elements.

The wind was still cold, and life was not yet affluent, but as long as they saw the omnipresent emblem of the Red Tide Sun, people's hearts were warmed.

Because they knew that as long as the red flag still flew, the harsh winter of Cold Sand Territory was already over.