

Winter 671

Chapter 671: Iron Pulse

In the early autumn of the Northern Territory, the wind already carried bits of a chilling cold.

In the northern district of Red Tide City, the newly built freight platform was cordoned off by a solemn circle of red-armored knights.

Only a few people were allowed to approach the inner circle: a black-robed scribe from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, a surveyor in a gray uniform from the Road Department, just over a dozen business group representatives, and seasoned craftsmen permitted to witness the scene.

On the hillock in the outskirts, a circle of citizens gathered from afar.

They were flushed with cold, but their eyes were fixed intently on the parallel tracks stretching into the gray-white mist.

"Damn this weather..." Retto shrank his neck, trying to tuck his frozen chin into the fox fur of his collar.

He looked to be in his early twenties, wearing a well-tailored but slightly thin silk suit from the South, seeming out of place among the thickly fur-coated Northern people.

This was his first time following his father to this place, Red Tide City.

"I don't understand why we have to stand here in the cold wind." Retto stomped his feet, complaining to a small, inconspicuous man beside him.

He had no idea who this man was, only that he was also invited by Lord Bradley, the head of internal affairs.

"Hey, listen." Retto sniffed, his tone filled with the arrogance of a young master from a major trading house, "My father, the president of Golden Wheat Sheaf Trading Company, had urgent matters to attend to, so he sent me to take his place.

The people from the Internal Affairs Office said this is some epoch-making moment? Ha! Just because of these two iron bars laid on the muddy ground?"

The small man beside him was called House, and he wasn't angered by Retto's arrogance.

He wore a coal-dust-covered work uniform, the attire of the Craftsman's Office.

"Sir," House spoke softly, "You'd better fasten the buttons of your collar tightly."

"What?" Retto frowned, thinking this lower-class person was mocking him for wearing so little.

"Because that is the Snowfield Iron Vein." House murmured, "First-time viewers often have weak legs. Falling down would be quite embarrassing, sir."

"Ha?" Just when Retto wanted to laugh off the warning as mere alarmist talk, an unusual sensation wafted up from the ground.

Just as he began to feel slightly uneasy, the pebbles at his feet started jittering and clacking against the tracks.

It wasn't the violent shaking of an earthquake, but a tumultuous vibration akin to thousands of horses galloping.

"Woo—!!!"

Suddenly, a sound he had never heard before tore through the cold stillness of early autumn.

The sound was neither the impassioned blare of a horn nor the roar of a magical beast.

It was cold, deep, highly penetrating, diving straight into Retto's marrow, making his scalp tingle, and his taunting words were instantly choked back.

The distant mist was violently shattered.

In Retto's tightly contracted pupils, a steel behemoth spewing thick smoke was pounding towards him along the track.

"What...what kind of monster is that?!"

Retto instinctively retreated two steps, his legs giving way, his back colliding heavily against the railing.

If not for the railing, he truly would have ended up sitting on the ground as House had said.

"That is the Snowfield Iron Vein." House said softly, eyes gleaming with an excited light.

The gigantic plow on the front of the locomotive was like a knight's heavy shield during a charge, gleaming with the cold sheen unique to cold iron.

Vast metal connecting rods drove the waist-high steel wheels, producing an aching rhythmic metallic clashing sound, carrying an irresistible physical oppression, as though anything in its path would be ground to pulp.

"Crunch, crunch, crunch!"

As the train approached, Retto felt that the land beneath the platform seemed to tremble slightly, his ears filled with the mechanical roar and the piercing sound of steam currents spewed by the colossal machine.

He had never seen anything so immense, so formidable.

The confidence and contempt he had as the young master of a merchant convoy were completely shattered by this steel monstrous entity.

He felt an indescribable shock, one that surpassed anything he ever imagined from any weapon or warrior.

He instinctively opened his mouth, but he could not utter a word.

"Is that...it?" Retto finally choked out this sentence from his throat.

The platform fell into dead silence, only heavy breathing echoed in the air.

The train, accompanied by the screeching howls of brake shoes, precisely halted beside the red line of the platform.

Scalding white steam sprayed from the pressure release valve, instantly engulfing half the platform, a wave of heat dispelling all cold.

The carriage door slid open.

The Red Tide Lord, Louis Calvin, was the first to step out.

He wore that signature black lord's long coat, his expression calm, his gaze sweeping over the crowd.

"Open the cargo hold."

With a gesture from Louis, the soldiers pulled open the seemingly immensely heavy enclosed cargo hold behind.

Stacks of burlap bags were inside, each one fully bulging, marked with a golden wheat ear and sun emblem.

Instinctively, Retto shielded himself, for he had seen too many scenes of the starving fighting brutally over half a loaf of black bread.

He expected these Northern people to eye those bags of flour like wild dogs, with a glimmer of greed in their eyes.

But he was wrong, terribly wrong.

When those life-saving food bags were laid out in front of them, of the hundreds to thousands of citizens surrounding them, not one gave those bags of flour a second glance.

Countless eyes, seemingly pulled by some magnetic force, were fixed intently on the young man in black standing amid the white steam.

It was something more primitive, more fervent than the desire for food.

It was the absolute reverence for the bringer of miracles.

"Lord Louis!!!" Someone shouted first, unknowingly.

Chapter 672: Iron Pulse (Part 2)

Following that, as if a fierce wind had swept over a field of wheat, the crowd on the hillside raised their hands in unison.

It wasn't a plea for food, but a soul-burning roar: "Lord Louis!!!"

This shout was sharper than the long whistle of the steam before, instantly tearing Retto's eardrums.

"Guardian of Winter!!!"

"Great Calvin!!"

The sound wave burst like a tsunami.

Retto was terrified to see House, the humble craftsman beside him, clutching the railing fervently.

In House's eyes was a nearly insane pride, the look of a believer showing off the true God to a heretic:
"Sir! Did you see that clearly! That's our Lord! That's the great Lord Louis!!"

Retto was driven back repeatedly by the wave of fervor.

Amid the deafening cheers, Louis did not show a proud expression.

He simply stood amidst the flying steam and cheers, looking at those fervent faces.

Then the young lord made a gesture.

He slowly raised his right arm and pressed his gloved fist firmly against his left chest, a salute in return.

"Boom——!!!"

If the previous cheers were a tsunami, then this moment was nothing short of an avalanche.

Seeing the lord's response, the crowd went completely mad.

Retto even felt the platform beneath him tremble violently with the sound waves, hearing nothing else but that name.

Louis held that pose for a full three seconds.

Then he lowered his hand, palm down, gently pressing the air.

But the moment that gesture fell, the avalanche-like cheers miraculously began to recede, until only the heavy breathing and the distant roar of the steam engine remained.

Controllable at will.

This was not just admiration; it was absolute dominion.

"A true man indeed." This was Retto's only thought.

Louis didn't linger on the platform, surrounded by knights, he walked through the road that the fervent crowds automatically cleared, and boarded the carriage returning to the administrative center.

Even when the lord's convoy disappeared at the end of the street, the suffocating fervor lingered in the air for a long time.

Half an hour later, at the Red Tide City administrative center, in the lord's office.

The heavy oak door slowly closed behind him with a soft "click."

The door, as thick as a wall, completely shut out the seemingly endless noise of the outside world.

Louis unbuttoned his collar, took off the black leather gloves stained with cold and coal dust, and tossed them aside on the corner of the long table.

"Please sit down." He walked around the desk and sat in his high-backed chair.

Despite the achievement, there was no slackening, his back remained straight, fingers habitually tapping the armrest.

Those who followed him in, Bradley, Desland, Lambert, and the sheepish Hamilton, finally snapped out of the fervent atmosphere earlier, regaining their composure as decision-makers.

Louis did not speak immediately, merely closing his eyes and tapping rhythmically on the table.

Four days, just four days.

Louis's bones still felt slightly uneasy from the prolonged vibration, but it made him feel real and joyful.

In the past, this road was a ruptured artery.

From the mines of Star Forging Territory to the docks of Dawn Port, it was a muddy death march, from the farmlands of Mai Lang Territory to the dinner tables of Red Tide City, it was a gamble with blizzards.

But in these ninety-six hours, this steel beast did not rest.

It neither needed sleep, nor needed to chew fodder like mules, nor would it go lame because of the hard permafrost.

It only consumed coal and water, running tirelessly across the night and day interchanging wilderness.

On the first morning, iron ore from Star Forging Territory poured into the carriages like a black waterfall.

On the second evening, the sea breeze of Dawn Port filled with the scent of southern spices blew through the windows.

At noon on the third day, it carried heavy powder bags from Mai Lang Territory.

And now on the fourth day's evening, they lay quietly in the warehouses of Red Tide City.

This isn't magic, this is order.

When four territories are forcibly bound together by this steel chain, the concept of Red Tide finally transformed from ink on a map to a living entity.

"A full one thousand two hundred miles... four days."

Even seated in the warm chair, Trade Bureau Chief Desland still found it somewhat incredible.

He flipped open the ledger he carried, his fingers quickly skimming over it, his usually squinted eyes now wide open, filled with a merchant's fervor.

"Lord, if it were my most elite caravans, without considering blizzards, bandits, or even mules dying of exhaustion, it would take at least forty days to make this round trip. And that's in the summer!"

Desland grabbed the thick ledger, waving it like a weapon: "This means our capital turnover speed is ten times that of those Southern Commerce Associations!

While their goods rot in the mud, ours have already been sold three times! This isn't even profit, it's like robbing money from their pockets!"

"Rather than your damn profit, I'm more concerned about stuffing all this in," Bradley interrupted Desland's fantasy.

"Four days can bring over a month's production from Mai Lang Territory... God, the city's granary can't handle such a fast turnover rate."

Chapter 673: Steel Pulse (Part 3)

Bradley scratched his sparse hair, sighed, but had a smile on his lips.

Lambert, who had been silent all along, neither looked at the account book nor drank water.

He stood like a statue behind Louis, eyes lowered, seemingly still savoring the vibrations of the train's movement.

"It's not just about cargo."

Lambert's voice was low, audible only to the few in the room.

As a Knight, what he saw was neither gold coins nor bread.

"If on these four days, the train carried my Knight Order and heavy crossbows... it would mean that just as the Barbarian Race in the north begins to gather, our swords would already be poised at their throats."

He raised his head, looking at Louis, with a glint of coldness in his eyes: "Four days is enough for us to launch a raid in any corner of the Northern Territory, or to support a besieged city."

Listening to their discussion, the expansive planning map in Louis's mind became increasingly clear.

Grain, wealth, war.

These three pillars that sustained the territory had finally found the most solid base during these four days and nights of steel roar.

He stood up, walked to the immense map of the Northern Territory on the wall.

"The internal circulation has been opened, but it's just the heartbeat starting. Next, we need to let the blood flow to the limbs."

He picked up a pen and drew a winding dotted line in the gray-marked ruins area on the east of the map, near the old site of Frost Halberd City.

"Phase two, head east. Lay the branch line connecting to the reconstruction area of Frost Halberd.

The survey team has already mapped out the route. We need to avoid those damn, poison gas-filled, insect disaster wastelands, and open a stable new line along the graystone valley."

"The reconstruction of Frost Halberd City requires a massive amount of stone. Hauling it by cart would take until the next century. I intend to speed up the reconstruction with a railway."

Then he pointed to the south: "Phase three, head south."

This time, even the Trade Bureau's Head Desland drew a sharp breath.

"We need to extend the railway to where it joins the trade routes of the Southern Nobles."

Louis coldly gazed at the area at the bottom of the map, representing blockade and hostility: "Since someone blocks our trade routes, we'll crash through their doors with cheaper goods and more efficient logistics.

Let Red Tide's goods flow south, attracting those unable to survive in the South, and the profit-driven merchants, pulling them all along the tracks."

What Louis mentioned was something the Calvin Clan seemed to have already noticed, as they were slowly distancing themselves from the Calvin Commerce Association and had used some methods to make certain Nobility refuse to buy Red Tide's goods.

Then Louis turned to Hamilton, who was hunched over his chair frantically taking notes.

"This requires a technological upgrade. Hamilton, currently the Snowfield Iron Vein is too heavy, struggling on long mountain routes."

"Y-yes, my Lord!" Hamilton pushed his goggle back up his nose, responding nervously.

"I want the next generation of boilers, lighter, and more fuel-efficient. I'll order Star Forging Territory to start casting more finely spaced cog rails to adapt to inclines." Louis held up a finger.

"Also, the Artisan Academy should immediately open steam repair courses. I don't want the trains breaking down halfway and having to wait for you to come all the way from Red Tide City to fix them. I want every future station to have someone who can repair trains."

The young craftsman nodded frantically, almost breaking the pen in his grip.

Finally, Louis turned to look at Lambert: "Lambert, what does this mean for our strategy?"

"It means speed, my Lord." Lambert answered without hesitation, "Winter supply lines will no longer be nightmares. If we don't rely on horse carts, our heavily armored infantry can mobilize at ten times the speed."

"Exactly." Louis pressed both hands against the edge of the map, lowering his voice with a suffocating sense of oppression, "In the future, when the Empire war bursts out..."

Hearing the words "Empire war," it was as if the warm atmosphere in the office froze instantly.

Desland's hand flipping through the accounts stopped mid-air, Bradley's smile froze on his face, even Lambert couldn't help but twitch his eyelids slightly.

But Louis didn't pause or shy away.

He continued calmly as if discussing tomorrow's weather:

"...when the Empire war bursts out, while the enemy's legions are gnawing on hard bread in the snow and waiting for marathon-like supplies, Red Tide Territory can gather a well-equipped, physically strong army within three days."

His pen swiftly sketched on the map, linking Frost Halberd Old City, Silver Pine Ridge, Red Tide City, Mai Lang Territory, Star Forging Territory, and Dawn Port into one.

It was a gigantic network covering the entire southeast Northern Territory.

"This is the long-term objective, a Red Tide internal Northern Territory external line." Louis dropped the pen and said after a pause.

Looking at the ferocious and vast steel net on the map, they finally understood that this young Lord's ambition was never confined to a corner.

Their breaths grew heavier.

Louis sat back in his chair, exhaled gently, and brought the topic back to the real threats.

"But the larger this net grows, the more fragile it becomes." He turned around, eyes once more falling on the man responsible for the oil-stained machine creation group.

"So besides this fast snake, we also need a beast that can bite. Hamilton!"

The young craftsman, lost in thought, jerked up in shock, almost throwing away the notebook in his hands, "Ah... yes! My Lord!"

"I heard that thing has already awakened?"

Hamilton froze for a moment, then the original shyness was instantly replaced by a unique gleam of a technological enthusiast.

He straightened his back: "My Lord, the boiler pressure test passed. Although the drive shaft still overheats a bit under high torque, it... it is already fully combat-ready."

"Good."

Louis adjusted his cuffs and looked at the nearby Lambert: "Tomorrow bring everyone from the machine creation group, we'll also go see."

Lambert raised his head in some confusion, meeting Louis's gaze.

"Go see your new mount, Lambert," Louis said softly, "It's prepared for you, and for the Red Tide Knight Order... a true war machine."

Chapter 674: Steam Tank

The morning in the No. 3 sealed testing ground was filled with an unsettling coal odor in the air.

This place was enclosed by towering gray limestone walls, with a level of secrecy said to be among the highest in all of Red Tide City.

At this moment, the center of the field seemed to be arranged like a vicious trap, with half-man-deep muddy ditches, sharply crisscrossed chevaux-de-frise, and several thick stone walls mimicking city wall structures.

Louis's gaze fell on the colossal object covered by canvas in the center of the field.

Half a step behind him, the Knight Commander Lambert stood like a silent statue.

This Extraordinary Knight also looked at the colossal object, his eyes lacking doubt, holding only the scrutiny unique to a soldier.

He knew that Louis never engaged in superfluous actions; since the lord referred to this place as the "New Era," there must be something hidden under the canvas that could change the rules.

However, the younger knights, Gray and Sacco, standing on the other side, seemed a bit impatient.

Gray tugged at his collar, looking at the muddy ground, "How much longer do we have to wait?"

"Be patient, you talk too much." The response came from Weir.

Once the clumsy little knight following behind Louis, he was now seventeen.

Serving as Louis's guard for many years had stripped away his youthful naivety, his previously somewhat thin shoulders now standing firm and straight.

He no longer paid attention to Gray's restlessness, his hand always on the sword hilt, deliberately mimicking the lord Louis he idolized most.

Meanwhile, in the center of the field, Hamilton was nervously wiping the fog from his goggles.

He and the dozen members of the machine-building group behind him looked utterly disheveled, faces smeared with grease, dark circles around their eyes, and their work clothes covered in coal dust and patches.

Yet the craftsmen, usually lost in blueprints, had eyes now flickering with a blend of excitement and anxiety.

"Ready?" Louis asked.

Hamilton took a deep breath, nodding to the apprentices behind him.

"Unveil!"

The coarse rope was pulled, and the gigantic waterproof canvas slid off.

Words stuck in Gray's throat, not out of amazement, but because it was so ugly.

No streamlined elegant armor, no mysterious glow of alchemy runes.

Before them stood a squat, clumsy wedge-shaped lump of steel.

Its surface was full of dense rivets, the black armor plates bearing forge marks and oil stains.

The enormous V-shaped obstacle-clearing shovel in front was like a wild boar with an iron shovel face.

"This thing..." Gray frowned, "Pardon my saying so, my lord. It looks like it'd have trouble even turning around. On the battlefield, I could ride my horse around it three times."

Lambert glanced sideways, calmly casting a look at Gray.

No words needed, the war-hardened eyes instantly silenced the young knight.

Hamilton heard Gray's mockery, yet he didn't retort, only silently patted the cold rivets, as if soothing a sleeping beast.

"Don't rush to conclusions." Louis said calmly, "Hamilton, first round of testing."

Hamilton waved a hand, and a test knight of the official knight rank lifted a steel lance, fiercely stabbing toward the front of the war chariot.

"Thud—"

The lance snapped, the knight staggered back from the recoil force.

"Wasn't that overdone?" Kosa, who had been itching for action on the side, finally couldn't hold back.

The young man stepped out with large strides, saluting Louis: "My lord, that strength is not even enough to scratch me. If Mr. Hamilton wants to showcase its resilience, there's no need for such a show. Let me have a try."

Louis nodded: "Go ahead and try."

A flash of excited ferocity appeared in Kosa's eyes; he was now a high-tier elite knight, dealing with an iron lump should be no trouble.

Grabbing a weighted pure steel javelin from the weapon rack, he took a deep breath, muscles in his arms swelling like rocks.

"Ha!"

With a thunderous roar, the lance turned into a black shadow, howling as it ripped through the air towards the war chariot.

This strike was enough to pierce a three-layer iron-clad tower shield.

"Boom!"

Not the brittle sound of tearing steel, but a dull thud like a heavy hammer smashing into a rotten wooden post.

Kosa shuddered violently, sliding back two steps.

But on the ugly armor plate, the lance was already twisted out of shape. The armor surface bore only a thumb-deep dent, glowing white.

"This is impossible..." Kosa ignored the sharp pain in his hand, rushing to touch the dent, his eyes filled with disbelief, "This touch feels wrong, like hitting some sort of... elastic stone."

"This is composite armor." Hamilton stood beside the war chariot, straightening his previously hunched back, pride evident in his voice as a technician, "The surface is cold iron steel, with riveted steel plates inside.

But the key is the middle, we sandwiched three inches of elastic teak, soaked in tung oil. Your strength is great, but the wood absorbed it all."

The members of the machine-building group straightened their chests too; it was their masterpiece, the result of countless experiments.

"My Lord." Suddenly, the silent Lambert stepped forward.

"The armor is indeed exceptional." Lambert's voice carried a hint of respect, "May I test its limits?"

Hamilton's face changed, looking worriedly at Louis.

Composite armor could withstand an Elite Knight, but against a Transcendent Knight... that was uncharted territory.

Louis nodded, a hint of exploratory interest in his eyes, "Go ahead. Don't hold back."

Chapter 675: Steam Tank (2)

Lambert took a deep breath and accepted a specially crafted two-handed heavy hammer.

The light red Extraordinary Fighting Energy wrapped around the head of the hammer like flames, distorting the surrounding air with its high-density energy.

"Break!"

Lambert swung the hammer forward.

"Boom—!!!"

The enormous roar echoed in the enclosed space, causing the twenty-ton vehicle body to suddenly jolt backward under the impact.

Shrill alarms sounded from inside the vehicle.

Hamilton rushed up as if scalded, examining the cracks on the armor and shouting to the driver inside, "Report structural integrity! Did the main beam break?"

"The main beam is intact! Only the exterior armor is deformed!" came the trembling yet excited response from the apprentice inside.

The dust settled.

The front armor of the vehicle was not penetrated. But at that point of impact, there was a terrifying, face basin-sized giant dent, half a foot deep.

Hamilton let out a long breath, turned around, and shouted excitedly to Louis, "It held up! Sir! The structure is intact!"

Lambert set down the heavy hammer, looking at the dent with a grim expression.

"I used all my strength." Lambert turned around, facing the knights who were equally shocked, "A full-power strike only made a dent. It will probably take another to break through."

Gray felt his throat dry up.

Even an Extraordinary Knight couldn't destroy it with one hit?

"That's enough." Louis' voice cut through the crowd's thoughts, "Next test."

Hamilton immediately shouted to the craftsmen, "Increase pressure! Open the valves to maximum! Let this beast roar!"

As high-energy coal was shoveled into the furnace, a thick plume of black smoke spewed from the exhaust pipe at the rear of the vehicle.

"Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!"

It was the rough sound of a beast with a lion's roar.

The treads began to move, kicking up mud. It wasn't faster than a warhorse, but its visual impact was devastating.

Next, it crashed into the line of cheval de frise meant to obstruct the cavalry.

"Crack, crack."

Those sharp wooden stakes, troublesome to the knights, were as fragile as crisps before the plow and treads.

The vehicle showed no signs of slowing, directly crushing through, diving into the muddy trench, and then crawling out with the engine's roar.

"It's too clumsy." Gray gritted his teeth, making one last defiant stand, "As long as I don't collide with it, and keep moving, its main cannon is fixed; it won't hit me!"

Louis glanced at him, speaking coldly:

"Hamilton, load the iron shot. Sweep a hundred and twenty degrees ahead."

The vehicle stopped turning.

The short, thick, aesthetically unappealing cast-iron cannon barrel rose slightly.

With a crisp "click," the driver pulled the huge loading lever, violently pushing a sealed iron canister filled with lead pellets, scrap iron, and flint oil into the barrel.

The sound of the locking mechanism engaging was like a steel beast closing its jaws.

"Fire."

There was no projectile's trajectory.

At that moment, everyone only felt their eardrums suddenly throb, as if someone had struck a copper gong in their heads.

"Boom—!!!"

An orange-red storm blasted out of the cannon's mouth, accompanied by roaring flames.

Hundreds of thumb-sized lead pellets, mixed with sharp iron shards, instantly formed an impenetrable web of death under the frenzied thrust of alchemical gunpowder.

It was a true metal storm.

Thirty meters ahead, fifty iron mannequins simulating cavalry charge, pulled by ropes, were squarely hit by the metal storm.

In the same moment, they completely lost their shape.

No blind spots, no gaps.

The ground was plowed uneven, with dirt lifted half a foot deep.

Those iron men...their chest plates pierced, limbs torn off, shattered metal pieces scattered and fell clanging back to the muddy soil amidst the smoke.

Even the stone wall at the edge of the field, used for testing, was riddled with bullet holes, scattered stones flying everywhere.

The whole scene was silent.

Gray froze in place, his face as pale as paper.

His lips trembled slightly, and he instinctively shielded his chest with his hands, as if the scorching gust would tear him apart in the next second.

The evasive maneuvers he had been rehearsing in his mind, the riding skills he prided himself on...all seemed laughable in the face of this absolute violence of the metal net.

No need for prediction. No need for aiming.

Even a fly would turn to pulp in this sector.

Lambert's mouth corner twitched slightly. As an Extraordinary Knight, his dynamic vision allowed him to see those lead shots clearer than others; their speed was so fast that even the afterimage was invisible.

Even he, if entering this proximity undefended...

Lambert closed his eyes, a picture flashing in his mind: rows of vehicles advancing, spewing relentless storms of lead pellets and flames, while his Knight Order toppled like mowed down wheat.

No honorable duel, only industrial slaughter.

This thing stripped away the battlefield space the knights relied on to survive.

But it's not over; Louis didn't give the crowd a chance to catch their breath, immediately ordering again, "Continue to the next item."

"Fourth round of testing, the siege breaker." Hamilton gestured to the vehicle.

The driver pulled the operation lever, causing the vehicle to shake violently in place.

The exhaust pipe at the tail spewed even thicker black smoke, clearly accumulating pressure for some heavier attack.

The barrel opened, and the warm iron shot casing was ejected, sizzling as it landed in the muddy ground.

Chapter 676: Steam Tank (3)

This time, two loaders worked together to push a cone-shaped shell marked with a red danger sign into the chamber.

The tank slowly adjusted its angle, the barrel aimed at the solid granite wall two hundred meters away.

"Fire!"

"Boom!!!"

Unlike the ripping explosion of air from the shrapnel earlier, this time the cannon's sound was deep and powerful, like a heavy punch hitting the earth's chest.

Their eyes couldn't even keep up with the shadow that flew out of the barrel.

The next second.

Two hundred meters away.

"Boom—!!!"

The granite wall, nearly two meters thick, seemed to be crushed from within by an invisible giant hand.

Shattered stones shot out in all directions like shrapnel, and dust rose several meters high.

When the dust cleared, the once sturdy fortification had become a massive breach, with broken stones still bearing scorched marks from the explosion.

Lambert's pupils constricted violently.

This was Louis launching Hillco's proud Magic Explosion Bullet inside.

Soon after, the tank roared, tracks churning up mud as it accelerated in a charge.

It was like an angry bull, using its large V-shaped plow at the front to crash into the ruins.

"Crash—"

The remaining walls completely collapsed under the iron's impact, leveled to the ground.

The field was dead silent, except for the "clink" sound from the cooling engine of the tank.

The air was thick with the strong smell of gunpowder, which dried out throats, but no one dared to cough.

"It's powerful," said Louis, breaking the silence, his voice calm with a touch of chill, "but it's not perfect."

Lambert took a deep breath, forcing himself to recover from the shock.

"Its sides and back are blind spots, and visibility is poor," Lambert's voice was a bit dry, "If someone flanks it, attacking the treads or observational slits, it's done."

"We need to address this," Hamilton quickly recorded, sweating profusely, "We could open firing ports on either side of the vehicle, but..."

"Heavy Cavalry." Weir, who had been standing behind Louis, suddenly spoke.

The young man's voice wasn't loud but exceptionally steady, looking at the steel beast without fear, only contemplation.

"Sir, since it's an anvil, it needs someone to wield the fly swatter for it."

Weir pointed at the side of the tank, "We can't let this thing fight alone.

I suggest deploying the strongest Heavy Cavalry to form a dedicated escort brigade to advance with the tank. The tank is responsible for breaking through the defense, while the Knights are tasked with slaughtering any enemies attempting to approach the tank's flanks."

Louis turned, looking a bit surprised at the young man who had been with him for two years.

The child who once stood foolishly with a sword now understood tactical collaboration.

"Well said, Weir." Louis nodded approvingly.

He looked at Lambert: "Did you hear that? That's called 'Cavalry-Tank Coordination'."

Lambert nodded, his gaze still locked on the tank.

But beside him, Hamilton didn't look relieved at all, instead, he seemed hesitant to speak: "Sir, I don't understand these tactics. But..."

Hamilton scratched his head, full of grease, and turned to a frail-looking young man holding a thick ledger behind him: "As for cost and logistics, let Toby report to you. The numbers of those Gold Coins give me a headache."

The clerk named Toby shivered when called, quickly hugging the ledger and hurrying forward.

"M... my lord!" Toby adjusted the glasses slipping off his nose, his voice trembling, "According to... according to the mechanical group's calculations..."

"Just give the numbers," Louis interrupted him.

"Yes!" Toby swallowed, opened the ledger, "This prototype, including development and material loss, burned a total of nine thousand eight hundred Gold Coins. Just that round of testing cost sixty Gold Coins in fuel and ammunition."

Hearing that number, the young Knights around gasped.

Nearly ten thousand Gold Coins? Enough to buy a prosperous small town!

"As for the cost per vehicle..." Toby's finger glided over the ledger, "Currently, the manufacturing cost of this Red Tide Type One is one thousand two hundred Gold Coins. That... that's equivalent to the total annual income of a Lord."

Gray couldn't help but mutter softly, "Crazy... over a thousand Gold Coins for a hunk of iron? That money could buy a plot in the Northern Territory."

"It's just a prototype."

Hamilton chipped in: "Once mass production is set, many parts can be cast using molds instead of each being hammered by a Blacksmith. Costs will come down."

Toby hurriedly nodded to supplement: "Yes! If... if we can establish an assembly line as sir said, the estimated cost for the first batch of ten units can be pushed down to about six hundred Gold Coins each."

"Six hundred Gold Coins..."

Lambert quietly repeated the figure. Still a fortune for ordinary people, but for war machinery...

Louis took the ledger, not even glancing at the numbers on it, closed it and handed it back to the clerk.

"Is it expensive?"

Louis turned, his gaze sweeping the people present, finally stopping on Lambert.

"Lambert, to train an Extraordinary Knight like you, starting from age six to build strength, with all the Magic Potion consumed, masters hired, weapons damaged... along with that one-in-ten-thousand luck, how much does it cost?"

Lambert was silent for a moment, then said softly: "Incalculable, sir."

"Exactly."

Louis patted the rough armor plate of the tank, making a muted sound.

"As long as there are blueprints and materials, the Red Tide's workshop can build three units a month. As long as it's fed fuel, it won't tire, fear death, or flee due to a collapse in morale."

Chapter 677: Steam Tank (Part 4)

"I have money and railroads. Establish repair stations at all train stations and transport it to the front lines by train."

Louis's voice became unusually firm, "Even if one explodes, I won't feel heartache. Just six hundred Gold Coins, equivalent to the profit from selling two carloads of spices."

"But if a Knight like Lambert dies, or if a hundred youths like Grey perish, then that would be a loss the Red Tide cannot bear."

With all worries addressed, Louis looked at everyone present.

"Kosa, how long have you been practicing spears?"

"Fourteen years, Lord."

Louis pointed to the driver climbing out of the war chariot, an apprentice whose face was covered in oil, skinny like a monkey.

"His name is Bill, two months ago he was a farmer. But just now, he could beat you into a sieve with one hit."

These words completely shattered the last pride of the young Knights.

Many Knights present showed complex expressions in their eyes.

Excitement because the Red Tide has divine weaponry, but more was an indescribable melancholy.

Unless they were Extraordinary like Lambert, the glory of ordinary Knights seemed worthless in front of such an iron tide.

Lambert took a deep breath and knelt on one knee.

This leader felt no melancholy, as a soldier he understood well that with the Empire's unfavorable situation and the growing southern threat, this brutal efficiency was the Red Tide's security.

"Lord," Lambert's voice carried determination, "The era has changed."

For Grey, Kosa, these young men who had practiced Martial Techniques from a young age, looking at the machine still spewing black smoke, the sense of loss in their hearts wasn't something a few slogans could fill.

If ten years of practicing spear techniques was surpassed by a farmer pulling a lever, what was the point of the sweat?

Louis keenly captured these emotions. He didn't immediately leave but stepped down from the observation deck, treading through the mud to the war chariot.

He reached out and patted the hot armor plate, feeling that rough vibration.

"What, feeling aggrieved?"

Louis turned around, his gaze sweeping over the dispirited young Knights, finally landing on Lambert who had just stood up.

"Lift your heads," Louis's voice calm but with undeniable command.

He pointed to this imposing object beside him: "Take a good look at it. It's certainly tough, its firepower is certainly strong. But Hamilton, tell them, how long did it take you to prepare it to run here for these ten minutes?"

Hamilton immediately wiped the oil and sweat from his face, and with a wry smile said: "Two full days, Lord. We had to preheat the boiler, check over two hundred valves, and have a dedicated convoy to transport water and coal to it.

The few shots just now were satisfying, but that was burning money. Just those high purity coals are enough to buy a pile of spears."

"Did you hear that?"

Louis looked at the Knights, "It's a blind man, a deaf man, a picky glutton. It can't see Death Warriors feeling their way from the side, can't hear the sound of bowstrings being drawn in the dark.

Once the tracks break or the coal runs out, it's just an iron coffin placed by the roadside. If fighting alone, a nimble assassin has a hundred ways to finish it."

Louis walked up to Kosa, looking at this Barbarian Race giant.

"Kosa, this can knock down walls, but can it climb cliffs? Can it infiltrate enemy camps and behead the commander? Can it engage in knife fights in the ruins of street battles?"

Kosa paused for a moment, instinctively shaking his head: "No, Lord. It's too fat."

A sparse laugh came from the surroundings, the atmosphere slightly relaxed.

Louis turned his head, "Building this is not to eliminate you, but to liberate you."

"Think back on past wars. Even the most elite Knights had to brave showers of arrows, using their flesh to impact the enemy's spear phalanx. That was sending them to die, wasting talent."

Louis pointed to the war chariot behind him.

"Now, this dirty work, this tiring work, give it to this."

"It will attract fire, it will smash defenses, it will eat dirt upfront."

Louis walked to Lambert, helping the commander adjust the slightly crooked shoulder armor.

"And you... you will be transformed from 'consumables' back to 'scalpels'."

"When it shreds the enemy's formation, you will cut in from the flank, using your swords to harvest those panicked commanders, to hunt down those fleeing leftover troops."

"The war chariot is a hammer, smashing all obstacles; while the Knight is a sharp sword, piercing the heart precisely."

Louis's voice clearly transmitted in the morning breeze to everyone's ears: "As long as war exists, human intuition, reaction, and courage will never be outdated. It needs you to protect its flanks, just as you need it to block the arrows from the front."

The last trace of loneliness in Lambert's eyes vanished.

He looked at that ugly machine, and then at Louis. Until then, he truly understood the intentions of the young Lord; this was not substitution, it was complement.

"Mutual arms," Lambert quietly repeated, then saluted Louis with a standard military salute, this time, the gesture was filled with pure battle intent, "I understand, sir."

The rising Sun finally crossed the high wall, golden sunlight spreading across the muddy testing ground.

On one side was a smoking, coarse and cumbersome industrial monster, on the other was a phalanx of Knights clad in fine steel armor, wielding sharp blades.

These originally incongruous forces, at this moment, harmoniously fused together.

"Alright, don't just stand there," Louis waved his hand and headed towards the exit, "Wash this big guy clean. Hamilton, don't forget to open a few ventilation shooting holes for it, Bill's face was almost purple when he got out just now."

"Yes, Lord!"

Laughter finally Burst out in the testing grounds. But this laughter no longer held contempt, but was full of anticipation for the future.

Chapter 678: The Red Tide's Blade

The top floor of the administrative center, Louis' private office.

The pinewood in the fireplace was burning, creating a warm environment, forming a stark contrast with the cold winds and flying snow outside the window in early autumn.

Louis was not sitting behind the large desk piled with documents; instead, he had changed into casual clothes and was sitting in a single sofa by the fireplace.

He picked up the silver pot and slowly poured the amber liquid into two crystal glasses, pushing one toward the empty seat opposite.

The door was knocked.

"Enter."

Lambert pushed the door open and entered. His cloak was still carrying the lingering chill, and he instinctively wanted to perform a standard knight's salute.

"Don't bother with that in private," Louis looked up with a smile, pressing the armrest slightly, "Sit. This is a new brew of golden wheat beer from the Mai Lang Territory, just delivered."

Lambert habitually lowered his head, gave a brief half-bow, and then sat down on the sofa opposite.

As he took the glass, his fingertip touched the cold wall of the glass, and only then did he slowly retreat from the shock of the experiment earlier that day.

Looking at the composed young man in front of him, a surge of indescribable emotion welled up within him.

Just a few years ago, Louis was the discarded child exiled by the Calvin Clan for lack of talent, with a gloomy and confused gaze, abandoned by fate.

At that time, he himself was merely a vow keeper with the title of a high-tier knight but with no promising future.

And now, Louis was the Lord of the North, controlling unprecedented industrial and military power.

And thanks to the resources Louis granted him, he broke through the bottleneck that had troubled him for years and became an Extraordinary Knight, commanding thousands of troops.

In just a few short years, it was as if a lifetime had passed.

Yet the cold touch of the wine in the glass reminded him that it was all reality.

"Sir, this wine is quite strong," Lambert took a sip, "but quite good."

"I find it acceptable, planning to export it," Louis gently swirled the glass, holding it up to the firelight, the amber wine reflecting a layer of dark golden luster.

Lambert recalled the scenes from not long ago and said softly, "That steam war chariot... it's a monster. The traditional knight phalanx wouldn't withstand even one charge in front of it."

He was an Extraordinary Knight, his body, his fighting energy, his martial techniques, by the standards of the old era, already stood among the elite few across the continent.

But at the moment of the artillery test fire, he was very clear that even if it were him, standing on that snowfield unprepared, the outcome would be the same.

Louis put down his glass, his voice calming, "It's not just a monster, it's the iron wheel of a new era. No matter how brave you are, no matter how thickly armored, in front of such a thing, glory can't save lives."

He paused, his gaze slightly deepening, "So we must create more of these monsters."

He looked up at Lambert, "Because the time left to us is shorter than I originally thought."

Lambert knew Louis was not referring to the Barbarian Race.

He put the glass on the table, leaning slightly forward, "Has something new happened?"

Louis got straight to the point, "The Regent King's health has reached its limit."

The wood in the fireplace crackled sharply.

"At most two years, maybe even less," Louis said lightly.

Lambert frowned, "Once His Highness breathes his last..."

"The moment he dies," Louis continued Lambert's unfinished thought, "the last stone pressing on the Empire's head will be gone."

He walked to the window, gently tapping the window frame, the wind and snow outside hitting the glass and blurring it into a sheet.

"The princes will start fighting, the nobility will start taking sides, legions will be pulled away, some in the provinces will want to treat the border as their own hedge, the Empire will slowly be torn apart."

Louis' voice was calm, "Civil war is inevitable."

Lambert was silent for a few moments before speaking, "What stance does the Red Tide Territory plan to take?"

"The Red Tide Territory will not take sides," Louis looked at the snow outside the window, "The Red Tide Territory, along with the North, intends to survive."

He said indifferently, "We need to prepare so that when they've almost torn each other apart, we still have the strength to raise our knives."

The Red Tide Territory cannot be a small boat adrift with the waves; it must be an iron ship against the tide. When the Empire descends into chaos, we must not only hold the North but also have the capital to hunt south at any time."

"Expanding the military and making war chariots is a bottomless pit," Lambert voiced his concern, "Didn't you say last time that the Calvin Family's business association has already started acting?"

This was his most immediate worry.

Soldiers can be trained, war chariots can be built, but without money, the best blueprints are just paper.

Yet a trace of a smile appeared on Louis' lips, devoid of warmth, carrying a hint of a distant chill.

"They're acting too late," Louis said, "Two years ago, such a move could indeed crush us, but now..."

He walked back and casually extracted a financial report from the stack of documents on the table.

"The minerals and industrial products of the Red Tide have already been pressed into the Jade Federation, and the food from the North is sufficient for the entire North's three-year winter reserve."

Louis looked up at Lambert, "You don't need to worry about the money. As long as you can train the soldiers, I will find a way to conjure the money."

Looking at him, Lambert suddenly felt that this statement was no boast.

From when they only had a destitute fief to now where the Red Tide warehouses and flags are everywhere on this vast snowfield.

Time and again, Lambert watched this young man conjure food, weapons, workshops, and territories out of thin air.

Lambert took a deep breath, already knowing what Louis wanted to know, and reported the figures at hand, "Sir, the total number of troops is now eight thousand six hundred and fifty people."

Chapter 679: Red Tide's Blade (Part 2)

The Red Tide headquarters has 3,650 troops, all of whom are absolutely loyal and currently outfitted with the latest equipment.

Duke Edmund's old troops, including the Broken Blade, Cold Iron, and Silver Tooth brigades, have been restructured into a 5,000-strong unit.

In these recent years, they have fought together and shared salaries and land, especially the Cold Iron group. They no longer just recognize Edmond's banner; they now recognize the orders of the Red Tide."

"The numbers are sufficient," Louis nodded, "but still not enough."

The words seemed contradictory, but Lambert understood what he meant.

In the old days, military strength was only judged by numbers, but after the battle at the Nest, no one dared to rely on numbers alone.

Louis extended his finger and began listing: "There are a few things you need to watch closely next."

"First, coordinated operations must be streamlined. Put away that Knights' pride and get used to charging under the cover of steam war vehicles, and working alongside Magic Burst grenadiers.

When we go to war in the future, it will no longer be knights in front and infantry behind; the whole line will advance together."

Second, specialized expansion. Double the White Bear Heavy Cavalry, specifically to breach through defense lines.

Deploy more flamethrower teams and demolition teams; whether facing monster hordes or urban street fights, these two groups are needed."

Lambert nodded slightly.

Then Louis put down his wine glass, leaned forward slightly, and said solemnly, "But Lambert, what I'm going to say next is more important than that steam war vehicle. I want to set a new rule for this army."

Lambert immediately sat up straight: "Please go ahead."

"It's quite simple." Louis raised a finger, "From today on, no Red Tide knight, whether on bandit suppression or patrol, is allowed to take even a piece of dry bread from civilians.

No riding into villages wrecking havoc; what is borrowed should be returned. If anyone dares to behave as before, thinking it's justified since they risk their lives for protection, and sees nothing wrong with taking someone's chicken, strip his medal off and kick him out of the team."

Lambert hesitated for a moment, his brows slightly furrowed: "Sir... that might be difficult."

This commander spoke frankly: "If your demands are this strict, I'm afraid the brothers below might have complaints, thinking we're too... too nitpicky."

"Complaints?" Louis chuckled, with a hint of deep meaning in his smile, "Lambert, what do you think is our greatest fear if we expand out of Red Tide Territory and start taking over other lands?"

"The greatest fear is a counterattack from enemy knights or an ambush by enemies," Lambert answered from a military perspective.

"No." Louis shook his head, "The greatest fear is leaving half of our forces behind to guard against uprisings in the cities we've conquered."

Louis stood up and walked over to the gigantic Northern Territory map, tracing his finger over lands not belonging to the Red Tide.

"Lambert, if we, like other lords, swept through with our army like locusts, seizing money, grain, and women, how would civilians view us?

They would see us as another group of bandits. They would hide their grain, alert our enemies..."

Louis turned, looking at Lambert, his tone becoming exceedingly plain: "But what if we are different?"

"Imagine, if our soldiers enter a village without disturbing the people, pay for goods, even help repair roads, what would we be to those peasants who've faced enough exploitation?"

Lambert instinctively replied, "A... friend?"

"A savior." Louis corrected, "People they'd eagerly open their gates for."

Louis returned to the couch, picked up his wine glass again, his tone relaxed yet filled with cold calculation:

"This is the public support I want. It's not to be a moral saint, but to save money and soldiers.

If our reputation spreads, when the army moves south in the future, civilians in other territories, hearing that the Red Tide Army is coming, their first reaction won't be to flee, but to breathe a sigh of relief.

At that time, to seize a city, all we need is to send a tax officer to plant a flag, with no need to leave soldiers garrisoned."

Lambert listened in astonishment. He had fought battles all his life, always thinking of ways to kill the enemy, never imagining that non-interference with civilians could be a more sophisticated siege tactic.

"This is attacking the heart." Louis pointed to his chest, "I want the words Red Tide to hold more sway in civilians' hearts than the Emperor's."

"So Lambert, even if it's a pretense, have them behave like gentlemen."

Louis's voice lowered, carrying an indisputable command: "Tell the men below, anyone who dares to tarnish the Red Tide's name is as good as smashing everyone's rice bowl.

Win the war, spoils are shared publicly, and I'll reward them handsomely with the treasury money. But anyone who privately reaches into the civilians' pockets, I'll cut off their hand.

Knights aren't street thugs. They should be like torchbearers walking a night road; too rough and they'll drop sparks and burn the house down, too weak and they won't light the way. You need to teach them this balance."

Lambert took a deep breath, the confusion in his eyes replaced entirely with a profound awe.

He had initially thought this was some kind of cleanliness fetish of the young lord, never expecting it to conceal an ambition to engulf the world.

"I understand, sir."

Lambert stood up, and this time, his salute was more solemn than ever. "This army will not only be your sword, but also the cleanest banner of the Red Tide."

Louis nodded in satisfaction: "Go, sharpen this blade a bit more, for soon we will use it to cut open this rotting empire's veins.

Once the empire's civil war starts, the blood of this old beast will flow in every direction.

Chapter 680: Red Tide's Blade (Part 3)

"I need you to ensure that when it's our turn to strike, the blade will cut precisely."

Lambert stood up, preparing to leave. He took one last glance at the young silhouette by the window.

The once frail boy thrown into the Northern Territory now stood atop the snowfield, as if speaking to the entire continent.

Lambert didn't say much, simply walked to the table, lightly pressed his right fist against his chest, and performed a standard, almost rigid, chest salute.

"Lord." His voice was low and steady, "No matter where you point your sword, the Red Tide Legion will not disappoint you. I'll arrange it now."

Louis glanced at him sideways and nodded, saying nothing more.

When the door closed, the sound of the wind pressed through the crack, and the room suddenly fell silent.

Only the fire in the fireplace continued to burn, alongside the map of the entire Empire on the wall.

Louis walked back to the table, his gaze gliding southward from the snow peaks of the Northern Territory to a small patch at the Imperial Capital.

The red dot there still quietly stuck to the parchment.

Louis reached out and gently tapped between the Imperial Capital and the Northern Territory.

"Come on," he said softly, "Let's see who breaks first."

.....

Gray Stone Fortress wedged in the throat of the Northern Empire and Graystone Province, like a black iron gate, sternly watching both sides north and south.

This is the boundary of order.

Southwards lies a prosperous world flowing with gold coins and wine. To the north is the exile land of ice and savage wilderness.

Inside the fortress exudes a suffocating severity.

Torches in the corridor spaced every five meters light up the walls adorned with heads of magical beasts and captured barbarian weapons. Though treated, the scent of blood still lingers.

The floor was polished bright by countless iron boots over the years.

The door to the office of the Seventeenth Legion commander was open.

Commander Ackman Greer sat behind a massive ebony table.

He wore not armor but an exquisitely crafted silk shirt, its collar slightly open.

As a knight who has entered the transcendent realm, the northern winds to him are but a refreshing breeze.

He was as burly as an upright grizzly bear, even sitting casually, the oppressive presence of a high-tier transcendent filled the room.

Hearing footsteps at the door, Ackman did not immediately look up.

He was examining a military map in front of him, fingers lightly tracing several red lines, focused and arrogant.

"If the military service department sent auditors for supplies, wait in the side hall. When I'm in a good mood, I'll see you."

"I came to deliver wine, General Greer."

The response was steady, unmoved by the pressure of the transcendent.

Sorel stood at the doorway, elegantly removing his snowflake-dotted cape, handing it to a somewhat trembling attendant behind him.

He wore a well-tailored dark hunting outfit, a longsword bearing the Remont family crest hanging at his waist.

Ackman finally looked up. In those deep brown eyes flashed a gleam, like assessing a hound daring to invade a lion's domain.

"Few can stand so straight under my pressure." Ackman put down the crystal cup with a crisp sound, "From the Royal Knight Order?"

"Third Legion, former deputy commander." Sorel nodded slightly, offering an impeccable military salute, "I had the honor of witnessing the general's prowess at the training grounds."

"That was a decade ago." Ackman leaned back in his chair lazily, "Sit. Since you're a person who knows the rules, I won't throw you out. The Second Prince sent you; what does he want my Seventeenth Legion to do?"

"It's not about wanting you to do anything, but rather what he doesn't want you to do."

Sorel didn't hold back, directly sitting across Ackman. He didn't touch the wine the attendant brought, instead staring into the commander's eyes.

"General, you are the Empire's sword. But right now, this sword is stuck in permafrost, what else can it do besides scaring a few barbarians? Rust?"

"Mind your words." Ackman's eyes narrowed, the room instantly grew heavy, "I'm guarding the Empire's gates."

"Guarding the gates is an honor, but merely guarding gates doesn't match the Greer family's ambition."

Sorel, enduring the suffocating pressure, maintained his steady tone, "I checked, your eldest son died heroically on the battlefield."

"But your second son... he has a talent for business, even secretly operating two smuggling routes to the Jade Federation. Instead of blaming him, you secretly sent personal guards to protect those caravans."

Ackman's killing intent subsided a little, revealing a hint of a playful smile: "What? Does the Second Prince even want to meddle in such a small business?"

"No, His Highness sees it as a waste," Sorel leaned forward, "Having the son of a legion commander engage in smuggling? That's beneath him. He should be sitting in a southern manor, having afternoon tea with the Minister of Finance, discussing the trade quotas of the entire province."

Ackman fell silent.

He gently rotated the ruby ring on his thumb.

He did not lack money; after being a legion commander for over a decade, the profits were not insignificant.

But what he lacked was the "foundation," the ticket to enter the Empire's core circles.

In the eyes of those century-old great nobles, Ackman was still just a skilled high-level guard.

"Continue." Ackman uttered a word.

Sorel took out a wax-sealed document from his bosom and pushed it over.

"The Second Prince's offer is the largest winery in the Valencia Valley and a Viscount title." Sorel's voice was full of allure.

"It's not a handout of money but a sharing of power. Your son will officially enter the Southern Nobles' social circle as a partner."

Ackman picked up the document, feeling the heavy texture of the parchment with his fingertips.

This document meant that the Greer family would no longer just be warriors of the Northern Territory, but a true local lord.

His descendants would thoroughly wash away the upstart taste.

"And the price?" Ackman closed the document, his gaze as sharp as a blade, "The Second Prince doesn't seem like someone who does charity."

"Very simple." Sorel spread his hands, "When the flags of the Northern Territory appear at the pass, we hope the Seventeenth Legion's vision can be a bit clearer.

And... if at certain critical moments in the future, something changes in the Imperial Capital, we hope the General will remember today's friendship and maintain a noble silence."

Ackman stared at Sorel for a long time, suddenly bursting into laughter. The laughter shook the books on the bookshelf, making them tremble.

"Noble silence... good words."

Ackman stood up, walked to the wine cabinet, personally took out a bottle of treasured southern red wine, and poured a glass for Sorel.

"This damned place is indeed too cold, even I am somewhat weary of it." Ackman pushed the wine glass in front of Sorel, raising his own crystal glass, "My sword belongs to the Empire, but my family belongs to myself."

Sorel raised his glass, the two glasses lightly clinked in the air, "Deal, General Greer."

...

Half an hour later.

The heavy iron gate of the fortress slowly rose. Sorel's carriage drove out of the massive shadow of Gray Stone Fortress.

The wind and snow were still frigid, but the inside of the carriage was as warm as spring.

"My Lord, Ackman is more difficult to deal with than imagined." The attendant whispered beside him, still holding a cold sweat with his hand, "Earlier in the study, I felt like being stared at by a fierce beast, ready to be torn apart at any moment."

"Of course he's a beast. How could someone who holds the position of commander of the Seventeenth Legion be an ordinary person?"

Sorel leaned back against the cushion, loosening his grip on the sword hilt.

His palm also had a thin layer of sweat; the confrontation just now was not only verbal but also a mental battle.

"He is arrogant because he has the capital. He is dissatisfied because he sees the ceiling." Sorel looked at the snowy landscape flying by outside, commenting lightly.

"He doesn't lack money, what he lacks is a ladder for social ascent. We gave him the ladder, and this lion will temporarily retract its claws."

"So we're heading back to the Imperial Capital now?"

"No."

Sorel's gaze turned north, through the wind and snow, seemingly trying to see through the vast white wasteland.

"Ackman is just a guarding lion, once fed will fall asleep. But I'm more interested in the person behind the door."

"Red Tide Territory?" The attendant hesitated a little.

Sorel sneered: "To control the entire Northern Territory in such a desperate situation, even making someone like Ackman apprehensive... such a person must either be a madman or a monster more terrifying than Ackman."

The wheels of the carriage etched a deep track in the snow, not heading south, but decisively towards the depths of the northern blizzard.

"Let's go. Meet this Louis Calvin and see what his ambitions are."