

Winter 681

Chapter 681: The New Northern Territory and the Old North

When the snowstorm passed over Gray Stone Fortress, it was like shards of glass being tossed down from a great height.

The old trade road was mixed with permafrost and mud, jostling travelers and leaving them dizzy.

Even the luxurious wheels creaked under the strain when caught in the potholes, as if protesting the cruelty of this wasteland.

Sorel sat steadily in the carriage, reaching out to check the door and window seams to ensure they were tightly shut, before retrieving the worn silver pendant from the lining of his shirt.

Flicking open the clasp, inside lay a thumb-sized charcoal sketch of a little girl clutching a doll.

Her face was pale, her eyes disproportionately large, yet she tried to smile ever so faintly beyond the frame, holding the doll tightly.

Sorel's fingertips gently caressed the image, briefly closing his eyes.

Then he fastened the pendant back in place, as if tucking away some secret into the crevices of his armor.

Sorel lifted a corner of the carriage window and looked outside.

The sound of the wind immediately rushed in, sharp and cold like needle pricks.

Withered Black Pine Forests lay twisted under the weight of the snow, and corpses sprawled by the roadside, some buried so deep only half their faces were visible.

In broken huts lived vagrants resembling beasts, their gazes numb as they looked up at the carriage, as if having abandoned all thoughts of survival long ago.

Chimney smoke was virtually absent in this stretch of wasteland, leaving the air with only the scent of rotting flesh and cold winds.

Sorel stared at all of this.

He knew he should maintain the royal envoy's decorous restraint, but that aristocratic disdain from the South unwittingly seeped out.

Sorel chuckled softly, without warmth.

"This is what the Northern Territory is like."

Barren, uncivilized, chaotic, worthless.

Such was the consensus of the Imperial Capital regarding the Northern Territory, and everything he was seeing perfectly corroborated this prejudice.

"Being a king in such a place...it's merely this."

He knew that Louis had a knack for political scheming, but being in the Northern Territory, he felt the conditions he brought from the Second Prince were practically useless.

"As long as I'm willing to offer a little Southern trade rights...he'll know how to bow and welcome civilization."

The carriage continued to sway northward, snowstorms beating against the window frames with a death knell-like rhythm.

It had been three days since leaving Gray Stone Fortress, yet the snowstorm still raged.

Suddenly, the carriage's jostling ceased, as if it had entered another world.

Sorel opened his eyes, frowning, clearly sensing something amiss.

He could feel the wheels were no longer being tugged at by muddy pits, the lightness even steadying the horses' gait.

He lifted a corner of the curtain.

Cold wind poured in, but what he first saw was not snow, but a vast expanse of...

Gray-black, smooth hardened roads.

The surface was pressed extremely flat, rain and snow formed no mire upon it, but were instead blown to the sides with an imperceptible gradient.

The center of the road marked with straight white lines, neat, precise, like measured symbols, not casual strokes.

Sorel paused for a moment, then slowly uttered, "Is this...the Northern Territory?"

He had traveled the main roads of the South and visited the Imperial Capital's road workshops, yet what lay before him was even better than many places in the South.

The carriage continued onward, soon the first building materialized in the snowstorm.

Red Tide waystation.

The house was modest in size yet cleanly lined, the walls made of neat gray stone bricks, a bright red flag with the Red Tide insignia hung at the entrance.

White smoke rose steadily from the chimney, indicating continuous warmth inside.

More captivating than the structure itself were the industrious people outside the waystation.

A team of workers in deep red uniforms were pushing iron snow scrapers along the road.

Their movements were orderly, occasionally whistling, a rhythm so carefree it seemed incongruent with laboring on the Northern Territory's permafrost line.

No shackles, no whips, no supervising knights.

The foreman held a hardboard noting snow levels and road conditions, occasionally glancing up at the sky as if gauging when next to clear the snow.

Sorel watched for a long time before exclaiming, "The Northern Territory's liegemen...are smiling?"

This whispered self-reflection carried an aura of unacceptable absurdity.

In his impression, the liegemen of the Northern Territory were either cold or hungry, either numb or terrified.

Those people should have been huddled in broken shacks trembling, not whistling as they worked in the snow.

Sorel slowly lowered the curtain, his brow visibly furrowed.

He even doubted whether he had mistakenly wandered into a land entirely engulfed by Red Tide, the scene here starkly different from the desolation he had seen for days in the Northern Territory.

And as the carriage journeyed further north, invitations flooded in.

Almost at every castle or town fortification, Sorel was stopped by the Lord's attendants, insisting he honor them with his presence, even if just for a moment.

With his identity as the Second Prince's Special Envoy, despite any deceitful intentions they might harbor, these Lords maintained a respectful facade.

However, Sorel quickly discovered the disparities among these banquets were astonishingly absurd.

It was as if he were being pulled into two completely different worlds along the same road, prosperity and decay, warmth and coldness, hope and rot.

The contents of the feasts, the Lords' attitudes, the liegemen's states of mind, were cleaved into starkly opposing halves.

The first kind of domain, were those places bearing the "Red Tide insignia" at the main street entrance.

For instance, when Sorel arrived at the first location, it was in the gray light before dusk. The sky seemed suffocated by snow, yet the castle gates opened swiftly, as if already waiting.

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The Lord, nearing fifty, personally came out to greet, draped in a cloak warmed by the stove.

His face red from the cold, he grabbed Sorel's forearm: "It is an honor for my entire domain that the Prince's messenger has arrived."

Speaking this, he took a Red Tide glass cup from the hands of an attendant and offered it with both hands, his expression solemn—not for any grand reason, but because this item had become a formal commodity in his family's warehouse, ready to be traded for tangible profits with surrounding territories.

"In past years, I couldn't even gift my own family anything decent," the Lord whispered, as if boasting about his foresight, "It's different now. These glass cups sell exceptionally well; I've heard southern noblewomen clamor for them. Please accept it, Your Highness, the value is substantial."

Then the old Lord noticed Sorel's frozen carriage creaking, and frowned: "That shabby vehicle is an embarrassment here. I'll replace it with a new one, with a Red Tide chassis. It's steadier and retains its value better."

He spoke with righteousness, as though concerned about Sorel tarnishing his family's dignity, rather than about Sorel's own safety; a full display of a nouveau riche's air.

Sorel was curious why a remote place like this would have such a nouveau riche-style Lord, and the items he gifted were indeed valuable.

Thus, Sorel stepped into the other's estate, eager to investigate.

The banquet hall was overly warm, brightly lit. The table was laden with rich dishes.

In the banter of the banquet, the old Lord couldn't hide his pride: "Three years ago, forty people froze to death in my domain; last year, fifteen. This year, not even two. Not because of me, but because of Lord Calvin."

Sorel raised an eyebrow.

The Lord continued: "My domain's workshops, roads, stoves... all traded with Red Tide for business.

I won't hide from you, Your Highness' messenger, my family's dividend this year is seven times the usual tax revenue. I don't care who Calvin is, as long as he can make my family prosperous, he is someone I am willing to follow."

Children's laughter wafted from outside.

Sorel looked toward the sound and saw several children wearing thick felt boots from Red Tide, chasing in the snow.

The Lord glanced casually: "Oh, them? They are people with knightly blood talent in the territory; Lord Louis needs them, wants me to cultivate more knights, so I have to prepare in advance."

On another table, the lady of the house spoke softly: "My son is studying at Red Tide City's school. When he grows up and returns to inherit the territory, he will move up another level."

Her tone held no trace of coercion, but rather a sense of satisfaction after calculation.

These words are not unique to this household.

All the way north, Sorel heard similar remarks in every territory joining the Red Tide system.

Not because the Lord suddenly became kind, nor for the happiness of the subjects.

But because the prosperity, market, and technology brought by Red Tide truly stabilize, enrich, and give the future to their families.

As for the improvement in subjects' lives?

That's merely a side effect, like some extra grain spilling over from a granary—not of concern to the Lords, but too lazy to oppose.

As the banquet continued, children's laughter drifted from outside again. Sorel followed the sound and saw several children chasing in the snow, wearing thick Red Tide felt boots, no longer barefoot, no longer shrinking.

When patrol soldiers passed by, they bent down to retie the children's shoelaces and continued their patrol.

Sorel realized he was being engulfed by these stories.

All the prosperity behind it came from Red Tide: food, roads, workshops, stoves, coal, glass, ironware, new farming tools.

The territory's economy was transformed, the lifestyle of the subjects was rewritten, and the power structure of the Lord was redefined.

The second type of territory was starkly different.

On the surface, these Lords give the Prince's messenger enough face: sending guards to greet, holding banquets, hanging up the family crest out of respect.

But as soon as Sorel alighted, he could smell the scent in the air—a stubbornness with no retreat forced by reality.

Inside the castle, what he always saw were damp walls, flickering candles, and servants huddled in corners trying to minimize their presence.

The food on the table was equally meager: a few plates of bread, salted meat bitter with brine, a pot of fish soup.

Yet these Lords still sat up straight, posing with the old Northern Nobility's pride, as if this poverty were part of their glory.

Cold wind swept in through the window crevices, making the candles sway wildly.

But they defiantly refused to switch to Red Tide's glass windows: "Our ancestors have always wintered like this."

Though their voices trembled with cold, they insist on using tradition as armor.

As the banquet opened, they always couldn't wait to first curse Red Tide.

"That Calvin kid is too overbearing."

"He's only flaunting because of his Duke Edmund son-in-law status."

"Alas, if only the old Duke were still alive..."

"We, the century-old nobility, won't be led by him."

But after a few sips of wine, the gaps in their words began to leak:

"Hawk Territory didn't have a single freeze death this year? Really?"

"Iron farm tools... two silver coins? Can't be that cheap."

"Solid roads... I wish I had one too."

Sorel understood that look in their eyes at once—it wasn't doubt, but jealousy, hatred, a suffocating feeling of being left behind by the times.

The most ironic part wasn't even this.

Despite shouting the loudest to "uphold the Northern Territory's glory."

Sorel saw the secret presents moved by servants—all Red Tide products, and of rather inferior quality.

They wouldn't admit verbally, but their hands already reached out to Red Tide.

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As long as they could avoid the Red Tide Caravan's gaze, they could maintain that shred of dignity remaining.

Sorel did not expose them, just smiled and accepted it.

When he left, he glanced back at the gloomy castle, as if looking at an old beast nearing death but still trying to stand up its mane.

He came to a harsher conclusion in his mind: these lords were not simply hostile towards Louis, they hated him for showing them their own backwardness.

They envied the prosperity of the Red Tide, regretted not joining earlier, yet stubbornly clung to pride, refusing to admit reality.

He sat back in the carriage, fingers clenched inside his gloves.

"This isn't a matter of character... it's a civilizational gap."

The Red Tide system was pulling the entire Northern Territory into a new era with silent, irresistible force.

And these people could only be left behind, the more they struggled the more ridiculous they seemed.

Heading north, Sorel initially focused only on these lords.

Gradually, he found that what truly reflected the reality of a land wasn't the feasts, wasn't the castle, but those ordinary people living in the wind and snow.

As the carriage passed through the old territory that rejected the Red Tide system, the sight was glaringly hard to ignore...

On a winter night, the street was pitch black, not a single decent oil lamp. The wind brought real cold, not warmth resisted by the fireplace.

Outside a shabby house, he saw the refugees curled up on the edge of the snowy ground, wrapping themselves in torn burlap sacks.

Some were startled, avoiding the carriage, others looked numbly, habitually lowering their heads and hunching their shoulders.

Children hid in the corner of a shack, eyes large but without light.

Occasionally staring at passersby, as if gazing at shadows that will bring no good news.

What made Sorel frown most were those knights.

Knights in shabby cloaks charged through the streets, completely disregarding the civilians.

Their horses scared the refugees to scatter, a woman forced against a wall narrowly avoided being trampled.

Watching this scene from the carriage, Sorel unconsciously clenched his fist.

"This is the Northern Territory I remember."

But moving forward for a few more days, the scene abruptly changed, as if cut from its roots by someone.

Entering the scope of the Red Tide system's influence, the night remained cold but was buoyed by scattered lights.

Iron stoves burned along the roadside, magic stone lamps hung from wooden poles releasing steady white light, allowing nighttime travelers to avoid stumbling in the dark.

Along the roadside, porridge stalls appeared, steam rising at the stall entrance, a few elderly queued to receive hot porridge, with two lazy wildcats at their feet.

Further away was a small clinic, a wooden sign painted with the Red Tide's sun emblem.

At the door, a medical woman wrapped in a thick shawl was comforting a mother holding a child in a low voice.

Sorel stared at these scenes, feeling an unfamiliar confusion sweeping through him for the first time.

Children played alongside the street, laughter purer than the snow. Some tossed snowballs, others fell down, immediately helped up by adults.

A woman repairing the fence with Red Tide's iron farm tools, using them effortlessly, her hands practiced as if using them for a long time.

A granary stood on the snow line, its outer wall constructed with new wood and stone, steady like a small mountain.

Workers moved grain bags back and forth from the warehouse, faces showing clear warmth and vigor.

Sorel watched the patrolling knights even longer.

The Red Tide system's knight team moved uniformly, clad in deep red cloaks, their horse steps light. When they passed the intersection, they'd actively pull the reins to slow down, giving pedestrians right of way.

A knight even greeted a passerby, "Watch your step on the ice."

That tone was one Sorel never imagined hearing from a knight.

"Is this... a transformed Northern Territory?"

Sorel murmured softly, eyes falling on the light and shadows interwoven from the distant granary and magic stone lamps.

"Or... an entirely new country?"

The faces of the lords can be camouflaged, but the lives of the people do not lie.

Moving further east, the wind and snow thickened.

A layer of frost covered the carriage windows, but the outline of the city squeezed into view from afar.

For the first time, when Sorel lifted the curtain, he saw not a single city but two completely different giant shadows standing side by side.

On the left, it was a glow of lights unfolding in the snow fog.

The city walls towering, streets aligned, magic stone light scattered like gilt in the wind, layered upon layers, illuminating half the sky. Even from this distance, the pressure of magnitude and order brought a feeling of completed prosperity.

On the right side, in the further shadows, lay another kind of scenery.

Black smoke rose there, fine columns of smoke ranged neatly and stably, not a chaotic haze.

The snow reflected a pale gray under these columns, colossal buildings spread like ridges, their lines straight, lacking any noble decoration.

Sorel stared for a long time before realizing these were workshops... but larger than any Imperial military workshop he'd seen.

Yet he knew none of the details, only that area resembled the body of an iron giant, while the flourishing city on the left was the giant's head.

Together they formed Red Tide City.

He lowered the curtain, sitting back into the soft seat, his chest feeling pressed by something.

He placed his hand in his bosom, gripping the silver pendant tightly.

The image of Ellie inside the pendant was familiar and gentle, yet now it made him more uneasy.

He repeatedly reviewed his mission all the way.

Royal family's favor? Ensign? Seat? Legitimacy endorsement?

These words circled in his mind, soon like paper meeting water, soaked and softened.

He had originally thought the chaos in the Northern Territory would make these chips useful, but the lords he encountered along the way... they didn't view Louis as a lord, but as a patron who made them wealthy.

What they pondered were dividends, workshops, roads, heaters, not the imperial title.

Even the most obstinate old nobility couldn't contain their yearning when discussing Red Tide's glass and hardened roads.

Sorel closed his eyes, fingers unconsciously pinching the pendant.

The imperial title held no allure here, the imperial laws held no authority,

As for money... he thought of those lords flaunting dividends, of the Red Tide's granaries piled like mountains, of the workshops and goods he'd seen along the way...

He could no longer lie to himself: Red Tide was wealthier than most provinces of the Empire, even much wealthier.

He couldn't offer them chips they'd find appealing.

Sorel closed the pendant, his palm cold, sweat already seeping through.

Looking up again, Red Tide City was drawing closer. Those two cities standing side by side, one bustling, one of iron, like a giant maw opening from the horizon.

Chapter 684: The Terrifying Red Tide City

When the envoy group was officially received, the sky was already dark, but the city was as bright as day.

Magic stone lamps formed an arc along the main street, extending to the tower of the administrative district.

Sorel was led into the administrative center building.

The heavy door opened with a gentle push, not even a sound from the hinges.

Waiting at the door for him was an elderly man with gray hair, dressed impeccably — Bradley.

This elder responsible for the Red Tide City's administrative hub exuded a calm that was utterly mismatched with the Northern Territory.

Bradley bowed slightly, with a demeanor neither servile nor overbearing: "Welcome, Lord Sorel."

Sorel noticed that every movement was just right, yet lacked the flattery nobles typically give to royal envoys.

He instinctively straightened his back: "Where is Count Louis Calvin? I have important business to discuss with him during this trip."

Bradley maintained his gentle yet aloof attitude: "The Count is inspecting new mineral veins and glacier routes, his return date is uncertain, it may take about ten to fifteen days."

Sorel was stunned for half a second, instinctively looking for signs of deliberate obstruction on the other's face, but found none.

He sneered inwardly: "Hmph, making me wait."

Having been in diplomacy for years, he immediately recognized this as a classic show of power, neither meeting, nor refusal, nor explanation.

You want to negotiate? Then wait first.

Yet Sorel did not get angry, as the roads were blocked by snow, he had not planned to leave within ten days; his original plan was to stay until spring before departing from Red Tide City.

Sorel smiled and expressed understanding: "Just as well, I can take this opportunity to appreciate the splendor of the Northern Pearl."

"Certainly," Bradley nodded slightly, calmly, "except for the military zones marked with red signs, Red Tide City is fully open to you."

Sorel became even more curious, but he did not express it, merely smiling: "Then I will await here."

Bradley gestured invitingly: "Your accommodation is ready. Should you need anything, please inform the steward."

Sorel was guided into the depths of the reception hall, increasingly feeling the floor beneath his feet unlike stone or wood.

Each step was stable, warm, even slightly heated.

When he pushed the door open, that "strange warmth" completely enveloped him.

There was no fireplace, no brazier, no fire in the room.

Yet the air was as warm as spring.

He walked in, instinctively reaching out to touch the wall.

The touch was of warm stone, as if baked by a stove, yet not a localized heat, but the entire wall gently radiating warmth, the floor beneath was the same.

"...What is this?" Sorel frowned.

The attendant accompanying him was surprised too: "Lord, there's no fire here."

Bradley stood at the door, his tone steady: "This city uses geothermal channels and centralized heating, you need not worry about temperature during your stay."

Geothermal, centralized heating.

Sorel had never heard of these terms, like some fresh and awkward concepts.

Anyway, he had never seen such things anywhere in the Empire.

Not only was the room warm, but even the air was clean, without moldy smell or dampness.

Fresh hot water was placed on the table, the wardrobe contained wool coats and dry leather gloves, the bed more comfortable than the Royal Guest Room in the Imperial Capital.

Sorel was silent for a long time.

He was not moved by the warmth, what he saw was something more terrifying, energy redundancy.

While other territories in the Northern Territory meticulously count every bundle of firewood, here they can make the floors and entire walls of guest rooms heat up.

This meant Red Tide's fuel reserves were abundant enough to squander, their mastery of coal output, transport efficiency, and energy storage far exceeding any force in the Northern Territory.

This meant they did not fear the cold or winter, while winter in the Northern Territory had always been the sharpest blade against this land.

Sorel sat in the chair, hand on his forehead, his heart thumping a few beats.

Bradley spoke softly: "You've had a tiring journey, you may rest first. I'll arrange for someone to report daily on Lord's itinerary progress."

Sorel looked up, seeing that the other's expression was still polite without any gaps.

In that expression was a peculiar disparity.

Not being despised, but being treated as a visitor received according to procedure, not as the Empire's envoy.

"I understand." Sorel said softly.

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The next morning, Sorel donned a light-colored cloak prepared by his attendant, lowered the brim of his hat, and walked onto the street with two bodyguards.

He didn't report, didn't bring the accompanying team, like a Southern noble simply traveling, just to see the city.

The snow was still heavy, falling like goose feathers, pressing distant eaves into white lines.

Yet the road beneath his feet seemed completely unseasonal.

The three-segment main street was spacious and straight, snow falling on the ground melted into water in less than a second, flowing along well-laid drainage ditches to the roadside.

No snow accumulation, no mud, and no common winter hard ice blocks.

Sorel crouched down, fingers near the gaps between the paving stones, felt a faint warmth.

He frowned: "Like the house, is the road heating below?"

The attendant was perplexed: "Lord, is it magic?"

"No." Sorel withdrew his hand, stood up.

He recalled the guest room walls of Red Tide City emitting warmth, then linked it to the main street below his feet that didn't freeze, the entire line connected instantly...

Red Tide laid heating channels under the roads, transmitting some kind of thermal energy from the city center to all main streets.

Ordinary people only see that walking won't slip.

Chapter 685: The Terrifying Red Tide City (Part 2)

In Sorel's view, this is not merely urban convenience, but a completely different level of technological capability.

He stared at the road that didn't freeze: "They can maintain the main roads of the entire city at a constant temperature? To sustain transport, commerce, and public order during a blizzard... completely unaffected by the weather."

His inner assessment of Red Tide's technological prowess improved significantly.

Then he headed towards the refugee area near the city gate.

Theoretically, this should be the dirtiest and most chaotic place, as every big city in the Empire has such an area to some extent.

They are not native residents but foreign parasites, and since they can't be entirely eradicated, a designated area is allocated for them to live.

In any case, they dissipate like weeds only to continuously re-emerge, serving as the most unwanted shadow in every city of the Empire.

Yet as he approached, his first reaction was not to cover his nose, but rather surprise.

The air was devoid of any foul smell, absent of the sour odor of excrement, filled only with the fresh scent of limewater and sulfur soap.

"...Something's off," Sorel muttered quietly.

The attendant assumed he was complaining, "Sir, let me..."

"It's not dirty; it's too clean," Sorel gently raised his hand, signaling him not to move.

Outside the refugee area, steam pipes emitted white mist, and several workers in thick aprons guided new arrivals into a large public bathhouse in line.

The bathhouse's outer wall was engraved with Red Tide's sun motif, with two medical women standing at the entrance.

A worker noticed them, briefly assessed before approaching: "Are you visitors from out of town? This is the containment line. If you'd like to observe, you'll need to stand outside the yellow marked line."

Sorel glanced at the yellow line on the ground and couldn't help but ask: "Do you clean this many people daily?"

The worker nodded: "It's the rule. New migrants must first be treated for lice and mildew, otherwise, they may bring epidemics."

Hearing this, Sorel was taken aback.

As the refugees entered, they were unkempt and covered in lice.

As they exited, their hair was cut short, their clothes replaced with uniform old cotton garments, and each held a bowl of steaming porridge.

At that moment, a middle-aged man who was pushed out suddenly halted, his hands shaking slightly as he held the porridge.

Upon seeing the sun motif of Red Tide on the wall, his eyes inexplicably moistened.

He spoke to no one, yet suddenly knelt in the snow, bowing firmly and choked up: "Thank you... thank you... I thought I wouldn't survive this winter..."

The foreman quickly lifted him up: "Don't kneel; register after eating, then you need to work."

Not far off, a frail woman holding a child softly asked the medical woman: "Can we really... really stay? We won't be driven away?"

The medical woman draped a clean shawl over her shoulders: "As long as you're willing to register and work, you can stay."

Holding her child, the woman couldn't help but break into tears on the spot: "Thank you... Red Tide saved us..."

Sorel watched this scene and found it somewhat difficult to comprehend.

These people were grateful to the point of tears, but he didn't understand, for refugees were not wealth; they only brought risk.

Why would Louis invest such effort into handling these people?

By the standards of the Imperial Nobility, this act was meaningless — laborious, uneconomical, with low return.

Yet in Red Tide, everyone seemed accustomed, as if following an incredibly mature procedure.

Sorel couldn't grasp it, nor was he likely to fathom the real reason.

The increase in the refugee population indicated a larger demographic base, representing a surge in mobilizable labor, trainable soldiers, and cultivable craftsmen.

Refugees cleansed wouldn't be immediately useful, but they would survive.

As long as they survived, they would be incorporated into Red Tide's food distribution, work points, and evaluation systems, not necessarily remaining in the city but distributed to surrounding Red Tide territories.

Once within the system, they were not burdens but resources — a human mine capable of being continuously processed.

Louis wasn't extending charity; he was preparing manpower for future industrial expansion.

As for discovering new industries, for Louis, a transmigrator from Earth and a Lord with the daily intelligence as a cheat, this posed no challenge.

Sorel naturally couldn't realize this.

From his perspective, this process was money-burning and labor-intensive, downright foolish.

He failed to comprehend the logic of this system due to his limited vision.

On the afternoon of the third day, Sorel walked to the plaza of the residential area.

It was the area where citizens gathered, and observing the city's demeanor there was direct and straightforward.

He happened upon an elderly man pushing a wheelbarrow who slipped, spilling a whole bag of flour onto the ground.

Sorel instinctively assumed the Knight would whip the obstruction out of the way.

After all, in the Imperial Capital, this was the norm.

But in Red Tide City, the patrolling Knight immediately halted his horse, dismounted, helped the elderly man up first, and then repacked the scattered flour into the bag, ensuring no harm before continuing the patrol.

The surrounding citizens did not retreat; instead, several children's eyes gleamed like stars: "I want to become a Knight too!"

Sorel stood frozen, realizing that Knights were no longer a privileged class but protectors.

The commoners were no longer inferior beings who had to avoid eye contact but citizens who directly faced the Knights, even taking pride in them.

If it were only one individual, it might just represent the noble character of a solitary Knight, but given his experiences over these days, it was evident that Red Tide's Knights were invariably friendly and patient with the civilians.

This signified that this was a rule deliberately established by Louis.

This was not merely management but a reshaping of class consciousness.

Chapter 686: The Terrifying Red Tide City (Part 3)

But even so, he still felt something was off. Once the lower strata embraced the new order, the old aristocracy would become superfluous, which might not be beneficial for Louis.

Yet the problem lay here; Sorel's understanding only scratched the surface.

As for the deeper logic—why change the class dynamics, why make the knights more moderate, and why make the populace embrace this order voluntarily—he still couldn't grasp it.

To Sorel, this approach was too complex, too risky, not adhering to any common sense of the Imperial Nobility.

He racked his brains but couldn't figure it out, so he kept it to himself for now.

On the fourth day, he was allowed, with Bradley's permission, to visit the peripheral area of the Red Tide City Council Hall.

The building lacked gold, lacked reliefs, and even lacked the stained glass windows that the Imperial Capital loved to flaunt.

Cold Iron beams held up the dome of the hall, and the Red Tide banner fell like a waterfall from high above, creating a strong sense of oppression against the cold iron structure.

The outer hall was very noisy, with citizens of Red Tide constantly coming to handle affairs, people coming and going amidst ongoing clamor.

Inside, however, it was surprisingly quiet. Clerks held folders in red, yellow, and gray, moved briskly, without whispering or chaos.

Everyone's actions were simple and precise, like gears polished over and over again.

A merchant ahead submitted his application; from taking a number, submitting, reviewing, to stamping and leaving, the whole process took less than fifteen minutes.

This scene stunned Sorel; in the Imperial Capital, such procedures would take at least three days and require three rounds of bribes.

He slowly exhaled: "No layers of exploitation, no petty officials, no middlemen taking cuts... Louis's will can reach the lowest level without any loss."

This was strong centralization, a highly efficient administrative machine, the way the new order operated.

But here, he was stuck again; if the Empire implemented this, it would immediately provoke backlash from all the nobility. How did Louis do it? Why hadn't the Northern Territory explode?

He couldn't comprehend it at all.

In fact, the reason why Red Tide's administrative system could operate efficiently was because Louis reformed the interest structure rather than the power structure.

The interest chain of the old aristocratic stratification was severed, replaced by an integrated interest loop of "infrastructure, industry, taxes".

The fewer the intermediary links, the higher the efficiency, and Red Tide Territory's resource growth would allow most people to profit, with officials earning very high salaries, complemented by a transparent promotion system, making them naturally compliant with this system.

Sorel certainly couldn't see these.

He could only see the surface order, completely unable to understand the underlying logic. He suddenly realized why the Northern Territory lord would be so fearful of Red Tide.

This wasn't establishing a fief; it was building a nation, a rapidly expanding giant machine.

A machine with its own military, industry, energy, administrative system that didn't rely on the Empire's resources.

Sorel stood at the edge of the administration area's high platform, gazing up at the enormous red flag, suddenly feeling swallowed whole by the machine's shadow.

And his gaze crossed the city walls, seeing the distant place constantly shrouded in light mist.

There were no lights of bustling districts nor the soft glow of magic stone lamps, only a massive complex looming like ridges.

The lines were straight, the surface harsh, lacking the patterns and decorations favored by the nobility.

More like an entire barrier piled from iron and stone, rising from the permafrost.

When Sorel first saw it, he thought it was some kind of military fortress.

No flags, no bugles, no sound of soldiers' drills, increasingly oppressive and unfamiliar.

Bradley previously mentioned "military controlled area", so Sorel assumed this place was one of them.

But the more he looked, the more he felt something was wrong.

This place was abnormally quiet, unlike a military camp, nor like a workshop; he couldn't tell what it was.

Sorel squinted his eyes, staring at the cluster of dark buildings, itching with curiosity.

"What exactly is Louis keeping in there?"

He found no answer and grew increasingly uneasy.

So Sorel whispered to the two High-tier Elite Knights accompanying him: "Don't alert anyone. Just get close and see what they're making in those dark houses."

The knights donned gray cloaks, quietly leaving through a side door in the darkness.

Sorel lit the candle on the stand, sitting by the window waiting.

Snow fell densely, the candlelight flickered, his heart skipped with it.

Before long, heavy footsteps approached.

The two knights kneeled together: "Sir, no way in, absolutely no way in."

Sorel's brow furrowed: "Many guards?"

"Not many." The knight spoke with difficulty, "Strong."

He looked up, expression complex as if seeing something beyond comprehension: "There are at least three... no, maybe five Transcendent Knights patrolling there."

Sorel nearly lost his footing.

In the Empire, one Transcendent Knight was enough to command a 500-person legion and become a baron's honored guest. They were the nuclear force on the battlefield, the symbol of noble power.

And in Red Tide?

Louis actually used five Transcendent Knights to watch a workshop door?

Sorel felt a chill: "What is that smoking place... hiding?"

The next day, he personally observed from a distance outside the main road in the East District.

The snow grew heavier, yet the road leading to the industrial district remained unclogged, with transport teams advancing along the moist pavement.

Sorel didn't get close, just stood at a safe distance.

Chapter 687: The Terrifying Red Tide City (4)

Even so, he was still stunned by the scale, making his scalp tingle.

Input of devoured raw materials

Hundreds of heavy trucks pulled by twin horses lined up, driving out from the depths of the snow.

The trucks were loaded with: neatly cut logs, shiny black charcoal, coarse iron ore from the mines...

There were even a few trucks with long metal pieces covered by oilcloth.

These things were continuously swallowed by the giant iron gates, as if fed into the belly of a giant beast.

Sorel murmured, "The daily consumption of this workshop is equivalent to a year's usage of the Raymond family blacksmith shop..."

He stared at the advancing convoy, "How many blacksmiths are kept inside? A thousand? Ten thousand?"

The more he thought, the harder it became to breathe.

And on the other side of the door, sporadic trucks were slowly moving out.

The cargo was tightly covered with oiled black canvas, indistinguishable in shape, with no labels.

Though few in number, each was absurdly heavy.

Even on hardened pavement, the wheels wrapped in iron still pressed white scars into the ground.

Six horses strained every muscle, and the driver had to rely almost on a whip to get the vehicle moving.

He couldn't help but whisper, "Such heavy cargo... Is it a battering ram? A catapult? Or iron bars to deal with heavy cavalry?"

Sorel stared at the giant gates for a long time, finally suppressing all guesses, since he couldn't get in, he could only leave.

He donned his cloak and returned to the reception hall, always occasionally looking back at the somber buildings along the way, as if staring at a giant beast that could awaken at any time.

Back in the room, he leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes.

Images from the past few days inside the city began flashing quickly through his mind.

Roads that never froze, odorless shelters, knights who proactively supported the elderly, administrative approvals taking only fifteen minutes...

Sorel finally managed to piece together a faint outline:

Traditional lords use the whip to instill fear in their people, good lords use charity to inspire gratitude.

But Louis Calvin relies on the system and life itself, integrating himself into the very air of the city.

The people here would cry for a bowl of porridge, laugh for an elderly person being helped up, nod in greeting during a knight's patrol.

Not because of fear, not because of benevolence, but because they can no longer do without this system.

"To these people, Louis isn't a 'Lord'..." Sorel opened his eyes, throat tight, "He's like the sun, and they're unable to leave him..."

Sorel suddenly realized a fact more frightening than the industrial zone.

"If I try to buy off Red Tide's generals, they'd be bound by their knights and sent to the judge's bench. If I try to incite a rebellion, the citizens here would likely be the first to rush up and tear out my throat."

Sorel felt as if something was pressing against his chest: "In this city... Louis is God. And I'm just a mortal trying to buy off a deity with Gold Coins.

He was silent for a long time, finally slowly sitting up straight.

Even knowing it's impossible to succeed, the mission still has to be carried out; if he returns empty-handed, he'd only become the laughingstock of the next day or a scapegoat.

Sorel slowly exhaled a breath, taking out that secret letter only circulating in the Empire's inner circle from his chest.

It was the trump card given by the Second Prince, the most extravagant condition the Empire was willing to offer to win over Louis Calvin.

Grant the title of Duke of the Northern Territory.

Promise the autonomy and labor exemptions of Red Tide Territory.

Open seventy percent of the profits from two core southern trade routes as the starting fund for cooperation.

Ensure a seat in the future Empire's new Dragon Throne Council.

These conditions, casually offering even one, could make half of the Empire's nobility weep while kneeling.

Sorel stared at the secret letter, but there was only one absurd thought in his mind: "These things... Louis probably doesn't care about them at all."

But he still had to try.

He even already thought of a strategy: take advantage of Louis's developmental stage, start with the Empire's title granting, use the Royal Family's name to gild Louis.

Induce political ambition by offering the status of Duke of the Northern Territory, then throw out the Raymond family's southern trade route interests, causing this young Lord to become dependent.

Once Red Tide and Raymond are deeply bound in their interests, slowly pull Louis into Raymond family factions.

To the Raymond family head's faction, not the Second Prince's family faction.

This was his most skilled method in the Imperial Capital.

But now, looking towards Red Tide City, he suddenly realized he wasn't hunting a beast, but trying to tie a rope around a mountain.

Even so, he gritted his teeth and put the secret letter back in his chest.

"I can only bite the bullet and go down negotiation... At least, let the Second Prince see I tried my best."

Sorel stood up, adjusted his collar, as if granting himself one last dignity.

"Louis Calvin won't be easily won... then I'll start with those around him. Start with Bradley, then with the legion commanders, then with the trade route controllers..."

He murmured, "Even if I can't move the whole mountain, I must chisel off a piece of stone."

Chapter 688: The Art of Negotiation

The wind and snow pounded against the dome of the Earth Tower Castle, producing a low hum.

Only the wall lamps were lit in the study, and the air was filled with the warmth of black tea.

Louis leaned back in the curved chair, flipping through the latest edition of the "Red Tide Daily".

The coarse pulp paper still had a faint scent of wood shavings, the layout was tidy, and the handwriting was clear.

Although the paper wasn't great, it was clear that the editorial staff had put in a lot of effort.

Since Red Tide popularized literacy education and night schools, the number of literate people had rapidly increased.

Louis then had the Department of Education try publishing a newspaper, filling it with local news and simple stories.

The coarse paper was enough to provide ordinary people access to the latest information in the Northern Territory, the Empire, and even the world.

Although there had long been periodicals circulating among the nobility in the Jade Federation and the upper echelons of the Empire, the literacy rate was so low that ordinary folks would never see them in their lifetimes.

Red Tide, for the first time in this world, had brought writing to the masses.

Louis promoted literacy not for personal betterment but for the future of production.

He knew that while illiterates could work, they couldn't understand procedures, identify symbols, or follow blueprints in workshops.

In Red Tide, only those who were literate could become craftsmen, recorders, grassroots officials, or army officers.

Literacy was the first threshold for entering the system of Red Tide.

If Red Tide wanted to expand, to build, to unify the Northern Territory in the future, it must first grant the masses reading and writing abilities.

Only those who understood the rules would be willing to follow them, and only those who understood the system would actively uphold it.

There was a knock on the door.

Bradley entered, holding a few documents: "Sir, the main structure of the new castle has stabilized, and it will be completed by next autumn."

Louis didn't even lift his head: "Emily and the others went there again today?"

"They went this afternoon." Bradley smiled slightly, "They care more about the new castle than you do."

Louis put down the newspaper and looked up, asking, "What has that envoy from the Imperial Capital, Sorrell, been up to these days?"

This was the first time Louis had taken the initiative to ask since Sorrell arrived over ten days ago.

Bradley reported truthfully: "He idles in the city during the day. He spends the most time in the shelter and the administration hall. On the seventh night, he sent two High-tier Knights to try to approach the East District."

Louis raised an eyebrow: "Were they able to get close?"

"No," Bradley said calmly, "they were stopped by patrols before even touching the second layer of fencing. After that, he became more restrained."

Louis chuckled softly.

"But since that day, he started using gold coins to bribe the servants and cooks at the guesthouse," Bradley continued. "He wasn't trying to gather military intelligence but to find out your preferences, like what wine you like, what food you favor, or... what kind of women you fancy."

Louis held his forehead, seemingly amused: "He's putting quite an effort into it."

"I told the servants to make something up," Bradley said lightly.

Louis laughed, "That's fine. Let them earn some extra money. It looks like he's trying the flattery route."

He stood up, picked up the black tea, and paused by the window for a moment.

Outside, the wind and snow were fierce, and the castle lights were shrouded in a haze.

"It's about time." Louis paused, "Go tell him, I just risked the snow to come back. Although I'm very tired, out of respect for the Second Prince, I am willing to see him immediately. Give him twenty minutes to prepare."

"Yes, Sir." Bradley accepted the command and left.

The study returned to silence, and Louis continued to lower his eyes to the newspaper on the table.

In fact, he had never left the Red Tide Territory for a single step.

The reason for not seeing Sorrell was simple: to let him stay in this city a few more days and see the reality of Red Tide with his own eyes.

And the gift he was waiting for was ready.

.....

Lord's Mansion, the main conference room.

The furnishings here were simple but nearly spartan for a Lord of the Northern Territory, except for the giant map of the Northern Territory on the wall, which stood out dramatically.

Louis Calvin pushed open the heavy oak door and strode in.

He was not wearing the noble garb Sorrell had imagined, nor was he clad in armor that symbolized force, but just an ordinary dark gray heavy coat.

A biting cold gust followed him into the warm hall, instantly dissipating the cloying Southern incense in the air.

"Sir Sorrell! Sorry for keeping you waiting!"

Louis's voice was cheerful and warm. He didn't head to the main seat but instead walked quickly to Sorrell and clasped his hand.

"The snow outside was too heavy, and there was a hitch on the Ice River route; I really couldn't get away. Bradley didn't neglect you, did he?"

Louis's grin was as bright as a sincere young man from next door, with genuine apology in his eyes.

Sorrell was momentarily stiffened by this sudden enthusiasm.

In the past ten days, he had seen the suffocating throughput of the industrial area, the refugee conversion line in the shelter like a precision instrument, and the luxury of having an Extraordinary Knight at the gate.

In his imagination, the master of Red Tide should be a sinister, ruthless tyrant radiating terrifying authority.

But this young man before him, aside from being somewhat handsome, was too... ordinary.

However, it was precisely this stark contrast that sent a deep chill into Sorrell's bones.

When a tiger roars at you, at least you know it wants to eat you.

But if a tiger smiles at you like a human and warmly places its arm around your shoulder, you'll never know what it intends to do.

"I wouldn't dare, I wouldn't dare." Sorrell hurriedly withdrew his hand, bowing deeply, "It's my honor to meet you, Your Excellency."

Chapter 689: The Art of Negotiation (Part 2)

"That's good." Louis casually pulled out a chair and sat down, gesturing to the opposite side, "Sit down, don't be restrained. We Northern People aren't particular about those formalities."

Sir Sorrell cautiously sat in the spot Louis indicated, only daring to sit halfway, his back straight as a rod.

The strategy he had planned before coming, rehearsed no less than a hundred times, was finally making its debut at this moment.

"Your Excellency Louis." He opened the golden velvet box he carried, presenting it with both hands, probably containing the Second Prince's letter.

"The Second Prince has heard of your achievements in the Northern Territory. He believes that an ordinary Count title no longer matches your status."

Louis raised his eyebrow, picked up the teacup, seemingly responding casually, "Oh? Then what does His Highness think I should be?"

Sir Sorrell looked into his eyes, slowly spoke the title powerful enough to shake the Empire's structure: "Grand Duke of the Northern Territory... which was once Duke Edmund's position."

He stared at Louis, waiting for the spark of ambition to ignite in his expression.

"Once His Highness ascends to the throne, he will formally recognize your governance over the Northern Territory. You will become the irreplaceable Guardian of the North for the Empire, and the young five-year-old Edmond will naturally no longer affect your inheritance of this land."

This was a meticulously designed trap disguised as praise.

As soon as Louis nods, he would immediately become the common enemy of the Empire's old nobility, dragged into the political quagmire of the Imperial Capital.

If he wished to maintain the dignity of Grand Duke, he could only continuously deplete the strength of the Red Tide.

Louis put down the teacup, glanced at the scroll of parchment, his expression as tranquil as if assessing ordinary goods: "It certainly sounds impressive. So then... What do I need to pay for this prestige? Fight battles for His Highness in the South and the North?"

"No, you don't need to deploy troops." Sir Sorrell quickly seized the opportunity, his tone becoming increasingly humble.

Sir Sorrell could tell, Louis hadn't immediately refused; this was the signal he most desired.

So he began his next persuasive step: "His Highness only hopes you become the Empire's stabilizing cornerstone. As a gesture of sincerity, the Second Prince is willing to have the House of Raimont open three key southern trade routes for the Red Tide to use."

This time Sir Sorrell's tone was softer than before, like patiently coaxing a young lord: "Red Tide's ores, glass, iron products, tools can enter the southern market tax-free."

And we are willing to provide spices, silk, sugar, these premium southern goods to the Red Tide at cost price."

He spoke as if describing a risk-free, mutually beneficial cooperation: "Red Tide only needs to transport the goods from the Northern Territory down continuously, and the southern trade routes will naturally open for you."

Hidden in his words was a sharp hook, enticing the Red Tide to get accustomed to southern goods, encouraging Red Tide's workshops to habitually export minerals and semi-finished products.

Once dependency forms, as soon as the House of Raimont tightens the trade routes, the entire industrial chain of the Red Tide will be choked at the throat, just like what the Calvin Commerce Association is doing to Louis now.

Sir Sorrell continued to press forward: "Duke Calvin... your father, seems to have always tried to block the circulation of Red Tide's goods, hasn't he? We're willing to help you dismantle the barriers he set up, allowing Red Tide to truly move towards the Empire."

This sentence was like a fine needle, gently poking at a wound.

It both hinted at Duke Calvin's hostility and suggested Red Tide's reliance on external markets.

But once the Red Tide embarked on this path, it would slowly become a vassal of the House of Raimont.

Louis still didn't speak, merely tapping his fingertips on the armrest, as if waiting for him to finish speaking.

Sir Sorrell gritted his teeth, threw out his final trap.

"Your Highness Duke..." His tone became low, as if concerned for the other party, "If I may speak frankly, the Red Tide has strength, has an army, but lacks the depth to match its status."

He proceeded slowly, "Your officials are very capable, but they are too much like craftsmen. They don't know heraldry, don't understand noble etiquette, nor how to host a ball befitting one's status. This will make those traditional nobles in the South look down on you."

Then he gently pushed forward a prepared list: "The Second Prince is willing to unconditionally dispatch a hundred-member advisory team, including Royal Academy's doctorate lawyers, etiquette masters, horticulturalists, musicians, royal chefs..."

"They will help Red Tide establish a truly court-like system. So that Red Tide is no longer just a barracks, but a Royal Court recognized by the Empire."

After saying this, Sir Sorrell held his breath.

This was his most skilled tactic in the Imperial Capital, giving you status, binding you with ambition, giving you trade routes, ensnaring you with profit, giving you etiquette, infiltrating you with culture.

As soon as Louis accepts this advisory team, Red Tide's administrative efficiency will be dragged down by etiquette and formalities, and Knights will be corrupted by indulgence.

In five years, no more than five years, this roaring iron beast will have its teeth dulled, transformed into a dancing cat.

Sir Sorrell waited for Louis to show even a momentary hesitation.

He knew in his heart that Louis probably would not agree.

But as long as there was any sign of wavering, he could steer the negotiation in a favorable direction.

However, Louis's response completely surprised him.

Louis raised his head, expression calm: "Sir Sorrell, may I ask you something?"

Sir Sorrell immediately sat upright: "Please go ahead, Your Excellency."

"Are you here representing the Second Prince?"

"Of course." Sir Sorrell instantly replied, "I am naturally representing His Highness."

Louis gently shook his head: "What I mean is..."

He paused, his tone still gentle, yet it seemed to cut through the air like a blade: "Are you here on behalf of the Second Prince? Or... on behalf of Duke Raimont?"

Chapter 690: The Art of Negotiation (Part 3)

Sorel's breath hitched, his heart seemingly gripped by an invisible hand.

Because this matter should remain unknown to anyone.

Besides himself and Duke Raymond, this true allegiance had never appeared in any document, any secret message, or any conversation.

The knowledgeable nobility in the Imperial Capital believed him to be the Second Prince's person, and the Second Prince never doubted it.

This identity was buried deeply in shadows, unknown even to the knights accompanying him.

Normally, a young lord far in the Northern Territory couldn't possibly point it out directly.

Yet Louis simply said it lightly, dissecting him as if he could see him through to his bones.

Guessing, perhaps? He comforted himself this way.

But fear still rushed up his spine instantly, like being seen suddenly in the dark.

Louis didn't stop. It was as if he continued down a thread he had long grasped, his tone even carrying a hint of concern:

"You're running tirelessly for the duke's sake, for your child recuperating in the monastery, aren't you?

The little girl named Ellie... The gray scale sickness has entered the second stage, right? The duke promised you a rare alchemy potion as a reward."

Sorel's breath was instantly choked.

He froze in his chair, as if drained of strength from within.

Why?

How did he know?

Sorel didn't even know which part of his fear was most potent.

Was it because the secret was revealed?

Or because Louis's tone was too calm, as though he had everything investigated without the slightest hostility?

Sorel looked at Louis's young face, as if seeing a giant eye lurking in the darkness.

This person wasn't a remote lord; he was a devil.

Not only did he know Duke Raymond's private accounts, but he held even his most secret, most untouchable vulnerability.

Ellie was his only child, the entirety left by his late wife.

He wouldn't let anyone near, let alone let outsiders know.

Yet before this young nobleman, he was completely transparent.

Moreover, Louis's tone wasn't threatening him. Louis was caring for him.

Louis didn't seize the opportunity to coerce; he just gently opened a drawer, taking out a slender glass bottle.

The bottle had a pale green body, sealed with silver wax at the mouth, its liquid slightly glowing under the light.

Louis placed the bottle on the table, sliding it toward Sorel.

"The potion the duke gives you can only suppress the illness." His tone remained steady, "It won't cure her. You know, that so-called treasure is ineffective for the second stage of gray scale sickness. This is a potion developed by the Red Tide, effective in curing this type of gray scale sickness within ten years."

Sorel stared at the potion, his pupils slightly contracting, as if in disbelief.

In fact, this formula wasn't something Red Tide extrapolated out of thin air.

A month ago, when Sorel stepped into the Northern Territory, Louis had learned of Sorel's daughter's illness and her exact location in the remote monastery from daily intelligence.

And this potion was initially developed under the leadership of the Jade Federation's Master Merian, as long as the materials were complete, it could be perfectly recreated with time.

Moreover, this pale green potion was prepared precisely for today's moment.

Louis gently pushed the potion closer: "This isn't a transaction; it's a meeting gift. You can take it first and try it. If it's effective... we can talk about the terms afterward. I have more, enough to cure your daughter."

Sorel's Adam's apple moved slightly, his chest seeming pressed by something heavy.

All his chips, titles, commercial routes, ritual systems, political bait, were insignificant compared to this small potion.

His lips quivered slightly, finally reaching out, yet paused before touching the bottle.

At this moment, his defenses completely crumbled.