

Winter 691

Chapter 691: Raymond and Calvin

The torrential rain pressed against the eaves, beating on the bronze rain gutters with a dull thudding sound.

Inside the house, only a single fireplace was lit, the weak light unable to illuminate the beams.

The Second Prince, Kaelin, sat at the desk, his shoulders slightly hunched.

He had been staring at the military and political list for a long time, his sutured stump aching intermittently, like the cold moisture seeping into his bones.

The feathered pen in his hand gently struck out the third name on the list.

It was the commander of the Twenty-Third Legion, who had once sworn allegiance with his own mouth, and they had once fought side by side.

But today's intelligence reported that the main force stationed outside the Royal Capital submitted a transfer request to the Ministry of Finance controlled by the Fourth Prince this morning.

Kaelin stared at the name smudged by ink, his throat constricted as if being choked.

Compared to the significant loss of strength, the feeling of being abandoned bit by bit was more piercing.

Like a tree hollowed out by termites, still standing yet ready to fall at any moment.

A gentle knock on the door interrupted the dead silence.

"Your Highness," the personal attendant lowered his voice but couldn't hide his panic, "Duke Raymond requests an audience."

The feathered pen slipped from Kaelin's fingers and rolled across the desk.

He abruptly raised his head, first bewildered, then incredulous.

Raymond? The titan who could make the Nobility yield in both the Empire's north and south?

At this moment, he should be far away in the Gray Rock Province.

How could he appear in the palace amidst the storm?

The shock lasted only a moment, quickly replaced by an almost greedy joy.

When everyone was preparing to leave him, this Duke braved the storm to see him.

"Quick! Let him in!" Kaelin stood up suddenly, the chair screeching against the stone floor, "Guard the door, don't let anyone approach!"

Thunder rolled across the palace roof as if heralding the start of this secret conversation.

When Raymond stepped into the side hall, the air seemed to weigh a bit heavier.

He shook off the rain on his shoulders, took off the soaked black cloak, and casually hung it on the iron hook by the door.

Underneath was dark leather armor without a family crest, simple yet exuding a dangerous aura.

Despite the chilly rain clinging to his body, his posture remained straight, like hardwood that wouldn't bend even in a storm.

Kaelin almost couldn't wait to greet him: "Duke, why would you... How dare you come to the Imperial Capital at this time?"

Raymond did not answer; his gaze fell on the list with names crossed out, pausing for half a second.

"Your Highness," his tone calm yet cutting like a knife through a wound, "Rotten meat must be cut off."

He lifted his eyes to add, "Keeping it will only drag the whole body to death."

Kaelin's breath halted for a moment.

Raymond walked forward a few steps, pulled out a chair, and sat down, his actions leisurely as if in his own mansion.

"Those fence-sitters leaving is a good thing," he continued, "At least now you can finally see who is still usable and who has long been someone else's man."

Kaelin clenched his molars, his voice tight, "The legions... were not supposed to be this way. The Twenty-Third Legion turned to the Fourth Prince because of the civil servants' intimidation and enticement..."

"It's more than intimidation and enticement," Raymond cut him off directly, "It's grabbing the lifeline."

He reached out, pushing the list back in front of Kaelin.

"The Fourth Prince controls the Ministry of Finance, as well as the Audit Office. He uses supplies, military expenses, audits to grind these old-fashioned military commanders' families into the ground."

"Without supplies, they can't last two months. Without audit exemptions, their family account books won't hold till next year. Without combat merit documentation, their sons and nephews won't pass the noble title exams."

Raymond looked up at Kaelin: "These old commanders never truly pledged loyalty to anyone. They are loyal to their families. The Fourth Prince gives them the means to stabilize their families, which you can't... Of course, they would turn."

Silence lingered between them for a moment.

Raymond leaned back against the chair, summing up crisply, "The current Military Affairs Department is an empty shell. You can't mobilize any complete legion."

Thunder rolled across the roof once more.

Raymond, as if foreseeing this, took another scroll of parchment from beside the chair and slapped it onto the desk.

Not a list, but an Empire frontier defense map full of dust, corners worn.

"Your Highness, not being able to mobilize the Royal Capital's troops doesn't mean you have no army."

Kaelin stared at the old map, his brow slowly furrowing.

Raymond lifted his hand, pointing to the region bordering the Jade Federation in the west: "The Thirty-First Legion."

He then pointed to the southern barren border line: "The Eleventh Legion."

"These two legions have been embroiled in years of border skirmishes with Magical Beasts and Alien Races. Troops forged in real battles." Raymond's fingertips paused on the map, his tone calm yet assured, "Combat effectiveness, the strongest of all regular legions in the Empire."

He paused: "Also the most forgotten by the Imperial Capital."

Kaelin's breath tightened slightly but he didn't interrupt.

Raymond continued, "They are too far from the political center, viewed by the Ministry of Finance as a money pit.

Annual military pay is delayed where possible, reduced where possible. Do you know how worn their equipment is? Old blades from ten years ago, barely functional if stitched together, would count as good.

These fellows have long hated the civil servants in the Imperial Capital who only know to use audit forms to withhold resources, and the Fourth Prince's hand."

He looked up at Kaelin, his gaze like a sharp dagger: "They don't care if orders from the Imperial Capital comply or who fights for what in the palace. They only understand two things: whether they get resources, whether they are respected."

"An old military adage says: 'Generals in the field do not take orders from sovereigns'." Raymond quietly repeated, "These people are more independent than you think. As long as you feed them, they will help you tear through the northern defenses of the Imperial Capital."

Chapter 692: Reymont and Calvin (2)

Kaelin stared at the two legion stations, a long-lost glint appeared in his eyes.

Raymont noticed this slight change and timely offered his stake: "In the private treasury of the Raymont family, there are enough high-quality weapons to re-equip three legions, as well as two years' worth of food reserves. I am willing to send them to the Thirty-First and Eleventh Legions."

"The premise is they must know who is feeding them." Kaelin stared at the frontier map, his chest feeling as if something was being stretched open.

The dull angry fire, buried deep in his heart due to the bitterness and humiliation from his severed arm, finally found an outlet to burn.

The storm knocked on the window frame, but his breathing grew more rapid.

"Duke..." Kaelin's voice was somewhat hoarse, "You are willing to take this risk for me... I..."

Before he finished speaking, his eyes were already heating up.

In this Imperial Capital, everyone was leaving him.

Only this man before him came back against the storm at the most dangerous time, pushing his family's fortunes toward him.

The bitterness at the site of his severed arm seemed somewhat mitigated by this passion.

To secure this only person still willing to support him, Kaelin almost blurted out with emotion:

"Raymont! When I ascend to rule the Three Counties of Fallow, you pick one! No... all three counties are yours!"

Kaelin raised his head, speaking urgently and decisively: "Also, the title of Grand Marshal will be hereditary forever! From now on, the Empire's military will be under your command!"

Raymont was momentarily stunned.

Not out of emotion.

But because the Second Prince's reaction was even easier to manipulate than he had imagined.

Yet he still showed the appropriate expression, looking both shocked yet subtly bloodthirsty.

"Your Highness..." he spoke softly, "The entire Raymont family swears to follow to the death."

The tears in Kaelin's eyes finally fell, but he did not wipe them, just nodded firmly.

Raymont stood up, donned his soaking cloak again, standing like a black wall once more.

"I will leave through the secret passage." He said simply, then pushed the door open and left, his figure swallowed by the storm.

After hiding inside that unmarked black carriage, Raymont put away all his emotions.

The fervor and loyalty he showed just now seemed to have never existed.

Kaelin raised his hand, taking out a clean handkerchief, and carefully wiped the shoulder armor.

That was the spot the Second Prince had just patted.

His movements were unhurried, yet carried a chill, as if wiping away some unwelcome bad luck.

The storm outside crackled on the roof of the carriage.

Raymont reclined in the shadows, his gaze cold like a predator hidden in the deep sea.

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Deep within the Duke Calvin's residence.

The Obsidian door closed behind him, the heavy echo dissipating in the narrow hallway, with the sea wind and lights outside shut out.

The secret room was not large, with simple furnishings.

Against the wall was a row of bookcases locked with iron clasps, in the center only a black walnut table with two chairs, a silver hourglass at the corner, where sand slowly fell.

Duke Calvin sat in the shadowed position, fingers lightly tapping the table.

His attire was restrained, with only a slightly old family emblem pinned to his chest, passed down from his father.

Opposite him sat the Fifth Prince and the envoy from the Golden Feather Flower Religious Authority Country, the Divine Envoy Salomon.

He wore a gray robe, white gloves so clean they looked deliberate, the silver Holy Emblem at his neck slightly glimmering in the firelight.

After a moment's silence, it was Salomon who spoke first.

"Your Grace, the Prince and the Cardinal Institute send their blessings." His voice was not too fast or slow, with a gentle tone, "In these turbulent times for the Empire, to still stabilize the Southeast sea route and deliver the spices needed by the Church Court on time, this reputation... is praised by everyone in the Holy City as well."

Calvin seemed to laugh casually: "The praise from the Holy City usually comes at a high price."

Salomon did not deny it, instead he followed up: "Not at all, what I bring this time is a surprise."

As he spoke, he took out a smaller parchment map from his sleeve and gently spread it on the table.

The map only depicted the current boundaries of the Southeast Province.

"The cracks in the Empire are already a fact." Salomon pointed a finger on the map, "Now there are not many provinces that can completely maintain military and political systems."

"What do you mean?" the Duke asked plainly.

"Now the Southeast Province is the Empire's only relatively intact framework on the eastern side." Salomon looked at him.

"But this framework is too scattered. The coastal cities, the major inland families, each acting independently. If it drags on any longer, the Prince's hope to rise from the Southeast will be impaired by these minor lords."

Calvin did not deny this point. Over the years in the Southeast he's dealt too much with these familial factions.

"So?" he asked again.

Only now did Salomon mention specific stakes for the first time: "The Prince is willing to promote recognition from the Council and Cardinal Institute on the Imperial Capital's side.

Concentrating the entire Southeast Province's military and political power into your hands. All command authority originally belonging to the Royal Family and the provincial Council will be handed over to you in the form of written orders."

The Duke slightly raised an eyebrow: "Sounds more like throwing a bunch of trouble for me to clean up."

"Cleaning up the mess is a necessary step before establishing a new order." Salomon did not avoid, "As long as you nod, within three months, the Prince will promote the issuance of the Southeast Reorganization Order. From that moment on, the Southeast Province will have only one master."

This stake was not shocking, yet pragmatic enough.

Calvin looked down at the small map, gently tapping the table with his knuckles: "With the Prince's current power, this order is not necessarily easy to implement."

"You are right."

Chapter 693: Remonte and Calvin (3)

Salomon admitted briskly and then changed his tone: "So this is just an opening letter. The real invitation is yet to come afterward."

After finishing his statement, he extracted a second larger map from the leather tube he carried.

This time, the parchment spread out, occupying half the table.

A red line set off from the Southeast coast, heading north, encircling the Golden Wheat Plains, then turning west, incorporating the inland river port of Oakheaven Province.

The lamp on the table flickered across the parchment, as if the red line was truly expanding outward.

Salomon's finger gently pressed at the end of that line: "If the plan succeeds, His Highness plans to support a guardian so that the eastern order will not collapse along."

He spoke calmly, yet each sentence hit at the Duke's heart: "This encircled area will form a new political entity.

Nominally, it's the Holy East Empire, acknowledging the spiritual symbol of the Royal Family's bloodline. Practically, it needs a governor with sufficient prestige and resources."

Calvin's gaze slowly returned from the red line to Salomon's face.

"Have you already chosen a candidate?"

"Besides you," Salomon spoke as if stating a fact, "no other name can be written."

He did not mention anything like "Emperor," only advancing the dialogue bit by bit: "The spiritual authority rests with the Holy City and the Royal Family.

Southeast Province's secular power, such as legislation, minting, convening the Noble Council, granting fiefs, all will concentrate on the governor."

"Put it another way, as long as the Holy East Empire is established." He added, "Within this encircled land, excluding religious ceremonies, all orders must be issued from your hand."

The secret room fell silent.

Only the fine sand in the hourglass was still falling, making a slight friction sound.

Calvin stared at the red line, silent for a long time.

This promise went far beyond his expectations for provincial integration, he even suspected this condition was randomly given.

Not only was it offering a larger fief, but it was proposing.

To tear away the granary and treasury of the Southeast Province along with the nominal rule, thrusting into his palm.

"His Highness is quite bold." The Duke finally spoke, his voice light, "But there is a problem."

Salomon gestured for him to continue.

"These lands," Calvin pointed at the Golden Wheat Plains with his fingertip, "do not currently belong to him. Promising me something not in his pocket, is this not a joke?"

Salomon's mouth twitched slightly: "Therefore, my purpose today is not to make you believe in the result immediately, but to invite you to see the direction."

"Direction?"

"The Empire is sinking." Salomon looked at him, "His Highness and the Church do not wish to be dragged down with it. We need someone to hold up a piece of the eastern ground that won't shatter at once."

He paused, lowering his voice: "If you are willing to stand on this ground, future profits can be discussed slowly. The red line on the map is not immutable."

At this stage, the real negotiation had just begun.

Salomon was not eager to continue expanding that red line, instead he slowly took out a letter from his pocket.

The letter bore no signature, a fire lacquer seal imprinted with pure gold, bearing the emblem of waves and the Golden Feather Flower.

The Duke's fingertip had just touched the lacquer, and his heart tightened slightly.

He did not need to open it to know the contents.

Three days prior, he had already received the same seal from the most secret family channel.

It was a personal letter from his third son, Eduardo.

The confidential letter contained only a few lines but was enough to change the future of the entire continent.

Eduardo confirmed the Fifth Prince's movements, the inclination within the Cardinal factions, and lastly wrote down a message he himself had deliberated over before penning.

The current Pope was gravely ill, and factions within the Church Court had begun to clear each other's strengths.

Eduardo Calvin, in that perilous arena, ousted the two strongest opponents with divine miracles and immense family dark gold.

He has now entered the final list of three people and claims his odds are seventy percent.

The Duke, after reading the letter, felt no excitement, only closing his eyes and contemplating for a long time.

Eduardo was the calmest and most straightforward of his children.

If he says seventy percent, then it's seventy percent.

Salomon seemed to have completely grasped the Duke's thoughts, pushing the letter a bit closer, his tone still tranquil: "Land may have to be claimed by sword."

"But authority..." he looked up, "is already in your hands."

Calvin's gaze darkened faintly.

The Divine Envoy leaned forward slightly, his voice lowered, like plotting a colossal secret: "Your Highness Duke, imagine if the future Pope were to bear the name Calvin."

The fire dances in the brazier, reflecting in his eyes like a fine line one dared not gaze at directly.

"That would mean, no matter how many countries rise on the continent, regardless of whether the Empire continues to exist... the Calvin Clan will stand above royal and divine power. That's a height even the founding Emperor could not reach."

The air seemed suppressed by something.

The Duke did not immediately refute, nor did he display greed.

He merely glanced at the fire lacquer seal, his fingertip gently rubbing its edge.

This was an era handing the reins to him.

Seeing the Duke's emotions perfectly played out, Salomon slowly drew back his hand: "Your Grace Duke, at this juncture, I must propose a necessary condition."

A crackling sound escaped the charcoal in the brazier.

"To ensure the stability of the eastern front," Salomon's tone was warm, yet imbued with a sense of irrefusability, "we need the north to become chaotic."

The Duke's finger halted.

The Divine Envoy continued: "Lord Louis from the Red Tide Territory is well-equipped and resourceful. If he simply cut off the supply of materials to the Empire, and then restrained the Imperial Northern Army... the northern line would immediately become unstable. Then His Highness could effortlessly advance the plan."

The secret chamber was so silent that one could virtually hear the sound of the tides crashing against the port.

The Duke did not immediately respond.

Since the last attempt to use trade routes to incorporate Red Tide failed, Louis was no longer a pup anyone could hold onto.

That child now... resembles more an Edmund than a Calvin Family member.

He seems to have grown out from the northern winds and snow, finding direction on his own, expanding on his own, and establishing order on his own.

Send such a person to instigate civil war in the Northern Territory?

Ha, he might even use the letter to clean his boots.

The key is not letting the Divine Envoy Salomon learn of this.

If the Church and the Fifth Prince realize "you cannot control the wolves of the Northern Territory," the entire negotiation would immediately depreciate.

Thus, the Duke composed himself, rewriting "uncontrollable" into "expensive" in a matter of seconds.

He frowned, pretending to sigh heavily: "Louis... that child listens to me."

He paused, as if weighing: "But he is now also a lord, feeding tens of thousands. Having him risk being consumed by the Empire to fight..."

The Duke raised his eyes, looking sharp as a blade: "That was not included in the original terms."

Salomon's Holy Emblem tremored slightly.

"If you want the wolves of the Northern Territory to bite," the Duke's tone remained calm, yet he applied pressure step by step, "you'll need to offer more meat."

The air hung for half a breath.

Salomon eventually nodded: "Fine."

He took out another parchment from his pocket, pushing it before the Duke: "His Highness and the Council of Cardinals are willing to add three years of military funding to the existing terms, to support the Northern defense line in the Red Tide Territory."

He added: "Furthermore, the clergy will provide blessings, protection, and pre-battle sacred rituals for the Red Tide Army at no charge."

The Duke's mind chuckled softly.

Louis would never permit the clergy to set foot in Red Tide.

However, this three-year military funding... he could pocket first, then consider how to relay it to the north if there's an opportunity.

They wouldn't know where the money went, and as for Louis, a simple letter asking if he needed help or not.

With this matter cemented, they went on in lowered voices to settle several crucial details, like the contact methods of the legion, routes for material transport, and the strategic pieces the Fifth Prince needed to place inside the Imperial Capital.

The atmosphere was as heavy as the rain outside the chamber; each decision seemed like wedging another stone into the Empire's cracks.

Until the Divine Envoy left.

The Duke sat alone in the chair, tapping his fingers against the table, unmoving for a long time.

He was well aware that the Fifth Prince's ambition was unrealistically large. But the direction offered by Salomon... did have some reasoning.

The Calvin Clan will eventually be forced to choose sides.

Choosing now would mean tossing the family's fate into a storm.

Better to wait until the situation becomes clearer or if Eduardo truly ascends to the papal position, then he could effortlessly take the reins, after all, no oaths were signed nor had he pressed a handprint today.

If the Fifth Prince manages to control the situation, he would naturally position himself at the right juncture.

If he doesn't? Well, he never agreed to anything.

Chapter 694: The Castle of Red Tide

In the early spring of the Northern Territory, the snow was still heavy, and the convoy moved forward slowly, the wooden wheels rolling over the permafrost, emitting a muffled sound.

The southern merchant Solton pulled his cloak tighter, still feeling the cold seeping into his bones.

With a frown, he looked at the vast whiteness of the Northern Territory ahead, his tone filled with disdain.

Throughout the journey, he heard more than once that Lord Louis, the Red Tide Lord, was building the "most luxurious main castle in the Northern Territory," more extravagant than the Silver Castle or the Holy Dragon Cathedral.

Every time Solton heard this, he felt as if he were listening to a joke.

A nouveau riche in the Northern Territory, no matter how he tosses, can he pile up stones into a miracle?

"Old John, I really don't understand how you can stand this godforsaken place. The winter in the Imperial Capital is a hundred, no, a thousand times better than here." He snorted, opening his mouth as if to deliberately show off his knowledge.

"I've sat at banquets at the Silver Castle and listened to sacred music at the Holy Dragon Cathedral. I've heard your Red Tide territory has built some main castle; in my view, it's just country folk stacking stones a little higher, pretending to be something they're not."

He gestured to the distance, "Isn't the most luxurious place here just Duke Edmund's old fortress? That thing is just a bigger stone cage. Your Lord Louis, however wealthy... can he turn stone into gold?"

Old John listened, merely smiling, without refuting.

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"Sir, wake up! We've arrived at Red Tide City!"

Solton had been dozing in the carriage, groggily waking from the bumps.

Hearing this, he frowned as he confusedly opened his eyes, and without a chance to complain, he reached out to lift the curtain.

The dazzling light poured in sharply, waking him up as if doused with cold water, clearing his mind in an instant.

The complaints that were originally on his lips were stuck in his throat, unable to utter a word.

The lights of the outer city spread out neatly, as if measured with a ruler.

But what truly rendered him speechless was the main castle standing in the deepest part.

It wasn't the kind of Northern Territory fortress he remembered, rough, gloomy, and filled with grey stone cracks.

Solton sat frozen in the carriage, looking up, motionless.

The first thing he saw was the overly complete shape of the main castle.

There were no common cracked stone seams of the Northern Territory, no moss traces grown full of frost.

The entire building seemed like a chunk of iron forcibly peeled from a mountain, polished until not an inch flawed.

The oppressive inward arc of the outer wall, from below looking up, felt as if a slumbering giant beast was overlooking.

That feeling of being shrouded made Solton's knees tremble slightly in the wind.

Four towers rose from the spine-like structure of the main castle, the copper-red domes emitting a faint glow under the gloomy sky, like embers buried in metal.

The most striking feature stood on the high slope, the western tower.

Its outline was sharp, like a giant iron eagle folding its wings, quietly resting at the snow line's edge.

Solton originally thought Red Tide City would be like other Northern Territories, full of rough stones and crude wooden beams.

But the closer he got, the more details he could see hidden behind its massive silhouette.

Between the towers were faintly glowing runes, steadily like breathing, and the white steam spewing from the gaps, weaving around the wind to form a thin warm mist surrounding the castle's perimeter.

And those massive devices wrapped on the wall tops, revealing only a few metal curves, like lurking skeletons.

These things made no sound, yet Solton inexplicably felt they were watching him.

For the first time, he had the ridiculous notion that this place did not belong to mortals.

Not out of piety but out of an instinctive sense of submission.

He almost wanted to kneel, like a mouse facing the shadow of a giant beast, afraid to lift his head.

"This...is a castle?" he rasped, "No...it seems like some kind of...."

He couldn't describe it, his gaze falling on the brass sun totem above the main gate, which hung there quietly but seemed to overlook the arrivals.

"Old John..." Solton barely spoke, "Who exactly is Lord Louis...?"

Old John didn't immediately answer, just looked at the castle with a solemn expression.

"Our sun," he whispered.

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In late spring, as the snow line of the Northern Territory receded, the weather had not fully cleared.

The air carried the mossy stench and damp cold mist, this wetness more unbearable than the dry cold winter winds, as if it were specifically drilling into one's joints.

For the nobles of the Old North, this was still a detestable season.

Cloaks always stained with mud, shoe soles constantly slipping, and with any inattention, rheumatism would cling to the knees and spine.

Lady Irina stood on the carriage steps, habitually lifting her skirt, even though the steps had already been wiped clean, she still instinctively did so with caution.

She didn't come alone.

A short distance ahead, Louis was holding his two-year-old daughter, with his other hand holding five-year-old Orsus, softly soothing the little one not to run around.

Emily held his arm, her other hand holding her eight-year-old brother Isaac, like taking two children for a stroll.

Sif, wearing close-fitting leather armor, walked in the rear position, her gaze casually sweeping her surroundings, occasionally exchanging a knowing glance with Louis.

This family walked side by side, appearing particularly warm in the muddy Northern Territory spring.

Time was rather forgiving to Lady Irina.

A few strands of silver had appeared at her temples, yet she didn't show much weariness.

But the Northern Territory's frost always made her think a step further, whether it was mud or the castle not far ahead.

It was a castle she had witnessed for more than four years.

Chapter 695: Red Tide's Castle (Part 2)

From the initial sketches Louis spread out on the table, saying we could live in the castle together when it's done since it would be big enough.

To the first Cold Iron beam standing in the muddy waters, and now today, with all the scaffolding removed, the Main Castle stands complete before us.

Construction took four years and three months.

During this time, Red Tide transformed from a fledgling territory into a name inseparable from the entire Northern Territory.

And this city, from what was once seen by others as a whimsical project, has become the largest architectural marvel of the Northern Territory.

Weir took the initiative to open and close the gate. He took a deep breath, gripped with both hands, and with a firm twist, the sound of gears meshing began rolling through the gatehouse.

Click, click, click...

The sound was heavy, but not harsh, more like a giant sleeping beast slowly turning over.

The half-meter-thick double-layered gate closed under the pull of gears and chains.

The outer layer is Cold Iron, the inner layer padded with cork and insulation boards, making the entire door like a black wall, shutting out the winds and moisture on the other side.

The moment the last sliver of light was swallowed by the crack of the door, the noise outside was abruptly cut off.

The world quieted.

Only the faint echo beneath their feet remained, and the gentle whispers of water flowing through pipes deep within the walls.

Alina instinctively relaxed her fingers. Before entering, she had clutched the hem of her skirt tightly, afraid of accidentally getting it muddy. At this moment, she realized she had let go at some point.

She glanced down at the ground, the Obsidian-paved surface was spotless, devoid of mud, puddles, or even the damp marks typical of late spring.

The ground was slightly warm, an indescribable comfort could be felt even through the soles of her shoes.

"The geothermal pipes run all day, powered by the shallow subterranean thermal veins for circulation," Mike, walking ahead, couldn't help but explain and added, "As long as the thermal veins don't dry up, the whole city stays warm."

The head of the craftsmen's office and the chief architect of this city walked with his back straight as if not merely heading to meet the Lord, but presenting an entire city as his accomplishment.

Though he already held a high position in Red Tide and even the entire Northern Territory, at this moment, there was still an undisguised tension and excitement in his expression.

"My lord, my lady, this way please."

Mike eagerly led the way, his steps light like an elementary school student poised to receive an award.

Alina took a deep breath, trying to divert her attention from the ground.

Her sense of smell recovered first.

The musty earth odor outside had entirely vanished, replaced by dry, warm air carrying hints of pine incense and the fresh scent of tea leaves.

For a moment, she even experienced an illusion, as if she had stepped not into the Northern Territory's Main Castle, but into a mild-climate Southern town.

Watching Louis's back, Alina felt a complex set of emotions.

She remembered those nights six years ago when she first arrived at Red Tide.

At that time, she was recently widowed, holding young Isaac, unable to sleep peacefully in the unfamiliar Earth Tower City of Red Tide.

She feared this family outcast banished to the Northern Territory would turn against her, feared he would use the guise of shelter to swallow Edmond's lineage whole, feared she, as the Duke's widow, was merely a pawn to be sacrificed at any moment.

Back then, she was vigilant in every way, observing his every meeting, every decision, afraid that a single wrong judgment would lead to no return.

Yet now, Louis, through his actions, had long submerged those old fears and wariness deep within her heart.

She hadn't woken up in fright in the deep of night for a long time.

Isaac excitedly told her, "Brother-in-law taught me something today."

Then the group turned a corner, and where the castle's inner corridors should have been dark, the view opened up grandly.

An entire outer wall had been thoroughly opened, with transparent panels stretching from the floor to the dome shining brilliantly.

As Alina turned the corner, her steps noticeably paused for half a second.

This was not the Northern architecture she knew, but resembled stepping onto a suspended sky bridge.

Though there was clearly ground beneath her feet, an indistinct illusion of standing mid-air arose in her heart.

"This is..." Alina softly inhaled.

From this corridor, Red Tide City unfolded beneath her, from the distant snowy lines to the close-by street lights, all unobstructedly in view.

The wind was shut out, leaving the light quietly pressed against the glass, as if even the breathing was lightened.

Hearing Alina's words, Mike finally couldn't contain himself, bursting with excitement like being ignited: "Madam, this... this is the highest achievement of our glass workshop this year!"

His voice trembled, "According to the traditional castle rules, this should be a wall for arrow slits and battlements, but we created it in this form, ensuring no other castle in the world can match."

Alina still fixed her gaze on the giant glass wall, the word 'astonishment' written in her eyes. She rarely lost composure like this, but the sight was enough to render one speechless.

"How about the defense?" she finally asked.

This question wasn't nitpicking but rather the instinct of a nobility living through the wind and fire of the Northern Territory for years.

Mike, as if faced with a favorite topic, puffed out his chest: "Three-layer structure! The outermost layer supported by Cold Iron won't crack even if hit by a snow beast."

The middle layer is newly refined crystal composite, able to block crossbow arrows, and the innermost layer is our own Red Tide glass, frost-resistant, shock-resistant, and impervious to temperature differences.

Madam, you needn't worry about this being an inner tower. The real defenses are on those Cold Iron towers in the outer rings, fitting with the North's best defensive measures..."

The more he spoke, the brighter his voice became, aching to spill every ounce of pride accumulated over these years all at once.

Chapter 696: Red Tide's Castle (Part 3)

Alina gently exhaled, letting go of the surprise she felt inside.

Louis didn't interrupt, just stood behind Mike, with a casual and gentle demeanor, letting Mike talk endlessly.

In front of the glass were two small figures.

Orsus and Isaac.

The five-year-old Orsus was on his tiptoes, breathing against the glass.

The eight-year-old Isaac stretched his arms, trying to draw a circle larger than himself.

Their fingertips traced arcs on the glass, leaving behind brief mist marks that were quickly erased by the warmth.

After Isaac finished drawing, he habitually glanced back at Louis.

There was no fear in his eyes, nor any cautious attempts to please, just a bit of pure anticipation, as if waiting for a review: "Did I draw well?"

Louis didn't scold them "Don't make it dirty," nor did he show any sternness of an elder.

He casually took the young girl Sif handed over, holding the two-year-old with one hand, and walked up to the glass himself.

The mist from the child's breath hadn't completely dispersed yet; he lifted his handkerchief, gently wiped off the moisture from Isaac's nose, and then casually cleaned the handprints off the glass as well.

The motion was casual, like tidying up a table at home.

"Don't crowd to look, be careful not to bump your heads." He just offered this reminder.

Isaac stuck his tongue out and obediently stepped back half a pace.

After this brief interlude, the group continued to explore the inner hall, and Mike finally seized the opportunity to lead the group to the bathroom in front of the master bedroom.

"Sir, there's a nifty feature here." He couldn't help speaking, glancing at Louis's expression.

Louis chuckled, rubbing his forehead with his hand: "It's not the craftsmen's assembly today. Keep it brief."

Mike relaxed a bit, walked to the dark wooden door, and pushed it open.

Inside was a spacious restroom, the walls were made of light stone slabs, and the floor remained warm.

He walked to the corner, grasped the elegant brass handle, and gently twisted it.

"Buzz—"

Accompanied by a slight vibration, a stream of steaming hot water spurted from the tap, falling into the stone basin and splashing small water droplets.

Steam slowly rose in the room, bringing a sense of relaxing warmth.

"Utilizing underground geothermal layers to heat underground water, then using pressure valves to pump it up," Mike tried to control his excitement, "Sir, it's available twenty-four hours a day."

Alina stepped forward and put her hand into the water stream.

The temperature was just right, neither too hot nor too cold, like stone that had basked in the sun all day, a rarity in the Northern Territory.

She couldn't help but think of the old castle in Frost Halberd City.

Even after renovation, in this season, a circle of mildew always formed in the corners, and the water had to be carried up bucket by bucket, and before it warmed, it would already turn cold.

Now, just a twist, and the entire city's underground is operating for this single stream of water.

Then, the group followed the spiral staircase all the way up to the top of the Main Castle.

The maids were already waiting at the door, the room was lit with soft lighting, and freshly baked pastries and warm berry tea lined the long table.

The air carried a faint sweet scent, lifting away much of the day's fatigue as one entered.

Orsus was already rubbing his eyes sleepily, held by Sif, and Emily sat on the settee, casually picking up a pastry to eat, genuinely seeming a bit hungry.

Louis placed his young daughter on the soft cushion, letting the maid care for her, then handed hot tea to everyone.

The children gathered around the plate of pastries, chirping with a rarely-seen relaxed demeanor.

Only Isaac didn't join the lively group.

He stood before the gigantic glass window, hands behind his back, gazing at the streets illuminated by interwoven lights and the constantly moving carriage fleet below, an expression of superior belonging unconsciously appearing on his young face.

Louis walked over, standing behind him: "Isaac."

"Hmm?"

"What do you think of this wall?"

Isaac was startled for a moment, instinctively reaching out to touch the glass, then quickly pulling back: "It's very hard, very transparent, and... it must be very expensive."

Louis chuckled: "Many Lords prefer to shut themselves inside thick stone walls. It's safe that way, you can't see outside, nor hear."

He tapped the carpet at his feet, then gestured towards the lights outside the glass.

"Stone walls can block assassins, but they can also block hungry people. Those inside can't see the cold outside, and those outside can't see what the people inside are eating."

Isaac pondered deeply, furrowing his brows: "Should we be different?"

Louis lowered his head, meeting his gaze: "You need to learn to be like this glass."

Isaac was stunned: "Be... glass?"

"Yes."

Louis tapped the glass lightly with his knuckle: "Strong enough to withstand the cold and malice outside. Yet clear enough so that everyone's lives below can be reflected in your eyes at any time."

He paused, his tone calm but with an undeniable strength: "A Lord who cannot see the people will eventually be overthrown by them. Remember these words."

Isaac looked up at him, nodding firmly: "I will remember."

Alina watched the scene, her heart slightly stirred.

It was not the first time she watched Louis teach Isaac something, she understood Louis was imparting to the future Lord how to guard a city, how to protect its people.

"When the Duke died, I thought Edmond had made a mistake, handing power to this young man, believing he would one day reveal his true self.

Yet, six years have passed, he rebuilt Frost Halberd City, treating Isaac not as a puppet but as real family, teaching him to be a person, a Lord like an elder brother."

She lifted her teacup, relaxing her grip quietly.

Outside the window, the snowstorm rolled beyond the city walls, clouds pressed against the horizon, but within, the warmth felt like another world, tea aroma lingered, and children's laughter still echoed in the corners.

"Outside Nobility calls him the Winter Tyrant," she whispered in her heart, "because they aren't qualified to sit beside the warm Sun."

"He's a good Lord, a reliable husband..." She paused, her lips curled into a slight smile, "To me, more importantly, he's Isaac's best brother-in-law and my best son-in-law."

Alina finally showed a completely relaxed smile.

Chapter 697: The Chess Player

In the dead of night, the warmth left by the departing family lingered in the study.

But once the door was gently closed, this warmth receded like the tide, leaving only a lamp casting Louis's shadow long and slender.

He sat alone at the desk, the gentleness in his eyes gradually fading away, replaced by the calmness unique to a Lord.

That temperament was like a blade sheathed again, unseen but carrying a distinct aura.

A knock sounded at the door.

Bradley entered, holding a letter sealed with dark red fire lacquer.

The fire lacquer seal bore the tidal emblem of the Calvin Clan, the family's highest-level urgent secret letter.

"Sir, it's a personal letter from the Duke."

Louis looked up, his expression calm, devoid of any emotion fluctuation, not even displaying surprise.

Because half a month ago, the Daily Intelligence System had already updated relevant intelligence.

Duke Calvin had a secret meeting with Church Court's Special Envoy Salomon, reaching a secret agreement to provide funds for Louis to disrupt the Northern Territory and constrain the Imperial Northern Army.

Now this letter was merely a belated prop in the script.

But Louis still took the letter, casually picked up the paper cutter, and unfolded the letter.

The contents brought an inexplicable feeling of an old actor repeating an old routine.

The gist of the letter: The Empire is in turmoil, and this is the Calvin Clan's chance to return to the summit.

Louis, you are the family's sharpest sword, the hope of the Northern Territory.

For the Northern Territory and the family, you should cut off the Imperial Northern Army's supplies and create border friction.

Once successful, the family will fully support you to become the true king of the Northern Territory.

Beautiful rhetoric, exaggerated vision, ambiguous promises.

But the Duke never mentioned a word about the huge military funds from the Church Court.

After reading the letter, a cool smile slowly appeared on Louis's lips.

In others' eyes, this letter was his father's entrustment to his son, the family's trust.

But in his eyes, it was nothing short of a pathetic clown performance.

"Real silver and gold first into your own treasury, then have me use Red Tide Territory's blood to fulfill your dream... Father, do you think I don't understand, or do you think I will pretend not to understand?"

Louis's eyes carried an indifference and disinterest after seeing through the scheming.

Louis handed the letter to Bradley, "Have a look; this is my father's grand plan."

Bradley took the letter and read line by line, his brow furrowing tighter and tighter.

He didn't know the military funds were secretly taken by the Duke, but he was smart enough to see the danger this posed to Red Tide Territory.

Cutting off supplies, provoking the Northern Army, this was strapping the entire Red Tide Territory to a powder keg.

This wasn't supporting Louis but pushing him off a cliff.

The old butler's hand trembled slightly as he held the letter; he knew the cunning of his former master.

"Young Master," Bradley lowered his voice, "this matter... the risk is too great. Although the Empire is chaotic now, the Northern Army is still a steel army. As soon as we touch the supplies, they will label Red Tide a rebel. No matter how good the family's promise, we have to survive that first blow."

Louis laughed softly, saying casually, "You see it too? He's trying to catch a white wolf with empty hands."

Louis casually crumpled the letter and tossed it into the nearby trash can.

"Since Father thinks I can handle things on my own," Louis stood, his gaze falling on the enormous map of the Northern Territory on the wall, "then I'll do it my way."

But it will no longer be the Calvin Clan deciding for him, but him deciding for the entire Northern Territory.

"Bradley, the reason Father is in such a hurry to jump out at this critical moment is because he smells blood."

The night was silent, the only sound in the study was the flickering of the fireplace.

Louis stood by the window, his silhouette stretching out. His tone was unhurried, yet it sent a chill down one's spine.

Bradley was stunned, "Young Master's meaning...?"

Louis looked up, gazing at the distant dark sky, as if he could see through the darkness to the chaos of the Imperial Capital.

"My intelligence source tells me the Regent King is about to die."

"What..." Bradley's breath caught, nearly unable to steady his voice.

In the current situation, the Regent King was the last pillar of order for the Empire.

Once he falls, the princes will tear each other apart, and the legion commanders will each raise their flags to declare independence. The Empire will crack from top to bottom like a great house from which the steel beams have been removed.

Louis continued, "Once the Regent King dies, the South will be in chaos, the Imperial Capital even more so. And in the Northern Territory... those legion commanders will smell opportunity; they'll test the waters and form alliances."

Bradley bowed his head, cold sweat beading on his temple, "This... the Empire splitting, has it really...?"

"It's a foregone conclusion." Louis's calm was terrifying, "Duke Calvin is only one of those who smelled the scent earlier. But since he wants to speculate, I will also speculate."

He slowly turned around, his steps steady and composed, walking toward the map of the Northern Territory.

The firelight illuminated the vast sheepskin map: mountains, valleys, provinces, castles...

As former noble territories of the North lay scattered across it like chess pieces.

Louis raised his hand, his fingertips falling in the center of the map.

"But who will I bet on?" he asked gently.

Bradley's Adam's apple rolled, "You... bet on?"

Louis smiled slightly, his eyes sharp as an unsheathed blade, "I bet on myself."

It wasn't arrogance, but a confidence naturally accumulated after countless victories and calculations.

"If the Empire is going to collapse, let it collapse. The important thing is the Northern Territory must become solid as an iron board in chaos."

His tone wasn't high, but each word struck Bradley's heart like a nail.

Chapter 698: The Chessmaster (Part 2)

"At times like these, we must not become other people's pawns. We need to integrate all the Nobility of the Northern Territory, all armed forces, and all productive power."

Bradley stared at him blankly.

Louis continued, "Not just to survive the upcoming storm, but to... go further."

Bradley suddenly looked up, and for a moment, it seemed as if he saw the outline of a new Empire slowly forming in Louis' eyes.

It wasn't ambition, but rather the inevitability bestowed upon him by the era.

"By the way," Louis suddenly asked, "How are the preparations for the Northern Territory reconstruction meeting?"

Bradley immediately came back to reality: "Everything is as you instructed. The location is set at Frost Halberd City, the time is autumn."

Frost Halberd City, the old capital of the Northern Territory, the political center and spiritual symbol.

The city that had turned into scorched earth amid the fires of the Nest and Barbarian Race was quietly rebuilt by Louis.

A cold light flickered in Louis' eyes: "The official reason for this meeting remains reconstruction, but the real purpose is to unify military power."

I want to reorganize all armed forces in the Northern Territory and incorporate them into a unified command system."

He raised his hand, brushing over the power range of Raymond and the location of the Imperial Northern Army on the map, finally letting his fingertip fall on Red Tide City.

"Does Father want me to restrain the Northern Army?" Louis sneered, "No, he underestimates me."

"A true player...never plays according to someone else's board."

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Gray Stone Fortress.

The cold wind slapped against the Iron Wall, the sound like a beast outside gnawing at the door.

Gray Stone Fortress stood between the north and south, like a black iron gate, tearing the whole Northern Territory into two halves.

Along the corridor, a torch was inserted every five meters, the flames danced in the cold wind, illuminating the dried heads of Magical Beasts on the wall with a ferocious exceptionality, like trophies, but also like warnings.

Inside the meeting room, the firelight of the fireplace flickered.

Ackman Greer sat at the main seat, his robust figure resembling a standing brown bear.

He sat casually, yet it made the whole room feel like the air was compressed, a unique pressure from years of being the Legion commander.

Fernan, deputy commander of the Fourteenth Legion, and the leader of the Seventh Legion, Soros, sat on either side of him, both being trusted subordinates of their respective legion commanders, responsible for representing their commanders at such border high-level meetings.

At the moment, both sat beside Ackman, their collars soaked in sweat, yet not daring to loosen their buttons.

When Fernan spoke, his voice was a bit tense: "Lord Greer, we already agreed, based on the agreement with the Second Prince's Special Envoy, Sorel, we only need to maintain blurred vision and noble silence towards the Northern Territory.

Why suddenly summon us to discuss joint defense? This move... will be seen as overstepping."

Ackman did not answer immediately.

He poured himself a cup of strong liquor, smuggled from the Jade border, outrageously expensive.

He took a sip, then let out a hoarse laugh.

"What the Second Prince promised me was merely a winery in the Valencia Valley and a Viscount title." Ackman sneered, "He wants me to be a well-fed guard lion, probably something similar promised to you?"

Fernan's brow furrowed deeper, hesitating: "But..."

"Do you know? Now," Ackman slammed the cup on the table, splashing wine, "The Regent King is dying."

The two officers took a sharp breath.

Ackman continued: "Once chaos breaks out in the Imperial Capital, the Princes will tear each other apart like hungry wolves. If the Second Prince loses, we, the border legions, will be the first discarded pawns."

He lowered his voice, a flicker of ambition in his eyes: "But what if I stand on the other side of the storm? What if I could become the Governor of the North, wielding the Empire's hardest iron and most coal...?"

No matter who becomes the new Emperor, they will have to grant me a hereditary Duke title, and of course, your benefits won't be lacking then."

Soros licked his cracked lips: "Lord... do you really intend to swallow the Northern Territory?"

Ackman stood up, walked to the map, his finger fiercely landed on Frost Halberd City: "Open your eyes and see! Ever since the battle at the Nest and the Bone Burial Wasteland, the Edmund Clan is all but dead! Among the Northern Territory's renowned Knight Orders, nine out of ten are gone!"

He showed a disdainful smile: "As for that Louis? Just a young lad. Don't be fooled by his flashy tricks, the true strong ones of the Northern Territory died in the Nest and at the hands of the Barbarian Race."

Ackman unfolded a parchment on the table, revealing a document titled "Draft of Northern Territory Joint Defense."

Yet inside was a meticulously terrifying division plan.

The Seventeenth Legion, controlling all passes and taxation in the Northern Territory, equivalent to choking the entire Northern Territory's throat.

The Fourteenth Legion, occupying the western black iron mining area, obtaining a stable source of weapons and equipment.

The Seventh Legion, holding the eastern plains and trade routes, directly controlling the Northern Territory's most fertile and affluent trade lifeline.

Soros' breath became rapid: "This is... to cut up and divide the Northern Territory?"

Ackman laughed like a blade: "Leave Louis with one main city, let him continue to be his tycoon. Don't mind him, as long as he obediently makes money, we won't touch him."

After a pause, he extended his hand and made a throat-cutting gesture: "If not obedient... then pick a more compliant one."

Fernan's expression slightly changed: "I don't have the authority to sign a military alliance, these must be decided by the legion commander personally."

Colonel Fernan and Leader Soros exchanged glances, both knowing why they were at this blizzard night's secret meeting.

They are the most trusted listeners of the legion commanders, must bring back every word of tonight intact, allowing the commanders to judge the direction of the situation.

Ackman was long prepared, handing over a new parchment scroll: "No need for a treaty, just a meeting memorandum."

Chapter 699: The Player_3

"Take it back to them, let them decide for themselves if they want a piece of the feast."

"Nevertheless," Ackman said in a low voice, "I'm in no hurry to make a move."

The firelight reflected on his face, as if casting a shadow over his blazing ambition.

The storm lashed at the windows, as though the entire Northern Territory was plummeting into the Abyss.

Ackman sat at the head, outwardly calm, but inside it felt as if he were scorched by fire.

He had a vague feeling that this might be the only chance in his life to leap into the true circle of Nobility.

The glory of the Seventeenth Legion was merely a line on the list of military achievements.

True noble status required land, inheritance, and resources that made the Royal Family apprehensive.

And now, with the imminent collapse of the Empire, this seemingly barren land of the Northern Territory held the most critical mining veins, grain routes, and the emerging industry of the Red Tide Territory.

If he could just step on this, he could engrave the name Ackman into the new history of the Empire.

Ackman's fists clenched quietly under the table: "I absolutely cannot let that Calvin family discard monopolize the Northern Territory. This is the only step for the Ackman family to ascend to the upper echelons of the Empire."

Ackman leaned back in his chair, as if he had just laid out the chessboard of his heart.

"The next step, no need to tear the mask yet." He raised his chin slightly, signaling his trusted officer to step forward.

He slowly traced his finger across the map, bypassing the Red Tide Territory, Frost Halberd City... finally stopping at an inconspicuous little territory—Morkan Territory.

Its location wasn't even clearly drawn on the map of the Northern Territory and was merely marked as a gray area.

It wasn't part of the Red Tide system, but due to its terrain and mineral resources, it had its own caravan, considerable financial resources, and was close to the Gray Stone Fortress.

Ackman tapped his finger on that gray area: "Start with him."

The trusted officer frowned: "...Baron of Morkan?"

"That's right." Ackman displayed a disdainful smile.

"Wait for his next caravan to come." He waved a hand at his adjutant: "Send two squads of cavalry there. Directly invoke the additional clause of the 'Empire Wartime Emergency Requisition Act' and say that to guard against the Barbarian Race, this batch of goods is to be requisitioned temporarily."

The trusted officer furrowed his brow: "What if the Baron resists?"

Ackman's voice was as indifferent as discussing the weather: "Break the leader's limbs and throw him into the snow."

The room fell silent.

It turned out Ackman really intended to swallow the Northern Territory.

The trusted officer couldn't help but lower his voice: "But... if the Red Tide Territory intervenes..."

"Red Tide?" Ackman sneered as if he heard a joke.

"I am giving him face by not touching his caravan or his bunch of fanatical supporters."

He drew his hand in the air, "But Morkan is different. He's not a vassal of Louis, not in the Red Tide system. If Louis dares to intervene..."

Ackman lowered his hand, flicking the corner of the table lightly: "Then I can immediately pin a heavy hat of interfering with military affairs and retaining private armies on him."

The trusted officer drew a sharp breath, feeling a chill down his spine.

Ackman had prepared excuses for every step, and no matter how Louis reacted, he could find reasons to continue expanding.

Ackman leaned forward, pounding his fist on the Morkan Territory: "If he stays silent, it would show the Red Tide is just a paper tiger.

The Nobility watching from the Northern Territory would immediately lean towards me, and this land would become like a buffet, where I can claim any part I want.

If he steps up, I will seize the opportunity to push him to the opposition of the Empire, giving him a treacherous name."

The firelight danced on his face, casting a dangerous arc.

"In any case, this blade will fall."

Ackman pulled out a small knife he carried with him, firmly stabbing the tip onto the Morkan Territory, the board making a faint cracking sound.

He stared at that knife, his smile slow and dangerous: "Let this sheep bleat for a couple of days.

I want to see whether that young master sitting in the warm room truly has the ambition to be the Northern Guardian... or just the skill to crunch numbers in his castle."

Chapter 700: A Minor Incident Before the Meeting

Summer in the Northern Territory never quite feels like summer.

The wind carries a chill of light snow, withered yellow wild grasses clinging to the ground, and on the high slopes, the thin first layer of snow has already appeared, like a probing hand of winter reaching forward.

Gareth rode on horseback, hunching his shoulders.

He was originally an Official Knight of the Morkan family, chosen by the Baron for his cleverness and ability to handle affairs, specifically responsible for managing trade routes.

He understood etiquette and human relations, and was better than other knights at dealing with garrison troops, outposts, and toll gates. Gradually, the operation of the entire caravan was entrusted to him.

For over a decade, he personally escorted every shipment, both to safeguard these vital goods for the Baron to exchange for grain and because he was acutely aware of the Northern Territory's rules that goods unsupervised could vanish at any moment.

He had traversed this trade route for over ten years, believing that he had everything at every toll gate and with every garrison perfectly arranged.

Even Lord Ackman of Gray Stone Fortress would acquire several batches of red-black iron from him annually for free.

So he believed nothing unexpected would happen this year either.

With such sentiments, Gareth spotted that shadowed canyon pass.

The trade route ahead was completely blocked by crude chevaux-de-frise.

Twelve black-armored knights, each an Elite Knight, stood in a line amidst the slushy snow, resembling iron statues growing out of a blizzard.

Gareth's guards instinctively drew their swords.

"Stop!" Gareth yelled urgently, his voice breaking, "Put the swords away! Do you want to die?"

He jumped off his horse and ran forward, as if fearing his head would be chopped off if he delayed even a second.

His smile was so forced that his face went stiff as he offered the heavy money bag he had prepared ahead of time.

"Gentlemen, you've worked hard! I am from the Morkan family's caravan and have already squared things with Lord Ackman. This money... is for the brothers to buy some wine and warm up."

The money bag crashed into the hand of the black-armored captain "Battleaxe," producing a muffled metallic rustle.

Battleaxe weighed it and laughed scornfully, casually tossing the bag to someone behind him without any indication of letting them pass.

"Sir Knight..." Gareth asked cautiously, "Can we go through now?"

Battleaxe, seated high on his horse, pointed down at the caravan: "People go through. Goods stay behind."

Gareth's smile finally faltered, as if waking from a cold splash of water: "Sir, those are life-saving goods to trade for winter grain... I've already paid the toll to the Legion's commander! The rule is, if you take the money, you let us pass..."

Battleaxe repeated in a low voice: "Rules?"

He urged his horse forward: "In the territory of the Seventeenth Legion, my hammer is the rule."

In the next moment, the heavy long-handled Warhammer, infused with Fighting Energy, struck Gareth's shoulder with force.

"Crack—"

The sound of bone fracturing echoed clearly in the canyon, making one's scalp tingle.

Gareth was directly struck to his knees in the slush, unable to make a sound from the pain, only twitching at the corners of his mouth.

The guard knights, eyes reddened with rage, charged forward, only to be cut down like wheat being harvested.

The black-armored knights were well-trained and ruthless; every strike efficient and precise, with no unnecessary flourishes.

Gareth shook from pain but struggled hoarsely, "You, you are violating Imperial law, this is a non-war area... no robbing of Nobility's private property..."

Battleaxe dismounted and seized him by the hair, forcing his face to the ground.

"Empire?" he snorted, "The Imperial Capital is tens of thousands of miles away; let it come to save you itself."

After speaking, he stomped again, shattering Gareth's knee.

Gareth let out a tortured scream, the sound echoing in the canyon but swallowed by the snow that kept falling.

Battleaxe pointed casually at the ground: "You guys, dig. Hurry up."

The remaining knights of the Morkan family turned pale, their hands trembling as they used short swords and gloves to dig through the soil frozen harder than stone.

Gareth was dragged aside, almost passing out from pain but stubbornly clung to his Fighting Energy, like grasping the last straw, trying to circulate its faint warmth within his body.

But under the torment of broken bones and cold wind, the Fighting Energy flickered like embers blown out by the wind, barely lasting a minute before growing dim.

By the time the pit was finally dug by the guards, that pathetic Fighting Energy within Gareth had completely extinguished, leaving his body to truly feel the piercing cold of the Northern Territory's summer.

The black-armored knights shoved him upright into the pit, leaving the muddy snow to engulf him up to his chest.

Cold slush pressed against his organs, and each breath felt like swallowing rusty iron shards.

Snowflakes fell into his bloodshot eyes, a pain like needle stings, but his neck was frozen stiff, unable to lift his head.

His consciousness drifted between suffocation and clarity; he wanted to scream but could only produce weak whimpers, ultimately sinking completely.

Battleaxe then found a young Apprentice Knight, who was so frightened he wet his pants, unable to even hold his sword.

Battleaxe grabbed him by the collar, dragging him to the entrance of the valley, and pointed in the direction of Frost Halberd City: "Get lost! Tell those big shots preparing to hold the rebuilding conference..."

He leaned closer, fresh blood dripping from the seams of his armor: "In the Northern Territory, to survive, learn to kneel and present your offerings."

The young knight scrambled away into the snowstorm.

The black-armored knights drove off with the ore-laden wagons, leaving deep tracks in the snow that persisted for a long time.

In the canyon, only that head remained, exposed above the snow, eyes wide open as if refusing to believe that this summer had become his grave.

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The wind and snow of early autumn in the Northern Territory descended like white shards from the heavens, falling thickly outside Frost Halberd City.