

Winter 701

Chapter 701: A Small Incident Before the Meeting (2)

At this time, it was just a few days before the reconstruction meeting, and various noble and family representatives were arriving one after another, the long convoy forming a gray-white line in the snow.

But as they stepped through the city gates, it was as if the world had been sliced in half.

Outside was a barren wasteland with bone-chilling winds and snow up to the ankles, while inside was a rising heat, like an iron city breathing on the snowfield.

Those varied Lords, Nobles, and family representatives froze in their expressions as they dismounted and saw the scene before them.

Beneath their feet was not mud, not permafrost, but a smooth gray-black road that could reflect shadows.

On both sides of the road, magic-powered street lamps were neatly lit, and inside the lampshades, the alchemical light cores flickered steadily, making the whole city seem to breathe awake at night.

These weren't the expensive crystal lamps found in noble halls, but reliable, cold-resistant public lighting produced in bulk by the Red Tide Workshop, and their sheer quantity made quite a few nobles unconsciously swallow.

Further away, a towering iron tower slowly exhaled white mist.

Steam rose into the night sky, making one mistake it for a blurry white moon hanging under Frost Halberd City's sky. That was the heating tower. The entire district's geothermal and steam circulation flowed from there, keeping the harsh winter at bay.

"This... is Frost Halberd City?" Someone exclaimed.

Frost Halberd City had turned to scorched earth after the Nest Battle, and almost no one believed it could be rebuilt in just a few years, nor did anyone anticipate it would become such a... monstrous city.

In a flash, the nobles from various regions divided themselves into three distinct groups, each with a completely different reaction.

Nobles from the Red Tide faction walked at the forefront.

Their clothing was the latest craft from the Red Tide Textile Factory, with a soft sheen and excellent warmth, the styles even beginning to mimic urban trends from the Jade Federation.

Each person stood with a straight back, their steps brisk, as if they had finally walked into their own territory.

Some quietly boasted about last week's Red Tide dividend, others discussed the soon-to-launch new-style heater, while more simply began each sentence with "Lord Louis," their tone unconcealed pride.

They walked with a high profile not out of recklessness but because every street, every lamp in this city reminded those around them that they had bet on the right person.

Another group appeared much more reserved.

These were the regretful ones, dressed in the finest outfits they could find in their territories, but standing next to the Red Tide faction nobles, the coarseness of their fabric, the ill-fitting cuts and dull colors were all exposed.

They clustered tightly together, whispering about how to "reconnect with the Red Tide."

Some cautiously glanced towards the castle, their eyes filled with probing and timidity, their steps neither too quick nor too slow, as if every step was on thin ice.

The last group was silent like shadows; these were the old nobles who were merely spectators.

They came to Frost Halberd City with a critical mindset, some even wanting to see whether the so-called Red Tide miracle was genuine or not.

But as they traveled along, Frost Halberd City's scale and warmth were like hammer blows, shattering their arrogance.

A gray-haired Viscount looked up at the distant brightly lit giant tower slowly exhaling warmth, his chest tightening.

"Duke Edmund... wasn't even like this back then," he murmured softly, but no one replied.

Because they all understood this city was not a reproduction of the Edmund era; it was bigger, more advanced.

Louis Calvin was not rebuilding the Northern Territory; he was rewriting it.

And facing this new order, these Lords accustomed to the old ways had only two choices:

Either integrate or be crushed.

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In the high-end lounge of Frost Halberd City's guesthouse, the air was warm as spring, but fine snow floated outside the window.

Inside, the furnishings were luxurious, with magic crystal wall lamps casting gentle light, isolating it from the harsh cold of the Northern Territory.

Morkan lounged in the soft chair, looking rather pleased.

He dressed especially handsomely today, donning a sable-collared cloak, silver-buckled boots, and even scented himself with noble balm.

All to display the Morkan family's confidence to other wavering middle and small nobles.

Three or four nobles around him held cups of Red Tide special tea, outwardly smiling but their eyes shared the same slightly sour sentiment.

"Lord Louis certainly made quite a fuss; entering the city required queuing and identity verification. Even I, a dignified Lord, was stopped by the guards," a noble complained in a lowered voice.

"Hmph, but he does have money," another sipped his tea, mocking with his mouth but hiding envy in his eyes, "I heard those joining Red Tide this year are just raking in profits, and I'm wondering... maybe we should..."

Before he finished, Morkan clapped his cup down, speaking with a self-satisfied teaching tone.

"Soft? If you want to be soft, you can queue up at the City Lord's Mansion to hand over a confession right now." Morkan sneered, "But smart people won't offer their necks for others to collar them."

A kid in his twenties stumbles upon some territory, messing around with fancy devices, and thinks himself the master of the Northern Territory? Without those craftsmen, he wouldn't even withstand the Northern Territory's wind."

He raised a hand pointing towards the snowy direction outside the window: "While we're drinking tea here, Morkan family's large caravan is passing through the birch forest pass."

The nobles perked up.

That was a famously lucrative caravan of the Northern Territory.

Morkan smirked, leaning back in his chair: "The carriage is loaded with high-purity ores. Once it safely reaches the South, the food and gold coins I exchange for will astonish you gentlemen."

Chapter 702: Interlude Before the Meeting (3)

The nobles exchanged glances and all showed expressions of admiration.

Someone whispered in awe, "To thrive without joining the Red Tide... the Morkan family surely has confidence."

Feeling flattered, Morkan smiled even more smugly, "When my goods arrive, I will treat you all to the finest Southern tea. The Red Tide... its taste is too coarse."

A few people joined in laughter, and the lounge was filled with a relaxed air of those who believed they had control over the situation.

Until an urgent knock came at the door.

"Who is it? Can't you see I'm discussing matters?" Morkan frowned, his tone impatient.

The door opened, and it wasn't a maid who entered but the old steward accompanying the Morkan family.

He was soaking wet, as if drenched by rain and snow, or maybe he had run all the way.

His face was deathly pale, devoid of any color, and he even forgot the most basic courtesies, staggering a few steps to fall at Morkan's table.

The nobles were startled into sitting upright by the scene.

"Lord Morkan..." the old steward's voice trembled uncontrollably.

Morkan's frown deepened, "What's the matter? Why so panicked, what's going on?"

The old steward, disregarding others, bent down to whisper in his ear with a trembling voice.

Suddenly, the lounge fell silent, leaving only the faint hum of the wall lights.

Morkan's expression gradually crumbled before everyone's eyes...

to astonishment.

to pupils fiercely contracting.

Finally, his whole face turned ashen.

"Crash—"

The porcelain cup in his hand fell to the ground, shattering.

Scalding tea splashed onto his boots, but he didn't react at all.

Morkan looked as if someone had grabbed him by the throat, struggling to utter a few broken words.

"You mean... all gone... even... him too..."

The voice shattered in his throat, as if the next moment he would collapse to the ground.

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In the center of the square, a ten-meter-high cold iron statue stood silently.

It was of the former Northern Guardian—Duke Edmund.

The cold iron statue glinted with a cold metallic light under the snow, rugged and heavy.

The duke was clad in battle armor, holding a giant sword, standing as if he could awaken from the iron at any moment and charge into battle.

Most striking was the terrifying scar that extended from the corner of his left eye to his jaw. The raw, rolled skin texture was powerfully carved by the sculptor, without the slightest embellishment.

Isaac gazed up at the statue, his face reddened by the cold wind, yet his eyes felt a subtle warmth.

He raised his hand, wanting to touch the base of his father, but just as his fingertips were about to approach, he was struck by a sense of reverence and silently withdrew.

Louis, standing by his side, quietly watched this scene.

"Brother-in-law..." Isaac's voice was hoarse, "The craftsmen asked me if I wanted to make my father's scar shallower, to make him look more dignified. I refused."

Louis nodded, "You did right. That scar is more valuable than any medal."

He looked up at the iron statue, "Ten years ago, during the Blood Battle of Black River, three Barbarian Race tribes allied, claiming ten thousand war axes, turning the Northern Territory's river red."

The wind and snow howled in the square, yet Louis's voice was clear.

"When the defensive line was breached, it was your father who led his personal guard into the barbarian tide. He faced three Berserk Battle Kings alone."

Louis pointed to the scar on the statue's face.

"This was left by one of the Battle Kings before he died. But your father nailed their heads to the city walls of Frost Halberd City. That night, all the barbarians retreated."

Isaac's breathing was rapid, as if there was fire trapped in his chest.

Louis placed a firm yet steady hand on his shoulder, "Remember, this scar is not pain, it is protection. It is the true honor of the Edmund Clan."

At this moment, the sound of hurried footsteps trodding through the snow approached.

Gareth came before Louis and knelt on one knee, "Lord, Baron Gareth... is kneeling outside the City Lord's Mansion asking to see you. He's crying so hard, claiming there's something major... very urgent."

Isaac snapped back from the hero epic of his memories, but Louis's expression remained unchanged, only blinking lightly.

Louis did not respond immediately; instead, he first tidied Isaac's collar disheveled by the wind and patted away a snowflake from his shoulder, all in an unhurried manner.

As if, compared to Gareth's panic, he cared more about his brother-in-law's appearance.

After a few seconds, he calmly spoke, "Tell him, my schedule is very full... How about the night after tomorrow at seven? I'll probably have ten minutes free."

Chapter 703: Dog

The heavy velvet curtains kept the howling snowstorm out, leaving Frost Halberd City's mansion so quiet you could almost hear the breathing of the flames.

The fireplace flickered weakly, and the dim magic lamps divided the room into light and shadow, with the only clear sight being the high-backed chair and the young lord seated in the shadows.

Louis wore a black silk shirt casually, his collar slightly open, as if he had just pulled away from the gentle atmosphere of a family banquet.

At his feet lay a snow-white Ice Wolf pup, half-squinting and dozing, yet still maintaining the keenest alertness to his surroundings.

Isaac stood quietly in the corner, the young man with a straight back, like a novice apprentice, with eyes full of reverence and tension.

Outside the door came the sound of chaotic footsteps.

Then came a creak, and Baron Morkan was led in by an attendant.

He was a far cry from two days ago in the tea room, holding a teacup, chin raised, full of contempt, claiming Louis was just a little brat.

Two sleepless nights, enormous fright, and waiting had thoroughly crushed his spirit.

His velvet suit, expensive enough to buy a small plot of land, was crumpled, his eyes were darkened, and his hair was as messed as if blown by a gale, almost pushed in.

The caravan was nearly a year's output of Morkan's territory, his entire hope for exchanging for winter provisions.

Worse still, he wrote to Gray Stone Fortress for inquiry, only to receive an icy reply: "You may ask Count Red Tide for his opinion." He realized completely that he had been made a pawn in a political struggle.

Just as Baron Morkan crossed the door, he fell to the ground, his voice trembling: "C-C-C...Count...please save me..."

Louis raised his eyes, leisurely and slowly stroking the soft tip of the Ice Wolf's ear, the pup hummed pleausurably.

Morkan mistook it for an impatient signal and crawled forward quickly, his voice becoming tearful:

"Ackman...he doesn't play by the rules, doesn't follow the noble way...Lord, I'm willing to pay, that batch is worth ten thousand gold coins! I-I will give you thirty percent of the profit, as long as you help me get the goods back!"

Louis's hand suddenly stopped, the Ice Wolf raised its head and made a low, disgruntled whimper.

Louis sighed softly, but his tone was cold as the winter chill of the Northern Territory: "Morkan, what have I done that makes you disrespect me like this?"

Morkan jerked his head up, his face full of confusion and fear.

Louis stood up, his hands behind his back, pacing slowly under the dim firelight: "If you had agreed to join the Red Tide half a year ago...everywhere your caravan goes, it would bear my banner. It is not a decoration, but a shield."

He turned back, his gaze sharp as a blade: "But you didn't. You said you didn't need Red Tide, you said you understood the rules between nobles, you said your connections were enough to make you filthy rich. And now?"

Morkan's face turned ashen, his lips trembled: "I...I was..."

"Now you've lost your goods, lost your knights, only then do you think of me, a reliable friend in the Northern Territory." Louis sneered, "Yet you still treat me as a mercenary you can negotiate a price with."

Morkan's voice was already without a pitch: "Lord, I...I just want to survive, just want the family to survive...I don't hope for revenge, just for the goods...I'm willing to pay, whatever the cost..."

Louis turned, gazing at the fire jumping in the fireplace, his tone as detached as stating a fact: "Your cousin had his limbs smashed, buried in mud and snow to freeze to death. Your knight was split in half. Now you kneel here, yet you only think about how much that wagon is worth."

You won't even address me as Count Calvin.

Morkan shivered all over and finally burst into tears.

But at this moment, Louis turned back, his gaze falling back on him: "But I am a reasonable man. The Morkan family, after all, is part of the Northern Territory."

Upon hearing this sentence, Morkan seemed to grasp a straw to save his life: "L-Lord...you're willing to help me?"

"I will give you a letter," said Louis, "in half an hour, Guard Gray will deliver it."

Morkan looked up, a trace of hope appearing in his eyes.

"Take that letter," Louis continued, "ride personally to Gray Stone Fortress, and hand it to Ackman."

Morkan acted as if struck by lightning, his face instantly turning pale: "Lord, Ackman...that madman will kill me!"

"If you send a servant with the letter," Louis said nonchalantly, "he'll kill you then."

Louis bent down, looking Morkan in the eye, his tone gentle: "You just need to show enough humility...enough sincerity...for my sake, he'll return a portion of your goods."

Better than losing everything, isn't it?

Morkan trembled all over, finally kowtowing, his forehead viciously striking the cold tiles: "Yes, Count...for the family, I'll go!"

Yet deep inside he remained stubborn, even cold.

He's not kneeling out of respect for Louis.

The kneeling was because he had no way out, because Ackman was more likely than Louis to kill him instantly.

His mind was racing, as long as he could get the goods back, losing some money was acceptable, as long as he could keep his family, face could be forfeited.

As long as Louis was willing to act temporarily, Morkan could remain an independent noble, not needing to truly kneel under Red Tide's feet.

Even though he was nearly suffocated with fear moments ago, he was still desperately biting his teeth.

Once past this hurdle, he would never bow down, he wouldn't be Red Tide's dog, nor truly submit.

When he raised his head again his eyes were red, his lips trembling, yet that hint of unwillingness and scheming remained hidden in his eyes, refusing to disperse.

Chapter 704: Dog (2)

The door slowly closed in the staggering footsteps of Morkan.

Isaac finally couldn't help but speak: "Brother-in-law... Someone like Ackman, the meat he swallows, he won't spit it out. Letting Morkan go... Isn't this sending him to his death?"

Louis lifted his feather pen, writing something on the letterhead of the Red Tide Emblem, his expression calm to the point of indifference: "Isaac, the first thing you need to learn is not to rely on the enemy's mercy.

I sent Morkan, not to have him retrieve the goods."

He paused his pen, letting the ink spread slightly in the air.

"From the moment those goods were taken, they were already gone."

Isaac was stunned.

Louis raised his eyes, his pupils as deep as the night of Northern Territory's midwinter: "What I truly want is a reason."

Then he turned his head to give orders: "Sako, go call Lambert over."

The Barbarian Race youth nodded and went out.

Isaac lifted his head slightly, seeming somewhat curious, but dared not ask too much.

He could feel the atmosphere changing, shifting from the earlier lesson to a kind of silent battle intent.

Moments later, Lambert stepped in, his armor frosted by the wind and snow, yet he wore it straight.

He stopped half a step before Louis, clasped his fists and saluted: "My lord."

Louis asked straightforwardly: "How many knights are currently in Frost Halberd City?"

Lambert's eyes narrowed, immediately understanding Louis's meaning.

He did not question nor hesitate: "Two thousand one hundred from the Red Tide Knight Order, six hundred Silver Fang Knights, plus knights accompanying various nobles, overall about one thousand one hundred.

If fully integrated, three thousand seven hundred riders are available, and that weapon has arrived."

Louis smiled faintly, a smile carrying a certain cold implication that chilled the heart.

"Enough."

The Ice Wolf at this moment let out a gentle growl, as if scenting the impending storm on the Snowfield.

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The war conference room on the top floor of Gray Stone Fortress.

On the wall, the gigantic map of Northern Territory was slashed with red lines, resembling a dissected beast.

Ackman stood before the map, his build burly, like a standing grizzly bear.

His finger lightly tapped on a parchment scroll, the "Northern Territory United Defense Draft" he personally wrote.

The firelight cast on half his face, making his eyes seem dark and greedy.

Empire, Prince, Nobility... These words were not as real to him as a hereditary duke.

He was not loyal to the Second Prince; the Second Prince was but a temporary stepping stone he could use.

What he aimed to replace was Duke Edmund's position.

Just short of a reason to ignite.

That batch of "requisitioned" Morkan goods was bait and also a probe.

If Louis remained silent, it indicated the Red Tide was merely a paper tiger.

If he dared to show up... It would provide a reason to accuse him of interfering in military affairs and abusing military power.

Ackman's lips curled into a cold smile.

While he was about to continue scrutinizing the map, hurried footsteps sounded from the doorway.

The atmosphere in the hall of Gray Stone Fortress suddenly tightened.

Two soldiers pushed a shivering man inside — a baron from the Morkan family.

Regardless of the ground's frost, he fell to his knees before Ackman's feet, his body bending like a frozen wild dog, yet he squeezed out a smile of servitude.

"Sir Legion Commander... It was my people from Morkan that didn't do well enough, disturbing your esteemed army. I'm foolish, not understanding the profound strategic intentions of your military maneuvers... I'm here to offer deep apologies."

Morkan spoke, intentionally lowering his voice, softening it like the tones of nobility pleading in the southern courts, even the end of sentences carrying a hint of flattery.

"I hope your lordship discerns... My small caravan is but a grain of sand in the Northern Territory, insignificant compared to your army's mighty reputation, insignificant, indeed..."

He quickly scrambled forward, taking out a pouch of gemstones from his bosom, raising it high with both hands, allowing them to emit the brightest reflections in the firelight, as if willing to offer himself entirely at Ackman's nod.

"This small gift... Please accept, my lord. Brothers tirelessly train and guard day and night; my heart is full of admiration. If that batch of goods might... um... be symbolically returned somewhat, not for the value, just for me to report back... On any future errands from you, the Morkan family will never dare slack!"

His words were extremely flattering and complimentary, elevating Ackman almost as the co-ruler of Northern Territory, every sentence calling out "Your lordship's brilliance," "Your lordship's mighty name," even his tone as if groveling at the boot tips.

Ackman lowered his head, looked at the gemstone pouch on the ground, his brow indeed twitched.

He was not entirely devoid of desire.

This noble, lowly to the dust yet exceptionally skilled in pleasing through speech, did indeed meet his taste.

If Morkan were smarter at normal times, more cautious, perhaps Ackman might have merely brushed him off with some empty words.

After all, keeping such talking fat sheep could yield more than killing them.

Yet this time, he was not here for such petty gains.

"The earlier goods... If returned twenty percent... No, no, a mere ten percent, my lord, I'd be content! In the future, I'd surely praise you as the true guardian of the Northern Territory..." But Morkan knew nothing of Ackman's true intentions and continued prattling.

The pouch of gemstones was kicked away by Ackman, bouncing against a pillar, gems scattered with crisp tinkling sounds.

"Misunderstanding?" Ackman looked down at him, his tone like cold iron striking, "Are you implying I stole your things?"

Cold sweat instantly burst from Morkan, his body collapsing further, his head nearly buried in the ground: "No, no, no! Absolutely not! It's requisition! It's an honor! I... I'm here to seek your guidance and enlightenment..."

Chapter 705: Dog_3

Ackman impatiently waved his hand, ready to have the soldiers drag this eyesore of a pest out.

Morkan hurriedly revealed his last trump card, his voice almost trembling, yet he struggled to maintain the decorum expected of nobility:

"Lord Ackman... The Red Tide Lord, Lord Louis Calvin, has entrusted me to present you with a handwritten letter. If you would deign to read it, you will understand its profound implications."

Ackman's brow twitched; it seems Louis isn't as foolish as he thought.

The envelope was torn open directly, and he began to read word for word.

The flickering firelight from the hearth cast shadows on his gradually darkening face.

Ackman scanned the first line, and the veins on his temple immediately bulged.

"To the Seventeenth Legion—Interim Overseer Ackman."

Interim Overseer, neither "Commander" nor "Your Excellency."

It was a temporary title seldom used even in Imperial administrative documents, laced with contempt.

Ackman's low chuckle was deep and dangerous.

He continued to read, the wording of the letter almost unerringly struck every note of noble humiliation:

"It has come to my astonishment that your subordinates have acted erratically of late, like uncultured prairie dogs, even plundering noble caravans, sullyng the honor of the Imperial Army."

This conduct constitutes treason. In consideration of your humble origins and ignorance of proper decorum, I have specially dispatched Baron Morkan to educate you in these matters.

You are to return all materials within three days and kneel in Frost Halberd City to receive thirty lashes. I may then consider not indicting your head in the Dragon Throne assembly."

The signature declaration seemed to assert some form of dominion: Count of Red Tide, Acting Governor of the Northern Territory—Louis Calvin

While reading the letter, the room was deathly silent.

Suddenly, Ackman burst into laughter, his laughter rough and wild, like chains grinding on the ground: "Hahaha... Louis! Louis! You genius!"

He laughed so hard that tears almost came out, but within his smile hid a smoldering intent to kill.

Morkan saw him laugh, thinking the situation had taken a turn, and quickly gave a nervous laugh: "The Commander is right, Lord Louis's words are always... very reasonable... Then my goods..."

The laughter abruptly ceased.

Ackman's gaze turned instantly cold as ice: "Teach me decorum? You bring this letter to humiliate me?"

"Wha-what...?" Morkan's face turned pale, unable to react in time.

Ackman's sword drawing was swift as lightning.

A flash of cold light, blood splattered over the "Northern Defensive Pact."

Morkan's head rolled to the ground, his face still maintaining a sycophantic smile, as if still hoping for a mercy that didn't exist before death.

Ackman looked at the ludicrous head and whispered, "This, is your sincerity to me."

He kicked the head fiercely away: "Very well, I'll accept it, and with your life, I'll embark on my path to Dukeness."

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Ackman, wielding a blood-stained sword, took large strides out of the secret chamber.

The outer area was crowded with his trusted officers.

Seeing the bloodstains on him, they all held their breath in unison.

Ackman slammed the letter onto the table with a voice like a battle drum's explosion:

"Look carefully! The Red Tide Lord, Louis Calvin, colludes with smugglers, threatens the Imperial garrison, and attempts to divide the Northern Territory! This is a provocation against the Empire, against all our legions!"

The trusted officers exchanged looks, no one daring to question, yet all understood Ackman's intent.

Ackman raised his sword, the bloody light reflecting on his face making him appear both mad and exhilarated: "This letter is a declaration of war from him! And our ticket into the circle of nobility!

Immediately send word to Sol of the Iron Wall from the Fourteenth Legion and the Mad Dog Bart from the Seventh Legion! Tell them... Louis has made his move!

Let them choose for themselves, whether to remain as watchdogs or come to partake in this feast of meat!"

The officers were aroused and departed, excitedly carrying out orders.

Finally, only Ackman was left standing by the window.

The wind and snow beat against the thick glass, like whispers from afar.

He looked northward towards Frost Halberd City, where all the Northern Territory nobility gathered.

His eyes burned with the light of a predator.

"Heaven-sent opportunity, once I take Frost Halberd City, I'll seize the chance to capture all those meeting nobles in one sweep... Heh...

No matter who becomes Emperor in the Imperial Capital, they would have to beseech me to ennoble me as a hereditary Duke!"

Behind him, two soldiers dragged Morkan's headless corpse across the floor, the bloodstains glaring like a crimson road extending towards Frost Halberd City.

Chapter 706: Black Tide

The massive black iron gate was slowly lifted, snow fragments sliding down the threshold and falling into darkness.

A moment later, a metallic roar that shook the chest resounded.

The iron hooves of the Seventeenth Legion stepped out from the shadows.

No horns, no drums, no ceremony, only the deafening sound of trampling.

Thousands of heavily armored knights poured out from within the gates, as if the darkness itself had been cast into form.

They were clad in black steel plate armor, riveted with cold iron, with storm-branded swirls engraved on the shoulder guards.

Every knight seemed like a weapon forged from steel and fury, and the warhorses beneath them wore heavy half-body armor, exhaling white mist like ferocious wolves.

Ground shook beneath their feet, snow was torn, crushed, and splinters of ice were ground into powder under their heavy hooves.

On the vast snowfield, they were not a formation, but an entire moving wall of black iron.

Oppressive, cold, merciless.

When thousands of lances rose up in unison, the "clang—" of lance tails striking armor exploded like thunder, shaking the snow off distant mountainside spruce trees.

Ackman Greer rode at the forefront.

His black-scaled warhorse was as tall as a magical beast, its mane whipped up by the cold winds, cloaked in heavy armor, a cape snapping open in the snowstorm like a war flag about to ignite.

Behind, a serpentine dragon of black armor spanning several kilometers moved with him, iron hooves rolling, armor grinding, lances swaying, forming a soul-shaking oppression amid the wind and snow.

He felt his heartbeat being driven by this iron flow, the rhythm growing more insistent, urging him forward, ever forward.

This was power, this was his true confidence.

When they stepped onto the Glacier Plain, another iron flow appeared on the opposite end of the battlefield.

To the left, Fourteenth Legion·Iron Wall.

An array of heavy knights with disciplined formation like iron.

Their steps were steady and heavy, each advance together was like a city wall slowly pushing through the snow.

The wall of shields was so tight it was nearly seamless, the lance array appeared to have been measured to the exact size.

Snowflakes fell on the armor, leaving only a thin layer of frost that quickly shook off by the residual warmth and action of the knights, revealing the cold, hard black steel beneath.

To the right, Seventh Legion·Mad Wolves.

Their armor varied in style, yet retained the insignia and sequence of the Empire's regular army.

Only on their shoulder guards and capes could be seen the spoils from the Northern Wilderness: whitened animal bones, dried manes, mottled magical beast leather.

These are not crude decorations but symbols left by conquered enemies, representing the Seventh Legion's years of heroic battles against magical beasts on the border.

The three streams of knights slowly converged on the vast icefield.

When the sounds of iron hooves from the three armies overlapped, it was like the heavy thunder roared through the heavens and earth, even the wailing of the wind was suppressed, turning into whimpering.

Although the Fourteenth and Seventh Legions together had four thousand riders, in front of Ackman's three thousand iron cavalry, they seemed restrained like two packs of hunting dogs surrounding a lion king.

During the march, the officers of the three sides completed a brief yet firm tactical confirmation in the wind and snow.

The Seventeenth Legion's heavy cavalry would serve as the main hammer, directly hitting the gates and central defense line of Frost Halberd City.

The Fourteenth Legion's Iron Wall formation was in charge of the left wing, forming a heavy shield wall in the snow to prevent any surprise attacks.

The Seventh Legion's Mad Wolf knights were arranged to roam the right wing, responsible for cutting off any potential escape routes, especially those lords and escorts trying to sneak away through the hillside paths.

In the eyes of these three armies, this tactic didn't even require complex simulation; they weren't facing a fully fortified fortress, but a Northern Army crippled by years of war.

More importantly, it was a surprise attack, those Northern Lords at a meeting would never expect a sudden assault.

No one believed there would be fleeing soldiers, because in their logic, to have fleeing soldiers, there must at least be a proper battle.

And this time, it didn't even count as a war.

In the eyes of these battle-hardened regular armies, Frost Halberd City was but a piece of meat placed on the cutting board, waiting to be sliced.

All they had to do was march forward along the established route, grinding everything into shattered snow under their iron hooves and lance tips.

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Ackman rode at the vanguard, wind cutting like knives, striking his face but making him more awake, more excited.

He recalled both forces once more...

Seven thousand knights against a newly rebuilt city.

In the history of the Northern Territory, only during barbarian invasions had such large-scale battles occurred, yet this time, the initiator wasn't the Barbarian Race, it was him, Ackman.

"Louis..." Ackman laughed darkly, "You can only blame your bad luck for encountering me in this special period."

In Ackman's intelligence, it was an overwhelmingly one-sided good news:

The main force of the Red Tide isn't in Frost Halberd City; left in the city are only about two thousand assorted knights from various nobility.

The new defense works weren't fully installed yet, the city walls just finished their last layer of protection, like semi-dry mud walls, unable to withstand a heavy cavalry charge.

This isn't Frost Halberd City; once that impregnable fortress, now soft meat that crumbles underfoot.

Ackman could already envision the future, Frost Halberd City conquered, the Northern Lords under his control, the lifelines of steel and coal in his grasp. When royal power shifts, he would be the foremost hero.

Ackman Greer, Duke of the North!

Amidst the wind and snow, he raised his lance and pointed toward the northern city: "Haha! Forward!"

Chapter 707: The Black Flood (Part 2)

The iron tide roared, and the earth echoed.

The largest military assembly in the Northern Territory in thirty years marched towards Frost Halberd City like a giant beast awakening, and Ackman was certain: victory was already decided.

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The wind and snow in Frost Halberd City continued to howl, as if trying to remind all visitors that this was once the most desolate ruin of the Northern Territory.

However, the grand hall was warm, as if two worlds were separated by a door.

A heavy crystal chandelier cast a bright golden light, and the new steam heating on the walls gently exhaled warmth, making the air as soft as a southern spring night.

Outside the window was a biting cold wind, but inside one could smell the sweet aroma of pastries and the spicy scent of strong liquor.

The long table was covered with fine velvet cloth, and artisans from Red Tide Territory had arranged the dishes to look as exquisite as artworks.

Pastries, red tea, strong liquor, honeyed fruit... piled up abundantly, almost making one forget this was once the focal point of war.

This Northern reconstruction meeting was the most organized in decades.

Besides the major nobility, even the pioneering minor barons sat at the outer seats.

The room was filled with chatter, mostly light-hearted conversations.

Some discussed this year's grain prices, others exchanged hunting tips, and some jokingly talked about how the dancers from last night performed with much vigor.

It was as if the Northern Territory had truly ushered in stability and prosperity.

Yet no one mentioned Gareth Morkan, as if he had vanished from everyone's memory.

No one wanted to jinx the lively occasion.

However, beneath all the light-hearted conversations lurked a common anxiety — Louis had not arrived yet.

The high-backed main seat at the end of the conference table was empty. The higher the nobility's status, the more frequently they glanced towards it.

Ten minutes passed, then another twenty...

Some seasoned nobility began to grow impatient, deliberately lowering their voices to complain: "Sure enough, just a kid, became a lord for a few years and forgot manners."

"Making all of us wait for him, who does he think he is?"

However, no one dared to speak too loudly.

After all, Frost Halberd City was now under the jurisdiction of Red Tide Territory, whose power was intimidating to everyone.

Just as the discussions began to spread, the door was pushed open from outside.

Everyone instinctively stopped and looked up.

As expected, Louis Calvin walked in.

Today, he looked completely different from the nobility dressed in formal attire; he wore the Red Tide Standard light battle armor, black steel gleaming coldly under the light, and the edges of his shoulder armor were still stained with snow mud that hadn't been fully wiped clean.

He didn't disguise himself as a distinguished noble in formal wear, but walked into the conference hall like he belonged there.

His steps were steady, as if always ready to turn and head to the battlefield, using this outfit to remind everyone that the peace of the Northern Territory was never maintained by etiquette.

Behind him followed Bradley and Isaac.

The old butler, with bowed head and eyes, upheld decorum.

Isaac, with head held high, bore the tension and pride unique to youth, entering as the heir of Duke Edmund and the future master of the Northern Territory to sit in on the meeting.

Louis walked to the main seat, not rushing to sit down but resting his hand on the table edge, speaking politely yet with a hint of ease: "Sorry to keep you all waiting, I was dealing with a minor issue and got delayed."

His voice was not loud, yet it instantly silenced the entire conference hall.

"My lord has worked hard!"

"Lord Louis, you're too kind!"

"Your presence is our honor."

The nobility rose one after another, exchanging pleasantries as if welcoming a grand event, to which Louis smiled and acknowledged before seating himself in the main chair.

But he did not open the agenda detailing business cooperation; instead, he drummed his fingers lightly on the table with an unsettling air.

"Ladies and gentlemen," continued Louis, "before discussing how to make money, I must first inform you of a... small piece of bad news."

The phrase "bad news" did not cause much of a stir in the hall.

Some furrowed their brows slightly but only casually agreed, while more nobility took it as Louis' usual dry humor, awaiting jokes or gossip.

After all, with such a light-hearted tone, how bad could it be?

Louis paused for a second, his tone still calm: "At this moment, the Seventeenth Legion, the Fourteenth Legion, and the Seventh Legion, totaling seven thousand fully armed knights, have already crossed the Birch Forest line."

He lifted his eyes slightly and added, "If the roads are clear, they should reach Frost Halberd City in about a day and... commence a massacre."

The air instantly froze.

Three seconds later, the noise exploded like ignited gunpowder.

"Seven thousand knights?! Are you crazy? How can we fight this?!" A skinny baron collapsed to the floor with a thud as his legs gave way.

On the other side, a white-haired old count slammed the table, causing the silverware to jump an inch high: "Louis! Did you drag the entire Northern Territory into this? Do you know what this means?!"

"It's over... it's all over..." mumbled a noble, collapsing against the back of his chair as if drained of all strength.

Some completely broke down, abruptly standing up and knocking over the chair behind them: "Quick! Send an envoy! Send them now! Open the city gates! Tell Ackman we weren't involved, we knew nothing!"

Fear spread like a plague, causing everyone's voices to escalate uncontrollably.

The entire conference hall was like a ship hitting a hidden reef, with screams, arguments, and chaos tearing apart all elegance.

In the midst of this chaos, Louis sat quietly, showing neither anger nor panic, even taking a sip of red wine with indifference.

The noble who shouted "surrender" was the loudest, even attempting to rush to push open the large door.

Louis set down his glass, his tone calm as if scolding a misbehaving child: "Surrender? Negotiation? Are you sure Ackman will spare your lives?"

When Morkan went to claim the conscripted goods, he was beheaded on the spot. His head now hangs on the city gate of Gray Stone Fortress."

As he spoke, he pulled out a roll of parchment from his pocket and tossed it on the table.

The parchment unfurled, revealing dense red markers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you have two choices." Louis held up one finger, "First, fight on your own. Be broken one by one. Entire families wiped out."

He then raised a second finger: "Second, immediately and unconditionally hand over all your personal soldiers, guards, and the complete military command of your territories to me. Let Red Tide unify command."

He leaned back against the chair, his tone still gentle, yet chilling to the bone: "Now, vote. Those in favor, remain seated. Those unwilling, the door is there, feel free to meet Ackman."

That door suddenly appeared as terrifying as the entrance to death.

No one moved.

Including the noble who had just shouted to surrender, who seemed nailed to the spot with legs weighed down by lead, cold sweat beading on his forehead.

A few seconds later, the first noble shakily raised his hand.

Then the second, and the third...

More people nodded silently, more people dared not raise their heads, more people expressed submission through silence.

No opposition.

Louis nodded with satisfaction, showing that gentle smile again.

"Very well."

He stood up, adjusted his cuffs, and with a tone as light as if concluding an ordinary afternoon tea, said: "Since we have reached a consensus... the meeting is adjourned. Now, it's time for war."

With that, Louis's coat tails fluttered slightly as he headed straight for the door.

Inside the hall, hundreds of nobles stood frozen as if their souls had been taken, leaving only wide eyes blankly following his departing figure.

Isaac trailed behind, his little steps nearly at a trot to keep up.

Though he tried to appear composed, his tense mouth corners revealed his unease.

Once outside the hall, he couldn't help but tug at Louis's sleeve, whispering: "Brother-in-law... is it really okay? There are seven thousand knights outside..."

Louis halted, looking down at the little one who was trying hard to appear mature, the coldness in his eyes instantly softening.

He reached out and tousled Isaac's hair.

"It's okay." His tone was as relaxed as commenting on today's weather: "No matter how many men Ackman has brought, he's already lost."

Isaac froze: "But we... aren't we in great danger now?"

Louis smiled, with a confidence born out of having everything under control: "I came today only to have them willingly hand over military power to me. Without this war, they would never agree wholeheartedly."

He patted Isaac's shoulder: "As for Ackman... a truly great war ends before the enemy even begins their advance. This meeting is also a part of the battlefield."

Having said that, he continued forward, his steps steady yet leisurely, as if the threat of seven thousand knights was merely a move he had long poised on his chessboard.

Chapter 708: Quagmire

The afternoon after the meeting, Louis sent someone to knock on the doors of every attending Lord and Knight representative.

Leaving just one light message: "Gather at the North City Wall, I have something for you to see with your own eyes."

He gave no explanation, only instructing his attendants to prepare cloaks and portable heaters.

Thus, those nobles who were discussing cooperation and profit-sharing over tea on velvet chairs yesterday were forced to climb the newly built wall of Frost Halberd City in the biting wind and snow.

They thought Louis was simply putting on airs or intending to hold a so-called lord inspection ceremony.

However, when they stood on the wall and saw the gathering black torrent outside the city, all their luck and conjecture were instantly crushed.

Louis called them here not for a ceremony but to let them witness the imminent danger and the power of the Red Tide.

Only true fear could make these people, still clinging to old noble traditions, understand why military power must be handed over to the Red Tide.

And only by standing on this wind- howling wall, facing the pressing regular army.

Could they truly realize that the Old North is dead, and the new Northern Territory can only be reborn in iron and fire.

...

The wind of the Northern Territory howled on the North City Wall of Frost Halberd City, like a whole Icefield roaring.

The sky was pressed extremely low, and the blizzard was torn by the wind into white whip shadows, striking the battlements and flags, making a dull snapping sound.

Yet more piercing than the wind and snow was the gradually approaching vibration, shaking even the air.

It wasn't the sound of hooves at first, but a deep rumble rolling from the depths of the earth, with lingering echoes and a sense of oppression.

The nobles on the city wall stopped breathing one by one.

"Is that... an earthquake?" someone's voice trembled.

"No." Another noble said hoarsely, "That's a cavalry tide."

Their gaze turned afar, where a line as thin as a hair suddenly appeared on the once white horizon.

The wind and snow couldn't conceal its spread; that black line thickened and widened swiftly like a rising tide, swallowing the entire Snowfield's color.

Someone exclaimed, "Is that... a legion? A whole legion?!"

No one could count how many Knights there were.

The black torrent stretched to the skyline, with no end in sight.

Even from miles away, you could feel the discipline of their movement.

No shouting, no roaring, only the countless iron hooves crushing the snow into a "thud—thud—thud—".

This silence was more suffocating than any battle drum.

This was the march of a regular army, the most terrifying war machine of the Empire.

On the command platform of Frost Halberd City's North City Wall, almost all attending nobles were scared pale.

At this moment, they truly understood that what Louis said at the meeting was no joke.

Three legions, nine thousand Knights, were heading this way.

The cold wind pushed their heavy furs, and some even knelt to the ground, clutching the edge of the battlements, their voices like broken pottery: "We're doomed... can't stop it... who can stop this scale?!"

Several timid Barons had already begun to retreat quietly, trying to find the stairs down from the wall, as if getting away from this scene could distance the apocalypse further from themselves.

Count Albert, however, stood at the front.

He was the late Duke Edmund's loyal subject, an old general who had weathered decades of wind and snow.

Even in this almost suffocating oppressive situation, he still stood straight, though his brows had more heaviness and concern than usual.

He did not panic like the others, lowering his voice to speak: "Lord Louis, the Seventeenth Legion and the other two armies advancing south simultaneously is a very unusual move. Are the defenses you set up in advance really enough to cope?"

This was an old general's concern and responsibility for the safety of the Northern Territory.

He wasn't doubting Louis, but confirming whether the young lord really had confidence in such an apocalyptic scene.

Louis glanced at him, his expression as calm as a lamp in a snowy night: "Rest assured, Count Albert. I am ready."

Count Albert was silent for a moment, then looked again at the distant black torrent, his tense fingers slowly relaxing.

He sighed lightly and could only shake his head: "...In that case, I'll watch."

As the cavalry got closer, everyone looked towards the young lord seated in the central chair.

Louis sat in the chair, lightly holding a steaming red tea cup, as if enjoying a quiet afternoon tea in a warm hall, not on a wall about to be crushed by a cavalry tide.

The gale lifted his cloak, yet he didn't even lift an eyelid.

He merely turned his head, looking at Isaac, who was sweating with nervousness beside him.

The child's shoulders were tense as stone, instinctively clutching Louis's cloak.

But when Louis looked at him, he hurriedly lifted his chin, trying hard to appear brave.

Louis put down the teacup, raised his hand to press down Isaac's blue hair tousled by the wind, speaking as if asking what he wanted for dinner: "Are you afraid?"

Isaac's breath hitched, his ear tips frozen red, but he gritted his teeth, stubbornly shaking his head: "No... not afraid."

Louis's lips slightly curled into a smile, not mocking, but a calming acknowledgment.

"Good." He said softly, "Then open your eyes wide and see clearly, this is the last curtain call of the old era."

...

The biting wind of the Northern Territory echoed in the Birch Forest pass, as if the entire Icefield was moaning softly.

Ackman reined in his warhorse, standing at the front of the formation.

He looked at the 300-meter-wide pass leading to Frost Halberd City, with smooth, ice-reflecting sheer cliffs on either side, and in the front, a wind-snow covered white plain.

Chapter 709: Quagmire (Part 2)

Any general could recognize this place as a perfect ambush spot.

But Ackman laughed, he had long expected Louis to play this way.

He stared at the eerily silent snowfield, his eyes glinting with a hunter's cold gaze: "Louis Calvin, did you think I would step into your magic burst trap? Using those explosive alchemy toys, who can you kill?"

Behind him stood the Black Steel Knights of the Seventeenth Legion, three thousand fully armored heavy knights like a pressing iron-colored tsunami.

The snow fell on their armor, but was instantly evaporated into white mist by fighting energy.

"All troops, hear my command! Slave cavalry advance!" Ackman snapped his whip.

A hundred Barbarian Race light cavalry charged into the pass like unleashed wild dogs, roaring.

A few moments later...

"Boom! Boom, boom!"

The accumulated snow exploded, with fire and blood mist mixed together, tossing over a dozen Barbarian Race riders and horses into the air.

But the explosion ceased there, no chain reaction, no large-scale detonation that would shock Ackman.

Ackman sneered coldly: "Sure enough, it's a minefield... but its power is limited. Heavy cavalry won't die."

Then, he ordered without hesitation: "Formation scatter! All knights, five meters interval! Advance by squad!"

Three thousand Black Knights spread into a web-like advancing formation at the sound of the horn, sparse but carrying an unstoppable destructive aura, rolling into the pass.

Until almost all of them entered the designated area.

... yet there was no second wave of explosions.

At the end of the birch pass, on the north wall of Frost Halberd City, Louis raised his hand from afar, as if signaling some elegant commencement.

In the next second, the earth emitted a thunderous heartbeat-like sound.

"Buzz—Boom!!"

No blinding fire, no flying metal shards. Only a tremor so terrifying it instantly numbed one's nerves, coming from deep underground.

The black-scaled warhorse beneath Ackman suddenly sank.

He reacted swiftly but still stared wide-eyed: "This... isn't an explosion?"

This wasn't a high explosive minefield; it was a magic burst package buried five meters deep—deep oscillation magic burst.

The shockwave first shattered the permafrost, then stirred the underground water, turning the whole iron-hard foundation into a fluid in an instant.

The snowfield collapsed instantly.

The entire 300-meter-wide passage turned into a swamp-like mud hell in moments.

Horse hooves first sunk in, the more they struggled, the deeper they went.

The heavy armor, along with the knights, was swallowed half by the viscous mud.

No dead, no casualties, but the entire army was immobilized.

Ackman's pupils contracted sharply, he wanted to curse but choked: "This brat... wasn't trying to blow me up. He's aiming to capture me alive like livestock?!"

The mud kept rolling, knights fell from their horses, one by one sprawling in the muddy water, struggling to stand, yet even drawing their weapons wasn't smooth. Chains, armor, horse armor all became restraints.

"Legion Commander! We're... stuck!"

"The rear army collided! Formation squeezed together!"

The three thousand Black Knights that had spread like a net now forced into a narrow "meat corridor" by the terrain.

The front stopped, the rear collided, the flanks sunk, squeezed together like sardines.

Ackman roared furiously, his fighting energy burst forth, pushing the mud away, leaping on horseback.

"Everyone stand up! Charge through! As long as we leave this mud pit, victory is ours!"

Under Ackman's near-mad roar and pressure, the heavy cavalry forcefully pulled their legs out of the mud.

Some abandoned their horses, others stumbled forward.

They finally, with difficulty, left the mud zone, only 800 meters remaining to near Frost Halberd City.

But Ackman paid no attention to any of this.

In his eyes, the mud was just a temporary obstacle, he even showed a hint of excited smile, shouting loudly: "Do you see?! Not even traps can stop us! As long as we charge through, victory is ours!"

Ackman had no time to observe the collapse of formations, only fixed his eyes on that seemingly still traversable piece of flat land ahead, fiercely clamping his warhorse, splashing mud water as he charged out first.

Behind him, this shattered, dragged by mud, forced into a mass of gigantic legion, flowed forward, forced to follow his rhythm.

They thought they still retained their momentum, believed that by continuing to charge forward, they could smash open the gates of Frost Halberd City.

And on the city wall, Louis calmly watched their almost ludicrous advance, with the corner of his lips faintly raised.

Louis never intended to kill them with traps.

What he wanted was to strip away their fighting spirit, strip the Seventeenth Legion of its meaning as a legion, break their fearless momentum.

Let them lose their qualification for war before even reaching the walls, as a prelude for the grand feast to come.

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Birch pass's side flank highland.

It's windy here, yet it's the best position overlooking the entire pass.

Snow spun in the cold wind, like tiny silver flakes, knocking out subtle and urgent sounds on the armor of the two hidden Knight Orders behind snow ridges.

Felan, leader of the Cold Iron Knight Order, stood at the forefront, his entire being seemingly cast from cold iron.

His heavy armor was deep black, almost able to swallow the light amidst the wind and snow, leaving only a hard outline.

He remained silent, only staring at the pass below, now turned into a sea of mud.

Oser, leader of the Silver Fang Knight Order, stood half a step behind him, his silver-gray light armor gently rattling in the wind.

Compared to Felan's steadiness, his emotions were markedly more tense.

Through the telescope, he could see Ackman's heavy cavalry struggling awkwardly in the mud, rolling, akin to an apocalyptic disaster.

"Felan! Look below!" Oser couldn't help but growl, his hand already gripped on the sword hilt, "Ackman's formation is scattered! Thoroughly scattered! It's a heaven-sent opportunity!"

He pointed toward the distant majestic Frost Halberd City, voice pressed low yet still leaking urgency:

"If they escape, the walls will bear full impact! Panic within civilians! Our Silver Fang Knight Order's duty is to guard Frost Halberd City! Charging down now, we can shred them from the side!"

Felan raised his hand, like an impassable iron gate blocking Oser. His voice steady as rock: "The Lord's red signal flare hasn't risen. Without orders, the Cold Iron Order won't move a step."

"You're too blindly obedient!" Oser's anger couldn't be contained, he shoved Felan's hand aside, even forcing nearby Cold Iron Knights to step up half-way.

"Louis is merely acting as a caretaker of military power! Frost Halberd City is where Master Isaac roots himself! If because of his hesitation Frost Halberd City suffers, you and I, how can we face the old Duke after death?!"

He gritted his teeth, angrily reprimanding: "What is that youngster thinking? The battlefield changes in an instant, and he actually wants to engage directly with heavy cavalry on the plain? Does he think war is child's play?!"

Felan slowly turned his head, the eyes that cried before the Duke's spirit now cold as blade edge: "Oser, do you remember my vow before the spirit?"

He pronounced each word steadily: "We vowed not to disgrace his ambition. Since the Duke granted command to Lord Louis, then his orders are the Duke's will.

You've stayed too far from Lord Louis. You only see his gentleness in Frost Halberd City, but haven't seen him turn the impossible into reality at Red Tide. He understands far better than us how to safeguard Master Isaac's future."

Oser wanted to retort but stopped ever so faintly as words reached his lips.

Because the earth... was shaking. *freewebnovel.com*

Initially, it was just a slight trembling, then gradually grew stronger, as if some colossal creature awakening underground.

Felan lifted his chin, pointing towards Frost Halberd City: "Do you think Lord Louis laid this setup only to trap them in mud pits?"

"Listen."

Oser held his breath. Amid the rushing wind, a low, deep rumbling increasingly resonated, unheard of—like a metal beast's heartbeat.

Thump—thump—thump—

The power of that sound even surpassed thousands of warhorse hooves, shaking off the snow piles on the ridges.

Oser's pupils shrank slightly: "This... what is it?"

Felan's voice was as cold and cutting as a blade: "A monster from the Red Tide."

The sound carried by the wind was the breathing of mechanical pistons, the roar of steam and steel.

That sound, increasingly loud, increasingly ferocious.

On the snow ridge highland, knights from both Knight Orders instinctively straightened their spines.

The power of a new era was about to take the stage.

Chapter 710: Era-Crushing Overwhelming Force

The Seventeenth Legion, despite being disheveled and covered in mud from their escape from the quagmire, still maintained a terrifying momentum with three thousand Black Steel Knights charging forward.

The ground trembled, and the warhorses snorted white mist, as if intending to uproot the entire Icefield.

The distance between them and Frost Halberd City was now less than a kilometer.

Ackman grinned viciously, his face grotesquely twisted by the cold wind.

Seeing the seemingly flimsy front line of the Red Tide Knights ahead, his arrogance erupted completely.

These men would soon be crushed to powder by the wave of his Black Steel Knights!

Just at the moment before the Seventeenth Legion was about to collide...

The Red Tide Knights suddenly retreated to both sides like a tide, their movements eerily synchronized.

Ackman's pupils contracted: "Hmph, trying to bait us? Naive!"

But before he could finish his words, the open field shrouded in mist behind his line of sight suddenly lit up.

As the white mist cleared, Ackman finally saw the second tier of wall hidden before the city gate.

It wasn't a shield formation, but a row of steam war machines as oppressive as abyssal giants.

They were arranged horizontally, forming an iron wall, each as tall as two warhorses, with wedge-shaped bodies covered in rivets like dense cold iron scars on their armor, and alloy ramming angles in the front like predator's fangs.

The tracks rolled slowly, heavy metal chains gripping the permafrost tightly, copper steam pipes swelling and trembling; high-pressure steam from the boilers spewing black smoke.

"Boom... boom... boom..."

The low-frequency rumble of pistons and power furnaces was as heavy as giants pounding deep underground.

It was the vibration, a fear spreading outward from the marrow.

The wind distorted, layers of frost peeled off the ground, and snow accumulated near the city gate slid off with the vehicle's tremor, as if the whole world bowed to these steel monsters.

Ackman froze for half a second, then burst into laughter filled with disdain and arrogance.

"Hahaha! Is this your trump card, Louis? Dozens of... iron coffins?!"

He raised his head, laughing wildly till his nostrils flared: "Trying to block me with these broken toys? What a joke!"

He suddenly raised his longsword high, Fighting Energy bursting into a dazzling white glow on the blade.

His roar echoed across the battlefield: "Seventeenth Legion—Crush them!!! Slaughter the city for three days!!!"

The black torrent roared its final rage. Warhorses neighed, iron armor vibrated, and the remnants of the formation were reassembled by collective killing intent.

Three thousand heavy cavalry were like a black giant spear ignited by fury, fiercely stabbing toward the wall of steel war machines.

The ground trembled under the hooves, the air heating from the steam, and snowflakes in the sky were shaken apart, scattered in disarray.

The two torrents of war were about to collide head-on in the next second.

.....

On the North City Wall, Count Albert looked at the neatly arrayed hundred steam war machines below the city, unable to hold back any longer, his gray beard trembling incessantly.

"Absurd... utterly absurd!" he shouted in a low voice, "No chevaux de frise, no infantry phalanx, no dense spears... relying on these iron lumps to stop cavalry? Louis, you're gambling the fate of the entire Northern Territory!"

His voice had just fallen, and other nobles also turned pale.

Count Albert wanted to say more, but Louis had already raised his hand and gently waved it down.

.....

"Boom——!!!"

A full hundred main cannons roared simultaneously.

The vibration was so intense that even the stone bricks on the city wall vibrated lightly, and a cup on the table splashed tiny droplets of water.

The air seemed to be torn apart, white snow blasting into the air, turning into a pervasive white mist.

In the next instant, a dense, seamless salvo of shrapnel shot from the war machine muzzles.

It wasn't an arrow rain, nor a magic light beam.

It was a steel grinding net capable of cutting through the knight order's formation, tearing apart heavy armor, and shaking horse skeletons.

The vanguard of the Seventeenth Legion didn't even have time to let out a roar of rage before being shaved away in a torrent of shrapnel.

They didn't fall, they just vanished.

Black steel armor was deformed and shattered, and warhorses' necks snapped like broken branches under the kinetic impact.

The knights were torn into blood mist in the shrapnel storm.

In just a moment, hundreds of heavy knights were erased from the battlefield.

Silence engulfed the entire city wall.

Ackman, face twisted in shock, still forced himself to shout, "Keep going! Getting past means victory! Retreat is death!"

The Seventeenth Legion, true to their reputation as the Northern Empire's elite, clenched their teeth against the terror in their hearts and charged forward.

But just then, behind the war machine array, a group of Red Tide Grenadier Knights simultaneously pulled their fuses.

Over a hundred frost-eating soul-shock grenades engraved with blue demon patterns were tossed high into the air.

As they fell, they emitted a faint yet eerie "buzz," like some ancient withered god breathing softly in the depths.

The bombs rolled among the knights, emitting no fire, only rings of outwardly expanding ghostly blue ripples hitting the soul like cold tides.

In the moment the blue light swept over, the fear smartly suppressed by reason within the Seventeenth Legion knights' hearts, was brutally magnified a hundredfold by the soul-shock grenades.

The stark coldness that would only emerge in the last moments of life was forcibly shoved back into their minds.

Their vision began to distort, colors drained away, leaving only gloom and dislocation.

In their eyes, the steam war machines were no longer cold machines but giants with steel spines, abdomens gaping open.

Every jet of steam was like a demon licking the victims' ears.

The figures of their comrades became elongated and twisted, the armor's reflection flashed like fangs, and they were no longer allies but monstrous shadows lunging at them, mouths agape.