

Winter 731

Chapter 731: Endgame (Part 2)

Below the steps, Remont stood silently.

He looked at Kaelin, whose back seemed on the verge of collapse, tidied his cuffs, and revealed a faint smile.

It was a kind of chilling satisfaction.

Like a craftsman checking the sharpness of a blade he forged with his own hands.

Before this, Kaelin was merely a fallen prince.

And now he had publicly killed his brother, the Empire's Regent King, cutting off all retreats.

This meant he could finally be molded into the Emperor he wanted to be.

Remont slowly ascended the steps, his boots echoing steadily and rhythmically on the cold stone surface.

He came to Kaelin's side, gently pressed his trembling shoulder, as if comforting a child after a nightmare: "Well done, Your Majesty."

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The once lively and never-dark Victory Avenue now echoed only with wind howling through the ruins.

Seven days ago, it was adorned with flowers to celebrate the Fourth Prince Rheine becoming Regent King, decorated by the nobility like the heart of the Empire.

Seven days later, this once prosperous street was lined with gallows, the wooden beams creaking in the night rain, like a lament for the old order of the Empire.

The muddy ground, trampled by hooves, mixed with blood, alcohol fumes, and smoke, emitted a nauseating stench.

The firelight of the Nobility District reflected in the puddles, like tongues of fire twisting and dancing in the night sky.

Before these gallows, Duke Simmons was dragged over.

He was no longer the figure of seven days ago.

His prison clothes were stained with mud, the torn parts revealing emaciated, dry knees, and his wig knocked off, exposing sparse, gray hair.

His face was wet from rainwater, but it couldn't wash away the confusion and fear in his eyes.

The head of one of the Eight Great Clans, at that moment, was like an old fish dragged ashore, gasping for air.

"I... I'm an Electoral Prince... I have immunity... immunity..." Simmons muttered repeatedly, as if chanting a protective curse, but with each utterance, his voice grew weaker.

As if he too realized that these titles wouldn't save him in the Imperial Capital.

The executioner stood before him, shouting to the surrounding knights: "Simmons Grand, one of the Eight Great Clans, adherent of the Old Empire, betrayer of military authority, assisted in the chaos in the Royal Capital according to military law, execution by hanging."

"I... I'm loyal! I've always supported the royal power! I..."

Before he could finish, a bag was placed over his head, and his voice was completely silenced.

The noose was tightened.

The captain raised his hand and waved down: "Drop."

The plank was removed, Simmons' body suddenly dropped, making a dull snap like a broken branch.

His legs convulsed a few times, gently shaking the gallows like a withered branch in the wind.

Soon after, his struggles ceased completely.

The rain continued to fall, unable to wash away the blood on Victory Avenue.

The remains of the Eight Great Clans' aristocrats swayed in the wind and rain, becoming the first sacrifices of the new Empire map.

Besides Simmons, several high-ranking officials of the former Empire were tied together.

Karen, Rheine's tutor, who formulated all his seizure plans.

Mei Si, head of the Supervisory Institute, drafter of the "New Charter."

Finance Minister Bellier, it was his plan to strip the Second Prince's knights' corps of provisions.

And dozens of civil servants, once the core of that elite circle.

Now their necks were bound by the same rope.

Their faces dusted with ash water, eyes blank, pushed to kneel before the gallows like livestock.

The night wind blew open the bags, raindrops tapped their cheeks, but none made a sound.

The curtain fell faster than expected.

As the nooses simultaneously tightened, there were no longer any celebration lights under the sycamore trees lining Victory Avenue.

In their place were the bodies hanging from the branches.

Wooden plaques hung around their necks: "Parasites of the Finance Ministry." "Traitor of the Supervisory Institute." "Rheine's lapdogs."

The night wind blew, gently rocking the dozens of bodies, and the plaques clattered with hollow sounds.

The onlooking commoners stood far away, their expressions numb, neither pleading for the dead nor daring to speak.

Because they understood: the new master was more brutal than the old.

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The high windows of the Imperial Hall continued to stream with rainwater, trickling down the glass.

The sound of torrential rain pounded the eaves, dull and continuous, as if the entire Imperial Capital held its breath for tonight's storm.

The Second Prince Kaelin sat on the Dragon Throne.

He wore no ceremonial robe, no gold-embroidered trim, no Ceremonial Crown, only a jet-black marshal's uniform, its shoulder armor stained with dried blood.

He refused the title of Regent King, rejected all titles presented by the civil servants.

Kaelin merely raised his chin slightly, uttering two cold words: "Just write—Emperor."

The civil servants buckled at the knees, not daring to question further.

On the steps at the entrance of the hall lay the battered helmet of the 8th Legion's leader, its cracks stained dark brown with blood.

A personal guard knelt on the ground, reporting tremblingly: "Your Highness... the 8th Legion... was completely annihilated, no survivors."

Kaelin was silent for a moment, his metal prosthesis rasping against the armrest of the Dragon Throne with a harsh screech.

"They followed the wrong person," he said softly, "but they exemplified the knights."

He raised his hand, ordering: "Give them a proper burial."

No one in the Imperial Hall dared to oppose.

That was Rheine's most loyal legion, yet it received a treatment higher than any traitor.

On the other side of the hall, two legion commanders knelt, their faces full of expectation and humility.

They had made a decision in the siege: to defect.

Now they thought they had chosen correctly.

"Your Majesty!" they kowtowed in unison, "We wish to serve you with all our might! To cleanse the world for you!"

Kaelin looked down at them, with no warmth in his eyes.

He suddenly chuckled, a sound that made everyone's hair stand on end.

"The 5th Legion deserted. The 18th Legion, cowardly."

He lightly tapped the armrest with his hand: "Implement the Eleven Execution Law."

There was an immediate deathly silence in the hall.

For every ten, one was selected for immediate execution, the rest were incorporated into the Death Warrior camp, and in the next battle, they would charge first.

The two legion commanders collapsed to the ground, their faces instantly paler than the dead.

Kaelin looked down on them: "This is your chance for redemption."

One sentence, and the hearts of all speculators simultaneously tightened.

The lights in the Supervisor's building extinguished in the rainy night, the iron gate slammed open, and three hundred volumes of files were thrown into the furnace.

Kaelin no longer needed the Supervisor; he only needed a military tribunal.

The lock teeth of the treasury vault door shattered, the door fell, shaking the entire cellar slightly.

Knights carried out crates of Gold Coins, filling the military wagons.

The civil servant wailed: "That's the disaster relief fund! That's the Empire's reserve fund! You can't..."

Kaelin cut him off coldly: "Transport it to the military camp, distribute it all as rewards."

Amidst the pouring rain, crates of Gold were transported to the military camp outside the city, knights holding torches cheered around the gold boxes.

Then a new edict was thrown from before the Dragon Throne, landing on the wet, cold stone bricks, opening with a crisp sound.

It was the "Wartime Military Governance Order."

The moment the civil servants raised their heads, each of their faces turned deathly pale.

"These laws are immediately abolished," Kaelin's voice was low, yet carried an unresistable absolute force.

One civil servant couldn't help but cry out: "Your Highness... that's the Empire's code..."

"Your master from last night is already dead."

At that moment, no one dared say another word.

The entire Imperial Hall seemed to have been slit open by an invisible dagger from the old era.

The roots of civil servant governance were uprooted, the careful system Rheine had built turned to ashes this night.

Kaelin returned to sit on the Dragon Throne.

He closed his eyes, as if listening to the rain.

After tonight, the Empire no longer needed explanations.

No longer needed laws. No longer needed those detailed articles written by civil servants.

He slowly opened his eyes, his voice low and calm: "From today, the Empire will be ruled by the military."

No one in the hall dared to make a sound.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, like the first death knell for a new era.

Chapter 732: Home Stolen

The storm continued to batter the Imperial Capital, yet within the temporary residence of the Graystone Province envoy in the capital, it was silent as if isolated from the outside world.

Raymont sat by the fireplace, calm and composed, not at all like someone who had just participated in an upheaval against the Empire.

Unlike the Second Prince, whose eyes burned red in the Imperial Hall, his fingers didn't bear a trace of blood.

It could be said that Raymont was the biggest beneficiary of this coup.

Years of planning resembled a grand chessboard, with the nobility, the princes, the legion commanders all mere pawns being pushed around.

Rhine was too soft, Kaelin too impulsive; only he stood outside the board, securing everything with the most prudent posture.

He even felt a slight joy rising in his heart...

The Empire, so vast, so ancient, had been easily grasped by him alone.

And those royal offspring who prided themselves as clever, focused so intently on that throne, never realizing the true source of power.

On the table were several of the latest appointment documents laid out.

One of them read: Raymont Grace, granted the title of Empire "Hereditary Grand Marshal."

The paper, cold and solemn, held a title not bestowed upon any noble in the past five hundred years.

This meant he gained the legal authority to command all imperial legions except the Forbidden Guard.

Not just symbolically, but the kind of power that could have Knight Order commanders mount their horses in action upon receiving orders.

On the other end of the table was a brand-new map of the Empire.

Three counties were shaded in the color of Graystone Province.

They were the fertile three counties surrounding the capital, the core of the Empire's granaries.

The Second Prince fulfilled his promise, handing over the Empire's most fertile lands to him.

Graystone Knights would garrison there, stockpile grain, train soldiers, and expand their planned new army.

Yet Raymont reached out and pushed the golden rewards aside.

These pages recorded titles, medals, gemstones, territories... enough to drive all the capital's nobility mad with desire.

But to Raymont, they were like candies scattered for children during festivals, good only for tempting fools who've never seen the world.

The one thing he truly longed to take was within a Black Iron Box by his left hand.

The first layer contained all the exploration maps of "ancient dragon relics" from past Emperors.

Each was detailed to the point of incredulity, marking the flow of magic power, rock strata structure, specific locations of dragon bone remains.

As Raymont looked over the maps, the calm in his eyes was as if finally placing the missing piece in a puzzle.

The second layer held a fragile parchment volume, with a mottled title on the cover: "Dragon Blood."

These recorded the serum extracted from dragon corpses by recent generations of Emperors.

This plan proved the Royals had attempted for centuries to extend life with dragon blood, even seeking a breakthrough in life's hierarchy.

But they failed because the "dragon" they held was never a true dragon, merely sub-dragon species.

And that giant dragon corpse in Graystone Province was a real ancient dragon, the key to completing the entire plan.

With these documents, the Dragon Blood Warrior plan, and even his own dragonization experiments had a further chance to advance.

Raymont's breathing momentarily paused.

Then he gently closed the parchment volume, as if packing away a sacred treasure.

Raymont slowly shut the box and stood up.

Outside, thunder rolled.

He walked to the window, gazing at the nightscape of the capital illuminated by firelight, and exhaled lightly.

The Second Prince thought he had won, believed it was him sitting on the Dragon Throne—but he was merely a puppet, molded by his own hands.

Raymont whispered softly, "Finally reached here."

As the words still echoed in the air, a cautious knock broke the silence in the room.

He furrowed his brows in extreme displeasure, not turning immediately, instead leisurely rolling up a scroll, slipping it into the hidden pocket of his sleeve.

Only when all was in place did he slowly turn: "Come in."

The doorway revealed the captain of the Second Prince's personal guard.

This man, ruthless enough to strangle Duke Simmons on the execution ground, was sweating under Raymont's scrutiny, his legs stiff as if filled with lead.

"What is it?" Raymont's voice was as cold as frost.

The captain swallowed, bowed deeply: "Grand Marshal, Sir, Your Excellency... His Highness has urgent military affairs. He's raging in the command room, has smashed two glasses, and insists you must come at once."

"Raging?" Raymont chuckled quietly; it was like hearing a starving dog barking wildly in its cage.

The captain dared not lift his head: "His Highness said that troops must be deployed immediately, but... he needs your instructions."

Raymont exhaled lightly, as if confirming that the beast on the other side of the board remained obediently trapped within its frame.

He adjusted his sleeves, his tone calm to a frightening degree: "Very well."

The voice was gentle, yet it sent chills down the captain's spine.

Raymont looked at the shivering captain before him, his eyes glinting with amusement and scrutiny, as though pondering whether a rain-drenched puppy could still remain steady.

He was too familiar with Kaelin's current state.

A mad dog that had just tasted blood, sensitive, irritable, eager to proclaim to all creatures that it was the new king.

The sense of inflated power would make Kaelin extremely dangerous in the short term, and simultaneously... very useful.

Kaelin still needed this madness, to purge the civil servant group, to bear the reputation of a tyrant for him, to fight desperately for him and other forces on future battlefronts.

If Kaelin were to feel marginalized and manipulated at this moment...

This dog might very well bite its master; hence caution was paramount.

Chapter 733: Home Stolen (Part 2)

"Give him face," Raymond said to himself, "let him show off for a few more days, let him indulge in this illusory glory.

Once he's finished off his dissidents and exhausted the army... I will gradually replace his guards, cut off his financial resources, and mix the potion into his food.

The bloodline of Auguste is already rotten. The future Empire doesn't need a crippled madman on the Dragon Throne. It needs a true dragon with dragon's blood."

Despite the thousands of calculations swirling in his mind, what showed on Raymond's face was the helplessness and gentle tolerance of a loyal minister.

He walked to the door and casually patted the shoulder of the Personal Guard captain: "Lead the way. As a minister, I must not keep His Highness waiting too long."

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The Second Prince's command room was brightly lit, the candle flames dancing wildly in the breeze, illuminating the huge Empire sandbox like a beast being torn apart.

Kaelin stood with his back to everyone, his shoulders rising and falling with his breath, like a volcano about to erupt.

The air was heavy with anxiety, all the Knights and Scouts stood tense against the walls, yet no one dared to speak.

Until Kaelin slowly raised his hand, his voice hoarse and low: "Say it again."

The Scout's voice trembled, almost unrecognizably: "Reporting to the Executive Officer... Fifth Prince Lampard has fled to the Southeast Province! Yesterday, with the support of the heretic Church Court, he announced the establishment of a new regime: the Holy Eastern Empire!"

The entire room fell abruptly silent.

The Golden Feather Flower Church Court, an eternal enemy regarded by the Ironblood Empire as heretical.

Kaelin suddenly turned around, his voice booming like thunder: "He dared to turn to heretics?! He dared to let heretics plant their flag on Imperial land?!"

The Scout shivered all over and continued: "The Fifth Prince issued a 'Call to Obliterate the Rebels', accusing the Second and Fourth Princes of regicide against the Regent King... The Southeast Province has already opened all passes to the Church Court army."

The sandbox trembled, dust rising.

Kaelin smashed his fist down, gritting his teeth, his chest heaving violently: "That spineless coward! To save his life, he even dares to sell his ancestors' ashes to heretics!"

Raymond slowly rolled up the Scroll, casually raising his eyes.

He glanced at the furious Kaelin, and then at the Scout kneeling on the ground, the corners of his mouth slowly curving into a faint smile.

"His Highness called me late at night, and it turns out it's over such a trivial matter." He walked over to the sandbox, picking up a glass of red wine from the side.

"Lampard thinks that a few bottles of holy water, a few heretic bishops, plus the Calvin Clan's ambiguous attitude, can prop up a state? He's just concentrating the Empire's traitors in one direction, making it easier for us to burn them down."

Raymond gently shook his glass, not even glancing at the new Golden Feather Flower flag planted in the Southeast: "Ignore it, once I integrate the Central Army and digest the remaining forces of Rhine, come next spring, I will personally lead the Knights to flatten that group of heretics' temples."

Kaelin's anger churned in his chest, but Raymond's calm demeanor slightly steadied him.

Yet the next moment, a sudden commotion erupted outside the door.

"Emergency military situation! Urgent report from the Northern Territory!"

The Personal Guard entered, kneeling on one knee with standard military salute, holding a frost-covered Gale Bird dispatch tube over his head.

The purple-copper shell showed fine frost cracks from long-distance flight, and touching it felt like the cold wind blowing from miles away.

This was a top-level emergency military dispatch.

Kaelin raised his hand, signaling for it to be read out loud.

The guard pulled out a thin message slip, the runic ink glinting in the candle flame.

He took a deep breath and, following protocol, read out the military intelligence sentence by sentence:

"Emergency report! Louis Calvin, Count of the Northern Territory, has led an army southward, and contacted with the Empire's Seventh Legion, Fourteenth Legion, Seventeenth Legion in the Gray Stone Fortress defensive zone."

Raymond's nerves, tense from the Southeast rebellion, relaxed instead upon hearing this.

He sneered faintly: "Is Louis mad? Nearly ten thousand regular troops defend the fortress; does he dare to crash into it with his family's meager forces? An egg hitting a rock?"

Someone in the advisory seat couldn't help but lower their head and laugh, clearly thinking this was just an overreaching probing skirmish.

However, the next sentence sliced through everyone's smiles like a blade.

Yet, the guard's voice noticeably trembled, but still he stubbornly adhered to protocol, reading on: "The contact battle lasted only one day; all three legions... were utterly defeated. Gray Stone Fortress, on the third day, declared fallen... it is now lost."

"Clang."

The glass fell at the moment, Raymond's face seemed split in half by a sharp blade, one half maintaining the aristocratic coldness, while the other twisted with anger and shock.

This time he had no elegant disguise, shouting angrily: "Absurd! You couldn't slaughter ten thousand pigs in one day!"

The guard struggled to maintain his composure, continuing to read out the final piece of intelligence: "End of the emergency report: the entire Northern Army has now regrouped, advancing south and officially entered the Greyrock Province... Intelligence ends here."

The flickering shadows from the candles shivered on the walls of the Imperial Hall, while the hall itself was so silent it seemed to lack air.

Straightaway, Raymond's expression completely changed, for he finally understood Louis's true aim.

Not aiding the King, nor vying for supremacy, nor annexing the Northern Territory, but Greyrock Province.

It held three hundred years of his family's accumulations, a treasury capable of equipping ten legions, innumerable still-public contracts of wealth, and the dragon blood experiment that could reshape the Empire's military map.

If those things fell into Louis's hands...

Raymond's chest heaved violently, yet he no longer seemed hysterical as before.

He slowly raised his hand, pulling away the thin piece of message slip, forcing himself to suppress his shout and draw his focus back to rationality.

He stared at the date on the bottom of the slip: seventeen days.

Chapter 734: Home Was Stolen (3)

The Gray Stone Fortress is extremely far from the Imperial Capital, and it takes the Gale Bird a full seventeen days to reach the Imperial Capital.

That is to say, at the moment this letter reaches the Imperial Capital, the army under Louis has been marching in the depths of the Gray Stone Province for at least seventeen days.

Remont's brow slowly furrowed, as if being pierced inch by inch by an ice spike. His lips trembled gently, and the sound that spilled from his mouth was so low it was nearly inaudible:

"Seventeen days... He's been gone for seventeen days..."

He subconsciously began tactical deductions, which was both a long-standing instinct from his military service and his way of trying to anchor his fear.

Self-comfort emerged first in his mind, his main force was in the Imperial Capital, but even so, the territory of the Gray Stone Province is vast, with layered defenses, and the Knights he had left behind relying on the checkpoints might not necessarily lose.

Moreover, though the fortress's fall was serious, it did not indicate the entire province would be swallowed whole.

No.

Remont slowly closed his eyes, veins bulging on his forehead: "No. Why does he dare to strike at this time?"

Remont's eyes gradually widened, as if finally seeing the true outline of the nightmare.

Twenty days ago, to support the Fourth Prince's coup, he secretly withdrew all main force regiments from the Gray Stone Province.

This operation was nearly paranoid in secrecy; the Overseer's Court didn't know, the Imperial Capital was unaware, even his confidants only grasped fragments.

Only a select few Death Warriors, whom he personally chose, and his eldest son knew the full picture.

And Louis, from the distant Northern Territory, a lord nominally still self-preserving in the Northern Territory...

Unexpectedly launched a full attack precisely on the day the Gray Stone was most void.

Remont's Adam's apple bobbed, cold sweat trickling down his neck, soaking through his inner clothes.

Could there be a mole? No, impossible?

Those who knew about the plan were all around him, except for his heir... So why did he act at this time?

That thought made his scalp tingle, as if something icy gripped his throat.

Louis didn't seem to be gambling, more like he was playing his card while watching Remont's hand.

Then, like a wolf finally baring its fangs, he ruthlessly bit into Remont's softest, most fatal spot.

Perhaps... it's not just Louis baring fangs against him.

Southeast Province, Fifth Prince Lampard's rebel army, the Calvin Clan, that newly anointed regime supported by the Church Court.

If the Fifth Prince and Louis were connected, linking the forces of the North with the Southeast, these two lands could merge into a giant force rivaling the Second Prince's territory.

They might simultaneously, from different directions, devour his foundation and connect his lands into paths beneficial to them.

Once the Gray Stone Province falls to Louis, the Southeast rebels will easily push northward.

Between them, only a valley divides, and in the future, they could exchange grain routes, share forces, even combine Remont's family's hundreds of years of resources.

Meanwhile, Remont himself would be thoroughly drained, turning from hunter into prey divided by two wolves.

And at this moment, another significant figure in the Imperial Hall, Kaelin, stood in the shadows, his lips tweaked lightly.

He looked at Remont, gazing at the man who once controlled him like a puppet master, suppressed him, used him, pulled him forward.

Now seized tightly by another unseen hand around the throat.

In this moment, Kaelin felt a long-lost sense of balance.

He knew he would suffer from this, and he understood the collapse of Gray Stone meant new chaos in the Empire's war situation.

But it didn't stop this nearly imperceptible yet truly intense thought from arising deep within:

Maybe... this was a chance to shake off Remont.

He even felt a strange gratitude towards the Wolf King of the Northern Territory.

Chapter 735: Heading South!

The dark iron domain before dawn was as heavy as iron.

Only the footsteps of patrol knights remained on the city walls, as the cold penetrated through the gaps in their armor into their bones.

Count Doron, clad in a thick cloak, stood behind the wall, overlooking the plains swallowed by the night.

He did not expect anything to happen tonight; even though the Empire had been turbulent recently, he treated the nightly patrols more like a routine, even a pleasure.

Especially when the subjects instinctively lowered their heads upon seeing him; those fearful eyes gave him a certain sense of satisfaction.

Because of the recent imperial dispute over the throne, Lord Raymond ordered vigilance across the entire territory, but in Doron's eyes, the faraway Gray Rock Province was practically unaffected.

He commanded five thousand knights, and if any dared to come, he believed they would die on this dark land.

However, the real danger never arrived as he had imagined.

At first, only the wind changed.

Doron frowned, just about to call for someone to investigate...

Suddenly, a blinding white flash fell on the southeastern corner of the wall, a corner so ignored that even the knights were lazy to patrol.

The next moment, explosions tore through the silence.

"Boom——! Boom——!"

"What?" Doron's heart skipped a beat.

The moment the firelight descended, Doron thought it was merely a probe, but the explosion point condensed too fiercely, like a nail precisely driven into a crevice, lodged in the most fragile joint with one strike.

The wall that had guarded the dark iron domain for hundreds of years, resisted beast tides, weathered three rebellions, and never bowed to fate during stormy times—the dark iron stone giant shield—was trembling under mysterious forces.

The vibrations burst from the depths of the bricks, pushing layer by layer outward, as if a giant was using massive fists to hammer the city wall.

The roar stirred up smoke and dust, the dark iron stone cracked into three gaps in the night.

"Enemy attack! Enemy attack!" The knights frantically grabbed weapons and rushed toward the breaches, but they froze halfway.

Because in the darkness, something terrifying was surging forth.

These shadows were moving, forming rows and columns, neatly and uniformly, like a black tide, then orderly splitting into three, flooding into the city.

Doron tightened his throat, staring at that breach from a distance, trying to identify what it was.

A group of heavy cavalry!

"How dare cavalry attack the Black Iron City? Who are they..." Doron exclaimed.

Iron armor had no reflection in the night, no torchlight to illuminate, making it impossible to discern who they were.

"What... what troops? From where? How dare they cause trouble in Gray Rock Province?" Doron gripped his sword hilt, sweat faintly emerging from his palm.

He finally saw the armor of the front row cavalry; all black, unadorned, with only a subtle red mark carved on the chest.

"Go up and block them!" Doron shouted, drawing his sword as he rushed down the tower himself.

He leaped down, his fighting energy instantly unleashed, gray radiance spreading along the blade.

With a powerful swing, he forced back two enemy riders half a step.

The knight across raised his head, meeting his gaze, with eyes that were cold and indifferent.

And in the cracks of the broken armor, there was an ice-blue light flowing.

The light seeped out from the split armor, ghostly and pure, piercing straight into his eyes.

In Doron's mind, it was as if struck by a heavy hammer, a deafening roar, thoughts suddenly blank.

Blue fighting energy!

Northern winter fighting energy!

In that moment, he even forgot to breathe.

This shouldn't be here! It couldn't possibly be here!

When the sword edge clashed again, the ice-blue surged up along the metal, like a chill tide wrapping around his arm.

His fingers stiffened from the cold, unable to hold the sword steadily.

"No... impossible..." Doron's throat tightened, voice akin to being choked, "Northern Knights? Three thousand kilometers away... how did they come here?"

Moreover, there was no beacon alarm, no scout report. Not a hint of warning signaling the approach of this army.

As if the entire army had emerged from the depths of darkness.

A fear climbing from his spine made him doubt whether he was facing some sort of ghost clad in armor.

This thought lasted only a few moments.

Because as the mysterious iron cavalry crashed into his own ranks, he saw his personal guards split like firewood cleaved by a heavy axe.

Formation torn apart cleanly and quickly, without any hesitation.

Fighting energy rendered meaningless in their face, their impact could seemingly press both man and armor into the mud.

"Retreat! Retreat into the fortress!" Doron screamed, but his voice was swallowed by the clash of iron armor.

He could clearly sense, the frontline wasn't merely beaten back, but completely overturned.

Enemy cavalry continued to advance in the darkness, without shouting, without gasping, without any of the chaotic emotions typical in normal warfare.

Like a ghostly legion bearing the breath of deep winter stepping through the night.

Thirty minutes passed.

In just thirty minutes, the more than one thousand knights he had always prided himself on, stationed within the city, seemed utterly routed.

Until now, Doron couldn't help but repeatedly question, how did they dare?

How did they manage to silently reach the city?

All of it seemed deliberately obscured by some force, the more he pondered, the more fear crept in.

Due to the continuous defeat of his knights, Doron had no choice but to ride back into the castle with the remaining guards, hearing footsteps relentlessly closing in from behind.

He cast one last glance at the city behind.

Ghosts from the extreme northern winter were silently consuming the entire city.

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From within the city came intermittent cries of battle, indistinguishable between ghostly wails or human screams.

Old Hans shrank in his little bakery, his whole body stiff as if frozen.

Chapter 736: Southward! (Part 2)

He was getting on in years, his legs were bad; he couldn't dodge fast or run.

The only thing he could do was stuff his little daughter into the jar in the cellar, put the lid on tight, then sit on top of it himself.

"Don't make a sound, be good... don't make a sound."

His daughter was quietly sobbing inside; he could only press the lid down with trembling hands, afraid the noise outside would scare her out of her wits.

The things Lord Raymond had been drumming into them all these years buzzed in his head...

The Northern People were beasts, child-eating monsters who would break down doors at night, drag babies from their cradles, and drink blood like wine.

He had never believed it, but tonight he did.

After the last few screams outside faded, the street sank into an almost deathly silence.

Old Hans's heart sank to the bottom.

"It's over... the demons have entered the city. May the Dragon Ancestor bless us, when they kill me... my darling girl mustn't make a sound."

He gripped the rolling pin tightly in his hand, trying to draw some confidence from this "weapon".

He knew the thing couldn't possibly hurt a fully armed Knight, but when people are in despair, they always clutch at some useless thing.

"Clang."

The door of the bakery was pushed open.

Old Hans froze, held his breath, closed his eyes, and waited for the blade to fall.

But the rough shouts and clatter of iron boots he had imagined did not appear.

There was only a young, clear voice: "Anyone here? Boss?"

Old Hans was stunned and opened his eyes.

Standing at the door was a female Knight, with dried blood on her armor, yet nothing like the beastly madness he had imagined.

She stood straight, her gaze clear, her breathing steady.

The female Knight swept her eyes around the shop and finally settled on him: "We need to requisition your oven."

Old Hans almost dropped to his knees on the spot to beg for mercy: "L-Lady, I... I don't have anything valuable here..."

"We're Knights of the Red Tide." The female Knight walked straight to the table and set down a large bag she was holding.

A heavy lump.

Old Hans shrank back in fright, thinking it was some kind of gruesome trophy meant to intimidate him.

But the mouth of the bag loosened, revealing fine, gleaming flour.

Refined flour? He was lucky if he got to touch this stuff once in several years.

"This is the raw material and the deposit." The female Knight took out five Silver Coins and casually placed them on the table, as if discussing business. "Before dawn, we need two hundred loaves. Once they're done, you'll get the other half of the pay."

Old Hans was completely dumbfounded. He cupped those few Silver Coins, his hands shaking violently; this deposit alone was worth half a year of his income.

The Knights in the city had always just taken what they wanted and walked off; if they were in a good mood and didn't beat you, that was already a favor.

These Northern demons not only didn't rob him, they were paying him?

His lips trembled several times before he finally squeezed out a sentence: "You... you really are... from the Northern Territory?"

The female Knight nodded: "The Red Tide Legion from the Northern Territory. It's chaotic outside; don't go out tonight. We'll stabilize the district."

She said nothing more, turned, and left; her cloak brushed lightly against the doorframe in the night wind.

Old Hans stared at that bag of white flour for a long time; his throat worked.

"Are these... really the man-eating demons from the stories?"

A light knocking came from the cellar: "Papa..."

Old Hans took a deep breath, opened the lid, and lifted her out: "It's alright now, sweetheart."

He looked at the flour and Silver Coins on the table, and somewhere cold inside him quietly cracked open a seam.

"Maybe... what came aren't demons."

.....

By the time the council hall of the Black Iron Domain was lit by firelight, it no longer belonged to Count Doron.

The banners on the walls had been taken down and replaced with the Red Tide banner.

The air still carried the metallic tang of battle, but it was quickly overlaid by a subdued sense of order.

Louis sat in the main seat, armor still on, head lowered as he wiped bloodstains from his sword.

His movements were neither hurried nor slow, as if this were just an ordinary conference room in the Red Tide Main City, not an enemy fortress that had just been taken.

Gray stepped into the hall, scorch marks from burning the inner keep still on his armor.

He walked up to Louis, dropped to one knee, and said in a low voice, "Lord, I have failed in my duty. We were a step too slow in storming the inner keep... that old fox released a Gale Bird. I'm afraid word of the raid has already gotten out."

Louis didn't look up; he only let out a light "Mm."

Cold sweat beaded on Gray's forehead: "I'm willing to accept punishment."

Before he could continue, a figure with hands bound behind his back and blood at the corner of his mouth was dragged in by Knights—Count Doron.

His armor had been stripped off; he staggered as he walked, yet still forced his head up, like an old wolf whose fangs had been broken but still tried to snarl.

"Louis!" he rasped. "Do you know what you're doing? This is invasion! The Gray Rock Province won't let you go! Duke Remont's army is right..."

Louis's movement as he wiped the blade paused for a moment.

"Take it easy, Gray," Louis said without even raising his head, as calm as if discussing the weather. "What are you so tense about? Gray Rock Province is so big; we were never going to sneak around forever."

He sheathed his Longsword and seemed finally in the mood to lift his eyes and glance at Gray: "The early silent encroachment has already taken a quarter. That's enough."

Gray froze, realizing Louis was deliberately grooming him.

His Fighting Energy talent was slightly lower than those two monsters, Sacco and Weir.

But Louis's Intelligence System had once given him a rare evaluation: "Possesses the talent of a strong field commander."

So before the campaign, Louis had called Gray over and personally fastened the adjutant's armband to his shoulder, intending to use this chance to cultivate a successor to Lambert.

And from that moment on, Gray had been strung taut like a bowstring, terrified of betraying that trust.

He had maintained a perfectly straight posture at all times, constantly noting every word, every order, every habit of Louis's.

His Fighting Energy talent was not dazzling, but the fact that Louis was willing to entrust him with the adjutant's position meant he could walk a completely different path.

Gray's palms were slick with sweat, but his tone was firm: "I understand."

Listening to Louis's words, Count Doron's expression shifted from fury to hesitation: "You... what encroachment are you talking about...?"

Louis raised a hand and pointed at him carelessly: "As for him, he's too noisy. Drag him out and cut him down."

Doron stared as if struck by lightning: "No! I'm Nobility! By the regulations, I can pay a ransom! Mmph!"

The Knights gagged him and dragged him out; his boots scraped along the floor, leaving a trail of chaotic footprints.

Louis never spared him a glance.

Noble status? Ransom? To the Red Tide that was about to launch a blitzkrieg, they were meaningless.

Intimidation was worth more than prisoners.

Louis did not—walked over to the larger map of Gray Rock Province on the wall.

The candlelight flickered on the wall, stretching his shadow long.

That vast Gray Rock territory looked like a cold iron plate in the firelight, but now, in Louis's eyes, it was being cut into gridlike hunting grounds by his red lines.

Louis raised his hand; his fingertip lightly touched the edge of the map.

According to the original plan, he was supposed to first stabilize the Northern Territory—stockpile grain, expand the army, build ports, lay roads—let Red Tide slowly grow into the northern behemoth of the Empire.

But the Intelligence System had rewritten everything.

That dawn, a few messages flashing across the light screen had pushed his tempo straight into war: Duke Remont had been drawn into the vortex of succession, pulling out seventy percent of his main forces and all Dragon Blood Death Warriors to rush to the Imperial Capital.

The Gray Rock Province had become an empty shell; he had to consider whether this might be the only chance in his life to claim it.

Moreover, if Remont secured his position in the Imperial Capital and then turned back, the Northern Territory would very likely be his first target.

Waiting meant only one road—to death; since that was so, if the enemy was sick, he would take his life.

Louis's fingertip slid along the map and came to rest where three thin red lines converged.

That was the route of the Red Tide Army's three-pronged "ghost advance."

Relying on the Intelligence System's planning, they had avoided patrol riders and outposts, infiltrating through side roads, woodland paths, and river networks, silently swallowing a quarter of the territory.

He let out a gentle breath.

"We've taken stealth this far... it's enough."

Only now did Gray understand that the Lord hadn't cared about whether they were discovered; he had merely been calculating the optimal turning point.

Louis turned back, his gaze cool and resolute.

"Since the news has leaked," he pressed his hand down on a city at the center of the map, "we won't sneak around anymore."

Louis took off his gloves and slowly closed his hand around the sword hilt.

The candlelight reflected in his eyes, like killing intent drawn out into fine threads: "From this moment on, we enter assault mode."

Chapter 737: Porridge Shelter and Judgment

The first few days after Black Iron City fell were even quieter than the night of the battle.

It rained three times, with low-lying dark clouds.

Occasionally, the echo of iron boots could be heard from deep within the streets, but it quickly vanished at the corner of the alley.

Hungry residents huddled inside their crumbling houses, window latches deadbolted, door cracks stuffed with cloth.

When a child cried, the mother would cover their mouth, and the elderly recited prayers to the Dragon Ancestor, yet dared not make a sound.

They waited for the "man-eating demons of the Northern Territory" to start looting, kidnapping, burning, waiting for the streets to be littered with corpses and their doors to be kicked open.

But nothing happened.

Two more days passed. When hunger became unbearable, someone cautiously pushed open the door crack a sliver.

They thought they would see streets filled with blood and chaotic looting scenes.

Yet what greeted them was the smell of wet earth and rain.

The streets were unusually clean.

The bloodstains from the fierce battle days ago had been washed away by the rain, not a corpse in sight, only the leveled soil marked what had happened here.

In the distance, a few soldiers in black raincoats patrolled the street corners.

They wore conspicuous red sun-patterned armbands, walked in unison, their gazes straight.

Passing shops, they even sidestepped to avoid knocking over the dilapidated shelves at the doors, afraid their toes might hit something.

"Are those... Northern People?" someone whispered behind their door.

No one answered, but more door cracks quietly opened a bit.

Until the first wisp of cooking smoke rose from the square.

In the Central Square of Black Iron City, a dozen large military iron pots lined up, their fires kept low but steady.

Steam rose from the pot edges, carrying the fragrance of salted meat and dried vegetables simmering, drifting into every alley.

This year, to prepare for war, Raymond had levied taxes early.

Many homes in Gray Rock Province had long exhausted what was edible, even rats were hard to catch.

Now this thick porridge mixed with salted meat bits, dried vegetables, and finely milled flour was more precious than gold to many.

Some children couldn't help but lean against the windowsill, drooling.

At this moment, a sound of a gong rang out from the square, piercing the city's dead silence.

"Dong—dong—dong—!"

A Red Tide Soldier stood before the pots, holding a gong, shouting loudly: "By order of Count Louis of the Northern Territory! Open the granaries for food distribution! Residents of this city, line up to receive—children one ladle, adults two!"

The voice was loud, every word clear, audible even at the furthest alley entrances.

The silence inside the houses began to loosen.

"Is this... a trap?"

"If they really wanted to kill us, why go to such lengths to cook porridge?"

Someone swallowed hard, mustered the courage, and cautiously moved with their family towards the square.

At first, only a few dozen ventured, but once they saw the line of actual iron pots, their feet wouldn't budge any further.

Hunger emboldened them, dispelling their last shred of doubt.

People picked up wooden bowls, their hands shaking like leaves in the wind, yet they still reached out.

The soldier scooped a ladle of thick porridge, the hot aroma wafting onto their faces brought several children to tears on the spot.

With the first bite, many were stunned.

It had been too long since they had tasted something so flavorful—not just watery gruel, but real food that could warm the stomach.

Some didn't care about the heat, gulping it down with the edge of the spoon, while others, midway through eating, suddenly covered their faces, shoulders shaking—unsure if they were crying or laughing.

A boy, thin as a skeleton, lay in his mother's arms, with a piece of unchewable dried vegetable in his mouth, muttering, "Is this... for us?"

His mother didn't answer, just held him tighter.

At this moment, the aroma of the porridge seemed to light up the whole Black Iron City.

Moreover, there was an after-meal event; a temporary wooden platform was erected beside the porridge stalls.

Several people, bound with ropes, knelt on the stage, mouths stuffed with rags, eyes filled with fear.

Someone recognized them as tax officials of Count Doron, Peacekeeping Knights of the city, and a few notorious bullies of the streets.

The crowd in the square fell silent.

They didn't know what would happen next.

A Red Tide Knight stepped onto the platform, unrolled a scroll, and scanned the crowd below.

"First up." He pointed at the tax official, "Tax official Jimmy raised taxes by twenty percent without authorization last month, and the surplus went to your private storeroom. When Blacksmith Old John's family in the west of the city couldn't pay, his son was driven to hang himself by you. Is this true?"

The tax official shook his head vigorously, letting out muffled sobs from his throat.

The Red Tide Knight was not in a hurry, "Where is the person?"

In the back of the crowd, someone received a gentle push.

Old John, with white hair, trembled as he moved forward. He should have died under the noose, but it was the Red Tide who removed the beam in time.

He looked up, and upon seeing the face on the platform, his entire body shuddered, "It's him."

"That day, he came to ransack our home with soldiers and drove my son to his death!" Old John's eyes were bloodshot, "I said I couldn't pay, and he said every missing copper coin was a missing life..."

Murmurs of suppressed whispers rose in the square—the public evidently knew the story was true.

The Red Tide Knight then pointed to the Peacekeeping Knight, "Peacekeeping Knight O'Neil forcibly took the miller's daughter. Afterward, he broke the miller's leg. The witness is here below."

The crowd automatically parted to make way.

A middle-aged man on crutches was helped up, his leg not properly set, every step causing him to grimace in pain.

Chapter 738: Porridge Shelter and Judgment (Part 2)

He did not dare to look at the person on the stage, only faced the wooden platform, and knelt down with difficulty.

"I beg you..." His voice trembled, "I beg you to give her justice."

Low sobs were heard among the women in the crowd.

Thus, one by one, the criminals were dragged up to be convicted, one by one the victims stepped forward to identify them...

The voice of the Red Tide Knight spread through the entire square: "Here in the Northern Territory, this is called the crime of plunder and murder."

He paused: "According to the law of the Northern Territory—death penalty."

The executioner stepped forward and drew his blade.

"Execute."

The blade flashed, blood splattered on the wooden boards in front of the platform, slowly washed down by the rain.

After the executioner stepped back, a knight with the Red Tide Emblem, the speech officer, stepped forward, standing at the edge of the platform where the blood hadn't yet dried.

"Listen up, this is the law of the Northern Territory, and it is also the order of the Red Tide. We do not rob, do not burn, do not kill for money. Anyone who dares to treat you like livestock, we will not spare."

He raised his hand, pointing at the corpse kneeling in the pool of blood: "These people take taxes as their private vault, take power as a stick to play with the people. Such behavior might survive in Gray Rock, but not in the Red Tide, not for another day."

The crowd was subdued by his voice, silent except for the sound of rain hitting the stones.

The speech officer continued: "The Lord of the North, Louis, once said... Let the people eat their fill is the meaning of the Lord and the Knight's existence. Whoever dares to block the people's livelihood is blocking the advance of the Red Tide's blade."

A few Red Tide Knights stood solidly below, their posture solemn, as if endorsing that statement.

The speech officer finally stopped speaking: "From today, you no longer need to kneel before Raymond's whip. Just remember one thing, under Lord Louis's rule, the law-abiding live, the harmful die."

After he finished speaking, he stepped aside.

At that moment, the square was so silent that even the sound of raindrops hitting the armor could be heard.

No one cheered, and no one cried, just stared blankly at those once high and mighty figures lying on the ground.

Someone subconsciously clutched their chest, as if a stone pressing down for years had suddenly been moved away.

Someone gently lifted their head, as if seeing light for the first time from the shadows.

Some families lost loved ones, as they looked at those bodies, there was no joy on their faces, only heavy breathing and a slow emerging sense of relief.

No one knew who first said softly, "Deserved."

Though the voice was not loud, it was like a needle piercing the pustule pressing for years on the city gates.

Immediately afterward, someone responded, eyes reddening: "Not unjust."

Then came the third, fourth... voices spilled from the crowd, initially fragmented, then growing urgent, like raindrops hitting the river surface, more frequent and dense.

"Not unjust!"

"Deserved!"

"Good!!"

The long-grieving people of Gray Rock finally found a place to let it out.

"Good!!"

More cries of approval exploded from the depths of the crowd, like waves pushing forward in layers.

They raised empty bowls, they tapped their wooden staffs, some even knelt excitedly to the ground.

The shadows of invaders in their eyes shattered at this moment, replaced by a long-lost exhilaration and nearly feverish gratitude upon seeing old scores settled.

Someone looked at the figure behind the judgment platform, whispering a name: "Lord Louis..."

The voice was soft, yet carried a subtle trembling that shifted from fear to reverence.

.....

Outside the castle's terrace, the wind still carried the chill of night, but below, the square was boiling.

The torches flickered among the dense crowd, casting light on numerous excited, feverish, and even intoxicated faces.

Louis stood high above, overlooking it all.

The steam from the hot tea in his hand rose, tracing a faint white mist on the side of his face.

Grey stood behind him, his gaze on the porridge being carried out in cauldrons below, the opened granaries, and the civilians kneeling in the mud, bowing to the Red Tide Army.

He couldn't help but speak softly: "...They look at you with eyes more devout than those at a god. But if we continue distributing food like this, military rations will deplete very quickly."

Louis heard this and lightly sipped his tea, his motion leisurely, as though the potential food shortage did not bother him.

"Grey, you miscalculated." He spoke indifferently, "These grains are not mine."

He raised his hand, pointing to the distant granary sealed by Red Tide Soldiers, the door still showing the emblem of the Doron family.

"These belong to Count Doron, to Raymond."

He turned, his gaze serene as if he were reading a judgment already confirmed.

"I use Raymond's grain to buy Raymond's people."

Grey was stunned.

Louis continued: "Taken from the enemy, used against the enemy. This is the cleanest combat technique."

The cheers below surged like tides, wave upon wave.

Grey hesitated for a moment, still uneasy: "But this way...might it not foster dependency among the people here? Or...pull them out of Raymond's rule too quickly?"

Louis shook his head lightly: "This is not charity nor mercy."

His gaze shifted below, to those oppressed till numb and hungry faces: "Every bowl of porridge, every bag of grain we give them, they must know clearly who they are receiving it from."

And their consumption of this bite begins the link between us.

Relying solely on slaughter, this place will only breed resentment. They'll hide in dark alleys to shoot arrows at us, set fires at night, annoying like rats."

"But if we let them benefit..." he raised his eyes.

"They'll voluntarily work for me, tell me the enemy's position, hope Raymond never returns, or the food they receive will be deemed treason."

Grey was silent.

Louis's voice was low, yet carried a cold logic that allowed no refutation: "They eat my porridge, see me kill nobility, they become my accomplices. From this moment, their fate binds with mine."

The wind swept across the terrace, lifting the corner of Louis's cloak.

Grey exhaled deeply: "Sir, this tactic resembles warfare more than a direct siege."

Louis smiled faintly: "War is, after all, a battle of hearts."

He suddenly looked towards the direction of the Gray Rock Province, deep in his eyes flashed a trace of anger, a disgust for Raymond's long-endured indulgence of noble tyranny.

"The nobility here, they've long been rotten." He spoke softly, "Their corpses are more suited as the foundation stone for this revolution than their names."

Grey asked softly: "But why not directly use Count Doron to establish authority?"

A faint glow flashed in Louis's eyes from the system panel. "Doron's rank is too high, too distant from them, the people hold no specific hatred for him. Such unsurprising executions aren't enough to establish a new order."

Below, the emotions continued to ferment, though no longer like panic after being shocked, but more like a tide ignited, slowly spreading along the street.

A crowd gathered at the city gates, not in panic or confusion but actively gathering at the registry asking if they could join the transport team or help with road repairs.

Artisans brought tools, each seeking places to contribute.

Some ragged drifters queued at the back, cautiously hoping to obtain a logistical errand.

The discipline and distribution system of the Red Tide Army allowed them to see for the first time an order truly incorporate them.

They approached not just because they were full, but because they felt they finally had a place within a new framework.

Grey couldn't help but mutter: "They... have completely stood on our side."

Louis's gaze deepened, and he spoke slowly: "This is only the beginning."

The Red Tide army followed suit through nearly every town they passed.

Granaries were seized, tax records taken, deeply resentful villagers actively identified oppressors by name.

Louis's intelligence system facilitated all this easily.

He could always pinpoint ahead which noble hoarded food, which officer embezzled military pay, which bully forced someone to death.

No miscarriages of justice, no accidental injuries.

Each sanction was like a precise judgment, turning hearts thoroughly toward the Red Tide.

Reg approached on horseback: "Sir, the impact of this tactic is even greater than we anticipated. The last two villages contacted us even before warfare began."

Louis was silent for a moment, looking toward the direction with overcast clouds. freewebnovel.com

Grey Rock Castle rested deep within that shadow, like a giant beast lurking in its lair.

"Raymond thought rule depended on fear, but he forgot that near-starving people wouldn't fear fear. To them, a bowl of hot porridge is worth allegiance over any god."

Louis raised his hand, gently waved: "Order the whole army, advance at full speed."

The wind pulled at the flag of the Red Tide Legion, letting the emblem of the Northern Territory's sun unfold under the sky of the Gray Rock Province.

"Before Raymond realizes, let this territory become our backyard."

Chapter 739: Duke Calvin's Stroke of Genius

The Governor's Mansion in the capital of the Southeast Province was temporarily transformed into the command center of the New Empire.

The hall was suffused with heavy religious incense, and the Holy Emblem of the Golden Feather Flower Church Court nearly covered the entire wall, glaringly prominent against the various gilded tableware stacked on the table.

The hall door was abruptly pushed open.

Fifth Prince Lampard, now self-proclaimed as the founder Emperor of the Holy Eastern Empire.

—He entered the hall with rapid steps, not so much a hasty leap but an uncontrollable joy leaking from his footsteps.

"Duke! Duke Calvin!" His voice echoed under the gilded dome, slightly raised, "A miracle...this is simply a revelation from the Father God!"

Duke Calvin's tea cup, just raised, quivered slightly, and in the next moment, Lampard gripped his arm.

An impulsive gesture, carried with the eagerness to share the excitement with someone.

The tea spilled on the sleeve made the old Duke slightly dazed, yet he maintained the noble smile cultivated over the years.

Lampard's voice was somewhat impatient: "You are truly the pillar of the Empire... Without you, today's situation would be impossible to discuss! Duke, this is a great trend, it's destiny standing by our side!"

The old Duke's smile trembled, for he really had no idea what the Fifth Prince was talking about.

Lately, he's been all agitated and troubled, with chaos being far too overwhelming.

The Southeast Province originally revered the Dragon Ancestor, but now the Golden Feather Flower Church Court forcibly promotes its doctrines, the provincial nobility are sidelined, and his family's enterprises are being eroded bit by bit.

But what could he do?

Those old fellows in the Imperial Capital had been hanged by the Second Prince, while those who sided with the Fourth Prince are likely buried in anonymous graves.

Now, he can only hope that his third son climbs up the ranks in the Church Court quickly enough to someday become the Pope, thus leaving a path for the Calvin Clan.

Thinking of this, he barely managed to stabilize his smile: "Your Majesty, calm down... May I ask, what exactly happened?"

Lampard nearly laughed himself into madness, shoving the battle report into his arms: "Louis Calvin led the Northern Territory army south, launching a raid on Gray Rock Province!"

Duke Calvin's fingers trembled, and the tea cup nearly fell to the ground.

Continuing with excitement, Lampard paced in the hall: "Raymond's lair has been pierced through! Hahaha! That old wolf is still stuck in the Imperial Capital posturing, while his back is burning!"

The nearby bishop twisted his Holy Emblem, his tone both heavy and laden with deep meaning: "Without the Duke's consent, would he dare to attack the Empire's Grand Marshal's territory?"

This is not only a declaration of war against Raymond, but also the Calvin Clan's strongest pledge to the Eastern Empire."

The Duke sat steadily, like a well-trained statue, yet his back was already soaked in cold sweat.

Everyone thought this was his command.

But he knew that the letter sent to Louis probably hadn't even had its seal broken.

That rebellious son headed south not to save him nor to swear allegiance to the Eastern Empire.

He smelled blood, sensed opportunity, and took a bite.

Whether it's Raymond's territory or the foundation of the Calvin Clan, in Louis's eyes, it's all just prey.

Since the last failed attempt to integrate the Red Tide into the clan's system through trade routes, Louis had seemingly been erased from the Calvin lineage.

The caravans stopped passing through the Calvin Commerce Association, and the trade route originally belonging to the Calvin Family was severed by him, now completely tilted towards the Northern Territory.

He no longer responds to family orders nor seeks protection, as if he's thrown the name "Calvin" into the trash heap forever.

Nowadays he... seems more like an heir of the Edmund Family.

He behaves like a beast nurtured on the Northern Territory's icefield, with eyes fixed on wider lands.

But if at this moment he denies, telling Lampard "I can't control my son either"

The Calvin Clan's status in the Eastern Empire would collapse instantly.

He would be seen as incompetent, as a liar, as utterly worthless to the New Empire.

Duke Calvin slowly stood up, supported by a scepter, approaching the Southeast battle map, pointing steadily at Gray Rock Province.

His voice was calm, as if he had no doubt from the start: "Indeed, Your Majesty, this is my directive. Raymond's main force is absent, if we do not strike now, then when?"

Lampard's eyes flashed with fervor: "I knew it! The Duke is indeed farsighted!"

Since the misunderstanding has arisen and brought immediate benefits, the old fox knew he must continue wearing this outer garment.

"Your Majesty is too kind." Duke Calvin's voice was steady and unhurried, devoid of any emotional fluctuation, "That child Louis may be stubborn, but he carries the Calvin family blood. In the grand scheme, he knows where his teeth should land."

His tone showed no sign of guilt: "This is simply... a part of my arrangement."

As his words fell, Duke Calvin was already quickly calculating the next step in his mind.

"Since my son is bleeding on the front line, the rear supplies cannot falter. Your Majesty, the batch of steel and Magic Crystals seized by the Church Court at Vero Port, please unseal it immediately. I must transport it to the Northern Territory to support the war."

Lampard and the bishop exchanged glances.

Though they disliked being led by the Calvin Clan, under the premise of "the Northern Territory Wolf King acting under the Duke's command," they had no choice but to agree.

The moment they nodded, the Duke clearly realized he had won a round.

Yet this didn't make him relaxed.

Later, he returned to his study, closing the heavy door.

In the flickering candlelight, he stared at the half-written letter on the table meant to barter interests to disrupt the Northern Territory, yet he hadn't expected Louis to achieve such a feat himself.

Chapter 740: Duke Calvin's Stroke of Genius (Part 2)

He was silent for a moment, then held the letter to the candlelight.

The parchment slowly curled up, and the burnt smell made the room even more suffocating.

After the flames went out, he spread out a new piece of paper again.

The first line written with the pen tip: "Well done, keep fighting, but don't forget your roots are in the Southeast."

This was a request for peace, a probe, and a belated gesture of goodwill.

.....

Outside the window, the rain whipped like a lash, beating against the tower's glass with a crackling sound.

In the side tower of Grey Rock Castle, Kael Remont clad in black half-armor, was processing the accounts of supplies sent to the Imperial Capital by the flickering candlelight.

He was always calm and steady, the main commander left behind in the territory by the Remont Clan, placed with high hopes by his father.

He had just written a line: "The third batch of grain carts departs tomorrow..."

"Boom."

The dull and abrupt sound of impact shattered the tranquility of the tower.

Kael suddenly raised his head.

A Gale Bird was tilted outside the window sill, its feathers plastered to its skin by the rain, wings trembling, as if struck down by some immense force from the sky.

A red tube symbolizing the highest emergency information was tied to its leg, and a broken crossbow bolt, made of fine steel and barbed, certainly not a weapon ordinary people could afford, was lodged in its chest.

Kael's heart tightened suddenly, and he pushed open the window.

The cold wind blew the rain into the room, nearly extinguishing the candle flame.

He reached out to catch the bird, already barely alive, and untied the message tube.

The parchment was unfolded with difficulty, covered in rain and bloodstains, the writing blurred into indistinguishable dark smudges.

But it could still be seen that it was written in haste and fear with trembling fingers...

"Attack! Unknown army! Weapons... can collapse city walls... loud noises..."

The signature was slanted as if it fell midway: Count Doron.

Kael froze for a moment, his throat tightening as if strangled by a rope.

Doron's domain was no more than half a day's ride from Grey Rock Castle, one of his father's most loyal and stern vassals.

The towns under his rule had a population of tens of thousands, considered impregnable, and were known for their brutality, as none dared provoke the Remont Duke's minions.

But now such a desperate call for help was sent.

"Impossible..." Kael murmured, "Who can take down Doron's domain overnight? Who dares? Who has such... a weapon that can collapse city walls?"

The candle flame cast a deep shadow on his face.

"Someone!" Kael's voice suddenly rose, laden with uncontrollable panic.

The door swung open, and the messenger officer rushed in: "Young Master?"

"Set the Gale Birds free!" Kael spoke rapidly, "Send messages to Black Iron Town, Fertile Plain, and the three Baron's Domains on the Northern Line! Immediately! Ask about their status, enemy banners seen, numbers, all types of weapons!"

"Yes!"

The messenger officer and attendants ran down the tower, cages opened one by one, and the Gale Birds flapped into the storm.

...

The next five hours were the longest darkness Kael had ever experienced.

Inside the tower, only the sound of the storm, the flickering of candle flames, and his own heavy breathing remained. Twelve Gale Birds flew out of sight, disappearing into the distant storm.

Kael stood by the window, eyes fixed on the black rift in the sky, as if concentrating hard enough would bring one bird back.

Yet.

Five hours passed, none returned.

It was as if those birds flew into an invisible giant mouth, their air swallowed along with them.

Kael's hand gripping the window frame grew cold. He finally realized what this meant.

All surrounding territories, completely fallen...

The Lords hadn't received the messages; they simply couldn't reply.

"Who... who are they..." his voice was so low it was almost inaudible, torn apart by the wind and rain.

The storm lashed against the tower's outer wall, like battle drums from afar.

.....

Kael had already dispatched several Knights overnight to investigate neighboring territories, but even Elite Knights at their fastest would take at least six days to return with news.

On the third day, urgent and chaotic hoofbeats sounded outside the castle gates, akin to a pack of beasts hunted to desperation crashing into their final refuge.

The guards nervously opened the gate as a disorganized group of fleeing troops from the north stumbled into the courtyard.

Kael quickly descended the spiral stone steps, his black half-armor dragging a heavy shadow in the torchlight.

Upon stepping into the hall, he saw a Knight Captain from Gray Stone Fortress huddled by the fireplace, drenched.

His armor was a mix of muddy black and grey, as if clawed from a mountain of corpses and blood.

Kael approached, grabbed the Knight Captain by the collar, and lifted him from the ground, "What happened?"

The Knight Captain's pupils were muddled and hollow, as if his soul had been devoured by something at night.

His lips trembled, he only snapped back to reality upon hearing Kael's voice, crying suddenly: "Gone... all gone..."

Kael clenched his jaw: "What's gone?"

"Gray Stone Fortress!" The Knight Captain's voice shattered like a snapped bowstring, "That fortress we were to hold for three months... gone in just two hours!"

Kael froze, almost unable to grasp the entire meaning of that sentence.

Gray Stone Fortress was not merely an ordinary defensive structure.

It spanned across the throat of the Northern Empire and Gray Rock Province, a mighty impregnable gate that split the northern territory into the north and south.

In the Empire, it was revered as the God Shield; as long as it stood firm, the Gray Rock Province would never be invaded by the Northern Knights.

Yet now, this Knight was declaring, two hours? That was Gray Stone Fortress! Triple-layered walls! Can you tell me... two hours?"

The Knight Captain clutched his head, as if resisting the remaining shadow of a nightmare: "Thunder everywhere... wave after wave... No siege ladders, no battering rams... They pushed some steel monster billowing black smoke from kilometers away... then the wall... the wall shattered..."

His voice became increasingly fragmented, as if his mind had been torn open.

Kael took a deep breath, forcing himself to stay calm: "Their banner. Tell me, what banner did they fly?"

The Knight Captain shuddered, as if pierced by the vision again: "Red... red sun emblem... the whole sky was dyed red... pressing down like a tide of blood..."

The air solidified.

Kael's hand released, and the Knight Captain collapsed to the ground.

But Kael stood there as if struck by lightning, his throat undulating.

Northern Red Tide, Louis Calvin.

All clues converged at this moment into a dagger, piercing mercilessly into Kael's chest.

Broken communication from the north, thunderous weapons, silent advancement... it all formed a clear and desperate truth.

"It's him..." Kael squeezed out a voice, like gravel grinding, "that wolf of the Northern Territory."

He had always thought Louis was merely a local Lord who rose through marriage and luck, a role to be utilized.

Now, this role was advancing with war machines, incomprehensible to even Knights, from the edge of the world, knocking on the doors of the Remont Clan.

Kael's voice was nearly shattered: "Why precisely at this time? Father... the main force was moved to the Imperial Capital..."

He almost staggered to the massive military map on the wall, tracing the route from the Northern Territory to Gray Rock Province with his finger.

"Three thousand kilometers... a full three thousand kilometers." His voice echoed in the empty hall, mingling absurdity with terror.

"Across natural barriers, fortresses, countless watchtowers and checkpoints.

The Northern Army couldn't suddenly appear here... couldn't defeat three legions in three days... couldn't bypass all surveillance..."

These incoherent words squeezed out, seemed to be spoken for himself.

The more Kael repeated, the more he realized he fundamentally couldn't comprehend what was happening before him.

All military knowledge shattered at this moment.

Such a massive, well-equipped army suddenly stepping into the Gray Rock heartland, with no beacon fires, no urgent reports, no sound at all...

As if born from the air.

"Impossible..." Kael's chest heaved violently, "The Northern Territory shouldn't have such speed... and there's no way to elude everyone's sight... Why now, of all times?"

He couldn't even describe what he was afraid of.

Kael raised his head, bloodshot eyes: "Quick! Send an urgent report to the Imperial Capital! Tell Father the family is doomed!"