

Winter 771

Chapter 771: New Intelligence

When Louis woke up, although the sky was just getting light, it was already late for him.

He opened his eyes, his gaze falling on the beam at the edge of the dome.

The beam was clad in polished dark wood trim, with narrow copper strips embedded at the joints to secure the structure and also serve a decorative purpose. The corners still bore the embossed patterns from the old nobility era.

This used to be the main residence of the Count of Black Iron, an old castle that had been completely taken over.

Of course, compared to Red Tide Castle, a wonder of the Northern Territory, it was naturally a thousand times inferior, but it sufficed.

Louis used this place as a temporary office and residence.

He didn't choose Gray Rock Castle because the smell of blood there had seeped into the stone crevices, something that couldn't be removed with a few cleanings.

Louis didn't think much of it, just turned his body slightly.

The white long hair lay on the side of the pillow, Sif was still asleep.

The strands spread on the pillow, carrying a natural cool luster, her long eyelashes closed, casting a faint shadow under her eyes.

Louis raised his hand and tucked the corner of the quilt over her shoulder, his movements very gentle. Sif's brows moved slightly but she didn't wake up.

Emily and the old butler Bradley stayed in Red Tide City to oversee the Northern Territory, which was already running with the Red Tide system, and it was fine without him.

While Sif came to Gray Rock Province to help him handle affairs, as well as deal with personal matters.

Louis sat up, casually took the robe off the back of a chair and draped it over himself, stood by the window, letting his fingertips pause for a moment on the old wood grain of the window frame.

The morning in Gray Rock always carried a bit of coldness, as if seeping through the stone cracks.

This is Black Iron Land, the core city of Gray Rock Province, where iron ores and coal veins nourished it robustly, and now the city gates, granaries, workshops, and barracks are all adorned with new banners.

Louis let out a soft breath, suppressing his distracting thoughts: "Let's see what today's luck brings."

He extended his right hand and waved it in the air.

A translucent interface emerged before him, like thin ice spreading out, the text jumping rapidly, finally freezing in place.

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

[1: Kaelin detains the commander of the Thirty-third Legion, Adrian Kress, and plans to publicly dispose of him within three days at Black Iron Land to signify the cleansing of his military power and sever old command chains.]

Louis finished reading the first entry with no change in his expression.

Kaelin indeed took action.

Detaining the commander of the Seventh Legion, and publicly disposing of him, was not simply a cleansing.

At this time, Duke Remont probably hasn't returned to the Imperial Capital yet, and this timing tells everything.

This means Kaelin has given up on any dealings with Duke Remont and intends to dispose of as many people as possible, quickly.

This person is just the first piece of the bone; afterwards, be it observing legions, hesitant nobility, or those still loyal to Remont, all will be forced to make a choice.

Either side with Kaelin or be named in the next public disposal until Duke Remont returns to the Imperial Capital.

This cut will inevitably lead to loss of control in the short term, with internal suspicion, private collusion, or even preemptive rebellion surfacing.

Gray Rock Province will only get more chaotic next, which is good for Louis.

It exposed Kaelin's distrust in the military heart and the fact that the Old Empire's system can no longer be maintained by rules, only by blood pressure.

When Duke Remont returns to the Imperial Capital, it will definitely be undercurrents surging, maybe even bloody and violent.

Louis even felt a bit pleased, because dogs were already starting to bite each other.

He didn't need to intervene, just stand by and watch them tear each other to shreds.

What Red Tide needs to do is lay the road, deliver food, and guard the city gates while they quarrel.

Louis thought he might recruit some talents over. He silently noted it down in his mind.

[2: The eastern Red Earth Slope of Gray Rock Province has a surface layer with volcanic ash, and a deep layer with high-activity volcanic ash deposits, characterized by water-hardening materials. It can be experimentally fired with limestone.]

Louis paused his gaze on the second entry.

Red Earth Slope, he recalled that area on the map, the color appears dark, the soil like it's been baked by fire.

Previously, those nobles only considered it a by-product of fertile land, digging some ash and scattering it on the ground in exchange for some yield.

But the intelligence mentioned another kind of value.

He quickly aligned the materials and uses in his mind.

Limestone is everywhere in Gray Rock Province

If the volcanic ash deposits are truly active, with the right ratio and heat, they could fire a water-resistant binder.

Not a fragile mortar, but something that can harden in moisture.

What this means, he doesn't need to think much about it.

Docks, embankments, bridge piers, warehouse foundations, military camp walls...

Once Gray Rock Province can produce this material on its own, the entire construction speed will change.

And not just Gray Rock Province, but roads and storage across the Northern Territory; once deployed, the next decade will be effortless.

Louis picked up the intelligence notebook on the table, and pressed the tip of his pen down.

"List Red Earth Slope as a strategic building material point for the province, send craftsmen and alchemy furnace teams for test burning to determine the ratio, send a squad of knights to seal the mining area and transport route, first sample, then batch transport to Black Iron Land workshops."

In Louis's eyes, Gray Rock Province was a treasure trove.

On the surface, it was just a piece of land that had been mined and exploited repeatedly by the Old Empire, but as the Daily Intelligence System continuously reported, you'd find that what lay buried here far exceeded what was on the ledgers.

Blind spots left by the old nobility, overlooked geological layers, and unclaimed corner resources—all slowly coming to light.

Since he stationed in the province, he could almost find one or two discoveries daily in the intelligence, some not striking, but practical enough.

Chapter 772: New Intelligence (2)

Some things, once used properly, can directly leverage the entire construction line.

This piece of intelligence is one of them; it can directly turn into walls and roads.

[3: Eduardo Calvin has been completely locked by the Golden Thorn Feather Crown, entering an irreversible synchronization state on the consciousness level, and will serve as its next-generation execution vessel.]

Louis's fingers paused in mid-air.

He stared at the line, exhaling slowly after two breaths.

Eduardo.

What first emerged in his mind was not the chess game of his family, nor the authority of the Imperial Capital.

But someone who was very comfortable to be around.

At the first meeting, the impression he gave Louis was very good.

On the surface, he seemed gentle, spoke softly, yet always grasped the appropriate measure perfectly.

Moreover, in the Nest investigation, he chose to confess his abilities. It was at that moment Louis truly confirmed that this was a person with principles, who was willing to take risks for others.

But now, such a person has been chosen, become a puppet, and Louis's heart is very conflicted.

As for the Golden Thorn Feather Crown, he is actually unfamiliar with it; this is the first time he has seen such a thing on the Daily Intelligence System.

But just from this intelligence, he could also deduce some things.

That crown is not a symbol; the person who sits on it will have their will replaced and judgment covered, leaving only the function of execution.

The Pope is one of the most powerful people on the continent, and can even be said to be one of the strongest beings in the world.

If even such a person can only exist as a puppet, then what controls all this must be far above the Empire and Church Court.

This thought sent a chill through Louis's heart.

He traced this line back, inferring a thought that made him break out in a cold sweat.

Nest, Burning Pain Vine Court, dragon relics...

Perhaps this Golden Thorn Feather Crown shares the same origin with them.

They are distributed throughout the continent, differing in form and function, yet all sharing a common trait: the ability to bear, amplify, and transmit certain will.

Over the years, he has combed through numerous history books, from the Empire's founding records to secret manuscripts of various Churches, even including pages judged as false history and collections of legends, yet has never found records of these existences nor the memory fragments they have instilled in him.

They seem to have been intentionally erased, or were born in an era unrecorded.

Perhaps there exists a fracture here, a history forgotten by the entire world.

And the Primordial Heart within him might very well be a thing of the same origin, possibly even its core component.

This thought brought rare powerlessness to Louis.

He wishes to investigate but has no starting point; for now, he can only rely on the Daily Intelligence System.

Give me some strength, system dad...

Louis remained silent for a moment, finally writing two lines on the intelligence book, the only thing he could do now.

"Dispatch two fake merchant lines, enter the Golden Feather Flower port. Establish three layers of scrutiny: dock, academy, grain market. Only investigate abnormalities, do not seek core contact."

He closed the book, and the interface dissipated, leaving only the coldness of the unlit stove in the room.

A barely audible inhale sounded behind him.

Sif awakened, did not immediately sit up, but buried her face in the pillow, her voice a bit hoarse: "You stood by the window for quite a while just now."

"Just pondering some things." Louis tightened his outer robe, looking back at her.

Sif opened her eyes, her gaze still somewhat hazy, yet she spoke clearly: "There's a mobilization meeting this morning. Troops stationed in Black Iron territory, workshop teams, and newly formed provincial night patrol teams will all be present. Don't forget."

Louis smirked: "Would I forget such a thing?"

"You would." Sif glanced sideways at him, her tone deliberately certain, "and usually right after I reminded you, no idea what fills your mind."

Louis raised an eyebrow: "This means your reminder isn't formal enough."

Sif snorted lightly, yet there was a subtle twitch at the corner of her mouth: "I see, then next time I'll make sure several times."

"That's unnecessary." Louis chuckled, walked back to the bedside, raised a hand to tuck a strand of white hair behind her ear, "If you really stared at me all the time, I'd be less at ease sleeping."

Sif looked up at him, her gaze clear: "Then remember better."

She sat up, pulled the blanket to her shoulders, her tone shifted to business-like yet retained some warmth: "That's why I came with you, to prevent you from overloading your schedule."

Footsteps outside grew denser.

A horn sounded briefly in the distance, as if reminding the entire city that dawn had arrived.

Since Sif arrived yesterday, Louis got up somewhat late today; there are matters to attend to later, so morning cultivation rest can only be skipped for a day.

Louis picked up the sword belt, and headed out the door.

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The entrance of Black Iron Castle in the morning is where cold wind sweeps up from below the stone steps, tightening the neck.

But the crowd in front of the door was like water in a kettle set to boil, with heat waves surging.

Over five hundred officials were queuing to enter.

Pete tightened the deep blue Red Tide uniform coat he wore, being pushed forward by the crowd.

The inner lining of the coat was already wet with sweat, sticking to his back, but there was no time to worry.

The surrounding accents were all familiar.

All Northern Territory dialect, speaking fast, with firm intonation.

All were bottom-level cadre chosen from the Red Tide system.

On the other side, over two hundred people wore thick outer robes, brighter in color, forming a stark contrast with the darker Red Tide uniform.

They stood straight, yet couldn't hide the tension in their expressions, with their gaze drifting constantly around.

They were old bureaucrats left from Black Iron Province, retained temporarily due to their experience after a preliminary screening.

Pete glanced at them briefly without dwelling; these people will become colleagues later, yet will eventually be filtered out gradually.

Gray Rock Province now resembles a gigantic refugee camp propped up. Food, shelter, healthcare, order—any one issue enough to crush people.

Only executors capable of holding the situation under resource shortage and personnel chaos are needed, this being the reason for Louis constantly sending people here.

Pete who had been filtered out layer by layer.

He had done the dirtiest, and the easiest work to be criticized for, forcibly suppressing death rates in a collapsing Northern Territory realm to single digits.

When the transfer order arrived, he scanned it several times.

Position upgrade, double salary.

More importantly, the appointment reason column bore the signature of Louis Calvin.

This was what truly excited Pete,

being remembered by Lord Louis means that he genuinely looked at your results and approves of your working style.

The work he previously did was not in vain.

The crowd moved forward a bit, and Pete followed into the hall.

This place was originally where the Count held balls. The ceiling was high, with a crystal chandelier still hanging centrally, though the lights weren't fully on.

To accommodate nearly six hundred people, all sofas, tea tables, and decorative small tables were cleared, leaving only dense rows of hardwood folding chairs.

Chair beside chair, shoulder against shoulder.

Despite the cold weather, the collective breath of hundreds caused the air to quickly become dull and hot.

Pete felt the collar of his uniform being soaked with sweat, yet he still stood straight.

He found his seat in the second row, off to the side.

As soon as he sat, a pungent scent wafted by.

Perfume mixed with sweat.

Pete turned his head, seeing an official of Black Iron Province origin, not young, looking pale, fingers constantly rubbing his sleeve.

The person was clearly not accustomed to such a scene, their gaze wandered among the backs of Red Tide officials in the front row, and their Adam's apple bobbed up and down.

"A bunch of lunatics..." Although the person's lips moved, they didn't make a sound.

Pete saw it clearly, didn't respond, just took out a charcoal pencil and a hardbound booklet from his pocket, and opened it on his lap.

There wasn't even a table to write on here, so notes had to be supported by the leg.

He had seen quite a few people like this before; initially, they often brought impurities, some could be worn away, some would inevitably fall off.

The once noisy murmuring in the hall suddenly paused.

As if pressed down by some invisible force.

Pete instinctively looked up.

A figure appeared at the door, Louis had arrived.

Without announcement, yet the entire hall fell silent.

Chapter 773: May the Sun Shine Upon Gray Rock

The Black Iron Grand Assembly Hall was overcrowded, with five hundred hardwood chairs packed together, making it necessary to gauge each other's expressions before even moving a shoulder.

The side door was pushed open at this moment.

Light slanted through the crack in the door, and Louis walked onto the stage, facing the rising morning light from outside the window.

He wore a dark cloak, without gilding or superfluous embellishments, fastened only by a simple insignia at the collar.

The morning light outlined his silhouette clearly as it fell upon his shoulders.

The previously scattered noise in the assembly hall naturally quieted down.

Louis stood firm, scanning the audience below, five hundred faces, almost pressed together, some young, some weary, some with sharp gazes, and some not completely adjusted yet...

He looked around, raised the corners of his mouth, showing a gentle smile: "It's good for everyone to squeeze together. On the initial stormy nights in the Northern Territory, that's how we huddled together to keep warm."

As he finished speaking, a few people in the front row subconsciously shifted their shoulders, as if the words had stirred their memories.

"A few years ago, the Northern Territory was a forbidden zone for life," Louis continued, his tone not intentionally raised, "The wind could blow people down, and the snow could bury bodies. But now there are steam-spewing factories, heated floors running hot, and schools where children learn."

He paused here, allowing the image to naturally form in people's minds.

"Some say, it is Louis who brought this miracle." He shook his head, "No, they are wrong, it's the miracle of Red Tide."

The moment his voice fell, the hall fell silent for a moment.

"This honor belongs to me, and to this banner," Louis raised his hand and pointed to the insignia behind him, "But more so... it belongs to everyone present, to every drop of sweat you have shed."

Pete felt a warmth in his chest, instinctively straightening his back.

Those around him did the same, sitting up straight as their eyes brightened, no longer leaning against the chair backs.

Even the most fatigued among them found it hard to deny that the efforts of the past years were not in vain.

Louis did not let this emotion ferment for long.

He shifted his tone slightly, speaking more lightly: "However, I've heard that the people of Gray Rock Province pity us."

Someone in the audience looked perplexed for a moment.

"They say, poor Northern People, living in a world of ice and snow, surely they gnaw tree bark every day."

As soon as he finished speaking, suppressed laughter began to emerge.

Louis didn't stop them, just smiled faintly: "Tell me, is the winter of Red Tide cold?"

This sentence seemed to open the floodgate fully.

Uniform and confident laughter exploded in the hall.

"Cold?" A representative from the Craftsman's Office half stood up, shouting loudly, "Sir, our heating is too hot that we have to open the windows at night!"

"Gnawing tree bark?" Another official chimed in, laughing and slapping his knee: "We're tired of eating meat!"

The waves of laughter rose higher and higher, unintentionally coordinated, yet exceptionally harmonious.

A few old nobility officials sitting against the wall exchanged glances, their expressions subtle.

The laughter seemed to slap them directly in the face, burning hot.

The place they thought of as a wasteland was unexpectedly more affluent than the province they prided themselves on?

The superiority they had built up from childhood was, at this moment, reversed.

Listening, Pete found his previously tense shoulders relaxing at some point.

He saw that many Red Tide officials around him had expressions that also softened from tension.

In that laughter, there was a nostalgia for those difficult years, accompanied by a pride that no longer needed proving anything.

As the laughter gradually subsided, the smile on Louis's face faded along with it.

He stood on the podium, with the morning light still streaming in through the high windows behind him, but his tone suddenly turned more solemn, with a bit of restrained empathy.

"But is this funny?" He paused for a moment, his gaze settling on those faces in the hall still not fully relaxed, "No. This is actually quite sad."

The assembly hall returned to a state of quiet.

"While we enjoy heating and hot meals in the Northern Territory, here, there are hundreds of thousands of Gray Rock Province people waiting to die in the mine pits."

Louis's voice wasn't loud, yet it carried weight, "They are neither lazy nor stupid, just told from birth that the world is inherently dark, hunger is God's arrangement, and living is a matter of luck."

He didn't raise his volume, yet allowed each word to land clearly: "This arrogance and ignorance are the true winter."

A brief silence spread through the hall.

Louis stepped forward, reaching out to the audience.

"We are here, not to conquer a territory, nor to snatch a few stones." His gaze swept across the faces of the rows of Red Tide officials, "We are here to bring the sun of Red Tide to this dark land."

To tell the people of Gray Rock that though the winter is cold, life can indeed be warm, and though fate is harsh, people can live with dignity."

He stopped here, not elaborating further.

"This is the mission of Red Tide!"

No one spoke in the hall.

The emotion that had just been burning was pressed into a heavier form in the hearts of everyone by these few words.

Louis quickly reined in the emotions, not letting the atmosphere descend further.

"Of course, saving people cannot rely on fervor alone," his tone shifted again, becoming calm, "All of you present have been tempered in the winds and snows of the Northern Territory."

He nodded, as if confirming a fact.

"You must adapt to local conditions, learn how to turn these wastes into food, understand how to turn stones into fortresses."

Chapter 774: May the Sun Shine on Gray Rock_2

As these words fell, many subconsciously straightened their backs.

"It'll be exhausting, and it'll be hard." But I promise, Red Tide will never disappoint any striver.

The achievements you establish here will directly determine your futures.

Whether you seek nobility, wealth, or a place in history, Gray Rock Province is your stepping stone."

This time, no one laughed, but Pete felt something slowly close within his chest.

It was no longer just repayment or mere personal loyalty to Louis but a sense of duty endowed with direction.

Suddenly, he realized he was not only saving compatriots he had never met but also climbing a path uniquely his own.

No order was given.

Chief Steward Green of Gray Rock Province stood up first, pressing his right hand to his left chest, "May the Sun shine upon Gray Rock!"

Next was Pete, followed by more people.

Three hundred Red Tide officials rose almost simultaneously; their movements were not uniform, yet they were exceptionally resolute.

Everyone pressed their right hand to their left chest, "May the Sun shine upon Gray Rock!"

The shout exploded under the dome, causing the crystal chandelier to tremble slightly.

Louis stood in the morning light and nodded slightly to the crowd.

In that moment, he resembled a statue clad in light, yet there was no sense of aloofness or distance.

After the meeting ended, the doors were pushed open again.

Cold wind blew into the hall as Pete strode out.

Outside the doors, in the square, a crowd of Gray Rock commoners gathered, clad in tattered clothing, eyes filled with apathy.

They had no idea what had happened inside, only instinctively watching the group dressed in dark uniforms.

Pete paused for a moment, looking at them, and felt a warm and unprecedented impulse in his heart.

Just wait, we are bringing the Sun.

.....

The heavy oak doors closed behind, the door hinge gave a low, dull sound, completely isolating the clamor of the five hundred outside.

The meeting room suddenly became quiet, leaving only the crackling sound of burning logs in the fireplace.

Unlike the crowded large meeting hall, this was a small meeting room.

A long, black walnut conference table lay quietly in the center.

Louis sat at the head of the table, and to his left was Green.

This Chief Steward of Gray Rock was once merely a Knight, having served as the manager of Mai Lang Territory, and now sitting here, he represented the highest authority of the Red Tide administration in Gray Rock Province.

His back was straight, but his hands unconsciously intertwined, with no expression of nervousness on his face.

Along both sides of the table were a dozen or so people.

All of them were from the Red Tide headquarters, core officials, and technical leaders summoned from a thousand miles away, who just sat in the first two rows of the large meeting hall.

Each had abilities repeatedly tested in the Northern Territory.

Green took a deep breath and slowly pushed a black ledger with a frayed cover to the center of the table.

"Lord Louis," his voice was low, "the situation is worse than we imagined."

He paused, seemingly searching for the right word.

"This is not a mess," Green finally said, "it's a graveyard."

The ledger, its pages' edges yellowed and curling, was opened; the writing upon it, dense.

"To prepare funds to attack the Imperial Capital, Raymond sold off all the registerable iron ore reserves in the province." Green turned the pages, his tone gradually chilling, "Not satisfied, he then emptied the province's treasury to buy the support of several legion commanders.

To gather military provisions, he forcibly collected several years' worth of taxes from the populace, and to gather equipment, he ordered the smelting of farmers' ploughs and iron pots."

Someone at the conference table subconsciously clenched their fists.

"Young and fit men were conscripted en masse," Green continued, "now in the province, those left are either the elderly, sick, and weak, or expendables locked in the mines."

He closed the ledger, his voice settling.

"Simply put," Green raised his head to look at Louis, "the current Gray Rock Province cannot sustain even a single mouse in its warehouses, and the blacksmith shops can't find a single nail. We need to support these 200,000 people and resume production; it's like climbing to the sky."

Louis did not open the ledger: "A mess is called a mess because the previous master was incompetent."

His gaze swept both sides of the conference table: "That's why I called you professionals here. Share your thoughts."

Valentine, the Director of Mining, spoke first.

He was an old craftsman who had spent a lifetime in the mines, his hands as rough as stones. Clearly, in his mind, he'd turned Gray Rock's mines over and over many times.

"I've been down several main mines." His tone was honest, without embellishment, "Conditions are far worse than in the Northern Territory. Ventilation is nearly absent, and drainage relies entirely on manual labor."

He paused as if he remembered something, and the corners of his mouth involuntarily lifted slightly.

"Of course," he added, "nowhere in the world could truly surpass the Northern Territory's mines in advancement."

Soft chuckles echoed in the meeting room.

Valentine quickly composed himself, becoming serious once more.

"But the problem isn't the veins." He lifted his head to look at Louis, "I've looked closely, and the ore veins in Gray Rock have good orientations and tidy strata. If we dig them using the system from the Northern Territory, their scale could even surpass the Northern Territory."

He raised two short, thick fingers, tapping on the tabletop: "We're only missing two things: ventilation and drainage."

"The problem is still power." Valentine furrowed his brow, "Large steam engines, like rock crushers or pumps, can't find suitable fuel here. If we use Qi Pulse stones, they'd have to be transported from the Northern Territory, and the cost is exorbitantly high; it can't sustain a long-term operation."

Chapter 775: May the Sun Shine on Gray Rock_3

Before Louis could speak, Director Mike had already stood up.

His movements were swift, as if afraid that someone might steal his idea, he quickly approached the map and firmly pressed his rough finger on the river running through the city.

"No need for Lord Louis to worry about this."

His tone carried a craftsman's unique confidence, and there was even a hint of excitement.

"Indeed, there's no fuel for steam engines here," Mike said, "but this river is like a raging beast."

He pulled a charcoal pencil from his pocket and swiftly sketched on the blueprint.

"I've calculated the flow rate; it's enough to drive a triple linkage waterwheel set. This is something new researched by the craftsman's office two years ago."

The pencil tip fell, and the structure quickly took shape.

"The first stage drives a giant bellows to push air into the mine, addressing the ventilation issue.

The second stage drives a chain winch to pull up water and ore together, solving both drainage and ore extraction."

He paused and drew a heavy stroke at the bottom of the blueprint: "The third stage can be used for a hydraulic forging hammer."

There was a brief moment of silence in the meeting room.

Louis looked at the rapidly forming sketch, raised his eyes, and asked, "Will this work?"

"Tried it in the Northern Territory." Mike nodded without hesitation, "But the water flow there isn't strong enough; many times it's just short of power."

He looked up at the river on the map, his eyes shining.

"Gray Rock is different. If this river is tamed, it's better than ten steam engines."

Louis was silent for a moment, not pressing for details.

The specifics of the structure, torque, and transmission ratio were beyond his knowledge.

But he knew one thing, Red Tide currently gathered the world's most creative and daring craftsmen.

To allow these people to try new things without hesitation, he had spent a great deal of money, resources, and institutional costs...

So Louis merely nodded, his tone calm and determined: "Then let's give it a try."

When it was Director Mike from the agriculture office's turn, he directly poured a bag of newly sampled black soil into the tray on the table.

The black soil spread out, carrying a moist and pungent acidic smell.

"This soil can't be planted."

Mike's voice was low but very assured: "The soil is thin, highly acidic, with short sunlight. I've compared the data, if we forcibly plant those things from the Northern Territory, the yield wouldn't even cover the cost of seeds."

He paused and added a more realistic judgment: "Relying on grain transport from the Northern Territory is out of the question, once heavy snow blocks the roads, it's over."

Louis did not look at the tray of soil.

He walked to the large map on the wall, his gaze sweeping over the whole province, finally stopping at a southern region.

His tone was light yet cut off all pessimistic extensions: "Go check out the Black Valley Basin."

Mike was momentarily taken aback, instinctively looked up.

"The soil there is acidic but rich in humus, and sheltered from wind." Louis continued, as if stating an already confirmed fact, "High acidity is not a defect; it's a condition that can be utilized."

He pointed on the map: "I'll have Hillco send you a batch of new types of crack powder, first neutralize, then improve it; don't rush to conclusions, experiment with several plots."

Louis quickly brought the conversation to the practical level: "As for sunlight and temperature, there is no geothermal here..."

He picked up the charcoal pencil and quickly sketched a familiar structure on the blueprint.

"Replicate the Northern Territory's Type III glass greenhouse, use steam for heating, the structure can be simplified, focus on stability first."

Louis paused without giving false assurances: "This plan won't feed everyone."

"But together with mushrooms that can be grown in mine tunnels, at least it ensures everyone gets a bowl of hot potato and mushroom stew every day."

"For the remaining gap, we'll adjust from the Northern Territory, afterwards we'll find ways to restore the soil or develop new crops step by step."

Mike did not pursue further questions, he glanced at the bag of black soil, then neatly sealed the bag and tucked it back into his pocket.

"Since Lord says it will work," he lifted his head without a hint of hesitation, "then something will surely grow on that land."

Then, Director Mike from the craft office scratched his chin, his knuckles tapping on the table producing a dull sound.

"The food problem can be solved, but the housing issue remains." He spoke directly, "Building greenhouses, factories, roads, all require construction materials.

There are many stones in Gray Rock Province, but extraction, grinding, and transportation are all painstakingly slow. At this speed, it will drag the completion of the first batch of worker dormitories to next year."

Louis moved to the map, his gaze crossed towns and mining areas, landing on the western region marked as wasteland: "Red Earth Slope."

As these words fell, Mike instinctively lifted his head.

Louis looked up at him, his tone was calm as if conveying a matter of fact.

"Below there is dark red clay. Dig it up, grind it with the abundant limestone into powder, and send it to the furnace for burning."

Someone at the conference table frowned, others instinctively checked the map.

"This isn't brick, nor pottery." Louis continued, "It's a special hydraulic lime. After adding water, it will harden on its own and even submerged in water, it's sturdier than stone."

Mike stood frozen, his eyes widening.

He'd been working as a craftsman all his life, seeing steel, seeing alchemy alloys, yet had never heard of such special earth that can be fired to be sturdier than stone.

But he looked at Louis's expression, that familiar determination emerging once again.

Within Red Tide, this was no longer a secret.

Chapter 776: May the Sun Shine Upon Gray Rock (Part 4)

Lord Louis sometimes seems to know the answers in advance, directly pointing to the result.

No one knows the reason, and no one questions it; they just know these judgments will ultimately be confirmed by facts.

Mike did not respond immediately, staring at the marked Red Earth Slope, then looking down again at the charcoal lines on the blueprint that hadn't dried yet, as if recalculating every possible mistake in his mind.

Then he raised his head and looked at Louis. "One month, give me one month, and I'll lead the Alchemy Furnace team to get the mix right."

"If this stuff is really as hard as you say," he grinned, his tone unable to suppress the excitement, "I'll personally pour the road in Gray Rock Province for you."

Mike sat down, and Cyril from the Health Department finally looked up.

She closed her notebook, pressing her fingertip on the cover as if verifying something: "Being full is not enough; we must stay alive."

Her tone was so calm it bordered on severe, without emotional fluctuations, yet it instinctively commanded attention.

"The health situation here is catastrophic," Cyril continued, "Dead rats, open cesspools, coal dust throughout the city. If left unaddressed, once Lord Mike's factory starts operation, half the workers will be down with diarrhea within three days.

"I don't need high tech; I want to implement the pre-Red Tide 'Mandatory Health Law'.

Build public bathhouses, using the residual heat from the steel furnace to heat the water. All workers must bathe after their shift; those who don't will have their work points deducted.

Form rat extermination teams; one rat, trade for one egg."

No one around the meeting table laughed.

"Approved," Louis nodded without hesitation, "Cyril, your authority here is equal to the Inspection Department. Anyone who dares dump garbage into the river, anyone who dares set up private cesspools, you can arrest them."

Green then took over the conversation: "Then I'll be responsible for organizing the people.

Pull these hundreds of thousands out of the old Nobility's estates and mine areas, and incorporate them into factories and farms. Everyone will receive a Red Tide ID card, which they'll use to collect food, bathe, and report for work."

The issues didn't cease there.

Someone mentioned mineral transportation, suggesting a single snowstorm could suffice to shut down the entire province.

Someone mentioned public security, with scattered Knights and escaped miners rallying together and already starting to loot grain.

...

The problems were thrown out one by one, without complaints or shirking, just laid out calmly on the table.

Louis didn't interrupt, letting everyone finish speaking, and then picked up each point one by one.

The transport lines were split up, heavy cargo would go by water, light cargo by land, prioritizing grain first, then minerals.

Security would be jointly taken over by the Knights and the Mining Bureau, scattered soldiers would be integrated on-site, and those who don't comply will be directly cleared from the mining area.

...

These decisions aren't sophisticated but are practical enough.

When the last issue was settled, no one spoke around the table anymore.

Louis stood up, looking at the assembled elite who had each found their place: "If there are no further questions, let's get started then. Plant the Red Tide's flag on every territory."

No unnecessary words.

Everyone began to tidy up blueprints and notes, the seriousness on their faces replaced by a kind of eager focus, the kind shown by experts facing highly challenging projects.

The meeting ended, the heavy oak doors opened again, and closed behind them.

The strategic meeting room quickly quieted down, leaving only the dust slowly settling in the air.

Except Green didn't immediately leave.

He carefully organized the blueprints on the table, then cautiously placed that heavy black ledger into his briefcase, his movements tired but extraordinarily earnest.

Louis approached Green, pouring a glass of water personally like he did years ago in Mai Lang Territory and handing it over: "From a Knight to a Provincial Governor managing the life and death of hundreds of thousands. Is this leap big? Are you afraid?"

Green accepted the glass, smiling wryly: "Afraid, last night while flipping through the ledger, my hands were shaking. Even facing a Knight's charge, I was never this afraid."

He raised his head, his eyes exceptionally clear.

"But I remember something you said in the Northern Snowfield: 'The road is made by people walking it.' As long as you point the way, I'll pave the road even if on my knees."

Louis reached out, patting his slightly stooped shoulder: "Go forth and manage, in this province, apart from the Red Tide's laws, you don't need to bow to anyone."

Green took a deep breath, his wrinkled eyes gradually relaxing.

That fear disappeared, replaced by a stability belonging to a high-ranking official.

He stepped back, bowing deeply in a standard Knight's salute: "I shall not fail, Lord Louis."

Chapter 777: Red Tide Assistance

Thorne was riding on horseback, the hooves sinking into the wet, soft black mud, making a dull sound.

Ahead was a low-lying area known as Black Swamp Town.

The gray-black water surface gleamed with an oily sheen, scattered dead trees tilted in the mire, and the air was filled with the stench of rotting meat, causing one to instinctively hold their breath.

Thorne's gaze lingered on that swamp for a long time.

He used to be a knight.

He used to wear orderly armor, wield a clean sword, recite oaths, and believe in those words of honor and guardianship.

Later, Duke Raymond gave the order for a militaristic campaign that persecuted the vassals, and Thorne refused to sign the command.

After that, his title as a knight was stripped, his military pay stopped, and even his steed was nearly taken away for debt repayment.

He didn't starve to death only because the Red Tide army quickly moved south, saving him.

It was because of this event that he appeared here.

In the files submitted by the Inspection Department, the evaluation of him was just one sentence: "The former knight who starves himself yet doesn't rob the vassals."

Chief Steward Green signed the document.

Thorne was transferred to Red Tide and became a probationary official.

In Thorne's view, this felt more like a position to while away time.

He didn't expect any changes, just a change of flag and rhetoric, too many times seen in Gray Rock Province.

No matter how eloquent the barbarians from the Northern Territory spoke, it was just another form of management, another method of exploitation.

This time, he only hoped to survive, as for saving the poor, he no longer harbored such illusions.

The horse team continued forward, the swamp's color growing ever darker, Black Swamp Town had arrived.

Almost no intact houses could be seen here.

Shacks made of rotten boards and mud were crammed together, resembling a pile of wreckage that could collapse at any moment.

Sewage flowed down the low points, carrying away excrement, and also the last bit of dignity.

Thorne reined in the horse, whispered to Pete beside him: "This is the garbage dump of the province."

Pete didn't respond.

"Raymond took all the young and strong here," Thorne continued, "They were sent to the front lines as logistics troops, or converted to labor slaves for money. Only the elderly and children remain."

He raised a hand to point at those figures crouched in the muddy water: "The farm tools have all been melted into soldiers, no land can be farmed, so they lie in the swamp catching bugs to eat."

Thorne paused, then added: "They aren't people, they are living ghosts."

Pete remained silent.

Behind him followed twenty young Red Tide junior officials, all quite young, and their uniforms were still new.

Faced with such a decayed place, they didn't show expressions of disgust, even seemed a bit eager to try.

Thorne didn't understand, didn't know what these people were thinking.

The convoy slowly drove into the town, no begging voices, nor curses.

Silhouettes huddled behind broken walls and mud huts like frightened mice, only showing pairs of hollow and vigilant eyes.

Pete jumped off the carriage.

The mud came over the tops of his boots, quickly soaking his trouser legs, he didn't mind, instead looked up at the half-collapsed stone tower at the entrance of the town.

"Here it is." Pete took the flagpole, stepping on rubble and rotten wood, he climbed up.

The bright red Red Tide flag was forcefully planted into the cracked stone seam.

Wind blew from the depths of the swamp, the flag flapping loudly.

That red color was exceptionally striking in the gray-black world.

Thorne involuntarily squinted his eyes.

At that moment, a beggar covered in sores rushed out from the shadows, mouth emitting unintelligible screeches.

Thorne's body reacted before his thoughts, with a clang, the longsword was drawn.

This was the instinct he learned as a knight, any act colliding with an official meant a threat, needed to be cleared immediately.

Before his sword raised, a hand pressed down on the hilt, it was Pete.

Thorne was stunned, while Pete had already taken a step forward.

He reached out both hands, firmly holding the tottering beggar.

The worn gloves instantly stained to dark by pus and mud, the stinking smell pressed close.

Pete didn't even furrow his brow, only quietly said: "Slow down, don't fall."

Thorne stood in place, the sword in his hand had somehow already lowered.

This didn't bring him relief, but made him more puzzled.

In his understanding, officials' hands were meant for signing orders, meant for commanding across tables.

Shouldn't touch such things, nor needed.

He looked at Pete's gloves dirtied by mud and pus, but a thought not quite fitting emerged: What is this? A show for whom?

The Red Tide flag flapped loudly in the wind, excessively bright red.

Soon the water in the large pot quickly boiled.

Iron pot set on temporarily built stone stove, flames licking at the pot's base.

Diced salted meat, dehydrated vegetables from Red Tide, finely ground oats were spooned into the pot, rolling in the boiling water.

White steam rose, quickly enveloping the whole open area.

The smell of meat spread in the air.

In this swamp perpetually filled with the smell of rot, that aroma felt out of place, even somewhat pungent.

It wasn't a festive fragrance, but a long-missed aura of life.

Thorne stood behind Pete, watching the rolling large pot, his brows furrowing tighter.

He finally spoke, with unusual seriousness: "Sir Pete. With all due respect, the meat in this pot of congee, could buy all the lives in this town."

Pete didn't raise his head.

Thorne continued: "You feed them meat today, what about tomorrow? The day after? No matter how full Red Tide's granary is, it can't fill a place like this."

Chapter 778: Red Tide Aid (Part 2)

His gaze swept over those figures huddled in the distance, their eyes nonetheless snagged by the smell.

"The day you can't hand out meat anymore, these starving wolves you suddenly fattened up will be the first to tear apart whoever's standing in front of them."

Thorne had seen that ending too many times. The old Nobility never did losing trades; charity only appeared when it could be used to keep control.

Pete was still stirring the pot. The wooden ladle scraped along the bottom, making a steady, rhythmic sound.

After a while, he finally spoke, lightly: "Knight Thorne, in the Red Tide we don't call people bottomless pits. We call them labor."

Thorne started, not knowing what to say.

Pete went on, his tone still calm: "But first, you have to make sure they survive today."

The loudspeaker was quickly set up.

"Meal time—!" The shout was dragged out long.

No movement.

Pete frowned, then signaled someone to shout again: "Meal time—!"

Still no one stepped forward.

By the time the third shout fell, the open space was already ringed with people.

Hundreds of eyes were locked on that boiling iron pot, yet it was as if some invisible line held them in place; no one dared take a step.

It wasn't greed. Thorne knew that look very well. It was fear.

A woman suddenly yanked her child into her arms, clapped a hand over his mouth, terrified that his crying would bring disaster down on them.

A few old folks hunched their necks, lips white, as if waiting for an ending that had been written long ago.

The air turned unnaturally quiet.

Just then, an old miner with graying hair crawled out of the crowd.

He no longer had the strength to stand. He could only drag his body, inch by inch, to Pete's feet, then knock his head heavily against the muddy ground.

"Master..." His voice was so hoarse it was barely audible.

Pete froze, not knowing what the old man was trying to do.

The old miner raised his head, his clouded eyes fixed on that pot, his voice shaking: "If you have to kill... could you... just kill me alone?"

He drew a breath, as if it took all he had: "Let my grandson go to the mine... he can still work, don't kill him..."

Pete's hand tightened abruptly around the ladle.

Thorne stood to the side, eyes closing for a moment as if choking back some disgust. He said quietly, "Raymond's rules. They only give them one full meal when they're about to process a batch of waste."

"A few times, they put poison in the porridge. Powder refined from mine slag." Thorne paused, as if confirming that Pete really wanted to hear the rest. "After they drank it, they started convulsing that night, and by dawn they were all dumped into the waste pit together..."

Thorne added under his breath, "It's easier that way. They call that meal 'beheading porridge.'"

Pete asked nothing more. He knew that here, any extra words of comfort were pointless.

He stuck the ladle into the pot and filled a bowl to the brim.

Chunks of meat, grains of wheat, and scalding broth sloshed in the bowl. The steam hit his face, almost forcing his eyes shut.

Under hundreds of eyes boring into him, Pete lifted the bowl, tilted his head back, and drank it down.

He seemed completely oblivious to the heat, unconcerned with appearances, just gulping it down in big swallows until only a few scraps were left at the bottom.

Pete turned the empty bowl over, the bottom facing everyone.

Then he flung it down hard: "Crack—"

The clay bowl shattered into several pieces in the mud.

"Did you all see that clearly?" Pete's voice sounded like it was ripped raw out of his chest. "No poison! Only meat!"

He pointed at the pot, his arm trembling with strain. "The Red Tide doesn't need dead people! We need the living! If you want to live, come eat!"

The instant the words left his mouth, it was like something slammed into the crowd.

Fear split open, and what poured out was naked instinct.

Some screamed, some shoved. Hundreds of dark figures surged toward the porridge shed, mud and water splashing, cries and panting melting into one.

Thorne's face changed on the spot.

Once things spun out of control, the next step would be trampling, fighting, blood.

His hand had already closed around the whip at his waist.

"Back off!" he growled, lunging forward.

In his experience, only pain could halt this kind of chaos.

"Stand down, Thorne!" Pete's voice crashed in from the side.

Thorne started. Several Red Tide relief officers who had been on standby rushed forward and smoothly pulled up a thick rope.

It was a hemp rope dyed bright red, stretched horizontally, blocking the way ten meters before the porridge shed.

Pete took the loudspeaker. His voice exploded through the chaos: "Listen up! Anyone who crosses this rope will never eat a single grain of Red Tide rice for the rest of their life! Get behind the rope! Line up!"

His words were like nails being hammered into the air, one by one.

The ones at the very front halted abruptly.

One meal, versus every meal to come.

Living through this moment, versus whether they'd live at all in the future.

The chaos felt like it'd had its throat squeezed shut.

Some people backed up, gasping, others dragged their companions backward with them.

A few breaths later, behind the red rope, a crooked line had formed.

Not neat, but taking shape.

Thorne stood where he was, the whip still in his hand, yet he'd forgotten to bring it down.

He looked at that not-so-sturdy red rope, then at the crowd gradually calming, his throat tightening.

"A rope..." he muttered to himself, "works better than my whip?"

The one who answered him wasn't Pete, but a rough, hoarse laugh.

As soon as the line steadied, a burly man with a face full of scars shouldered his way out. Old whip marks from some foreman were still visible on his shoulders. His back was ramrod straight, like he was used to bullying his way through crowds.

He shoved aside the orphan holding a bowl in front of him. Soup splashed into the mud.

"Out of the way." He looked up at Pete, then split his mouth in a fawning grin. "Sir, can you let me have the first bowl? I'm very useful."

Chapter 779: Red Tide Aid (3)

Thorne's hand was already on the sword hilt, but he also knew that managing such a chaotic place still depended on the local thugs.

Pete didn't get angry; instead, he just raised his hand.

Two knights came forward, holding the strong man from left and right, dragging him away from the line.

"What are you doing!" The strong man struggled, cursing.

Pete's voice was low, yet it carried clearly to everyone's ears: "Tie him over there."

Beside the gruel stand was a wooden platform with a pole originally used to hang flags.

The strong man was bound to the pole, a cloth shoved into his mouth, causing him to emit muffled whimpers.

Pete didn't spare him another glance: "Continue serving the gruel."

The first bowl was handed out to the orphan who had been pushed down.

The child held the crude pottery bowl, his hands trembling fiercely, yet he bowed his head and took large gulps.

Steam rose against his face, but he didn't care about the heat, only focused on stuffing his mouth.

The aroma of meat wafted repeatedly through the air.

The line moved slowly forward.

The strong man tied to the pole initially struggled, his gaze fierce.

Soon, the fierceness was suppressed by hunger.

He watched as those inferior to him left with bowls, watched as others ate until they burped, watched the orphan licking the grease at the bottom of the bowl.

The whimpers changed tone, turning into uncontrollable cries.

This was the process of both body and consciousness being crushed simultaneously.

The gruel was all handed out.

Only then did Pete turn around, giving Thorne just a look.

Thorne understood, drew the Longsword smoothly.

A cold light fell, and the crying stopped abruptly.

Blood splattered on the pole, soon swallowed by the damp cold air.

After drinking the gruel, people slowly regained their strength.

With something solid in their stomach, the trembling in their limbs gradually ceased.

Suddenly, someone knelt down, their forehead thudding heavily into the muddy ground, producing a dull sound: "Tha... thank you, my lord..."

The voice quivered, yet was sincere.

This kneeling seemed to unlock something.

More and more people followed suit, the old, the young, those holding children, all bowing toward the direction of the gruel stand, repeating the same phrase over and over.

"Thank you, my lord..."

Pete did not accept this gesture, raised his hand signaling the knights to steady the scene, then moved to the front of the crowd, his voice suppressing the chaotic kowtows: "Don't thank me."

Someone hesitated, raising their head.

Pete reached out, pointing to the red flag unfurled in the wind at the village entrance: "If you must thank, then thank the Red Tide."

His finger lifted slightly: "Thank Lord Louis, who planted this flag here."

The crowd followed his gaze.

The bright red flag flapped fiercely above the gray-black swamp.

Someone hesitated for a moment, then lowered their head once again.

This time, the direction of their kowtow changed.

Only then did Pete continue to speak, his tone regaining calmness.

"After eating your fill, return home. Tomorrow morning, if you want to keep eating, gather at the red rope."

He waved his hand, and the guards began to guide the crowd to disperse.

The crowd slowly retreated, their steps still staggering, but no longer as chaotic as before.

The crowd gradually dissipated, the fire still burning, the leftover gruel in the pot bubbling softly over the small flame.

The aroma of meat faded, yet still lingering with warmth.

Pete scooped a bowl, handing it to Thorne who had stood aside all along without moving: "Eat some."

Thorne took the bowl, feeling the heat clearly in his palm.

He looked down at the rolling wheat grains and oil droplets, his Adam's apple moving, yet he did not drink immediately.

"Today's routine," he said in a low voice, "was indeed impressive."

He raised his head, looking at Pete, his tone still calm.

"But I still say, this cannot go on forever. Tomorrow they will still be hungry, the day after too. That red rope of yours, how many times can it hold?"

Pete wiped the remaining oil from the corner of his mouth, didn't refute.

He followed Thorne's gaze, looking into the distance. The ice river flowing in the twilight, the abandoned mines standing like a row of silent shadows.

"Thorne, do you think this bowl of gruel is free? Today's meal is to ensure they still have the strength to move rocks. The Red Tide isn't doing charity, we're making an investment."

Pete pointed to the red rope that hadn't been put away: "In a few days, those standing behind the rope won't be beggars, but workers. If they want to eat, they have to work, earn credits for what they do."

Thorne didn't say anything, just listened.

"As for whether it can last..." Pete smiled lightly, "When that dam gets built, you'll know the answer."

Chapter 780: Change

The warmth from last night's food distribution hasn't completely dissipated yet, and the eyes hiding in the shadows remain vigilant but are less likely to flee at the sight of people.

Little Mud shrinks into the deepest shadow, back pressed against the cold stone, not daring to move an inch.

She's eleven, or maybe twelve, thirteen... she can't remember.

Age is a meaningless number in Black Swamp Town.

People are only divided into two kinds, those who can move and those waiting to die.

Little Mud doesn't remember her parents' faces, only the salty taste when the dust choked her on the day the mine shaft collapsed.

Later, she was told her mother was buried underneath, and her father lasted six months before dying at home.

The body was dragged away the next day, filling a pit.

Children like her are not uncommon in Black Swamp Town.

When they're truly starving, they crawl to the swamp's edge to dig for insects, nails perpetually blackened.

Little Mud's hair is matted into a single mass, like someone poured tar over it, sticking to her scalp.

Pustules climb from her neck to her shoulders and back, the burst areas oozing yellow fluid, soaking the piece of burlap trying to cover her modesty, turning it black.

When the wind blows, the stench wafts, even rats avoid her.

She stares at the alley's entrance, where footsteps and unfamiliar voices approach.

"These people come from the North." This sentence began circulating around town last night.

She knows these Northern Territory savages.

The adults, during idle chat in the mine, said the Northern savages eat people.

But because she remembers the taste of that hot porridge, when the footsteps approach again, Little Mud doesn't flee immediately.

The footsteps stop at the alley's entrance. A few young people in matching protective suits peek in, their gaze lingering on her briefly.

She lets out a short, sharp scream, turning to run, but a hand grabs her wrist.

These people are strong; she struggles desperately, her voice hoarse, as if howling, "Let me go! Don't eat me!"

Little Mud is dragged out of the alley, sunlight suddenly hitting her face, instinctively making her squint.

Steam rises from the square, barrels lined up one after another, as if prepared in advance.

She is lifted and tossed into a barrel...

"They really are going to cook me," Little Mud thinks in despair.

The expected burning pain does not come; the water is warm.

Little Mud is stunned.

The next second, a bar of soap with the scent of grease and wood ash is pressed onto her shoulder.

Rough, but not painful.

Someone vigorously scrubs her back.

Black sludge falls from her body, dispersing along the water's surface.

The grime around the pustules is gradually washed away, revealing skin underneath, pale to the point of transparency.

...

On the high steps, Thorne stands, hand resting on the railing, able to see the entire square.

Barrels, steam, razors, piles of cut hair.

People are forcibly sat down, their hair shaved off; some cry, some curse, but these people don't stop.

He initially thought this place was inhabited by monsters twisted by mud and disease.

But when each face is washed clean, the hair falls away, exposing complete features, he suddenly realizes an uncomfortable truth: these people are no different from him.

The same eyes, the same nose bridge, the same instinct to close their eyes when water splashes on their face.

Just crushed by time and despair into their current state.

This realization makes Thorne's throat tighten.

Beside him, Pete says, "Once they're clean, they feel human again."

He pauses: "People won't willingly die in the mud like pigs."

After the cleaning, someone leads Little Mud to the side.

A resized old cotton coat is shoved into her arms.

The fabric is coarse but thick and clean, carrying a slight scent of sunshine.

It's the Red Tide uniform, ill-fitting but flea-free.

It's the best clothing she's seen since she can remember.

The woman from the medical team makes her sit, unscrewing a small bottle. Purple liquid is poured onto a cloth and pressed onto her festering skin.

Pain explodes suddenly; Little Mud gasps and instinctively shrinks back, but she's held firmly.

"Bear it," the voice is calm.

A coolness quickly overrides the prickling pain, like the wind blowing over a searing wound, her shoulders and back stop itching.

At the village entrance, there's something she's never seen before, an upright large copper mirror.

Little Mud is pushed in front of the mirror, instinctively lowering her head, then her chin is lifted.

The person in the mirror stuns her.

She raises a hand to touch her face, then the new cotton coat, her chest suddenly tightens.

She doesn't want to die anymore; she wants to live.

Wants to live like this, clean and neat.

...

After cleaning the body, shaving hair, and applying medicine, the next step is environmental cleanup.

Filth can't just stay on bodies or continue piling where they live.

A fire is lit by the swamp, not for warmth, but for those crooked, mud-soaked black poplar logs.

The trunks are dragged out, still dripping water, full of wormholes that make one frown at a glance.

Thorne stands nearby, his brow furrowed tightly: "Lord Pete, these logs are all wet, full of insect eggs. If used to build houses, they'll collapse in three months, and the indoors will be even more stench-filled than outside."

In his experience, such materials are fit only to burn or continue to rot in the mud.

Pete doesn't argue, ordering the bark to be stripped, the logs placed over the fire.

Flames lick the surface of the wood, steam first crazily evaporating, then the color gradually deepening.

The outer layer chars black, cracks open but quickly stabilize as if sealed with a shell.

"Fire can kill insects," Pete says while adjusting the logs' position, "The charring layer resists decay and moisture."