

Winter 781

Chapter 781: Change (Part 2)

He kicked the already blackened stump with the tip of his boot: "This wood won't rot even if it's thrown back into the swamp to soak for a hundred years."

Thorne watched as the burnt stumps were carried away, only to be hammered deep into the mud by others with heavy hammers.

The part of the stumps protruding above the ground was connected by beams, elevating the floor half a meter.

The walls were made of carbonized wood panels, and the gaps were filled with clay mixed with dry grass, tightly packed so the wind couldn't penetrate.

Thorne stood in place, watching rows of black house frames rise from the swamp, his throat moved.

He was about to look away when he saw Pete's shoulder was rubbed raw from the logs.

Blood mixed with sweat seeped out, but he seemed oblivious and kept directing people to adjust the position of the stumps.

Thorne frowned, he took off his robe, casually tossed it aside, revealing the shirt underneath, and walked over to seize the log from Pete's shoulder.

"Move aside." His tone was blunt, "You don't have the strength for this. Leave this work to the Knight."

Pete was stunned for a moment, then smiled, released the log, and handed over a jug of water.

The two exchanged a look without saying anything, class distinctions at this moment were drowned out by sweat.

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As the sky darkened, Little Mud was led into the new house.

This was one of the first houses built in Swamp Town, following Red Tide's rules, prioritizing use by the elderly, sick, and children who had no one to care for them, while the able-bodied adults were behind in line.

She hesitated at the doorway before cautiously crawling inside.

The floor was dry wooden planks, her feet didn't sink into it, nor did water seep through.

The house was elevated above the swamp, leaving some distance from the ground.

The walls were black, rough to the touch, yet warm.

The smell of scorched wood reminded her of last night's distant fire, strangely calming her heart.

The wind blew through the swamp.

In the past, such a night wind would cut through burlap sacks like knives, scraping the bones until they ached.

But tonight, the clay mixed with dry grass sealed all the gaps.

In the corner, there was a small tin stove, crudely made, with marks from hammering on its edges.

When coal was lit, heat slowly spread.

Little Mud huddled inside the house, clutching her knees, and for the first time did not shiver from the cold and damp at night.

The house was suspended above the swamp, like a clumsy yet stable ark.

When she lay down, her eyes were open, reluctant to close for a long time, afraid it was all a long dream.

At this time, the door was gently pushed open.

Little Mud instinctively tensed up, but didn't smell the familiar stench of rot and alcohol.

Pete stooped in, still in his uniform jacket, cuffs stained with mud.

He held several roasted, cracked hot potatoes, steaming.

"How come you're not sleeping?" Pete took a few steps closer, handed over a potato, then paused, "Still hungry?"

Little Mud blinked, instinctively extended her hand, then quickly withdrew it.

Pete didn't retract his hand, instead, he grabbed her wrist, turning her hand over, examining it closely in the glow of the stove fire, the fingernails were clean.

"Nicely washed, it passes." Only then did Pete place the potato into her hand.

The warmth spread up through her palm, Little Mud swallowed, lowered her head, and softly asked: "Why... are you good to me?"

Pete thought for a moment and said: "Because in Red Tide, children are seeds of the future. If a seed doesn't sprout, it's not its fault, but the fault of the person responsible for planting."

He stood up, brushed off the ash on his hands: "Tomorrow night there's class. Literacy, arithmetic, and how to exchange work points for goods. Make sure you come and see."

The door closed again, Little Mud cradled the hot potato, lowered her head, and took a bite.

It was scorching, but she didn't let go.

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The next evening, candles were lit in the central square.

The wind was weaker than during the day, but the flames were still unsteady, gently flickering inside the lamp covers.

Pete stood at the wooden platform, hung a rough wooden board, then smeared it with charcoal, leaving marks of varying depth.

People slowly gathered around, including children and adults.

Thorne also stood on the fringe, having worked all day, his shoulders were still aching, yet he stayed.

Pete picked up the charcoal, looked at the orphan he had met last night: "What's your name?"

Little Mud hesitated, instinctively lowered her head.

"No name." She whispered, "Everyone calls me Little Mud."

Pete shook his head: "Mud is on the ground." He said, "You are a person who stands."

The charcoal made a sound as it moved across the board.

"This reads Lily." Pete pointed to the two symbols, "In the Northern Territory, it's a type of flower. Even in Permafrost, it can bloom."

He turned around, looked at her.

"From today, that's your name."

Lily, she stared at the board, the name that belonged to her.

Pete didn't linger for long.

He drew a few simple lines below the board, then wrote a few numbers.

"Learning to read, learning arithmetic, is not for now." He said, "It's for the future."

"The future when you're standing in workshops, at accounting desks, on bridges and dams, you won't have to bow your head and ask others, 'Is this mine? Should I take it?'"

He drew a square box on the board with the charcoal.

"Those who can do arithmetic, can keep accounts, manage people, those who can read, can read plans, be a foreman, wear uniforms, don't have to labor all their lives."

Pete looked up, at the faces slowly coming into focus.

"Now you are illiterate, but in the future the roads to be built, the cities to be founded, the factories to be managed around here, will all need literate people."

Chapter 782: Change_3

Words and numbers are the thresholds. Cross them and you stand inside; fail to cross, and you can only watch from outside.

The crowd quieted down.

"Lord Louis said," Pete continued, "Whoever can learn a hundred words within a week can become a recorder. The kind that wears uniforms."

When the class ended, the crowd slowly dispersed.

Lily didn't leave. She picked up a stick and started drawing on the freshly paved cement ground.

A circle, surrounded by short lines.

Pete squatted down and glanced at it: "Gold coins?"

She shook her head: "No."

She lifted her face, speaking softly yet earnestly: "That's Lord Louis. I haven't seen him, but you said he's warm, like the Sun."

The people nearby who hadn't yet dispersed stopped in their tracks.

A blind old man felt his way over to the drawing, and slowly knelt down.

Only one part of the ground was still damp.

But in their hearts, the person who gave them food, clothes, and names was more real than the Dragon Ancestor in the Church who only collected taxes.

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A month later, on a foggy morning, the valley was shrouded in mist.

Black Swamp Town no longer existed.

The once man-eating, bone-spitting muck had been flattened and solidified, with two rows of stilt houses lined along the riverbank.

Charred wooden pillars driven deep into the ground, the buildings suspended above, casting shadows on the gravel and quick-drying cement-paved roads, reflecting a layer of cold, bluish-gray light.

The air was free of stench, leaving only a faint scent of burnt wood and the cool, sterile smell of lime.

The copper bell in the square rang out.

It was a freshly cast bell by the craftsmen's office, not very melodious, but clear enough.

The sound spread, and over a thousand workers quickly emerged from various houses, gathering in the square.

Lily stood in the front row.

She wore a washed-out gray uniform, with sleeves altered to be short, and had her hair cut into a neat bob.

The face once covered with pustules was now clean and lean, with extraordinarily bright eyes.

A polished wooden plaque hung on her chest, engraved with the simple words "Outstanding Literacy Class Student."

She stood straight, raised a hand to adjust the collar of an orphan beside her who wasn't standing properly, and whispered: "Chest up. Pete said, we're the reserve for the Red Tide, not beggars."

The child hesitated for a moment, then immediately mimicked the posture of a Knight, standing upright.

Thorne stood on the lookout on the high slope, gazing over the entire square.

Not just Black Swamp Town; within a month, changes had spread outward like ripples.

On three dirt roads in the distance, teams wearing the same gray uniforms were converging towards the riverbank.

They carried shovels and pickaxes, with steps not entirely in sync, yet walked steadily.

These were Iron Slag Village, Kumu Village, and several other almost forgotten small hamlets further away.

In the past, even tax collectors didn't bother to visit these places.

But now, people were voluntarily coming out, following the river, following the signposts, heading in the same direction.

They didn't fully understand water resource planning, nor could they articulate the rules of the Red Tide, but they heard there's work, food, and nights where people wouldn't be randomly dragged away.

The flow of people, like guided water, converged from all directions, slowly pouring into this emerging construction site.

This wasn't the revival of a town.

This was the entire Gray Rock Province, for the first time, beginning to breathe in the same direction.

By the riverbank, the steam pile driver was ready.

Black iron pipes emitted white mist, pistons slowly moved, like a giant beast just awakened, with the steam whistle sounding loudly.

The sound tore through the dense fog, frightening away the water birds.

Pete climbed onto the high platform, raised the red flag, without any superfluous mobilization: "Start construction, for the Red Tide!"

"For the Red Tide!"

The echoing shouts drowned out the roaring of the icy river.

Lily picked up a gauge almost as tall as herself, and charged towards the riverbank with the team.

The first pile was driven heavily into the riverbank amidst the mist.

The fate of Gray Rock Province, at this moment, was pinned beneath the foundation.

Chapter 783: A Half-Year Miracle

It's been exactly six months since Red Tide took over Gray Rock Province.

The meeting room in Black Iron City was very quiet.

Outside the window, the early autumn morning light was slightly chilly, sliced into a thin line by the thick curtains, falling on the black walnut long table.

The air lacked the biting chill of frost, carrying a slight coolness, with the fireplace lit symbolically, allowing those inside to forgo coats.

Louis sat at the head position, his cloak draped over the back of the chair, holding a pen which he twirled lightly between his fingers.

"Lord Louis." Green entered with a hint of the outside cold on his shoulder, carrying a heavy roll of parchment in his arms.

Louis nodded, with no unnecessary pleasantries, signaling Green to begin his report: "Go ahead directly."

Green placed the parchment in the center of the table, pressing it down with both hands, and gave it a firm pull.

As the map unfurled, everyone in the room instinctively lifted their heads.

This was no longer the old map of Gray Rock Nobility's territory seen six months ago.

No mottled color blocks, no densely-packed coats of arms, none of those borders that fragmented the province into pieces.

The entire parchment was left with only red lines, crisscrossing from the Governor's Mansion extending to the mines, valleys, work sheds, checkpoints, and villages and towns.

The lines varied in thickness, dense at nodes, resembling the veins and nerves of a body.

Louis's fingertips moved slowly along the map's edge, his gaze pausing on each of the red line nodes one by one.

Green stood straight, reporting: "My Lord, according to your Red Tide System Plan, Gray Rock Province's transformation is complete."

He raised his hand towards the center of the map: "The seventy thousand population, forty-eight mining areas, and three glacial rivers have all been integrated into the Red Tide System."

Louis glanced up at him, his gaze resting on his face for a moment: "Well done."

Then he gestured slightly, indicating to continue, "Continue."

Green cleared his throat and continued: "Six months ago, hundreds of petty barons governed independently, determining tax collection, mining, and labor usage based on their debts and temperaments."

He spoke of the old state briefly, as if tossing out decayed meat: "We abolished all local nobility's legislative powers. Now Gray Rock speaks with one voice, the voice of Red Tide Central."

Green pointed to the three main lines on the map.

"Every directive issued from the main city, through a tri-level hierarchy of Deacons, town officials, and village chiefs, reaches even the most remote mining villages, without discrepancy, achieving one hundred percent execution."

Louis's fingers tapped the table lightly twice: "Rules must be clear. Fear can only maintain order, rules can maintain the system."

"Yes." Green nodded, "Thus, we've posted the regulations at the entrance of each work shed, and even literacy classes first teach them to recognize work points and rules."

Hearing this, Louis's mouth moved slightly, as if satisfied.

Green turned a new page: "In the past six months, the Inspection Department Division in Gray Rock initiated 620 cases, publicly trying 850 holdover officials."

"Extortion, embezzling public rations, falsifying work points, illegally selling medicine. We didn't overlook a single one."

He voiced the numbers unemotionally, as if reporting mineral weights.

"The populace finally believes, there's no leniency based on moods, nor privileges based on identity here."

"Keep a close watch." Louis nodded, "And even if it's Red Tide's officials involved in misconduct, they cannot be exempt."

Green acknowledged, turning to the Population Register, continuing: "The officially registered population is 724,000, among which 400,000 were extracted from mines, mountains, and abandoned villages, previously undocumented."

"They didn't count as people before, now they have names, numbers, and work point accounts."

Green's hand paused in turning the page: "In the past six months, we've promoted over three thousand grassroots officials. Six months ago, they were slaves, refugees, or miners."

He looked up, unable to entirely suppress the excitement in his tone.

"As long as they're willing to learn, work, and recognize words, even a slave can sit in an office. This upward path, once opened, wins hearts more than distributing Gold Coins."

Louis confidently smiled, as if anticipating this: "Have they gone mad?"

"They have." Green also smiled, "Every day, people lining up for literacy classes break down the doorstep."

After a brief silence, someone in the meeting room suddenly chuckled softly, soon spreading like ignited laughter around the table.

They themselves once sat on the benches of literacy classes, starting with copying the first word, tallying the first work point step by step to where they are today.

"Regarding supplies," Green brought the topic back, "we replicated Red Tide City's free adoption system. First registration, then housing, clothing, and food distribution. Epidemics and unrest have been mostly nipped in the bud."

He pointed to the southern part of the map: "The Black Valley Basin. Leveraging glacial hydropower and geothermal technology imported from the headquarters, we completed the first phase of the greenhouse zone.

Though not yet able to feed everyone well, there's enough potato stew with mushrooms. Death from hunger and cold has vanished from the statistics."

Louis gently exhaled, his gaze still lingering on the map: "Progress meets expectations."

Green said: "This is the Lord's plan..."

His words started to drift unconsciously towards praise.

Louis first raised his hand to interrupt him: "Enough. Don't flatter me."

After these words fell, the meeting room first went quiet, then someone couldn't help but laugh.

Interrupted like this, Green felt slightly relaxed, smiling still, yet not wholly restrained.

"My Lord, you may dislike hearing this, but it must be said." He closed the booklet, as though wrapping his words differently.

"What shocks me the most is people's hearts. Previously, they shouted 'Long live Duke Remont' out of coercion. Now shouting 'Long live Lord Louis' is because they know their lives are genuinely on the rise.

Chapter 784: The Half-Year Miracle (Part 2)

"They no longer see themselves as Gray Rock People; they call themselves Red Tide People when dealing with outsiders."

A few people in the room exchanged glances; some had a smile at the corner of their mouths, some quietly let out a breath.

Louis's gaze returned to the map crisscrossed with red lines.

He was not carried away by these words; he merely confirmed one thing in his heart: once people start willingly placing themselves into this network, they will no longer be willing to return to the shadow of the old Nobility.

Green closed the Population Register and switched to a thicker file, whose corners had grown fuzzy from constant flipping.

"Next is material output." His tone clearly shifted up a gear. "The daily output of various minerals has increased tenfold compared to before we took over.

It's not that new veins suddenly appeared, but that for the first time the mines have truly achieved round-the-clock operation. The hydropower forge on the Ice River runs day and night; raw ore is no longer piled up inefficiently in open yards, but is directly compressed, cut, and forged into standardized steel ingots."

Green paused, as if to confirm that everyone present was keeping up with this change, then continued.

"This is the first time Gray Rock has possessed the concept of standard components; it can now be integrated as a whole into the Red Tide industrial system, rather than merely serving as a producer of scattered raw materials."

He tapped a few sections of the Ice River on the map. "In addition, based on your intelligence, we also discovered an associated mineral—Frost-Grain Copper—on the deep riverbed of the Ice River.

This metal has excellent ductility, and its tolerance to hot and cold changes far exceeds that of ordinary copper. The Craftsmen Office has confirmed it is highly suitable for critical components of steam engines and for the core structures of urban heating pipelines."

Green turned another page. "Also, the Mining Office dug out high-density iron ore from an abandoned deep shaft. Valentine has named it Abyss Black Iron."

This ore has three times the density of ordinary iron and naturally possesses anti-magic properties. It is extremely difficult to forge, but once formed, it becomes an exceptionally reliable military material.

"At present it is only in the trial-production stage," Green reported truthfully, "but it has already attracted attention."

Louis nodded. "Classify these two as strategic materials."

Green continued, "The data on the agricultural line is not dazzling, but it is stable.

Gray Rock is unsuitable for growing wheat; we have repeatedly verified this conclusion. So we did not forcibly copy the Northern Territory model, but directly acknowledged the mismatch and turned to alternative solutions."

He pointed to the western side of the map.

"In the deep layers of Red Earth Slope, we discovered an associated magic-plant, Ember Root.

It absorbs volcanic ash and trace fire elements as it grows; it cannot serve as a staple grain, but it is highly valuable in the field of Knight cultivation.

Potions refined from it can gently nourish Fighting Energy bloodlines and significantly improve Apprentice Knights' success rate in breaking through to the formal rank. We have already submitted an application to expand the cultivation area."

Louis inclined his head. "Expand it to the maximum extent."

Green nodded and turned to the next page:

"For food security, we still rely on Ghostlight Mushrooms. Director Mike has completed an improved cultivation method in Gray Rock: high in protein, highly adaptable, able to yield steadily in mines, greenhouses, and damp environments.

They cannot solve the problem of affluence, but they can solve hunger. For the Gray Rock of today, that is enough."

As for animal husbandry, the local Rock-Scale Boars have already been fully domesticated.

These beasts have thick skin and dense flesh, are resistant to cold and disease, their meat is firm, and their hides approach the strength of light Armor materials.

From breeding and slaughter to processing, everything can be completed within the province. This is the first time Gray Rock has formed a complete agriculture–industry closed loop."

Green paused, then naturally pushed the topic forward.

"Next, all remaining old Knights in Gray Rock and wandering mercenaries have been brought under control, totaling eight hundred people.

The original family-based formations have all been abolished; they were all broken up and reorganized, then integrated into Red Tide mixed units. The political commissar system was stationed simultaneously; tactics, discipline, and ideology have been advanced together."

"There were plenty of conflicts in the first two months, including those who refused to execute orders, and those who formed private associations in secret."

Louis asked, "And now?"

Green replied steadily, "Now they know for whom their swords are used, and they also know where they will be sent if they disobey.

Finally, talent: the first batch of night school graduates have already been assigned down to the village and township level.

They may not know many characters, but they can calculate work points, keep accounts, and fill out forms. Grassroots operations have already become inseparable from them. These people are more loyal than Knights.

Another unexpected gain is the return flow of technical skills. Craftsmen and Blacksmiths, stonemasons, Pharmacists who had been buried among the common people... have all been re-rated and decorated by the Craftsmen Office and brought back into the system.

Someone improved the waterwheel transmission shaft, increasing efficiency by twenty percent; someone improved the structure of mine lamps, cutting the accident rate in half.

We gave them medals and houses, and the result is that craftsmen across the entire province have begun proactively submitting improvement proposals."

At the end of the report, Louis wrote a single bright red character: Excellent.

He then closed the "Gray Rock Province Reconstruction Report," which was almost flawless.

When the parchment scroll was set back on the table, there was no deliberate pause, no symbolic sense of ceremony; it was simply laid down, as if merely to finalize a confirmation.

He rose and walked to the floor-to-ceiling window on the side of the conference room; outside was Black Iron City.

The streets were clean, the transport rails straight; the rhythmic sound of steam engines came through the thick window, not harsh, but steady.

Louis concluded, "You have done more than just revive Gray Rock. You have proven one thing: the Red Tide system can take root away from the Northern Territory."

No one in the conference room responded; this was not something that required an answer.

Louis turned around, his gaze sweeping along both sides of the long table. "Everyone, it's time for me to go back."

When this sentence fell, there was none of the commotion one might have expected in the room.

"The Northern Territory is the brain and heart of Red Tide," Louis went on. "There is a far more complex game waiting for me there."

His eyes lingered on Green for a brief moment, then moved to the others. "As for Gray Rock, it is now a giant that has learned to walk. It no longer needs me to hold its hand at every moment."

At this moment, the atmosphere changed—it was a kind of joy born of being acknowledged by Louis.

Louis returned to the head of the long table, placed his hands on the tabletop, and leaned forward slightly.

In that instant, the air in the conference room clearly tightened.

"Before I leave, there are two things. First, the old Nobility will not give up. Having lost in open confrontation, they will inevitably change their methods. There will be money sent, favors offered, marriage alliances discussed."

Louis's tone was very calm, yet carried a chill that could not be misunderstood.

"Tell the Inspection Department to keep their eyes sharp. Red Tide does not fear steel blades; what it fears are soft knives."

Whoever dares accept a single Gold Coin from the old Nobility, I will send him to Black Valley to dig coal for the rest of his life—no matter who he is, no matter how great his merits."

"Second, once I am gone," Louis looked at Green, "you are the highest-ranking official here.

But you must remember, it is not you, Green, who governs Gray Rock, but the Red Tide Code. Do not let personal likes and dislikes take the place of law. Institutions are an iron cage, and also a shield."

He straightened up, pressing his voice even lower. "Seven hundred thousand people can lift you up, and they can also tear you to pieces. The only thing that can keep them from falling into chaos is the system."

Green nodded nervously, indicating that he understood.

Louis straightened, walked up to Green, and took a seal from his breast.

The seal was not large, its edges polished smooth, with the Sun emblem of Red Tide engraved upon it.

"Green. The food, clothing, shelter, and transport of seven hundred thousand people, and forty-eight mining districts—are now all entrusted to you."

He placed the seal in Green's hands.

Green was the first to rise, followed by Mike, Mike, Cyril, Valentine...

The chairs slid back at the same time, the sound as neat as if it had been rehearsed.

Green held the seal with both hands, his eyes turning red, yet without a trace of wavering.

"My lord, please rest assured as you head north. We will guard this southern gate of Gray Rock well. Whether it is the Imperial Army or the temptations of decay, as long as the banner of Red Tide still flies, Gray Rock Province will never change its colors."

Everyone saluted. Louis looked at them, said nothing more, donned his coat, and turned to push the door open.

The chill wind of early autumn poured into the room, lifting a corner of the map on the table, then letting it fall again.

The great machine of Gray Rock Province no longer needed him to push it; it was already running calmly and steadily along its predetermined track.

Chapter 785: The State of the Imperial Capital

Dusk hung over the wilderness outside the Empire's northern gate like a veil of dirty gold.

Two skinny horses blended into the sparse stream of people entering the city, their hooves crushing the frozen mud churned by wagon ruts, making a dry creaking sound.

On the horse in front sat a middle-aged man wrapped in a linen cloak; the edges of the cloak were worn to fuzz and caked with dust from the road.

He pressed his hood very low, as if unwilling to let any gaze linger on his face.

His name was Valerius, and he was a Viscount.

Riding beside him, the Knight Cassian wore no cloak, only buttoned his outer coat tight.

The man had been silent all the way, even suppressing his coughs; his gaze never left the edges of the crowd and the road.

Valerius knew Cassian did not believe in those soothing words that eased the heart; he believed only in the sword in his hand.

As for Valerius... he preferred to put his faith in other things.

He laid one hand against his chest.

There, wrapped in oiled paper, was a sheaf of documents—more than one.

On top lay one of the revised drafts of the New Imperial Charter.

During the Fourth Prince's regency, he had been summoned to the palace's legal office, charged with revising and compiling the original draft.

Line by line he had checked and weighed every clause, pressing idealistic phrasing back toward reality, breaking apart and rewriting any article that might lead to chaos.

When the great Burst broke out, he was not in the Imperial Capital.

At that time he was in one of the Empire's most remote territories, investigating the implementation of local courts.

The roads were blocked; by the time he heard the news, the Imperial Capital's gates were already flying a different banner.

He did not dare return; the scraps of information that trickled in afterward grew more terrifying each time.

The legal office had been raided, its archives sealed; most of his colleagues who had remained in the Imperial Capital were likely already hanging from the city gate or the public square.

Valerius stopped in that border province, lying low to wait out the storm.

And now, nearly a year had passed.

No matter how bloody the Empire became, someone still had to write documents, collect taxes, and pass judgment. Even the most brutal rule could not dispense with Civil Servants.

And he... at the very least, wanted to come back and see whether his family still lived; if they did not... then at least he needed to see it with his own eyes.

The horses rounded a bend.

The city walls of the Imperial Capital loomed into view.

Valerius's pupils tightened sharply; even his breath stopped for an instant.

The walls in his memory were a work of art built from white sunstone.

Reliefs of the founding epic were carved into their surface: ranks of Knights, farmers at harvest, the oath of alliance among all races, all etched into the light by the stonecutters' delicate strokes.

On festival days, the reviewing stands would be draped in colored cloth, and the scent of spices and incense would ride the wind all the way beyond the city.

But the wall before him looked as though someone had taken a hammer to it in a rage.

Those reliefs had been crudely chiseled flat, leaving jagged white scars, like a face ruined beyond recognition.

A layer of black molten iron had been poured over the outer side of the wall; once cooled, it formed a rough, scale-like texture.

Above, barbed wire was strung tight as a drawn bowstring.

The original reviewing stands were gone.

In their place stood dozens of heavy ballistae; their arms as thick as tree trunks, their bolt-heads shrouded in black iron, cold and utterly lightless.

What truly made Valerius's stomach sink was that those bolts were not aimed at the barren plains and enemies outside the city.

Their targets were the road leading into the city—people like him, common folk.

The wind blew from the direction of the moat.

There was no spice on it, only the reek of rust and horse dung, and a faint tang of blood that would not disperse.

The waters of the moat shimmered dark red, as if polluted with alchemy waste; fine black scum floated on the surface.

A few crows perched on the barbed wire, heads lowered as they pecked at something, then lifted them again, their eyes like drops of lacquer.

Valerius's hand trembled beyond his control; the oiled paper bundle in his cloak rustled faintly.

He forced himself to swallow the dryness in his throat, only to find he could not shape a single complete sentence.

"This is no Imperial Capital..." he said inwardly, "this is plainly a vast prison, ready at every moment to slaughter."

Cassian reined in his horse beside him, his gaze sweeping over the ballistae above the gate and the patrolling armored soldiers.

There was little expression on his face; only his hand clenched more tightly around the hilt of his sword.

The line at the gate inched forward.

Someone ahead was called to a halt; a gate guard used his spear to hook open the man's bundle, fished out a piece of silver jewelry, and tossed it straight into the iron chest at his feet.

The man began to protest, and was immediately kicked face-first into the mud.

When it was Valerius's turn, the inspection was not a whit more lenient.

The soldiers rifled through his baggage, tossing every trinket he had brought along the road into the iron chest. A few Silver Coins he had meant to keep for "greasing palms" were struck on the spot to test their metal, then confiscated without a second thought.

Even an old ring—a family keepsake of little monetary value—earned only a cold sneer before the soldier threw it into the chest.

Then someone's gaze fixed on Cassian. "Sword."

Cassian's hand tightened reflexively for a heartbeat, then relaxed.

He unbuckled his Knight's Sword and laid it flat on the ground.

The blade had been dulled by years of use; old oath-marks still scarred the guard.

A soldier kicked the sword aside with his boot, as if shoving away a piece of useless iron.

The line moved on. No one spoke.

Valerius looked at that city gate; now the world beyond it was like an iron cage cinching shut.

He tried to find some familiar order in the shadow of the walls, but saw only black iron and barbs.

Beyond the gate lay another kind of order.

The inner-city streets had been widened and straightened, yet there was nothing of openness about them.

The stone slabs had been pried up and relaid again and again, their gaps filled with dark pitch; the horses' hooves rang on them with a dull echo.

Chapter 786: Imperial Capital Status (2)

Every hundred steps, a temporary outpost could be seen, with iron plates nailed to wooden stakes. Behind the plates stood fully armed soldiers, their crossbows perpetually taut.

As the knight patrol turned the street corner, pedestrians fell to the ground like stalks of wheat swept by the wind.

No one needed reminding; the rules here were evidently ingrained in their bones.

Commoners had to kneel, with their foreheads touching the ground and their hands spread open.

Someone who was a beat slow was directly kicked over by the front hooves of a warhorse, rolled half a circle on the stone slabs, and then stomped on by the hooves from behind.

A scream echoed, yet the procession did not stop, the knights didn't even glance down.

Valerius dismounted his horse as well.

The cold of the stone slabs seeped through his knees, leaving him with a nameless absurdity.

Continuing forward, a commotion arose from a side street.

It was a tavern, surrounded by a circle of knights at the entrance.

Two knights were dueling, their blades clashing and sparking as if putting on a show for someone.

The surrounding laughter and jeering merged into one; someone bet loudly, their tone as flippant as if gambling on dice.

Valerius instinctively looked for the judge, but saw only a woman pressed into the corner of the wall.

Her hand was forcefully pinned to a barrel, her mouth gagged, and she couldn't make any sound.

Only then did he realize what the stakes were.

The outcome was quickly decided.

The victorious knight kicked his opponent aside, casually swung his sword, and blood splattered onto the tavern's wooden door, leaving bright, wet marks.

The knight raised his sword above his head, one arm wrapped around the woman, accepting the surrounding knights' cheers.

Valerius' stomach churned.

He recalled lecturing about knightly spirit, self-restraint, and honor in the classroom; those words now seemed empty and ridiculous.

"They are not knights," Cassian said quietly.

Valerius did not respond; he had no extra words to refute or argue.

Further ahead lay the Empire's Supreme Court.

The building once was the quietest place in the Imperial Capital.

Only soft conversations were allowed under the dome; between the stone columns echoed the sound of judgment being pronounced by the judges.

Now, stakes stood in the square.

Ropes hung in mid-air, beneath which were bloodstains not yet cleaned. The side hall, once storing archives, was emptied and piled into a small black mountain.

Books and codes were casually thrown together, some already scorched, others still emitting faint smoke.

A soldier squatted by the fire, holding a tattered page in his hand.

Valerius recognized it immediately.

It was a torn page from the Ancient Royal Code, a passage he had quoted countless times before.

The corners of the page curled up, soaked in grease; the soldier wiped his fork with it and tossed it into the fire.

As the flame surged, the writing was consumed.

Valerius stood still, as if something heavy pressed on his chest.

He finally understood something.

Laws were no longer needed here, or rather, only one law remained here.

Valerius did not walk further.

He turned with Cassian into a remote side street.

The stone slabs here were older, walls scraped repeatedly, leaving mottled red stains, like blood dried and then smeared.

His former residence was not hard to find.

Yet when it truly appeared in his sight, Valerius still halted.

The gate had been repainted with an eye-catching, almost flamboyant crimson, adorned with unfamiliar military flags, black-backed with red patterns, the emblem of the 13th Legion swaying slightly in the twilight.

Valerius did not approach, secretly peering over the fence into the yard.

The tree in the garden was gone.

He had planted it with his wife, almost died in its first winter, he had wrapped it in straw ropes himself.

Now, in its original position stood a coarse stake, with a war beast's reins tied around it, the ground trampled into a quagmire.

Laughter rang from the balcony.

A legion commander with a pugnacious face sat boldly in a deck chair outside the study.

He held an antique wine cup, which Valerius recognized as one of his collections, brought back from the South many years ago.

The wine was poured into a copper bowl on the ground.

A hunting dog lowered its head to lap at it, the wine dripping from its mouth onto the stone slabs.

The commander patted the dog's neck, laughing as if praising some obedient animal.

Valerius' gaze slowly shifted away.

"Go." Cassian said just one word, already turning to block him ahead.

They wound through the back alley, lined with trash bins, the smell pungent.

A hunched figure struggled to pull a cart filled with overflowing chamber pots, staggering and almost slipping on icy patches.

Valerius recognized him immediately as his former butler.

Now the old man's one eye was cloudy and white, eye sockets sunken, wrinkles on his face like deeply carved lines.

"...Master?" the old man rasped, lifting his head.

He paused for a few breaths, then abruptly knelt but didn't dare clutch Valerius' clothes.

"What, how, why have you come back..." Before he finished speaking, tears fell into the dirty water.

Valerius helped him lean against the wall to sit down.

The old man's voice was intermittent, as if afraid of being overheard.

"Master, a month after you left, the Second Prince's men came. They said this house had good feng shui, fit for raising dogs..."

His voice choked as if blocked by something.

"The lady... the lady took out the legal documents to reason with them." His voice suddenly lowered, "and was immediately..."

The rest wasn't said, only suppressed sobbing remained.

Chapter 787: Imperial Capital's Current State (3)

"The young master and young lady were sent to the orphanage." The old man raised his intact eye, which was filled with fear, "Never... never heard from again."

The alley was very quiet.

In the distance, a bugle sounded, and nearby only the slight sloshing of water in the night soil bucket could be heard.

Valerius just stood there, head bowed, clutching the packet of oil paper tightly.

A dozen seconds later, he slowly let go.

A clear bloodstain was left on the oil paper.

Valerius lifted his head and looked at the old man sitting against the wall: "Come with me."

The old man hesitated for a moment, then shook his head firmly, though his movement was slow: "I can't, sir. I'm just old bones now, can't move fast, can't hide. Following you will only be a burden."

Valerius frowned and was about to speak, but the old man raised his hand to stop him.

"Besides..." The old man looked down at his filthy hands, "Even if we leave, where could we go?"

The words fell like a stone.

Outside the Imperial Capital was a war-torn land, a hunting ground for the nobility, land that could be reclaimed and abandoned at any time.

For an old servant who had lost his identity and sight, there was no road truly leading to survival.

Valerius stood silently.

But the old man forced a crooked smile: "It's enough that you're alive."

Valerius finally closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

...

The night wind swept across the wasteland, stirring the dry grass, its mournful cries heard in the distance.

They didn't stay long in the Imperial Capital, leaving that very night.

The campfire was small, barely able to ward off the cold, its flames flickering in the wind, stretching their shadows long and short.

Valerius stood by the fire, not sitting down. His back was more hunched than during the day, as if weighed down by the night.

Slowly, he untied the oil paper packet.

The manuscript was revealed, its corners stained with blood and mud, the pages frayed.

Valerius gazed at it for a long time, his sight unfocused, as if looking at an old relic disconnected from him.

Then, he let go.

The manuscript of the "New Imperial Charter" fell into the flames.

The tongues of fire quickly licked the pages, consuming the words bit by bit in the heat.

Several clauses that he had pondered repeatedly flashed in the firelight, then turned black, fragmented into fine ash.

The fire gradually dimmed.

Cassian stood nearby, pressing the empty scabbard of his sword, speaking softly: "Where to go? South are heretic gods, west is war."

Valerius looked at the embers, his gaze as hollow as the night over the wasteland.

"This continent has gone mad." His voice was light yet clear.

"Perhaps we should find a deserted mountain, live like savages. At least beasts eat to survive, unlike those people in the city who do it for pleasure."

Then, the shadow of a roadside tree swayed lightly.

A man emerged from the shadows.

He wore a gray double-breasted wool coat, the edges clean, free of mud.

His footsteps were light, stopping at the edge illuminated by the firelight, a distance avoiding any hint of provocation.

The man removed his hat.

He gave an impeccable classical nobility bow to the dust-covered, ragged old man.

Valerius squinted, like a wounded old wolf, instinctively taking half a step back.

"Are you a lapdog of the Second Prince or a spy of some bandit? If it's for money, you've come to the wrong person. Every last silver coin I had was trampled into the mud by those knight lords."

The man merely smiled slightly, took out a silver hip flask from his coat, and also a honeycake carefully wrapped in a clean white linen napkin.

Steam wafted from the edges, carrying the sweet scent of honey.

"Strong northern liquor drives away the cold." His tone was steady, "The honeycake has honey in it. Please don't misunderstand, sir, this isn't charity. It's Red Tide, honoring you."

Valerius' gaze fell on the white napkin.

It was the first clean thing he'd seen since stepping into the Imperial Capital.

The deliberate propriety pricked his heart.

"Honor?"

He laughed coldly, not reaching out.

"The Northern Territory? That boy Louis Calvin? Why, now even an old bone like me discarded by time is to be reclaimed?"

His tone turned sharp.

"Or is he trying to buy my name, to gild his makeshift regime full of the stench of money and blood with a sheen of legitimacy?"

He turned his head, refusing to look at the food again, suppressing the spasms in his stomach.

The mysterious man withdrew the honeycake and flask, his expression still gentle: "You misunderstand."

He said, "It's not reclamation, it's seeking counsel."

"The Northern Territory's wind snow is hard, not only needing iron walls but also rational laws to soften it."

He sighed and from his coat drew out a roll of parchment, handing it over with both hands: "This is the draft of 'Citizen Law' being trialed in Red Tide Territory."

Valerius snorted, grabbing the parchment.

"Let me see what kind of nonsense that little lord can write."

He scanned it in the moonlight.

At first, there was contempt.

But when he saw the first clause regarding "the sacred inviolability of private property," his gaze halted.

He continued reading.

The phrasing was straightforward, even a bit crude, yet the logical framework was unexpectedly clear, impossible to ignore.

Valerius' fingers began to tremble slightly, a mix of anger and jealousy.

This should have been my work in the Imperial Capital.

He suddenly closed the parchment tight, snatched the silver flask, and took a gulp.

The spicy liquor slid down his throat, bringing color to his pale face.

"Crude, too crude." He pointed at the parchment, as if scolding an unruly student.

"Article 3 and Article 7 clearly conflict. If implemented like this, your courts will collapse within three years."

The mysterious man bowed again, a smile flickered in his eyes: "That's why we need you."

Valerius snorted, stuffing the parchment into his muddied coat, turning up into a nearby carriage: "Don't misunderstand.

I'm not joining you; I just... can't stand such garbage laws circulating in the world. If his cellar only has such poor liquor, I can leave at any time."

The carriage started slowly, leaving two deep ruts on the wasteland, extending northward.

Chapter 788: Headhunting Operation

Sixty miles north of the Imperial Capital, there lies an abandoned mill.

The night was pressing down heavily, with wind blowing in from the edge of the wasteland, carrying the scent of broken snow and dry grass, stinging the face.

The wooden wings of the mill had long since broken, leaving only a shadow-like axle, swaying slightly in the wind.

When Varius was brought here by that mysterious figure, the first thing he saw was a group of carriages.

They were scattered around the mill, their tracks crisscrossing on the permafrost, looking like a temporary assembly point.

Varius dismounted, stood still, and observed the silhouettes around him in the flickering light of scattered torches.

Maintaining order was a team of knights who looked like mercenaries. They wore mismatched armor, cloaks of varied colors, and their weapons were from different origins.

But Varius could see that it was just a disguise.

Their stance was steady, their speech brief, and their gaze constantly patrolled the entrance and perimeter of the mill.

These were people who had received systematic training.

What truly made Varius' heart tighten was the people gathered in the open ground of the mill.

These people did not seem like ordinary refugees.

Varius' gaze scanned their faces, recognizing a few.

They were people who had shown their faces in various departments during the former Emperor's reign.

There was a special officer from the Treasury, an auditor from the armory, and one... responsible for judicial inspections in the Southern Empire.

Now these people were either disheveled or looked ashy; he understood it was the Second Prince's disruption.

Yet, even so, Varius could see the marks of long-term professional polishing on them.

"The Northern Territory has a big appetite," Varius whispered to Cassian beside him, "so many talents, not one missing."

Cassian glanced at the knights on the mill's exterior fringe and did not respond.

His hand still hung naturally at his side, as if ready for any sudden situation.

At this moment, the man who had brought them all the way north walked to the mill entrance.

He had changed into more practical clothing, the gray wool coat replaced by a simple leather jacket.

The firelight cast sharp and calm contours on his profile.

"Victor," someone murmured his name.

Victor stood at the mill entrance, holding a thick roster.

The pages were well-thumbed, full of names, origins, destinations, with several symbols marked in different colors.

He verified each one, and whenever a name was called, someone stepped out from the crowd, either nodding quietly or standing silently in a designated spot.

The entire process was very quiet, and everyone whose name was called was led to different carriages, which seemed random but was clearly arranged.

Varius was quickly assigned to an inconspicuous carriage.

When the roster reached the last page, Victor closed the book.

He lifted his head, his gaze sweeping over all the carriages around the mill: "Everyone is here, get ready to depart."

A few knights who looked like mercenaries immediately sprang into action, untying reins, adjusting axles, quietly urging the horses.

.....

Sitting inside the carriage, Varius wrapped himself in a blanket to keep warm.

The carriage was small, with rough wooden planks and an old mat covering the floor.

Besides him and Cassian, there were two other people.

One of them was an older man with a rather rugged appearance, broad shoulders, hands full of calluses, and fingers so gnarled they were somewhat deformed.

As he sat down, he carefully cradled a tool bag in his arms, protecting it as if it were more important than life itself.

"Varius," he introduced himself, "a registered Viscount of the Empire, formerly working in the palace legal office. This is my knight, Cassian."

"Baron," the old man spoke first, his voice hoarse but with a straightforward tone.

"Used to work in the Royal Factory." He straightened his back instinctively as he said this.

"One of the top craftsmen." He added, quickly explaining as if afraid of being misunderstood, "Awarded during the last Emperor's reign."

Varius nodded.

He noticed that his interlocutor always made a point of addressing him with "you" in a formal sense, a blend of reverence and hesitation.

"No need for such formal address now," Varius said calmly, "at this point, we're all about the same."

Baron paused, then scratched his head with a somewhat awkward smile: "Yes, yes... but rules must be kept."

"The Second Prince's men treat craftsmen like livestock," Baron's voice lowered, "doesn't matter what skills you have, only if you can endure. Those who can't are dragged away."

He swallowed hard: "I couldn't take it, so I ran away. Almost starved in the woods, until the Red Tide found me, saved my life."

Varius did not pursue further.

His gaze shifted to the other corner of the carriage, where the third person sat.

That person had disheveled hair, eyes sometimes dull, sometimes clear.

He was muttering under his breath, fingers drawing in the air as if silently writing formulas or dispelling nonexistent things.

Baron followed Varius' gaze and sighed.

"Master Herman. From the Royal Alchemy Institute."

He spoke slowly, as if piecing together the person's identity.

"Truly skilled, just... mentally unstable."

Herman suddenly raised his head, clarity in his eyes for a moment: "I'm fine..."

Chapter 789: Headhunting Operation_2

But the next moment, that clarity dissipated again.

Baron lowered his voice and continued, "The Second Prince forced him to conduct human experiments. While they were alive."

"He refused, but he had no choice, and later he became like this, lucid at times, confused at others. It was the people from the Red Tide who secretly brought him out."

The carriage gently rocked and began to move forward.

Varius leaned against the carriage compartment and closed his eyes.

He finally understood that this was not an ordinary transfer but an effort by the Red Tide to slowly extract the framework of the Imperial Capital.

This action was not a spur-of-the-moment decision.

It was an order from the North.

The Lord of the North was not in a hurry to seize land nor interested in immediately intervening in the burning city.

Because, in Louis's view, territory could be reclaimed with an army, but once truly talented individuals were exhausted, even the vastest lands would become nothing more than an empty shell.

And now, with the Northern Territory expanded by so much, this kind of professional talent was precisely what was needed.

Craftsmen, judges, alchemists, auditors... These are not knights and do not decide the outcome of a battle, but they determine whether a land can continue to function.

It is precisely because of this that the hands of the Red Tide would reach the crumbling edges of the Empire.

They do not seize the burning city or touch the already established powers; they only extract the remaining framework, not yet thoroughly crushed, from the crevices of disintegrating order.

.....

The carriage traveled on the bumpy dirt road for more than two months.

At first, it was muddy. The black soil churned up after the rain clung to the wheels, requiring frequent stops to scrape off the mud.

Later it was gravel, with loose stones bouncing around under the wheels, making the carriage sway until one felt queasy...

Until one morning, the carriage suddenly stabilized, and the bumping vanished without warning.

Varius opened his eyes and instinctively reached out to steady himself, only to find the carriage was no longer shaking.

He lifted the curtain; the road beneath was no longer the familiar earthen color.

It was a wide and straight gray-white hardened surface extending forward, showing almost no signs of rainwater damage.

The carriage's speed began to increase, and there was no need to urge the horses, which picked up the pace on their own.

"We've reached Gray Rock Province; it's Red Tide territory now. Everyone can come out and get some fresh air."

The knight disguised as a mercenary shouted from the front, his tone noticeably excited.

Baron directly jumped off the carriage.

He squatted by the roadside, disregarding his status, and scratched the road with his coarse fingers.

"This isn't stone," his voice tense, "and it doesn't feel like brick either."

He lifted his head, eyes wide open, as if seeing something defying common sense for the first time: "This is man-made, right?"

No one answered immediately.

Victor came from behind, glanced at the road, then looked at the shocked Baron.

"They say it's Red Tide graystone," he said calmly. "I don't know exactly how it's made, but it should be man-made."

Baron was at a loss for words, pressing his palm against the road surface as if to confirm the texture.

"To think there's such a thing..." he mumbled.

Varius did not get off the carriage.

His gaze followed the straight road ahead, looking at the distant rolling terrain.

In such muddy ground, what is the point of building such a straight road?

And how could it be done so quickly?

Gray Rock Province was captured less than a year ago.

And this road doesn't look like the result of rushed construction.

Victor seemed to notice his doubt, "When you get to the Red Tide, you can ask the craftsmen yourself; they know more than I do."

The convoy reorganized, no longer holding back the speed of the carriages, which started to move freely.

On this gray-white road, they could finally speed north without hesitation.

.....

This was already Red Tide territory.

The convoy moved forward for a while longer without pressing on through the night.

By the roadside, they stopped at a uniformly styled building.

The outer walls were painted a light gray with no family crest, only a simple wooden sign by the door.

This was Gray Rock Province's supply station.

After entering the province, such buildings would appear at regular intervals.

The carriages stopped in turn, and soldiers and mercenaries began guiding the people to rest.

As soon as Varius got off the carriage, he smelled a faint spicy scent.

In the center of the courtyard stood a large copper tea barrel, its walls polished to shine, with a small stove beneath to maintain temperature.

Someone turned the valve, amber liquid flowed out of the copper spout, and steam rose.

"Ginger tea, it's free." The soldier in charge of guarding spoke in a casual tone, as if repeating something commonplace.

Varius took the wooden cup, feeling the warmth on his fingertips.

He noticed that the people around him did not rush but lined up voluntarily.

After drinking, they would return the cups to the designated place.

Notices written in neat handwriting were posted on the walls of the supply station.

The contents of the "Sanitary Convention" were not complicated but were enforced: wash hands, centralized toileting, daily cleaning.

What surprised Varius even more was the absence of the pungent stench of filth in the air.

In this era, even in the Imperial Capital, the streets inevitably smelled of waste, whereas here, there was only the scent of hearth, hot tea, and moist earth.

He couldn't help but take a few more glances.

This order did not require constant oversight.

The convoy would rest here for two days.

After the first night, Varius found himself unable to stay in place.

At dawn, he left the supply station alone.

The Red Tide official at the door merely glanced at him without stopping or assigning anyone to follow.

Not far away was a mining area.

It was lunchtime, and from deep within the mines, a bell tolled.

The sound was deep and clear, projecting far in the cold air.

Varius had mentally prepared himself.

In his mind, miners always stooped over, covered in grime, like mice crawling underground.

But as he got closer, he was taken aback.

Emerging from the mine were brawny men in uniform gray cotton coats.

Their faces had coal dust, but they walked steadily and even laughed as they talked.

No one wielded a whip; they lined up of their own accord, waiting patiently for meals before a makeshift cafeteria.

The queue was orderly and quiet.

As Varius watched, he suddenly noticed a detail.

A young man reached out to receive food but was lightly tapped on the hand by a fellow worker beside him.

"Go wash your hands." The man motioned to one side, "The health team is watching; if you don't want points deducted, hurry up."

The young man cursed playfully but still ran to the sink, carefully scrubbing his hands with soap, before returning to the back of the line.

The whole process had no disputes, let alone coercion.

Varius stood where he was, feeling as if something lightly touched his chest.

It was something dreamlike for him.

He hailed from the Empire's legal system.

In the past few decades, all governance methods he had witnessed rested on a single premise.

They were inert, shortsighted, relying on violence, fear, or privilege to operate.

Laws on paper could be intricate and precise, but once separated from the noble's seal or the knight's whip, few truly believed they would be enforced.

Yet the miners before him voluntarily adhered to rules, reminded each other, and even actively maintained order, without any threats.

This was what shocked him the most.

It wasn't based on suppression by status, nor intimidation by force, but a clear, continuous, and predictable mechanism.

The further north they went, the more composed the people near the Northern Territory appeared.

Walking formations would yield the way, vendors priced their goods clearly, patrolling knights skirted around crops when passing fields.

Until one day, he saw a knight's horse ruin a field ridge with his own eyes.

The knight dismounted and spoke with the farmer briefly, then took out his purse and handed over compensation.

The farmer accepted the money and even gave a bow.

Varius stood by the roadside, not moving forward.

At this moment, the last hard part in his heart silently crumbled.

In Red Tide territory, class did not supersede the law.

Wasn't this the ideal he had meticulously debated in charters but couldn't realize?

The wind from the Northern Territory blew, bringing a deeper chill.

Varius felt that perhaps this land was worth observing seriously.

Chapter 790: Varius's Observations

The convoy continued north.

The wind and snow gradually became clean and sharp, with a familiar chill in the air.

When Frost Halberd City appeared on the horizon, Varius instinctively squinted his eyes.

This was once the core of the Northern Territory.

He had visited here several times in his youth. The city, scarred by war, had its walls repeatedly repaired, and its districts ripped open and barely stitched together like scars.

Everyone was in a hurry, eyes vigilant, as if the next horn could sound at any moment.

Even then, it was considered a major town of the Northern Territory, yet always a city dragged forward by war.

But what he saw now was completely different.

The city walls were taller, yet not bloated.

The streets were wide and straight, the snow promptly cleared, piled neatly on both sides of the road.

Pedestrians walked at a leisurely pace, and the shop signs were uniform and restrained, lacking the hysterical luxury of the Imperial Capital.

What surprised him most was the temperature inside the city.

The cold wind was kept outside, with pipes along the street constantly spewing warm air.

Even without approaching the fire, a steady warmth emanated from beneath his feet.

Varius stood at the street corner, momentarily lost.

This city was more magnificent than any of his previous visits, and more like a truly living capital than the current Imperial Capital.

They weren't allowed to stay long and were directed north of the city the next day.

A colossal building, never seen before, stood there.

Thick concrete walls extended outward, steel exposed without decoration, emphasizing only the functionality itself.

The dome was semi-enclosed, seemingly to accommodate some gigantic creature.

Varius' gaze fell to the ground.

Two parallel black iron tracks stretched into the darkness of the dome's depths.

His brows furrowed slightly, was this the sliding track for some giant ballista? Or... a device to transport the entire castle?

Just then, Baron suddenly rushed out.

The former royal chief blacksmith almost fell to his knees beside the tracks.

He removed his gloves, ignoring the chill, and touched the cold steel rail with trembling hands.

Then, he took out a small hammer and struck it hard.

"Dong—"

The sound was crisp and lingering.

Baron abruptly turned his head, eyes red: "This is top-grade steel, forged with no air bubbles!

You... you've laid it on the ground for people to step on? Such waste! Are the mines of the Northern Territory endless?"

Staff quickly pulled him up and stopped him from jumping further: "Do you want to die!?"

Victor stood aside, explaining: "This is called a railway, Master Baron, to make that steel beast run, the track must be harder than bones."

Before he could grasp the idea, the ground beneath his feet suddenly vibrated lightly.

It was a rhythmic dull sound, low and steady, like some kind of awakening pulse.

Soon, the sound arrived first: "Woo—!!!"

A piercing whistle tore through the wind and snow.

Everyone instinctively covered their ears, the warhorses startled into whining, hooves chaotically stomping the ground.

In the darkness, two dazzling yellow beams abruptly lit up, as if a giant beast had opened its eyes.

The next moment, steel broke through the fog, and the Black Steel charged out from the track's depths.

It was a five-meter-tall black locomotive, its body wrapped in heavy riveted armor.

Huge red rods drove half-person-high steel wheels, producing a rhythmic and fierce metallic clashing sound.

"Clack—Clack—!"

The chimney on the roof spewed thick black smoke and white steam, condensing rapidly in the cold air, rolling like clouds, engulfing half the platform.

Faced with this monster, no one's expression looked good, and some even slumped directly to the ground: "Monster..."

Varius' face was pale, gripping the railing beside him tightly.

Even on the battlefield, facing the Knight Order's frontal charge, he had never felt such clear helplessness.

If the Knight Order were to crash into this thing, he didn't need to think further.

The train slowly decelerated with ear-piercing brakes, sparks scattering along the track sides.

After brief hesitation, everyone was guided to board.

As the doors closed, wind and snow were completely shut out.

Warmth wrapped them silently.

Herman paused for a moment, then quietly took off his worn-out coat.

Inside the carriage, upholstered leather seats were arranged neatly.

The transparent glass windows were clean and bright, such features only graced the reception halls of the nobility in the Imperial Capital.

A conductor passed by with a trolley.

"Gentlemen, would you like some hot tea or today's Red Tide Daily?"

Varius accepted the teacup, then the fine printed newspaper.

He looked down at the headline, which was Louis' new decree for the day.

The tea was warm, the paper dry.

Yet his hand tensed slightly, this was not a means of transportation, this was the veins of rule.

The train started again.

Initially slow, then accelerating continuously.

The trees outside quickly receded, eventually blurring into lines.

In the distance, a cavalry team patrolled the snowy grounds, waving upon seeing the train.

The train passed them without pause, leaving them behind in the wind and snow.

"How many miles per day does this thing cover?" Varius asked softly.

The intelligence officer glanced at his pocket watch: "It can reach Red Tide City in three days, equivalent to the Knight Order's half-month journey."

Varius leaned back in his seat, exhaling slowly.

As someone who studied warfare and governance, he instantly understood what this meant.