

Winter 791

Chapter 791: Varius's Observations (Part 2)

Supplies delivered, troops deployed, and orders communicated.

No wonder the Northern Territory was able to conquer the Gray Rock Province in such a short time.

In front of this steel beast, all old warfare theories become a joke.

"The Northern Territory is bitterly cold?" He looked at the howling wind and snow outside the window, whispering self-mockingly.

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The train slid into the platform under the cover of darkness.

The moment the train doors opened, the scent of steam and metal surged in, like a thick fog clinging to the nostrils.

People disembarked with their luggage, and even as they stepped onto the hard ground of the platform, they could still feel the tremors from the tracks.

They followed the signs towards the exit.

Varius remained silent all the way. The sound of the whistle still lingered in his mind, like an echo that couldn't be stopped.

It wasn't until he stepped out of the station doors that the cold air hit his face.

The sky was so low and deep that it was almost dark blue, and by rights this kind of night should swallow everything.

Yet there was no night in the city before him.

Magic Stone Street Lamps and Gas Lamps intertwined into a massive web of lights, spreading from the main street and extending to the farther alleys, illuminating every patch of snow.

Snowflakes swirled and fell in the light, like finely polished crystal fragments.

In the distance, the Red Tide Main Castle hung on the mountain wall.

It was not a castle in the traditional sense.

A huge dome was fixed to the rock wall and steel frame, with a surface that emitted warm red light, like a steadily beating heart.

Heat waves slowly seeped from above, forming a thin white mist in the cold air, sliding down the mountain wall.

Varius instinctively raised a hand to his chest.

He recalled the Imperial Capital, where the city too had lights, but the lights were only in the Nobility district, and the night in the commoners' district was like a silent well, so dark it was suffocating.

But here, even the most peripheral alleys were lit, and it seemed only natural.

Patrolling Knights passed the street corner, their steps steady, snowflakes falling on their capes.

Workers pushed small carts along the roadside, the sound of wheels softly rolling over the hardened pavement.

Children's laughter leaked out from the cracks of some door, only to be quickly engulfed by the warmth inside.

Varius stood for a moment before realizing he had been in a daze.

"Please follow me." A gentle voice sounded beside him.

They were led to the station's side hall.

Someone was already waiting there, an elderly man in a neat black uniform.

His hair was white, but his spine was very straight, his gaze not cold, and even carried a well-judged sense of distance.

Varius had seen many similar people in the court.

The difference was that this elderly man had no air of flattery, and simply placed a hand on his chest, giving a crisp salute.

"Bradley." The elderly man introduced himself, then handed over a neatly bound thin booklet and a somewhat heavy bronze key.

The cover of the booklet had a few clear words, "Accommodation Guide."

Varius suppressed the inappropriate fluctuations in his heart and spoke quickly, "I wish to meet with Lord Louis Calvin immediately. I have important amendments to legal codes and intelligence regarding the Imperial Capital..."

Bradley smiled slightly, "My lord, the Lord is currently inspecting the test firing of new cannons at the armory and is unlikely to return for three days."

Varius frowned.

But Bradley did not give him a chance to continue speaking, "Moreover, you've traveled far and wide, and it would be disrespectful to meet the Lord in your current state.

Please first rest for a few days in an apartment and experience life in the Red Tide. You will better understand what kind of people the legal codes you wish to amend should protect."

Varius opened his mouth, instinctively wanting to argue.

The apartment was not the kind of mansion used to flaunt status in the court, but a standard stone building, not very tall, with simplistic exterior walls.

Bradley simply pointed out the direction and then no longer accompanied him.

Varius pushed the door open alone, and as the door closed behind him, it isolated the sounds from the street.

The temperature inside made him stop instinctively.

It wasn't the scorching heat of a fireplace, but a uniform warmth seeping out from the floors and walls.

Following this warmth to the side, he saw a metal faucet embedded in the wall.

He hesitated for a moment but still reached out to turn it on, and clear hot water immediately flowed out.

Varius was stunned.

In the Imperial Capital, it took three servants to take turns boiling, carrying, and then lifting a bucket of water upstairs. But here, it was as readily available as air.

He continued inward, and in a white and quiet compartment, there was a strange white porcelain fixture.

Next to it was a brief usage instruction—it was a toilet. Following the instructions, he pressed a metal button, and the water spun down, neatly carrying everything away.

Beside the window, there was an expansive double-glazed pane, barring the cold wind outside, while preserving the night and lights in their entirety.

Even during early spring, snow still fell in the Northern Territory, and the city's web of light quietly stretched into the distance.

That night, he slept deeply.

The next morning, Varius walked alone onto the streets.

The main street was bustling with people, yet it wasn't noisy.

Workers pushing carts, children with backpacks, and women carrying baskets, each heading in their designated directions.

A newspaper-delivering teenager paused, around thirteen years old, dressed in a thick cotton coat, with a bulging cloth bag on his back.

The teenager pulled a newspaper from his bag, skillfully checked door numbers, and marked something off a list he carried using a charcoal pencil.

Varius slowed his steps.

Watching the sequence of actions, he finally couldn't help stepping forward.

"Child," he lowered his voice, as if afraid of disturbing something, "do you recognize the words on it?"

Chapter 792: Varius's Observations (3)

The boy lifted his head and looked at him.

There was no awe or guardedness in his eyes, only pure confusion.

"Of course I know, sir." He pointed to the door plate and read: "Baker Street, Number 22, Fisher Bakery."

The boy thought for a moment, then added matter-of-factly, "This is a second-grade compulsory lesson. If I couldn't read, how could I deliver newspapers and earn money?"

Varius stood there without responding immediately.

In the Imperial Capital, literacy was a privilege of the priests and nobility.

Knowledge was tightly guarded within high walls; the common people were not only ignorant but were deliberately kept from accessing writing.

As a result, the lower class was driven like beasts by instinct and fear.

Yet here, a child delivering newspapers could read, write, and earn a reward from it.

This is what truly shocked Varius.

Not far away, a few people gathered outside a bakery.

A customer was quietly questioning the weight of the bread. The shopkeeper did not raise his voice, simply placing the bread on a scale at the entrance.

Beside the scale stood a wooden sign—Fair Scale.

The shopkeeper pointed to a notice on the wall, "Red Tide Commercial Code."

"Tenfold penalty for shortweight." He said calmly, "Lord Louis set these rules; Red Tide people don't cheat each other."

The customer nodded, took the bread, and the matter ended there.

Varius sat down by the roadside.

It was an inconspicuous bench, its wood polished smooth, yet not cold to sit on.

Heat slowly emanated from beneath the bench, climbing up the spine from the geothermal pipes buried below.

Not long after he settled, another person joined him.

A young worker just finished his shift, his cotton coat unbuttoned, with sweat still on his forehead.

He placed his tool bag by his feet, exhaled deeply, but wore a smile on his face.

Varius turned his head, deliberately keeping his tone relaxed, "Is it tiring working here?"

The young man was momentarily stunned, then burst into laughter, revealing a mouthful of white teeth.

"Tiring!" he replied straightforwardly, "The Lord is strict about deadlines; if you run late, points get deducted."

Then he changed his tone to one of light-heartedness, "But it's worth the exhaustion. Last month I earned the full attendance award, so tonight we can stew lamb at home."

He turned his head and gave Varius a glance, "Sir, you're from out of town, right? In Red Tide, as long as you're willing to work, the Lord won't let you go hungry."

The young man patted his knee as if affirming the substantial reward he received, "Two years ago, I was a miner slave; how can I not be content now?"

After saying this, he stood up, picked up his tool bag, and naturally merged into the crowd.

Varius remained seated, the administrative center square not far away.

In the center of the square, a massive Red Tide flag was raised high.

The yellow sun emblem flapped in the cold wind, seemingly casting both light and heat into the night sky.

A row of bulletin boards stood beneath the flag.

Technological innovation awards, sanitary evaluation results, new legislation announcements, each notice was neatly posted; some stopped to check them, some whispered discussions, before quickly dispersing.

Varius stood up and walked to the flag.

He observed the bustling yet focused Red Tide people around him and finally understood.

This order wasn't built on plunder; it grew from the ruins, bit by bit.

At this moment, a slight commotion came from the street corner.

The crowd spontaneously opened a path.

Bradley walked over, accompanied by several attendants, his eyes sweeping the square before stopping momentarily on Varius.

The old man revealed an almost imperceptible smile, "Lord Varius, how has your stroll been these past days?"

Varius turned around, his gaze intense to the point of being impolite, "Please, you must tell me, when will Lord Louis return?"

He paused as if restraining something, "I have so many questions; I must see him, right now!"

Chapter 793: Fear and Belief

Bradley stopped in front of the door, raised his hand to gently push it open, then stepped back, gesturing a brief and restrained "please".

Varius walked in, the door closing behind him, cutting off the footsteps outside.

The air carried the scent of ink, mixed with the aroma of freshly brewed hot coffee.

There was none of the damp wood smell typical of old nobility's studies, nor any deliberately cultivated incense.

This place did not resemble a space meant to flaunt one's status, but rather a workstation ready to operate at any moment.

Varius instinctively took two steps forward.

Three walls were completely covered by enormous parchment maps.

The contour lines on the maps marked ridges and valleys layer by layer, meticulously outlining the direction of the mineral veins, and even indicating seasonal changes in water flow beside the rivers.

In the corners of some areas, there were tiny annotations detailing population density, food production, and labor structure.

Red lines extended from the various provinces, penetrating the maps like blood vessels.

Blue lines intertwined among them, marking the water and geothermal networks.

All lines ultimately converged on a single red dot — Red Tide City.

Varius stood still, not moving any further.

Suddenly, he experienced a vivid illusion; it felt as if he had walked not into a room but into the interior of a vast and intricate machine.

And this room was the brain of that machine.

It was then that he noticed the other side of the wall. It was not a solid wall but an entire expanse of glass.

Through the glass, one could overlook the city below.

Lights spread out during the polar night, and the streets resembled orderly neural pathways.

Crowds moved, convoys traversed, patrolling knights and workers with carts navigated around each other, all functioning in a set rhythm.

There was no chaos, nor was there stagnation.

Varius' Adam's apple moved slightly.

This was truly the center of Red Tide, the place that created the new Northern Territory and eventually conquered the entire Gray Rock Province.

Louis stood in front of the map at the center, with his back to the door.

It was a map that occupied the entire wall, the "North Territory Comprehensive Development Map".

His shirt sleeves were casually rolled up to his forearms, revealing strong and well-defined wrists.

He held a red pen, its tip steadily resting at the junction of Gray Rock Province and Red Tide Territory.

He drew a new line, as if adding the final confirmed trajectory to a plan long formed.

This was the third railway, an artery that would fully integrate Gray Rock into the Red Tide system.

Louis did not turn around but knew someone had entered.

"My lord Varius." He paused, with a hint of apology in his tone, "Sorry to keep you waiting.

I've been busy until now and only just found time to see you. I've reviewed the draft amendment to the Civil Law presented by Vic." Placing the red pen aside, he spoke naturally, "The supplemental provisions in Article VII are very precise."

Varius took two steps forward, stopping at a long table.

He adjusted his coat slightly and performed an old and restrained gesture of respect.

This was neither the courteous exchange between nobles nor the genuflection of a vassal to a monarch; it was a salutation used only among scholars and true wise men.

"Sir." Varius' voice was deep, yet carried an irrepressible excitement, "Those legal articles are but the work of a patchwork artisan, hardly worth mentioning.

What truly kept me sleepless throughout the night were all the things I've witnessed in your city over the past few days."

He raised his head, his gaze locking onto Louis: "I saw honest bakers, saw miners who instinctively lined up to wash their hands, and also saw children with light in their eyes.

In the Old Empire, such order existed only in the pages of a saint's book."

Varius' speech gradually quickened, as if seeking an answer: "I don't understand, how did you accomplish this? Was it your noble character that inspired them?

Or did you tirelessly preach to them about morality and honor, cleansing their originally savage souls?"

His gaze was almost fervent, this wasn't deliberate flattery, but rather the answers he found along his journey and during his days in Red Tide.

At that moment, he even forgot about identity and distance, wanting only to confirm one thing...

Was this young lord before him the moral saintly monarch he had searched for all his life?

Louis did not answer immediately; brief silence spread throughout the room.

Then he seemed to hear something slightly amusing and gently shook his head.

Louis turned around, casually tossing the red pen onto the table: "Clap."

His deep-set eyes calmly observed Varius, without any trace of joy from receiving praise.

"Viscount Varius." His tone was neither heavy nor slow but direct and crisp. "They abide by rules, speak truthfully, and understand politeness, perhaps because I taught them morality, but I don't think it's the main reason."

Louis walked to the table, picking up a piece of bread meant for a late-night snack.

He didn't eat; he simply held the bread aloft.

"Merely because..." he paused for a moment, "I fed them."

The air seemed to freeze for a moment, and Varius clearly paused.

This answer was unlike any explanation he had anticipated, momentarily throwing off his train of thought.

"Politeness is a flower that blooms on wheat stalks. When a person is hungry enough that their stomach walls contract, and the child in their arms cries, honor, law, and virtue are but waste paper.

For half a piece of moldy bread, even the most devout believer would turn into a beast.

Chapter 794: Fear and Trust (2)

"This is the instinct for survival, even God cannot change it."

He walked back to the huge map, his fingers slowly tracing the vast and fragmented territories of the Old Empire.

"When survival resources are depleted, any moral preaching will appear pale and laughable."

Louis suddenly turned around, his gaze sharp as a blade: "So the first thing I did was not to build churches or courts.

Instead, it was to grow food, repair heating, open mines, and make fertilizers... first to ensure the right to survive.

To let people live like humans without having to fight over each other just to survive.

At that time, they will naturally follow human rules."

He stopped speaking and looked at Varius: "Those virtues you praise.

Are merely decorations that naturally sprout out after the overflow of productivity."

Varius did not respond immediately, instinctively raised his hand and wiped the cold sweat from his forehead.

This explanation made him uncomfortable.

Not entirely wrong, but chilling, like a sharp blade without a handle.

He instinctively wanted to refute it, but couldn't find an entry point to overturn it as a whole for the moment.

"I admit, survival is the foundation." After thinking for a moment, Varius finally spoke, his voice lowered but still persistent.

"But a well-fed herd is often harder to control, they will become greedy and want more."

After calming down, Varius looked up again, refocusing his gaze on Louis.

"Not only do you feed them, you make them maintain awe and obedience to you even without military coercion, why is that?"

He paused for a moment, unconsciously retreating to his familiar territory.

"Or is it because of your background? The son of Duke Calvin... noble lineage naturally carries a kind of intrinsic legitimacy."

Louis smiled, his smile was shallow but carried a hint of mockery.

He turned and walked to the large floor-to-ceiling window, raising his hand to point towards the dark wasteland outside.

"Lineage?" Louis looked at Varius.

"If I throw myself into the wolf pack in that Snowfield now, do you think they would spare me because of my noble lineage?"

He turned around and gave an unadorned conclusion.

"They obey me, not because of love." Louis paused, "But driven by fear to the point where they have to make a choice."

Varius's brows remained furrowed, but it was no longer shaken by offense, it was an effort to understand.

Louis did not stop, continuing to speak, as if patiently breaking down a story that had been rehearsed repeatedly:

"Imagine what this land was like before Red Tide City existed.

There were no towns, only scattered villages, isolated from one another. When winter comes, roads are blocked, granaries run empty, Lords, fending for themselves, only able to guard their manors, with the fate of the common people left to destiny."

"Once an ordinary person enters the wilderness, they first have to beware of Magical Beasts." He paused, his tone not exaggerated, "But the truly lethal ones are often not them.

But another group of equally hungry, equally desperate people, who would rob, kill, treat strangers as threats, even as food.

But that is not evil, just an instinct when pushed to the limit. This was the true norm of the Northern Territory before the appearance of Red Tide.

In that state, life was solitary, poor, dirty, cruel, and short-lived."

Louis slowly clenched his fist, but didn't raise it so high, his tone also softened accordingly.

"Precisely because of fear, fear of freezing to death, starving to death, being devoured by their kind, these people finally realized, continuing like this, no one would live long."

His gaze was steady and clear.

"So they made a rational choice, willing to surrender a portion of their freedom, pay taxes... to exchange for order."

Louis gently exhaled: "They chose order, and I was just the one who happened to step forward and repeatedly fulfilled my promises.

When they discovered that what they surrendered truly exchanged for safety, food, and dignity, fear gradually retreated to the background."

"In its place, belief." He paused for a moment before adding another, "And gratitude."

"They fear losing me because they feel that once I fall, this city could disintegrate, and they would be thrown back into that wasteland where knives and luck are their means to survive."

"So they cherish everything they have now, willing to follow orders, maintain order, and contribute to this city."

Louis slightly lowered his eyelids, his tone very certain: "I know their intentions, and I know this trust and gratitude was earned by repeatedly fulfilling promises, which is precisely why I cannot betray it."

Varius's pupils slightly contracted, this was the first time he heard such an argument.

He wanted to refute, but found himself unable to find a truly solid flaw.

Louis turned around, leaning against the large glass window.

The lights of the city unfolded behind him, the streets, workshops, patrolling Knights, and still operating factories together creating a silent yet powerful scene, as if the entire Red Tide stood behind him.

"So you must understand one thing, the power in my hands is not bestowed by God, nor left by my father.

But temporarily handed to me by the twenty thousand Red Tide People and millions in the Northern Territory and Gray Rock Province who willingly choose order.

This is an entrustment, a transaction, an unseen but truly existing contract.

The reason this contract can be achieved is because they believe what I say counts.

I promised safety, so I built the city, formed the army, eradicated the wilderness, promised survival, so I repaired heating, expanded food supply, ensured winter was endured.

Promised people wouldn't be arbitrarily trampled, so rules were implemented on everyone."

"I fulfilled my promises, so they were willing to stake their future on me."

He did not evade reality, calmly added a sentence: "Of course their choices aren't many, but precisely because of this, this choice appears more important."

Louis turned his gaze back to Varius: "They give me compliance, taxes, and labor, and I give them safety, certainty of survival.

And a future that won't throw them back into the abyss during the deepest snowstorm."

"This is a contract neither dares easily breach."

Varius remained silent for a moment, he no longer tried to refute, tried to understand the logic within.

"Since it is a contract, breach is inevitable." Louis's tone turned cold, "The Second Prince treats power as personal property, only knows how to demand, but refuses to bear the responsibility of protection.

When the ruler only demands taxes, military service, and obedience, but no longer provides safety and survival guarantees...

This is no longer ruling, but unilateral breach of contract."

Louis raised his eyes, gaze cold: "So his downfall is a reckoning that will inevitably arrive."

Varius's legs went weak, almost unable to stand.

Within the Empire's context, this is the most vicious heresy of all doctrines.

Because it denies all the premises he was repeatedly taught...

Power does not descend from above, granted by God to the Emperor, and then by the Emperor to the vassals.

But ascends from below, converged by countless those who desire survival, and temporarily entrusted to one capable of bearing consequences.

This means imperial power is no longer a sacred gift, but an assignment that could be recalled at any time.

Means loyalty is not an obligation, but a result after meeting conditions.

In the Empire's legal system, this equates to shaking the foundations of the throne, any priest and judge would indisputably deem it as blasphemous thinking.

Yet in Louis's whole set of calm and coherent deducing, it appears extraordinarily reasonable and self-consistent.

Varius looked at the young man before him, as if watching someone tossing the crown into a furnace, trying to reforge the very rules of governance.

Louis restrained his momentum, he took up that red pen again, his tone returned to the previous calm.

"So I do not worry they will rebel as long as there's meat in their bowls, this city stands firm as Iron Wall.

Compared to the illusionary devotion to the monarch or patriotism, a contract alliance based on common interests is the world's strongest relationship."

Chapter 795: Contracts and Law

Everything Varius had ever been taught, and the legal intuition working in him like instinct, were all resisting this entire chain of argument.

In the classics he had studied, order came from the grant of those above, and authority came from the endorsement of the sacred.

If power could be lent out and taken back, then law would lose its foundation, loyalty would degenerate into transaction, and the whole world would be left with nothing but naked calculation.

This was sophistry—at least it had always been so throughout his life thus far.

Varius forced himself to calm down, pushing his emotions back into the depths of his heart, just as he did in the Imperial Court.

He rapidly sifted through those familiar arguments in his mind, trying to find a flaw sharp enough to pierce this entire system.

A few breaths later, his train of thought suddenly halted.

Not because he fully agreed, but because he had finally grasped a seam he could use to refute it.

Only then did Varius raise his head, take a deep breath, and speak again: "My lord, in the Imperial Capital, I too have seen countless commoners who cannot even eat their fill.

They are slaughtered by Knights, yet still remain obedient; if the weak have no power at all to resist the strong,

then why would the strong bother to care about this so-called contract?"

At these words, Louis laughed.

The lights outside the window plated his silhouette with a thin, cold edge.

"You're not wrong. In this Transcendent world, commoners indeed cannot kill an Emperor; even if an entire city is butchered, the strong still sit upon the throne."

He walked back to the map and lifted his hand to point at the location of the Imperial Capital.

"But resistance does not only take the form of drawing a sword. In this world, when the contract breaks, the weak indeed cannot kill the strong.

So they choose another path: they stop giving this country anything beyond what is needed to survive."

He raised his hand and pointed to the patches of farmland marked on the map.

"Farmers no longer till their fields deeply. Because an extra bushel of grain will not bring lower taxes; it will only bring heavier exactions.

They sow only enough seed on their own plots for the family to get through winter and barely manage the taxes; anything more they harvest cannot be kept, nor can it be protected."

Louis's finger shifted toward the workshop districts on the other side.

"It is the same with craftsmen. To repeatedly hone their skills and forge durable tools costs time, effort, and materials.

But these efforts bring them no additional reward.

What they hand over will only be underpriced by the Nobility, skimmed by Knights, even seized outright.

So they work only by the quota and routine; the tools function, but they do not last."

At last his gaze fell upon the regions marked with legions.

"As for Knights, when they discover that charging at the front will not earn them honor, but only see them used as consumables again and again,

when compensation is endlessly delayed, when their fiefs are constantly shaved away, when even their families receive no security after they fall, they will no longer die for their Lord.

They begin to calculate: how much does this battle pay? Is it worth getting hurt? Is there any need to risk my life?"

Louis lowered his hand: "Order begins to hemorrhage from within. Not through rebellion, but through a whole realm quietly withering away."

The red pen was driven hard into the map—right on the Imperial Capital.

"The Empire as it stands now has already reached this point. The strong cannot be slain, but they will be slowly starved to death.

When the foundations have rotted through, no foreign enemy is needed; a single gust of wind, and this giant colossus will topple of its own accord."

Louis drew a simple circle on the map.

"Establish order, overexploit, trust collapses, national strength declines, then comes collapse and destruction; new strongmen arise and establish a new order.

This is the death cycle that has never ceased on this continent for a thousand years, and we are standing right now at the darkest end of this cycle."

Varius remained silent for a long time.

Those words unfolded layer by layer in his mind, like old files being taken out and reviewed anew.

He thought of the Empire's history of rise and fall, of those familiar scenes that accompanied each imperial succession: heavier taxes, discipline in the legions decaying, workshops shutting down, rebellions flaring up along the borders.

When these fragments were placed within one and the same logical framework, they actually fitted together seamlessly.

They turned out not to be accidents, nor mere moral decay, but a kind of inevitable outcome.

Varius's lips moved, as though he wished to argue, yet in the end he said nothing at all.

Louis turned to look at Varius; there was no pity in his eyes: "That is why I never intended, from the very beginning, to become a stronger Emperor. That would be nothing more than the starting point of the next cycle."

He lifted his hand and pointed toward the city outside, where lights and steam intertwined: "What I seek to build is a system... In Red Tide, the contract is mutual.

I give them dignity and a path of advancement; they give me creativity and loyalty—not driven by the lash, but by letting them know that if they run forward, there truly is a road."

Varius felt a chill crawl up his spine.

All his life he had defended the dignity of imperial power, convinced that so long as the Emperor was tough enough, the state would not collapse.

Yet Louis's words seemed to negate all of this at the root.

The most terrifying thing has never been the rebels' blades, but the silence of the obedient.

That kind of soundless decay is more despairing than a legion's rebellion.

Varius finally understood that the Old Empire was beyond saving.

His knees went weak, and he dropped heavily into the chair, as though the last ounce of strength had been drained from him.

"So that's how it is..." Varius was now drenched in sweat. "This is why, no matter how many Knights the Imperial Capital has, they still cannot stop the decline—because the roots... are already dead."

That entire chain of reasoning Louis had laid out was, to him, far too heretical, yet it was calm and rigorous, with no obvious logical cracks.

Chapter 796: Contract and Law_2

This made him feel a long-lost unease, forced to rethink in the realm he was most familiar with.

He raised his hand to wipe his forehead with his sleeve, took a deep breath, and finally posed the last core question as a jurist and a survivor of the Old Empire's bureaucratic system:

"Sir, if, as you say, the state itself is a contract, what role should the law play?"

Each sentence he uttered was carefully considered.

"Is it merely the means you use to ensure the contract is honored? Ultimately, is it a sword hanging over the heads of those who breach it, used for deterrence and punishment?"

That was his most instinctive understanding, equating the law with punishment, with another form of violence.

Louis listened, shook his head: "Weapons? No. Weapons are used for war, oppression, against enemies; law aims to solve another matter."

Then Louis posed a question: "What do you think this city resembles?"

Without waiting for Varius' response, he continued: "Like a giant machine. The baker, blacksmith, farmer, soldier... everyone is a cog within it.

Cogs mesh together and operate, inevitably leading to friction, jamming, and issues.

Law is the manual for this machine, and also the oil that lubricates it."

Louis raised a finger: "Its purpose is not to kill, but to reduce friction.

Why stipulate private property? So that the baker knows this bag of flour is his, and no one can take it away at will.

Only then can he bake bread in peace, instead of standing guard at the warehouse door with a knife all day."

"Why emphasize contracts? So that the blacksmith believes as long as he makes tools as agreed, the other party must pay him.

Only then can he focus on forging iron, rather than guarding against being defrauded."

Louis lowered his finger, looking at Varius: "Ultimately, the law is doing two things.

First, clarifying ownership and responsibility.

Second, when interests conflict, it tells everyone what rules should be followed to resolve it, rather than resorting to fists or swords.

What the law truly does is draw a line.

It tells everyone what belongs to them, which steps they can take, and which steps they can't.

As long as one stays within this line, they can work and act freely; only by crossing it do they need to pay the price."

Louis paused and added: "In the Old Empire, you inscribed the law on stone tablets for people to worship, but among the Red Tide People, the law is just a tool.

Since the focus is on people, and people are alive and changing, the law can't remain unchanged.

New production methods will be created, and new problems that old rules can't cover will be encountered.

If the law stays put while people move forward, it's the order itself that will be torn apart."

Varius stood in place, at this moment the halo of sanctity surrounding the law in his eyes was gradually fading.

Louis seemed unaware of Varius' inner change, continuing:

"The Old Empire's code has been used for three hundred years, with scarcely any amendment. But during these three hundred years, land changed hands, the population multiplied, wars altered their style... only the laws remained static.

If reality has moved forward a hundred steps, but the law remains still, then it ceases to be part of the order, and becomes an obstacle."

He looked up at Varius.

"What I need you to do is not to guard a set of ancestral laws, treating them as untouchable relics.

Like repairing a running machine: adjust the gears when the structure changes, replace parts when the load changes, rewrite the rules when they no longer apply.

Keep the law usable, clear, and reliable, rather than becoming a burden slowing down the entire Red Tide."

Louis concluded his discourse on the essence of law, directing his gaze at the map, deep in thought.

Varius didn't speak immediately, standing there with his gaze sweeping past Louis, landing outside that giant glass wall.

The city continued to operate.

On the streets, night-shift workers pushed carts forward, patrolling knights changed shifts at street corners, distant factory buildings spewed white steam, shredded by the cold wind.

The room fell into a long silence.

The sensation was like a storm had just swept through—the old beliefs entrenched in the heart were uprooted, yet no new creed immediately filled the void, leaving behind a clean and unsettling empty space.

Varius suddenly realized that everything Louis just said was not a negation of the law.

Quite the opposite, it was about pulling the law down from its pedestal, and returning it to the human realm.

And this was exactly what he wanted to do all his life but never succeeded.

During those years in the Imperial Capital, he participated in revising the New Imperial Charter, trying countless times to add annotations, provide explanations, and introduce flexible clauses to the rigid old law.

Yet every time, he was thwarted by one sentence: "The Imperial Code cannot be changed lightly."

Law was treated as a symbol of authority, rather than a means of solving problems.

He had vaguely sensed this incongruity but never had someone dissect it as thoroughly as Louis.

More importantly, Louis wasn't just theorizing, with Red Tide City and even the two provinces of Northern Territory and Gray Rock as evidence.

Written into the daily lives on streets, workshops, mines, and countless ordinary people.

Varius slowly exhaled, realizing why these words resonated, because deep inside, he had already agreed with them.

It was just past him that lacked the strength and the environment to admit it.

Varius spent his life searching for a moral sage-king, hoping for someone noble and wise enough to correct the world's deviations with personal virtue.

He once thought that person would be the Fourth Prince, only to be thoroughly disillusioned by reality, and later, in Red Tide City, in this great city, he again once thought he had finally found the answer.

Until now, he finally realized that what is truly needed is never a perfect person.

But a system that can operate continuously without relying on a saint.

However, Varius fell into a kind of emptiness after being persuaded because the old had fallen, and the new had yet to be built.

Louis broke the silence, walked to the desk, and picked up the draft that had been repeatedly revised.

"Lord Varius," he began, "The reason the Old Empire decayed wasn't due to the absence of laws, but because their laws were like a fog.

The right of interpretation was always held by the nobility and priests, but the Red Tide is different..."

He gently tapped the draft, "The foundation here is the contract, but the contract can't be vague; it must be clearly written and fixed."

Louis turned, looking directly at the old man: "Perhaps I understand how power operates, but am missing a sufficiently precise pen.

I want you to write down those abstract things in the most rigorous, precise wording."

"Make it a ruler that measures from the Emperor to the common people."

Louis pulled a pen from the holder; it was a product from the Red Tide Workshop, with a simple design, no excess decoration.

He handed the pen along with the draft to Varius: "The Old Empire's code, along with the fire you set, has already burned away."

Louis looked at him: "Now there's a blank page—do you wish to take this pen and write the first line of rules for this reborn land?"

Varius' gaze fell onto the pen, the black pen barrel gleamed coldly under the light.

He knew well what accepting it meant.

It meant he would lay the foundation for a new set of rules and bury the old ones he had sworn allegiance to for a lifetime.

His hand trembled slightly.

No need to argue anymore, no need to search for profound meanings in old records.

The true law lay right before him.

Varius didn't immediately reach out; he took a deep breath, stepped back, and straightened his worn collar.

Then solemnly knelt on both knees.

"Lord," his voice was hoarse yet unprecedentedly firm, "I'm willing to take this pen."

Varius raised it above his head, receiving the pen.

Louis did not let him kneel for long.

He stepped forward, firmly supported the old man's arm, helping him to his feet: "Rise, from today you are the Red Tide's legislator."

They stood side by side in front of that giant floor-to-ceiling window.

The night wasn't entirely gone, but in the depths of the city, a new round of lights was igniting.

A train's low and long whistle echoed from afar.

That sound pierced through the darkness, announcing a brand-new order beginning to unfold.

Chapter 797: Fernando

Louis reached out and pushed open the oak door, the hinge letting out a low groan.

Varius stood inside, clutching a pen tightly. It wasn't a particularly splendid object, but in his eyes, it was heavier than any scepter.

"Lord Louis, I will not let you down," he said softly, his voice still slightly strained as he bowed deeply to Louis.

Louis said nothing more, only nodding slightly.

Varius turned and left.

His figure disappeared at the end of the corridor, exceptionally resolute.

"Clack." The door slowly closed behind him.

Almost at the same moment, the nearly mentor-like solemnity on Louis's face completely faded away.

He raised his hand to rub his forehead, as if finally releasing a string that had been taut for a long time.

"Phew..." A long breath escaped.

He turned and walked back to the table, picked up the cup of tea that had long since gone cold, and drank a sip without hesitation.

The bitterness exploded at the back of his tongue.

Louis frowned slightly, but didn't put down the cup, sipping again, as if pulling himself back to reality this way.

The gentleness and guidance in his eyes disappeared, replaced by familiar calculations and an unmistakable exhaustion.

Just then, Bradley entered silently.

His movements were swift, with no unnecessary pleasantries, as he walked straight to the table, gathering the draft of the legislative proposal that had been spread out earlier and placing it into the marked folder.

Immediately, he opened another file box and spread out a few new dossiers.

On the parchment were coastal routes, port draft lines, dock structure diagrams, and densely packed shipbuilding data.

Louis placed the empty cup back on the table, his voice returning to its usual calm: "Who's next?"

Bradley glanced at the itinerary in his hand: "Orland Fernan, former chief shipbuilder of the Southeast Province, also a veteran from your grandfather's era."

Bradley paused for a moment, then added: "He's been standing at the door for half an hour. He seems very nervous."

Louis's gaze fell on the sea chart on the table for a moment, then he nodded lightly: "Let him in."

The oak door was pushed open once more, and Orland came in.

His hair was gray, yet meticulously maintained, with not a strand out of place following the hairline closely against his scalp.

He wore a dark purple velvet formal suit, with a cut from twenty years ago. There were slight frays at the cuffs and elbows, but after thorough cleaning, it still remained dignified.

Most conspicuous was an antique badge pinned to his chest.

The Calvin Clan's emblem.

The silver base was oxidized and blackened, with tiny chips along the edges, evidently a relic brought forward from the old days, not a recent replica.

Orland stopped five steps from the desk, executing an impeccably standard and slightly exaggerated subordinate's salute.

He bent slightly, his knees noticeably sinking, positioning himself extremely low.

"Master Louis..." he began, his voice slightly trembling, "... No, Lord."

"Seeing your achievements today, even if I died this moment, I could finally face the old Duke. God bless the Calvin family."

Orland lifted his head, his eyes slightly reddened, his tone carrying a perfect blend of excitement and choking.

Even so, it was their first meeting.

As his words fell, the room fell silent for a brief moment.

Louis's gaze brushed over the badge on Orland's chest, his mind already making a judgment.

The badge had most likely been hidden at the bottom of a box for thirty years.

Taken out, polished, and pinned to his chest today, it was a statement in itself.

You are of the Calvin family, I once served this family.

A reminder of his credentials, and an implication of past merits.

But Louis did not expose it, for the act was well performed, and he needed such a character.

Louis immediately went around the desk, striding to the old man and offering a supportive hand.

"Please rise, Mr. Orland." His tone was gentle and assured, without a hint of perfunctoriness, "You are a legendary figure from my grandfather's time, and also my elder."

At the moment these words fell, a noticeable tension in Orland's eyes loosened slightly.

Louis did not give him the opportunity to express further, and personally pulled out a chair for him: "Please, have a seat."

Soon, the attendant brought in hot tea.

Not just any beverage, but the finest within the Red Tide.

As the tea was poured, steam rose, instantly adding a warm fragrance to the room.

"The journey was long, you have my gratitude."

After Orland sat down, his hands naturally rested on his knees, first glancing down at the teacup, then subtly studying Louis's expression out of the corner of his eye.

When he confirmed that the young Lord indeed cherished the past and held a sincere attitude, his previously slightly stooped back straightened imperceptibly.

His expression transitioned from previous excitement to a measured kindness.

"Thank you, Lord, for your concern." Only then did Orland look up, his hands on his knees slightly tightening, but no longer as humble as when he first entered.

"The journey was indeed long, but... I still manage." He chuckled lightly, "To see you with my own eyes, that little effort is nothing."

Louis did not respond immediately, simply observing the subtle changes in the old man's face.

"With your skill," Louis remarked as if casually chatting, "you should have been in the chief engineer's position of the Southeast Province. How did you end up being hunted?"

Chapter 798: Fernando (2)

As soon as the words were spoken, the layer of deliberate humility on Orland's face was ripped open as if in front of everyone.

He struck the ground heavily with his cane, and the wooden thud sounded particularly harsh in the quiet room.

"Wanted?" The old man's voice suddenly rose, his face turning purple with anger, "That's not a warrant, it's persecution!"

"It's a purge by those mad dogs of the Golden Feather Flower Church!"

Once his emotions breached the dam, the pent-up anger could no longer be contained.

"They have their eyes on my shipbuilding techniques and want me to hand over the latest ship design blueprints to them. Fine, let it be..." Orland's hand trembled slightly, "But they even forced me to publicly renounce the Dragon Ancestor!"

He suddenly lifted his head, humiliation filling his eyes.

"They said the Dragon Ancestor is a false god, a totem of beasts! They want me to burn the dragon bone amulet passed down from my family in public square, kneel before that damned flower idol of theirs to be baptized, and even change my name!"

Orland's voice grew hoarse, carrying an uncontrollable tremor: "But the Fernan family has built ships for generations under the gaze of the Dragon Ancestor.

They want me to betray my ancestors and believe in their god of flowers who only sells indulgences?"

He spat viciously: "I'd sooner set the shipyard on fire than build even a plank for those god-botherers!"

The room fell into silence once more.

Louis looked at the emotional old man before him, yet he remained unusually calm inside.

The anger was real, the dignity was real, but he was equally aware that something else was just as true.

This old shipwright was accustomed to wealth and admiration, unable to bear being crushed in the mud by time and power.

What he needed wasn't just shelter, but a stage worthy of his ambition and vanity.

Louis spoke, his tone more direct than before: "They indeed are blind, but in the Red Tide, technology is the only faith."

Louis looked straight at Orland, giving him no room for maneuver.

"Stay, Mr. Orland. The newly built royal dockyard at Dawn Port is all yours to oversee.

There is no limit on the research funding; you can recruit the best apprentices, use the finest wood and steel.

Your residence will be arranged at the highest point of the port, from where you can see your ships launch with just a glance."

Hearing this, Orland's breathing became rapid, yet he still maintained a pose of seasoned composure.

"This... how could I dare." He forced a smile, "I only wish to leave something behind for the family..."

"Mr. Orland." Louis interrupted his pleasantries.

He reached out, pulled open a drawer, and took out a folded blueprint, slowly spreading it on the table.

As soon as the paper was laid out, Orland froze.

The blueprint wasn't complex, lacking the dense symbols he was familiar with, nor the strange structures beyond the era; it could even be said to be straightforward.

The hull was wide and thick, with heavy lines, eschewing the sleek form meant for speed, resembling more a wooden stone platform that could move on water.

The keel was repeatedly thickened and marked, with only a simple note beside it: "Load-bearing priority, stability priority."

At the center of the deck, a sealed iron compartment was drawn clearly, occupying the core position of the entire ship.

No decorations were noted, just its purpose: boiler room.

What sped up Orland's heartbeat was the sides of the hull.

There were no unfoldable reserve sails depicted, nor complex oar racks, but each side featured a giant wooden wheel.

The wheel paddles were wide and thick, with a simple structure, like a waterwheel directly affixed to the ship's side.

The wheel axle connects through a strong connecting rod directly to the boiler room at the center of the hull.

No elaborate annotations, just one sentence: "Fire turns the axle, the axle drives the ship forward."

Orland noticeably paused, not because the blueprint was profound, but because it was too straightforward.

"...Without relying on the wind?" His voice lowered, tinged with hesitation, "Fire burns inside, and the wheels turn outside?"

He looked up at Louis, then back down at the blueprint, as if repeatedly confirming that he hadn't misunderstood.

"Whether downstream or upstream, as long as the fire doesn't stop, the ship can keep going?" Orland's finger halted by the wooden wheel, "Isn't that... not waiting for wind, not watching the tide, not asking the heavens?"

At this moment, all calculation and performance vanished from his face, leaving only the primal awe of an old shipwright.

Louis observed his reaction and gently nodded: "You're not mistaken, and it's not just an idea confined to the blueprint."

Upon hearing this, Orland's head jerked up.

Louis continued, "A prototype has already been made, in the inner bay of Dawn Port."

Orland's pupils suddenly constricted, and his breathing momentarily faltered.

Louis didn't give him time to digest, smoothly delivering the next blow: "Of course, the current version isn't perfect.

The hull's structure isn't reasonable enough, the wheel axle's load distribution has issues, and prolonged operation will damage the keel."

"That's why I need you." Louis looked directly at the old man, "If all you want is to build a bigger sailing ship, then indeed, I don't need you."

He paused, adding another line, seemingly offhandedly, yet with immense weight: "But if this ship can truly be finalized and mass-produced, I will name it after your family name."

Upon these words, the room was filled only with the faint crackling of candle flames.

Orland stood frozen in place.

His Adam's apple rolled intensely, as if he wanted to say something but couldn't immediately find his voice.

His gaze first fixated firmly on the blueprint, then slowly lifted to land on Louis's face.

Chapter 799: Fernando (3)

In that gaze, calculation and performance persisted, but were forcefully pushed out by an irrepressible heat.

Using a surname for naming, this idea echoed repeatedly in his mind.

If Louis's words were true, in the future in port taverns, voyage ledgers, and even academy textbooks, people would casually mention Fernando when discussing those "monsters that don't rely on the wind".

Orland's breath became rapid, instinctively puffing out his chest, as if already standing on the imagined shipyard, watching workers and apprentices look up waiting for his command.

"...Use my name." He seemed to be savoring the weight of this title itself.

Orland said nothing more, just slowly nodded his head.

The action seemed somewhat dazed, as if the whole person was still lingering in the instant the name was spoken out, the consciousness had already agreed first, but the rationality hadn't caught up yet.

Louis did not probe further, he simply closed the blueprints and personally escorted the old man to the door.

In the hallway, the lighting was soft, footsteps echoed on the empty stone ground.

Orland stopped at the door, again tidied his bow tie, as if making final preparations for an appearance long predestined.

The door closed.

Louis stood at the original spot, watching that silhouette disappear at the end of the hallway, and only then did the corner of his mouth imperceptibly curl up slightly.

The reason he wanted to do this was not due to Orland's loyalty, nor because of his noble character.

It was because the current Red Tide had reached a stage where it must look towards the waters for the future.

The Northern Territory lacks neither ore nor coal nor manpower.

What truly restricts it is transportation.

Inland rivers freeze over in winter, carriages are unable to move in mud and snowstorms.

Grain, coal, steel, all are stuck on the road. Even if there were railways, they could not cover all river networks and harbors.

But water power is the most economical, yet also the most ruthless passage on this continent.

As long as ships still rely on sails, voyages depend on weather, dispatch depends on luck, that is not a variable an industrial system can accept.

The significance of steamships was never just running fast.

But turning rivers and coasts into transport lines that can be precisely calculated, like gears embedded into the entire production system.

And Orland is precisely the most suitable person on this chain.

He did not climb to that position by luck.

In the age of sails, over half of the Southeast Province's ocean-going main ships originated from docks that he presided over or personally shaped.

What he excels at has never been fancy design, but how to make a ship not disintegrate or deform even when fully loaded, facing harsh waves, or sailing for days on end.

Which places can save materials, which places must be reinforced, which rib endures long-term fatigue, which keel segment is most prone to breaking before returning to port.

These things do not exist on paper, but in his decades of experience.

His craftsmanship, his habits, his entire logic of shipbuilding, still solid despite being eliminated by the times, would be passed down through apprentices layer by layer.

Today it is one ship, tomorrow it is an entire shipbuilding system.

An industry that can take root, replicate, and spread in the Red Tide's harbor.

And for a true top-tier artisan, the most stable shackles have never been orders or money, but reputation.

As long as that ship bears his name, Orland could never abandon it.

He would strive harder than anyone to ensure the ship's success.

Because it's not just Red Tide's ship, it's also his, although it's only a name.

And his apprentices and their successors also will live their whole lives on this voyage route.

Louis then slowly exhaled, turned back to his desk, leaned against the back of the chair, and closed his eyes to rest for a while.

Not due to exhaustion unable to sustain, just needed to let the tense thoughts relax.

These days, he practically never truly had free time.

The door was gently knocked, Bradley walked in.

"Anyone else today?" Louis asked casually, without opening his eyes.

"There's no one." Bradley checked the itinerary in his hand, "The others are all scheduled for tomorrow."

Louis nodded: "Then let's end here."

Bradley did not immediately leave, but stood aside, waiting for instructions.

Louis opened his eyes, looked at the documents on the table yet to be cleared, his gaze returned to its usual calmness.

These days, he has been doing the same thing, meeting talent from the Old Empire coming from the South.

As of today, various technical officers, legal officers, and craftsman leaders been formally absorbed, settled, and reactivated by the Red Tide have surpassed a hundred people.

This number itself is not eye-catching, but the impact it brings has already begun manifesting in the Empire's talent market.

Workshops and institutions of Southern provinces are quietly hollowing out. freewebnovel.com

People with reputation, experience, are disappearing one after another from sight, the remaining ones are either apprentices yet to be shaped or mediocre people only clinging to outdated practices.

And rumors about Red Tide also continue fermenting along these people's circulation routes...

It doesn't ask about origin, only looks at ability... As long as you can create value, someone will back you with a way out, and there's generous compensation.

Once this signal forms, it becomes difficult to contain.

To many marginalized, cleansed, excluded talents of the Old Empire, Red Tide has become the best choice.

They come from various backgrounds, have different dispositions, some crave fame, some crave profit, some only adhere to their already outdated philosophies.

Thus, how they are utilized cannot be the same.

To people like Orland, talking philosophy is a waste of time.

He needs to be remembered, needs a place where his name can once again stand at the forefront of the era.

Hence Louis gave him honor, gave him a stage, and conveniently put on him a pair of unbreakable shackles.

And to those like Varius, money and status are secondary instead.

What he truly craved is a cohesive, world-explaining philosophy, an order no longer easily distorted by the powerful.

So Louis gave him thoughts, logic, a new system he can personally participate in building.

Everyone's heart has its price; what he has to do is just calculate the price right.

Place each person in the most suitable position, letting them willingly burn for the same goal.

"Continue tomorrow," Louis said finally.

"Yes." Bradley replied quietly, softly closed the door.

Chapter 800: Drowning in the Arms of Tenderness

The door to the captain's cabin was tightly shut.

But the air couldn't be contained.

Thick silk rugs covered the floor, footsteps were almost inaudible upon them.

In the corner stood a chandelier crafted from a single piece of crystal, an old model from the workshops of the Jade Federation, the light cut into tiny, gentle fragments.

A full set of golden drinking vessels was displayed on the table, the cup walls absurdly thin, as if meant only for show, not for use.

Ambergris was burning, but too much had been used.

The cloying sweet scent suppressed the air, overwhelming to the point of dizziness.

Yet even so, a trace of an indelible fishy smell lingered in the depths of the room, like a dead fish hauled from the deep sea, confined under the deck for days.

The candle flame flickered lightly.

The bed curtains shook violently, emitting a rapid, chaotic sound of friction, then suddenly stopped, followed by dead silence.

Balk lay flat on the bed, his chest heaving fiercely, each breath accompanied by a noise like that of a broken bellows.

Sweat covered his body, yet he shivered with cold, his soaked back pressed against the mattress, and waves of chill seeped into his bones.

He suddenly raised his hand and pushed away the person beside him: "Get out."

The woman was pushed to the edge of the bed, letting out a muffled cry of pain.

Balk sat up, punched the mahogany bedboard.

The dull sound was particularly jarring in the luxurious captain's cabin.

Then came a slow throb of pain, he stared at his hand as if it wasn't his own.

Damn it, another failure.

Even with such a beauty lying beside him, his body showed no reaction, like a broken ship stranded in the mud, motionless.

He looked up at the bedside, Meryl was half-kneeling there, her loose hair draped over her shoulders, her skin as white as snow.

Her eyes were moist and soft, like wronged, yet still carefully trying to please.

But a corner of the blanket had slipped.

The candlelight illuminated her exposed shoulders and back, the skin had no color of blood, merely a nearly dead ash-like pallor.

As she turned, a few small scales on the back of her neck gently moved, as if breathing.

Balk turned his gaze away, he saw his own hands trembling, out of control.

Outside the window was the sea, the night pressed low, the sea surface undulated slowly, like a sleeping giant beast. He stared into that darkness, his thoughts being dragged back to long ago.

Twenty years ago, he could lift an iron anchor with one hand, hundreds of pounds of weight, like a spear in his hand, hurl the entire iron anchor out, snapping an enemy ship's mast.

The taverns in the harbor always had a spot saved for him. The dancing girls surrounded him, their laughter loud enough to cause a headache. He

remembered those nights, by the next morning, some people couldn't even walk.

They called him the Prince of Black Reef, the head of the seven great pirates, the king of the ocean, with the strength of a Peak Knight.

And now? He looked down, staring at his once powerful hands, now shaking like those of a new recruit.

The sword's hilt had long lost its weight in his grasp, and he couldn't even conquer a single woman.

Aging, the word slowly unfolded in his mind, crawling up from his marrow like poison.

Balk grabbed the robe at the bedside, throwing it over himself haphazardly, staggering toward the table.

He brought the cup to his lips, downing a mouthful of strong alcohol.

The liquid trickled over the rim, splattering onto his graying beard, dark red like unwiped blood.

Balk panted, suddenly letting out a laugh: "Louis Calvin."

He bit down on the name with intensity.

"It's all that damned little bastard's fault." Balk slammed the cup onto the table forcefully.

"Ever since he linked up Gray Rock and the Northern Territory, all the northern merchant ships have changed!" His voice grew louder, "Robbery used to be as easy as collecting taxes. And now? Those smoking ironclad monstrosities, faster than sea beasts!"

He gestured with his hand, but it trembled badly: "The hulls are as hard as a turtle's shell, cannonballs hit them, and all you hear is a bang!

Three years, a full three years, my brothers have only had cheap rum to drink, the treasury only outputs and no input! He's trying to starve me, trying to force the Prince of Black Reef to death!"

The smell of alcohol spread through the room.

Balk attributed the stuffiness in his chest, the weakness in his body, all to that name.

In his mind remained a simple yet dangerous thought.

If he could just defeat Louis, everything would return.

After the anger subsided, Balk sat at the edge of the bed, his shoulders slumped, the fury had retreated, leaving only emptiness.

He seemed suddenly ten years older, his breathing slow and shallow, his gaze unfocused.

Suddenly a chill embraced him, Meryl slid up from one side, her movements nearly soundless.

She was very close, her icy chest pressed against his sweat-soaked back. The touch made Balk shiver involuntarily, yet he did not pull away.

The room's scent was changing.

The thick ambergris was invaded by another smell, sweet and with the briny staleness of seawater rot, like the dampness left in the cracks of rocks when the night tide receded.

This scent delved into his nostrils, clinging to his thoughts, slowly relaxing his tense nerves, his mind grew sluggish, yet comfortable.

Meryl's fingers traced slowly over his abdomen, where the skin had long since sagged.

"Don't blame yourself." Her voice pressed against his back, low and gentle, "You have borne so much, glory, hardship, blood. You are merely tired."

Balk's Adam's apple moved.

"Aging is not your fault." Her tone was gentle to the point of compassion. "But you are a king, and a king has the right to refuse it."

The words hooked into his heart.

"In our homeland," Meryl continued to whisper, "there is a secret art of the deep sea that can make withered wood sprout anew. It can allow the strongest... to surpass their original limits."