

Winter 801

Chapter 801: Drowning in a Sea of Tenderness (Part 2)

Balk did not respond, he just slowly raised his head.

Meryl reached out and pulled out a slender fishbone bottle from under the pillow.

The bottle was semi-transparent, and the liquid inside was an eerie green, viscous and slow-moving.

Balk's fingers tightened, intuition screaming that this thing was very dangerous.

He held the bottle, pausing in mid-air: "This thing... it doesn't seem like it's meant to save a life."

Meryl was in no hurry, she just placed the bottle by his lips.

Right then, a crashing sound came from outside the cabin door, footsteps chaotic, and the air reeking of alcohol.

"My prince!" The adjutant's voice was low outside the door, but it could not conceal the panic, "Broken Tooth Jack drank too much! He's causing trouble on deck, saying you... saying you've lost your teeth and should give up your place."

That sentence hit like a dull punch, Balk's chest tightened, his heart skipped a beat.

Jack, young and fierce, at the height of his prowess, also with the power of a mid-tier Extraordinary Knight.

Twenty years ago, such a character wasn't worthy to even approach him.

Now? Balk suddenly realized he felt fear.

He wasn't sure, unsure if he could really go to the deck and suppress that wild dog.

Meryl looked at him, her mouth barely detectable in a slight smile, leaning in close to his ear, gently biting his earlobe: "Hear that? That little dog wants to step on your head."

"Drink it, for your dignity, for this ship. Don't you want to crush his throat with your own hands? Don't you want... to prove yourself again?"

She grasped Balk's hand, guiding the bottle's neck closer to his lips.

Outside the door, the insults grew clearer.

Balk closed his eyes, fear surging at the bottom of them, but swiftly crushed by something else.

He tilted his head back and swallowed the icy viscous liquid in one gulp.

The world suddenly sank.

His abdomen felt like it exploded in a burst of fire.

He felt his dried-up Fighting Energy being rudely filled, his heart pounding heavily, each pulse pushing a new surge of heat.

Exhaustion was shattered, dullness torn apart; he felt he could rip apart the deck.

But in reality, he suddenly arched his back, forcing out a shapeless, low growl from his throat.

The blood vessels beneath his skin rapidly darkened, bulging and twisting like living worms.

His nails shattered in an instant, new ones sprouting, pitch-black and sharp, pupils contracted, elongated.

It wasn't returning to youth; it was something inside replacing him.

Balk walked out shirtless, draped in only a coat, torches on the deck swayed, heat mixed with a fishy smell wafting around.

Broken Tooth Jack was stepping on an old crew member, turned to see him, stunned for a moment, then grinned, "Old fool..."

The words weren't finished, his vision blacked out.

Balk's figure was already looming over him.

With one hand, he seized Jack's throat, lifting him directly off the deck.

Fingers closed in, a crisp snapping sound.

Jack's body instantly went limp, blood splattered on Balk's face.

Deathly silence covered the deck.

Balk licked his lips, smiled: "Anyone else?"

The only answer was the sound of someone kneeling.

Laughing broadly, he turned around and went back to the captain's cabin.

Candlelight still flickered.

Meryl waited for him on the bed, Balk pounced, his consciousness filled with desire.

In his feeling, it was conquest.

And in the shadows, Meryl's legs turned into slippery tentacles, wrapping around layer by layer.

Suckers fit snugly, silently extracting the overflowing life.

Balk laughed wildly, reveling in the regained youth...

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In the first few days after drinking the potion, Balk seemed like a coiled spring wound back up.

He was on the deck shirtless, facing the noon sunlight, wrestling with five robust sailors.

The planks creaked underfoot, a sailor's wrist cracked crisply in his grip.

Balk laughed, the laughter loud yet carrying a dry hoarseness, like metal grinding against metal.

No one dared challenge this pirate king.

His skin was cold, against others it felt like a dead fish. Under the scorching sun, not a drop of sweat appeared.

And when the chef brought a delicious roast leg of lamb, Balk sniffed it, his face suddenly darkened.

He shouted the meat was spoiled, then killed the chef.

Late at night, a crew member saw him squatting in a corner of the deck, grabbing live fish from a barrel, devouring them whole with scales and innards.

Green bile trickled down the sides of his mouth, mixed with blood, yet he closed his eyes as if savoring fine wine.

On the sixth day, things changed.

That power was no longer stable, each fading came faster.

Even half a day without replenishment, his skin would begin to tighten and itch.

Balk was restless, fingers scratching back and forth on his chest and arms, nail beds filled with flesh and blood.

As dead skin peeled away, what was revealed wasn't red new skin but a translucent, grayish-white hard layer that felt like an unformed shell.

He stared at that layer for a long while before shifting his gaze away.

When Meryl approached, her scent arrived first.

The fishy smell grew heavier, sickening to ordinary people.

But in Balk's nose, it was a maddeningly sweet fragrance.

He buried his face in her hair, breathed greedily, like a drowning man grasping for the last breath of air.

He started to despise his own image, the figure in the mirror appearing bloated and inefficient to him.

Conversely, Meryl occasionally revealing her tentacles, mucus seemed more fluid, more logical to him.

"This is evolution." He told himself.

On the twelfth day, the door was smashed open, the old adjutant rushed in with others, his face pale.

He had followed Balk for thirty years, yet at this moment, it was as if he was meeting the person before him for the first time.

Chapter 802: Drowned in the Arms of Tenderness (Part 3)

"Captain." His voice trembled, "Look at the mirror."

Balk stood in the shadows, his shoulders raised, with fine hard patterns on the side of his neck.

"You've grown scales." The old lieutenant choked up.

Meryl hid behind Balk, very close, her voice so low it was almost inaudible: "He's jealous of you, he wants to stop you."

Balk looked at the old lieutenant, remembering countless nights when this man blocked blades for him, guarded the ship for him,

The remnants of feelings in his chest twitched, then desire overwhelmed them.

He let out a discordant roar and lunged forward.

Mutated claws tore open the throat, blood sprayed onto the cabin walls.

The old lieutenant wasn't dead yet, dragged to the ship's side.

"Don't blame me," Balk said, "The path to the throne always needs someone to pave it."

The sound of falling into the water was light, like a thread being snipped.

On the fifteenth day, under Balk's compulsion, they sailed into the depths of the Broken Isles.

The sea caves were called the Silent Eye, no wind, the water surface like a black mirror, pink mist flowing below.

In Balk's eyes, it was a waterway leading to the temple.

On either side of the rocks, silver armor stood, praises echoed in the air.

Meryl held his hand. Her lower body had long turned into tentacles, climbing on the rock wall.

But in Balk's eyes, she wore a long dress trailing on the ground, with lotus blossoms blooming at each step.

The scent deep inside the cave became excessively sweet, like honeyed fruit on the verge of rot, with warm pink light pervading the air, soft and surreal.

In the center, Balk stopped, untied his sword, laid aside his armor, and took off the heavy coat.

He knelt down, his bare knees sunk into softness.

At this moment, he was letting go not just of equipment.

Vigilance, tension, self-defense—those lifelong companions—were shed one by one.

The relaxation of a long-awaited reunion surged forth.

His breathing became steady, the fervor faded from his demeanor, like a child finally home, wanting only to sleep, never to wake.

The shadow above slowly descended.

It was a parasitic brain jellyfish, its tentacles translucent, light, and soft, emitting a subtle glow.

Meryl stood by, her voice low like a lullaby: "You don't need to fight anymore, don't need to be angry anymore, close your eyes and accept this gift."

Balk closed his eyes, he felt no foreign presence.

Only felt his back being held up by warm hands, gently lifted.

The sky seemed to open a crack, golden rain fell, warm and pure, pouring in from the top.

Fatigue washed away, fear soothed, aging disappeared.

He saw himself sitting on a throne among the clouds, the sea spread beneath his feet.

Enemies dwindled into dust, insignificant. He needed no arm-waving, just a thought, and the sea bowed.

The ultimate sense of satisfaction rose, whole and smooth.

"Ah..." he sighed in his heart, "This is completeness."

In reality, tentacles gently wrapped around the back of his head, scalp and bones quietly softened.

Balk's body went completely limp.

His head tilted back, the corners of his mouth lifted into an extremely happy smile, innocent and peaceful.

A tear slid from the corner of his eye, yet before reaching his chin, the light in his eyes extinguished.

A brief silence ensued.

Then when those eyes opened, there was no flame of ambition, only a fathomless tranquility.

Empty yet seeming compassionate.

The creature behind his head had merged with him, tentacles turned into pale blue veins under the skin, subtly flickering with the heartbeat.

Balk raised his hand, flexed his fingers slightly, as if adapting to a new instrument.

The wide brim of the hat cast a shadow, perfectly concealing the mutation behind his head.

He turned and walked towards the exit, his steps light.

Chapter 803: Intelligence Three Years Later

The constant temperature barrier glowed faintly around the window sill.

The wind and snow were kept out, even the sound couldn't get in. Heavy curtains hung down, and the indoor temperature remained at a level that made one reluctant to get out of bed.

Louis woke up to a slight numbness, simply because his arm had been pressed for too long.

He opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling.

On his left, Sif was almost clinging to him, a leg draped over his waist, her breathing even, sleeping undefensively.

Her body temperature was slightly high, with a wild and direct warmth.

On his right, Emily was very close, yet maintained a proper distance.

Her hand rested on his chest, her body naturally curled, breathing softly.

The two of them clung to Louis like octopuses.

Louis didn't move; he just continued staring at the ceiling, a hint of helplessness showing at the corner of his mouth.

Since his eldest daughter was born six years ago, no more children had been born, and these two wives seemed to have reached some consensus at a moment he wasn't aware of.

Then the competition began, with the clear goal of having a third child.

Louis sighed in his heart.

Even for a Peak Knight's physique, this level of sustained combat couldn't be said as easy.

Carefully, he withdrew his arm, Sif frowned slightly and instinctively moved closer, while Emily moved lightly but did not wake up.

After a few minutes, Louis finally sat up in bed.

During his wash-up, he stood before the mirror, glanced up.

The person in the mirror was not quite the same as the one in his memory.

The lines were harder, the gaze steadier; the sharp sense of striving in his youth had been worn down by time and responsibility, leaving only a patient and enduring tenacity.

It's been three years since the annexation of Gray Rock Province.

In these three years, the Red Tide's territory hadn't rushed outwards but thickened internally bit by bit.

The port had expanded more than tenfold. New docks stretched along the coastline segment by segment.

The storage area was completely rebuilt; food, minerals, timber, and finished products were each segregated, the foundation raised, with ventilation and damp-proofing addressed.

The main trunk road of the Northern Territory was resurfaced, allowing winter merchants not to gamble their lives rushing; the journey could be timed to the day, and delivery schedules could be written into contracts.

Five railway lines were constructed, three of which directly extended into Gray Rock Province, linking mines, quarries, and ports into a line.

Routes that originally took half a month of detours were compressed into a few days, altering the flow of goods, and many places for the first time were absorbed into a stable supply.

The changes were not only in material, but people gradually adapted to this rhythm.

Officials were stuck in their respective positions. Not relying on personal prestige, but the system made them clear; crossing the line would only cause more trouble.

The system began to operate independently.

Occasionally there would be friction, disputes, even mistakes, but all were confined within a correctable range, not sliding towards loss of control.

Louis no longer needed to oversee specific matters; now he was more like a symbol.

No longer the commander issuing orders daily, but standing atop the system, only writing in key moments.

Life changed accordingly, no longer awakened by urgent reports in the morning, rarely losing sleep over a ledger at night.

He dedicated more time to cultivation, now having reached the rank of Junior Peak Knight.

The higher a knight's rank, the closer the body to its limits; each breakthrough felt like grinding bones with a blunt knife, relying not on impulse but on years of accumulation.

He could feel his strength growing, yet no longer surging; each inch of advancement required exponentially more time.

The remaining time was occupied by children, then fulfilling duties as a husband.

Lastly, it was sitting back at the desk, signing on the real grand directions.

Louis wiped his face dry, expertly opened the system, a pale blue light screen unfolded on his retina.

[Daily intelligence update completed]

[1: The Jade Federation gathers mercenaries, Empire's Kaelin mobilizes legions, tension escalates at the Southwest border, probability of full-scale war rises.]

Louis glanced at it, not immediately averting his gaze.

Most outside wagered on the Empire, given the Empire's knights and territory were greater.

Yet Louis, with an omniscient perspective, didn't view it the same way; the Empire's issues lay not externally but internally.

Kaelin and Duke Remont were nominally monarch and vassal, but in reality wary of each other.

Military power, supply, command chain, every link was probing each other, ready to draw swords anytime.

Louis could even imagine the scenes over there; the same batch of grain wagons, stamped with the prince's seal in the front, detained by the duke's inspectors in the back.

The same legion, awarded in daylight, someone seeking secret orders at night.

Once such a system hits the battlefield, what gets consumed first isn't the enemy, but one's patience and trust.

In contrast, the Jade Federation, greedy yet unified.

As long as interests are clear, they'll pave every line for mercenaries, bonds, supply chains.

No one talks to them about honor, they only discuss accounts.

Of course, the longer this war drags on, the more beneficial it is for the Red Tide.

In the past two years, he sold eliminated outdated cold weapons and armor at a high price to Kaelin.

Those Longswords, War Axes, and plate armor had long been categorized as secondary in the Red Tide's military sequence, but in the eyes of Imperial Capital's military officials, still stock that could immediately complete the formation.

He had the workshop re-sharpen the blade, correct loose guards, reinforce plate rivets, recalibrate straps and buckles, then seal them in sets by legion number, with maintenance and replacement cycles attached.

The buyers were rather pleased to pay; they were never afraid of expense, only of running out of time.

Chapter 804: Intelligence Three Years Later (2)

At the same time, he sold ores and intermediate materials to the Federation. Not by dumping entire shiploads, but by staggering shipments, in batches and through different ports.

Every contract was written as meticulously as a Church pact.

The Federation Commerce Association loved this approach, even willing to prioritize Red Tide's goods at the docks.

Both sides knew that Red Tide was benefiting from both ends, yet both tacitly accepted it.

As long as Red Tide's routes remained clear, warehouses full, and ships could sail on schedule, even if the Empire and the Federation put up a front, they would discreetly send gold coins to his accounts at night.

He didn't need to choose a side between their banners, just watch from the sidelines.

"Let them fight." Louis thought to himself, "The day they officially start is the day Red Tide moves south."

[2: The national strength of the Southeast Holy Empire is steadily growing, and the power of the Calvin Clan is expanding in the region.]

Louis's gaze halted.

Under the rule of Fifth Prince Lampard, the Holy Eastern Empire's power had surged too rapidly over the past three years.

Taxes hadn't significantly increased, yet military expansion continued relentlessly, and nobility obediently followed orders like never before without any noticeable purges.

The beliefs of the populace were steadily being replaced as well.

Orders from the Church were more effective in that region than even royal decrees.

And at the center of it all was Eduardo Calvin.

His third brother, now the Pope.

Hence, the Calvin Clan was no longer just a symbolic leader of the nobility; it now practically covered the power structure of the eastern territories.

The emblem of the Calvin Clan appeared frequently on castles, courts, and ports, like a silently spreading net.

Lampard's military expansion, Eduardo's influence, and the rise of the Calvin Clan in the east, in Louis's eyes, were all within the realm of comprehension.

This was the expected expansion of a normal regime gaining additional resources and a foundation of faith.

Red Tide had seen these things before, and could deal with them accordingly.

The Holy Eastern Empire itself was not what truly troubled him.

The overseas Golden Feather Flower Church Country had been silent for three years, with spies from all factions unable to extract any useful intel.

Yet Louis had the Daily Intelligence System, and there was a word that kept recurring in the intel regarding the Golden Feather Flower Church Country: spread.

Since Eduardo was implanted with the Golden Thorn Feather Crown, it seemed the final piece of the puzzle had been completed.

Over the past three years, they had been spreading continuously, assimilating the people on the island, slowly and quietly, yet thoroughly.

Last month's intel showed that over a quarter had already been assimilated.

Louis leaned back in his chair, gently tapping the armrest with his fingers.

This was no longer just a Church issue, but a presence more patient and dangerous than the Nest.

Coldness rose in Louis's heart.

If left unchecked, it would eventually turn the whole sea island into a petri dish.

And it certainly wouldn't be content with just the island; it needed a bigger stage.

And the Holy Eastern Empire was merely its most convenient stepping stone to set foot on the mainland.

A complete set of mature administrative systems, armies, ports, and a populace already accustomed to obedience.

He had already made a judgment; the shipbuilding technology tree of the Red Tide must be accelerated, it must be ahead of schedule.

Once the Jade Federation and Kaelin went to war, he would immediately move south to annex the entire Holy Eastern Empire and use it as a springboard to set sail and eradicate such aberrant creatures.

[3: Prince Balk of Black Reef, leader of the seven great pirates, has been fully controlled by the Dream Coral in the Broken Isles, his individual self entering a state of deep assimilation.]

Upon seeing this piece of intel, Louis's pupils slightly contracted.

He didn't treat this as an ordinary pirate problem.

Mind control, biological mutation—these characteristics were all too familiar.

The Nest, Burning Pain Vine Court, Ancient Dragon remains, and the Golden Thorn Feather Crown from the previous intel... just manifested in different forms.

There was a longing gently surging in his mind, the Primordial Heart was responding.

But Louis quickly suppressed this impulse, starting to ponder the relationship between this intel and himself.

It was right at the junction of the Northern Territory and Gray Rock Province.

Once signs of an outbreak at sea began to appear, the first wave of impacts would fall here.

This wasn't speculation but the inevitable result dictated by geography.

If left unchecked, it would ultimately draw such things right to Red Tide's doorstep, forcing a costly response once fully established.

Thus, this matter couldn't wait; it had to be dealt with.

Moreover, Prince Balk was an aptly chosen target.

As the head of the seven great pirates, his reputation was loud enough, the threat tangible enough, die at sea, and no one would question too much why they were at least eradicated.

This way, the seaway could be smoothly taken over, and the ports along the coast would begin to actively lean towards Red Tide.

As for the deeper issues, the Dream Coral, the source of assimilation, and the will behind it must be immediately annihilated.

Louis closed the intelligence interface and stood up.

The pale blue light screen folded up and extinguished, like a thin layer of ice shattering in the depths of his consciousness.

Instead of standing up immediately, he sat cross-legged with his back straight, breathing slowly.

This was a daily routine, the cultivation of fighting energy and magic.

He closed his eyes, letting his consciousness sink inward.

The body was the first to respond, blood rushing through the meridians but without a hint of noise.

Muscles, bones, and organs each rested in the most stable positions.

This was the result of long-term refining with various resources and constant rinsing by the Primordial Heart, the power no longer spilled over but was firmly locked within the body.

Last month he reached the peak of the Initial Stage Knight, and moving forward would require an extremely long time to hone each step.

His body had already approached the limits of the mundane, and any slight improvement would magnify into a burdensome multiplier.

Louis could clearly feel this, so he wasn't very anxious.

After cultivating the fighting energy, the world on the spiritual level unfolded slowly.

The pathways of the Primordial Meditation Technique operated automatically within the sea of consciousness, without verbal recitation or deliberate guidance.

His spiritual power surged and swirled like tides, covering every corner.

This was not the mage's common focus, but an entire sea.

Now when casting spells, he didn't need calculations or external aids; just a thought, and the structure would naturally form.

The dual cultivation of fighting energy and magic, along with the Primordial Heart and those three peculiar sources of power, turned him, at a young age, into a super strong individual.

In his heart, he made a judgment: "There aren't many people left in this world who can kill me."

This was a conclusion reached after long-term quantification of power.

After the meditation ended, he slowly opened his eyes.

As soon as his vision cleared, he sensed something amiss.

The bedding on the left moved slightly.

Sif, at some point already awake, was propping her chin while watching him, her eyes bright, with a slightly under-slept yet enthusiastic spirit.

A subtle change in breathing came from the right.

Emily opened her eyes too. She didn't get up immediately, but just turned her head slightly, her eyelashes gently fluttering in the morning light, as if silently confirming if his cultivation went well.

Louis paused for a moment.

The clarity brought by cultivation had not completely dissipated, yet fatigue crept in afterward.

It wasn't physical weakness but a weariness from sustained high exertion.

He exhaled softly and was the first to speak, his tone very light: "There are important matters to attend to this afternoon."

This was true; the southern seaway, shipbuilding plans, and the line he had already targeted were not suitable for handling in a relaxed state.

Sif blinked, not replying, just smiling and moving forward a little.

Emily then slowly sat up, tucking stray hairs behind her ear, her tone still composed: "There's still time."

Louis glanced out the window.

The sky was still early, the wind and snow kept out by the constant temperature barrier, leaving the room quiet and enclosed.

He opened his mouth, wanting to say more, but finally just sighed inwardly.

The reason had already been used and was clearly not accepted.

A warm sensation came from the left side.

Sif had already leaned in closely, her arms naturally wrapping around his shoulders, her palm warm with the residual heat of the morning, irresistibly yet rightfully so.

Almost simultaneously, the bed on the other side slightly sank.

Emily wasn't in a hurry to speak, simply placing her hand on his wrist, her fingertips gently tapping the pulse, also silently expressing her stance.

Two completely different sensations settled simultaneously.

Louis closed his eyes: "Alright then."

Chapter 805: The Current State of Dawn Port

At the Red Tide train station, a pitch-black railroad cut across the snowfield like a giant black snake coiled on the ground, extending with the terrain and disappearing into the gray-white horizon.

Parked beside the platform was Louis's private steam train.

Louis wore a dark outfit, with a long, cold-resistant cloak neatly fastened on the outside.

Two ladies stood on either side of the platform's edge, seeing him off.

Sif was wrapped in a thick white bear fur coat, her breath turning into white mist in front of her.

She leaned in a little closer and whispered, in a voice only the three could hear, "Are you running off in a hurry because you're afraid of tonight...?"

Louis paused for a moment, his ears barely perceptibly warming up, turned his head slightly, and coughed, as if he hadn't heard clearly or simply did not want to engage with such talk.

Sif noticed this, her smile growing more apparent as she added, "Come back soon. Or I'll go to the port to catch you."

Louis looked at her this time, his tone dropping a bit, "I really have things to do."

After saying that, he felt he might have explained too much and decided to stop talking.

On the other side, Emily adjusted Louis's collar and fastened the topmost button tightly. "Ignore her, the wind at the port is strong, remember not to catch a cold, and... don't overwork yourself, some things can be left to others to handle."

Louis nodded, "I'll be careful. You two, while in the city, remember to take good care of yourselves."

The whistle sounded at this moment, white steam spouted from the valve, billowing over the platform, instantly obscuring the view.

Louis waved his hand and turned to step onto the carriage.

The connecting rod began to move, with a low and rhythmic clashing sound between steel.

The steel giant started slowly, driving forward with a steady force toward the distance.

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Before the train had completely stopped, the wind at the platform's edge had already rushed in first.

Eliot stood at the front of the platform, his face calm, but only he knew his Adam's apple was uncontrollably moving up and down.

A Sun Medal pinned to his collar, simple in design but weighty, was the symbol of the highest administrative authority of the Red Tide.

A delicate pocket watch lay quietly in his left hand, while his right hand repeatedly adjusted his tie and cuffs.

The train finally came to a complete stop, and the position of the door perfectly aligned with the white safety line under his feet.

The pressure valve let out a short and low hiss, and the heavy cast iron door slid open to both sides.

A black long boot stepped onto the platform.

Eliot took a deep breath, suppressing all emotions swirling in his chest, and stepped forward.

He stopped three steps away from Louis.

Eliot straightened his body, his right fist clenched, pressing heavily onto his left chest over his heart, his left foot slightly stepping back, then he bowed his head, his actions clean and restrained.

This was the standard knightly greeting.

"Lord..." his voice was a bit hoarse, "Dawn Port has been waiting for you."

Louis looked at him, now sporting a few strands of gray hair, exuding a more steady aura, standing there like a ballast stone.

He reached out and brushed off a snowflake that had fallen on Eliot's shoulder.

"Haven't seen you in two years." Louis's voice was light, with a hint of a smile, "You now appear more like a governor, Eliot."

He paused briefly, then added, "No need to be so tense. I'm not here to inspect the battlefield."

Just such a simple gesture.

Eliot's eyes, however, uncontrollably reddened for a moment.

He quickly blinked, pressing his emotions back down, straightening his back once more, regaining that calm and competent demeanor.

But the excitement in his tone could not be hidden: "Lord, the changes in Dawn Port are tremendous. There's so much... I really want you to see for yourself."

Louis raised his hand, gently patting Eliot's shoulder, "Let's go. Show me what you all have turned this port into."

The open-top steam carriage departed the station.

The wheels touched the surface without the previous jolting shake, only a steady rolling sensation.

The heartbeat of the steam engine was hidden at the back of the carriage, low and regular, like a tamed beast breathing.

Louis sat by the window, with the administrative report just handed to him spread out on his lap.

The paper was very thin, the handwriting dense, and the format was neat.

He originally only needed to glance at the conclusion, with a crime rate below 2%.

This was a sufficiently impressive number, but Louis had seen too many similar numbers.

He moved his gaze from the page and looked out the window.

He wanted to see with his own eyes what kind of port city this system, designed by him and refined by countless daily adjustments, had become.

The docks of the Southeast Province in the original owner's memory were already considered one of the best docks in this world.

There were always three things: the stench of fermented fish guts, flowing black sewage, and drunken hooligans passed out in the streets.

The bustling façade felt like a deliberately polished coat of paint, while underneath was already rotting wood.

The slums clung like tumors to the shadows of mansions, refusing to fall off.

At night, if you turned into the wrong alley, the next day you might be fished out of the water.

And now Dawn Port spread out beyond the window.

The streets were straight and wide, the curbstones on either side of the road painted with neat black and yellow warning stripes, with lines so clean that they seemed measured with a ruler.

The road had a slight slope, allowing rain and snow to flow to the sides without forming puddles in the middle.

Louis's gaze fell on the cast iron rain grates every ten meters along the roadside.

He knew what lay beneath was an extensive underground network.

While other lands on this continent were still emptying chamber pots onto the street, the Red Tide territory had already implemented sewage separation.

Chapter 806: Dawn Port Status_2

Dirty water and rainwater follow their own paths, the treatment pools in the dock area operate day and night, even the most unpleasant smells are pressed underground.

The air carries no odor of urine, no smell of decay, only the saltiness of the sea breeze, along with a faint hint of carbolic acid, a scent not quite pleasant yet reassuring.

Louis did not speak, but sitting across from him, Eliot noticed his gaze.

The supervisor of Dawn Port still sat upright, the folder in his hands firmly resting on his knees: "Sir, it's not because they're innately clean-loving, it's the effect of the 'Red Tide Code'."

Louis lifted his eyes slightly.

Eliot continued: "In other ports, dock laborers live in pigsties, earn copper coins as daily wages, and whether they get a hot meal tomorrow depends on the employer's mood. In Red Tide, we provide allocated housing and a monthly salary system.

Correspondingly, there are strict contracts. Those who relieve themselves anywhere are fined three days' wages, those who drink and cause trouble lose their housing qualifications and are deported.

With access to dignity and money, no one wants to go back to being treated like livestock."

Eliot spoke with an unmistakable fervor: "It is your system that has transformed them from beasts into citizens."

The carriage slowly moved along the main road of the residential area.

It was shift change time, and the street swarmed with a gray tide.

Workers wore uniformly issued canvas workwear, thick and durable, with reinforced cuffs and knees.

Their faces were smudged with coal dust, and their fingernails weren't perfectly clean either.

But their hair was cut short. Not for appearance, but to prevent lice, sweat rashes, and those persistent diseases that used to be impossible to drive away in shanty houses.

Most importantly, their expressions were clear, their gazes sweeping across the streets, across the guards on watch, across the bulletin boards along the roads, without any evasion or numbness.

As the steam carriage flying the Governor's flag passed by, the crowd along the street spontaneously halted to pay respect.

Fortunately, they didn't recognize Louis, otherwise they would surely have surrounded the carriage tightly.

Louis watched this scene, remained silent for a moment, then gently tapped his fingers on the paper.

"This is what I wanted to see." His voice was not loud, but very firm, "Even the lowest loaders stand tall."

The carriage continued forward, the heartbeat of the steam engine echoed behind, and the geometric lines of the street extended in the snowy mist.

Louis watched it all, finally releasing a slow breath: "Order... is the most extravagant luxury for humanity."

The carriage did not stop, turning past a gentle slope, leaving the edge of the residential area rapidly behind.

In the next moment, the view suddenly opened wide, tranquility shredded violently.

Roaring sounds came pressing from all directions, like a vast low thundercloud, rolling close to the ground.

The air suddenly turned murky, the temperature rose, coal smoke mingled with heat waves slapped the face.

This is the coastal industrial zone.

Louis' gaze crossed the street, seeing the elevated steam conveyor belt spanning half a factory district.

The black belt operated at high speed under the drive of a set of gears, emitting a teeth-grinding friction sound. Coal and ores unloaded from the railway were brutally swallowed by it, then poured continuously as a black waterfall towards the depths of the dock.

In other ports, such scenes would mean another picture.

Thousands of bare-chested slaves carried heavy ore baskets, crawling like ants on narrow catwalks.

Some slipped, some fell, those dying from exhaustion were conveniently kicked into the sea, without any pause.

While here, flesh stepped back, steel stood forward.

Louis' mind flitted across a line from the report, mechanization replacement rate, fifty percent.

When the steel dragon before them swallowed and spewed resources, this number truly gained weight, one conveyor belt.

Freeing countless laborers.

The carriage's water cup suddenly shook, followed by a heavier vibration.

The sound surpassed the waves, even causing the ground beneath to respond.

It was the hundred-ton steam forging hammer, each strike reshaping the form of steel.

Flares flickered in the depths of the factory district, molten iron splattered, swiftly pulled away, cooled, and formed.

This is the true main theme of this city.

Eliot stood by the side of the carriage, following Louis' gaze, his voice involuntarily elevated.

"This is Gray Rock, the Dawn linkage mechanism, ores from Gray Rock Province, directly reaching here via railway, undergoing digestion in this factory district."

He raised his hand, pointing to the area engulfed in black smoke and firelight, his tone carrying an almost proud certainty.

"Sir, your designed resource allocation system is truly astonishing, no noble layers exploiting, each piece of iron ore precisely sent to its destined place, ultimately forged into the armor of the Empire."

"Other Lords..." Louis slowly spoke, "still whipping slaves, while we have learned to steer steam with institutions."

He withdrew his gaze, looking toward Eliot: "Let's go, take me to the shipyard."

.....

The dry dock's dome resembles a hollowed-out mountain.

Steel beams crisscross, hundreds of alchemy spotlight lamps hang above, casting a stark white below.

The light fell on the steel surface, smeared with oil to a layer of cold, hard sheen, even the shadows appeared sharp.

The air was mixed with the scorching smell of hot metal, the sweet scent of high-quality lubricating oil, and the residual warmth of steam not fully dissipated, heavily pressing into the lungs.

This is the deepest area of Dawn Port, the Dawn Port shipyard.

This place is not open to any workers, the passages locked layer upon layer, the ground deliberately cleared nearly spotless, even footsteps magnified.

Chapter 807: Dawn Port Status_3

Louis stopped in his tracks, his gaze not immediately drawn to the bottom of the dock, but instead attracted by the figure on the scaffold.

That was an old man utterly out of place here.

He stood on the steel frame mid-air, back to the entrance, not tall, yet unusually straight.

He wore a pair of linen overalls stained black with machine oil, sleeves rolled up to the elbow, revealing wrists covered in calluses.

In stark contrast to this outfit was the meticulously knotted, slightly yellowed silk scarf at his collar.

His hair, graying, was carefully combed back and even slicked with pomade, gleaming subtly under the lights.

In his hand was not a wrench, but a piece of chalk.

A blackboard stood by the steel frame, covered with densely packed lines. Not an outline, but complex stress structure diagrams that made one's scalp tingle.

"This rib's angle is incorrect. It may not show in still water, but under full load, crosswaves, and headwinds combined, it'll crack first. Shipbuilding isn't about piling wood."

He firmly pointed with chalk on the diagram: "It's about providing sailors a living home in rough seas and heavy loads. Even if a rivet snaps, the structure must hold. Remember that, children?"

A few engineers stood below, clutching papers, sweating slightly, yet not daring to argue, only nodding repeatedly.

At that moment, he seemed less a craftsman and more a master passing on the flame.

Eliot softly reported something.

Only then did the old man turn around.

When he saw Louis, he was neither flustered nor in a hurry to descend.

He took off his reading glasses, slowly wiped away the chalk dust with a handkerchief, and then reached out to adjust the tarnished badge on his chest.

It was an old Calvin Clan badge, oxidized almost beyond its original sheen, but polished very clean.

Then, he steadied himself on the swaying scaffold.

At that moment, his back was ramrod straight, as if raising his last dignity together.

He performed a courtly salute from the Old Empire, as standard as it could be.

This was his homage as a shipwright, to a person who truly understood ships, craftsmen, and this era.

The old man's posture was very straight, yet still showed a momentary tension.

He was controlling his emotions, as if striving not to appear inappropriate.

"Lord Louis." His voice was lower than before but steadier, "Without you, these hands of mine should have long been taken away."

He paused, his gaze briefly sweeping over the surrounding steel beams, scaffolding, and those young engineers standing silently.

"It's because of you I can still stand in this dock, and these children are willing to listen to an old man. To me, that is the greatest kindness."

Having said this, he no longer explained further.

He just took a deep breath, as if pushing all the weight in his chest back down, then quickly composed himself.

Then, he stepped aside, gesturing towards the depths of the dock, for the first time unable to hide the urgency in his tone.

"Please."

The spotlights lit up one by one, peeling away layers of shadow.

Two massive steel beasts lay quietly at the dry dock's bottom.

No sleek lines, no embellishments.

Like black bastions forcibly pressed onto the water's surface.

On the left ship's bow armor, the prominent name was cast in brass — [Fernando].

Louis's gaze lingered on those words for a moment: "I never go back on my word, Orland, your surname will be engraved on the Red Tide Navy's flagship."

The old shipwright's Adam's apple noticeably moved.

He didn't reply, only stared intently at that ship, as if confirming it still existed.

This ship did not belong to this era at all.

The hull was broad, freeboard towering, with a suffocating sense of oppression.

Completely black, not a single plank exposed, entirely wrapped in thick, surface-hardened steel armor.

The hull featured two cold gun ports, resembling fortress firing holes, silently gaping.

In the middle of the ship, two massive smokestacks tilted back.

Even when extinguished, one could imagine them belching black smoke, obscuring the skies.

Orland's voice echoed in the empty dock, filled with almost manic pride: "It's not pretty or gentle, my lord, it was born to end this era."

He looked at that ship as if it were his most cherished child.

And Louis, standing in the shadow of steel, reached out to touch the cold armor: "No, Orland, this is the era's finest work of art."

Chapter 808: Birth of the Industrial Behemoth

The heavy airtight door on the side hull closed behind them.

The metal latch locked section by section, emitting a low and short muffled sound.

The outside sea breeze, wave sounds, and noisy voices were completely isolated by steel in this instant.

The passageway was narrow and low, with cold gray steel plates on both sides, without an inch of extra decoration. Rows of rivet heads nailed to the wall were neat and dense, like some kind of giant beast's exposed joints.

Every few steps, an explosion-proof glass lamp was lit.

The lamp cover, slightly yellowed from long-term exposure to high temperatures, shimmered, casting the shadows of several people fragmented and broken.

Orland walked in front, his steps steady as if he were not an old man.

He stopped in front of an especially heavy watertight door and raised his hand to pat the solid brass knob on the side of the door, the metallic sound crisp and solid.

"The entire ship has been segmented into forty independent watertight compartments." The old man's tone carried unabashed pride as he turned the knob, indicating for Louis to observe the complex locking structure.

"Even if hit by a torpedo or the hull punctured by pirates, as long as the door is shut tight, it will float like a cork. Here, comfort is superfluous; survival is paramount."

Louis reached out and touched the steel plate.

The sensation of cold roughness transmitted to his fingertips, providing a reassurance unlike any expensive silk.

"You're right, Orland," Louis retracted his hand and said approvingly, "At sea, survival is the only elegance. Even if we're to die, it should be in the charge forward, not drowned in a leaking coffin."

Orland paused for a moment, then nodded heavily.

They continued downward; the more they descended towards the lower compartments, the hotter the air, and the more noticeable the vibrations beneath their feet.

Even if the machinery hadn't fully powered up, the entire ship seemed to suppress some emerging force.

The moment the soundproof door of the engine room was pushed open, immense roars and heat waves almost rushed in.

The space suddenly widened, with four giant vertical steam engines occupying the entirety of the core compartment.

Thick connecting rods, crankshafts, and cylinders layered, resembling internal organs made of steel, glistening with cold metallic sheen.

Beside it was a massive coal-fired boiler, half-open furnace door, with firelight casting the dimly lit compartment into a blood-red hue.

A few shirtless coal shovelers were busy moving back and forth before the furnace.

Sweat gathered into streams on their dark backs, flung onto the scorching iron plates along with their muscle contractions, emitting sizzling sounds.

Seeing the compartment door open, these lower-level workers instinctively paused their actions.

They gazed at Louis in his coat, eyes filled with a hint of bewildered respect.

The air seemed to freeze for a moment.

"What are you all staring at!" Orland stepped forward, his voice like a resonant bell, echoing within the enclosed space: "Standing before you is the one who breathed life into this ship, the ruler of the Red Tide Territory, Lord Louis Calvin!"

The coal shovelers' pupils constricted sharply, scrambling to kneel.

Louis said, "Pay no attention to me, keep going."

In the next instant, the sound of coal shoveling intensified rapidly.

If the previous sounds were mere labor, now, they contained a kind of frenetic rhythm.

Iron shovels colliding with coal heaps, the coal thrown into the furnace, movements much faster and fiercer than before.

They dared not meet the great Lord's eyes, yet poured all their gratitude into the furnace.

Flames licked wildly inside the furnace, with the needle on the pressure gauge trembling slightly.

Louis watched all this, nodding faintly, "Good, very spirited."

Then the old man led Louis to the engine room's center, pointing at the thick transmission shaft running through the ship's body: "The one-piece casting process of the steam factory. From here, directly connected to the twin propellers at the stern."

He reached out and patted the shaft, as if calming a temperamental yet obedient warhorse.

"As long as the boiler burns fiercely, it can drive this seven-thousand-ton block of iron until it flies," the old man's mouth slightly upturned, eyes gleaming with fervor.

Having examined the steam core, the two slowly descended on the hydraulic elevator.

Heavy steel cables tightened in the tracks, emitting a deep, rhythmic humming.

As the altitude decreased bit by bit, the internal vibrations of the ship became increasingly distinct, seemingly penetrating along bones and veins, delving into the most dangerous belly of a steel beast.

This place could no longer simply be termed a ship compartment. It was more like a museum of violence sealed in steel.

The first layer of the main gun deck, space deliberately elevated, unusually broad.

Along the central axis, two massive turrets stood side by side, like two slumbering iron hills, firmly anchoring the ship's center of gravity.

With just one glance, Louis confirmed the specifications of the actual objects.

Black, long cannon barrels extending forward, cooling and reinforcing rings layered; even stationary, the chilly aura from the muzzle was enough to evoke an instinctive sense of suffocation.

Orland stood beside the turret, reaching out to pat the cold riveted armor: "This main gun layout was entirely executed according to your requirements."

The old man's eyes carried a hint of reverence.

In the initial plan, he had tried to use a more economical medium caliber but was flatly vetoed by Louis.

"In those years serving the Southeast Province, I've seen too many flamboyant warships, beautiful in parameters, but turning into floating coffins after the first broadside."

Orland's voice echoed across the spacious deck, "But you said the first volley must be heavy enough, brutal enough. To shatter their bones even before they realize the pain."

Chapter 809: Birth of the Industrial Behemoth (Part 2)

Louis stepped forward, his fingertips gliding over the rough cast iron cannon body: "In the future world, caliber is justice, range is truth."

Louis's voice was calm and indifferent, as if discussing the weather: "I don't want our enemies to have a chance to sit down and negotiate. This is not meant for warfare, Orland, it is meant for unilateral judgment."

"In combination with the Red Tide Territory's special Magic Explosion Bullet," Orland added, "One shot can open a five-meter diameter hole on ordinary wooden sail battleships. That's absolute destruction."

The elevator continued descending.

The space on the second level noticeably tightened, rows of armored gun mounts unfolded along the sides of the ship, each harboring a rapid-fire cannon.

The cannon bodies were simple and aggressive in design, brass ammunition belts neatly coiled on the supply racks, resembling venomous snakes ready to be awoken by the smell of blood.

"Medium and small caliber, twelve guns," Louis surveyed the muzzles, "The ammunition capacity has increased by 30% compared to the original plan."

Orland nodded, with a solemn expression: "This is to counter the type of dirty warfare you annotated on the blueprints."

This was not a gentlemanly fleet battle, but a quagmire dragged in by numbers.

Louis was well aware that the icy seas of the Northern Territory contained not just pirates, but also swarms of fishmen and even more bizarre group-dwelling magical beasts.

"Precision is secondary when dealing with hordes of scraps."

Louis picked up a cold string of ammunition belts, weighing it: "The main cannons are to instill awe, while these are to shred the sea surface to pieces. I want a barrage, a metal downpour with no blind spots."

Next, the third level, the air suddenly became scorching.

The ceiling was low, pipes densely packed. On the platform high on the deck, several sets of sinister-looking devices were mounted, numerous short and thick cannon tubes arranged in a fan shape, connected to independent steam power supply lines.

"Reaper," Orland introduced, "Six hundred rounds per minute. Any creature attempting to board, whether pirate or the fabled fishmen, will be shredded upon stepping on the deck."

Below these devices, a row of inconspicuous nozzles was hidden at the edge of the ship's side.

"And there's the Dragon Breath system. High-pressure injection of alchemy gel oil, instant ignition." Orland made a gesture, "If something climbs up the hull, the entire ship will instantly turn into a burning fiery porcupine. This is the purifying fire against filth."

Louis nodded in satisfaction.

This was a tangible manifestation of his extreme aversion to close combat; in this low magic world, any action allowing the enemy close was a tactical failure.

Finally, the elevator descended to the lowest level.

Here, near the stern, the space seemed spacious and cold.

Inclined deployment rails led directly to the outside water surface; beside the rails were several huge iron barrels, their bodies engraved with runes sensing water pressure.

"Deep Water Shock Bombs," Orland looked at these iron barrels, eyes complex.

This was the last part written into the design, and also the part he least understood, until Louis showed him the statistical report on "unexplained missing ships."

"Underwater countermeasure system. Upon detonation, the incompressibility of water will magnify the impact tenfold," Orland said in a low voice, "If there really is something below, their innards will crush first."

"It must have," Louis interrupted him, his tone indisputable.

"Orland, remember my words."

Louis turned around, his back to the pile of deep-water bombs, his gaze penetrating the dim cabin, as if looking at the unknown depths of the sea.

"Many people think the sea is flat, thinking hiding underwater is safe, but I don't believe so; underwater, there are far more terrifying enemies."

.....

As night descended, they returned to the fully armored command tower.

Located at the highest point of the vessel, it was the central hub of the entire battleship, its true brain.

Five-centimeter-thick bulletproof glass tilted forward, like a cold, hard shield, isolating the exterior from the interior.

Through the glass, one could overlook the elongated and spacious foredeck and the main cannon silently aimed at the night sky.

The muzzle was silent, yet carried an oppressive feeling as if ready to tear everything apart at any moment.

Unlike the lower cabins, the air here was exceptionally quiet.

Only the slight sounds of gears slowly meshing inside the dashboard, occasionally accompanied by tiny jumps of the pointers, formed a stark contrast with the thrum deep within the ship yet to awaken completely.

Louis clasped the cold black iron steering wheel with both hands, not looking at the sea chart. His gaze passed over the bulletproof glass, landing on the dark and fog-covered sea ahead.

"According to the Imperial Navy's regulations, launching a new ship requires at least three months of sea trials and adjustments. And we've just completed half of those tests."

He paused, his voice calm yet oppressive: "But Orland, if I want to take it out now to shed blood, will it disappoint me?"

The old shipwright was momentarily stunned, then understood the meaning of these words.

He did not dissuade, his eyes even more fervent, as if discussing a feast about to begin:

"All the linkages have been lubricated, even that most difficult third cylinder adjusted perfectly. It's like a shark born hungry and mad, sir. It doesn't need gentle test runs; it yearns for the blood ritual."

"Good," Louis's lips curled into a shallow, cold smile, fingers tapping gently on the steering wheel.

"To the south, the passage has gathered a group of scoundrels ignorant of life and death. No need to find a target ship, this bunch will be the most suitable prey."

Louis turned around and issued the final directive to the adjutant behind him: "Relay the order, the entire ship will undergo final supply and preparation tonight. Set sail tomorrow at six in the morning."

.....

The dock at Dawn Port was already crowded with thousands of territory residents who had rushed over upon hearing the news.

Their breath gathered into a burning mist, and all eyes were fixed on the massive black silhouette in the drydock.

Doubt, fear, and a silent waiting for judgment.

"How can iron float on water?" A merchant shivered, clutching the mooring post, full of disbelief, "That's a coffin destined to sink to the bottom..."

"Woo—!!!"

A piercing roar instantly tore apart the morning calm.

That sound did not belong to the graceful horn of the sail era but was the whistle of high-pressure steam passing through brass reeds.

It was domineering and savage, carrying a heart-palpating penetration, instantly overwhelming the sound of the waves, making the eardrums of the workers in front throb painfully.

Next, the ground began to tremble.

"Rumble!"

Under everyone's terrified gaze, two thick and almost tangible plumes of black smoke, like the breath of an awakening dragon, surged out of the massive chimney.

The rolling black smoke instantly stained the gray-white sky, even obscuring the first light of the just-risen dawn.

A kind of oppressive force called the industrial beast descended upon this primitive world for the first time.

"It moved...it's moving!" A scream erupted from the crowd.

Accompanied by the harsh sound of tightening winch cables, that black steel mountain appeared to defy logic, relying on its irritable steam heart, forcefully pushing aside the seawater ahead.

The sharp prow sliced into the water, not creating white waves but two walls of turbulent muddy water.

The merchant's pipe fell to the ground and broke to pieces.

Watching the towering riveted armor pass by, seeing the giant cannon large enough to fit a grown man, his knees buckled, instinctively kneeling.

To the inhabitants of the old era, everything before their eyes was no longer a tool but a terrifying divine miracle.

"Is this...the Lord's power?" A young coal shovel worker, face smeared with coal dust, looked at the rolling black smoke, eyes shifting from dazed to passionate.

He clenched his fist tightly, feeling the vibration beneath his feet.

This wasn't the vague spell of a mage; this was steel, a miracle driven by the coal they mined with their own hands!

Someone led the shout, and the suppressed voice wave erupted like a volcano the next second.

"Long live!!"

"Long live the Red Tide Lord!!!"

The cheering of thousands converged, mad and hoarse, even drowning out the steam engine's roar.

Amidst this deafening worship, this steel titan representing industrial truth arrogantly held its head high.

Crushing the waves of the old era, carrying a full cargo of killing intent, it sailed slowly into the mist-covered vast ocean.

That was its hunting ground.

Chapter 810: Scorpion

The captain's cabin of the Scorpion was not spacious.

In contrast to the ostentatious luxury of the Black Reef Prince, it appeared cramped, yet it was filled with a kind of barbaric abundance.

Crumpled silk carpets were carelessly laid on the floor, several crudely crafted yet substantial gold ornaments hung on the walls, and at the corner of the table, gilded wine utensils from the South were piled like a heap of forgotten scrap metal.

Rosa sat at the table, slicing open white bread with a silver knife in hand, the blade sinking into the soft crust with almost no resistance.

Butter was lavishly spread on top, gleaming with a greasy and enticing sheen under the dim candlelight.

Outside the window, muffled chewing sounds could be heard.

It was her sailors squatting in the wind on the deck, gnawing on hard black biscuits.

Dry crumbs fell into the gaps of the deck, soon being trodden deep into the wood grain by bare feet.

Of course, not everyone was like this.

A small group of core crew members gathered around a wind-protected fire basin.

They were given soft bread mixed with grease and occasionally took turns sipping light wine.

These were the ones responsible for sailing and gunnery, the real assets that could determine life and death in combat.

As for the lowest ones, the newly recruited swine, the unlucky ones with ship debts, or just the hapless laborers caught up on board.

They only deserved to squat in the cold wind, using saliva to soften those stone-like black biscuits.

Pirates were never a group of equal brothers; they were a staircase of layers stepping upwards.

Those standing in the center of the deck stepped on the ones at the stern, and the ones at the stern stepped on those at the bottom, while she stepped on everyone.

In her eyes, it was already a blessing for this trash to be standing alive on the deck.

Rosa took a bite of bread and picked up the wine glass for a sip.

The next moment, her face turned sullen.

"Ugh." She spat the wine back into the glass, her only remaining eye full of disdain, "Damn Southern sour wine."

She shook the glass vigorously, as if confirming whether this stuff had been watered down by those damned merchants, "I really miss the strong liquor from the Northern side..."

Although Louis had blocked the Northern routes in recent years, she was not short of food.

On the Southern routes, there were always unlucky grain ships and porcelain caravans to target.

Grain could fill stomachs, porcelain could be exchanged for gold coins, but these things had slow turnover, and the real profits received were pathetically small.

What could make someone wealthy overnight was never this kind of junk.

What Rosa truly craved were the cargo holds with the Red Tide seals on the Northern routes.

Refined steel, alchemy parts, crates of standard weapons...

Those things were the real windfall, but ever since the Red Tide Territory blocked the routes, that vein flowing with gold had been completely cut off.

She hated Louis because this damned Lord of the North had turned her windfall into a pittance.

At that moment, there was the sound of flapping wings outside the porthole.

A huge albatross landed on the mast, tucking away its feathers ruffled by the sea breeze.

A small object wrapped tightly in oilcloth was precisely tossed through the half-open porthole, landing with a dull thud on the table.

Rosa squinted her eyes, first holding her breath to confirm there were no eavesdropping shadows outside the door, then slowly unraveled the oilcloth.

Lying quietly within was a Black Reef Order, a letter from that old guy Balk.

Beside the token was a thumb-sized deep-sea black pearl.

In the candlelight, the pearl shimmered with a deep and mysterious glow, as if condensing the whole of the night within its small shell.

Rosa's breathing noticeably halted for a moment.

Just this one could equal three months of her pillaging income in the South.

She reached out to grasp the black pearl in her palm, feeling its cool and smooth touch, then unfolded the letter.

The handwriting was rough, without any unnecessary pleasantries.

"Rosa, I know you can make a small fortune in the South. But don't you miss the Northern firearms and steel?"

Rosa sneered, and the letter continued:

"I found a way to deal with Louis, the iron turtle. The Corrosive Touch, a poison that can melt black iron armor instantly like hot water pouring over snow.

Come to the Shattered Isles, and we seven will split this pie equally. By then, every Red Tide merchant ship will turn into a drifting treasury."

Rosa toyed with the black pearl repeatedly, greed and calculation intertwined in her one eye, the light growing ever brighter.

That old bastard Balk, hiding such a good treasure?

With what she knew of Balk, if it were truly a solo deal, that old shark would never even let a whiff of it leak.

Having the seven called upon could only mean one thing, that he couldn't handle it alone.

Either the thing was too dangerous, or it wasn't as incredible as he claimed.

Or maybe that old guy's courage was no longer like before, preferring to drag others into the fray rather than dare to gamble alone.

Balk had done this kind of thing more than once.

For decades, whenever an opportunity arose at sea that was tasteless to eat but a pity to discard, he was the first to think of this method.

Releasing rumors, gathering kindred spirits, promising to share the spoils, dragging everyone into the same pot to cook.

A dozen years ago, when the Jade Federation routes were at their ripest, there would be a so-called joint hunt every couple of years.

Sometimes three families, sometimes five, and at most, a full assembly of nine black sails.

The most famous time, they hunted the Federation's oceangoing convoy like crazed hyenas.

On the surface, it was an alliance sharing profits, but in reality, everyone was scheming against each other, everyone using allies as cannon fodder.

In the end, that battle sank seventeen Federation ships and killed half of the pirates.

And as usual, Balk withdrew early when the fire burned brightest, preserving the most complete strength.

It was by stepping ashore on ally corpses time and again that he reached where he was today.

Thinking of this, the smile on Rosa's lips grew even colder.

If that so-called Corrosive Touch really had the effect described in the letter...

She stuck out her tongue, greedily licking her cracked lips.

To the Shattered Isles? Of course she would go.

But not to shake hands and form alliances.

What she intended to do was to devour that sincerity skin and bones.

If she could get the formula in her hands...

Then the next pirate king ruling the seas will need a new name.

.....

The fleet gradually slowed down outside the Shattered Isles.

Mist rose from the sea surface, not the usual white vapor, but a type of murky gray.

The mist rolled along the dark water's surface like a layer of greasy, filthy gauze that hadn't been washed in years.

When the Scorpion cut into it, even the noise on the deck seemed to be mostly engulfed by the thick damp air.

The air carried a certain fishy smell.

But it wasn't just the stench of rotting fish, it was mingled with a cloying sweetness, like some kind of expensive spice slowly evaporating in a damp, dark cellar.

Rosa stood at the prow of the ship, taking a deep breath.

The one remaining eye narrowed slightly, a look of near pleasure appearing on her coarse face.

This smell reminded her of a southern spice ship she had plundered in her youth.

When the crowbar snapped the seal of the cargo hold, this same smell burst forth, pungent and strong, yet it could make one's heartbeat accelerate.

"It's the smell of gold coins." She muttered softly, a greedy curve lifting at her mouth, "Looks like the old Balk creature has really hoarded quite a fortune."

Rosa muttered softly, her gaze penetrating the mist to fix intently on that barely visible black fortress on the distant reef.

As the distance closed, the mist partially cleared.

Rosa's pupils contracted sharply.

In the anchorage below Skull Castle, several warships of various designs were quietly docked.

Though their black sails were furled, those tattered and blood-stained flags on the masts stood out dangerously in the gray mist.

"Bonesplitter Kane, Viper... even that old charlatan showed up."

Rosa's fingers unconsciously rubbed the dagger at her waist, her original greed instantly cooling into a state of extreme calm.

It seemed Balk hadn't lied.

This was a grand feast, but wasn't he afraid that, caging so many hungry sharks together, he himself might be torn apart first?

Unless he had an ace card that could absolutely control the situation.

"Looks like this isn't just picking up scraps, it's risking life and limb."

The ship continued forward, and at a distance of five nautical miles from Skull Castle, Rosa raised her hand to signal a halt: "Anchor."

The position was calculated precisely, at the edge of the tailwind and the coastal artillery range, ready to make a turn and withdraw at any moment.

She turned back to the captain's cabin, hung up her heavy captain's coat, and began checking her gear piece by piece.

First mate Miller stood nearby, watching her stash two poisoned daggers into her sleeves, finally unable to hold back from speaking: "Boss, at least four factions' ships are stationed outside. In this situation... Do you really plan to go in personally?"

Rosa didn't look up, swiftly checking her ammunition: "Since I'm here, who's gonna be satisfied without seeing the thing?"

"Listen up." She finally turned her gaze, sharp as a knife: "Position the ship broadside, aim all the side cannons at the fortress, but not one step closer."

Miller paused, asking instinctively: "If two hours pass and you haven't returned, or if we see a red flare... should I lead the crew to charge in and rescue you?"

Rosa chuckled coldly, looking at him as if he were an idiot: "Fool."

"If even I end up trapped inside, leading the crew in will just be delivering yourselves to death."

She stepped closer, her voice edged with undeniable severity: "If anything happens, or you notice something amiss inside, give the order immediately to indiscriminately bombard the fortress. Stir the water, the more chaos, the better."

Miller opened his mouth: "And then?"

"Then you sail away as fast as you can. I'll escape underwater during the chaos."

Rosa heavily patted the wooden wall of the cabin, her gaze sharp enough to intimidate: "Remember, this ship is my lifeline, my foundation at sea. I won't let you sacrifice it, even to save me."

As long as the ship remained, Rosa could make a comeback.

If the ship were lost, even if she escaped, the other pirates would devour her leaving nothing behind, like scavenger creatures tearing at carrion.

.....

The small boat lowered, and Rosa, with her two finest guards, embarked onto the gangway.

The pier was quieter than she had imagined.

Though several pirate ships were moored, the gangway was eerily devoid of the usual rowdy chatter and drinking songs, disturbingly still.

Several black-robed attendants stood on either side, heads bowed, their movements stiff and sluggish.

As she approached, the oppressive sweet and fishy odor intensified.

Rosa's gaze swept over the hands peeking from the black robes, her pupils slightly tightened.

The skin was an ashen gray, wrinkled and appearing to be perpetually coated in slime, like it was a severe skin condition or a waterlogged corpse left afloat for too long.

"Is it marine leprosy? Or a side effect of alchemical toxins?"

She assessed inwardly, her hand subtly resting on the hilt of her sword.

"What on earth is that old Balk creature up to..." Rosa did not speak, but her gaze darkened considerably.

Unlike her normal derision for her rivals' misfortunes, every muscle in her body tensed, like a leopard stepping into a foreign territory marked by the scent of its kin.

High-heeled leather boots clicked crisply against the decaying wooden planks of the gangway.

"Clack, clack, clack..."

With each step, she surveyed the shadows all around.

To her eyes, this place indeed appeared as a lion's den.

But those standing guard here weren't necessarily decrepit old lions; they might as well have been beasts driven completely mad for survival.

And she had to muster every ounce of vigilance to ensure she would be the one eating meat, not the one served on a platter.