

Winter 81

Chapter 81: Banquet

The Baron wanted to say something more, but his mouth was just halfway open when he was interrupted.

"Lord Louis!" A cheerful voice suddenly interjected.

Only to see a young noble stepping forward with a beaming smile, his face full of flattery: "You are now my greatest idol in the Northern Territory!"

Before his words could finish, another person squeezed in, a middle-aged noble dressed in a brocade robe, his hair sleek and shiny.

"My lord, may I have the honor of hosting you at my territory someday? We'll certainly prepare the finest wine and the most tender roast venison!"

Next, as if a dam had been opened, more people kept crowding over.

Each with a flattering smile, holding a wine cup, surrounded Louis with greetings, toasting, and handing out name cards.

The Baron of the Southwest could only watch helplessly as he was squeezed out of the crowd, looking somewhat embarrassed.

Meanwhile, Louis maintained his dignified smile, responding to the greetings while keeping an eye on the distance between them.

"Thank you for the compliment. I shall certainly visit when the opportunity arises."

"I am flattered, I have long admired the elegance of past seniors."

Every sentence was flawless, neither too close nor too distant.

But there were simply too many people, and no matter how composed and complete he was, he was nearing his limit.

At this moment, a well-dressed Attendant quietly approached, whispering in his ear: "Lord Louis, the Duke requests your presence."

"Excuse me," Louis seized this opportunity to gracefully take his leave.

Like that, under the envious eyes of the crowd, the Attendant led him out of the banquet hall, towards the Duke's parlor.

Duke Edmund was already seated there, with a dozen other distinguished nobles by his side.

"Louis, let me introduce a few people," the Duke said with a smile, introducing Louis one by one, "This is Count Albert, and this is Count Grant..."

Each of them had considerable fame in the Northern Territory, and these people should indeed be the Celestial Dragon People of the North.

"The scion of the Calvin Family is certainly no mediocrity," Count Albert began with a hint of commentary, "There are plenty who can fight these days, but not many as outstanding as you."

"You really took down one of the Snow Swearer's outposts with just about a hundred men?" Count Grant continued.

Louis replied calmly, "It was mainly good fortune; I don't dare to claim credit."

"Hmm, well-spoken," Count Grant snorted, "Much better than some young hothead telling tales right after a battle."

Duke Edmund observed this, feeling more satisfied.

He gave a gentle smile and said in passing, "I invited him today, hoping he can integrate into our Northern circle sooner."

The nobles exchanged glances, a bit surprised.

This lad... just won a battle, didn't he?

It was indeed impressive, but the Duke seemed to hold him in too high regard.

However, those present were all vassals of Edmond, naturally no one would dare contradict him publicly.

Count Albert thought for a moment, then simply raised his glass, speaking with a hearty tone: "Though young, your future is limitless. It looks like we'll have another outstanding companion here."

Louis smiled and raised his glass in return: "I'm thankful for the kindness, I will not disappoint."

They all nodded with smiles, and after a round of pleasantries, the topic gradually shifted direction.

The nobles began discussing the most pressing issue—winter preparation.

"I'm afraid the winter snow will come early this year, the construction in my territory is only halfway finished, who knows how many will freeze to death again."

"This is easy to solve; come spring, just buy more slaves from the South."

"But these slaves are getting more and more expensive, they might soon become unaffordable."

"Hahaha, then we'll just capture some barbarians from the North."

"That's not feasible, the barbarians are hard to manage."

...

Every word from each noble made the serious issues seem light and casual, as if they were discussing a few farm animals.

Louis didn't speak up, just listened quietly, but his expression grew increasingly grim.

The winter problem was one he couldn't escape.

The victory at Qingyu Ridge brought him new land, which certainly made him very pleased.

But behind this reward lay three times the territory, multiple times the population, and countless issues.

Moreover, this year's situation is rather unusual, having just conducted large-scale warfare, resources would be even more scarce.

He knew very well, if he wasn't sufficiently prepared, by the end of winter, he wouldn't just lose a few lives under his command but thousands to tens of thousands.

But the Red Tide Territory could still manage, with smoked fish and the year's grain harvest, they could temporarily maintain their basic needs.

The houses were sufficient, and the geothermal heat in the territory ensured nobody would freeze to death for now.

But in those newly acquired places...

The citizens there were clad in thin linen, with roofs still leaking, and a heavy snowstorm could spell disaster.

These old nobles spoke lightly, but their families had cultivated their roots in the Northern lands for many years; their foundations were solid.

One harsh winter wouldn't cause them major damage.

Moreover, they were indifferent to the plight of the lower rung populace.

Come spring, if the numbers were insufficient, they would simply purchase them from the South.

Hey, and the slaves are full again.

This was much easier than maintaining the survival of slaves.

But Louis was not yet capable of being that cold-hearted, still hoping to save more people.

Prepare more food, build more houses, gather more firewood.

However, such challenges require a lot more effort.

While Louis silently pondered the way out for his territory, the nobles' conversation took another turn.

"Those Pioneer Nobles are truly a joke, a bunch of fools."

"They only create chaos in battle, and in territorial management, they only waste money. Quite a number died in this war too."

"Hmph, serves them right," one person sneered, "saves us the trouble of cleaning up after them."

For a moment, a few voices of agreement echoed lightly in the parlor.

No one noticed, seated quietly on one side, that Louis was indeed a member of the so-called "Pioneer Nobles."

Yet he displayed no change in expression, simply raising his glass quietly and sipping his wine.

Indeed, Louis was different from those people, not like the useless ones they spoke of, he performed better than most Northern Lords.

This was precisely why they forgot that this young man was just a newly risen noble "banished" to these lands.

"But not all Pioneer Nobles are useless," Count Albert glanced at Louis and casually added.

Duke Edmund smiled, seizing this opportune moment to broach a matter he'd prepared to inform everyone about.

"Speaking of pioneering," his tone was casual yet demanding attention, "There has been some activity on His Majesty's side recently."

The group paused slightly.

"His Majesty intends to expand southward in a few years, targeting those small countries in the Southeast," Edmond said softly, "He's asking us in the Northern Territory for some Knight reinforcements."

As soon as the words fell, the air tightened.

"Us again?" Count Grant furrowed his brow, "We haven't even finished fighting our own battles."

"That's right, the Southerners only suck our blood," another noble complained.

Chapter 82: Marriage Alliance

"Us again?" Count Grant frowned, "We can't even finish our own battles."

"This time it's different," Duke Edmund's gaze swept over the crowd meaningfully, "After success, the land in the South can be divided."

As soon as these words were spoken, the parlor fell into a brief silence.

Soon followed by a flurry of discussions.

"That's a fine place indeed!"

"Far better than this freezing backwater we have here."

"The Emperor finally remembers to compensate us?"

"Ha, compensate? This is clearly to make us the knife to pare down those old Southern folks."

"But this knife, I am willing to be!"

"Those Southern weaklings, who can they even beat? When the time comes, we'll have to bear the burden."

"Fight if we must, as long as we can get some land, I'll even go to the frontline."

Laughter, whispers, and toasts gradually intertwined.

Excitement fermented in the air, even a few nobles who originally held indifferent expressions lit up.

The land in the Northern Territory is too harsh.

A whole year spent just preparing firewood and grain for winter is enough to suffocate a Baron's Domain.

Every snow disaster, every livestock epidemic, every war, and all of that is reality they must face.

But the Emperor has spoken; as long as they send troops, as long as they win.

They can step out of this snowy permafrost into the sun-drenched, orchard-rich Southern Country.

What does that mean?

Lower security costs, higher taxes, more prosperous trade routes, more valuable population...

A feudal land that can truly be passed down for three generations, providing a new lifeline for the family.

These Northern Lords are long accustomed to fighting in the wind and snow, relying on war to snatch a living.

Now, this tempting opportunity, how could it not make their mouths water?

As evening fell, the banquet ended in a lively atmosphere.

The nobles left in groups, laughter and the scent of wine still lingered in the hall.

Louis, however, was held back by Duke Edmund.

Only a few lamps remained in the hall, the light warm, the Duke's expression affable.

"Too many died in the battle of Snow Eagle City," Duke Edmund said, a trace of heaviness in his tone, "Especially the nobles of Snow Peak County suffered heavy losses."

Louis didn't speak, just listened.

"The Forrester Clan is finished, their territory mostly reclaimed, with some distributed to distant relatives. Now Snow Peak County is leaderless."

The Duke changed his tone, revealing a meaningful smile: "I want you to be the Prefect of Snow Peak County."

Louis was taken aback, his eyes subtly changed.

Being a Prefect is not just a title.

It means he can oversee all military arrangements in the entire Snow Peak County, having the authority to mobilize the noble Knights.

He could also, during times of war, directly enlist the people, build defense lines, and gather supplies.

It means he can represent the Empire in collecting taxes from the affiliated villages and lands within the county, and of course, he can take a cut for himself.

It also means he can preside over the county council, mediate noble disputes, serving as the arbitrator of the area;

Three parts warlord, three parts administrative official, three parts like a gang leader, and the rest like a worried community head.

The rights and benefits he could gain from this are considerable.

Louis was quite tempted.

But he also knew it wasn't purely a reward; he would have to bear the corresponding obligations.

"You know what this means," the Duke said, "that place isn't empty land now, it's a mess."

"I... am willing to take on this responsibility," Louis answered softly.

Edmund nodded and added, "Snow Peak County suffered heavy losses after the war. Many civilians died, and refugees scattered.

If you have the ability, you could help them. Of course, all of this mess is left by the foolish Forrester Family.

I won't blame you if you can't do it, but I hope you can."

Louis was silent for a moment, then nodded: "I intended to do so anyway."

Duke Edmund patted Louis, indicating approval, though his gaze was a bit overly affectionate.

Louis could also sense that gaze was somewhat strange, but couldn't pinpoint what was off, just politely nodded thanks.

Unbeknownst to him, that afternoon Edmund had already written a letter, quietly sent to Duke Calvin's Mansion.

The letter's subject had only two words: Political Marriage.

This was no sudden whim.

In fact, the idea of a political marriage had occurred to Edmund months ago.

Though this generation of direct heirs hadn't yet married Southern nobles, he had always encouraged family heirs to marry into Southern power.

After all, the Northern Territory is cold and resource-tight; to seek future prospects, expansion south is necessary.

He himself had long intended to lay the ground for potential future Southern fiefs.

A political marriage is the most secure way to gain political support.

But such a marriage must be carefully chosen.

It requires a match in status, and one whose character and capability are commendable.

Now, the only eligible daughter was Emily.

His most beloved youngest daughter, she was intelligent, gentle, and not troublesome.

Though he had considered marrying her to an heir of a Southern duke, the thought of sending her far away alone made him hesitant.

Until after the Battle of Qingyu Ridge, a young noble named "Louis Calvin" emerged.

At a young age, he could lead raids, set ambushes, annihilate enemies, accelerating the Northern war situation in one stroke.

And he was directly descended from the Calvin Clan.

The Calvin Clan, also one of the Eight Great Clans of the Empire, spanned the Southeast Province.

Controlling several key imperial ports and large salt fields, it was one of the oldest families in the Noble Council.

Rank, wartime achievements, competence, prospects...

Louis had it all.

Moreover, he was not rash, acted with discretion, could be humble yet decisive.

Including his handling at the banquet, his conversational poise, the composed confidence he exuded among the crowd.

In addition, secret letters from Bond and Gibson mentioned him as highly strategic, destined to become a great figure.

The most important point is that Louis's territory was only a few days' journey from Frost Halberd City, so even if his daughter suffered grievances, she could return at any time.

And the Calvin Clan, for the sake of benefits, would likely consent to this marriage.

Thus, the letter of political marriage flew to the Southeast Province.

...

Duke Calvin, as usual, awoke at six in the morning.

Then proceeded with the routine morning exercise he had adhered to for twenty years, incidentally contributing to the family.

After washing and dressing, everything in place, he walked leisurely into the study.

The butler silently delivered a new batch of mountain-high letters.

Duke Calvin flipped through them, suddenly stopping his hand.

"Hmm?"

He picked out a letter sealed with dark blue wax, its handwriting bold.

"Edmund? Which one?"

He squinted at the signature, confirming it wasn't written by some minor noble with a mistaken name.

Finally confirming it was from Duke Edmund, Governor of the North.

"That duke from the Northern Territory? Why would he suddenly write to me?"

Though they were both heads of the Eight Great Clans of the Empire, normally they had little interaction.

Filled with questions, he opened the letter.

"A, a political marriage??"

Duke Calvin nearly sprayed tea onto the letter.

Chapter 83: The Third Letter from the Northern Territory

Duke Calvin unfolded the letter and, after a quick glance, his eyes stopped on two words.

"Marriage alliance?!"

"Huh?" He almost spat out his tea.

"Who? Who's getting married to whom?"

His eyes quickly scanned downwards, reading ten lines at a glance, until they landed on that line.

"Emily Edmund, the third daughter, is to be betrothed to Louis Calvin."

His whole body seemed to stiffen.

He remembered this eighth son, Louis.

His initial impression of him was that he lacked talent, ambition, and drive, a typical noble kid who idled away his time.

So he was sent to the Northern Territory as a way to make use of a waste, with no intention of letting him inherit anything.

Later, the old butler Bradley mentioned a few times in his letters that Louis had managed the messy corner of the Northern Territory with great order.

He even found a Demon Marrow Ore in the Northern Territory, and every month engaged in trade with the family, providing a substantial and stable income.

He was satisfied with this, casually approved some resources for Louis to establish himself in the Northern Territory.

"Worth nurturing," he thought at the time, but nothing more.

After that, he became too busy to pay attention.

In his mind, Louis was always someone useful but not central.

Just a spare pawn.

Unexpectedly now, Duke Edmund had singled him out for a marriage proposal, wanting to marry his precious daughter to him. This was no ordinary action.

"There must be something happening that I don't know about."

He immediately called for the butler, "Is there any letter about Louis?"

"Yes, Sir." The butler, unhurried, accurately picked out a letter from the thick pile, and handed it over with both hands.

"It just arrived today," he added.

Duke Calvin took the letter, opened it, and unfolded the paper, frowning as he read.

This letter mostly reported on what Louis had recently been doing; the first sentence made his eyelids twitch:

"Ordered to scout Qingyu Ridge, night raid fifty miles, led 130 knights to capture an important enemy stronghold."

Each subsequent line shocked him even more.

"Set up an ambush, annihilated 800 elite Wolf Riders of the enemy, with zero casualties on our side."

"..."

The information kept pouring in, nearly making his eyeballs pop out of their sockets.

"What? Night raiding fifty miles? With 130 knights taking down 800 elite troops and having them all survive? What kind of military genius is this?!"

"Also, awarded the Shield of the North Medal, granted 1,000 square kilometers of land, and promoted to Prefect of Snow Peak County!?"

A 19-year-old Prefect!

The Duke gently folded the letter, leaned back in his chair, and lowered his head in contemplation.

This could no longer be described as just "noteworthy" or "worth attention."

"Could this be fabricated?" he questioned softly, as if doubting the letter's content.

But he quickly calmed down; even if Louis dared to lie, Duke Edmund wouldn't be backing him up.

These military achievements could easily be verified.

"At just 19, with so few resources from the family... and yet he turned the Northern Territory on its head, earning the title of Prefect."

Duke Calvin admitted he had indeed misjudged.

Suddenly, he remembered that Louis had always been a bit too quiet since childhood.

Unlike other children who competed fiercely, he was always a step behind, very obedient, as if he had no desires at all.

Back then, he thought this child lacked ambition, but looking back now...

"Could it be he was pretending? Feeling there was no chance to inherit the title, he purposely appeared mediocre, early on wanting to escape the Southeast Province, avoid sibling conflict, and fled to the Northern Territory to rise?"

"Although still not as good as his two brothers, he can no longer be considered a fringe figure."

He glanced at the letter from Duke Edmund on the table, his expression gradually becoming more serious.

He began assessing the pros and cons of this marriage alliance.

The Edmunds, known as the Lords of the North, were practically emperors among the Northern Lords, the unshakeable core of the Northern Lands.

Louis, though previously a fringe member of the Calvin Family, now held legitimate land and a Shield of the North Medal due to his battlefield achievements in the Northern Territory.

More crucially, he was now the Prefect of Snow Peak County.

In the North, this represented considerable influence, serving as the family's representative in the Northern Territory.

"If this marriage succeeds," Duke Calvin narrowed his eyes, "it could be the Calvin family's retreat in the Northern Territory."

The Calvin Clan of the Southeast Province, though affluent, faced grim prospects in recent years.

The Royal Family's reach had extended too far.

Favoring close allies, promoting new nobility, continually inserting war-credited nobles and bureaucratic factions into the Southeast frontier, not to mention rounds of audits, increased taxes...

Officially, it was to balance power, but in reality, it was to seize land, people, and profits.

The goal was simple: to pull the teeth of the noble families.

"Over at the port, for the past few years, we've had to give up thirty percent of the profits to support the new nobility of the Imperial Capital." Duke Calvin sneered.

As the local powerhouse of the Southeast, he had to yield a portion every year.

If he could connect with the Northern Territory's fresh force, he might secure more escapes before the situation changed.

As for the Edmund Family, though they intended to extend their influence southward, they didn't want to get thoroughly involved in the Imperial center's power struggle. The marriage alliance was a fitting method.

Moreover, both their families were among the Eight Great Clans, well-suited for each other.

Duke Calvin nodded slightly.

The only downside was that the Emperor wouldn't approve; he didn't like any connections among the Eight Great Clans.

With the present Emperor's high prestige and swift methods, he had cut the Eight Great Clans to the point they were without complaints.

Even if they joined forces, they couldn't shake him in the slightest.

So they waited patiently.

Waiting for this aging Emperor to naturally fade, hoping for a more manageable, more willing-to-compromise successor to ascend the throne.

And that day seemed not too far off.

He closed his eyes, recalling the last time he had an audience with the Emperor in the Imperial Capital.

It was an old, frail figure sitting on the golden throne.

He was eighty-seven years old then and couldn't hold on much longer.

As for successors? Each one worse than the last.

The only well-regarded Third Prince, renowned since youth, excellent in command, held high public esteem.

Yet half a year ago, he "accidentally" fell into a cesspit and drowned during his territorial inspection.

Duke Calvin let out a light snort, his expression tremendously indifferent.

"A Peak Knight would 'accidentally' fall into a cesspool?"

What a joke, it was an assassination, an insult.

Blatantly, in front of everyone, an insult to the Royal Family and the Emperor.

Most likely a certain old noble family did it to retaliate against the Emperor.

Of course, it wasn't without consequences; in the past six months, the Emperor had been governing more frequently, promoting only those loyal to himself, the new nobility, and civil servant families around him.

His distrust of the old noble families had reached its zenith.

So even a routine marriage proposal could spark suspicion.

"This matter must be handled with extreme caution." He sat back down, took out a sheet of paper, and dipped it in ink.

Chapter 84: Huh? I'm Getting Married?

Duke Calvin sat at his desk, setting down his pen, with freshly written letters lying before him.

He finally made a decision—agreeing to the proposed marriage.

No family meeting was called, nor were other family members gathered for discussion. For such matters, he could decide on his own.

If the head of a family needs to consult others on such trivial matters, then what's the purpose of being a duke?

As for the parties involved, Louis and Emily from the Edmund Family, their wishes hardly mattered.

In this ancient Empire, within this noble society that values bloodlines and honor.

The marriages of children have always been tokens for families to trade and strategize.

Love? It's the stuff of poets' tales.

Noble marriages are firstly a responsibility, are duty-bound, are alliances, are exchanges of benefits and consolidation of status.

Having enjoyed the resources and aura brought by status, naturally, they must pay the appropriate price.

Accepting doesn't mean a wedding immediately follows.

Many subsequent matters are left to discuss; a noble wedding is never simple.

What he must do now is send a reply.

To express an "initial intention" to accept the marriage proposal.

His letter also noted that prior to engagement, it must be reported to the Emperor, to inform him in advance.

The reason for letting Duke Edmund speak is because he is among the Eight Great Clans, and maintains good relations with the Emperor.

Duke Calvin meticulously checked the content of the letter.

No excessive emotions, no excessive promises, merely expressing "initial acceptance," while preserving the other's face and keeping the backdoor open.

He nodded, expressing satisfaction.

"Send it then." Calvin folded the letter, sealing it with an envelope stamped with the red family crest.

"Understood," the steward replied.

After sending the letter, Duke Calvin didn't immediately rise.

He tapped the desk, his gaze darkening.

"Louis, that boy... seems like he's really stabilized the Northern Territory."

He thought of his numerous children; indeed, few truly stood on their own.

Now, suddenly Louis emerged.

He originally thought of him only as a competent offspring who could fend for himself, yet in a short period, he's already caught the eye of the Duke of the North, promising marriage to his daughter.

"I can give him a push," Duke Calvin murmured, picking up the pen to write several commands.

Choose a batch of loyal civil servants and stewards from the family, sending them to the Red Tide Territory to assist Louis in managing the new domain.

Allocate resources to support the Northern Territory, prioritizing the supply of food, cotton clothing, and cold-resistant medicines for the winter.

Dispatch ten elite knights, thirty official knights, and a hundred apprentice knights to bolster Louis's forces.

Within the family hierarchy of permissions, elevate Louis's permissions from "Level 5" to "Level 2," significantly increasing his resource permissions.

Officially appoint Louis as the Calvin Family's representative in the Northern Territory, granting him authority to represent the Calvin Family there.

After writing, he handed it to the steward: "Arrange these as well."

"Alright."

...

Louis woke on his camp's cot, sunlight streaming through the tent's gap onto his face, he rubbed his eyes.

After the banquet ended a few days ago, he didn't linger long in Frost Halberd City.

The post-war banquet was enjoyed, the rewards accepted, and all necessary courtesies were paid.

Now, it's time to return to Red Tide Territory to deal with a slew of new troubles.

Of course, the first thing Louis did upon waking was to access the Daily Intelligence System.

A light blue screen of the system appeared before his eyes, he glanced at it, almost sitting up straight the next second.

[1: Duke Calvin agreed to Duke Edmund's proposal for the marriage between Louis Calvin and Emily Edmund]

"...Huh?"

He stared at that piece of intelligence for a full three seconds.

Me? Getting married?

Although he always knew, as a noble offspring, a day would come when he would face a political marriage for family interests, he didn't expect that day to come so soon.

But thinking carefully, reaching nearly twenty but not married was somewhat late, he even thought Duke Calvin had forgotten about it.

Unexpectedly, the union was with Duke Edmund's daughter.

No wonder the duke's gaze was peculiar at the banquet.

Turns out it wasn't a gaze for looking at a commander, but a gaze for evaluating a son-in-law!

Thinking of that big burly man with two scars on his face and a rather intimidating smile, Louis's mouth twitched.

"Hopefully, his daughter doesn't take after him in looks..."

Fortunately, this world doesn't emphasize monogamy; you can have a harem!

He then looked at the second piece of intelligence.

[2: Duke Calvin's fourteenth son will be born in 7 days.]

"..." Louis was silent for two seconds, then sighed helplessly.

"Certainly prolific..."

He couldn't help but hold his forehead, thinking, "Exactly how many kids is this now?"

Twenty-something? Or thirty-something? He suddenly found himself unable to count clearly.

"At this rate, forming a 'Calvin's Personal Guard Knight Order' would be more than enough."

No, an entire legion is possible too...

Louis thought of those brothers he never met, whose names were difficult to recall.

He couldn't help but imagine the future family meeting scene, Calvin sons and princesses lined on both sides of the long table, each more numerous than the last, even requiring expansion of the conference hall for seats.

Perhaps, one day, the sight of ninety-nine competing heirs could be seen.

But those have little to do with him now.

He has established himself separately in the Northern Territory, making the competition for the almost hopeless duke title unlikely, none of his brothers could take his domain.

Only his maternal sister, Rachel, still had real contact.

Louis occasionally would send letters to update her on his situation for peace of mind.

Years ago, she married a viscount in the Southeast, also a vassal of Duke Calvin.

Before Louis came to the Northern Territory, Rachel secretly sent him quite a bit of money and supplies.

Louis always remembered this kindness, and pledged to repay it generously someday.

After quietly teasing for a bit, Louis continued to check the third piece of intelligence.

[3: Several Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbits appeared 5 kilometers northwest of the camp for foraging.]

He was stunned, then immediately widened his eyes, springing up from the bed.

Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbits, a truly elusive magical beast of the Northern Wilderness.

Though small in stature, its agility and swiftness were unmatched, silent as the night.

Most importantly, three clusters of rare "Ice Moss Fruit" grow on their backs.

These are incredibly rare combat supplements, cooking them boosts knights' fighting energy.

For Louis, who is now just a step away from becoming an elite knight, it's nothing short of a lifesaver!

He wasted no time donning his cloak, gathering several knights: "Let's go hunting."

Going hunting so early? The knights were puzzled.

Nevertheless, now these knights would obey Louis's orders unconditionally.

Immediately, they mounted steeds, following Louis galloping towards the northwest.

Chapter 85: Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbit

The early autumn air in the Northern Territory carried a dry chill, as low bushes and yellowing grass swayed gently in the wind. Several warhorses quickly swept past.

With magical beasts like the Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbit, which aren't highly aggressive but extremely fast, having too many people would more likely startle them.

Therefore, Louis only brought seven knights for this hunt.

To these knights, a distance of five kilometers was just a few minutes' journey.

Before long, under Louis's lead, they arrived at the location indicated by the intelligence.

"There's a magical beast over there!" The elite knight at the front suddenly stopped and whispered, "Gray-brown fur, bluish-gray fruit... It's Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbits, at least three of them!"

Upon hearing this, Louis immediately waved his hand: "Stop."

The group promptly reined in their horses and tied them behind some bushes, then dismounted silently.

"Don't make a sound," Louis whispered, "These rabbits have extremely sharp hearing."

Thus, the seven knights moved as stealthily and steadily as leopards, quickly arriving behind some rocks situated at a higher ground.

Louis crouched down, placing a hand on a rock, his gaze peering through a gap towards the distance.

There, amidst the not yet withered grasses of the hills, three gray-brown Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbits were foraging cautiously.

Their short ears perked up, hind legs lightly kicking the ground, with short legs covered in thick pads, moving soundlessly through the dry, cold, and hard earth.

However, the most attention-grabbing feature was the three clusters of "Ice Moss Fruit" hanging from their backs, emitting a faint bluish-gray glow, gently quivering in the early autumn sunlight.

"Mature rabbits... carrying fruit," Louis whispered, a trace of excitement flashing in his eyes, "Thank nature for its bounty."

The Ice Moss Fruit could enhance the knight's energy, presenting a providential opportunity for someone on the verge of a breakthrough, like him.

However, the alertness of the Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbit far exceeded that of ordinary beasts.

They never moved in a straight line, instead, preferring to move slowly against the wind to sniff out danger in advance.

They also avoided sunlit areas, hiding in the sparse shadows of grass or behind rocks.

Even the rustling of a single leaf could startle them into fleeing at top speed.

This made the hunt more of a test of patience than of courage.

"Rushing in recklessly will definitely end up in failure." Louis whispered, "Prepare the bait trail."

"Yes!"

The knights took out pre-prepared "Cloud Moss Powder" from their pouches.

This was a processed moss spice, highly favored by some herbivorous magical beasts, including the Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbit.

Louis always carried some for moments like this.

The knights scattered a winding feeding trail along the direction where the three rabbits were moving.

This feeding line ultimately led to a slightly sunken natural depression.

Dense thickets surrounded that spot, concealing people, making it an ideal ambush site.

"Group up, lurking around the depression, and wait for them to approach," Louis instructed.

The rest was just waiting, as time slowly passed until the sun hung low in the sky.

Just as expected, the Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbits were slowly drawn forward, cautiously sniffing the moss scent lingering on the ground, occasionally using their forepaws to stir some fallen grass.

"Finally moving, get ready." Louis's eyes sparkled.

Three, two, one.

"Now!"

The hunting net flew out swiftly from all directions, blocking the rabbits' escape routes.

Immediately following, several Silver Light Flying Needles flashed through the air, "puff, puff," embedding into the rabbits' spines.

The prey initially attempted to struggle and leap, but the paralyzing agent quickly took effect, causing them to weaken and collapse on the spot.

"Caught all of them!" Louis let out a breath of relief.

Although it took more time, the harvest was definitely worthwhile.

Three Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbits, nine clusters of Ice Moss Fruit.

Louis stepped forward, his gaze fixed on the bluish-gray Ice Moss Fruit on the rabbits' backs.

The fruit appeared like some kind of frost-formed berry, with a color almost like ice crystals, and a thin layer of white frost on the surface.

However, in reality, they were attached to flesh, clearly not a plant structure, but a manifestation of the unique energy within the magical beasts.

"While they are called fruit, they are more like a growth of flesh."

He reached out to touch one of the clusters, finding it icy yet resilient, as if harboring a faint, pulsing energy.

"Truly a mystical thing..."

The energy of this Ice Moss Fruit is incredibly concentrated, akin to the fuse for an explosive for a knight facing a bottleneck.

"Take them back to the camp and have the cooks prepare a stew." Louis ordered.

"Yes!" One knight immediately retreated with the spoils.

Soon, night fell, with only the sound of the crackling fire remaining in the camp.

"Rabbit stew is ready!"

Louis sat cross-legged inside the tent, accepting the steaming rabbit stew from the cook.

The soup was almost ice blue, shimmering with a faint light under the fire, tiny bits of Ice Moss Fruit floating on the surface.

Tilting his head down for a smell, there was an exotic fragrance somewhere between frost and herb, faintly intertwined with a hint of the wild beast's blood scent, yet not unpleasant.

He took a gentle sip, the broth dissolving instantly upon touching his tongue, bearing a slight, sweet aftertaste.

But in the next instant, the cold transformed into heat, a surge of energy flooding from his throat to his limbs like a tidal wave!

Louis's eyes sharpened, hastily downing the entire bowl, then quickly seated himself cross-legged, placing the wooden bowl beside him, and closed his eyes to execute the "Tidal Breathing Technique."

At this moment, his internal fighting energy was pushed by tides, continuously expanding, surging, and crashing against the final barrier preventing him from entering the realm of the Elite Knight.

One wave, two waves, three waves...

The energy inside became increasingly intense, the bones emitting light tremors, and his muscles pulsed as if burning.

Suddenly, an invisible gate was forcefully breached!

"Boom!"

The internal fighting energy surged out like a deluge, rushing from his heart through his veins.

Breakthrough! Junior Elite Knight!

Louis opened his eyes softly, exhaling a breath of white air as his breathing slowly stabilized.

Sweat drenched his clothes, as if he had been thoroughly cleansed, renewed from the inside out.

The energy within became more consolidated, with the fighting energy faintly surfacing in waves just under his skin.

"Finally broke through....so this is the world of the Elite Knight."

It was an indescribable feeling of lightness.

Louis felt as if shedding a heavy burden, even his breathing became smoother.

Whereas before, practicing his fighting energy required concentration, calibration, and exhalation in unison to maintain the cycle,

Now, whenever he desired, his fighting energy would circulate autonomously, like tides.

Even standing still, he could feel the power quietly flowing, nourishing his bones and flesh.

However, the most delightful surprise was not the breakthrough itself.

It was that at the moment of breakthrough, a long-dormant ability within was finally awakened by the surging fighting energy.

"Is this the awakening of the bloodline?!" Louis murmured excitedly.

Chapter 86: Bloodline Talent: Trajectory

The concept of bloodline talent is not something every knight possesses.

In fact, most knights go their entire lives without ever awakening their bloodline talent, not even showing any signs of it.

But a lucky few, even from the moment they become Apprentice Knights, have already awakened their bloodline talent.

It's not like Fighting Energy cultivation, which can be accumulated through hard practice; it's purely a product of talent, even...

Carrying a hint of destiny.

And today, Louis finally welcomed his own awakening.

The bloodline talent he activated is called—[Trajectory].

Its most basic ability is to briefly predict a target's actions within two seconds by consuming Fighting Energy and focusing attention.

Additionally, there is a passive effect: when encountering lethal danger, it triggers a faint sense of forewarning.

At first glance, this ability doesn't seem impressive.

Two seconds? What use is that?

But in a life-and-death knight duel, a lead of one or two seconds makes the difference between life and death.

Against a similarly ranked opponent, even a moment of hesitation can be a flaw in winning or losing.

Moreover, bloodline talents are not unchanging.

As Fighting Energy levels rise, it strengthens and might even develop new abilities.

An excited Louis lifted the tent flap and walked out.

The night breeze swept through the camp, the flames flickered, everything seemed usual.

But the next moment, an Elite Knight guarding outside suddenly had a bright look in his eyes and blurted out: "Lord... have you broken through?!"

With this exclamation, cheers erupted almost instantly.

"The Lord has broken through!"

"That's great!"

"Congratulations, Lord Louis!"

The knights who were originally patrolling and on guard immediately gathered around, each face filled with genuine joy.

They always had respect for the strong, but even before his power, they'd been moved by Louis's calmness, decisiveness, and generosity.

During the toughest times, it was this young Lord who led them across the wasteland, established in the Northern Territory, slew the Snow Swearers in night battles, and seized the chance of victory at Qingyu Ridge.

They were already 99.9% satisfied with this young Lord.

The remaining 0.01% was just regretting that his cultivation was slightly lagging behind.

But now, even this little regret is slowly being filled.

"At this rate... Lord becoming a Legendary Knight is no longer a dream."

"Hahahahaha."

As the cheers subsided, Louis suddenly spoke: "I want to test my strength."

He glanced at the crowd and finally pointed to a tall Mid-tier Elite Knight: "You come and spar with me."

This was a battle-hardened Elite Knight, with steady strength and thick Fighting Energy.

And he was a full minor rank higher than the newly broken-through Louis.

The surroundings instantly grew quiet, knights looked at each other, faces reading "This isn't good."

"Lord, a difference of a tier is not something to joke about..."

"If Frio uses too much force..."

Frio himself was unbearably nervous, his face somewhat pale, hesitantly said: "Lord, maybe we should just take it easy..."

"If you go easy," Louis's voice suddenly lowered by a half tone, "I'll kick you out of Red Tide Territory."

"..."

Seeing that Louis wasn't joking, the camp quieted down.

"Understood." Frio swallowed, nodded.

Thus, a duel with a real gap in strength officially began.

Louis drew his longsword, red Fighting Energy swirled around the blade like a flickering flame, hissing slightly.

Frio also drew his sword, likewise, with crimson Fighting Energy.

They were both knights of the Calvin Family, and although their methods of cultivating Fighting Energy differed, they shared the same lineage, making their Fighting Energy particularly similar.

The blades collided, sparks scattering.

Louis didn't rush to use his bloodline talent, wanting to see his own strength now.

Initially, he relied purely on keen reflexes and the fighting spirit from his fresh breakthrough to engage Frio in a tight exchange.

But as time passed, the difference widened.

After all, Frio was a seasoned Mid-tier Elite Knight, with richer Fighting Energy and more precise control over combat rhythm.

After a few moves, pressure overwhelmed Louis like a tide, and he gradually began to struggle.

He could still barely parry, but the unsteady swaying and irregular breathing after each block betrayed him.

"Ah, the gap is still too great."

"Frio, that's enough..."

The knights watching broke into a cold sweat, instinctively holding their breath, afraid their breathing might disturb Louis.

Some already began to exchange glances nervously: "Should Frio pretend to narrowly lose? Just act a bit!"

Yet just then, Louis's eyes suddenly changed.

Bloodline Talent · Trajectory, activated!

At this moment in Louis's vision, time seemed to pause for an instant.

He saw that in the next second, Frio's shoulder would slightly drop, executing an upward slashing strike.

"I see it!"

Louis moved like the wind, sword light carrying Fighting Energy cut through the air, directly piercing that momentary gap!

"Bang!"

It was the sound of metal colliding.

Frio's longsword was knocked out of his hand, and he had to step back two steps to regain his balance.

"Ah?"

The field was silent for three seconds.

The crowd widened their eyes, faces asking what just happened?

From dominating one moment to being defeated the next!?

"What was that just now?"

"I didn't observe any flaw at all..."

"Too fast... it was like knowing in advance what the opponent would do!"

Even Frio himself was bewildered.

He looked at the empty hilt in his hand, then at Louis who was standing steadily not far away.

A moment later, he came to his senses, let out a bitter laugh: "I concede, Lord truly is... deeply hidden."

Louis stood in place, slowly exhaled, looked down at his sword-holding hand, his palm slightly numb, and his chest rising and falling continuously.

He was not carried away by this victory.

The outburst at that instant, although exhilarating, fast, and precise, came with a considerable cost, requiring intense concentration when Trajectory was activated and continually consuming Fighting Energy.

As expected, bloodline talent is not something that can be used recklessly.

Lambert stepped out from the crowd, brows furrowed.

He was Louis's Guardian Knight and had been teaching him combat techniques since he was a child.

One could say Louis was cultivated by him, yet this spar made him puzzled.

Louis's attack style was one he couldn't have been more familiar with, but that sudden counter-attack...

Had completely caught him off guard, something that couldn't be achieved with mere technique.

He approached Louis, asking softly: "Lord, that move just now, how did you do it?"

Louis didn't beat around the bush, replied in a low voice: "I have awakened my bloodline talent."

"Ah?" Lambert was stunned.

Chapter 87: Red Tide Territory, Your Lord Has Returned

"I have awakened my bloodline talent."

"Ah?"

Lambert's steps halted, as if he had heard something fantastical.

Moments later, the astonishment faded, leaving only heartfelt joy for Louis.

"Don't tell anyone." Lambert reminded in a whisper, "Bloodline talent... it can be lifesaving at critical moments; keep it a secret as long as you can."

Louis nodded: "I understand."

He certainly knew the fewer people who knew about this, the better.

He told Lambert simply because he trusted him.

To him, Lambert was not just an Elite Knight.

For the former master, Lambert was more like a mentor and father figure, teaching him combat techniques since childhood.

Additionally, Lambert had sacrificed a lot for Louis; as a high-tier Elite Knight of the Calvin Clan, he could have stayed in the family and enjoyed life but chose to follow him to the impoverished and dangerous Northern Territory.

Even during Louis' most downtrodden times, Lambert never left his side, which was reason enough to trust him.

And there was another small reason.

Awakening a bloodline talent was such a cool thing, Louis wanted to show off a bit... that's reasonable, right?

On the other side, Lambert was feeling conflicted.

Before arriving in the Northern Territory, he viewed Louis as nothing more than a shy, averagely talented noble.

To be honest, Lambert didn't hold much hope for him either.

Years ago, when following Louis to the North, he only wanted to protect the life of the child he had watched grow up, to prevent the Calvin Clan from being disgraced.

But what he didn't expect was that the young lord who used to daze off in the training grounds had in this war-torn land thrived like a dragon entering the sea.

Not only managing the territory meticulously but also able to lead troops and defeat enemies, winning hearts and becoming a true Lord.

And now even his bloodline talent had awakened.

Lambert was truly happy and proud of Louis.

Yet deep inside, there was also a flicker of unfamiliarity.

"By the way." Louis suddenly recalled something, turning to Lambert with a smile.

"Today I hunted three Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbits, ate one, and made a breakthrough."

"You've been stuck at the high-tier Elite threshold for almost five years, haven't you?" Louis said casually, "Take one and eat it."

Lambert's eyes widened, momentarily speechless.

He had been stuck at this bottleneck for so long, and he had considered using external resources to make a breakthrough.

However, given the rarity and preciousness of the Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbit, he didn't even dare to dream of it.

"I..." He suddenly knelt on one knee, his eyes reddening: "Thank you, my lord..."

Louis sighed, reaching out to help him up: "Why be so formal with me?"

That night, Lambert quietly drank the rabbit soup.

The fighting energy within him surged, his blood roared like thunder.

Eventually, a low growl escaped his throat.

The bottleneck that had been unmoved for five years shattered at that moment.

Lambert had ascended to become an Extraordinary Knight!

And also the first Extraordinary Knight of the Red Tide Territory.

If Louis had a golden finger to see the attributes panel, he'd see Lambert's loyalty had already maxed out.

...

On the return journey, although there were some gains, there were no rare resources like the Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbit.

Thus, the team didn't delay any further and set off directly back to the Red Tide Territory.

By this time, the Red Tide Territory was already boiling with excitement.

The news that the Lord not only survived but also achieved great victories shook the entire territory.

Even the city took the unprecedented step of giving everyone a day's holiday.

The people spontaneously gathered at the city gates and along the main road; the entire territory was bustling like a festival.

Everyone had expectant expressions, though some had hints of unease.

They worried that if the young Lord were dead or incapacitated, this land might return to those dark days of coldness, hunger, and exploitation.

So they waited, hoped, even with a touch of devotional sincerity.

Until this moment, he appeared.

Louis rode on horseback, clad in a red and black military cloak, his figure upright.

The crowd initially fell silent.

Then, like thunder, cheers exploded.

"It's our Lord Louis!"

"He's back!! Our sun has returned!"

"It's him! It's definitely him! Our heroic Lord!"

The noise from the crowd was deafening.

They were moved to tears, some even knelt down with hands clasped.

Children sat on adult shoulders, waving cloth strips edged with red.

Bradley the Old Butler emerged from the crowd, his hair white but his steps steady, his eyes slightly red from excitement.

"Welcome back, my lord." He said quietly, unable to suppress his joy.

He too had worried about Louis dying on the battlefield; when the battle report reached the Red Tide Territory, he almost didn't believe it because it was too glorious.

When he first came to the Red Tide Territory, he thought someday this young man would rise high, but didn't expect that day would come so soon.

Louis dismounted and gave him a gentle embrace.

"You've worked hard, Bradley." Louis said quietly, "I'm back."

Bradley took a deep breath, his eyes slightly red: "It's good you're back... it's good you're back, my lord."

After a brief exchange, Louis returned to his horse while Bradley personally led the horse along.

As Louis headed toward the residential area of the Red Tide Territory, the cheers along the streets grew louder.

Petals were thrown from the rooftops, cascading like rain upon Louis' path forward.

The people of the Red Tide Territory were welcoming their hero with the most sincere gesture they could muster.

Weir stood in the crowd, staring intently at the majestic figure riding high.

That was Lord Louis, the man he aspired to follow for life, and he was working hard for it.

Two months ago, he was just a little kid stumbling and being ridiculed in the training ground, unable even to hold a sword steadily.

Now, he was a high-tier Apprentice Knight.

The Official Knight teaching him had been astonished: "Of all the knights I've trained, none have shown talent like yours, and none have been as diligent."

Weir simply smiled, and continued swinging his sword, because he had a clear goal.

"One day..." Weir muttered quietly, his voice swallowed by the crowd's cheers, "I will don the red and black knight cloak and become a knight by Lord Louis' side."

Louis dismounted slowly at the town center, surrounding him were fervent citizens.

He raised his hand slightly, signaling everyone to quiet down.

And unbelievably, within a few breaths, the once-boiling crowd quieted down.

"Red Tide Territory, your lord has returned."

No lengthy speech, just one simple sentence and the entire town erupted like a volcano.

Applause, cheers, shouts, and tears wove together, crashing over like waves.

"Lord Louis!! Welcome home!!"

Chapter 88: Homecoming Banquet

A few days earlier, upon learning of Louis' imminent return, the old steward Bradley began preparing the banquet.

This feast was not merely a celebration for the knights.

The entire populace of the Red Tide Territory, whether freemen, slaves, or soldiers, were all invited, and it was held in the town center square.

Though the food wasn't luxurious, it had all the essentials.

Pickled fish, smoked meat, steamed vegetables...

And beer brewed from rye, stored in large barrels, ready for guests to serve themselves.

Suddenly, someone shouted, "The Lord has arrived!"

The laughter gradually subsided.

All eyes turned to the end of the square, and then everyone stood up.

Children sitting on the ground were gently lifted by their parents, the soldiers instinctively stood at attention, and the slaves all put down their wine cups one after another.

In the firelight, Louis walked slowly toward them.

On either side of him, two rows of knights lined the path like an honor guard, silent and solemn.

The Lord whom everyone admired, Louis Calvin, walked slowly in the center, guarded by the knights.

He was dressed in a simple yet elegant black robe with red patterns, draped in gold chains, with a nobility sword strapped to his waist.

His expression was calm as usual, yet he exuded an unignorable composure, an "aura of leadership" that compelled confidence.

Like a king returning in triumph.

Like the dawn sun rising.

He slowly ascended the steps, standing before the crowd, his gaze sweeping over them—these were his people.

"Thank you, everyone present, for guarding the Red Tide Territory in my absence. None of you recoiled or gave up.

This victory does not belong to me alone. It belongs to you, and to everyone who has contributed to this land."

He paused slightly, his eyes sweeping over the square—some people were weeping, others stood straighter.

"Winter is approaching, and we still have many challenges to face. But I promise you, I will not let the Red Tide Territory return to those days of cold and hunger.

I will use this victory to bring you real change. Now that I am back, I will make the Red Tide Territory better."

As his words fell, the entire crowd went silent for a moment, then applause erupted like a tidal wave, carrying a long-suppressed excitement that burst forth.

Louis slowly raised his hand, signaling for the cheering to gradually quiet.

Then he spoke in an unhurried tone, "There are some, who were merely slaves, but they have made indelible contributions to the development of the Red Tide Territory with their blood and sweat.

He paused, his tone firm, "I, Louis Calvin, hereby declare that the following 200 people are freed from slavery as of today."

His words sent a shockwave through the crowd.

Then Bradley stepped forward, unfolded a list, and began to read the names one by one: "Isaac, Marine, Belson..."

A middle-aged slave hearing his name was momentarily stunned, then fell to his knees, tears streaming down his face.

"Thank you... thank you, my Lord, for giving me my freedom!"

More and more names were announced, more and more people knelt and wept.

"Am I... really free?"

"I thought I'd never witness it in this lifetime..."

"I have been diligently fishing every day, knowing my turn would eventually come... and indeed it did today."

Each month, some slaves were released from the Red Tide Territory; it wasn't an uncommon occurrence.

But when this moment truly arrived for them, the overwhelming emotion was beyond words.

Those whose names were not read mostly lowered their eyes in silence.

"Ah... once again, it wasn't me."

"It's alright, the Red Tide Territory releases people every month; maybe next time, it will be my turn."

"There will be another opportunity... as long as I continue to work hard, I can become a freeman one day."

Yet there was no resentment in their eyes; instead, they comforted each other, as the number of slaves in Red Tide Territory was diminishing.

Moreover, being a slave here was much better than being a freeman elsewhere.

Many had been freemen in other territories, sold as slaves to this place.

In their hearts, they knew well how kind this land and its master were.

Some freemen applauded spontaneously, and many had eyes filled with comfort.

"He worked with me in the fields," a tall, thin middle-aged man said to the person beside him, "He worked fast and diligently... I knew he could become a freeman."

"Yes," others nodded, "We were once slaves too."

Louis' gaze swept over the crowd below, many slaves still kneeling, tears unstoppable.

His voice was not loud but reached every corner clearly: "Your names, the Red Tide will not forget. Those announced today are examples among the slaves."

But it is not the end. As long as you are willing to contribute to this land, one day, you will also gain freedom."

Then he paused, his tone becoming solemn, "And now it's time to thank another group of people, those knights who fought, defended, and bled for the Red Tide Territory."

Both those who charged on the front lines and those who stayed to guard the Red Tide Territory—your loyalty and courage have kept this land and the Northern Territory safe.

Your glory is worthy of being remembered by the entire territory. Next, I will personally bestow upon you the honors and rewards you deserve."

Then the drum beat softly as Bradley unfurled a parchment, loudly announcing the name of the first knight.

"Seymour Bell, for participating in the main battle at Qingyu Ridge and slaying seven enemies, step forward to receive your reward!"

Knight Seymour walked steadily onto the high platform and knelt on one knee.

"For your bravery and loyalty."

Louis personally pinned a Red Tide Territory badge crafted beforehand by an artisan onto his chest, poured a cup of malt liquor, and proceeded to announce his reward.

Seymour's hands trembled as he took the cup, drinking it in one go, tears in his eyes, "I am willing to die for the Red Tide Territory, for Lord Louis!"

Then came the second, the third...

The knights, either with notable battle achievements or for being meritorious in defense, were each named and called forward.

Some couldn't stop their hands from trembling as they received bags of gleaming gold coins, while others couldn't resist drawing out exquisite longswords to have a closer look.

Several were granted "miniature fiefs" or "manor management rights," along with symbolic land grant documents.

"You will be the overseer of that land, governing it in my name," Louis said.

Upon hearing this, those individuals knelt immediately, bowing their heads deeply.

"Sworn to never betray your trust, my Lord!"

The applause came in waves, surging throughout the square like the tide.

Weir stood at the back of the crowd, his cheeks reddened by the firelight.

He didn't move or clap but simply stared at the rows of knights being rewarded.

That was the position he yearned for, the glory in his dreams.

"I will stand there too," the young man clenched his fists, his eyes blazing with determination.

"No matter the cost... one day, I will receive the Lord's personal reward."

Chapter 89: The Cruel Rules of Nobility

Louis raised his glass and shouted loudly, "Let the feast begin!"

The square instantly boiled over.

Burning braziers were lit at the four corners, and colorful lanterns were hung high.

Musicians played on flutes and violins with a brisk rhythm, as young serving girls danced to the beat of the drum.

The craft beer was foamy and rich, the aroma of Red Tide smoked fish was enticing, the roast lamb leg oozed with oil as it was carved, and the wild mushroom venison bone soup rolled with steam in a large pot.

Soldiers raised their glasses in laughter, children chased and played...

Standing at the edge of the high platform, Louis quietly watched it all.

His gaze softened a bit.

This land he once watched over silently was slowly becoming prosperous.

Those trusting eyes, those faces smiling with tears of joy.

All of these stirred a faint warmth in Louis's heart.

Of course, he wasn't without fatigue, after all, the greater the responsibility, the heavier the burden.

But on nights like this, he still felt a sense of tangible achievement.

Not the lofty vanity of nobility, but a more solid satisfaction.

Louis gripped his wine glass and muttered softly, "Let's relax a bit tonight."

...

After the revelry, work had to continue the next day.

Louis sat up from his bed and rubbed his temples.

This was a familiar semi-underground dwelling, and even though he was now a Lord with vast lands, he still preferred to stay here.

In his own domain, he slept peacefully.

He stretched lazily and casually activated the "Daily Intelligence System," as a translucent screen appeared before him.

[Daily Intelligence Update Complete]

[1: Signs of Eagle Claw Vine growth have been found near Eagle Rock at the eastern entrance of Qingfeng Canyon. This plant has excellent effects on wound healing and can be developed into battlefield herbal medicine.]

[2: Magic power fluctuations have appeared at the southern end of Silver Shadow Forest, with a small amount of Demon Marrow Ore buried nearby.]

[3: A small herd of snow sheep has appeared in the central Pasture Snowfield, suitable for captive breeding and producing more milk in winter.]

[4: The Calvin Clan has selected over forty loyal and stable civil servants and stewards to assist Louis in managing the land.]

[5: Duke Calvin has dispatched a batch of supplies to support Red Tide Territory, prioritizing grain, cotton clothes, and cold-prevention medicines for the winter.]

[6: Duke Calvin has dispatched a group of knights under Louis's command, including ten Elite Knights, thirty Official Knights, and one hundred Apprentice Knights.]

[7: Duke Calvin has upgraded the Louis family's resource authority to level two, granting the title of Northern Territory agent for the family.]

"There's so much intelligence today, and here come the resource-based reports again." He glanced at the first three entries, already forming a rough idea in his mind.

Ever since he acquired nearly a thousand kilometers of new territory, such resource point prompts had been popping up intermittently.

Some were medicinal herbs, some were magic mines, and there were even potential pasture resources and so on.

Although these new territories weren't as rich as Red Tide Territory, the system always managed to dig up some unexpected benefits.

These resources were important, but right now, more pressing matters awaited, such as preparing winter supplies, restoring post-war order, settling refugees, deploying stationed troops, and handling the remaining movements of the Snow Swearer.

"These resources... can wait until these current troubles are sorted out."

Yet, the rest of the intelligence left Louis momentarily stunned.

"The old man's gold coins, really... more than I expected."

It wasn't just a few bags of flour or a few horses, but a whole system of support.

The resources from the Calvin Family were not just material provisions, but more importantly, those accompanying civil servants and stewards.

Over forty, all proficient figures selected internally from the family, loyal, reliable, and experienced.

Louis could assign them to Red Tide Territory and the newly acquired four pieces of land to manage affairs, taxes, census, and grain levies, establishing a proper "administrative skeleton."

This meant Red Tide Territory was no longer a makeshift operation.

"Finally... the days of Hillco doing the work of ten people are gone forever."

He said this with his mouth but felt a bit nostalgic for that alchemy apprentice who was respectful on the surface but cursed behind his back.

And those Merit Knights who were knighted yesterday would work alongside this team of civil servants, officially taking over the land that was just on the brink of revival.

"Finally looks like a territory now."

Louis alone couldn't manage so large a territory.

He had once thought of directing all the refugees to concentrate their development in Red Tide Territory, but resources were really tight, and without a modern logistics system, it was impossible to urbanize on a large scale.

And now he also had the possibility of diversion and coordination.

Additionally, the accompanying military support included ten Elite Knights, thirty Official Knights, and one hundred Apprentice Knights.

Adding to his already existing knights, he now had the makings of a mature noble lord's military.

It could even be said, when compared with the positions of some senior Viscounts, his foundation was not inferior at all.

As for the seventh piece of intelligence, it kept him silent for a long time, pondering what it represented.

"Calvin Family's" Northern Territory agent, this was not just a title, but one with real power.

It meant he could act in the Northern Territory in the name of the Calvin Family, like a remote executor of the family's will.

Of course, the Calvin Family's power in the Northern Territory was somewhat small, and this title's actual power wasn't as high.

In the end, it didn't hold much military power or land.

Only a few fringe kin-owned small enclaves in remote areas.

Combined, they weren't as large as Louis's current territory.

The real value lay in the family's long-standing businesses in the Northern Territory.

Several granaries, ironware shops, transport convoys, and a few safe trade routes, mostly available for use.

This meant he could use the family's name to credit, negotiate prices;

He could also mobilize transport, distribute supplies, prioritizing his own territories;

Even in negotiations, he could play the "I represent the Calvin Family" card to gain more trust.

Though it wasn't an overpowering means, it was enough to give him some breathing room.

"This really is a... timely benefit." Louis closed the light screen with a soft smile.

These resources and manpower were like glazing warmth to Louis at this moment.

His territories were too new, too vast, the people too mixed and chaotic, with every issue urgently needing human handling, every piece of material critical for survival.

Even temporary support could help sustain a breath.

Thus, he genuinely felt some gratitude towards Duke Calvin.

Even though this biological father had practically ignored him in his childhood, and even kicked him to the Northern Territory, which was nearly a death sentence.

But now that he's pulled through and gained military achievements—the support came down generously.

People, money, status, resources, all given sufficiently.

This was probably the cruel rule of nobility.

Not nurturing useless ones, but once you prove your worth, they'll "invest" in you without hesitation.

Chapter 90: The Refugee Problem

Louis finished reading the Daily Intelligence System and gently waved his hand to put away the light screen.

"Alright, time to get to work." He rubbed his forehead and turned over to get out of bed.

Washing up, dressing—his movements were as neat as ever.

Just as the sky brightened, with the sun yet to pierce through the morning fog, the door to the office was already open.

As he walked in, he saw Sif sitting by the desk, flipping through a thick stack of documents.

"Good morning, Xiaobai." Louis greeted with a smile.

Sif paused, seemingly surprised by his greeting, blinked before she stood up and bowed.

"Good morning, sir." Her voice was soft, but her ears were slightly flushed.

During the time Louis went to war, she did have thoughts of fleeing.

She wasn't lacking courage; it was just not the right timing. Besides...where would she even go?

Eventually, she simply stayed.

And then Sif realized that she would find herself lost in thought at night.

Would he die on the battlefield?

What if he never came back?

Upon hearing he had returned victorious, Sif let out a long sigh of relief.

But such things, of course, couldn't be said out loud; it would be too odd.

Sif merely bowed her head, pushed the organized documents over, her tone as usual: "The paperwork you wanted to see, I have already processed."

Her voice wasn't loud, but her movements were very proficient.

She just didn't realize that her hand, as she passed it over, was somewhat trembling.

Louis didn't notice Sif's small anomaly.

His gaze fell on the stacks of documents, almost taller than a person, and he sighed softly.

These were the materials he had instructed Sif to organize before returning to the territory—about the situation in Red Tide Territory and the areas newly assigned to him.

He casually flipped through a few pages, and the headache feeling followed.

Bandits, food shortage, winter survival, well water contamination...

Each page was filled with problems.

He leaned back in his chair, fell silent for a moment, and finally decided to start with the refugees.

Because with this issue, the earlier one took action, the more people could be saved.

Snow Peak County suffered heavy damage during the war; vast villages turned into ashes, and even Red Tide Territory was repeatedly harassed by Snow Swearers, held barely by the knights and soldiers Louis left behind.

But the other territories weren't so lucky.

Months of warfare had left the entire county battered and bruised.

Fields abandoned, livestock plundered, warehouses ransacked, even the well water was poisoned by enemies.

Countless people lost their homes and family, struggling to survive on remnants, tree bark, and wild vegetables.

They moved like shadows without a body, flowing through the broken ruins.

"All problems, really such a hassle." Louis flipped through the stack of documents, finally sighed and grumbled, pressing his forehead.

Sif said nothing, just silently turned a page of parchment.

She was well aware that Louis was right.

Those struggling to survive in the ruins were like boiling water under too much pressure.

At any moment, they might overflow due to cold, hunger, or fear.

Louis slapped a sheet of parchment on the table and his tone sank, "Other issues are manageable; the worst fear is an outbreak of epidemics among them—that's trouble that can't be salvaged."

He put away his grievances, lightly tapped on the table, his gaze becoming calm, taking out a roughly yet meticulously marked map.

"Alright, we'll divide this area of nearly a thousand square kilometers into four sub-regions, handled by different groups responsible for refugee affairs in each area."

He bent over the map to mark, dividing the whole territory roughly based on mountains, rivers, and abandoned villages into four parts.

"Naming them Canglu Territory, Ice Ridge Territory, Snowfield Territory, Cold Fir Territory," Louis casually named them.

"Next, we'll send out the knights," he said, "bringing dry food and medicine, conducting a field investigation to see where the refugees are, their conditions, and...how many people are still alive."

Upon hearing the last sentence, Sif's movements stalled, then she resumed quickly recording.

"Then, set up reception points in each area," Louis said as he circled a few spots with a pen, "the marks should be prominent, let's use Red Tide Territory's banner."

He paused, his voice softened: "Also let them know that there are people in the world who care about them."

"Alright." Sif replied softly as she recorded.

"It's still not enough." Louis thought for a moment, then bent down to make several notes on the table.

"The outposts must be built quickly. They need simple sheds, braziers, hay mats, and clean water sources."

He paused, added: "If the half-dug houses of Red Tide Territory can be replicated, that's the best; they can be built quicker, and they're warm. Arrange for the carpenters and stonemasons to start directly at suitable locations."

Sif quickly recorded, while asking: "So, do all the outposts need to be prepared?"

"Yes." Louis nodded solemnly, "Prepare them to winter standards. Dry food, smoked fish, blankets...and also bring medicine, don't give plague any chance."

Listening to Louis's words, Sif gently pursed her lips, suddenly feeling an inexplicable emotion, like reassurance.

Louis stood straight, his tone as calm as ever: "Additionally, refer to Red Tide Territory's early model of the work-for-food program. Those who are willing to work will receive food and temporary shelter."

He paused, continued directing: "Build sheds, dig wells, chop wood, fish, hunt, plough, and grow vegetables...these tasks will be allocated.

Record in the register those willing to work, prioritize housing allocation for the particularly diligent.

Also, those with special skills, such as medicine, farming, literacy, or blacksmithing or carpentry, register all of them."

"What about management personnel?" Sif asked.

"The family members are already on their way." Louis's tone was steady, "They will partner with the knights of the fief to form the initial backbone of each outpost."

Louis tapped his fingers on the table and continued: "But ultimately, it depends on the refugees themselves. We'll guide them to form groups, elect representatives, who will then uniformly receive supplies, report affairs, speeding things up and stabilizing."

He spoke naturally, as if already well-prepared.

Sif quietly glanced at him.

Louis's brows slightly furrowed, appearing tired but still focused.

Very different from his usual carefree and unruly manner.

This young noble from the Southern Empire seemed...

More reliable than she imagined.

Though a bit unwilling, somewhere in her heart she did feel a slight admiration.

Perhaps, but just a bit.

At this moment, Louis looked up, directly meeting Sif's light-colored eyes.

The girl froze, quickly lowered her head, pretending to continue flipping through the documents at hand.

"...Why are you staring at me?" Louis asked instinctively, "Is there dirt on my face?"

In that instant, Sif's ears turned red very quickly, even her neck was tinted with a thin layer of pink.