

Winter 831

Chapter 831: Deadly Transaction

The spiral stone stairs leading to the top of the clock tower were dark and long.

The stone walls, eroded by time and weather, were rough and uneven, while the candlelight flickered in the airflow, stretching and twisting the shadows.

Seldon Calvin ascended step by step, his expensive boots making a steady "tap, tap" sound, echoing repeatedly in the narrow space.

Thousands of steps, and his breathing did not falter.

Not just because of the physique of a knight, but also due to the adrenaline surging through him at this moment, overwhelming all fatigue and discomfort.

The stone steps extended upward layer by layer.

With each step he took, Seldon could clearly feel a psychological disorientation spreading from his feet, as if he were slowly being lifted off the ground.

Leaving behind the hesitation of old nobles, the indecision of paternal figures, those outdated yet still revered decency and promises.

The scene in the square replayed uncontrollably in his mind.

Flames rose, golden, foreign fire consuming the scaffolding, his father silent two streets away.

That silence, more glaring than any plea.

The old man, once known as the Southeast Fox, now dragged his tail in the dust, left with nothing but dull and futile caution.

This proved the decision he made two years ago was not wrong.

Seldon sneered inwardly.

That outdated aristocratic dignity would only drag the entire family into the fire together.

What the Southeast Province needed now was someone who understood calculation, a person to rebuild upon ruins.

A new master was needed.

He did not think he was bowing to the Church; quite the opposite, he saw it as a collaboration with well-calculated costs and returns.

Divine authority is ultimately hollow.

Taxes, grain, ports, warehouses, account books—these are what truly control the entire Holy Eastern Empire.

Bishop Salomon and his clerics are outsiders; without the Calvin Clan's administrative network laid out over centuries, they couldn't collect a single copper tax, couldn't transport a single carriage of grain, let alone maintain the superficial order of the city.

If the Church wanted to take root here, they must borrow a hand familiar with the terrain, and that hand could only be him.

At the end of the stone steps, the heavy wooden door to the tower top stood quietly.

The thick door panel was carved with prayer texts long worn down, and the iron hinges showed an age-old dark color.

Seldon paused in front of the door.

He did not push the door immediately; instead, he leisurely tidied the family crest on his collar, ensuring it was impeccable.

He raised his hand again to smooth his hair, making certain it wasn't disturbed by the draught.

Finally, he adjusted his expression in the empty air of the tower top.

He suppressed the despise and ambition lingering in his eyes deeper, replacing them with a shrewd, reliable, and appropriately respectful face.

Then, Seldon stretched out his hand and pushed open the door leading to the top of the clock tower.

The wind howled at the pinnacle, like some invisible beast hovering above the city.

Bishop Salomon stood at the edge of the clock tower without any railing, overlooking the colorful but darkly fluid capital of the Southeast Province.

Seldon stepped onto the tower top, the heavy wooden door closed behind him, shutting off the city's clamor.

He stood a few steps away; the wind stretched his voice, yet it remained clear.

"Your Eminence, it seems the purification ritual was very successful." His gaze swept over the lingering smoke on the square below, "But to truly quiet this city, faith alone is not enough. Fear can make people kneel but cannot keep them obedient for long. Here, more worldly power is needed."

Salomon slowly turned around, his face adorned with the usual gentle smile, the curve of his mouth precise, like a pre-cut mask.

"God heals the soul," he said softly, "The world governs the body."

He looked at Seldon, nodding slightly as if assessing a chess piece that approached voluntarily: "Mr. Seldon, the Church always respects obedient partners."

Seldon walked a few steps forward, standing with Salomon at the edge of the clock tower: "Precisely why I came up here."

He didn't beat around the bush, directly throwing out his bargaining chip: "As you said, my father's body can no longer manage the current situation. But I am different. I can fully cooperate with the Church's taxation system, assist in integrating the province's accounts, and even..."

He paused, as if weighing the weight of his words.

"Allow half of the Calvin Clan's monopoly on grain to be jointly managed by the Church."

Seldon turned his head, looking at Salomon, his gaze honest to the point of sincerity.

"I want the glory of Golden Feather Flower to bloom in every city, every port in the Southeast."

The sound of the wind darted between them, as if awaiting the next striking blow.

"Of course," Seldon shifted the topic, his tone becoming sharp and clear, "Cooperation needs a title."

"I want the Royal Family's Duke Protector of the Realm title." He said the word without hesitation, "The Church must publicly crown me."

Then he added the second condition.

"There are still some stubborn people within the family." Seldon's gaze cooled, "They are not devout enough to the crown, nor do they understand order. I currently lack sufficient troops to address these internal threats."

He looked at Salomon, his tone deep and direct.

"I need to borrow your Holy Hall Knight Order to help me clear the house."

The clock tower peak was momentarily silent.

Salomon did not immediately respond; his gray eyes fixated on Seldon, seemingly piercing through flesh and blood, weighing value.

Chapter 832: Deadly Deal_2

Finally, the bishop chuckled softly, "Mr. Seldon, your vision is too small. As long as you sincerely serve the crown, the Church Court will not only support you in becoming Duke Protector of the Realm."

He leaned slightly forward, his voice deep and persuasive, "We can even support you in founding a nation.

As for those who oppose you..." Salomon waved his hand casually, his tone light and dismissive, "The Judicial Court excels at such tasks."

When the word "nation-building" fell from Bishop Salomon's mouth, Seldon Calvin's heart contracted suddenly for an instant.

But that was only a moment; years of experience navigating between the chambers and the nobility almost instinctively suppressed all his emotions.

Only his gaze slightly narrowed, hiding the fleeting glint into the shadows.

His mind was racing.

The blueprint drawn by the Church Court was vast and enticing, but not without logic.

The Royal Family was crumbling, the steel of the Northern Territory was approaching, and the old order could no longer hold.

The Church Court needed a secular face, one that could be accepted by the locals, to mobilize administrative and wealth networks.

And the Southeast Province precisely needed a new banner.

This idea was like a calm and sharp chip, repeatedly weighed in his heart.

As for the risks?

Seldon's mouth tightened almost imperceptibly.

Using the Church Court's blade to cleanse the stubborn factions within and outside the family was indeed dangerous.

But it was a profitable transaction.

As long as the old nobility was uprooted, real administrative power, ports, warehouses, ledgers would still be firmly in the hands of the Calvin Clan.

By then, the Church Court would merely be a careful sword in his hand.

He took a deep breath, smoothed the wrinkles in his cuff, making his demeanor appear calm and equal, rather than begging.

Then Seldon lifted his head, straightening Bishop Salomon's gray eyes, his tone steady and solemn, "Your Eminence, since our goals are aligned, the Calvin Family is willing to be this cornerstone."

He extended his right hand, his movement graceful and controlled, "For the order in the Southeast."

The wind howled past between them.

Salomon regarded Seldon with a gaze near compassion for about a second before slowly reaching out his hand.

The instant their hands clasped, Seldon's brow twitched imperceptibly.

The palm was shockingly cold.

Even in the piercing cold of the tower top, an ordinary person's temperature shouldn't be like this.

An instinctive sense of repulsion crawled along his spine, making him nearly want to withdraw his hand immediately.

But he resisted.

Seldon forced himself to grip the other's hand tightly, with just the right amount of force, thus proving to the other this was a well-considered choice.

Salomon's fingers slowly closed in, the force not aggressive yet carrying an undeniable locking sensation.

The bishop's expression remained gentle, those gray eyes calm and unruffled, only the corners of his mouth lifted into a perfect arc.

"A wise choice." His voice was low and soft, "My child, you will see the new world."

The wind continued to howl atop the bell tower.

And above in this invisible high air, a piece determining countless people's fate had already fallen.

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Late at night, in the deepest chamber of the Duke's residence.

Heavy stone walls isolated all sounds from the outside world, even the wind was kept at a distance.

The fireplace burned with expensive refined carbon, the flames stable and restrained, yet unable to dispel the lingering coldness in the room.

The secret door silently slid open behind the fireplace, and the Fifth Prince Lampard did not take the main entrance.

His figure emerged from the passage only the Calvin Patriarch and core members knew about, moving as lightly as a shadow.

Outside, the Duke's sole loyal Personal Guard captain had been sent away in advance, now only guarding the end of the corridor.

This chamber became an absolutely closed secret room.

Duke Calvin lay half against the bed, a thick wool blanket beneath him, yet his shoulder and back still slightly hunched.

He held an exquisite porcelain teacup in his hand, yet now that hand holding the teacup was as thin as a skeletal branch.

His breath carried a wheezing sound like a broken bellows, each inhale felt like a struggle against some invisible resistance.

Though the fire was blazing, he still wrapped himself in three layers of thick wool blankets, his face pale as if drained of blood.

Two years ago, it was merely easy fatigue.

Then it was cold limbs, in the mornings the hand gripping the sword trembled uncontrollably, he couldn't muster the strength to hold the sword to his chest.

All priests said it was overwork, all alchemists couldn't detect any toxins.

The results of the inspections got cleaner each time, his mind remained frighteningly clear, yet his body was inexorably collapsing.

Precisely because of this, his eyes turned toward the past Imperial Palace.

The Regent King's death was overly quiet, reportedly also due to heart disease, reportedly also due to overwork.

But the Duke knew, that manner of death was exactly like the decline he was experiencing.

That was the only clue.

And yesterday, Lampard reached out on his own, saying he knew everything.

At this moment Lampard was already standing by the bed, the Duke raised his clouded yet sharp eyes, his voice hoarse and direct, "Your Highness, where is my answer?"

Lampard did not exchange pleasantries. He took out a scroll of unbound parchment from his chest and placed it by the bedside, "Just as you suspected, this is not illness, it is murder."

He sat by the bed, his tone calm as if discussing the weather, "The Regent King did not die of heart disease. I watched him myself, within two years reduced to a dried corpse."

The Duke's gaze didn't move away, yet his breath halted for half a beat at that moment.

Lampard continued speaking, his voice lowered further, "I'm not afraid to tell you, at the time I also participated, because the Church Court promised me the throne."

He paused, a touch of self-deprecating cold smile appeared on his lips, "But I regret it now, because next is me."

He briefly described that method called [Death Without a Trace].

"A curse not requiring ingestion."

"By establishing a life transmission channel through the reverse crown demon pattern. The caster is below ground, the recipient above ground, as long as the distance conditions are met, life force will naturally flow continuously downwards."

The Duke listened intently, his emaciated fingers lightly tapping the cover of a tax law book beside him, as if hearing a logically arranged academic lecture.

"No wonder toxins couldn't be detected." He said softly, even nodded slightly, "Turns out my life is being moved remotely."

He raised his eyelids, a slight cold commendation in his tone:

"The Church Court's craftsmanship, indeed exquisite."

Lampard regarded him, then revealed the final and most cruel truth:

"This remote extraction is inefficient unless... there is a living anchor around you, spending long hours by your side daily, used for positioning and accelerating transmission."

His gaze landed on the teacup by the bedside long since cold.

"It's not that the tea is poisoned," Lampard said softly, "but the person serving the tea is part of the curse."

The room fell silent.

The Duke slowly turned his head, glanced at that teacup, it was brought by Seldon not long ago, the porcelain surface pristine, without a single crack.

He remained silent for three seconds, then a light, near mocking smile appeared at the corners of his mouth.

"Seldon." He softly uttered the name, his tone lacking anger, lacking sorrow, only indifferent.

"My son turned himself into the knife that slays his father."

He gently exhaled, as if reaching a clear conclusion, "This shows, in his view, the Church Court's offer was more valuable than his father."

Lampard watched this overly calm response and couldn't help asking, "You're not angry?"

The Duke closed the tax law book, his movements slow yet steady.

"Anger is a sign of impotence."

His voice was deep, yet every word distinct, "Since Seldon chose the Church Court, then he is no longer my son, but an enemy."

Regarding enemies, all that is needed is to calculate how to deal with them, not to engage emotionally."

He lifted his gaze, focusing back on Lampard, like a weakened yet not dead lion, recalibrating its target in the darkness.

"Your Highness," the Duke said, "since the child wants to succeed early, I will fulfill him."

Chapter 833: Duke Calvin's Last Letter

The early summer in the Northern Territory rarely shows any mildness.

The last layer of snow on the castle's high windows is quietly melting, with droplets falling along the stone walls, reflecting a faint light in the sunlight.

Warm wind blows through the half-open long windows, carrying the scent of reviving moist soil, making one almost forget that this was once a frigid place where even breathing would frost.

The sunlight carries just the right touch of warmth, slanting across the giant oak long table in the center of the study.

Louis, however, has no mind to enjoy this comfort.

He stands by the wall, back to the window light, holding a pen in hand, his gaze fixed on the giant map hanging on the wall.

But not the Northern Territory, rather the Southeast Province and its surrounding regions, or rather, the Holy Eastern Empire.

The pen moves across the map, making a subtle rustling sound.

Main ports are circled, coastal grain distribution centers are marked with heavy lines, and several main inland rivers are repeatedly annotated.

Beside key nodes, he left symbols that outsiders would not understand, which are marching routes, supply transit points, and contingency plans in case the situation spirals out of control.

The heavy wooden door of the study suddenly opens.

The pen in Louis's hand pauses mid-air.

Bradley walks in, his steps as steady as ever, but his expression is graver than usual.

Behind him follows a person fully wrapped in a dusty cloak, the hood pressed low, almost covering the entire face, looking like a vagrant lost on the plains.

Louis only glances up, easily penetrating the deliberately suppressed aura of the other.

High-tier Extraordinary Knight.

And severely wounded, Fighting Energy is on the verge of depletion, sustained solely by willpower.

Such a strong figure is enough to hold a city, yet at this moment stands in his study wearing a tattered cloak, hinting at instability even in posture.

Bradley steps aside slightly, whispering, "My Lord, the man is brought here, this is Nico. He is... one of old Duke Calvin's most trusted personal guards."

The man beneath the cloak slowly lifts his head, removing the hood.

It's a face thoroughly washed by wind and frost. Deep-set eyes, cracked lips, evidently long deprived of decent rest.

Even so, his gaze remains awake and alert, only unable to hide the deep weariness nearly drained.

Nico doesn't utter a single unnecessary word, nor does he kneel in salute.

He merely retrieves an envelope from inside his garment with slightly trembling hands, handing it over.

"Master Louis..." His voice is hoarse, yet firm, "This is what the Duke wanted me to deliver to you."

Louis reaches out to take it.

It's just an ordinary brown paper envelope, corners even slightly worn, without a family emblem, no wax seal, clean almost deliberately.

Because any extra mark could prevent it from ever reaching its destination.

Louis merely nods slightly at Nico, then briskly slashes open the envelope, pulling out the neatly folded letter paper inside.

The script is all too familiar, except it no longer conveys serenity.

Each letter is written with extraordinary force, strokes sharp and rough, many places directly piercing through the paper, ink spreading across fibers, leaving indelible marks.

Louis can almost imagine the scene when the letter was written.

Hand trembling uncontrollably, body too weak to sit long, yet forcing himself to complete it stroke by stroke, simply due to the letter's importance.

The first line of the letter, without any pleasantries.

No greetings for Louis, no my son, not even a single unnecessary embellishment.

"By the time you read this line, I should have little time left, but I've planted a landmine for the Holy Eastern Empire

It won't explode immediately, but not long after my death, the administrative center will first collapse, the Holy Certificates issued by the Church Court will become worthless within three days, the rice price in the capital will multiply dozens of times..."

Louis's gaze pauses on those few lines, yet shows no surprise.

These conclusions are not unfamiliar to him.

Long ago, pieces of this picture were already assembled on his desk through fragmented reports from [Daily Intelligence]:

[Lampard and Duke Calvin forge an alliance. Agreement details: After Louis heads south, Lampard will be permitted to retain an offshore island as his fief, and will receive a third of the Calvin Clan's wealth in a lump sum.]

[Sudden fire broke out at the Southeast Province Archives last night. Key documents, including nearly a decade of "Land Measurement Records", "Population Register", "Real Tax Source List", were all incinerated.]

[Due to declining health, Duke Calvin officially appoints his eldest son Seldon as "Regent", to fully manage family affairs and sign external treaties.]

[Vero Port sealed off at night, but confirmed a fleet secretly loaded gold coins, destination unknown.]

...

And this scattered intelligence, at this moment, is reconnected by this letter, deliberately created chaos by Duke Calvin.

"The Southeast Province now is a piece of meat smeared with poison.

The Church Court swallowed it, Seldon swallowed it, the Royal Family is drooling aside. Even if you do nothing, within ten days, they'll slaughter each other because of uneven spoils.

Your task is not to enter the fray, but to wait, wait for their poison to take effect before landing."

Louis's fingers silently tapped the desktop, Duke Calvin's spoon-feeding manner wrote his advice intermittently, to feed to him.

Chapter 834: Duke Calvin's Final Letter (Part 2)

"I burned all the tax registers, leaving only a single copy, in the black box. Without it, the Church Court is blind in the Southeast."

"I've already cut off the grain routes. Now, the only one who can save those few million people is you."

"Remember, don't hand out grain immediately. Wait until they're starving to the brink of death, wait until the Knights work only for those two Gold Coins. Then give them what they want. Make the people of the Southeast understand that only you can grant them their lives..."

Reading this, in Louis's mind the southbound deployment of troops, the order of port takeovers, the temporary grain price curves and the public security nodes had already aligned, one by one.

He had long since begun these preparations.

Even certain details imperceptible to outsiders—such as quietly relocating his full-blooded elder sister who was still in the Southeast Province and placing her in the protection roster—had long since been completed.

In the middle section of the letter, the handwriting began to show a marked change.

The strokes grew unsteady; some lines seemed almost carved into the paper by brute force, and in several places the ink had abruptly blurred, like blood that had dripped upon it.

"The family seal is in Nico's hands; the true tax ledgers and the secret keys to the overseas vaults are as well..."

"From this moment on, you are the head of the Calvin Clan..."

Louis lifted his eyes and glanced at Nico, who was still standing to the side, barely holding himself up, then lowered his head and continued reading.

"And help me find out what happened to Eduardo."

"As for the rest... including Seldon, those idiot leeches of cadet branches who feed on the family's blood; if you find it troublesome, just dispose of them all..."

When the letter was turned to the last page, unexpectedly, the tone suddenly changed.

It no longer sounded like the cold calculations of a schemer, but carried a candor tinged with something close to black humor.

"A final piece of advice from someone who's been through it: have more children, marry more women, and breed like mad."

"Don't bother about feelings, don't bother about how to raise them. As long as the numbers are large enough—twenty, thirty—by sheer luck you'll end up with a few monsters like you."

This is the supreme survival secret of the Calvin Clan: quantity defeating probability."

At the end of the letter, there were no superfluous farewells, only a single signature—Calvin.

Louis folded the letter.

He thought of that absurd piece of advice about "having more children" and, at last, let out a short, cold laugh.

In that man's logic, he had never been a cherished son, but a lottery ticket that had hit the jackpot, after more than twenty failed wagers.

The mediocre, the ruined, the exhausted offspring were all merely acceptable sunk costs.

As long as, in the end, a "Louis" was drawn, this investment was a total victory.

He did not grow angry because of it; on the contrary, he calmly accepted this definition.

Since you treat me as a matter of probability, then I will, as a matter of course, take all the winnings.

And when he reviewed the structure of the letter as a whole, what arose in his heart was not tenderness, but a nearly icy respect.

Exalting to death the most obedient second son, giving up on the long-lost son of the Pope and Peak Knight elder son, chewing to pulp the family's flesh and blood together with the old order—only to place the final authority in the hands of the most dangerous, yet most likely to win, heir.

That was not fatherly love, but a naked transfer of power.

An old lion, before age and death overtook him, personally bit to death all the feeble cubs.

But as a Lord, Louis had to admit that this ruthless resolve, this willingness to sacrifice everything for victory, was itself a force worthy of awe.

The Duke had not left a will, but a ticket of admission.

Louis reached out and took the heavy family ring that Nico handed him, and slipped it onto his finger.

From that moment on, he chose to consume this blood-soaked feast in its entirety.

At the instant the metal ring clasped tight, the aura about Louis shifted by a hair's breadth—almost imperceptibly.

That unique chill restraint of the Lord of the North and the vicious, calculating cunning passed down through the Calvin Clan fused silently at this moment, no longer rejecting one another, like two tightly meshed gears finally locking into place.

He turned, and walked calmly toward Nico, who still knelt on one knee.

Having completed his mission, the breath that had barely supported Nico across the continent had utterly dissipated.

His body swayed slightly, cold sweat seeping from his temple; if not for his will strained taut, he would likely have collapsed already.

The Fighting Energy of the High-tier Extraordinary Knight was running dry, like a well about to be exhausted.

Louis halted before him.

"Sir Nico," his voice was low, but devoid of even a trace of condescending pity, "don't be in such a hurry to go see the old Duke."

Nico's shoulders gave a faint tremor.

"In his letter, he let that last breath out," Louis went on, his tone so calm it was almost cruel. "But I have not."

He bent slightly forward, bringing his gaze level with Nico's.

"Live well. Keep your eyes, and watch for him.

Watch how I grind that rabble of the Southeast to dust, inch by inch; watch the banner of Calvin rise again atop the capital's walls."

Louis straightened, his tone tightening with him, returning to the cold, hard cadence of a Lord issuing orders.

"Take Sir Nico to the finest guest chamber, and use the highest-grade Life Potion."

"Without my permission, the Death God does not take him."

The guard answered at once, stepping forward to support Nico.

Just as Nico was about to bow and withdraw, Louis seemed suddenly to recall something and called out to stop him.

"By the way, Nico."

Louis walked to the window and raised his hand, pointing toward the drill grounds outside the castle.

In the setting sun, the Red Tide Legion was going through its routine exercises, ranks perfectly aligned, Iron Armor reflecting a steady, muted light.

Chapter 835: Duke Calvin's Last Letter (Part 3)

The command fell, and ten thousand moved as one, turning and advancing like a giant iron beast with a clear will.

"Don't rush to leave tomorrow; it's just the Red Tide Legion's parade."

He didn't turn his head, merely saying lightly, "Since you are the Duke's most trusted knight, stand guard for him."

"See if my wolves of the Northern Territory have teeth as sharp as his Southeast Province did back then."

A rare ripple finally appeared in Nico's cloudy eyes.

Originally, he had harbored a desire for death, wanting to bring everything to an end.

But the phrase "stand guard for the old Duke" hit his final weak spot precisely.

Nico bowed his head deeply, his forehead almost touching the ground.

"At your command..." After a brief pause, his voice was deep and clear, "Patriarch."

The moment the form of address changed, the power completed its final transfer.

Louis's gaze lingered on Nico for a moment, then shifted away.

However, a calm and realistic thought flashed in his mind:

A High-tier Extraordinary Knight, such a rare resource, would be wasted if lost halfway.

After Nico left, the top floor study returned to silence.

Bradley stood where he was, not speaking immediately.

This Chief Steward, who always managed everything in Red Tide Territory impeccably, now had his eyes fixed on Louis's left hand.

More precisely, they were fixed on the signet ring worn on his thumb.

His Adam's apple rolled, and his lips trembled slightly beyond his control.

Having served the Calvin Family for thirty years, he was all too familiar with this ring.

Now that it had changed hands, it could signify only one thing...

The once-mighty Duke Calvin might have reached the end of his life.

Sorrow surged in his chest like a belated tide.

But when Bradley's gaze rose and fell on Louis again, that grief was suppressed by a more complex emotion.

The demeanor of the young lord before him was even more composed and powerful than the old Duke Calvin at his prime in memory.

Bradley suddenly realized that the child once deemed unnecessary,

The young master sent to the Northern Territory to fend for himself had truly come this far.

The ring had not chosen the wrong person.

He opened his mouth, wanting to bow, but found his throat caught by something: "S... Sir... the old master he..."

No sooner had he spoken than his voice choked uncontrollably, and the latter half of the sentence couldn't be uttered.

Louis looked at him and said nothing, walking instead to the liquor cabinet to retrieve a bottle of strong wine, swiftly pouring two glasses.

He handed one to Bradley: "Don't put on a mournful face, Bradley, the old Duke isn't dead yet."

This statement was not gentle, yet it held more strength than any consolation.

Bradley took a deep breath, accepted the glass, and nodded firmly, forcibly pressing down the emotions that threatened to overflow.

The atmosphere calmed accordingly.

Louis didn't give him much time to process his emotions, naturally turning around and walking back to the oak long table covered with maps and documents.

"How's the parade preparation for tomorrow?" His tone had reverted to the cold demeanor typical of a lord inquiring about military affairs.

Bradley almost reflexively straightened his back.

"Everything is ready, Sir." His voice was once again clear and orderly, "The compositions of all the legions have been verified, equipment inspections, and formation drills are all completed. Logistics, medical, and the craftsman departments are all on standby."

Louis nodded, seeming to mull something over when he suddenly opened his mouth: "I have an idea."

Bradley was taken aback, instinctively raising his head.

"Keep it in mind first." Louis's tone was unhurried, "Add a segment to tomorrow's parade..."

Bradley's eyes widened slightly.

Chapter 836: Before the Parade Begins

The early summer sunlight pierced through the thin morning mist of the Northern Territory.

From a high vantage point, the stands surrounding the first parade ground of Red Tide Territory were already overflowing with crowds.

This wasn't a chaotic and noisy refugee camp but a slowly undulating sea of people.

Rows of dark cotton clothes swayed gently in the wind, like unending tides, stretching to the horizon.

Even in the distance, the hillsides, bare ridges, and tree branches were filled with human figures.

To secure a vantage point with a clear view of the parade, some had set up camp here three days in advance.

Yet the air was free of any sour decay, replaced by the aroma of baked potatoes heated by charcoal, the faint sizzle of butter melting on an iron plate, and the unique sweetness of malt sugar wafting in the morning breeze.

Vendors weaved through the crowd, carrying wooden boxes on their shoulders. As soon as the lids were opened, children flocked around them.

Nearly everyone was dressed in thick and clean cotton clothing.

Dark cotton clothes, not exactly luxurious in cut, yet sturdy and well-fitting.

These were standard goods woven in batches by the Red Tide Textile Factory, unaffordable to commoners in the Southern Province, yet just ordinary everyday wear here.

The patched, oily linen of the old era had long been relegated to memory.

But the more obvious change was written on their faces.

These were faces that were full and vibrant, no longer with sunken eye sockets or protruding cheekbones.

The stamina from a diet rich in meat and fats allowed them to stand with naturally relaxed shoulders and straight backs.

It's a posture only those not worried about tomorrow would have.

A sturdy father lifted his daughter onto his shoulders.

The little girl held onto his neatly trimmed hair with one hand, waving a small flag with a sun emblem with the other, her cheeks adorned with red stickers, screaming with excitement.

The father tilted his head back, letting his child sway on his shoulders, his face openly showing pride.

In one corner of the crowd, a family of three stood particularly quiet.

They were a craftsman family from the Gray Rock Province that migrated to Red Tide Territory two years ago.

The father had once improved steam pistons in the workshops of Gray Rock and was later recruited to Red Tide, now a formal resident.

The child clutched a string of sugar-glazed berries, a treat he'd only heard of in tales of noble banquets before.

The man's hand unconsciously rubbed his new cotton coat, fingers caressing the fabric's texture repeatedly, as if afraid it would all vanish if he let go.

The woman's eyes turned slightly red; instead of looking at the center of the parade ground, she gazed towards the distant castle, hands clasped in silent prayer.

A few years ago, they were worried about the heavy taxes from the Remont Clan, even secretly discussing whether to hang themselves together.

Now, they stood in the sunlight, stomachs full of fine bread, the child's mouth still stained with sugar glaze.

For them, Louis was more than an abstract title of lord; he was the Savior who kept them fed and warm.

Among the crowd, there were also many outsiders.

Merchants from the Northern Territory, wandering knights from other regions, and even some small nobles from the South.

They too had dressed themselves neatly, striving to emulate the attire and behavior of the Red Tide residents, hoping one day to be accepted by this land.

Low murmurs of conversation swirled in the air.

The Red Tide populace was not ignorant.

The spread of night schools and literacy made them exceptionally aware of happenings outside.

"Have you heard? The iron factory has developed the third generation of steam war chariots."

"Those iron beasts that can move on their own and spew fire?"

"Shhh! My second uncle works there... but I can't say more."

The topic quickly shifted to the South.

"Those damned bastards from the Church Court are actually daring to cut off our grain routes?"

A retired knight missing an arm stood in the crowd, the remaining hand clenched in a fist. "My life was saved by the lord. Anyone dares harm him, I'll fight to the death!"

No one was afraid of war.

On the contrary, there was an almost burning anticipation in the air.

They knew better than anyone who granted them this dream-like life.

But since they've only lived well for a decade, they feared being dragged back to the hell of hunger, cold, and being at the mercy of others.

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Countless gazes turned in unison towards the center of the parade ground.

Gray stood on the command post in the center of the parade ground.

He donned a new pure black officer's ceremonial uniform, sharply tailored, without any excess adornments.

His chest, however, was adorned with heavy medals, marks of the past four years of battles, the most prominent being the Gray Rock Conquest Medal and the first-class Sun of the Red Tide medal for highest military achievement.

His hair was meticulously groomed, the hairline as if measured with a ruler.

On that still-young face, the boyish innocence was hard to find.

The authority from long-term command settled like an invisible armor, calmly covering his brows and eyes.

Only he knew this composure wasn't entirely genuine.

He repeatedly adjusted his collar and instinctively tugged at the edge of his white gloves, ensuring every fold was neat and proper.

His left hand on the command sword was still trembling imperceptibly.

As the chief commander of this parade, he knew better than anyone what stood behind him.

Chapter 837: Before the Parade Begins (2)

That was neither a hastily assembled mercenary band, nor a knight order propped up by noble bloodlines.

It was an army molded through discipline, industry, and cold calculation, the first truly fully industrialized army in human history.

His thoughts uncontrollably drifted back; the earliest memory was the orphan camp.

Back then, like many children, he was abandoned by disaster by the roadside. In other territories, being an orphan meant slavery, mines, and a short life.

But in the Red Tide Territory, Louis gave them milk, meat, and the qualification to cultivate Fighting Energy.

It wasn't compassion, but more like a calm and direct investment.

Later, he was selected into the Lord's guard, standing behind Louis, wielding a longsword shield, serving as an iron wall against hidden arrows.

Until that day, Louis took away the shield that had accompanied him for years and instead gave him a command sword.

"Your swordsmanship is good, but in the Red Tide Territory, I want you to learn to use your brain to protect the Red Tide."

The next five years were like an unavoidable forced indoctrination.

Ballistics, trench construction, logistics coordination, multi-arms cooperation...

All the warfare knowledge absent in the old times was crammed into his mind.

And these were not merely theoretical.

In the conquest of the Gray Rock Province, Louis handed over the frontline command to him completely for the first time.

How steam tanks forged the path, when cavalry should be deployed to harvest...

What followed was the elimination of remaining noble forces, the hunting of mountain bandits, the repeated suppression and restoration of old noble powers.

Repeated low-intensity yet prolonged and dirty battles honed him into a true commander capable of managing the situation.

In simulations and real battlefields, he was repeatedly trained, forcefully matured into a general by Louis.

Now he looked back and saw an endless steel dragon behind him.

The steam tanks covered with canvas breathed lowly, like a group of beasts lying in wait.

The smell of metal, oil, and steam weighed heavily in the air.

"No bloodline, no family background. Yet, they entrusted this army capable of crushing the world into my hands."

Gray was well aware that the spectators were the old nobility of the Northern Territory, people he once couldn't even dream of looking up to.

But today, the one standing here is him.

"I want to show them that the people chosen by the Red Tide Territory are ten thousand times stronger than those noble knights propped up by bloodline."

In the distance, the steam whistle sounded deep and low.

The countdown to the parade began.

Gray closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. The air mixed with the smell of oil was the unique scent of the Red Tide Territory.

When he opened his eyes again, all distracting thoughts were suppressed to the bottom of his heart.

He donned his white gloves properly, gripping the command knife at his waist tightly, his hand no longer trembling.

.....

Nico changed into clean everyday clothes.

It wasn't a military uniform, nor a formal suit, just a well-tailored dark jacket.

Making his face appear even paler, the weakness left by fatigue hadn't fully faded.

If not for the foundation built by years of cultivation, he probably wouldn't have recovered so quickly.

As the representative of the Calvin Clan, he was arranged in a seat next to the main seat, surrounded by some executives of the Red Tide and high nobles of the Northern Territory,

Sitting beside him was Bradley.

The old steward had changed out of his usual deacon outfit, wearing only a formal suit, with his back still straight, hands naturally resting on his knees.

If not for the white hairs at his temples, he looked almost unchanged from when he stood behind Duke Calvin twenty years ago.

Nico spoke first, his voice hoarse, yet with a long-lost relaxation: "Old friend, you've aged."

As he said this, his gaze lingered on Bradley's eyes, as if re-confirming something.

"However," Nico paused, nodding slightly, "your spirit is even better than when you were in the Southeast."

Bradley smiled slightly, raised his hand, and poured Nico a cup of hot tea. White mist slowly rose from the cup, dispelling some of the Northern Territory's morning chill.

"Because there is hope here." He pushed the teacup in front of Nico, his tone calm and certain, "The young master here has created too many miracles."

Nico picked up the teacup, looking down in the direction of the ceremonial platform.

The formations below were already aligned, black units like steel plates embedded in the wilderness, with precise spacing and stable formations, carrying an inherent oppressive aura, even before any action began.

Nico said softly: "I know, the Gray Rock Province and the Northern Province are not made of paper. To swallow them and still stabilize the situation..."

He let out a gentle breath, "Though I don't want to admit it, the young master has already surpassed the old Duke."

His assessment was not flattery, but the instinctive evaluation of an experienced knight.

Before coming here, he had already envisioned the parade in his mind.

A Knight Order with strict discipline, dozens of Extraordinary Knights, complemented by some new equipment. This was already enough to be considered a strong army.

But when he was actually sitting here, watching those silent steel phalanxes with his own eyes, he realized that his expectations were still too conservative.

Nico's fingers holding the teacup unconsciously tightened a bit.

"Let me see," he murmured softly, almost talking to himself.

"Since we're marching south for revenge, we need teeth." His eyes were fixated on the phalanx about to commence, a long-lost sharpness emerging in his gaze, "I hope the young master's teeth... are hard enough."

Exactly ten o'clock in the morning.

The massive steam clock tower in the center of the parade ground emitted a deep and resonant mechanical echo, its hands steadily settling into place amidst the expulsion of white steam.

"Hoo—!!"

The sound of a horn abruptly tore through the air.

It was not an ordinary military horn, but a low-frequency sound wave amplified by an alchemy acoustics array, deep and lingering, as if striking directly at the human heart.

The audience that had been surging like a tidal wave fell silent in an instant, as if someone had pressed the mute button on the world.

Deathly stillness.

Tens of thousands of people simultaneously ceased their movements, eerily synchronized.

Everyone's gaze lifted at the same moment, focusing on the highest reviewing platform of the parade ground.

The involuntary compliance, formed without command, sent chills down the spines of the nobles on the VIP viewing platform. This was not mere excitement; it was a fully domesticated order.

In the shadow of the reviewing platform, a figure slowly stepped forward.

Louis Calvin stepped out.

He wore neither the cumbersome and elaborate noble attire nor the traditional heavy plate armor of a knight.

It was a sleek, deep black marshal's uniform, a style unique to the Red Tide Territory.

The golden sun epaulettes gleamed coldly in the sunlight, while the crimson cloak behind him fluttered in the northern wind, like a silently burning battle flag.

The early summer sunlight fell upon him, but it seemed to be entirely absorbed by the black fabric.

Young, exceedingly young.

This was the thought of all the nobles. Although they knew of Louis's age, every time they saw him in person, they couldn't help but be surprised at the young appearance of the man who wielded authority over two great provinces.

But beneath that stern face, his gaze was unnervingly calm.

On the VIP platform, Nico instinctively held his breath.

He couldn't fathom the depth of this young lord, nor could he sense the oppressive aura of fighting energy in its traditional sense. It was absolute confidence, as if the world was in his grasp.

Louis walked to the railing, merely took off his gloves, and casually waved his hand downward.

"Boom—!!"

In the next moment, the long-suppressed silence was completely shattered.

Countless people shouted the same name, some wept, some knelt on the spot, their foreheads hitting the ground heavily.

"Lord Louis!!"

To them, the young man on the platform was not an abstract lord, nor a distant noble, but the savior who had dragged them out of hunger, cold, and humiliation.

He allowed them to live, to live with dignity, and that was enough.

Then Louis raised his hand, palm down, making an extremely simple suppressing gesture.

Three seconds, just three seconds.

The uproar that could have toppled city walls seemed to be pressed back to the ground by an invisible giant hand.

The cheers abruptly ceased, leaving only the sound of the wind and the deep breathing of steam engines.

This effortless control was more chilling than the earlier fervor.

Louis did not simply say a few words but extended his hand and slowly drew the Cold Iron Longsword from his waist.

In the instant the sword left its sheath, a crisp and icy metallic ring echoed in the air.

The sword's edge pointed directly at the sky, reflecting a dazzling cold light in the sunlight, like a line of judgment spanning between heaven and earth.

The acoustics array projected his voice to every corner of the parade ground.

"The blade of Red Tide, unsheathed."

Chapter 838: Parade! Southward!

As Louis's words fell, the air in the parade ground seemed to tighten instantly.

All gazes, without exception, shifted from the towering review stand to the forefront of the formation.

Major General Grey stood upright in the half-track command vehicle, his back straight as a gun, like a crossbow that had been drawn.

In the next moment, Fighting Energy burst from his chest.

"Clang!"

The sound of the command sword unsheathing tore through the air, a sharp arc of cold light pointing directly at the sky.

"All troops, form up! Prepare for inspection!!"

The shout was like thunder, carrying the murderous aura refined on the real battlefield, striking the crowd fiercely.

The spectator area, which was initially restless, was forcibly subdued by this voice, even their breaths slowed by half a beat.

On the VIP seats, Nico's eyes lit up slightly, "What a voice... what killing intent."

Before the words had fallen, the heavy and primal sound of battle drums roared to life, pounding the earth rhythmically.

The first formation advanced from the horizon's end.

Sacco rode on a black horse, his cold iron armor glimmering under the sunlight, Fighting Energy flaring intermittently through the armor's gaps.

His gaze was straight and fiery, firmly locked onto Louis on the review stand.

He knew that Lord Louis as well as his own parents and siblings were watching him at this moment.

In the crowd, Sacco's father stood straight.

Seeing his child leading, he understood that sending his child to the Red Tide Territory years ago was the most correct move of his life.

Sacco's younger brothers clenched their fists, only filled with aspirations.

And behind Sacco, the true awe was just beginning.

The Red Tide emblem shone on the standardized plate armor, each knight exuding stable and condensed Fighting Energy.

They were all Extraordinary Knights!

The Northern Territory black horses trotted orderly, their hoofbeat rhythms were so synchronized it made one's heart pound, like a single giant heart beating.

On the podium, Louis simply nodded slightly.

That slight acknowledgment was enough to make Sacco's back even straighter.

On the VIP seats, Nico was already sitting completely upright.

The nearby Eastern nobility instinctively began whispering counts, "One... twenty... thirty... fifty..."

The voices grew quieter, yet the counting increasingly slow.

When they realized their count was chaotic, even feared to continue, their backs unconsciously drenched with cold sweat.

"Over three hundred..." Nico swiftly calculated in his mind.

In the Southeast Province, if a Count could employ twenty Extraordinary Knights, it would suffice to dominate a region.

At its peak, the Calvin Clan had merely two hundred knights stationed at headquarters.

"Where did the Red Tide Territory get the resources to assemble such numbers?"

Their youth was most unsettling to him, averaging under thirty-five years of age, signifying they were not built over time or through resource accumulation, but rare talents against all odds.

"This isn't all," Nico was almost certain, "Knowing this young lord's character, these three hundred are just for show, how was this achieved?"

Of course, he didn't know the underlying strength of the Red Tide Territory surpassed other Dukes, for the Daily Intelligence System ensured that resources were never wasted.

Identifying sources of potion ingredients, which potion could break through bottlenecks, which group deserved Fighting Energy material allocation.

All fortune gambles turned into precision investments here.

In the seats of old Northern nobility, Count Albert stroked his beard, his face beaming.

"Have you seen clearly?" he whispered to several young Lords beside him, "This is what a Northern Guardian should embody."

Looking at the iron-clad cavalry, he seemed to see the shadow of Count Edmond years past. But this current troop was younger and more powerful.

"Guard the Northern Territory?" Albert squinted his eyes, "No, this power is more than sufficient to conquer the world."

After the Extraordinary Knights' formation, the scene suddenly shifted.

Ice Wolf Riders swept across the parade ground like a wave of grey and silver.

Giant wolves ran silently, knights in light armor with compound bows slung diagonally on their backs.

The wolf pack itself was a formation, intertwining wildness and discipline into an imposing beauty.

Screams erupted among the crowd.

Following closely behind was the ground's tremor, as the Polar Bear Corps stepped into view.

Massive bodies clad in heavy semi-armor, leaving clear white marks with each step on the stone slabs.

These magical beast cavalry might not surpass Extraordinary Knights in combat efficacy, but their display of force was so evident that even ordinary people could recognize and feel impressed.

Cheers surged like tidal waves.

As the final white bear passed the review stand, Nico slowly exhaled.

Powerful, yet within his realm of understanding.

On the command podium, Grey's lips curled into a cold smile.

His gloved right hand slowly raised, making a sharp cutting-off gesture.

The battle drum abruptly ceased.

In the next second, the low and horrifying steam whistle tore through the firmament once more.

"Warm-up finished, now witness truth." Grey smiled.

Three short and clear commands echoed above the parade ground.

Major General Grey lifted his right hand, slowly pressing down.

Those who were immersed in the cavalry and magical beast impact quickly realized the true oppressiveness didn't come from roaring and thundering, but from a disturbing silence.

At the horizon's end, the Red Tide Infantry Division began to advance.

Their pace was not swift, yet precise like gears interlocking.

Gray-black uniforms aligned uniformly, gun butts pressed to shoulders, barrels slightly elevated, all actions without excess movement, like a moving Iron Wall.

What they held wasn't spears, pikes, nor any weapons familiar to the Nobility.

Chapter 839: Military Parade! Southward Advance! (Part 2)

It was a slender, cold, and hard "iron tube" with simple lines.

A barely audible hum arose from the viewing platform.

Count Harvey instinctively furrowed his brows, his hand holding the teacup paused mid-air.

"These people..." he murmured, "what are they doing with sticks of firewood?"

The tone was not mocking, but purely puzzled.

He was a newly risen financial aristocrat of the South Empire, having struck it rich through shipping, mining, and finance, currently popular in the Imperial Capital.

Before the Second Prince took control of the Imperial Capital, he had sharply sensed the scent of danger and immediately transferred most of his business to the Northern Territory to rely on his second son, thinking he was being smart enough.

But at this moment, he couldn't understand the scene before him at all.

Beside him, Yorn's eyes shone intimidatingly.

"Father." His voice was very low, yet carried a near-reverent certainty, "Just watch, Lord Louis's weapon will astonish you."

Count Harvey was slightly taken aback and turned to look at his second son.

Yorn Harvey, the second son of the Southern Harvey Family, now the Viscount of Silver Ridge Hill in the Northern Territory.

He was also the one with the most resolute stance in the entire circle of Northern Lords.

From the very beginning, he had been open about his choice. While everyone else was still hesitating and watching, he had already declared his intention to "cling tightly to Lord Louis," which, of course, had brought him significant benefits.

In Count Harvey's eyes, this almost reckless loyalty had once made him extremely uneasy.

But now, he somewhat believed in these esoteric sciences, so he did not immediately refute.

The soldiers on the field had already stopped in their tracks.

At the end of the parade ground, three hundred straw men clad in full heavy plate armor were neatly arranged with helmets, chest plates, and shoulder guards, all crafted to the specifications of a Heavy Knight.

Gray's hand fell, and a whistle pierced the air sharply.

The first row of soldiers knelt simultaneously, with their gunstock against their shoulders, and muzzles aligned.

"Bang——!!!"

A thunderous explosion erupted.

Blue flames powered by Demon Marrow spewed from the muzzles, forming a cold and deadly curtain of light.

Time seemed to stretch for a moment.

The distant armored straw men disintegrated thereafter.

The thick steel ripped apart and flipped over under the terrifying kinetic energy. Iron pieces and straw soared into the sky, as if struck head-on by an invisible giant hammer.

The wind carried the debris towards the viewing area, the crowd first fell into brief silence, then burst into deafening exclamations.

For most civilians, this was merely a spectacle, something novel, but those who understood had their expressions changed.

Count Harvey's hand suddenly trembled.

The tea spilled onto his expensive robe, yet he was completely oblivious.

"This..." His Adam's apple bobbed once, "If this power, if that previous volley had hit my knights..."

The words went unfinished, but the answer was all too clear.

On the other side of the VIP seats, Nico had already sat up straight.

His pupils slightly constricted, his gaze locked onto the shattered pieces of armor.

"Without the augmentation of Fighting Energy..." he muttered under his breath, "purely kinetic energy."

In Nico's mind, calculations ran swiftly.

If one were an Extraordinary Knight, operating Fighting Energy at full force, facing this volley head-on...

It could be blocked, but not with ease.

The shield would shatter, Fighting Energy depleting rapidly.

And if it were a Heavy Knight beneath the extraordinary level...

Nico's gaze swept over those fragments torn into pieces of iron armor, and his mind had already reached a conclusion.

"Life or death depends on luck, but as long as it's a direct hit, combat capability would be obliterated in an instant." Nico exhaled slowly, his spine already chilled.

Thus, the so-called knight charge, in front of this cold infantry line, was merely a ritual of death.

The old butler Bradley, who had always been by his side, smiled slightly and refilled Nico's teacup.

"Lord Nico," he said conversationally, "Are you wondering if this is some sort of one-time alchemy tool?"

Nico didn't answer, but silence itself was assent.

"No." Bradley gently shook his head, casting his gaze towards that still-smoldering infantry line, "This is called a rifle, and its principle is actually not complex. Purified Magic Marrow Powder ignites instantaneously, propelling a metal bullet to kill with kinetic energy."

He extended a finger, making a negligible gesture: "And what is truly frightening about it has never been its power, but its cost."

Bradley's gaze swept over those young and silent soldiers, his tone calm to the point of cruelty.

"To cultivate someone like you, an Extraordinary Knight, requires talent, magical potions, resources, and at least twenty years, costing no less than ten thousand gold coins."

"And to train a qualified musketeer, only takes an Apprentice Knight about three months."

He pointed again to the pile of shattered armor fragments in the distance, the corner of his lips curving into an exceedingly standard Calvin Clan smile.

"If nurturing an Official Knight is valued at a thousand gold coins."

"Then the cost of the bullets that shattered him is about fifty silver coins."

"Spending fifty silver coins to exchange for a thousand gold coins. This is the war economy that the young master taught me."

Nico's hand holding the teacup froze mid-air, for a long time not bringing it to his lips.

"This is already no longer a war of knights..." he said quietly, his voice tinged with a sense of bewilderment at being left behind by the era, "This is the mass processing of life."

Nico's mind raced, unconsciously using his decades of war experience to patch up that worldview in collapse.

He forced himself to calm down; the power was indeed horrifying, but as long as the Knight Order was fast enough, in that brief window of reloading, there was still a chance for a breakthrough.

Chapter 840: Military Parade! Southward Advance! (Part 3)

As long as we can get close to these infantry with their iron tubes, they are ultimately just flesh and blood.

The weak point of the Red Tide Territory lies in sustained firepower.

Just as this thought was forming in his mind, a shrill steam siren mercilessly shattered his self-comfort.

The ground began to tremble slightly.

Six heavy steam vehicles, spewing white steam, slowly drove into the parade ground.

They dragged bizarre metal devices, some resembling bundles of thick iron tubes arranged in parallel, others arranged like honeycomb-shaped launchers, cold and silent.

Major General Gray stood on the command vehicle, raising his hand to make a brief gesture.

"Clear the site."

In the next instant, the world lost its rhythm.

The barrel of the rotary machine gun began to spin rapidly, the "hissing" sound during preheating made one's teeth ache, and then it was completely drowned out.

"Ratatatata—!!!"

That could no longer be called gunfire, but a continuous roar.

The fire flared out as if it were tangible, the barrage became a sweeping metal torrent across the battlefield, tearing through a massive piece of fabric.

Almost simultaneously, the rocket launchers in the rear let out a shrill wail.

Several alchemical war rockets, trailing white streaks, sliced through the air, covering the rear half of the iron plate formation.

Nico watched helplessly as the dense boards simulating a human wave charge were completely flattened in a matter of seconds.

Iron fragments, debris, and frozen remnants were repeatedly smashed in the rain of bullets and icy blasts, the ground thoroughly plowed, erasing any trace of their existence.

The fantasy he had just constructed, that "rushing forward will ensure victory," was crushed at this moment.

This rate of fire...

Even if a mage started chanting, the spell wouldn't be finished before the person was torn to pieces.

The only effect of a human wave tactic against it is making the ground fill up with corpses faster.

Nico's throat tightened, yet this wasn't the end.

The teacups on the viewing platform began to tremble violently, the porcelain clinking with a crisp and ominous sound.

On the distant horizon, billowing black smoke rose, obscuring the already dim sunlight.

Twelve heavy steam tanks roared onto the scene.

"This is the legendary mobile fortress..." Nico murmured, "With this thickness, siege crossbows can't penetrate; on the battlefield, this thing is... invincible."

The tank formation halted.

The turrets slowly rotated, the sound of gears meshing echoed clearly throughout the area.

A target was dragged out a kilometer away, a giant obsidian boulder weighing ten tons, was placed in the center of the test area.

This mineral's hardness rivals that of city walls, usually used only to withstand forbidden curse-level impacts.

Bradley stood next to Nico, his tone still gentle: "Mr. Nico, you were just thinking that hiding behind the city walls is safe, right?"

Nico didn't answer.

"Please watch, this is the young lord's answer."

In the next moment, the world was forcibly flipped open.

"Boom——!!!"

The alchemic main cannon roared, the terrifying recoil caused the several dozen-ton steel behemoth to sink heavily, the dust kicked up by the cannon formed a visible shock ring.

The obsidian boulder, at the moment of contact, seemed to be wiped away by an invisible giant hand.

A small mushroom cloud rose at the explosion's center, leaving only a deep pit with edges in a glass-like molten state, with smoke slowly rising.

The parade ground fell into dead silence.

Even the cheers of the civilians halted.

Nico's fingers trembled uncontrollably.

He always believed that with enough sacrifice, individual martial might could turn any tide in battle.

But facing those twelve dark cannon mouths, he finally bowed his head.

Even if a Peak Knight burned his life... he couldn't withstand three shots.

And the Red Tide Territory had countless such machines.

He turned, looking at the young figure on the high platform, an expression full of complexity.

On the other side, Count Harvey intensely grasped his son Yorn's hand, a near-mad light in his eyes.

"Yorn! You've done well!" He stared at the still-smoking crater, his voice trembling with excitement, "Following Louis was the right choice; our Harvey Family is going to prosper!"

The tank formation did not conclude the parade.

After the steel behemoths slowly drove out of sight, the ground trembled again.

The engineering corps appeared on one side of the parade ground.

The massive bridge-laying vehicles deployed folding steel beams like metallic insects extending their limbs.

The steam shovels' buckets reflected a cold light, and even at an idle crawl, they gave off a sense of terrain nonexistence.

The knowledgeable nobles' faces subtly changed, this meant that the Red Tide Army needed no waits, needed not be slowed by rivers or gorges; warfare was linear before them.

Next came the logistics column.

An endless line of steam trucks slowly passed by, their carriages loaded with field kitchens, and boxes of medical equipment.

People detected the scent of coffee and broth, an introduction was made that it allowed soldiers to have hot meals in the trenches.

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Amongst the VIP seats, Bradley quietly spoke, his tone calm: "War, is about logistics."

He smiled slightly: "Our soldiers can drink hot coffee on the front lines. The enemy... can only gnaw on dry bread."

The subtext was unspoken, the Red Tide Territory could not only fight but was wealthy enough to operate war as an industrial project.

When the last formation returned to position, the entire parade ground fell into a near-reverent silence.

Louis walked to the very front of the platform and began his speech.

The wind tousled his hair, and the sunlight fell on that slightly weary but exceedingly resolute face.

He surveyed the sea of people below, then spoke:

"My father, Duke Calvin, a guardian who devoted his life to the Empire, is dead.

He did not die from illness, but from betrayal, from heartbreak."

A suppressed murmur came from the crowd.

Louis's gaze turned sharp: "In the Southeast Province, what are those heretics veiled in holiness doing? They levy excessive taxes on the civilians in the name of faith.

They seize the farmers' last bits of grain to build opulent churches, they brand resisters as heretics, calling hunger penitence."

His voice gradually rose.

"My father tried to stop all this, attempted to protect the people there. As a result, he was imprisoned, dying with resentment!"

The actual truth mattered not, what mattered was that the people below had clenched their fists.

"The people of the Southeast are starving!" Louis suddenly raised his head, pointing southward, "Our compatriots are bleeding!"

The Cold Iron Longsword was unsheathed, casting a cold gleam in the sunlight.

"Warriors of the Red Tide! We march south, not just for revenge, but for liberation!"

"Break the chains of the Church Court! Bring bread, freedom, and justice to the people of the Southeast!"

Nico stood in the shadows below, listening to this impassioned speech, his mouth involuntarily twitching.

He knew better than anyone, the old Duke was never a benevolent protector.

And this so-called liberation, in essence, was merely a complete armed annexation.

But when he looked at the young and calm figure on the high platform, a sense of indescribable admiration arose in his heart.

Finally, the frenzy of the crowd erupted.

"Down with the Church Court!"

"Liberate the Southeast!"

"Avenge the old Duke!"

Hats were thrown into the air, the shouts becoming a tidal wave.

After seeing those steel and flames with their own eyes, no one doubted the outcome.

The merchants swiftly calculated their profits, the knights longed for military achievements, the Northern Lords reveled, and the civilians were immersed in a sense of imminent honor in saving others.

Among the VIP seats, Count Harvey clutched his son Yorn's hand tightly, the flames in his eyes burning.

"Do you see that?" he whispered, "This is the trend."

He unhesitantly turned to instruct his retainer: "Go tell Steward Bradley, the Harvey Family is donating the first batch of military supplies for free."

On the high platform, Louis's longsword swung down: "All troops advance! March south!"