

Winter 91

Chapter 91: Genius Youth

Just as Sif's cheeks flushed crimson and her ears burned, and she was hurriedly searching for an excuse to explain something, a knock came from the door.

"Report, my lord, the chef has arrived," a knight guardian said, pushing the door open.

Louis turned back and casually said, "Let him in."

Before long, a chef wearing an apron gingerly walked in with a wooden tray: "The rabbit soup is here! It's been stewing for four hours."

This was the rabbit soup Louis had instructed him to stew the night before.

Sif glanced over and immediately perceived that this bowl of soup was out of the ordinary—it looked expensive.

"Put it on the table," Louis just casually commanded, then turned to the guardian and said, "Go find Barnes and have him bring Weir over."

"Yes, my lord," the guardian bowed and left.

Once the room was quiet again, he turned and glanced at Sif, as if suddenly remembering.

"Just now... What were you going to say?"

Sif was once more ignited entirely like a torch, her face instantly turning even redder.

"N-no, nothing!" she quickly lowered her head, her voice so fast it was almost inaudible.

Louis nodded, not thinking much of it, and began immersing himself in the documents on the table.

He read earnestly, his brow furrowed, completely unconcerned with their previous conversation.

Sif finally breathed a sigh of relief, leaning against the edge of the table and taking a step back, feeling her heartbeat finally slow down.

Yet the redness on her ear tips didn't fade easily.

Not long after, footsteps were heard outside the door.

"Report, my lord, Barnes is here."

Soon the door was pushed open, and an old knight stepped into the room, followed by an adolescent boy.

"My lord, as soon as you asked me to bring someone over, I knew it must be to hear about this lad's performance."

Barnes grinned, patting the shoulder of the youth beside him: "This child, Weir, is the most talented apprentice knight I've ever trained.

I've served as a knight instructor for over ten years in the Calvin family, teaching more than two hundred students— I've seen those with talent, the diligent ones, and those from noble birth, but never! Have I met anyone like him."

He lowered his voice, as if discussing some forbidden heavenly secret.

"Weir has, within two months, transformed from a kid who hadn't awakened his bloodline to a high-tier apprentice knight!

This isn't due to divine favor nor a surplus of resources, but purely some talent I still can't perceive and a certain drive.

Several times I've patrolled at night and found him practicing alone with a training sword, covered in injuries yet still training, and the next day standing at the forefront of the lineup."

The young boy listened to his teacher's praise without arrogance, becoming even more reserved.

He stepped forward silently, knelt on one knee, and spoke with almost reverent respect: "My lord Louis."

He raised his head, the fervor in his eyes almost blinding, containing the gaze of faith, gratitude etched into his bones and blood.

Weir knew it was this noble youth before him who bought him and his mother from the slavers, abolished their slave status, extracted them from the mire of fate, and promised them a future.

From that moment on, Louis became the sole sun in his heart.

If enemies approached, he would deflect every blade, every arrow for this lord.

Louis quietly watched Weir kneeling on the ground.

His expression scarcely changed, only nodding, his gaze calm.

Yet he was truly shocked.

This quickly to high-tier apprentice? It's only been two months...

He knew long ago Weir was a "Talent Monster," but witnessing this experience bar rapidly flash forward in green light left him slightly dazed.

However, beyond talent, what caught Louis's attention was Weir's gaze.

That fervor, reverence, even a touch of near-faith.

Since coming to the Northern Territory, he'd gradually become accustomed to such looks.

Those originally destitute natives, fleeing slaves, refugees struggling to survive amidst rubble...

They placed their hopes on him, responding to his goodwill in the most simple, direct manner, willing to give their all for him, even their lives.

Louis gazed at Weir and silently made a judgment in his heart: loyalty... Hmm, probably above ninety, evidently a grateful person.

"Stand up," Louis said, his tone flat.

But Weir, as if receiving some sort of oracle, stood with his spine straight, his whole being seemingly aglow.

"The rabbit soup, it's quite nourishing," Louis casually pointed to the wooden bowl on the table, speaking to Weir, "You drink it."

The soup's color was a near icy-blue, emitting a faint glow like a lake under the Northern Territory night sky, gently rippling with chill.

Barnes glanced over, hesitantly moving closer for a look.

"T-this... my lord, this is...?"

His voice quivered, as if doubting his own eyes.

"Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbit," Louis answered, flipping through documents, his tone breezy.

"T-t-t... It's not appropriate!" Barnes stammered immediately, "This thing, in an auction house, would fetch at least several thousand Gold Coins! How could we let Weir drink it?"

"What's inappropriate about it," Louis didn't look up, "Just make sure he properly thanks me."

"You kid, why are you still standing around? Hurry and thank the lord!" Barnes turned back and smacked Weir, nearly knocking him to his knees, "This is a treasure even I dream of drinking!"

Weir finally reacted, immediately dropping to his knees with a "thud."

"Thank you, my lord! Thank you, my lord! Thank you..." He kowtowed more than ten times in a row, his forehead turning red.

Louis then raised his hand to help him up.

"This stuff is good, but more importantly, you need to show the skill that's worthy of this soup in the future."

Weir raised his head, his tears already unstoppable, nodding as he cried: "My lord! I will definitely achieve it!"

Sif at the side widened her eyes.

She looked at the rabbit soup, then at Weir's excited appearance, and finally at the calm Louis, her face full of astonishment.

She never imagined Louis would share such a precious thing with a youth of humble background.

"Enough chatter," Louis pushed the bowl forward, "Drink while it's hot."

"Yes!"

Weir carefully cupped the wooden bowl, cautiously bringing it to his lips for a deep sip.

Cool yet slightly sweet, as if his entire insides were cleansed by snow water, immediately followed by an intense heat exploding in his chest!

"Um!" His body jolted, pain and surprise flashing in his eyes, nearly losing grip of the bowl.

It felt as if something within him suddenly ignited.

A fiery energy rose from his abdomen, rushing through his veins, swiftly surging towards his limbs!

"Don't move!" Barnes urgently said, "Don't move! Sit cross-legged, close your eyes, follow the breathing method I taught you, make sure to steady your breath, don't let the Fighting Energy rampage!"

Chapter 92: Consecutive Breakthroughs!

Barnes hurriedly kneeled beside Weir and said, "Don't move! Cross your legs, close your eyes, follow the breathing technique I taught you, and stabilize your breath. Don't let the Fighting Energy run wild!"

Heeding the words, Weir endured the severe pain and immediately did as told, sitting cross-legged to begin the breathing technique.

With each breath, the power that had been rampaging through his body gradually started circulating within.

"Very good... feel it, don't resist," Barnes said softly with relief.

Louis stood aside, watching the cross-legged youth.

These Frost-Bearded Tundra Rabbits, he had hunted three in total.

One was kept for himself.

One was given to Lambert, the most powerful person in the Red Tide Territory.

And the other ended up in the hands of the youth before him.

Weir, the most promising rising star in the Red Tide Territory.

As for why not eat all three himself.

Because although the rabbit's medicinal effects are good, its efficacy diminishes very quickly.

The first can make one reborn, the second is just a minor nourishment, and the third is almost a waste.

Louis wasn't the kind of person who wanted "everything," rather than keep it all to himself, he preferred to use it to win hearts and cultivate subordinates.

Faced with choices that offered maximum benefits, he never hesitated.

Compared to brief personal growth, he needed a force he could trust more.

Of course, this carried a great risk. Hopefully, this young man wouldn't disappoint him.

Weir's whole body was red hot, but he still tried hard to control himself, slowly guiding the Fighting Energy within his familiar "return path".

With each breath, the violent energy seemed to be carefully drawn into the bloodstream, transforming into a warm spring that slowly flowed within.

Soon his body quivered slightly.

An almost imperceptible aura rose from his chest and rushed straight to the back of his brain along the spine.

A red halo of Fighting Energy appeared on his body's surface, clearly visible.

Barnes exclaimed loudly, "Has he broken through?!"

Junior Official Knight!

"To this extent... is as expected," Louis nodded slightly, yet couldn't help but feel a touch of comfort.

Weir really hadn't disappointed him, breaking through from Apprentice Knight to Official Knight so quickly.

However, just as everyone thought Weir had absorbed the rabbit soup's essence and would stop the breathing technique.

He didn't move, and his breathing became deeper and longer, his breath continued to flow like a tide.

Everyone felt something was amiss, maybe there was some mistake?

In the next moment, an even denser ripple of Fighting Energy expanded from his body!

Barnes' eyes suddenly widened, "Again... again?!"

Louis's pupils also contracted slightly.

"Intending to break through two tiers at once?! This can't be done by luck alone, kid, don't be greedy!" Barnes shouted.

But Weir didn't heed the external commotion, his Fighting Energy was still surging, the once somewhat immature aura suddenly became as sharp as a blade!

The rhythm of the breathing technique changed accordingly, transitioning from steady to forceful, as if war drums were beating, further driving the power to condense.

The air seemed to churn, wisps of tiny airflow spiraled around him.

Soon, a second halo of Fighting Energy appeared, thicker and steadier than before.

Mid-tier Official Knight!

Barnes was already speechless, "What's going on?! This kid... jumped two tiers!"

Just as he finished speaking, he suddenly realized Louis beside him hadn't said a word.

He turned his head to find Louis still standing with his hands behind his back, composed as usual.

Indeed, the Lord of nobility is truly different, witnessing such a miracle without batting an eye. Barnes thought admiringly.

But at that moment, Louis's nails were almost embedded in his palm.

"To leap two stages..." The shock stirring in his heart far exceeded the calm on the surface.

And Weir before him still had his eyes tightly shut, the breathing technique showing no signs of stopping.

The ascending momentum continued to accumulate slowly, seemingly brewing up an even more astonishing leap.

His face flushed red, washed by the Fighting Energy, beads of sweat oozed from his forehead.

Louis's gaze suddenly focused, he had already guessed the other's intent.

"Could it be... he's aiming to directly advance to High Tier? Does he have a death wish?!"

But just as the momentum was nearing its peak, Weir's body suddenly shook, the Fighting Energy fluctuation abruptly ceased.

No breakthrough, but he also didn't get caught in a backlash.

He slowly opened his eyes, a trace of clarity... and slight regret emerged in his gaze.

"A little bit short," he murmured softly, "What a pity, just short by a bit."

For a moment, the office was so quiet that even the sound of the wind ceased.

Barnes stood dazed, his mouth half open, as if struck by lightning.

And Louis standing beside him still wore an imperturbable expression, as if everything was under control.

Only, his lips twitched slightly.

And inside, he was already cursing.

He himself, from High-tier Apprentice Knight, struggled, practiced, battled arduously, spending nearly ten years to cross those thresholds to become a formal mid-tier knight.

And this kid?

Drank a bowl of soup, crossed legs, uh-hummed a little.

Directly, thundered through two tiers!

And still looking regretful?!

Louis took a deep breath, silently turned his head to look at the ceiling, suddenly feeling somewhat tired.

"Really, comparing yourself to others can be frustrating." He gritted his teeth hard in his heart.

Weir opened his eyes, the power within still felt like surging tides, but the excitement within was even more overwhelming.

He opened his mouth towards Louis, as if wanting to say something, but when the words reached his mouth, he couldn't express them.

Wanting to express gratitude, loyalty, to voice out this unimaginable excitement well.

But due to limited cultural level, he finally only squeezed out, "Sir, I, I will definitely... definitely..."

Then he got stuck.

Louis looked at him in this state, his lips curled, "Alright, you better save some brainpower."

Then he paused, his tone shifting, "Starting from tomorrow, besides continuing the basic training with Barnes, stay by my side as my guardian knight."

"Gua-guardian knight..." Weir's eyes widened, his brain instantly short-circuited.

That was something he had fantasized numerous times in his dreams.

He didn't expect that this dream would come true today just like that.

Being able to follow this lord personally, becoming his close strength, traversing battlefields, witnessing each glory...

For a moment, he didn't know what to do, only knelt down again with a thud, his head almost touching the ground.

"Hey, stop kowtowing." Louis said disdainfully, "I won't accept kowtowing bugs as my protector, keep kowtowing and you can go be a stable boy."

Weir froze, instantly not daring to move, but his entire face still flushed, yet his eyes were shining.

He stood up, his voice trembling, "I...I definitely won't disappoint you!"

Louis patted his shoulder, "Hope you can do it."

Weir nodded repeatedly, expressing his resolve.

Chapter 93: Red Rock Warehouse

The midday sun slanted down, and a gentle breeze carried a hint of chill.

Louis draped a dark grey wolfskin cape over his shoulders, a sword at his waist, riding along the dirt path.

Behind him followed several guards, all armed and armored, silent without a word.

In the ranks of the guard knights, the most eye-catching was not the few burly Elite Knights but rather a slightly immature figure.

That was Weir, clad in a not-so-fitting knight's light armor, with a shorter Knight's Sword at his waist.

Despite his body not being fully grown, riding on that sturdy horse gave the impression of "a child riding a big horse."

Yet, he sat steadily, without a hint of wobbling, indicating he had put in considerable effort into his horsemanship.

The only jarring thing was probably his face, trying hard to maintain a stern, yet still somewhat childish expression.

He was trying hard to put on a face that said, "I'm already a protector of the great Lord."

Yes, clearly posing for coolness.

Louis passed by him, glancing sideways, almost unable to hold back a laugh.

Just then, a strong smell of smoked fish hit them; they were passing by a smoked fish workshop.

Within the half-open wooden shed, cooking smoke swirled, and the fish hung on iron hooks slowly changed color; the aroma wafted through the air.

A woman in a coarse apron came out of the shed and happened to see Weir riding by.

That was Weir's mother; her face was still damp with sweat, but her eyes were filled with joy upon seeing Weir.

"Oh, it's Weir!" She waved her hand, her eyes turned into crescent moons, "The Lord is here too!"

Louis nodded gently in acknowledgment.

And Weir? Pretending not to hear, he sat up straighter, staring stiffly ahead, as if saying, "I'm currently the Lord's protector, on duty, can't get distracted."

The next second, "smack."

Louis raised a hand, lightly swatting Weir on the back of the head, "You little rascal, greet your mother."

"I, I..." Weir stood there stunned, his face instantly flushed red.

"Quickly." Louis urged.

"Yes!" Weir hurriedly turned his head, speaking a bit loudly, "Mom! I'm with the Lord, protecting him!"

He waved to his mother, not daring to lift his eyes.

The woman in the workshop beamed with a smile, "Yes, yes, protect the Lord well, and I'll make you some fish soup tonight!"

"Mom! ...Stop it..."

"Hahaha."

A few guards couldn't hold it any longer and burst into laughter.

Weir completely lost his composure, his entire face turning red to the roots of his ears, his neck almost changing color too.

He lowered his head, muttering something softly, like a little fox with bristling fur.

Louis also stifled a laugh, shaking his head as he turned his horse to continue forward.

The purpose of this trip was to inspect the main grain storage of Red Tide Territory, the Red Rock Warehouse.

It was a natural cave converted into an underground granary, close to a mountain stream, its location hidden, maintaining stable low temperatures and humidity year-round, practically a natural cold storage.

The geographical location was personally chosen by Louis.

The design draft was roughly sketched by him, listing a bunch of requirements like "must be low temperature," "rodent-proof," "pay attention to ventilation."

Then, he confidently handed over the daunting task to Bradley.

A typical pass-the-buck type of leadership.

But Bradley was the kind of person who, when given a piece of land, could build a granary and two underground rooms with ease.

Otherwise, he wouldn't have reached such a high position in the Calvin Clan.

This task was more than manageable for him.

Of course, Louis made a point to visit the site once before heading out for battle, casually strolling around.

He offered quite a few suggestions, such as "removable wooden racks inside the granary," "keep dry and wet areas separate," and so on.

Then Louis patted his backside and went off to the battlefield.

Now that he's back, it's time to see the quality of this "entrusted to Bradley under my guidance" underground granary.

"Ahead is the Red Rock Warehouse." One of the knights rode forward, pointing to the end of the cliff.

Following that direction, a natural rock face had been finely polished, still retaining its original ruggedness, yet a deeper structure could be seen hidden behind.

The overall environment was quiet, with moderate humidity, and exceptionally hidden, making finding it a tough task unless the location was known in advance.

This rock cave at the mountain's base was indeed like the Daily Intelligence System suggested, a natural constant temperature storage place.

At the entrance stood five or six Red Tide Knights and a dozen soldiers, ensuring absolute security here.

Upon seeing Louis and the others, the guards straightened up, saluting solemnly, "Lord!"

"Thank you for your hard work." Louis replied briefly, dismounting, and headed towards the entrance of the warehouse.

In front of the entrance, a person stood respectfully, awaiting Louis's arrival.

A black cloak lined with dark green, slightly curly silver hair, leaning on an ebony cane.

He was Bradley, now the most trusted elder in Red Tide Territory by Louis and the person in charge of internal affairs there.

"Your Excellency." The old man slightly bowed, his tone respectful, "The Red Rock Warehouse is ready, please follow me."

Louis nodded and followed Bradley into the granary.

Entering inside, they were greeted by cool and dry air.

The floor was laid with moisture-proof stone bricks, the sections were clearly divided, and everything was neatly arranged.

Bradley led the way while introducing: "The main warehouse is divided into three chambers: the grain storage, smoked fish storage, meat cold room, and dry goods herb storage."

He lightly pointed at the roof's ventilation hole position: "According to your suggestion, each storage is equipped with ventilation shafts and rodent-proof boards, while the smoke chamber has a simple diversion system installed to disperse smoke and moisture."

"The grains, fish, and meats are stacked on categorized racks. We designed detachable wooden racks to save space as you suggested, and a double-door buffer design to prevent sudden temperature changes..."

Louis surveyed the surroundings, noticing the warehouse was clean and tidy, with a reasonable structure, not a trace of mildew or dust even in the corners.

Several design details, like the small wheel rails for easy transport, were ideas he had casually mentioned before.

Now all were implemented precisely

"Very well done." Louis softly praised, conveying genuine approval.

Bradley gave a slight bow, neither arrogant nor humble, as if this result was only to be expected: "Thank you for your praise, my Lord; it's my duty."

As they spoke, Bradley pushed open a warehouse door, inviting everyone inside.

Cool and dry air rushed over them, the floor laid with moisture-proof stone bricks, everything neat and orderly.

Guardians lit petroleum lamps, illuminating the warehouse clearly.

Seeing everything in the warehouse, Weir's eyes brightened, unable to hold back an exclamation, "So...so much grain?"

He remembered how his mother was worried if the Lord had prepared enough, worried whether they would have enough to eat in winter, and had secretly said to eat less to lighten the Lord's burden.

It seems now she shouldn't need to worry anymore.

Indeed, the Lord remains so reliable.

Chapter 94: Not Enough Food

Bradley ignored the young knight's exclamations and took out a notebook, opening it to a page and introducing:

"The current food reserves are as follows: 170 tons of rye, 70 tons of potatoes, 20 tons of turnips...

If distributed rationally, this batch of staple food is enough to feed 2,000 people for three to four months."

Louis slowly scanned the orderly arranged sacks of grain in the warehouse, with clear markings on the wooden boxes and a reasonable distribution of layers, all stacked proportionately, with gaps for moisture and rodent prevention.

He praised, "Very good."

Bradley continued to lead the way, pushing open the door of the adjacent warehouse.

A rush of smoky aroma with a roasted scent hit him.

"Regarding smoked fish, this season's production is 12 tons, along with another 10 tons of fresh fish stored in ice pits to preserve." He introduced while walking, "To increase the winter food stock, we made our fishing nets denser. During the last wave of fish migration in autumn, we should be able to catch quite a bit more."

Louis nodded.

Initially, to maintain sustainable fishery, he had instructed to use nets with large holes to let the small fish go.

But given the current special circumstances, to handle emergencies, he personally approved to change the net holes to be smaller for intensive fishing to maximize the harvest.

Further inside was a small room filled with cured meats and dried herbs.

The space was not large, yet it was organized neatly.

Wild game was hung on the wall, and farmed meat cuts were placed on shelves.

In the corner, there were several bundles of dried herbs, not a lot, but enough for emergencies.

"These are from the rounds of hunting and slaughtering before autumn." Bradley introduced, "Not much, but can be quite useful."

After making a round, they retraced their steps through the warehouses and finally returned to the exit of the main warehouse.

Bradley opened his portable notebook, organizing his records with his head down, while summarizing in a soft voice:

"Combining staple grains, smoked fish, cured meats, and miscellaneous herbs, the current stock is as follows:

tons of rye, 70 tons of potatoes, 20 tons of turnips, for staple food use;

tons of smoked fish, 10 tons of fresh fish, with processing ongoing;

About 4 tons of cured meats and wild game, some still air-drying;

Although herbs are few, they are barely sufficient and can treat several common cold ailments accordingly."

He paused slightly, speaking steadily: "If we follow a standard of two pounds of grain per day, distributing rationally, rotating, and supplementing with a labor-for-grain policy,

it can support the current population of over 2,000 in Red Tide Territory, barely making it through the four-month-long winter.

However, if we encounter extreme cold, snow-blocked roads, or external disasters, it will become tight. The coming months require strict control over entries and consumption."

Louis listened quietly, not speaking immediately, knowing Bradley was not wrong.

The food... is indeed "enough."

But this "enough" is supported by frugality, by system, and by human will.

Should anything go wrong in any of these links, even just a sudden winter epidemic, or the spring coming late by a few days, the little surplus in the warehouse could be consumed clean in a matter of weeks.

Red Tide Territory, located in the southern part of Northern Territory, is somewhat better off than the true extreme cold regions, but the winter cannot be underestimated.

From early December to the end of March the following year, a whole four-month-long permafrost period awaits, with low temperatures, and snowstorms average once or twice a week, snow accumulation reaching up to three meters. The coastline will also enter a fully frozen period, lasting at least one to two months.

No matter how full the warehouse is, it cannot guarantee to withstand this period's storms, delays, and various "what ifs."

And this is already the best situation the Red Tide Territory, and even the entire Northern Territory, could achieve to face the harsh winter by the year's end.

He could not demand more of the people. They had already been frugal and hardworking enough.

Moreover, Bradley's accounts only considered the existing population of 2,500 in Red Tide Territory.

There are more people waiting to be accommodated in the newly acquired territory of over a thousand square kilometers.

Most of those people are refugees displaced by war and can't possibly have any surplus food for wintering.

If relief is not provided, it is almost predictable that by the end of this winter, they will one by one die in the snow, unable to find even their bones.

"Even with the newly supported food from father... it's actually just a little, not enough to save those people."

Louis silently calculated, his eyes darkening slightly.

The food supported by the Calvin Clan, including black rice, legumes, dry wheat flour, and a bit of salted meat, totaled less than 100 tons.

After deducting wastage on the long journey and storage losses along the way, what truly ends up in the warehouse might only be seventy to eighty tons.

These supplies can somewhat sustain a few hundred people.

But for those thousands waiting for food to survive the winter, it's merely a drop in the ocean.

His fingers lightly tapped the edge of the warehouse door, pondering for a long time.

He understood that there were, in fact, only two choices before him.

One was to give up on the refugees in that new territory.

Wait till spring next year to buy slaves from the South, to develop and build at a lower cost, slowly turning the land into one's truly own fiefdom.

This path... is the correct one.

As long as he closed his eyes and didn't look at those people shivering in hunger and cold, everything would fall into place.

But Louis couldn't do it.

His gaze fell to the distant valley, as if seeing those shabby figures kneeling and begging in the snow, he couldn't bear it.

But the limit of food storage had been reached, and field gathering wouldn't make it in time.

Only one method truly could fill the gap — buying food, which is the second choice.

He is currently the Calvin Clan's agent in the Northern Territory, having the right to mobilize all the resources and trade channels of the business associations.

Taking this path, the cost of buying food would also be significantly lower than ordinary nobility.

"Bradley."

The old man stepped forward immediately, slightly bowing: "Yes."

Louis ordered, "Arrange for a group to buy food directly through the Calvin Family's commercial channels."

Surprise flickered in Bradley's eyes, then he lowered his head to respond, "Understood, but... regarding funds..."

"Don't worry about money." Louis said calmly.

The rewards exchanged from wartime merits, the revenue from extracted and sold Demon Marrow, and the various miscellaneous earnings, altogether, he now held cash exceeding 20,000 gold coins.

In other words, he was almost "so poor that he only had money left."

But that's just right, because this money should be spent on the most critical place.

Even if not lavishly, saving a bit is enough to buy people hope for a winter.

So this matter, he not only could do, but also must do it cleanly and efficiently.

"Buy for me — the most durable for storage, the most filling, the cheapest yet most reliable." He locked eyes with Bradley, speaking smoothly and without haste, "The most important thing is, it must be fast, before winter arrives."

Bradley nodded solemnly, "Understood."

Chapter 95: Multiple Contingency Plans

Despite the fact that the Calvin Commerce Association's grain procurement is advancing splendidly.

In a few days, carts will come from the South, delivering heavy sacks of grain into the Red Tide Territory.

But Louis is very clear in his heart that relying solely on purchasing grain is far from dependable.

This is ultimately just a stopgap measure.

The winters in the Northern Territory are unrelenting, and to truly survive, relying solely on external support won't work.

In case the snowline advances, transportation is obstructed, or enemies take advantage of the situation...

There are too many variables, so he doesn't dare pin all his hopes on the 'outside.'

"We must plan ahead and prepare in multiple ways."

Thus, a few days later, he proposed two emergency plans to slightly increase food supply within the Red Tide Territory.

The first is to utilize the geothermal hot spring areas within the Red Tide Territory to build a 'mini greenhouse' system.

Though the Red Tide Territory is located in the icy snowfields of the Northern Territory, it does have a few rare hot spring spots.

These places have perennial mist, melting even the snow on the ground in winter, with ground temperatures remaining above zero degrees even in winter.

Perhaps for others, these are just a few 'curious hot water pits.'

But in Louis's eyes, these are the most precious farming resources in the entire territory.

He stood before a densely marked map and circled a few areas, placing these mini greenhouses near these hot springs.

After detailed design work, he entrusted this task to Mick, the agriculture officer.

"Mobilize manpower and use local materials to build a few first."

Mike widened his eyes, although he had no idea about the reason behind Louis's actions or whether it would work.

However, he didn't object at all, simply nodding emphatically, as he always had complete faith in Louis's words.

The structure of the mini greenhouse designed by Louis is not complex.

Using thick wooden beams to prop up arch-shaped frameworks, covered with animal hides and thick burlap, then sealed tightly with mud.

The hot spring water is piped inside, forming a circulating hot air corridor.

Without needing a stove, the temperature inside the greenhouse can be maintained above the growth line for crops.

Thus, even if it's a blizzard outside, the inside can remain as warm as spring.

Of course, what to plant is also crucial.

"We don't seek high yield, only speed," Louis's requirements were exceedingly clear.

After careful selection from the seed bank, the first batch to be planted included the following three crops:

Fast-growing lettuce, which can be harvested in just twenty days, may taste bland but grows quickly and provides sustenance, making it the first choice for the commoners' staple food.

Winter radish, with a slightly longer maturity period, but it excels in high yield and long preservation. It's suitable for soups, pickling, and porridge, offering good nutrition.

Ground dragon grass, usable for both food and medicine, with sturdy rhizomes not only usable for medicine but also combinable with grains to make a pot of warming medicinal porridge, especially important for children and the elderly.

Upon receiving Louis's orders, the craftsmen began building by his drawings, clanging beside the hot springs.

A few days later, the first batch of greenhouses was ready near the hot springs.

A few low huts stood quietly amidst the steaming water vapor, in the geothermal area by the hot springs.

The wooden frames were sturdy, and the tops were covered with animal hides and burlap, shielding from the cool breeze of early autumn.

Hot spring water flowed slowly along the channels, bringing the warmth from underground into the greenhouse.

Louis lifted the covering and took a glance inside.

Rows of fast-growing lettuce seedlings had quietly pushed through the soil, revealing moist green buds that hinted at vigorous life in the gray-brown earth.

Seeing Louis come to inspect, Mike ran over with unstoppable joy on his face.

"Lord! They've sprouted, really sprouted! Your method truly works!"

He trembled with excitement, like a child planting for the first time and seeing their seeds germinate.

Louis nodded: "Continue building."

He spoke calmly, as if this outcome was entirely expected.

"Yes!" Mike nodded repeatedly, "I'll arrange for more manpower immediately, as many as we can plant!"

Following behind, Weir, who was never much for farming, widened his eyes in astonishment at the sight of the green buds emerging from the soil.

"This, can this actually grow? Although it hasn't snowed yet, isn't the ground already cold?"

"The hot spring water is underneath," Louis glanced at him, "As long as the ground is covered, the heat won't escape, the warmth in the soil allows for planting."

Is it really possible to do this?

Weir opened his mouth, but ultimately said nothing, staring at his lord with a fiery gaze.

The great sun warms the earth, allowing it to be cultivated.

Louis noticed his gaze and smiled gently: "Let's go, we'll have a look at the fishing."

From the greenhouses to the dock, the temperature was mildly cool, but the wind was gentle, vapor mingling at the surface, carrying a subtle scent of mud and fish in the air.

Early autumn had not yet frozen the rivers, providing the last window for fish migration.

Now, the fishery in the Red Tide Territory was already highly developed.

Rows of wooden stakes were erected on the dock, with several newly built large ships docked at the side, sails still bearing the creases of fresh cutting.

On the water, an entire fleet of fishing boats was busily working in an orderly fashion.

Over a dozen fishing boats, circled together, with nets descending slowly underwater, oars slicing through the water, creating waves.

The fishermen on the boats cooperated seamlessly.

They rowed to drive the fish while simultaneously tightening the nets, the thick ropes creaking through the water, sounding like some wild beast's mouth slowly closing.

Suddenly! The water erupted!

Silver-white fish bodies were thrown high into the air, glistening enticingly under the sun!

"The fish are up!!"

"Quick, haul in! Haul in!!"

The fishermen shouted in unison, their movements on the boats turned urgent yet orderly.

The water surface boiled, silver glints everywhere, as a heavy net was pulled up, causing the boat to tilt slightly.

This sight captivated Louis.

Just then, a familiar voice came from the dock: "Lord! You're here! Without any notice."

Luke ran over with a beaming smile, his face full of pride and sycophancy.

"The first catch today is at least over two thousand fish!" He said, gesturing wildly to indicate the fish's size, his eyes full of light, "This fish migration is a great harvest!"

Louis looked at the face almost splitting from smiling and just nodded lightly: "Good work, Luke."

"It's all thanks to your wise arrangements!" Luke immediately straightened his back, his tone brimming with pride, "If you hadn't let us modify the nets beforehand, we couldn't have caught so many! Now there's no worry about food and drink for winter."

"Enough of the flattery, just speak the truth."

Luke chuckled, quickly straightening his posture: "Yes, yes! Whatever instructions you have, Lord! I'll complete them one hundred percent!"

"Hmm." Louis looked at the unfrozen waterways not far away, "Today, I want you to take some people and try to set up a batch of simple winter fisheries."

Chapter 96: A Human Tragedy

"Winter... fishing ground?" Luke was taken aback, quickly understanding, "You mean ice fishing? We usually do that."

"Something like that." Louis nodded, "But I have a few improvements to make."

He took out a map, pointing to several tributaries on it, carefully choosing his words as he shared his ideas:

"Those areas with lower terrain, slower water flow, and slower freezing speeds can be prioritized.

First, chisel an ice hole, then reinforce the edges with thick planks and stones to prevent collapse.

Next, set a net under the ice and use small fish and minced meat as bait to create a fishing hole, then establish a fishermen rotation, fishing once each morning and evening.

You can also dig drainage ditches to direct hot spring runoff or geothermal water. Any warmth in the water helps, so the fish don't freeze to death.

Of course, these are just my ideas, and the specific operation is up to you. You don't have to follow exactly what I say, as long as you can catch more fish."

"Yes! I'll do my best!" Luke patted his chest, "If this works out, there won't be a shortage of meat in Red Tide Territory this winter!"

"You're exaggerating, but even if we catch only a few dozen pounds a day, it's better than nothing." Louis replied coldly.

Luke responded and left, quickly sketching something in his notebook while muttering to himself, "The master is truly a genius."

Although the first snow had yet to fall, the winter food stockpile battle in Red Tide Territory had already entered its second phase.

.....

The sky was oppressively gray, and the wind howled through the gaps in the ruined rooftops, stirring up a layer of charred ashes on the ground.

Ian knelt in a dilapidated house, holding the unconscious Mia in his arms, his expression despairing.

The girl's small face was burning hot, her lips already cracked, and her eyelashes trembled lightly in the wind, like withered leaves in late autumn.

"Wake up... Mia, you have to wake up..."

Ian wiped her forehead with his sleeve, being so gentle as if afraid that any force would erase her from this world.

But Mia showed no response, her breath growing weaker by the moment.

Ian, in his futile efforts, lowered his head, burying his face in his daughter's shoulder, letting out a deeply suppressed sob.

But no one responded to him.

This place was once the village where their ancestors had lived for generations.

Two months ago, one could still hear the laughter of children by the stream, wives chatting cheerfully by the well while doing laundry, and men busy with wooden boards repairing houses for winter.

Ian's home was at the village entrance, not too big or small, with a virtuous wife and an adorable little daughter, Mia.

He never thought that everything would be gone in an instant.

The first attack was two months ago, when the Snow Swearers rode warhorses down the mountain pass, like an avalanche coming out of nowhere.

There were no horns, no warnings.

The men didn't even have time to grab their axes before they fell in pools of blood.

The women and children didn't have time to escape and were dragged into the sea of flames.

That day, Ian happened to be chopping wood in the back mountain, and by the time he returned, the village had already turned into a sea of red flames.

He only managed to rush into his house and carry out his daughter, who was hiding in the corner of a room.

He couldn't find his wife, nor did he see her body; he only found her apron and shoes by the shattered stove.

He had to take his daughter into the back mountain and hide in the woods for three days, surviving on spring water and tree bark.

A few days later, they returned to the village with other survivors.

The village had been completely looted.

The bodies had already decayed, some dragged away by wild animals, the warehouses emptied, even the well water shining with an oily, putrid gleam.

Someone tried to take a sip and never woke up the next day.

Ian covered that well, sealing it with rubble, not daring to let Mia near it even by a step.

Holding Mia, he searched house by house.

Every remaining mud house he meticulously searched, looking for anything edible, usable, or burnable.

Even just a piece of not completely moldy hard bread, a torn piece of animal skin.

At that time, he had only one thought: as long as Mia survived.

He cleared out a small wooden house in the back, nailing two large wooden boards horizontally where the door had burned down.

The roof was leaky, so he climbed up and patched it with thick layers of burlap and straw.

In the corner were moldy grains; he carefully sifted them clean, boiled them into porridge, and fed her mouthful by mouthful.

Every day, he had to go out to gather firewood, find wild vegetables, and turn over the muddy ground, hoping to find a not completely rotten turnip or catch a wild rabbit.

At first, things were still alright; Mia, though weak, could open her eyes, smile, and even make little jokes: "Dad, you stole the little mouse's meal again, it's going to be angry."

But two nights ago, she suddenly developed a high fever.

She kept shivering yet complained of feeling cold, her lips pale, her forehead burning hot.

Ian panicked, stuffing everything burnable into the stove, even placing his outer coat into the bedding.

He fed her herbal decoctions and small bits of dry food.

But nothing worked; Mia grew weaker by the day, spoke less and less, and her eyes wouldn't open.

Just a while ago, Old Eun made a special trip to visit.

He was one of the few elders who survived in the village, highly respected.

He bent over as he entered, glanced at the child on the bed, then looked at Ian, "She won't make it."

Ian said nothing, only tightened his grip on his daughter's hand.

Old Eun took a few steps closer and sighed, "This burning can't be saved... If you drag it out, you'll also drain yourself."

He pointed outside, "That little river out back hasn't frozen."

Ian raised his head, his pupils constricting instantly, "What are you trying to say?"

"Let her go, it'll be a release, and she'll suffer less," Old Eun said.

The air suddenly turned as cold as frozen snow.

"Say that again." Ian's voice was as hoarse as sandpaper.

Old Eun tried to persuade further, "Ian, be realistic! If she were awake, she wouldn't want you to... even risk your life..."

"Get out." Ian stood up, eyes devoid of human warmth, "Leave now."

Old Eun sighed, shrinking as he retreated.

The moment the door closed, the room returned to its deathly silence, with only the crackling sound of the fire and the girl's intermittent breathing.

Ian sat by the bed, holding Mia, carefully pressing her burning forehead against his chest.

She was so hot, as if she could burst into ashes at any moment.

He was helpless; he truly had no solution left.

The firewood was nearly gone, the clean water was running out.

Ian dared not close his eyes, dared not sleep, just hugging her repeatedly in his heart saying, "Hold on... just a bit longer... just a bit more..."

At this moment, the distant sound of hoofbeats suddenly emerged.

"Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop..."

"Could it be those bandits again?"

Ian stiffened all over, his breath caught in his throat, his eyes crazily scanning for any escape route.

How to escape now? With what?

He was barely holding on, and Mia was still burning with fever, unable to even walk.

Ian clenched his teeth, his fingers reaching toward the firewood knife beside the stove, his eyes glued to the door.

Chapter 97: The Camp

The door was pushed open, and a boot stepped into the room.

"Ahhhhh!!"

Ian rushed forward and raised the firewood knife to chop!

But before he could strike, the newcomer easily caught it with a hand.

With a click, the firewood knife was snatched away with one hand.

Ian was stunned.

The visitor was not the bandit he imagined.

He was dressed in metal armor, with an emblem of a crimson sun on his chest.

"You are..."

Before Ian could react, the knight had already tossed the firewood knife aside and quickly walked towards the bed, looking at the huddled little girl.

He frowned, took off his gloves, and tentatively touched Mia's forehead.

"High fever."

His tone was steady, yet it felt like a decree. Without another word, he bent down to pick up the girl.

"What are you doing? Put her down!" Ian instinctively tried to snatch her back but was stopped by the other's hand.

The man said firmly, "I am a knight from the Red Tide Territory, here to save lives. There's a healer nearby; your child is still in time."

As he spoke, he had already turned and was heading out the door.

Ian was stunned.

Red Tide Territory? Rescue? Healer?

He couldn't quite grasp what the knight was saying, his mind still in chaos.

But he clearly heard those four words: "Still in time."

Those were the most beautiful words he had heard in months.

So Ian let go of the knight's arm.

The knight said nothing more, just carried the little girl in his arms, hurried out the door, mounted his horse, and galloped away to the west.

Ian was stunned for a moment, then suddenly reacted and dashed out the door barefoot.

He ran desperately in the direction the knight left, with the earth scraping his soles, rough soil leaving streaks of blood.

But the knight rode too fast; within moments, he disappeared into the forest, not even a shadow to be seen.

"Mia!" he shouted, stumbling as he chased.

There was no response, only the howling of the wind.

Ian didn't know what else he could do, only that he had to pursue, just to confirm that the knight wasn't a mirage.

Even if it's just...

To give himself a reason to go on living.

He could only keep running in that direction.

His breathing was like rust scraping inside his chest, every step as if on burning iron.

Yet he dared not stop.

After almost two hours of running, something finally appeared in front of him.

It was a campsite.

Ian was stunned.

This place... he'd been here before.

Before the war, it was this small village where he, as a carpenter, had come to repair houses.

But now, the village was no more, the place was filled with collapsed houses, charred wooden beams, with ax marks and arrows on the scorched walls.

It seemed like this place had also been attacked by the Snow Swearers.

But unlike his own village, amidst the ruins sprouted a cluster of tents, campfires illuminating the night, with smoke rising and figures bustling about.

He couldn't believe his eyes.

The air was filled with the warm aroma of porridge, people holding bowls, sitting by the fire blowing gently, faces full of contentment.

Soldiers patrolled, children peeked out from tents, wounded lay wrapped in bandages in corners.

And healers in clean robes bent over the wounded, carefully bandaging them.

The tents weren't new, but they were sturdy, dry, and free of mustiness.

The porridge was plain grain gruel but warm, fragrant, enough to fill the stomach.

Compared to past days, this was paradise.

The most striking sight was a high flag in the center of the camp.

A crimson flag fluttered in the wind, with a golden sun emblazoned in the center.

Ian soon found where his daughter was.

Not because of any great sense of direction, but because the place was surrounded by so many people, the noise was so great, he almost instinctively rushed over.

There was the largest tent, the curtain half-lifted, surrounded by a circle of equally ragged refugees, anxious expressions, some weeping softly, others just biting their lips in silence.

Several healers in white robes moved busily inside, their hands smelling of blood and herbs.

The injured, most like him, were ragged refugees, tormented survivors.

He even recognized a few familiar faces, some with bandages on their legs, others with wounds on their faces.

Then he saw his daughter.

Amongst a heap of herbs and draperies, a small figure lay on a makeshift wooden bed, her face pale, breathing faintly.

Beside her, a healer carefully applied herbal paste to her forehead, the green ointment exuding a pungent bitterness, but also a bit of reassuring fragrance.

Ian almost collapsed beside the healer, his voice trembling like a broken bellows, "Can she... be saved?"

The healer didn't even look up, continuing to work, "Yes, she can be saved; the fever isn't too deep, it's already lowered a bit. It's mostly up to her to hold on, but her chances are good."

Those few words pulled Ian back from the edge of a cliff.

His eyes burned, his body went limp, and he knelt down, head to the ground ready to bow.

But before he could, a hand grabbed his arm, roughly dragging him to the side.

"Don't block the way, there's a line behind you!" The voice was not loud but laced with impatience.

Ian could only be pulled aside, but he kept muttering "thank you"

Tears streamed down.

He couldn't remember how long it had been since he last cried.

But at this moment, he finally dared to weep.

The hope of his daughter surviving... it truly came.

So Ian stayed by Mia's side an entire night.

He never left the tent, just squatting by her bed, eyes fixed unwaveringly on her face.

Her complexion no longer seemed so pale, and the heat on her forehead had decreased somewhat. Although still in a deep sleep, her breathing stabilized.

His heart was like being slowly lifted from hell.

"Much better..." Ian muttered, saying it for himself.

Outside the tent, the sky was already turning pale; dawn was near.

Someone came in from outside—a young boy holding a wooden bowl, bearing the Red Tide Territory's red armband.

He saw Ian hadn't left all night and said nothing, just placed the bowl of hot porridge by his side.

"Just cooked, while it's still hot." The boy left those words and went busy elsewhere.

Ian blankly looked at the bowl of porridge.

The bowl was wooden, the porridge without meat, just a few grains, some unknown wild vegetables, and a few yellowing beans, with a light oily sheen floating on the surface.

But after taking a sip, the faint aroma rushed straight to his nose.

The warm porridge slid down his throat, his stomach tingling with a long-lost warmth, almost causing him to choked with emotion.

He lowered his head, drinking the not particularly tasty porridge, while tears trickled down, dropping into the bowl.

Chapter 98: The New Lord

"Ian?"

Upon hearing someone call him, Ian lifted his head and saw a man who seemed vaguely familiar standing at the entrance of the tent, cautiously waving at him while holding a bowl of porridge.

It was Aik, a young man from their village. They weren't very close, but often met.

In this unfamiliar camp, encountering someone he recognized felt like meeting an old friend in a foreign land.

"Ian? You survived too!" Aik's tone was much warmer than usual.

He seemed more spirited than Ian imagined, looking well, and though his clothes were somewhat tattered, he appeared more composed than Ian's disheveled state.

"You're here too?" Ian was a bit surprised.

"Lucky me." Aik sat beside him. "Recently escaped to the mountains and nearly froze. If it weren't for the lords of the Red Tide Territory finding me, I'd probably be nothing but bones now."

"The lords of the Red Tide Territory?" Ian looked at him, his eyes full of questions.

"It's them!" Aik's eyes lit up, his voice almost flying, "Haven't you heard? We have a new lord now! He's called—Louis Calvin."

"Calvin..." Ian murmured, repeating the name.

"Yes, that's him!" Aik's voice carried a touch of reverence, "I was previously escaping in the mountains with a few others."

They sent people into the mountains to find us, carried us down, fed us porridge, gave us medicine, and even provided a temporary identity card, saying if we work, we'd receive food."

He spoke proudly, as if recounting a glorious event, his eyes full of light.

"The new lord isn't like Baron Merrick, the type of nobility that indulges in luxury in the castle, eats meat, drinks wine, and picks concubines.

This Lord Calvin, he's different—he sent many physicians, soldiers, and stewards here. We have food and drink, even children and elders can live in tents.

He even said he would build wells and houses... He's no ordinary lord; he's like a Dragon Ancestor Envoy descended to earth!"

Ian listened quietly, his gaze somewhat dazed.

He looked at his daughter, whom he guarded day and night, and thought of those former nobles who treated refugees like grass, his heart heavy.

He had never met this young lord named Calvin, not even known what he looked like.

Yet, the people he sent rescued Mia, rescued him, and rescued so many others.

In this world, already in shambles, he unexpectedly instilled a new hope.

"It really feels different." Ian murmured softly, his voice so light that even Aik couldn't hear.

If this lord truly accepts them, if he is willing...

Then Ian will surely follow him.

Even if the work given to him is hard and exhausting, as long as his daughter survives, he will do anything.

Fortunately, his wish was soon fulfilled.

By noon, an officer dressed in a Red Tide Territory uniform stepped into the tent.

The man carried no weapons, nor was he in a rush, but calmly carried pen and paper, interviewing people one by one.

He approached Ian and nodded slightly, "May I ask your name and village of origin?"

"Ian, from White Stone Village." He instinctively answered, his eyes still cautious.

"Here, we are gathering refugees, requiring identity registration. We can provide food and shelter, but it needs to be exchanged with labor. Is there anything you're skilled at?"

Ian hesitated a moment, "I used to be a carpenter, can make furniture, repair houses."

Upon hearing this, the officer nodded, his tone becoming more earnest, "Very well, those with expertise will be given priority for accommodation and later may apply for a settlement quota."

Then he handed Ian a full set of supplies:

A number card painted red, marked with his new number;

A set of gray thermal underwear, styled like old military wear, homemade but clean and sturdy;

A wooden bowl wrapped in coarse burlap, along with a worn but sun-dried blanket;

He noticed Ian was barefoot, hesitated for a few seconds, then pulled out from his bag a pair of somewhat dirty old military boots and handed them to him: "Make do with these."

Ian took the boots, his fingertips trembled, his voice somewhat hoarse, "Thank you."

"You've been assigned to the workshop area number three; gather early tomorrow with the craftsman team to build houses.

No need to worry about food scarcity; meals are arranged three times a day."

After saying this, the officer turned to continue with the next refugee, while Ian lowered his head, staring at the items in his hands, touching each one, as if afraid they might disappear suddenly.

That night, Ian, as usual, watched over his daughter, spooning porridge to her mouth.

At some point, Mia slowly opened her eyes.

"Mia...?" Ian almost couldn't believe what he was seeing.

The little girl was still very weak, but her gaze seemed focused.

She looked at her father, tears slowly seeped from her eyes, her small hand reached out, gently holding his large hand.

"Daddy..."

With this single word, the heavy stone weighing on Ian's heart for so long was finally shattered.

He bowed his head, buried his face beside his daughter, his voice choked as though ripped apart: "You survived... Thank you, Lord, Dragon Ancestor bless... Thank you..."

Outside the tent, a gust of wind passed, the red flag hanging high in the wind fluttered like flames in the night.

At the flag's center, the golden sun gleamed brightly, seemingly real, like light dispelling the winter cold, warming those below.

Ian looked at the flag, his lips moved slightly, quietly reciting the name he heard from Aik:

"Lord, Louis Calvin... Thank you... Thank you..."

Such a miracle was not unique to Ian alone.

In every piece of land Louis newly acquired, he dispatched such a team.

A team comprised of Red Tide Territory soldiers, knights, physicians, craftsmen, and registration officers, carrying food, medicine, and order, delved into villages and towns like ruins.

They set up tents, cooked hot porridge, received refugees, registered information.

Providing an opportunity for survival to those who lost everything in the war.

And for those migrants not within his territory, as long as they were willing to seek refuge and work, he was willing to turn a blind eye, willing to accept them.

Of course, not everyone came with gratitude in mind.

After the war, many bandits and hooligans indeed emerged; they plundered, extorted, even disguised as refugees infiltrating the camp.

At dawn, outside the camp's porridge tent, a long queue stretched with smoke wafting, the pot bubbling audibly.

Suddenly, chaos erupted from the rear.

"Get out of the way! If you don't want to die, get far away!"

"Food! Hand over all the food to us!!"

A group of ruffians in ragged clothing, eyes fierce, rushed out from the forest.

About thirty in number, wielding broken axes, firewood knives, even longswords.

They had long been lurking nearby, waiting for the moment when porridge was served.

Chapter 99: Order

The bandits attacked, and the women and children screamed in terror, scattering in all directions, while the elderly in line were knocked to the ground.

Chaos ensued, and these refugees didn't know what to do.

At this critical moment, a warhorse suddenly leaped out from the command tent.

The knight on the horse wore a crimson cape, and with a sharp squeeze of his boots, the warhorse neighed, charging straight through the crowd.

The knight's Fighting Energy erupted like flames, surging from his shoulder to the tip of his sword, igniting with a glow like crimson flames!

"Those who dare steal grain! No mercy!" His voice thundered through the chaos, intimidating everyone.

Following him, two more warhorses charged out, and the three Red Tide Knights quickly formed a flanking formation.

One in the front and two on the sides, they surrounded the bandits in a semicircular area at the edge of the camp!

"Charge! There's only three of them!"

Someone shouted, and the hot-blooded bandits raised their knives and axes, screaming as they rushed at the three riders!

Then they saw the difference between knights and ordinary people.

The leading knight raised his longsword high, performing an arcing horizontal slash, cutting three charging bandits in half at the waist!

Their limbs, imbued with Flame Fighting Energy, rolled through the air, blood splattering on the muddy ground, carrying a scent of blood.

"Wha-what's going on?" one person exclaimed in shock,

The second knight spurred his horse into a thrust, the horse's front hooves rose high, and the acceleration of the charge sent him flying ten yards away.

Then another knight, with a swift sword thrust, pierced through the chests of two nearby people, pulling the sword out violently, spraying blood!

The longsword swung horizontally, the severed torso flying out, knocking down the third person who still tried to advance.

Next, he turned and cut a bandit trying to flank them from the shoulder to the belly, splitting him in two, dying a gruesome death.

"Run, run away!!"

Finally, someone realized something was wrong; these knights were simply monsters to them.

But alas, it was already too late.

The three knights galloped their horses, the roar of Fighting Energy echoing as they began the hunt.

Each slash carried the explosive force of Fighting Energy, slicing through flesh and bone as easily as chopping wood!

Someone tried to climb over the wall to escape, only to be pinned to the wall with a single sword strike.

Someone threw down their weapon and begged for mercy on their knees, but no one paid attention, and their spine was crushed by horse hooves.

In just a few minutes, more than twenty of the thirty bandits were cut down like vegetables,

The remaining few were deliberately spared, tied up and dragged to an open area outside the camp.

That night, a simple wooden platform was erected in the camp square.

Torch flames burned brightly, lighting up the whole open area.

Seven bandits were tied up, kneeling on the platform, each with a look of deathly pallor, trembling with fear.

The fierce look they had when holding daggers against their fellow men had long disappeared.

People crowded around the square, hundreds of them, mostly civilians who had just struggled out of hunger and war.

Though faces were filled with exhaustion, at this moment, they all stood tall, glaring angrily at the few bandits.

"Why should you steal food when everyone else is working honestly?"

"Just as life was getting a little better, they wanted to cause chaos? They deserve to be cut down!"

"Lord Louis truly doesn't tolerate wrongdoers!"

The Law Enforcement Officer responsible for the judgement loudly proclaimed, "According to the Red Tide law, those who rob grain, attack the camp, and intentionally harm others are inexcusably guilty and sentenced to death!"

There was an uproar below the platform, but it was not questioning, rather a relieved cheer.

Several of the seven began to cry and plead loudly, and some tried to argue or beg for leniency.

"Spare me! I-I was just following to watch the commotion, didn't steal anything!"

"I have an eighty-year-old mother... please, don't kill me!"

A younger bandit struggled desperately, tears streaming down his face, "I-I will definitely reform and start anew in the future!"

A Red Tide Knight stepped forward, expressionless, and said, "It's the Dragon Ancestor's business to forgive you, my duty is to send you to meet him."

He drew his sword and stepped forward, "Execute!"

The sword flashed, and a head flew, blood sprinkling the yellow earth.

The same action repeated seven times, and the entire square fell silent.

When the last head fell, someone shouted first:

"Well done!"

"Yes! They should be killed!"

"Great, now we don't have to worry about our porridge being stolen anymore!"

The cheers rang out one after another, and some even put their hands together and bowed toward the crimson banner.

From that day on, no one in the camp dared to steal anymore.

Louis had ordered before, if there were bandits causing trouble, deliberately leave a few for public judgement, public execution.

"War has just ended, rules must be established." he said.

He wanted everyone to see firsthand, in his territory, robbery and murder meant death.

And those refugees who registered compliantly and worked honestly could now eat three meals a day, without having to live rough, with clean mats and blankets at night.

And this simple way of life was precisely what they had dreamed of.

Under the leadership of craftsmen sent by Red Tide Territory, one semi-underground house after another rose from the ground.

Ian was among the first craftsmen involved in building houses.

Although the daily work was tiring, he felt at peace.

The foreman provided meals on time, and in the evenings, they could listen to people playing and singing by the fire.

Mia was also gradually recovering, color returning to her face.

Though her body was still frail, she could walk steadily and even jog a few steps around the camp to play.

She always liked to follow behind Ian, sometimes helping to pick up some wood chips at the construction site or poking small stones on the ground with a stick.

The coworkers, seeing her obedient and sensible, often teased her and occasionally gave her some food.

"You little girl, you're much more hardworking than your dad," someone said with a smile.

Hearing the teasing, Mia blushed and ran away.

Ian watched and grinned, but his eyes welled up with tears.

He watched his daughter's lively figure, feeling a sense of relief in his heart.

A few days ago, he had to wake up every night to check her breathing, fearing that one day he would wake and forever lose this child.

Now, he no longer needed to beg for a meal or frantically search for herbs in the mountains.

The porridge, though bland, was enough to fill them, with a bit of pickled vegetables on the side.

The humble house withstood the wind and rain, and there was charcoal, blankets, and people to talk to.

Ian held the rough porcelain bowl, gazing at the rising cooking smoke, silently thinking, "Thank you, Lord Louis."

Not just Ian, the camp's people gradually regained some vitality.

They had food, work, and a place to sleep, but more importantly, a sense of safety.

"As long as you follow the rules, there's food; if you're willing to work, someone will protect you."

This slogan quietly spread through the camp, like a simple but genuine creed.

No one thought it was false because it was what they had all witnessed and experienced firsthand.

Gradually, this belief quietly took root and sprouted amidst the ruins after the war.

And that crimson banner, waving in the morning light, grew brighter, as if truly dispelling the shadows over this land.

Chapter 100: Wolf Training and the Castle

The great Lord Louis, who is thanked by thousands, is currently playing with wolves.

Leng Feng crouched on the grass, his ears quivering lightly, eyes focused, ready for Louis's command at any moment.

"Ambush."

Leng Feng silently slid into the grass, his figure resembling a silver-gray shadow, weaving to the rear flank.

"Attack!"

He suddenly lunged out, biting the suspended cloth target fiercely, swinging it vigorously several times.

"Retreat!"

He swiftly released it, deftly turned and rushed back to Louis's side, his movements clean and agile, without a single extraneous gesture.

After several months of training, Leng Feng could now expertly understand almost all of Louis's commands.

Whether it's lurking, attacking, or guarding, he executes flawlessly.

Sometimes he doesn't even need verbal cues, just a glance, and he can gauge his master's intention.

Of course, in these past two months, it wasn't Louis who trained Leng Feng, but Egger.

Yet the ice wolf naturally possesses a strong sense of hierarchy.

Egger was responsible for drills, feeding, and discipline, but Leng Feng never truly obeyed him.

Until Louis returned, and he immediately wagged his tail and greeted him, following closely and shadowing him.

Because he clearly knew who was the real boss.

"Good dog." Louis squatted down to stroke his forehead.

Leng Feng let out a low whimper and, as if showing off, nuzzled his head against Louis's palm before tilting his neck and confidently resting his large head on Louis's leg as if being playful.

"Here it goes again."

Louis chuckled wryly, half his body immobilized by Leng Feng's weight: "You're a Wolf King, not a dog... Hey, don't lick!"

Leng Feng's tail wagged like a windmill; tongue out, he seemed like a Husky.

Of course, this behavior only appeared in front of Louis, in front of other wolf pups, he embodied a leader's demeanor.

"Tsk...this guy, you've completely accepted me as your master now."

Louis's fingers gently combed through the hair on Leng Feng's neck, savoring the smooth yet wild texture.

"If you could grow a bit taller, a bit stronger, that would be better."

Leng Feng was approximately six months old now, just having passed the puppy stage; his limbs were starting to extend, and his muscles gradually firming up.

But to fully mature, it would take more than a year.

"Which means, my dream of Wolf Riders will have to wait a while longer..."

Louis's gaze drifted afar, seemingly envisioning himself riding a wolf, galloping through thousands, leaving everyone in a trail of dust.

Just then, light footsteps echoed from behind.

It was Sif; she held a stack of reports in her arms, softly speaking as she approached: "The intelligence from various territories has arrived. Shall I read them out to you?"

Louis nodded, indicating for her to begin, while on the other hand, continuing to play with Leng Feng.

Sif unfolded the parchment and began reading each part:

"The Snowfield Territory successfully tamed a herd of snow mountain goats suitable for breeding, with increased milk production in winter."

"The Cold Fir Territory's grain station and tent outposts are established, with over seven hundred registered residents."

"In Ice Ridge Territory, knights successfully rescued hundreds of trapped civilians from the mountain paths, now all settled properly."

"As for Canglu Territory, the third bandit eradication concluded, three bandit leaders executed publicly, and remaining fugitives fled upon hearing the news."

"..."

After listening, Louis nodded lightly.

"Not bad, the preliminary plan results are starting to show." His gaze was calm, with a hint of self-talk, "I wonder how many can be saved..."

Though food consumption is too fast, but the first batch should arrive soon, we can last a few more days."

He smiled wryly: "Is this the price of being the sun?"

Sif didn't quite understand why Louis often likened himself to the "sun."

Probably due to some special meaning, like "illuminating others" sort of thing.

Then Sif proceeded with some routine territorial reports.

Mostly minor issues.

Louis listened sporadically, until Sif mentioned something he had longed to hear.

"Oh, one more thing," Sif leafed through her report, "Mike says the castle in Red Tide Territory is almost finished, asking you to take a look."

"Oh?" Louis's eyes lit up, sitting up straight.

He certainly remembered this matter.

Back then, he personally designed the blueprint inspired by earth towers, incorporating geothermal heating plans from hot springs—all his planning.

"Wasn't there an issue with the hot spring clay before?" Louis inquired.

"Yes, there was a slight delay," Sif nodded, "but later a new team of craftsmen was introduced, and progress greatly increased. Now the main structure is complete, only some decorations and defenses are yet to be finished."

"Really almost done, I thought I'd have to wait till next year." Louis marveled.

He frequently walked past the construction site, only seeing the outer walls completed, but hadn't specifically checked the inside.

Louis chuckled, "Let's go take a look around noon today."

After lunch, the sunlight was just right.

Louis donned a cloak, accompanied by Sif and several guardian knights, and strolled over.

Walking past the freshly paved dirt road, Louis spotted it immediately.

The outline was rugged; the heavy rammed earth walls seemed to emerge from the ground, carrying an indescribable pressure.

At the bottom was a whole circle of deep gray stone bricks tightly hugging the base.

The stone extended up to mid-waist, seamlessly connecting with the arrow tower's stone walls, simple yet not rigid lines.

Further up was the wooden structure of protruding eaves, beams carved with the Red Tide sun totem and wave patterns, rough yet intricately detailed.

The entire castle resembled an armored beast, steady, cold, pragmatism above all, yet hiding a stubborn craftsmanship.

It struck right at Louis's straightforward aesthetic.

It's not the luxurious beauty of Southern Nobility; it's the Northern Territory's rough, utilitarian beauty.

Though the exterior differs greatly from the castle of Frost Halberd City, in spirit they're very similar.

Louis looked for a while, unable to resist sighing: "Old Mike actually produced such a styled castle... He's certainly skilled. Though primarily it's my credit."

He also recalled sketching on the blueprint, seemingly it was just a bare column.

"The design concept was mine," he added quietly, shamelessly.

Meanwhile, Sif tilted her head looking at the newly finished earth tower.

It didn't quite match her imagination.

She expected the castle to be gleaming stone bricks, ornate beams, yet it appeared plain and rough.

Just then, the large gates creaked open.

A dust-covered Mike stepped out boldly.

"Lord! You've arrived?" He beamed with pride, "Successfully completed, despite challenges."