

Winter 441

Chapter 441: Fall (Part 2)

They were entwined with living vines, their muscles bulging, and where bones were exposed, vine armor wrapped into bizarre patterns.

They ran with beastly roars, their fists like hammers, stomping the ground like drums, each step causing the rocky walls of Windflame Valley to tremble slightly.

Through his binoculars, Rudolph could see clearly, yet his expression remained unchanged, merely snorting coldly: "Scary tricks."

He gestured and said, "Continue holding the line, focus on the big targets first."

Magic Explosion Bullets were fired again, rocks rolled down, fire rains poured.

Yet, those Frost Giants stepped into the fire line almost fearlessly, flames licking the vines on them, yet did not halt their pace at all.

The vine armor they wore seemed to possess high heat resistance and physical defense, and in the flames, some Giants' vine armor quickly regenerated, entwining, crawling like a living thing.

The Empire's archers fired, and the magic burst array struck as if hitting a moving mountain.

Effective, but far from enough.

Meanwhile, the Barbarian Race's rear army surged like a flood.

Magical Beasts charged with roaring aggression, mutated cavalry raised spears, weaving through the gaps between giants, one wave after another, seemingly endless.

The battlefield turned into a tidal wave crashing against a stone dam.

Rudolph's face changed slightly, a hint of unspeakable fear flickered in his heart: "These lunatics... Why did they suddenly empty their nest? Why are these beasts growing more numerous... and stronger? Did I... come to the wrong place?"

He clenched his teeth, swung his hand fiercely, and roared angrily: "Order! Silver Wing Corps, three thousand knights, attack!"

Horn answered the call, echoing through the canyon, like angry thunder rolling over the silversnow mountain walls.

The heavy gates on the eastern side of the canyon opened, and a tide of silver armor surged out.

Three thousand Imperial Knights lined up on the forefront, armor shining in the sun, battle flags flapping fiercely.

Fighting Energy burned on them, like eagles spreading wings, like dawn slicing through fog.

Silver Wing crest shone with cold light, warhorses neighed, iron hooves struck the ground, three thousand knights whipped up a steel vortex!

"Empire, victorious!"

Roars surged, the Knights' Corps rushed from the flank like a sword light cutting into the chaotic frontline.

Blades and swords clashed, slashing through the air, crashing into the red killing ground.

Red and silver, flowers and blood, Fighting Energy and rage clashed violently in the valley.

Initially, the momentum of the charge caused the Barbarians' forefront to retreat several steps, yet what followed was a situation these knights couldn't figure out despite racking their brains.

Hunter was a member of the Empire's Third Corps Silver Wing Knight Order, having participated in dozens of battles against the Jade Federation, his long sword stained with enemy blood, but he had never encountered such foes.

They charged smoothly at first.

Wherever spears reached, beast blood splattered, Fighting Energy scorched vines, warhorses neighed in flames, everything seemed like a regular victory.

The Barbarian Army was fierce, but in the narrow valley terrain, they couldn't execute a real charge.

Hunter once thought victory was within reach, until he struck down a Northern Barbarian cavalryman's head.

Blood sprayed onto the silver-white cloak, Hunter hadn't even had time to shake off the blood from his sword, when suddenly the fallen corpse ignited.

Not ordinary flames, but a twisted spark of plant and flesh burning.

The corpse seemed like a "fire seed" for some plant propagation, releasing scorching red mist the moment it fell, instantly spreading and covering several nearby Northern Barbarian Warriors.

Next moment, those Barbarian Soldiers' roars shot up sharply!

The few charging Northern Barbarians, their eyes suddenly turned red, their bodies expanded, muscle surfaces erupted with ironwood-like textures, vines grew crazily from armor gaps binding their limbs, as if they were 'buffed'.

They could even tear long spears with bare hands, slam warriors riding horses into the air.

"They... absorbed their comrade's death energy!?"

Not far away, another Northern Barbarian Warrior fell, another violent explosion ignited a cluster of red mist, and three nearby tribesmen suddenly roared up, vine armor abruptly expanded into humanoid beasts charging forward madly.

"The more they die, the crazier they get!!"

Hunter heard someone screaming, but it was already too late to think.

A teammate beside him had just chopped down an enemy, yet in the next moment was slashed off horseback by an 'enhanced state' Northern Barbarian, thrown airborne with the horse, landing heavily on the vine-covered ground.

How is this a battlefield?

It's an altar, a sacrifice!

It's living blood and bones, summoned to awaken a storm of vines and fury.

Moreover, every fallen corpse seemed to complete a bizarre sowing at the moment of death.

From the remnants, vine seeds burst instantly, spawning new vines and flowers.

Red light surged like blood mist, writhing vines like snakes danced wildly, grew crazily, tangled horse legs, tore knight armor, seeped into flesh through cracks.

Every drop of blood was irrigation.

Every deceased person was fertilizer.

The entire battlefield resembled a living garden, a garden of rage nurtured by the Empire and Northern Barbarians' flesh and blood, growing madly, twisting, dancing in the smoke.

Above the high platform, Rudolph watched all this.

His silver hair quivered in the wind, the layer of usual contempt in his eyes was being swallowed by shadow.

He witnessed firsthand, the Silver Wing Knight Corps, the three thousand elite that once terrified enemy armies, now seemed caught in a blood web tightening with every battle.

Their every charge fed the opponent supplements.

Their every inch of advance was met with even more frenzied counterattacks.

"Impossible." Rudolph clenched his teeth, gripped the railing tightly, as though talking to himself, "They are just Barbarians... just savages..."

Chapter 442: Fall, Part 3

But this is not the Barbarian Race; it is a... war group infected by some uncontrollable force, a monster army that feeds on death.

He originally thought this would be an easy defensive battle.

He would achieve glorious military honors on this peaceful frontier, then transfer back to the South, retire as true nobility of the Imperial Capital, and live an elegant life.

But now he stood at the edge of the valley, watching an Empire frontline that was spiraling out of control, collapsing, and rotting, staring foolishly as his knights were swallowed by flowers.

He violently flung away his cloak, turned around, and ordered loudly, "Deploy all knights to block it! Just hold on for a few more days, and reinforcements will come!"

Adjutant Thalion hesitated for a moment but ultimately accepted the order and went.

Meanwhile, Rudolph quickly ascended the command platform of the Main Castle, staring intently at the burning frontline.

The Imperial Army lasted only two days.

Two days and nights, all arrows shot, Magic Explosion Bullets exhausted, and the Catapult Platform utterly ruined from repeated launches.

The knights charged in wave after wave, one team falling, only for another to take its place.

But the enemy's main forces still never appeared.

Throughout this war... they had only faced the vanguard.

Even so, the Third Imperial Army continued to retreat, step by step.

The Northern Barbarians' vanguards grew wilder and more ferocious with each battle, even thriving amidst death. Both the blood of their kin and that of the Imperial People became fuel for their raging spirits.

They seemed to fear no death. Each corpse seemed to be an offering that drove them further into madness in battle.

This was a sacrificial rite, madness, and Purgatory.

And the knights of the Empire, though well-trained and steadfast, were still human.

They would tire, they would fear, they would watch helplessly as comrades died, consumed by floral vines.

They would, in certain moments, be shattered by psychological collapse.

Finally, before dawn on the third day, the defense line was breached.

A gigantic shadow leaped from behind the mountain, and several massive logs came whistling through the air.

"Block it—!!"

Before anyone could finish shouting, the Main Castle's front gate shattered amid a thunderous crash, dust rising like mist.

Vines surged in through the cracks like a tide, Frost Giants wielding giant hammers smashed down arrow towers.

Barbarian Race knights followed close behind, warhorses stepping into the camp.

The first fortress of the Northern Territory, fallen!

By this time, Rudolph had already discreetly retreated, donning his war cloak and leading his remaining Personal Guard in a hasty retreat through the southern mountain path.

He had once shouted, "Just hold on for a few days and reinforcements will arrive," but he abandoned his knight subordinates and chose to flee.

Amid the billowing smoke, some followed him, some roared at his disappearing figure, while others couldn't even curse before being entangled into the earth by raging vines sprouting from below.

In the distance, atop a rocky outcrop, a flower-like entity quietly bloomed.

It was not a flower, yet it possessed an allure more sinisterly bewitching than any flower.

Petal-like flesh veined with blood threads slowly opened, emitting a beam of white light that enveloped the entire scene.

A brief silence descended.

Countless people inexplicably paused their actions, eyes wide as they stared in the direction of that flower.

Their bodies trembled, their gazes filled with fear, as if they had seen something unspeakable.

But this fear did not become chaos; instead, it gradually... ignited.

At first, the soldiers instinctively shouted, roared, trying to dispel the fear within.

But soon their breathing grew rapid, eyes reddened, bodies heating up, their blood like it was set aflame, and fury rolled up from the deepest part of their souls!

"We are the abandoned ones."

"The Empire discards us like weeds, yet these monsters... make me feel power!"

"If this is the will of the flower... I am willing to fight for it!"

Underneath the breath of that blooming flower, some of the Empire soldiers, once gravely wounded and near death, suddenly struggled to rise, clad in charred armor, dragging blood-stained swords, and in the astonished eyes, turned and swung their blades at their former companions.

"Madness! They've gone mad!"

"Stop, we are knights of the Empire!"

"Their eyes show no reason... no, something has taken it from them!"

But it was too late.

The faces of these fallen ones were ferocious, their rage uncontrollable, they no longer chanted slogans, nor hailed the glory of the Empire.

They shouted nothing, only wreaked havoc on the battlefield.

As if to turn past shame, fear, and pain into blood on their blades.

Vines and blood flowers began to entwine upon them, they tore apart their Empire uniforms, stitching new clothes from animal hides, joining the army entwined with blood flowers and raging vines.

Chapter 443: The War Begins

The night is yet to end, snow falls incessantly. The outer walls of New Frost Halberd City resemble a silent giant beast in the wind and snow, cold and gloomy.

Before dawn, Rudolph led an almost ceremonial personal guard to the city gates.

Their armor was unstained by blood, the cavalry formation as precise as an arrow drawn, with not a step out of place.

If not for the fatigue and terror in their eyes, this group would almost seem to be returning in triumph.

Rudolph sat high on horseback, his expression stern.

After retreating from Flame Valley, to ensure a dignified entry into the city, he even used strong liquor to wipe the scorch marks and bloodstains off the armor.

This was not for dignity, but for credibility.

If even his demeanor revealed despair, then no one would believe a single word he said.

Upon arriving at New Frost Halberd City, he dismounted, his cloak billowing in the wind, and said in a deep voice, "Imperial Sixth Army Commander Rudolph urgently reporting on the northern front's situation, request immediate audience with the Duke."

The gatekeeper approached, seeing it was Rudolph did not dare to slight, and went to report promptly.

The Duke's study was located in the west tower of the main castle, perched high on the cliffs.

At this moment, the fire flickered in the room, failing to warm the stone walls steeped in coldness.

Duke Edmund sat alone in front of the fireplace, wearing an unadorned military uniform, starkly contrasting with the wall filled with honors.

The slanted scar running from his cheekbone to jaw, under the firelight, seemed as if still bleeding.

His fingers pressed against the edge of the wine glass, slowly rotating.

On the table before him lay a map of Flame Valley, marked clearly, the ink still fresh.

The adjutant behind him whispered a report, "General Rudolph requests an audience."

He was silent for a moment, then coldly said, "Let him in."

Rudolph stood at the door of the study, took off his gloves, and gently shook off the snow atop them.

In just a few steps, he tidied his appearance, adjusted his cloak and breastplate, and pushed the slightly weary look deeper into his eyes.

The door was pushed open by the adjutant, a dry cold wind carrying snow mixed in from the corridor, soon melted by the low hum of firelight from the fireplace.

He stepped into this silent study like a tomb, with measured pace.

"Rudolph greets the Duke." He performed a military salute that was exceedingly standard, almost like a model stepping out from an Imperial military academy textbook.

Duke Edmund sat upright without moving, only lifted his eyes, and glanced at Rudolph lightly.

His knuckles still rested on the edge of a half-filled silver cup, as if freshly drawn from his thoughts, his gaze holding restrained composure.

"I have received the brief report of Flame Valley's fall. Is there anything more you need to add, General?"

The voice was not loud, yet it sounded as if striking cold iron, every word knocking into Rudolph's ears.

Rudolph stood firm, unwavering, as he had anticipated.

He maintained a dignified officer demeanor, reporting, "Northern Barbarian front line exhibits fundamental alteration.

The enemy's combat structure no longer adheres to traditional barbarian characteristics, tactics system, and resource allocation show high systemization and directionality.

Their vanguard units are equipped with many heavily armored magical beasts, some possessing innate anti-magic structures, almost moving fortresses.

Our army, arranged according to Imperial standard, initially used magic burst suppression and fuel strike, supplemented by knight assault disruption, achieving partial breakthroughs.

Moreover, the enemy possesses a rare death reinforcement mechanism. The more enemies we kill, the more frenzied they become, extremely bizarre."

Duke Edmund did not interrupt, only slightly focused when hearing "death reinforcement."

Rudolph continued, "Furthermore, terrain rapidly alters. Enemy vine structures can erode the surface, causing localized collapse, magic field disorder, mobilization delay.

Some soldiers suspected of mental contamination, experiencing hallucinations, mania, even actively leaving the command chain."

Yet following this, he hesitated slightly: "Thus I judged, unclear enemy situation, distant reinforcements, exhausted forces... If forced to hold, the entire army may be wiped out.

Therefore, decided to preserve core army backbone, withdraw from the front line, to preserve a glimmer of hope for the Northern Territory."

The study fell into long silence.

The fireplace crackled explosively, startling a shower of sparks.

Rudolph knew every word in this statement treaded on thin ice, even a slight misstep, is a crime of the entire army, a shame of the entire clan.

Edmund still did not move, he merely placed the silver cup in his hand gently on the windowsill, listening quietly.

The firelight reflected on the scar on his face, making the wound from years ago seem like bursting open and bleeding anew.

He had known long ago.

Ever since the spies within Northern Barbarian territory started going missing one after another a month ago, he knew something was wrong.

Those were veterans not new to deep infiltrations, certainly not easily exposed.

Initially, he told himself perhaps it was just transmission delay, perhaps it was a snowstorm issue, perhaps some barbarian integration of counter-intelligence...

But he knew in his heart, that was just self-deception.

True fear does not come from the enemy, but ignorance.

He watched helplessly as the northern line became foreign, yet saw nothing, felt nothing.

Now, the "truth" Rudolph brought... might as well call it a trial of his own self-deception.

Vine erosion of the battlefield, death enhancement of enemy troops, mental pollution of soldiers, total collapse of the Third Legion.

That little bit of surviving hope, finally crumbled just now.

He closed his eyes, for a fleeting moment almost losing strength, recalling five years ago when he could directly deploy thirty thousand knights for a charge against the Barbarian Race.

And now? After plague, rebellion, insect tide...

Those able to fight, are only barely one thousand able to gather.

He need not wait for a total collapse of the Northern Territory, already seeing the future.

This time whether win or lose, the governance power of Northern Territory, the authority of Edmund Family, will irrevocably decline.

Chapter 444: The War Begins (2)

Even if we win, we can't regain the lost territory.

Duke Edmund opened his eyes and looked at the monocle of Rudolph.

He really wanted to smash those lenses with a punch and shatter his inherent arrogance.

But his clenched fist slowly loosened in the next second.

He even displayed a slight, extremely restrained gentleness on his face: "It's commendable that on the way back to the city, the general maintained the military discipline of his subordinates."

His tone was so light, it seemed like praise, everything was as usual.

He nodded slightly again, then instructed, "You have worked hard for many days, rest at the guest building first, sort out the detailed battle report tomorrow and submit it to the Imperial Capital."

Not a word was mentioned about defeat, retreat, or responsibility.

Rudolph finally exhaled the breath he'd been holding; he barely made it through this.

But deep down, he knew this didn't mean that Duke Edmund would truly let him go.

Those indifferent eyes, like ice, merely moved the knife away from his neck by half an inch, ready to fall again at any time.

He had to act immediately, quickly contact his friends and old connections in the Imperial Capital, and weave a net that could protect his life.

He would package his retreat, abandonment, and even leaving the battlefield as decisions made to "prudently preserve strength."

With this thought, he lowered his head, gave a steady military salute to the Duke, and then turned to follow the steward's steps down the corridor leading to the guest building.

Rudolph's steps faded, and the door was gently closed.

Edmund leaned against the window and whispered, "He has the high-tier strength of an Extraordinary Knight, we can't be careless. Find a few more people to act immediately, make sure it's clean and swift."

The personal guard immediately accepted the order, responding in a deep voice, turned, and hurriedly left.

Edmund slowly exhaled a heavy breath and stood up from his chair.

He reached for the map box and began to spread out the heavy scrolls on the long table one by one.

The candlelight reflected off the edges of the battle maps, the worn corners frayed like the broken defense line of the Northern Territory.

He couldn't allow himself a moment of hesitation, even though he had just confirmed the worst-case scenario.

"Stay calm," he whispered to himself.

The thirty thousand men were all the forces he could directly mobilize at the moment.

Plus, if he could complete the territorial mobilization within three days, pressuring, coercing, and enticing the different forces in the Northern Territory, he might be able to gather a total of seventy thousand.

There was still a great chance of winning, and as long as he could hold them off... the Imperial Capital would take action, he had to preserve time for the entire Empire.

He unfolded the deployment with lightning speed, dividing the response into four target levels:

First-level mobilization targets: Cold Iron Legion, Silver Teeth Legion, and Broken Blade Legion, all subordinate armies, to complete assembly within three days, around the new Frost Halberd.

Order the deputy general to first deploy the defense line, repair the river defenses, set up petroleum pits, and cut down the concealing forest.

Second-level response targets: Send "emergency battle call letters" to border generals with higher loyalty, such as Count Hutton and the Saier Family.

Third-level targets to strive for: Target the military forces with weaker control, such as the Pioneer Nobles from the south and the Empire's Sixth and Twelfth Legions, allowing them to remain stationed on their own lands, but cannot rely on them for now.

Fourth-level rejection targets: Some families with private contact with barbarians, secretly draft a "kill list," immediately dispatch shadow guards to execute the purge if they refuse to respond when the mobilization order is issued.

Simultaneously, he issued a political order: Administrative resources to prioritize wartime allocation, including food, iron ore, armor, livestock, and transport horses.

Craftsmen work tirelessly day and night, tripling the production of weapons, shields, and siege equipment.

Local granaries are frozen, switching to wartime ration distribution across the territory, prioritizing according to line hierarchy.

Anyone obstructing the allocation would be immediately dealt with under the crime of "endangering military orders."

Those who refused to answer the call will be hunted down, have their families ransacked, and have their territories confiscated.

He knew this would offend many nobles, but there was no time for compromise now.

What he wanted wasn't their hearts, but their soldiers.

Afterward, he picked up his pen and wrote several letters.

The first letter was written to the Imperial Capital, voluntarily reporting the defeat at Wind Flame Valley and requesting intelligence support.

Regarding Rudolph, he changed his wording, simply writing, "General Rudolph of the Sixth Army, fought valiantly to the last moment at Wind Flame Valley, heroically sacrificing his life for the country."

The second letter was addressed to his son-in-law - Louis.

Louis was currently one of his most trusted kin.

Under his governance, order was meticulous, trade was thriving, and the people's morale was stable, making it almost the only miracle in the Northern Territory not ravaged by war and plagues.

But after all, he had only been in the Northern Territory for three years, his foundation wasn't stable, and military reserves were weak.

Edmund gently expressed his concerns in the letter and reminded him to guard the southeast of the Northern Territory, for the eastern wing must remain firm.

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He personally wrote several dozen letters in total, sealed, stamped, and waxed them, and handed them to the waiting Gale Birds to immediately dispatch them to various places.

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Mist surged within the valley like a slowly receding tide.

The morning at Qingyu Ridge carried a bone-chilling cold, the wet and cold wind carried fine snow particles hitting leather armor and cloaks, turning into icy damp marks.

Louis stood on the cliff platform halfway up, his cloak fluttering in the wind.

His gaze traveled beyond the platform's steep cliff, overlooking the developing defense works below.

The zigzagging wooden and iron chevaux-de-frise along the valley path, combined with spouts for burning petroleum and mechanical trap pits, resembled a giant steel snake bristling with thorns winding through the snow.

Occasionally, craftsmen revealed the gleam of spiked iron chains beneath the snow cloth.

Ballistae and batteries were pushed onto newly erected stands, the wooden wheels creaking dully on the icy surface.

"Raise the chute's angle by half a foot over there," Louis directed, pointing towards the high rock wall.

A team of knights in snow-white cloaks immediately responded, dragging massive wooden beams and petroleum vats, climbing the perilous mountain path to the designated location.

Although the suggestion was trivial, it was mainly to assert Louis's presence.

On the other side, soldiers wedged massive stones into the grooves with crowbars and iron wedges.

Once released, these hundreds of pounds of stones would cascade down the slides, transforming into a deadly avalanche.

He lifted his eyes towards the canyon's deeper recesses, the inevitable path for the enemy army.

If they dared to venture into this mist-shrouded gorge, they would be ensnared in a purgatory of crossfire and falling boulders, a trap Louis personally crafted.

At this moment, a knight on a frost-covered warhorse arrived, handing over a letter stamped with Frost Halberd City's seal.

Louis received it, glanced over the cracked wax seal, and unfurled the parchment.

The writing was rushed, the ink still wet, the lines radiating a cold urgency.

Duke Edmund reported that the main forces of the Northern Barbarians had breached the northwest defense line, describing the terrifying phenomena arising post-casualty in their ranks.

He ordered Louis to strictly guard the southeastern passage, not to redeploy.

Louis folded the letter, sealed with triple layers of wax by the Ministry of Military, as casually as if storing a receipt, and slipped it into a hidden compartment of the desk.

In truth, before the letter arrived, he already knew most of its contents, if not more, given that he had a leg up.

The closer the Daily Intelligence System got to the war, the more urgent and dense the information became, fueling anxiety.

That bizarre Northern Barbarian army seemed like a layer of frost being peeled back, revealing flesh and barbs within.

Among this intelligence, two points were most critical.

First: [Upon death, Northern Barbarian soldiers' bodies instantly ignite with twisted plant and flesh sparks, emitting a scorching red mist that engulfs nearby brethren, surging their rage and strength. Only by disrupting their rage can their boon be ended.]

This line caused Louis's brows to furrow. Rage, the cheapest and most fierce fuel on the battlefield, had been converted by the enemy into a contagious power.

As a result, he summoned Hillco, commanding him to swiftly develop a secret weapon to counter this phenomenon, though its effectiveness remained to be seen.

Second: [A Northern Barbarian army of over five thousand will cross Qingyu Ridge from Ice Sea County seven days later, heading straight for the heart of Red Tide Territory.]

This intelligence made his eyes flash with a cold light.

Qingyu Ridge was his place of renown.

A gorge sculpted by blades and snow, narrow enough to transform an army into a hill of corpses within a day.

There, he had severed the reinforcements of the Snow Swearer.

So days before the letter's arrival, he had stealthily left the main city, leading the vanguard to Qingyu Ridge, laying traps in the gorge the Barbarian army must pass through.

When the enemy appeared at the gorge's entrance, they wouldn't encounter a skirmish, but an ambush meticulously orchestrated, destined to bleed the Northern Barbarians rivers of blood.

Chapter 445: Infernal Hellfire

Carlos the Axe Breaker, originally from the Axe Breaker Tribe, was the direct son of the chieftain.

However, that fateful day Titus' war axe cleaved open his father's helmet, blood splattering three meters away.

Carlos charged forward in fury, only to have the whispers of the Burning Pain Vine Court pierce his ears the next moment.

It directly altered the anger in his heart, turning the hatred of his father's death into a stagnant pool of water.

When he looked up again, the enemy had become his master, the foe had turned into faith.

Thereafter, he followed Titus with renewed loyalty, being personally recognized as his new elite.

But when this military order dispatched him to the southeast, his heart was full of disdain.

The main force is fiercely battling the tough bones of the Northern Empire, and he is sent to conquer a desolate land?

The southeast defense line? To him, it was nothing more than some remote mountains and valleys guarded by the Empire's most marginal forces.

Even if there were a few knights, they couldn't withstand the sharpness of his five thousand elites.

This was not a battle of honor, but a waste of his opportunity to achieve merit on the main battlefield.

In the days traveling south from Ice Sea County, his disdain was confirmed.

His army crushed the small scattered Empire garrisons along the way as easily as wolves tearing apart snow rabbits.

Those soldiers didn't even have time to blow the horn before being drowned in snow by axes and spears.

The victory was so simple it made him feel bored.

As he stood at the mouth of Qingyu Ridge and looked at the towering snowy cliffs on both sides, the contempt in his heart deepened.

This was a narrow valley wedged between two mountains, the mouth shrouded in morning mist as white as a mass of lifeless beast fur.

Carlos reined in his mount and looked up to assess.

The mountain walls on both sides were silent, there were no beacons, no sentry riders.

He snickered, his judgment firmer: what a foolish prey, leaving such a good ambush site unguarded.

Once he led his army through, the entire southeast of the Northern Territory would be under his feet.

Yet he was completely unaware that behind the mountain fog, a pair of cold eyes had been waiting for days.

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The cold wind of Qingyu Ridge carried snow flurries that lashed at faces like invisible blades.

Louis stood at a strategic high point in the canyon, obscured by rock faces and snow drifts, with rows of knights poised and awaiting orders behind him.

The sound of hooves approached from afar, a knight racing up to the mouth of the valley, his armor stained with still-damp snow mist.

He leapt off his horse, dropping to one knee and said, "Lord Louis, the enemy vanguard has entered the northern ravine!"

Louis' eyes sharpened, and he took the telescope handed by his adjutant, raising it slowly.

The distant snow mist was pushed aside by a heavy presence, as the enemy vanguard finally appeared.

The first thing to break into view was a group of heavily-armored magical beasts shrouded in vines.

They were massive in size, their backs covered with plant scale armor interwoven with gray-green and iron colors, moist red mist seeping from the gaps in the scales, gently pulsing like breaths.

These giant beasts walked on multiple feet, each step leaving knee-deep depressions in the snow.

The red mist they exhaled carried a pungent smell, and wherever the mist passed, the air emitted a low, unnatural thud.

On the other side of the curtain of mist, the figures of Northern Barbarian Knights emerged.

They rode various grotesquely shaped mutated mounts, each knight bearing the emblem of the Flower Crown on their shoulder armor, their rough and heavy battle armor flickering in the red mist, their eyes burning with fervor.

Then a thunderous rumble echoed from deep within the snow mist!

Dozens of Frost Giants descended from the northern slope, each step causing the snowy cliffs to tremble slightly.

They wielded giant hammers capable of shattering city gates, or dragged chains covered in hooks.

Their exhaled cold breath instantly crystallized in the air, turning into fine ice fragments that fell softly.

The heavy beast hooves, the scrape of iron chains, the low growls of exotic beasts all intertwined, like some flood about to surge from the depths of the earth.

For anyone else, just this momentum would be enough to shake their spirits.

But Louis merely put down the telescope, squinting slightly, and said calmly, "They're here, stand ready, act as soon as the signal is given."

On top of the snow cliffs, the ambush of ballistae, oil reservoirs, and sliding stone mechanisms were already primed and ready.

The cold wind swept by, the line so quiet it was only the faint sound of snow and ice rubbing against each other, the entire Qingyu Ridge holding its breath, waiting for the signal.

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No one believed that the Barbarian Race's vanguard would cross this snow-blocked mountain path today.

Even less did anyone think that Louis would set an ambush here, especially since aside from himself, no one knew of the Daily Intelligence System's existence.

The red mist rolled forward, covering the cliffs on both sides, yet when it reached the midpoint of the gorge, the snow suddenly appeared different.

In certain areas, the snow was thin and hard, exuding an unusual luster underfoot, as if doused with hot water and frozen into a brittle ice crust again.

The hollow "dong—dong—" sound occasionally came from beneath the hooves, as if treading on a concealed cavity.

But within the red mist, resonating with the sound of war drums and beast roars, those sounds were buried in the cacophony, almost unnoticed.

The nostrils of the front-row giant beasts twitched slightly, catching a trace of fine oil scent.

Yet enveloped by the wrath and red mist instilled before battle, the warning from their sense of smell was quickly buried, turning into a subtle illusion ignored by all.

Snow mist, red mist, sound of war drums.

To Carlos, this was nothing but an overwhelming advance.

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When the Barbarian Race's troops partially entered the canyon, Louis stood concealed atop a high point at the mouth of Qingyu Ridge, his fingers flicking lightly; the crisp snap of his fingers was quickly swallowed by the snow mist, yet it was precisely conveyed.

A waiting knight brought the war horn to his lips, the horn's sound hoarse and deep, piercing through the red mist and snowstorm, echoing like a call from the Abyss.

Chapter 446: Hellfire Inferno (Part 2)

The long-planned ambush unveils.

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Carlos was riding atop a giant magical beast, his gaze sweeping back and forth amid the red fog and snow shadows.

"Woo—"

Suddenly, an unfamiliar battle horn sounded, his brows furrowing sharply, as if his heart had been pierced by an ice needle.

Before he could issue a command, the ground beneath him emitted a teeth-gritting low hum.

Soon after, thin cracks opened up on the surface, and scorching light burst forth from beneath the snow layer.

The flaming oil lit up the chevaux-de-frise, and in the next instant, it transformed into rushing fire snakes, sprinting along pre-dug trenches, slicing through the already chaotic Barbarian Race legion.

The flames weren't merely sparked by petroleum, but were the purgatory fire mixed with Fire Scale Ointment and Flint Oil.

Sticky, greedy, impossible to extinguish.

The heavy-armored magical beasts bore the brunt, with the plant scale armor on their backs seeming to be doused by boiling water in the high heat, their juices boiling and overflowing, transforming into pungent white mist rising vigorously.

The thorns in the gaps between the scales exploded under the pressure of the heat wave.

"Bang!"

The overflowing viscous juices were immediately ignited, emitting a sharp and short sound.

These vines and plant scales originally had strong heat resistance, common flames were not to be feared.

However, Louis's specially made Fire Scale Ointment and Flint Oil had a far stronger adhesion than ordinary fuels.

Once ignited, they stuck tightly to scales and vines, no matter how the beast rolled and shook, the flames clung on like greedy venomous snakes not letting go.

The temperature was so high that it distorted and shivered the air.

The originally bizarre and tough vines had no resistance under this intense heat, their surface rapidly cracked and curled.

Fire tongues climbed along the vines, then "pa" exploded open, splattering boiling green juice, instantly turning into sizzling ignition points upon contact with the ground.

The fat hidden behind the vines was forced by high temperatures, continually swelling and bursting.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Each expansion bomb was accompanied by a sharp and short blast sound, turning the joints of the magical beast's armor into gaping holes spewing fire.

A giant beast howled miserably, half its head blasted into flesh and charred bone by the oil fire eruption, the shattered lower jawbone thudding into the arms of the cavalry behind.

High-temperature flames licked the faces and armor of Barbarian Soldiers, instantly igniting hair and fabric.

The knights emitted piercing screams, their voices swallowed by the roaring mixed with war drums, red fog, and flames, like cries from the deepest abyss of hell.

More than one, some low-intelligence magical beasts had been driven mad by the firelight, their eyes filled with despair.

They retreated out of control, charging and bouncing frantically, emitting deep and broken roars mixed with piercing wails, as if begging the earth for mercy.

The massive bodies frenziedly collided, toppling and crushing the cavalry and mounts following behind them.

Though Carlos had Fighting Spirit Protection, the flames could not harm him, yet his breath was choked by the scorching and pungent air, his chest felt like it was suffused with flames, a dull ache.

"Ahhhh!" He raised his War Axe suddenly, shouting furiously with all his might.

But in response to him, there was only the echoing "buzz—" of the heat waves in the canyon, along with the hellish curtain woven from red fog and fierce flames.

"How could there be an ambush!?" Carlos's heart surged with both rage and unease, "Was there a leak of intelligence? No, impossible! No one could have known!"

Yet the remaining rationality and battlefield instinct led him to make a choice: "Advance the whole army!"

But just as the vanguard stepped onto the clearing lit red by the flame.

"Boom!!!—Boom rumble rumble rumble!!!"

The muffled magic explosion mines triggered deep underground, the explosion sounded like a colossal beast roaring in the canyon, bringing a shock wave like angry waves surging forward.

"Crack—Bang! Bang! Bang!"

Countless shattering and explosion sounds followed closely, the air was completely torn apart, the shock wave was like an invisible tide, instantly tearing apart the vine armor and scales of the heavy-armored magical beasts and cavalry.

Chunks of flesh and armor plates were roasted by high temperatures until blackened, shooting back into the rear army with sharp whistles.

Scattering on the snow, kicking up clouds of rolling white mist and a pungent burnt odor.

A Frost Giant growled and leaned forward, trying to avoid the flames, yet the blast wind pushed like an avalanche, staggering it.

Its protective vines and ice continuously cracked and peeled off under the high-temperature impact, revealing the grayish-blue, crack-filled flesh beneath.

Dark blue giant blood was forced out, spouting from cracked flesh like scorching ink.

It splattered on the snow, making a sharp "sizzle—" noise, instantly turning into a pungent white mist.

That colossal body lost balance amidst the gale and flames, crashing down with a thunderous sound.

Several tons of weight crushed the beasts and knights behind like a landslide.

Armor was pulverized, bones crackled under the heavy pressure, and blood plasma snaked through the snow grooves, glowing red from the fire's illumination.

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From above, Louis, amidst the rolling red mist, gazed upon this purgatory-like scene, his lips slightly curved, with not a hint of mercy in his eyes.

"It's like the gates of hell have opened..." he murmured softly, as if enjoying a grand feast.

Immediately, he raised his hand brusquely and commanded, "Suppress with long-range firepower!"

"Buzz—whoosh whoosh whoosh!"

The ballista above emitted a low, muffled twang, the bow arms trembling with the rebounding tension.

The thick and long armor-piercing arrows dragged fiery tails, roaring down like meteors tearing the blood-red sky.

Fire traced bright trajectories in the red mist, swiftly embedding themselves into the enemy formations.

"Bang!"

The first Magic Burst arrow pierced the heavy beast's forehead, exploding with flames at the back of its skull, scattering bone shards and blood plasma.

The arrows that followed rained down, embedding into armor gaps, penetrating chest cavities, and tearing the enemy's ranks into a chaotic mess.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

Several Magic Explosion Bullets fell in succession, shock waves surging through the snowfield like a stormy sea.

Flames and rubble mixed with screaming waves smashed against the enemy's face masks, causing eardrums to ache.

Warriors caught in the blast points were flung into the air, landing as charred remnants.

Nearby beasts were blasted off the ground, their heavy bodies spinning in the air before crashing into the blood and snow-mixed mire.

Explosion sounds, screams, and the shattering of metal melded together, echoing through the canyon like a sinister symphony, obliterating cavalry and beasts attempting to break out in the flames.

If everything proceeded according to Louis's plan, these armored beasts would be buried in this valley amidst the entwining flames and arrows.

However, an unexpected event occurred.

The first beast that fell brought an unforeseen transformation.

Its massive body was engulfed in flames, with scales and vines carbonized and peeling off, expected to remain motionless in the smoldering ash.

Yet from the cracked wound, a bizarre red flower suddenly sprouted, with flames carrying the texture of flesh, crimson and moist.

In the next instant, the red flower exploded, spewing forth swirling red mist.

The mist was dense, as if boiled with fresh blood, carrying a sweet and rotten scent, swiftly enveloping the surrounding barbarian soldiers.

A gut-wrenching roar erupted from within the mist.

Several barbarian soldiers, pierced by arrows and barely standing, suddenly straightened.

Their muscles swelled as if inflated, veins writhing like worms, vines madly growing from their wounds and armor gaps, entwining their bodies, forming a second layer of living battle armor.

The battlefield began to grow.

Each corpse became a sowing point, their charred bodies split apart, blooming blood-red flowers, the flower hearts spewing more vines and red mist.

Red light and mist intertwined into a rolling canopy, transforming the entire valley entrance into a pulsating, living abyss.

The barbarian knights infected by the red mist not only stood alive amidst the flames but seemed infused with a frenzy-like power.

Fire danced on their armor and vines, unextinguished and unabated.

Their eyes burned hotly with emptiness, beast-like growls accompanying their breaths, their forms quick to the point of blurring.

They began to climb and approach along the fire line break, the shadows of the valley wall. Their targets were the hidden shooters above.

The light of the flames instead revealed their sinister smiles.

From the high ground, Louis, through his telescope, felt the chilling pressure facing him, yet it wasn't from the wind and snow.

This isn't a group of warriors; this is a pack of hunting beasts fed by anger and death.

Chapter 447: Frostbite Soulshaker Grenade

The corpses split open, revealing charred shells, spilling crimson vines and flesh-colored petals, like a kind of morbid greenhouse crazily spreading across the battlefield.

The vines wrapped around the fallen magical beasts, snapping their necks, vine roots drilled into the wounds of Knights, piercing deep into flesh as if nurturing rage with corpses.

Injured magical beasts neighed and fell to the ground, only to stand again in the blink of an eye, suckled by the red mist, their eyes crimson, their steps faster and more vicious than when alive.

The mist engulfed the charging Knights, obscuring their forms, but amplifying their murderous intent.

Those who should have faltered under wounds, flames, and arrows now roared, charging directly toward the heights of the cliff, where hidden crossbowmen and snipers lay in wait.

Louis observed the scene coldly through a monocular.

He had long known from daily intelligence and the Duke's letters that this monster troop possessed a bizarre ability, where the dead empowered the living with multiplied strength.

Yet, witnessing this mad assault that disregarded any harm, he still felt a moment of astonishment.

It was not courage, but a mad surge forcibly dragged onto the battlefield by death and fury.

The ability to enhance strength four- or five-fold and completely lose fear.

Yet his expression remained calm as he slightly raised his hand to order the soldiers behind him: "Load all the Frost Devourer Soul Shaker Bombs."

Several Knights specializing in heavy weaponry immediately sprang into action, opening heavy iron-locked chests, extracting short, thick projectiles engraved with blue demon patterns and faintly glowing with a black light at the center.

They were swiftly loaded into short-barreled launchers, scintillating within the metal interior.

Levers were pressed down, and a deep rumble roared into the air.

One by one, projectiles trailed with a ghostly blue arc, falling into the thickest mass of blood-red mist in the valley's depths.

These were no ordinary magic explosion bullets; after learning the weakness of the "Burning Pain Vine Court," Louis had Hillco craft this ultimate weapon in person—the Frost Devourer Soul Shaker Bomb.

Utilizing the crystal core of a Soul Devourer Lizard, it was honed by the Alchemist into an oval crystal core, inlaid with a micro talisman array, releasing a powerful psychic shock wave upon explosion, directly striking the brain's emotional center, blanking out all rage in an instant.

Furthermore, it housed a frost vine leaf liquid capsule, a medication pouch prone to cold cracking, releasing cold mist upon bursting, with the powder seeping into the bloodstream, swiftly suppressing adrenaline and berserk hormone secretion.

Of course, this had never been tested in actual combat, and even Louis wasn't sure if it would work.

Until the moment it hit the ground

Boom!!!

The blue shock wave exploded like an unseen meteor at the valley's floor, the sound wave not an explosion but a nerve-tearing loud noise, as if a war drum had blasted within one's eardrums.

The air compressed abruptly, even the red mist aggressively pushed away by a circular transparent ripple.

Within a fifty-meter radius of the explosion's center, the movements of Barbarian Soldiers and magical beasts were all frozen.

Their eyes, like candles blown out, dimming from crimson to dead water, faces losing expression, weapons half-lifted in the air, even forgetting to maintain their balance.

A galloping warhorse lost its strength mid-air, collapsing to the ground like a puppet with cut strings.

In the next instant, cold mist burst forth like millions of sharp ice needles from the explosion's core, penetrating every breath and every inch of bare skin.

The sensation was bone-chilling cold yet accompanied by a strange numbness.

As if the switch for adrenaline was forcibly turned off, and rage snuffed out by an invisible hand, replaced by a deep emptiness reaching the marrow.

"...Huh?" a barbarian Knight emitted a low, puzzled sound from his throat.

The psychic shock of the Frost Devourer Soul Shaker Bomb severed his emotional resonance with the Burning Pain Vine Court like a sharp blade.

Rage instantly turned into nothingness, leaving only the naked survival instinct in his consciousness, needing an immediate outlet.

He couldn't even distinguish friend from foe as his spear thrust along a habitual attack trajectory, deeply piercing the nearest body clad in vine battle armor.

Even if it was a companion he charged with.

Chaos spread like wildfire.

More Knights lost their recognition after their emotions shattered, blindly brandishing swords, blocking, and roaring.

The once snarling War Beasts and giants now fell silent as if their spines were severed, their limbs stiff, not daring to advance a single step.

Their gaze no longer a blazing flame ready to tear everything apart, but weighed down by frost, hesitant, even shrinking.

At that moment, the killing tide in the valley seemed frozen solid by the blue cold light.

Watching the enemy army self-destructing in the valley, a smile couldn't help but tug at the corner of Louis's mouth.

At the very first sight of the intelligence, he had instructed Hillco to craft this magic explosion bullet.

Yet, before this, he had never truly faced the Berserkers of the Burning Pain Vine Court, nor was he sure how effective it would be.

But now the answer was written in barbarian blood at the valley's bottom.

The magic explosion bullet seemed like a death's kiss tailored specifically for these monsters, severing their rage and causing them to scatter in fear.

This ignited excitement like soaring flames in his chest.

After all, the hellish scene unfolding was the result of his meticulously calculated steps.

Like having the test questions days in advance, providing a sheer sense of satisfaction.

However, he was acutely aware that the opportunity would quickly pass, lasting only several seconds at most.

The power of the red mist was being diminished, yet the vine roots of the Court continued to frantically spread. Any further delay, and the living vine walls would gnaw through the entire defense line.

Louis immediately concluded that deploying heavy weaponry was imperative.

Thus, over fifty Steel Beasts emerged simultaneously from both the side valley and valley mouth flanks, revealing themselves on the battlefield.

Chapter 448: Frostbite Soulshock Round (Part 2)

The berserk bulls clad in Cold Iron armor emerged out of the snow, exhaling white mist through their nostrils. Their hooves beat like war drums, pulling the custom-made heavy armored combat platforms of Red Tide Territory.

The magic steel frame of the chariots was covered with thick armor, and the side-mounted siege hooks flashed coldly in the firelight.

Inside the shooting ports on either side of the chariot, the crossbowmen were already in position, with magic explosive bolts and flamethrowers at the ready.

On each side of every Steel Beast, there was a unit of more than twenty Red Tide Knights, providing cover on the left and right flanks.

Their mission was clear: eliminate any enemy slipping through and protect the chariot from close-range sabotage.

Of course, they had to preserve themselves first, and then this "Steel Bull" combat platform.

At the forefront, Red Tide Legion Commander Lambert led the charge.

His black-armored warhorse snorted white mist, hooves pounding like war drums, as he raised his lance high and charged directly into the inferno of red mist and fire.

The roaring Steel Bulls dragged the chariots wildly, iron hooves crushing vines and flesh, splattered hot blood transforming into steam instantaneously within the blazing flames.

The siege hooks on the sides of the chariots constantly extended and withdrew, flinging the riding beasts and their riders of the Barbarian Race into the air.

The knights pressed close to the chariots, charging in and advancing along the gaps opened by the hooks.

Lances precisely penetrated the armor of the Barbarian Soldiers, before drawing swords and swiftly slashing down the fallen enemies.

In this moment, the roar of fire and iron drowned out the screams, and the edge of Red Tide swept across the entire gorge like a tidal wave.

However, the crushed bodies of the Barbarians did not immediately quiet down.

Once the red mist-enhanced flesh bodies fell, their skin would swell and crack within seconds, bursting with flesh and bone, revealing dark red vines as strong as steel wire.

The vines grew madly, climbing onto the Steel Beast's armor plates, while the blood flowers at the tips opened tentacles and tooth-like saws, spitting corrosive and suffocating blood mist.

In past battles, these would be enough to render most warhorses into useless scrap.

But today, their fangs bit into Cold Iron.

The bodies of each Steel Beast were forged from premium Cold Iron Ore reserved by Red Tide Territory.

The cold suppressed the corrosiveness of the red mist, and its toughness could withstand the full force of a battering ram.

Thus, the blood mist condensed into dark frost marks on the surface of the Cold Iron without corroding even a single dent.

The vines climbing onto the chariot were merely wedged into the thick armor crevices, and were then ground to fragments by the wheels and chain teeth.

The blood flowers that reached the flamethrower ports had their petals incinerated to the root by high-pressure flames before they could even close.

And the Steel Beasts, fearless, retaliated with a sea of fire. With flamethrower ports open in the front and on the sides of the chariots, searing blue tongues of fire shot along the vines, burning large patches of blood flowers into charred fragments.

The knights wielded Fire Scale Oil bottles and flamethrowers for the finishing blow, igniting the scattered remnants, while the acrid smoke was swept away by the fierce wind.

In the firelight, Lambert ordered, "Advance in sections! Chariots crush them, knights apply the fire, second wave move in!"

The Steel Beasts surged forward like iron waves, crushing the unburnt remains and vines, while knights weaved through the breaches, mopping up and finishing off the enemies cleanly.

The second wave immediately reinforced and compressed the formation, ensuring the entire line of advance remained as solid as an Iron Wall, giving no chance for the enemy to regroup.

Yet, the Barbarian warriors who should have fallen convulsed under the catalyst of the red mist, with adrenaline spiking their body growth and muscles swelling until their skin burst, oozing blood.

Pupils dilated into slit beast eyes, breathing turned into deep growls.

To them, the flames were meaningless as they had lost all sense of pain.

A maddened warrior with a severed leg, like a beast unleashed, thundered in front of a Red Tide Knight.

"Aaahhh—!"

The lance pierced through his chest, but those blood-stained hands still tightly grasped the spear shaft, yanking it, dragging the knight and armor into the vine thicket.

In the next moment, the barbed vines tightened like a whip, tangling both into a vortex of flesh.

Elsewhere, a maddened warrior with his back ablaze leaped onto a Steel Beast, hooking his bare hands onto the flamethrower port, his fingers embedding into the metal seams, producing an ear-piercing tearing sound.

Until a Magic Explosion Bullet exploded at arm's length, blasting him into a veil of blood mist.

The outer-ring knights roared as they formed a human wall of steel shields against the frenzied attackers.

The heavy crossbowmen calmly fired through the gaps in the shield wall, the magic explosive arrows creating blossoms of scarlet fireworks among the enemy ranks.

The Steel Beasts wielded hooked spears, their wheel axles grinding over the ground, throwing the approaching Barbarian away, then finishing with a final strike from the flamethrower port.

These frenetic offensives certainly exhausted the knights of Red Tide Territory, forcing the line to contract slightly multiple times, with several chariots even briefly entangled.

But with their thick defenses, proficient coordination, and the cover of the Steel Beasts, they steadied the formation, turning every assault into the enemy's funeral.

Aside from a few soldiers unlucky enough to be dragged away by the vines, most Red Tide Knights remained safely within the formation.

Yet, not all counterattacks were effectively blocked.

From the depths of the red mist came heavy, slow footsteps, like war drums pounding beneath the earth.

A hulking silhouette, almost monstrous, emerged from the blood mist.

It was Carlos, still surviving on this hellish battlefield, a double-edged giant axe slung over his shoulder, its blades still dripping with fresh blood.

The red mist enveloped his body, with muscles swelling until they painfully split the skin, exuding dark red blood like magma flowing through cracks in a rock.

Each breath saw his chest swell like bellows, exhaling a hot gas laced with a sweet, metallic scent of blood.

His scarlet eyes shone glaringly in the smoke, like wax flames ignited by hellfire.

Chapter 449: Frostbite Soulshaker Shells (Part 3)

The motion of raising the axe whipped up a visible wave, and as the blade fell, it sharply sliced through the air.

"Boom!" The steel beast's heavy side armor was smashed inward, metal warped to the point of emitting a wail.

Carlos wasted no time for the opponent's response, swiftly twisting his wrist to yank the axe, tearing off a piece of armor stained with iron fragments, and hurling it towards a nearby knight, knocking them along with their shield into the pool of blood.

The next strike directly met the hook spear, the metal arm shattered like dry wood under his brute force, oil spraying out, splattering on his exposed shoulder and back like a new coat of blood-red war paint.

He let out a low roar, snapping the broken hook spear shaft into two pieces, casually thrusting them into the chest of a knight attempting to approach.

Vines beneath his feet were crushed into fragments, mud and blood splattering upwards, like a tide of dark red waves.

Behind him, dozens of elite berserkers followed closely.

Their skin was encased by layers of dark vines, the tips burrowing directly into their flesh, constantly writhing as if something alive were sucking inside.

Whenever slashes tore open their bodies, blood sprayed while vines swiftly extended, intertwining to forcibly stitch up the wound, even pushing newborn flesh through the gash.

They were like gods of slaughter sprung from mythology.

The first berserker collided head-on with a "steel mad bull," the bull's flames searing scorch marks on his face, yet he ignored it.

The next second, the giant axe swept across, cleaving the beast's head along with half of its neck bone, sending it flying with boiling blood in an arc in the air, crashing heavily to the ground.

Another berserker charged to the steel beast's side compartment, ripping open the armor with bare hands, embedding fingers into metal seams, and wrenching the door open like paper.

The knight operator inside had just raised the sword before a giant hand grabbed the helmet and yanked him out with the neck bone, axe blade slicing down in one smooth motion.

Blood and brain splattered across the side of the war machine, the warm vapors turning into a layer of crimson mist in the cold wind.

The battlefield was instantly engulfed by blood and fire, screams, roars, and the sound of shattering metal meshed into one.

The knight array at the perimeter was forced to retreat, shields scattered, breaches rapidly expanded along the line like gaping wounds made by beasts.

These berserkers lost in the crimson fog had long since lost their reason, rage burned within them like an inferno, driving them only to tear, crush forward, almost disregarding any tactics or defense.

This made them fierce, yet easier to be led and lured.

Just then, Louis's orders echoed through the trumpet sound across the battlefield: "Quick ride! Lead them away!"

Several light-armored knights charged out in response, circled around Carlos and his elite forces, releasing volleys of bolts, tauntingly appearing at the fringes of the crimson fog only to vanish, inciting them to roar and chase away from the main battle array.

When the formidable enemies stepped into the pre-set firepower zone, the shooting ports of the steel beasts flashed simultaneously.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The magic explosion bullets fired in volleys, the impact stirred up wave after wave of crimson fog, flames and torn flesh swirling in the air.

The flamethrower's tongues of fire spurted from both sides of the war machines, igniting the berserkers who had charged close, the repeating crossbows consecutively piercing through their chests.

Carlos's wounds were sewn repeatedly by the vines, but the scorch of flames and the impact of explosions gradually slowed his movements, his heavy breathing like a giant stone pressing on his chest.

He raised his axe intending to charge again, but was struck directly by a magic explosion bullet, the impact sending him staggering backward.

The crimson fog dissipated from around him, his knees buckled, and he dropped heavily to the ground.

Unwillingly, he lifted his head, his eyes still burning with unquenched flames of hatred.

Yet in the next moment, the steel beast's heavy crossbow fired its last bolt, piercing through his heart.

Carlos collapsed with a thunderous crash, his war axe rolled several times in the muddy earth before coming to a standstill.

Chapter 450: Calamity in the Northern Territory

The atmosphere of a sea of corpses and blood rolled through the valley, mixing flames and stench into a complete hell.

Five thousand barbarian knights lay dead in the mud and blood, with the remains of the giant magical beasts crushing the surrounding rocks, the charred sinews still smoking.

The red mist had not fully dissipated, thick like stirred old blood, glowing a sinister dark red in the light.

Yet the knights of the Red Tide Territory steadily traversed through it, their faces shielded by transparent masks framed with silver.

The edges of the masks were inlaid with patterns of pale blue sheen, distilled from Frost Leaf Vine, slowly releasing a film of mist with each knight's breath, isolating all mental disturbances from outside.

The eyes behind the mask were cold and focused, showing not a trace of being swayed by the red mist, their movements crisp.

The remaining uncontrolled barbarian remnants were directly stabbed down, Fiery Oil poured from the bottle onto the pile of corpses, instantly igniting a piercing explosion.

Flames pounced on the flesh like a beast, devouring, charring, turning it into ashes.

Vines and blood flowers twitched and shrank back in the blaze, and just as the petals turned to ashes, the air was filled with a nauseating burnt sweet scent.

A knight bent down, the tip of his blade lifting a piece of dark red vine not yet burned and a few flower cores still emanating faint light.

They were carefully placed into a Cold Iron-wrapped potion jar, sealed and locked, handed to the knight behind.

The alchemist would dissect these items in the laboratory of Red Tide City, attempting to understand their origins and weaknesses.

The flames were still burning, their light reflecting on the knights' silver armor, like a column of slowly advancing cold iron statues.

Louis stood upon the scorched earth, his gaze piercing through the lingering red mist, falling upon the charred corpses.

He did not consider this an easy victory.

If not for knowing in advance that this barbarian force would pass through here, and meticulously setting traps, they might have quietly reached the gates of Red Tide City.

Even so, the cost of this encounter still made his heart subtly tighten:

Four Steel Beasts were destroyed, over thirty knights died, several chariots shattered in the impact of vines and beasts, and the Magic Burst reserves were nearly consumed by a third.

And these dead barbarians were just the tip of the iceberg of the southern army, not even a tenth of their total forces.

If such scale units could repeatedly breach the defenses, then the real disaster had yet to arrive.

The barbarians' advance south might be even more terrifying than he had previously imagined.

"Hope this land... can really endure." he murmured quietly.

Next, he must unite with the nobles of the Southeast, first clearing out the invading barbarians around, ensuring the safety of his territory before considering supporting other fronts.

At least before Duke Edmund's summons, or the Daily Intelligence System hinted at a turn in the war, he would not rashly mobilize the main force.

Moreover, this battle also exposed the shortcomings of their weapons.

For instance, the design of Steel Beasts pulled by Steel Bulls was indeed powerful on the battlefield, but lacking in flexibility and safety.

As long as the enemy precisely killed the pulling Steel Bull, the massive Steel Beast immediately turned into a stationary iron coffin.

If this issue wasn't resolved, the losses next time might be even more severe, it seemed he had to accelerate the development of fuel engines.

Louis withdrew his gaze, silently turning to leave.

The flames burned behind him, dyeing the night sky a deep red, this was just one inconsequential victory amidst the long fires of war in the Northern Territory.

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Astha arrived in the Northern Territory just a year ago.

But with the resources allocated by the Royal Family and guidance from his mentor Sai Fu, he rebuilt this long-abandoned frontier town at "Frost River Valley".

Raising the Silver Dragon flag, setting up a camp, treating it as his jurisdiction, he once thought this would be his starting point in the Northern Territory.

Until two days ago, that barbarian army shattered it all.

They crossed the Ice Rift Gorge, considered "impassable" by the Northern People, flooding directly into the heart of Frost River Valley like a black tide.

The outposts sent no warnings back, the scout teams were entirely wiped out.

When the intelligence reached Astha, the enemy was just half a day away from the town.

He relied on the outer wooden and stone perimeter, attempting to hold.

Amidst the wind and snow, spears stood tall, crossbows drawn full, muskets spewed weak light, the line seemed like a solitary black fence amidst the white wasteland.

But soon the first monster emerged.

It was a bloated barbarian warrior, his skin bulging with dark red vine veins, the parasitic scorching vine constantly twitching in his flesh, like a living creature voraciously drinking blood.

Even pierced through the shoulder by a spear, he roared forward, smashing through the fence, tearing the defenders' breastplates like soaked parchment, hot blood spraying a scarlet arc across the snow.

Then more figures charged in.

Arrows pierced their chests and necks, only making them more frenzied like provoked beasts, their shouts in the wind and snow painful to the ears.

In the snow mist on the horizon, colossal silhouettes gradually emerged.

These were five-meter-tall giants, skin armored with vines, holding stone axes capable of cleaving rooftops.

Each swing accompanied the sound of wood walls crumbling and bones breaking.

Further away, the cries of magical beasts pierced the wind and snow.

A Thick Armored Split Skull Rhino charged into the crowd, tossing a row of soldiers like straw.

The parasitic vines wrapped on its back flung out thorns as it ran, embedding into the rear row of defenders like raindrops.